

MERRICKVILLE (Staff) — In 1908, this busy town of about 900 had a thriving woollen industry, grist mills, saw mills, two founderies and even a furniture manufacturer.

But Merrickville had something about which no other town in North America could boast — a regulation Lord Baden-Powell Boy Scout Troop.

And if anyone wishes to argue the point that this town hosted the first troop in North America, there are three original members available to set them straight.

Most encyclopedias give 1916 as the date for the first troop in the United States. Merrickville's first troop pre-dates its U.S. counterpart by eight years.

Just how the troop got its start is no mystery. Methodist pastor Rev. Ernest Thomas, posted to Merrickville in 1908, had just returned from England where he had travelled to learn about the Baden-Powell organization.

Shortly after taking up residence, Mr. Thomas organized the first meeting of the Scouts.

There were about thirty boys in that first troop, according to Joe Hutton, 77, one of the three original members still residing in the area.

Every Saturday afternoon the young Scouts would set out on foot to travel up to five miles to the hall of Merrickville Methodist Church (now Merrickville United).

Activities then were much the same as now, with Mr. Thomas giving instruction in knot-tying, outdoor survival, fire-building and the host of other endeavors for which the Boy Scouts have become famous.

Carman Knapp, 75, who retired as a game warden after 30 years, testified to the invaluable training received as a Scout.

"The discipline and character building and training you get in the Scouts is something you never

forget," Mr. Knapp said.

The most valuable thing Mr. Knapp learned under the guidance of Mr. Thomas was the St. John's Ambulance first aid course.

Mr. Thomas was a certified instructor in the St. John Ambulance Brigade and passed much of his knowledge on to the Scouts of his troop.

His instruction was so good that when Mr. Knapp took the St. John's course years later in the Department of Lands and Forests he graduated as an instructor.

"It was just a refresher course for me," Mr. Knapp said. "It was something I never forgot."

For Harold Hutton, 75, Joe Hutton's brother, Mr. Thomas' instruction in outdoor survival is still remembered.

"He taught us how to light a fire without matches and tie all sorts of knots but the best thing he taught me was

how to find my way home," Mr. Hutton said.

The Merrickville troop didn't last long. It disbanded after Mr. Thomas was posted to western Ontario in 1911.

United Church minister Rev. Harold Kempling, now hopes to revive that original charter. The first meeting of the troop was held last Monday with 18 boys participating.

Mr. Kempling has applied to the Boy Scouts of Canada for permission to call his troop "The First Canada (Merrickville) Troop". If permission is granted, the new troop might help save the memory of North America's first Scout troop from disappearing into historical oblivion. This is Boy Scout Week. □

