



There and Back Again:

Follow the rules of the road to ensure safe outings

By Mark Ray

American Scouting Digest
Spring 2003

During my first stint as an assistant Scoutmaster back in the 1980s, our troop had its own bus: a '60s-era former school bus complete with overhead racks, bays underneath, and a custom-built equipment cage where the rear seats used to be. Painted in true Scouting colors—khaki at the top, olive drab at the bottom, and a red stripe down the middle—that old bus took us on many adventures across the Southeast.

Unfortunately, it also led to some adventures we hadn't planned. The twin gas tanks didn't play well together, which caused us to run out of gas on our very first trip. The manual transmission tended to get stuck in gear, so our mechanic had to teach us how to disassemble the gear box—at highway speeds—and fix the problem.

And then there was the time the rear axle broke in two. For years afterwards, you could still spot the meandering gash down the middle of Mississippi Highway 7 where the axle scraped the pavement as my father, who was Scoutmaster, fought the steering wheel long enough to get us stopped safely.

All these adventures taught me some things I should have known all along: that travel planning is as important as menu planning, that *how* you get to camp can determine *whether* you get to camp, and that safety is no accident.

So what can you do to get to camp safely? Just follow the rules of the road.

As is so often the case, your first source for safety information should be the Guide to Safe Scouting (GSS), which you can purchase at your local Scout shop or view online at www.scouting.org/pubs/gss/toc.html. The GSS includes a whole chapter on transportation by a variety of means, including cars and trucks, buses and boats, trains

and planes. A separate chapter on youth protection and adult leadership includes other guidelines related to travel.

In discussing transportation by private vehicle—the way Scout groups typically travel—the GSS offers mostly common sense advice: obey the speed limit, put everyone in seatbelts, keep your passengers out of truck beds, and keep your Scouts out of the driver's seat.

But the GSS also offers a few less familiar rules. You may drive no more than ten hours per day (interrupted by frequent stretch breaks), and you should only drive that long if you have multiple drivers. All driving is to be done during daylight hours, except for short trips. And convoying is prohibited.

If you've ever tried to follow someone to an unfamiliar destination across town after dark, you'll understand why the BSA prohibits convoying. Yet many Scout groups still travel in convoys—long lines of cars where only the leader knows the way and everyone else must struggle to keep up.

Even if everyone does keep up, convoys can be a recipe for disaster. Besides making drivers nervous, they encourage people to follow too closely, which can cause accidents and impede the flow of traffic. Furthermore, you're sometimes only a missed traffic light away from becoming separated.

A better method for traveling is to hand out maps and directions to all drivers and let them proceed at their own pace. (Web sites like MapQuest—www.mapquest.com—make mapping a breeze.) Arrange for rendezvous points every two hours or so, picking rest areas or highway exits where the drivers can gas up and the Scouts can stretch their legs, hit the restroom, or grab a snack.

Of course, if you're not going to travel closely together, you need to maintain communications. Once upon a time, the only way to keep in touch on the road was with citizens-band radios, which can be expensive, require external antennas, and use busy radio frequencies. In recent years, however, two new technologies have expanded the range of communications options. The first is the ubiquitous cell phone; the second, the less familiar Family Radio Service, or FRS.

These days it seems that everybody has a cell phone, so you might think cell phones would be a perfect way to communicate between cars. They *are* useful—as long as you exchange phone numbers before you hit the road and don't mind the potential expense of long-distance and roaming charges. You also have to keep in mind that Scouts tend to go places where there aren't a lot of cell towers.

With FRS, you don't have to worry about cell towers and big phone bills. Introduced in 1996, FRS is a cousin of CB radio (technically one of six Citizens Band Radio Services) and offers reliable two-way communications for families, friends, organizations, and businesses. FRS radios are half-watt handheld units that offer up to 14 channels on a "take-turns" basis. Manufacturers promise a range of up to two miles, but you'll probably find that your effective maximum range is closer to a mile. You don't have to have a license to use FRS; you just have to have the radios. Best of all, FRS radios don't cost anything to operate, and they can come in quite handy even after you get to camp.

Dozens of companies now make FRS radios, including such familiar names Motorola, Kenwood, Radio Shack, and Uniden. Since the radios all use the same channels, they are generally compatible with each other.

FRS radios cost from \$30 to \$200 each, depending on how many bells and whistles you want. There are a few features you should consider as you shop: durability, the number of channels each model supports, and the type of batteries each uses. You'd also be wise to pick a model with some sort of lock button that prevents you from accidentally changing channels or turning the unit off.

The more vehicles you take on a trip, the more important good communication becomes. An obvious way to prevent communication problems—and driver shortages—is to reduce the number of vehicles by using 15-passenger vans or school buses. Many troops, or their chartered organizations, own such vehicles or rent them for major trips.

Even when their axles don't break and their gear boxes don't lock up, large-capacity vehicles present their own special problems. For starters, you must carry higher liability limits, and each driver may need a commercial driver's license, or CDL. Most jurisdictions require a CDL for vehicles capable of carrying more than 15 passengers, while the limit is 10 in California. (Note, by the way, that the requirements refer to passenger capacity, not the actual number of passengers at the time you get pulled over by the state police.)

You don't need a CDL to drive a 15-passenger van in most jurisdictions, but those vans can be prone to rollovers. In fact, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA, regularly issues special advisories about this problem.

A 15-passenger van's rollover risk stems from its high center of gravity, a problem that's made worse when you carry 10 or more passengers or place luggage on the roof. The high center of gravity reduces resistance to rollover and changes how the vehicle handles. Add driver inexperience, and you've got a recipe for disaster.

The NHTSA recommends carrying no more than 10 passengers, which might seem to defeat the purpose of using large-capacity vans. Some troops live with this recommendation—quite literally—by removing the back seat or two and using that space for equipment. Doing so can help lower the center of gravity and eliminate the need for a separate vehicle to haul gear. (For more on the NHTSA's safety recommendations, visit <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/hot/15PassVans/index.htm> on the World Wide Web.)

If all this talk of lost drivers and liability limits and CDLs has you worried, relax. By following the rules of the road and employing some modern technology, you can get your Scouts there and back again safely—wherever “there” happens to be.

Sidebar: Playing musical car seats

Most troops travel in personal cars, which is probably the cheapest and safest way to travel. One downside to this method of travel is that it can create or strengthen cliques—especially on long trips. If you give Scouts a choice, they'll naturally jump in a car with their buddies or with other boys their age. And when you get to your

destination, they'll continue those associations, consciously or unconsciously excluding other Scouts.

There's an easy way to break down the barriers between cliques—and to save the sanity of your drivers. Let's say you're using two drivers: Mr. Smith, who can carry three Scouts in his car, and Ms. Jones, who can carry six in her minivan. Write "Smith" on three blank index cards and "Jones" on six.

When you start the trip, let each Scout draw a card at random; the card he draws determines where he rides. Then, each time you stop for gas or a bathroom break, reshuffle the cards and have everyone draw again. This technique helps ensure that you arrive at your destination not just at the same time but as a group.