



ELBERT KIRTLEY FRETWELL

Professor Elbert Kirtley Fretwell, Ph.D. (1878–1962), was an American academic and early leader in the field of youth development through recreation and extracurricular activity. Upon the retirement of Dr. James E. West in 1943, Dr. Fretwell was appointed Chief Scout Executive and served until his retirement in 1948. He was the only Chief Scout Executive appointed to the position who was not previously a professional staff member of the BSA. Upon his retirement from the BSA, Dr. Fretwell was bestowed the title of Chief Scout.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Born in rural Lewis County, Missouri in 1878, E.K. Fretwell grew into a man of varied talents and varied interests. As a boy, he used his time plowing to focus on his reading and recall. With two books in the family home—the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*—he would place one of the books at the end of a row. He would plow several more rows, and while the horses were resting, he would review what he had read to work on improving his memory. Eventually he received his undergraduate degree from LaGrange College in LaGrange, Missouri, where he was noted as both a brilliant scholar and the best singer in the college glee club. Upon college graduation, he joined the faculty, teaching English literature and serving also as the Lewis County, Missouri, commissioner of schools.

He continued his education at Brown University, acquiring an MA degree, and continued his affiliation with singing through Brown’s glee club. He engaged in further study at the University of Chicago and two additional years spent in Europe, studying both music and English during his travels and during his enrollment at Heidelberg University and the University of Dijon.

The problem of enabling our pupils to live in a democracy and to make democracy a fit place in which to live is an insistent necessity, a delight, and a test of our ideas, of our technique, and of our faith.

- E.K. FRETWELL, 1931

AN APPRECIATIVE AUDIENCE

The first appreciation of his singing talents came from the cows he looked after on his father’s farm. Calling the cows in from the pasture one evening with his standard call of S-W-E-E-E-E-K!!! (moving across two octaves from a low C to a high C) impressed a local musician, who encouraged him to further develop his talents.

FAMILY LIFE

In 1919, he married Jean Hossford, a faculty member at the Teachers College at Columbia University. Mrs. Fretwell published three children's books and served as the director of camping for the Girl Scouts of the Greater New York area. They had two sons, E.K. Fretwell Jr. and James H. "Stretch" Fretwell. E.K. was an accomplished college administrator serving as chancellor at two major state institutions. James was an engineer at Los Alamos National Laboratory and an active Exploring Advisor.

CAREER IN MUSIC

Upon his return to the United States, the elder Fretwell served as a faculty member at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, teaching English. Still unwilling to commit to a single career, he combined two into one and was a featured professional tenor singer in New York. A profile of Dr. Fretwell in the *New York World* described a typical day in his life during this era as lasting more than 20 hours, starting with teaching multiple sections of English before noon, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge to report to work at the Hippodrome for practice, rehearsals, and performances through the late evening hours. Upon arriving home after midnight, he resumed grading and lesson preparations, retiring at 2:30 a.m. Each Sunday, supposedly his day of rest, was not complete without singing in the choir of the Classon Avenue Presbyterian Church for both morning and evening services.

ACADEMIC CAREER

While singing was a passion, he recognized that he ultimately did not care for it as a career. He enrolled as a graduate student at Columbia University and earned a Ph.D. in secondary education in 1917. Upon graduation, he joined the faculty serving as a faculty member from 1918 until 1943. He received appointments as an associate professor of Scouting and recreational leadership and later, professor of education at the Teachers College, Columbia University.

In 1918 Dr. Fretwell was appointed by the surgeon general of the United States together with the American Red Cross to supervise recreation work in United States Army "reconstruction hospitals."

His interest in Scouting drew from his professional interest in extracurricular education. To this end, Dr. Fretwell had extensive and long-lasting volunteer service with the BSA's National Council, beginning as early as 1915. He served as a member of BSA's Department of Education—the forerunner of our current Education Relationships Subcommittee. He had an early appreciation both for the educative power of Scouting—but also the importance of preparing volunteers and professionals to understand and to deliver the program. His professional career and his volunteer service to Scouting in many ways were not distinct from each other—he appreciated the union of formal and informal education in helping young people to grow into effective citizens. Dr. Fretwell lectured widely on Scouting throughout the nation and additionally provided academic preparation for both volunteer and professional Scouters. By the early 1920s, he was teaching courses for academic credit at Columbia University, covering topics such as Scouting and Scoutcraft, recreation education, and a course designed for Scout executives. Dr. Fretwell also served to explore and support Scouting from an academic perspective. His contributions to this area were noted in the highly regarded *Teacher's College Record* as early as 1922.

His book *Extracurricular Activities in Secondary Schools* (1931) allowed him to explore his interest in considerable detail, documenting how experiences in the extracurricular realm were important for preparing young adults for participation in a democratic nation. While his book was not exclusively about Scouting, Scouting's values and its impact on education were integral parts of the book.

Among many distinguished contributors and child development experts, Dr. Fretwell contributed to the development of the Cub Scout program, penning the foreword to the first edition of the *Boy's Cubbook* (later retitled the *Wolf Cub Book*).

In 1933, Dr. Fretwell was appointed to the National Executive Board of the Boy Scouts of America. He remained as a board member until 1943, when he accepted a new role as James West's successor as Chief Scout Executive. For his distinguished work as a volunteer, he was recognized for his service to the Boy Scouts of America with the Silver Buffalo Award in 1939. He also received the Silver Tamaraw of the Boy Scouts of the Philippines.

SCOUTING CAREER

During his time as Chief Scout Executive, the membership of the Boy Scouts of America set records for growth each year. The program was also modernized and updated during his tenure, launching a new Exploring program for young men, and adjusting the entry age for Boy Scouting and Cub Scouting.

Of his many contributions during his five years of service in that role, two are evident today, nearly 80 years later.

The Philmont black felt bull was created in 1944 by Dr. Fretwell. It was patterned after the bull found in the tile mosaic located at the downstairs entrance to the Villa Philmonte. In the beginning, a first year camper or leader received only the head of the bull to sew over the left pocket of the shirt. After another year's participation, they qualified for the body portion of the bull, and

with three years, the tail. Presently, the recognition is awarded in a single piece, but his legacy lives on in all those who wear this distinctive emblem.

Wood Badge training was of particular interest to Dr. Fretwell. An education enthusiast, he launched the formal delivery of the Wood Badge training program, 10 years after two experimental courses were not considered suitable for use by the members of the BSA. Wood Badge continues to this day as a training course, serving the needs of thousands of leaders every year.

RETIREMENT

Dr. Fretwell remained active throughout his retirement, serving with distinction in the role of Chief Scout. He continued his support of Scouting by honoring speaking engagements across the country. An avid hiker, Dr. Fretwell noted that he had once walked around the entirety of Manhattan Island. He also maintained his family farm in Missouri, and continued his work there, growing vegetables each summer during his retirement. He

continued his early interest in English literature and remained a voracious reader, much as he had been as a boy during plowing season. Dr. Fretwell passed away, at home, in Weston, Connecticut, in 1962. He and his wife, Jean, are buried in the Providence Baptist Church Cemetery, near Williamstown, Lewis County, Missouri.

*He never grew old in spirit.
To the end, he had his fund
of good stories and, better yet,
always delighted in yours.
Like some of the other great
pioneers in Scouting, he leaves
us with the lesson that the way to
have abiding youth is to live with
youth and give yourself to them.*

**- E. URNER GOODMAN, REMEMBERING
E.K. FRETWELL, 1962**
