

LIVING



The crowd at the Canadian Scouting Jamboree in Thunder Bay in July included both boys and girls because many groups have voluntarily accepted a mixed membership. But this fall, Scouts Canada may make integration mandatory.

Bracing for profound change

Boy scouts will be boys — and girls — if proposed integration is approved

BY HEIDI RIEDNER
CORRESPONDENT

Scouting groups across the region may need to be prepared when they are forced to consider co-ed membership this fall.

"I'm very upset by the national organization's decision to go co-ed," said Georgia Ho, a Markham scout leader for the past decade. "Of course, when they come up with something new, they push it through. But what's the point if not everyone supports it? I would never say I don't like co-ed. I just don't like it that they are forcing groups who don't want it to do it against their will."

Almost 6,000 youth and adult leaders in York Region will be affected by Scouts Canada's decision, set for Nov. 21 in Ottawa.

Ten years ago, when her son Michael joined cubs, Ho became a volunteer leader.

After five years, she became vice-president of communications for the York Rouge District's public relations department, covering Markham, Milliken Mills and Unionville.

Today, she is upset about the issue of co-ed membership and may quit her associa-

tion with scouting altogether.

"I suspect everyone will get used to it, if it goes through, but my interest is to work with boy scouts, not girl guides," said Ho. "I'm thinking of quitting. I just don't like that we volunteers are not given a choice."

But Ron Turner, regional commissioner for Shining Waters, which includes York Region, points out that the organization is simply moving with the times to become an inclusive program with family appeal. He also notes that the decision itself is still in the consultation process.

"It hasn't been decided yet, though I suspect it will pass. There's usually a resistance to change in general, but the inclusive nature of the motion is a good thing," said Turner.

Turner has been involved with scouting since 1952, and while he feels some personal twinges of regret for the potential loss of the traditional all-male youth organization, he recognizes that change is inevitable.

"The way of the world is totally inclusive," said Turner.

"It's a fact that we have some girls in the

movement already through local negotiation and agreement. So it's sort of like being half pregnant, either you are or you aren't."

Those who support the move say it's an effort to remain interesting and relevant to today's youth. A steady decline in membership during the past 10 years may also be a contributing factor.

South Lake Simcoe District Commissioner Tom Smith explains that his area, bordered by Aurora, Leffroy, Pefferlaw and Stouffville, has been co-ed for the past five years. About 20 of the 30 groups contain boys and girls.

"I haven't seen any negative response from the boys and the fact that it's new becomes old hat after a few weeks," said Smith.

The challenge we are going to have to face is that our organization has committed, passionate leaders. We'll probably lose some, but I don't expect we'll lose a lot."

Smith's own cub pack in Newmarket two years ago was also co-ed.

He suggests that having girls in the group created a better learning environment, did-

n't require any changes to the program and didn't affect the boys at all.

The organization has changed a number of times during the past few years and if you think about it, it would be unfair not to make the change to co-ed membership in certain respects. The problem is in the head of some of the adults. They forget that it's what we do that differentiates us, not which sex we are.

But Colin Norman, president of the Richmond Hill District, expects it will be a tough adjustment for the boys, parents and leaders alike, particularly when it comes to legal questions.

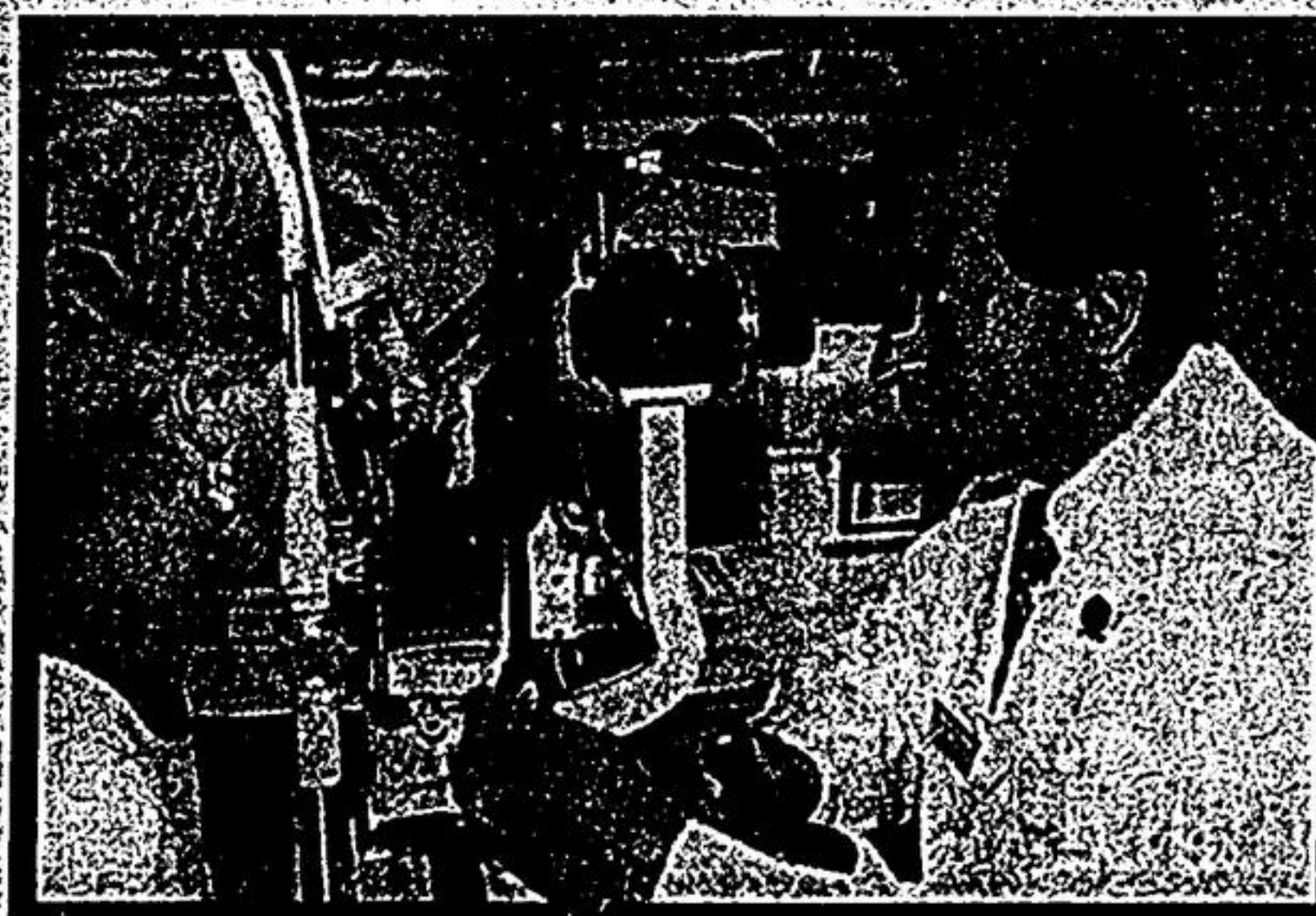
"I've heard more opposition from the girls' parents than those of the boys," said Norman.

"If a girl falls out of a tree, I won't go check her, I can't. Eventually, it won't be a problem, since we'll get the women leaders, probably a lot of refugees from guiding."

The effect on the Girl Guide organization is another concern, but most feel that it will be negligible.

"My group is not co-ed, only because we

See MANY, page 17.



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