

More Than Cookies: Girl Scouts have sold cookies as an activity since the year they were founded 100 years ago in 1912 and every year since. And although, cookie sales teach important life and business skills, it was not the founding reason nor purpose for these young girls.

In 1912, women were facing deeply entrenched struggles. Their education was limited and thus their futures. As World War I approached many women realized their need to be involved outside the home was vital. One of these women was a remarkable achiever. She set high ideals for the world and for her fellow women. During a time when women were restrained by society, she set a precedent for young women to follow and founded the Girl Scouts of the United States.

Juliette Gordon Low was born (Juliette Magill Kinzie Gordon) in 1860 Savannah, Georgia. She was the second of the six children of William Washington and Eleanor Kinzie Gordon. Her maternal great-grandfather, John Kinzie was one of Chicago's first permanent settlers. His son, her maternal grandfather John H. Kinzie played an important role in forming Chicago. He was Chicago's second president and when it became a city, he ran for mayor but lost to William Butler Ogden. Her paternal ancestors were prominent early settlers in Georgia.

Juliette, known as Daisy, developed what was to become a lifetime interest in the arts. As a little girl, she was always jumping into new games, hobbies and ideas. She wrote poems; sketched, wrote and acted in plays; and later became a skilled painter and sculptor. In her teens, she was educated in several prominent boarding schools including at Virginia Female Institute (now Stuart Hall School) in Staunton, Va., and later Mesdemoiselles Charbonniers, a French finishing school in New York City. Following her school years, she traveled extensively in the United States and Europe.

At age 26, she married the wealthy Englishman William Mackay Low in Savannah, Georgia. His father was a wealthy cotton merchant in Savannah and England, his mother, a Savannah native. They moved to England, but Juliette continued her travels and divided her time between the British Isles and America. During the Spanish-American War, Juliette came back to America to aid in the war effort and helped her mother organize a convalescent hospital in Florida for wounded soldiers returning from Cuba.

After the war, and fifteen years in a childless marriage, Juliette planned to divorce her husband due to his drinking and philandering. However, in 1905, before the proceedings were finalized he died from a stroke. In the reading of his will, Juliette discovered he had left "their" money to his mistress.

Juliette was searching for something useful to do with her life when in 1911 she met Sir Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides in Great Britain. She became immediately interested and moved to Scotland to lead a troop. She realized that young women in the United States were missing this wonderful opportunity. Within the year, she returned home to change that. Once in Savannah she called a friend saying, "Come right over. I've got something for the girls of Savannah, and all America, and all the world, and we're going to start it tonight."

On March 12, 1912, Juliette "Daisy" Low gathered eighteen girls to register the first troop of American Girl Guides. The name of the organization was changed to Girl Scouts the following year.

In developing the Girl Scout movement in the United States, Low brought girls of all backgrounds out of the backwoods, so to speak, and into the out-of-doors, giving them the opportunity to develop self-reliance and resourcefulness. Her goal was to bring girls out of isolated home environments, into community service and into the open air. She encouraged girls to prepare not only for traditional homemaking, but also for possible future roles as professional women—in the arts, sciences and business—and for active citizenship outside the home.

She believed that all girls should be given the opportunity to develop physically, mentally, and spiritually. Girl Scouts hiked, played basketball, went on camping trips, learned how to tell time by the stars, and studied first aid. Girl Scouts welcomed girls with disabilities at a time when they were excluded from many other activities. This idea seemed quite natural to Juliette, who never let her own deafness, back problems, or cancer keep her from full participation in life.

Juliette Gordon Low developed breast cancer in 1923, but kept it secret and continued diligently working for the Girl Scouts. She died January 17, 1927, from the cancer and was buried in her Girl Scout uniform in Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah.

Commercially baked Girl Scout Cookie sales began in 1936. On July 3, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed a bill authorizing a stamp in her honor, one of only a few at the time dedicated to women. During World War II, a liberty ship was named in her honor. In 1954, the city of Savannah named a school in her honor, and a Juliette Low School also exists in Anaheim, California.

Low was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York on October 28, 1979, and in 1983 President Ronald Reagan signed a bill naming a new Federal Building in Savannah, GA for Juliette Gordon Low, only the second Federal Building in history to be named for a woman.

In 2011, Anna Maria Chavez, was appointed chief executive of the Girl Scouts, the first Mexican-American, the first person of color to lead the group. Previously Chavez had served as CEO of Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas, and worked in numerous federal and state government positions including as a deputy chief of staff for urban relations and community redevelopment for Janet Napolitano, former Arizona governor and current U.S. secretary of Homeland Security. Napolitano is herself a lifetime Girl Scout member.

According to Chavez, "Girl Scouts has a wonderful history of preparing women for leadership." This organization of now over 2.3 million girls and nearly 880,000 adult members is about a lot more than cookies.

Happy 100th Birthday, Girls!

Sources: http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/history/;
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<http://www.main.org/gsusa/histry.htm>; <http://yourlife.usatoday.com/mind-soul/doing-good/story/2011-08-24/Hispanic-attorney-named-new-Girl-Scout-CEO/50127058/1>.