

Scout ruling chastizes boy for religious belief

I have been in uniform twice in my life. The first time was in the Boy Scouts and the second time was in the Army and nary a difference did I discern between the two. One taught me knots and the other taught me how to build bridges and neither are skills that have been in any way useful to me. Comes now the news, however, that there is a difference between the two uniformed services. The Boy Scouts require a belief in God.



Richard Cohen

If this is news to you, it was news also to Paul Trout, a 15-year-old West Virginian who failed to make the rank of Life and was bounced from the Scouts for admitting that he did not believe in God. From the very highest levels of Scouting came a ruling that, while a Scout does not actually have to be brave or (for sure) clean, he had better be reverent: "If a person does not believe in a Supreme Being, then they (sic) can not be a member of the Boy Scouts of America," wrote Ben H. Love, chief scout executive and a man who shakes hands with three fingers.

Forget for a moment that Ben H. Love will get no merit badges for grammar, and concentrate instead on the principle implied in his letter to Trout's parents: that a person's beliefs are infinitely more important than the way he or she behaves. Trout, for instance, managed to almost make it to Life, the penultimate rank, before it was discovered that he was an atheist. And he is praised by those who know him as a Boy Scout par excellence. "I hated to lose him," said Albert Magahee, his scoutmaster. "He was the best-disciplined and most helpful of the boys in my troop."

In a cynicism borne from a Scouting experience in which boys who could not tie their shoes were forced to make knots that could handcuff an octopus, I would counsel Trout to forget all about Scouting. It instills in young men useless woodland arcana which comes in handy only should you choose to live in a tree. I would remind him also that the entire organization was founded by an eccentric, Robert Baden-Powell,

who even as a very old man insisted on sleeping on the porch. Better half-hitch yourself to another star.

But there is a matter of principle involved here — and it is more important than knowing that moss grows on the north side of the tree. That happens to be something called religious toleration — the reason, after all, the Pilgrims set sail for the New World and so many others followed. The real worth of scouting is that it is supposed to teach true American values and not just how to build a radio out of dry leaves and polar bear spittle. One of those values is that you should be judged by what you do, how you act, not by what you believe.

As far as Scouting goes, Trout's atheism ought to be besides the point. It puts out no fires, it scares off no animals and it does nothing to erode the land. It simply sits in Trout's head as a personal belief — a conclusion he has reached by following the dictates of his own logic. Most people have reached a different conclusion, but that should hardly disqualify a young man from membership in the Boy Scouts. The purpose of Scouting, as I recall, is the moral and physical education of young men so they grow into wonderful old men. One of the characteristics of wonderful old men is religious tolerance, a phrase that should certainly embrace atheism.

After all, if some beliefs are to be considered beyond the Pale, then where would you stop? Why is a belief in the "wrong" God better than a belief in no God? And if one of the exalted, if unstated, tenets of Scouting is to follow your intellect, then how can you tell a kid that his beliefs — not his actions — have taken him right out of a movement he cherishes? What is the lesson here for kids — that you are free to believe anything as long as it is accepted?

The Scouts respond with the Scout Oath and its reference to doing "my duty to God and my country" — a non-answer reminiscent of other times when casually chosen words formed the basis for discrimination. But no words alter the fact that a young man has been penalized for his religious convictions. If there's a merit badge for hypocrisy the Scouts have earned it. With just an oath and a closed mind, they have shown how little it takes to build a wall of intolerance.

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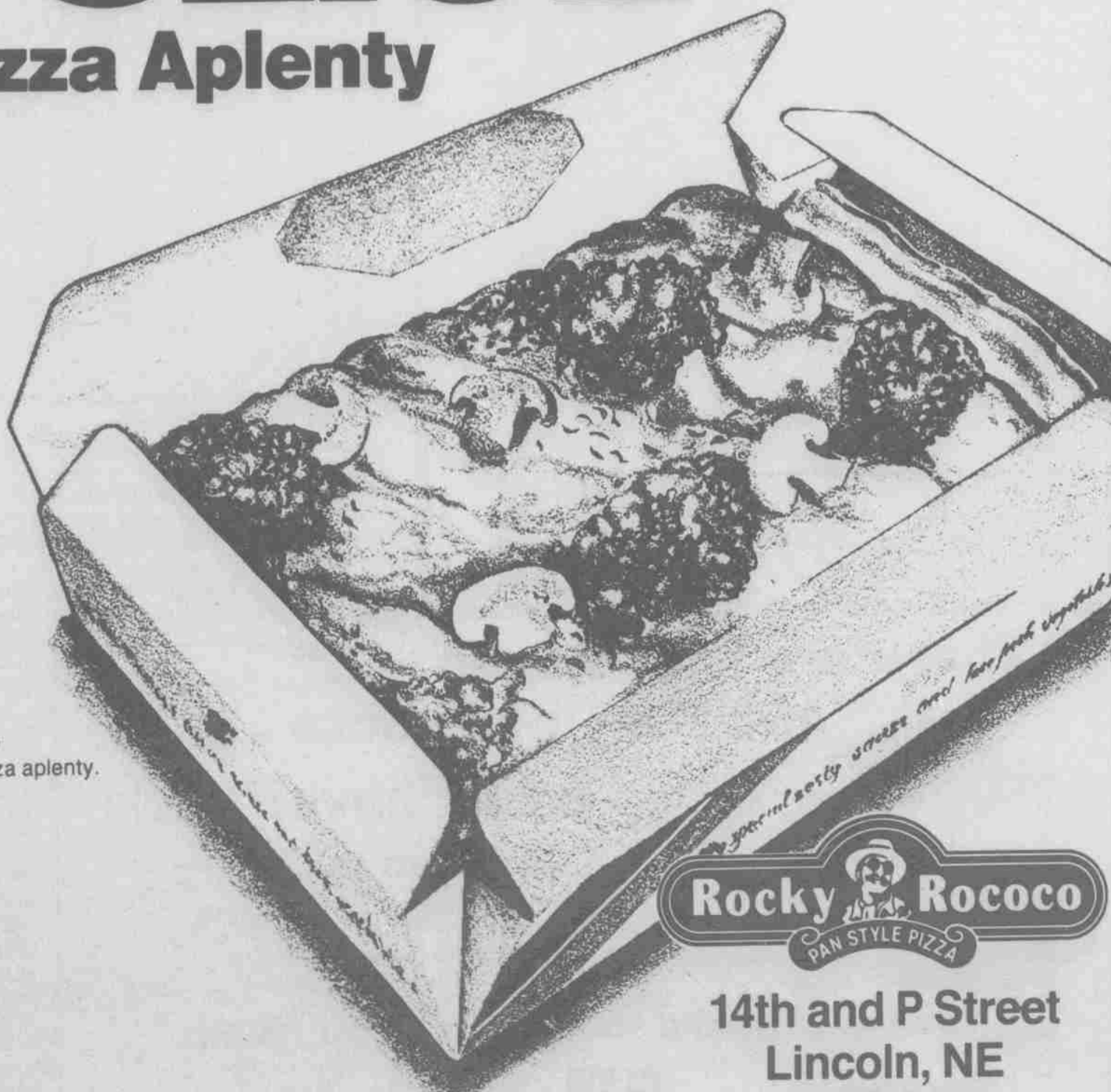
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