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scouting

HHHH

On his merits — 121 of themDexter teen accomplishes the rare feat of earning every merit badge offered by the Boy Scouts

By [Don Robinson](#)

For The Register-Guard

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Living: Personal Life: Story

Ambitious Boy Scouts strive for the rank of Eagle. To reach it they must earn at least 21 merit badges before they turn 18. Badges are awarded for acquiring knowledge and skills related to any of 121 subjects, from American Business to Woodworking.

Craig Richins became a Scout at age 11 but didn't begin working on merit badges until he was 13. He became an Eagle when he was 14 and by then had 40 badges. Two months ago, he acquired the last of all 121 badges authorized by Boy Scouts of America. And he won't be 18 until Nov. 8.

Michael Pendergrass, a district executive in the Eugene Scout office, says an old-timer there recalls no equivalent achievement in the past 23 years of the Oregon Trail Council, which covers most of Western Oregon from Corvallis to California.

Nationally, Pendergrass estimates the comparables at fewer than "1 percent of 1 percent" of Scouts.

How did Richins do it? He recalls that when he received his Eagle he thought, "OK, what am I going to do now?"

He set his sights on Eagle palms, which represent three months and five merit badges "and you can get as many palms as you have time or merit badges," he says.

At first, his target was 96 badges.

"I thought, if I get 96 that will be a miracle ... So I worked hard and during the summers I would get, like, 30 merit badges," he says. "Basically, I would wake up, brush my teeth and then do merit badges."

He hit 96 when he was 16 and still had a year and a half of eligibility if he wanted to try for the whole shebang. With family encouragement, he plunged ahead.

Some ironies attend his achievement, one of which involves his dad, Jeff Richins, a relay technician for the Eugene Water & Electric Board. Jeff was a Scout in his own youth, but fell a couple of badges short of attaining Eagle status.

"My dad told me that when he was a Scout he didn't get his hard badges first," Craig says. "So when he was 16 and 17 he didn't want to do merit badges any more because they were boring. My dad told me you should do the hardest badges now because you still have the energy to do stuff, and once you turn 15 or 16 you'll start liking girls and cars ..."

A second irony is that Craig's younger brother, Porter, is only 11 but already has 17 merit badges. Craig expects him to earn all the possible merit badges at an earlier age than Craig did. Porter is not doing the hardest badges first, though.

Although girls and cars didn't divert Craig from his quest, he's not just a Scouting drudge.

"He's a pretty well-rounded kid," says his mother, Denise Richins. He has a 3.97 high school grade point average, plays the piano for his church and is an athlete.

At Pleasant Hill High School he plays basketball (he's just shy of 6 feet tall) and performs in four track and field events: the 100- and 200-meter dashes, the long jump and the high jump.

The Richinses live on a 100-acre "hobby farm" near Dexter, just half a mile from Denise's parents, Tom and Gwen Cordon. Denise grew up on the farm and attended Pleasant Hill schools.

She and Jeff, a native of New Mexico, met at Brigham Young University. They have seven children, the youngest of whom will enter kindergarten this fall. Craig is the second oldest.

"I'm a stay-at-home mom," Denise said, although she worked briefly as an elementary school teacher. "People ask me if I work, and I say yes, I just don't get paid for it."

Denise says their church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Springfield, sponsors Troop 171, to which the Richins boys belong.

The church "really encourages all the boys to get involved in Scouting," she says.

Now, Craig is in Mexico City where he and his 15-year-old sister, Kelleen, are enrolled for one semester in Benemerito de las Americas, an 1,800-student high school run by the Mormon Church.

At the end of December they will return to resume classes in Pleasant Hill. Craig expects to graduate with his class next June.

Craig says this international adventure was inspired partly by exchange students — a brother and sister from Mexico — who lived with the Richins for a while last year.

Craig's main interest in going to Mexico is "to learn Spanish," which he undoubtedly will, since all classes are conducted in Spanish and according to his mother, "There are only about six gringos there."

In a telephone interview from his Mexico City dormitory, Craig said he is considering a career in engineering but has not decided whether to pursue electrical, chemical or biological. Nor has he chosen a college. He answered a few questions about his merit badge feat:

Which badge was the easiest? "Fingerprinting. It took me 15 minutes. I went to a clinic where the teacher gave a brief history, took our prints, and then signed the merit badge card."

Which was the most fun? "Aviation," he said. He got to go up in a small plane and, with an instructor manning the dual controls, do some turns and "go up and down."

One of the badges was reptile and amphibian study, for which he was required to keep a qualifying creature for a month and feed it what it would normally eat.

So he caught a tree frog, he said. At first he tried to feed it ants, but the tree frog wasn't interested. The frog also turned up its nose to a menu of dead flies.

"So we had to catch live flies, and had to put them in there and put a lid on top of the cage," he says. "And we could watch the fly buzz around and the tree frog would jump in the air and catch the fly and eat it. It was really interesting."

Knowing what he does now about acquiring 121 merit badges, would he do it again?

"I think I would," he says. "It was an awful lot of work, but ... you learn a little bit of everything. You don't really learn a lot about these (121) subjects, but at least you learn enough that when someone asks a question you can answer intelligently. I think I would do it again."

Besides, he says, "If I could do this, then maybe I can do other hard things, too."

"I would wake up, brush my teeth and then do merit badges."

— Craig Richins, 17-year-old scout

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