

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I'm June Simms.

On the show today, we play some music about soldiers.

We also explore the history of the word OK.

But first, we tell you about the new leader of the Boy Scouts of America.

A New Leader for the Boy Scouts

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently agreed to take on a new leadership position. He will still head up hundreds of thousands of troops. But these young men do not go to war. They seek fun, friendship and service as members of the Boy Scouts in the United States. Jim Tedder has more.

Robert Gates has served under eight American presidents. He has led the Central Intelligence Agency and the country's military. Now, he has volunteered to hold the office of president...of the Boy Scouts of America. He is expected to start next May.

Robert Gates was a member of the Boy Scouts as a child. He recently said there is no finer program for preparing American boys for citizenship and leadership.

But Mr. Gates will not find a problem free organization. The Boy Scouts has faced several legal actions in recent years. One group sued the organization for reportedly letting suspected sex abusers work with and abuse boys in the 1970s and 80s.

Andrew Chasen represents the accusers.

"We know that in Idaho alone there were fifteen different pedophiles based on these documents."

There was also a recent embarrassment for the organization in Utah. Two adult troop leaders purposely pushed down an ancient rock formation in Goblin Valley State Park. They video recorded the act and placed it on Facebook.

The local Boy Scout Council has removed the men as leaders. They also face possible criminal charges.

But one Boy Scout issue is larger than all the rest. Last May, the Boy Scouts of America announced it would permit gay boys to openly join the organization. Wayne Perry is the current Boy Scouts president.

“It’s a very difficult decision for a lot of people. But we’re moving forward.”

Not everyone agrees. Thousands of people joined in opposition to the decision. Some even broke ties with the Boy Scouts, returning honors they had earned years earlier as members.

The issue is not entirely new to Mr. Gates, however. He was Secretary of Defense as the United States military ended its ban on open homosexuality in the services.

"You're supposed to go on treating everybody like you're supposed to be treating everybody now, with dignity, respect and discipline."

Now Robert Gates will share that message, and many others, with more than two-and-a-half million boy scouts.

A Better Than OK Word

Next we turn to the story of an American word that began in Boston, Massachusetts, and spread around the world. "OK" started as a joke in eighteen thirty-nine -- and, no, we're not joking about that.

Well, a few years ago, VOA's Avi Arditti and Rosanne Skirble talked with Allan Metcalf. He wrote the book "OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word." And, he says, not just the greatest word.

"America's most important word. The most successful American export to the rest of the world. And also an embodiment of the American philosophy, the American way of thinking."

"All this, packed into two letters."

"Yes, that's the beauty of it and that's the economy of it. One of the two aspects of the American view of the world is pragmatism, getting things done. Even if they're not perfect, they're OK. And the nice thing about OK is it doesn't imply that everything is perfect or beautiful or wonderful. In fact, it's a neutral affirmation. When you say 'That's OK' or someone asks you 'How are you?' and you say 'I'm OK,' it doesn't mean that you're in perfect health. But it also doesn't mean that you're sick.

"O-K are just two letters of the alphabet. Do they stand for something?"

"Well, they do, as a matter of fact. One of the curious things about OK that makes it require a whole book to tell its story is that it began as a joke. It was on March twenty-third, eighteen thirty-nine, in a Boston newspaper, that the newspaper first used 'o.k.' and explained those as an abbreviation for 'all correct.' And, of course, the joke was that 'o' is not the beginning of 'all' and 'k' is not the beginning of 'correct.' So this thing supposedly all correct was not all correct."

At that time, Boston newspapers were publishing all sorts of abbreviations that were meant to be funny. Most of these disappeared.

"But it turns out that in the next year, eighteen forty, in the American presidential election of eighteen forty, a man named Martin Van Buren was running for re-election. He happened to come from Kinderhook, New York, and so somebody thought of calling him 'Old Kinderhook' and then thought of founding clubs supporting him throughout the country, called OK Clubs. OK, Old Kinderhook, is OK, all correct or all right. And that suddenly gave continued life and prominence to OK."

"During that presidential election year, Martin Van Buren's predecessor as president had been Andrew Jackson, and so there was an attack on Andrew Jackson by an opponent of Van Buren. The attack said that Jackson couldn't spell, so that Jackson would look at a document and if he approved of it, he would write 'OK' on it, meaning it was all correct. Now it turns out that that was a complete hoax."

Andrew Jackson never wrote OK on a document, Allan Metcalf says. But as a result of that story, within about twenty years people really began marking OK on documents. People have been doing that ever since. But Allan Metcalf says the idea that OK began as a joke kept people trying to guess where it really came from.

"The OK-as-Andrew-Jackson's hoax was the first misleading statement of its origins. And then around the eighteen eighties a professor decided that the true origin was from the Choctaw Indian language, where they had an expression like OK which means 'it is so,' and for various reasons that was proposed as the true explanation for OK. They spelled it 'o-k-e-h,' and the only American president ever to have a PhD, Woodrow Wilson, thought that was the correct explanation, so he would mark o-k-e-h on documents."

"How does OK in our vocabulary represent who we are as Americans?"

"One way that it represents who we are is that it represents the pragmatic sense of getting it done. Maybe not getting it done perfectly, but it's OK. But the other way began with a book published in 1967 by a guy named Thomas Harris. The book is called 'I'm OK -- You're OK.' And the book happens to be about a kind of psychology known as transactional analysis.

"'I'm OK' -- that means I can do what I want. 'You're OK' -- you can do what you want. Maybe we aren't doing the same thing, but that's OK."

Allan Metcalf is an English professor at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois, and longtime executive secretary of the American Dialect Society.

Songs for Soldiers

Monday is Veterans Day in the United States. The day honors American women and men who serve in the American military. There are many songs that celebrate these people as well. Kelly Jean Kelly is going to tell us about some of them.

Johnny Cash wrote and recorded several songs about soldiers, war and duty to country. He first released "Song of the Patriot" in 1981. He sings *I am a flag-waving patriotic nephew of my Uncle Sam / a rough riding fighting Yankee man.*

Rhythm and Blues singer R. Kelly released "A Soldier's Heart" in 2003. It is a song of praise and thanks for the sacrifice service members make.

We leave you with the Dixie Chicks. The band performs "Travelin' Soldier," a song written and first recorded by country musician Bruce Robison. It tells the story of a lonely American soldier who has a relationship with a high school girl through letters. He dies at war.

I'm June Simms. Our program was written and produced by Caty Weaver. Join us again next week for music and more on American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.