

Marty Mann and the Early Women of AA



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Dr. Bob (the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous) threw up his hands and said, "We have NEVER had a woman and will NOT work on a woman."

By bob k

A tremendous change has taken place over the past few generations in the way alcoholics are viewed in our society. Although it is undeniable that some level of unawareness and misunderstanding remains, substantial improvements have been effected since the 1930s. We have cause to be grateful.

The once virtually universal stigma that besieged alcoholic men was exponentially greater for women. "Nice women" didn't drink to excess. This made it extremely difficult to admit to a drinking problem in the first place. As our pioneers battled not only for their own sobriety, but for some level of "respectability," their reluctance to associate themselves with "beggars, tramps, asylum inmates, prisoners, queers (sic), plain crackpots, and fallen women," (12 & 12, p. 140), can be looked on with some degree of sympathy.

Of course, many men failed to get sober, but were able to come and go without fanfare. The women drunks seemed more disruptive. Explosions took place over "out-of-bounds" romance and the arrival of alcoholic women at the early gatherings. According to Bill Wilson, "Whole groups got into uproars, and a number of people got drunk. We trembled for AA's reputation and for its survival." (Dr. Bob & the GO, p. 241)

It did not help that AA's earliest efforts to rehabilitate women did not go well. When Caroline, ex-wife of Hank Parkhurst, called her sister Dorothy, the wife of Cleveland AA member Clarence Snyder, to tell her that she was bringing a woman to Akron from Chicago for "the cure," Dorothy was nervous about telling Dr. Bob. From *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* we know that her trepidation was warranted: "Dr. Bob threw up his hands and said, 'We have NEVER had a woman and will NOT work on a woman.' But by that time, Caroline was on her way with Sylvia K." (p. 180)

Sylvia K.

Sylvia arrived in the late summer of 1939, and the men of AA were immediately tripping over themselves in their efforts to talk to her. By all accounts, the drunken divorcee and heiress from Chicago was stunningly beautiful, and in an era when America was still feeling the effects of the Great Depression, Sylvia was getting alimony of \$700 per month. A comparison to Dr. William Silkworth's rather paltry salary of forty dollars a week as a psychiatrist at Towns Hospital puts proportion to the enormity of this stipend.

All too soon after her arrival in Akron, Sylvia began tripping over herself. Clearly, the "little white pills" that she was taking were NOT "saccharin" as she was claiming. A nurse was flown down from Chicago to take care of her.

After talking to Bob, Sylvia decided to live in Akron. This caused great consternation, since her presence threatened to disrupt the whole group. But someone told her it would mean a great deal more if she could go back and help in Chicago. This appealed to Sylvia, so the members put her and her nurse on the train. Sylvia headed for the dining car and got drunk. (Dr. Bob & the GO, p. 181)

This tale has a happy ending as she sobered up when she got back to Chicago and contacted Earl T. They both worked diligently to grow AA in Chicago, and to this very day remain revered and legendary figures in Illinois AA. Sylvia's personal story [The Keys of the Kingdom](#) appears in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th editions of our book. Sylvia K. was the first woman to achieve long term sobriety in AA, although that distinction is often erroneously conferred on Bill Wilson's close friend, Marty Mann.

"Lil"

Dr. Bob's concerns about women in AA pre-date Sylvia's 1939 arrival. The first woman, ever, to seek help from the folks who were not yet, but would one day be, AA is identified in Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers only as "Lil."

There was a man we'll call "Victor," a former mayor of Akron, and a lady we'll call "Lil," who was the first woman to seek help. Together, Victor and the lady known as Lil started out to write the "thirteenth step" long before the first twelve were even thought of. What is more, they say it began in Dr. Bob's office - on his examination table - while he was at the City Club engaged in his sacrosanct Monday night bridge game. In any case, Victor decided it was time for him to go home - but Lil was loaded. (p. 97)

Lil wouldn't leave so Victor called Ernie G., (AA #4), for assistance. Lil grabbed some pills from Dr. Bob's medicine chest and was trying to gobble them while the two men chased her around the examination table in what must have appeared like a scene from "Benny Hill," or "The Keystone Cops."

Ernie recalled, "Then she made a dive for the window. I caught her halfway out. She was strong as a horse and used some profanity I have never heard before or since. I got her quieted, and Doc came. We took her out to Ardmore Avenue (the Smith home) and put her in a room in the basement. She stayed there two or three days, and then her people took her home. Of course, they were never too kind about it and thought we didn't handle her right." (Dr. Bob & the GO, p. 98)

This tale also has a happy ending, as well as a message of open-mindedness. According to Sue Windows (Dr. Bob's daughter), "Lil" straightened out after a few years - but NOT through the AA program - got married, and had kids. AA isn't the answer for everyone. "They say that Dr. Bob was leery of anything to do with women alcoholics for a long time thereafter, although he still tried to help as best he could with any who came along." (p. 98)

Florence R.

Some consideration that was being given to the name "One Hundred Men," as the title of what would become the Big Book, was squashed by the presence of Florence Rankin, whose story [A Feminine Victory](#) appeared in the Big Book's First Edition. At the time Florence had been sober for a little more than a year. Florence's hard-drinking ex-husband, who knew Bill Wilson from Wall Street, brought Lois to talk with her. This was in March of 1937. She reports having great difficulty in seeing herself as an "alcoholic," but after some slips she got sober in early 1938.

Again, this is another tale of AA's early women that does not end well. Florence moved to Washington D.C. where she tried to assist Fitz Mayo ("Our Southern Friend") in getting AA off the ground in and around the nation's capital. One of the prospects drew her romantic interest and they married. The bridegroom was unable to stay sober and after a time, Florence got drunk as well and disappeared. When Fitz finally located her, it was at the morgue - she had committed suicide.

Jane Sturdevant

Women who joined the Akron group in the earliest days had adequate, if not impressive social credentials. Jane was married to the vice-president of a large steel company, and Sylvia was an attractive heiress. (Silkworth.net)

Dr. Bob's February, 1938 list of 'successes' showed Jane S., 12 months. Jane was making the 35 mile trip from Cleveland to the meetings at T. Henry Williams' house from early 1937. Described as "colorful and vivacious, with a fine sense of humor, Jane was the first woman to "have attained any length of sobriety - meaning a few months." (Dr. Bob & the GO, p. 122) That she has no story in the First Edition is evidence that she relapsed, AND by the time of Sylvia's arrival in September, 1939, she remained only as a bad memory for Dr. Bob, prompting the previously-cited "we have never had a woman, we will not work with a woman" remark.

Others came from the opposite end of the social strata. There is brief mention of an "Indian waitress," and early member Warren C. recalled one woman who sought help but was "thrown out of AA by the wives. She was so bad that they wouldn't allow her in their homes."

Dr. LeClair Bissell

Bissell was an M.D., an addiction researcher with an "inside knowledge" of the malady, and the co-author of the 1987 book, *Ethics for Addiction Professionals*. Joining AA in 1953, at the age of twenty-five, she stayed sober until her death in 2008. William L. White, who interviewed Dr. Bissell in 1997 described her as "an unabashed atheist, a vocal lesbian, and a visible woman in addiction recovery before such openness was in vogue." Dr. Bissell's specific relevance to this essay is that she was personally acquainted with Mrs. Marty Mann, and was able to relay to us Mann's own experience of AA in 1939:

Marty shared with me that when she went to her first AA meeting at Bill and Lois' home in Brooklyn, the men were very afraid. The experience of some of the earlier women was that the men were very threatened by them, and didn't want them in the group. That is what happened with Marty Mann... It was Lois Wilson who made her welcome, and pretty much insisted the men behave themselves. (White, William, [Reflections of an addiction treatment pioneer: An Interview with LeClair Bissell, MD \(1928-2008\)](#), conducted January 22, 1997)

Marty Mann

Born in 1905, Margaret "Marty" Mann grew up in Chicago, where her wealthy family provided her with every advantage including the finest boarding schools and finishing school in Europe. In her Big Book story "[Women Suffer Too](#)" we are told "My family had money - I had never known denial of any material desire." An attractive and popular debutante, Marty's circle was a young, privileged and fast-moving crowd. It was the "roaring twenties," after all.

Following her own "debut" in 1927, at the age of twenty-one, Marty eloped with a handsome New Orleans "party boy" from a socially prominent family. Both bride and groom were considerably "high on alcohol" at the time. The young husband's dubious "claim to fame" was being his town's "worst drunk." In her words, "My husband was an alcoholic, and since I had only contempt for those without my own amazing capacity, the outcome was inevitable. My divorce coincided with my father's bankruptcy, and I went to work (1928), casting off all allegiances and responsibilities to anyone other than myself." (Women Suffer Too)

Described by those who knew her as "favored with beauty, brains, charisma, phenomenal energy, and a powerful will," she merged these with strong social connections to forge a successful career in Public Relations. "I had my own business, successful enough for me to indulge most of my desires." She even "went abroad to live." That her life of success, hedonism, and fulfilled desires left her "increasingly miserable," is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's insightful dictum - "There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." The fun and frolic of the late 20s had become something altogether different ten years later.

Hangovers began to assume monstrous proportions, and the morning drink became an urgent necessity. 'Blanks' became more frequent... With a creeping insidiousness, drink had become more important than anything else. It no longer gave me pleasure - it merely dulled the pain - but I had to have it.

A return to America and her "drinking grew worse." The one-time debutante, then PR whiz kid, found herself on the charity ward of first Bellvue Hospital and then the Blythewood Sanitarium in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Mann's psychiatrist, Harry Tiebout had been given a manuscript of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* which he gave her to read.

The first chapters were a revelation to me. I wasn't the only person in the world who felt and behaved like this! I wasn't mad or vicious - I was a sick person. I was suffering from an actual disease that had a name and symptoms like diabetes or cancer or TB - and a disease was respectable, not a moral stigma. (Women Suffer Too)

Spreading the message expressed in the previous quotation would eventually take Marty Mann far beyond the rooms of AA.

Meeting Bill Wilson

In spite of not being happy with "the number of capital 'G' words" present in the manuscript, in April 11 of 1939, Marty was driven by Popsie M. to the Clinton St. meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. The occasion must have been somewhat somber as the government-imposed moratorium on foreclosures had been recently lifted, and the Wilsons were about to lose their home. At the gathering of "this group of freaks or bums who had done this thing" a surprising thing happened: "I went trembling into a house in Brooklyn filled with strangers... and I found I had come home at last, to my own kind."

In spite of this auspicious debut, and a somewhat secular "awakening" about the need to let go of anger, Ms. Mann did not go deaf to the siren call of fermented beverages. Several relapses preceded her achieving a long term sobriety well into 1940 - possibly just one more illustration of the insidious nature of the malady.

The Yale Plan for Alcohol Studies

When Dr. E.M. Jellinek, America's premier researcher into alcoholism, joined Dr. Howard Haggard (medicine) and Dr. Sheldon D. Bacon (sociology) to form "The Yale Plan for Alcohol Studies," they had a problem. In order that they not be viewed as "Ivory Tower" types with only a superficial, academic knowledge of "real" alcoholism, they needed a "real" alcoholic, "Exhibit A." Of course, this issue was not unrelated to fund-raising. Marty Mann joined these men in their noble cause of bringing change to public attitudes toward the disease and its sufferers. She felt the calling to work in the field of alcoholic education, and in particular she desired to help women alcoholics who were cursed with a "double stigma."

The National Committee for Education on Alcoholism, Inc., the organization Marty founded, opened its offices on October 2, 1944. N.C.E.A. - eventually to become the National Council on Alcoholism - received an enthusiastic endorsement from the Grapevine, itself only four months old. It also received the support of many prominent (and some not so prominent) people, whose names, including those of Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, appeared on the committee's letterhead... The AA co-founders' names on the letterhead gave the impression that the two groups were connected. To confuse matters further, Marty, as she spoke across the country on behalf of her new organization, was breaking her own anonymity. (Pass it On, p. 320)

Ultimately, Wilson and Smith withdrew from N.C.E.A. and became persuaded that total non-affiliation was the only answer, as they had inadvertently associated AA with the plea for public funds by Mann's organization, a solicitation that went out at some point to AA members. Additionally, Marty agreed to discontinue publicly identifying herself as an AA member. This was not entirely satisfactory, as the public was becoming aware that only AA members tended to refer to themselves as 'alcoholics' after becoming sober through the fellowship, while those who had gotten sober by any other means typically referred to themselves as "ex-alcoholics."

Anonymity issues aside, the N.C.E.A., with Mrs. Mann as spokesperson and 'Exhibit A,' was quite successful in communicating the three tenets of its core message:

1. Alcoholism is a disease, and the alcoholic is a sick person;
2. The alcoholic can be helped, and is worth helping;
3. Alcoholism is a public health problem, and therefore a public responsibility.

These ideas are so universally accepted today, that it can be difficult to imagine that they were both revolutionary and counter-intuitive at the time.

In the 1950s, famous journalist and newscaster (he was HUGE, young people), Edward R. Murrow included Marty Mann on his list of the ten "Greatest Living Americans." (Murrow is brilliantly portrayed by Canadian David Strathairn in the 2005 film "Good Night and Good Luck," directed by George Clooney and nominated for several Academy Awards.)

Mann's breach of her own anonymity "for the sake and good of others" clearly had mostly positive outcomes. It is hard to know the causes leading to her relapse at twenty years sober. Perhaps the aggrandizement of ego that is at the core of AA's fears for members who "go public" was a factor. AA also warns of the dangers of being a "secret keeper," and Mann was an "in-the-closet" lesbian for decades. Her close friends knew the truth, but she shielded this additional "stigma" from the public to the point of retaining and using the title "Mrs." her entire life, in spite of returning to the use of her maiden name. Her volatile love affair with "the Countess" may have also been a factor - all matters of speculation.

People have also speculated that later in her life she had been drinking at times when she was representing herself as sober. Regardless, she is an iconic character in the history of AA, and at a far broader level in the worldwide treatment and understanding of alcoholism. Mrs. Marty Mann died in 1980 shortly after suffering a stroke. She was seventy-five years old.

There are few things that have changed more since these earliest days than the position of women within the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. From this less than auspicious debut and a mere token presence in 1939, women now comprise fully thirty-five percent of our society. Young women, arriving new to AA in the twenty-first century, may well be surprised and even displeased with the male-dominant language of the Big Book, but it is a reflection of a different era, fully three generations in the past. Much is owed to these intrepid female pioneers, for blazing the trail for the women of today.

bob k is the author of *Key Players in AA History*, and today's article is Chapter 28 in the book.

Key Players in AA History is available at [Amazon USA](#). As well, you can get the paperback version at [Amazon Canada](#) and at [Amazon - UK](#).

It is also available at all of the standard online outlets in all eBook formats, including [Kindle](#), [Kobo](#) and [Nook](#), as well as an [iBook](#) for Macs and iPads.

