

## THE EVOLUTION OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

By Jim Burwell

The spark of Alcoholics Anonymous was ignited about the middle of November 1934 in a kitchen on a second floor at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn. This was Bill Wilson's home. The occasion was the visit of a schoolboy friend of his from Vermont, Ebby Thacher. Bill was in the middle of a binge, which had started on Armistice Day. His friend Ebby had heard of Bill's trouble with alcohol. Ebby was sober and Bill said later that this was the first time he had seen him in that condition for many years, for he always thought that Ebby was a hopeless drunk. He greeted Bill on this visit with the words, "I've got religion," Bill says at the time he thought poor Ebby had probably gotten sober only to become balmy on religion. While still drinking, he listened to Ebby's story about being converted some six months previously by the New York Oxford Group. He told Bill about the main idea of this group being one person helping another, and their other formulas. Bill said he listened to all this talk while he was in the process of keeping the jitters down by continuously drinking and probably smiling cynically to himself. When Ebby left a few hours later he practically dismissed the incident, but he later found that this was not the case. Within five days he found himself wheeled into his refuge, Towne's Hospital on Central Park West in New York, for the third time that year. On his arrival at the hospital with his wife Lois, he was greeted and put to bed immediately by his old friend, Dr. Silkworth, the Director. (Editor's Note: Incidentally, this is a great friend of the Group, who later wrote the "Doctor's Opinion" in the AA book.)

Bill said that after he had been in bed a short while during an earlier hospitalization he heard the doctor talking to Lois by the door, saying that if her husband came out of this episode and did drink again, he did not honestly believe he would live six months. Bill states that when he heard these words he was immediately carried back to his talk with his friend and could not dismiss the idea that although Ebby might be batty with religion, he was sober and he was happy. He kept turning this over in his mind, in a mild delirium, and came to a vague conclusion that maybe Ebby did have something in a man's helping others in order to get away from his own obsessions and problems. A few hours later when the doctor came in, he felt a tremendous elation and said, "Doc, I've got it." At the same time he felt that he was on a high mountain and that a very swift wind was blowing through him, and despite the several weeks of drinking, he found he was completely relaxed and quiet. He asked Dr. Silkworth, "Am I going crazy with this sudden elation I have?" The doctor's answer was, seriously, "I don't know Bill, but I think you had better hold on to whatever you have."

While he was in the hospital Ebby and the other Oxford Group people visited Bill and told him of their activities, particularly in the Calvary Mission. On Bill's release, while still shaky, he visited Dr. Shoemaker at Calvary Mission and made a decision to become very active in the Mission's work and to try and bring other alcoholics from Towne's to the Group.

This resolution he put into effect, visiting the Mission and Towne's almost daily for four or five months, and bringing some of the drunks to his home for rehabilitation. During this time he was also trying to make another comeback in his Wall Street activities, for Bill, like many others, had

built up tremendous paper profits in the roaring twenties, only to go broke in the '29 crash. However, he did make a temporary comeback in the depression years of '32 and '33 as a syndicate man, only to have John Barleycorn wipe him out more completely than ever in his worst drinking year of 1934. Through hard work and a little good luck, by May 1st, 1935 he managed to become a leader of a minority group of a small corporation, and obtained quite a few proxies from others. This group sent him out to Akron, Ohio, hoping to get control of the corporation. Bill said later that if this had happened, he would probably have been financially independent for life, but when he attended the stockholders meeting he found himself snowed under by the other faction. So around the middle of May, there he was in the Portage Hotel in Akron, without even return fare home and completely at the end of his rope. Bill's story goes that he found himself pacing the lobby, backwards and forwards, trying to decide whether to forget it all in the hotel bar, when he noticed the Directory of Churches at the other end of the room. The thought struck him that if he could talk to another alcoholic he might regain his composure, for that had been effective back in New York. Although he had worked consistently with drunks for over six months he had not been able to save anyone, with the possible exception of himself. He telephoned several of the churches listed, and was finally directed to one of the Oxford Group's leaders in town, Henrietta Seiberling. Bill tells of calling Henrietta and being so shaky that he could hardly get the coin in the slot. The first thing he asked her was, "Where can I find another alcoholic to talk to?" Henrietta's answer was, "You stay right where you are until I get there, for I think I can take you to the very man you are looking for." This she did, and the man she took Bill to see was Dr. Bob Smith, who later became the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. When Henrietta and Bill got to Dr. Bob's they found his wife, Annie, alone. She was in a mental uproar herself because her husband had been on the loose for several days. After Bill and Henrietta had waited and chatted on the Oxford Group policies, in popped the good doctor himself, quite potted and with a potted lily in his arms for his wife's Mothers Day gift. When Bob had been bedded Annie insisted that Bill stay and try to straighten her husband out. Bill did this and his stay lengthened into months. During the next few days Bill and Bob talked for hours and decided to pool their resources to help other drunks. When Bob had been dry only a few weeks, a new hurdle arose, for Bob found it was imperative for him to go to a medical convention in Atlantic City. Bob did make the convention, but suddenly found himself drunk on the train going back to Akron. However, this turned out to be his last spree, for he dates his last drink June 10, 1935.

This apparent calamity was probably one of the greatest blessings in disguise for us later members, for it did cement Bob in this new fellowship they were launching. Bill stayed on with the Smiths until the 1st of October and during that time Bob and he managed to secure two more converts to the fold. Bill then returned to New York where he continued his previous activities, with daily visits to Towne's and Calvary Mission. During the latter part of October, Bill got his first real New York convert, Hank Parkhurst. Hank later became one of the genuine inspirations of Alcoholics Anonymous, for he was a red-haired, high-pressure human dynamo. Before his last trip to Towne's, where Bill found him, Hank had been sales manager for Standard Oil of New Jersey. From the time of their meeting and during the latter part of 1935 it was Hank

and Bill who did all the ground work, but even then they had but indifferent success until their next real convert, Paul Rudell came in about April 1936.

The next man to be pulled out of the mire, through Towne's, was dear old Fitz Mayo who joined the others about November 1936. From this time on the duet became a trio, Bill, Hank and Fitz and they were the spearheads in drunk-saving for the Oxford Group in the New York area. However, they discovered in September 1937, that despite all the wet-nursing, praying and rehabilitation work done at Bill's house on Clinton Street, of approximately thirty-five or forty drunks, they were the only three men to come clear in almost two years. During this period many things happened, some quite tragic, with even an alcoholic suicide in Bill's home.

In September 1937 the three concluded that perhaps their technique would be better if they would do their work with drunks outside of an affiliation with a religious organization. Having arrived at this decision, the trio formally resigned from the Oxford Group and concentrated all their efforts on working with alcoholics in Towne's Hospital, using Bill's home as a de-fogging station. About this time the first completely alcoholic meetings were held in Bill's home on Tuesday evenings and average attendance ran about fifteen, including the drunks' families. Even though the trio had separated from the Oxford Group, they still retained a lot of their principles and utilized them in the discussions at these weekly meetings, but at the same time more emphasis was placed on the disease of alcoholism as a psychological sickness. At the same time they stressed spiritual regeneration and the understanding of one alcoholic for another.

A few months after the break with the Oxford Group, January 1938, I was brought into the New York fellowship from Washington by Fitz Mayo, whom I had known since boyhood. I was enticed to New York by the existence of this new group and a small job that Hank Parkhurst gave me in a little business he and Bill had gone into on the side called "Honor Dealers". When I arrived in New York I found myself thrust into this new group of three or four actively dry alcoholics, who at that time had no group name, or real creed or formula.

Within the next two or three months, things really started popping. Hank, with his promotional ideas, started to push Bill into writing a formula, the trio finally decided a book should be written on our activities and this was in June 1938. Bill was naturally given the job of writing the book for he was the only one who had made any real conclusive study of our problem. From what I can remember, Bill's only special preparation for this was confined to the reading of four very well known books, the influence of which can clearly be seen in the AA Book. Bill probably got most of his ideas from one of these books, namely James' "Varieties of Religious Experience." I have always felt this was because Bill himself had undergone such a violent spiritual experience. He also gained a fine basic insight of spirituality through Emmet Fox's "Sermon on the Mount," and a good portion of the psychological approach of AA from Dick Peabody's "Common Sense of Drinking." It is my opinion that a great deal of Bill's traditions came from the fourth book. Lewis Browne's "This Believing World." From this book, I believe Bill attained a remarkable perception of possible future pitfalls for groups of our kind for it clearly shows that the major failures of religions and cults in the past have been due to one of three things: Too much organization, too much politics, and too much money or power.

Bill started his actual writing of our book in the later part of June 1938 in Hank Parkhurst's office in Newark, with Hank's secretary, Ruth Hock, taking dictation. About a month later Bill had completed two chapters. Each had been brought up at the Clinton Street Tuesday night meetings. Bill would read what had been written to the group as a whole and then pull apart and suggestions added by all those present. When these two chapters were rewritten, we were all very elated because we felt we were well on our way to saving all drunks everywhere.

With these two chapters in hand, and without any introduction of any kind, Bill went to see the editors of Harper's Publishing Company. Harpers immediately caught fire and offered Bill, on the strength of this one visit, a \$1,500 advance payment to finish the book, plus regular author's royalties. Bill said later that he almost succumbed to this offer because that was big money in those days and we were all broke. When Bill returned and reported this offer, Hank said, "If it's worth that much for just two chapters from an unknown author, it's worth easily a million to us," and the trio immediately determined that Bill would finish writing the book and our Group would do the publishing.

In August, promotion minded Hank formed our first corporation for handling this book, to be named "100 Men Corporation" and he provided that two-thirds of the corporation would belong to him and Bill, the other third to be sold on shares at \$25 par to friends and members. He announced that this third should easily bring us in \$10,000, which was to see us through publication. Our idea at this time was that the book alone would save the drunks in the majority of cases, by self-education. Then it was decided that there would be some that the book alone would not do the job for, so another corporation was founded at the same time called, "The Alcoholic Foundation." The Foundation's function would be the disbursement of funds and the establishment of alcoholic "farms" all over the country. The money for this, of course, we would get after the sale of the first million books. Then we were faced with the problem of who was to go on this new foundation. At this time, August 1938, we had only four men dry over a year in New York. These were Bill, Hank, Fitz and Paul Rudell, so to these four Dr. Bob Smith of Akron was added.

During this time of promotion, corporations and other such activities, Bill continued his writing of the book, averaging about a chapter a week. These were made up in triplicates, one copy going to Akron, one to the Clinton Street meetings and the third reserved as an office copy. These chapters, as completed, would be ranked and mauled over in the two group meetings, changes were noted in the margins and returned weekly to the Newark office. About the middle of October 1938 the manuscript of the book was finished and the personal stories that appear in the AA book, in its present form, were contributed by individual members from Akron and New York. As previously mentioned, the name of the book at this time was "100 Men" and the new corporation had finally raised, through forty-nine members in New York and Akron, about \$3,000.

We then submitted the book to Dr. Yussel, well-known critic of New York University – this was about the 1st of November and he was paid \$300 to edit the book. Practically nothing was done to the personal stories of the individual members and there was less than 20% deletion from the original manuscript. When Yussel returned the book we found our "100 Men Corporation"

broke, the \$3,000 gone. The only concrete assets we had besides the manuscript were some blank copper plates to be used in printing. We also found our name "100 Men" inadequate for we had forgotten the ladies and we already had one girl, Florence Rankin, on the ball. In one of our discussion meetings at Clinton Street other names were brought up for consideration. Most prominent of these were "This Way Out," "Exit," "The End of the Road" and several others. Finally we hit on our present name. Nobody is too sure exactly where it came from but it is my opinion that it was suggested by one of our newer members, Joe Worden, who had at one time been considered quite a magazine promotion genius, and who had been given credit for starting the New Yorker magazine. Hank and Bill finally decided on the name "Alcoholics Anonymous" in the latter part of November 1938.

About this time we almost had a disaster in our still wobbly group but it later turned out to be a Godsend. Bill and Hank had distributed quite a few copies of the original manuscript to doctors, psychiatrists and ministers to get a last minute reaction. One of these went to Dr. Howard, Chief Psychiatrist for the State of New Jersey. He became greatly interested and enthusiastic, but was highly critical of several things in the book, for after reading it he told us there was entirely too much "Oxfordism" and that it was too demanding. This is where the disaster nearly overtook us, for it nearly threw Bill into a terrific mental uproar to have his "baby" pulled apart by an outside "screwball" psychiatrist, who in our opinion knew nothing about alcoholism. After days of wrangling between Bill, Hank, Fitz and myself, Bill was finally convinced that all positive and "must" statements should be eliminated and in their place to use the word "suggest" and the expression "we found we had to." Another thing changed in this last rewriting was qualifying the word "God" with the phrase "as we understand Him." (This was one of my few contributions to the book.) In the final finishing the fellowship angle was enlarged and emphasized. After many arguments and uproars, the manuscript was finally finished, complete, in December 1938. We now had one real problem – no money.

It was about this time that the "100 Men Corporation" was closed out and a new one started named "Works Publishing Company." This name derived from a common expression, used in the group, "It works!!" Those that had stock or interest in the old corporation maintained the same priority in the new one.

Then a new wrinkle was devised by our master-minds – we would make a couple of hundred multilith copies of the finished manuscript and these we would use as a promotion for more stock selling and at the same time to get possible endorsement of well-known people, particularly, in the fields of religion and medicine. These copies were distributed to the Works Publishing Company shareholders and possible prospective stockholders. With these multilith copies we sent out a prospectus for our corporation and a note saying that the copy could be purchased for \$3.50 and a copy of the book, if when printed, would be sent gratis to each purchaser. From this venture, we did not get one new stockholder. However, the copies did get into all sections of the country. One created quite an amusing incident for it got into the hands of a patient in a psychopathic hospital in California. This man immediately caught fire and religion all in one fell swoop. He wrote and told us about the wonderful release he had from alcohol through our new Alcoholics Anonymous multilith. Of course all of us in New York

became highly excited and wires bounced back and forth between us and our new convert regarding this miracle that happened 3,000 miles away. This man wrote the last personal history in the book while he was still in California called the "Lone Endeavor". Our New York Groups were so impressed by his recovery that we passed the hat and sent for him to come East as an example. This he did, but when the boys met him at the bus station the delusion faded, for he arrived stone drunk and as far as I know, never came out of it.

The major result of the multilith was our first important endorsement outside of our group and friends. It came from Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Baptist Church in New York and a nationally-known speaker and writer.

So here we were again, broke, only more so!

Bill came to our rescue, as usual, by floating a \$2,500 loan from Dr. Towne's, who already had a good slice in the original corporation. With the blank copper plates and Dr. Towne's loan, Hank prevailed on the Cornwall Press, in February 1939, to make 8,000 copies for our first edition. The book was purposely made to look bulky for two reasons – to give it an air of intellectual authority and to make it look like a lot for the money. The dust jacket, with its familiar red, black, yellow and white, was designed by one of our artist members, Ray Campbell, whose story in the book is called "An Artists Concept". Although Cornwall did print these 5,000 books in April 1939, they still felt that we were quite short in our down payment and insisted that the books be kept in a bonded warehouse and withdrawn only on the payment of \$2.00 per copy. Our method of distributing the books was to get possibly ten copies out at a time, and the members would individually buttonhole libraries, doctors and others for sales. Funds received from these purchasers were in turn used to buy additional copies, which in their turn were sold in the same way. About the only bookstores we could interest at the start was Brentano's in New York, who did gamble on a half a dozen copies. Five of the very first books were presented to Dr. Fishbein, editor of the American Medical Journal to whom Dr. Towne had lauded AA. Dr. Fishbein had promised to give us a real buildup in the Journal but when his review appeared, it merely said that AA was nothing new and had no real significance to the medical profession. So another balloon busted.

In June, Bill and Hank decided to try another promotion stunt – this was to put a 2" x 3" advertisement in the New York Times Book Review. This cost us \$250 and I have often wondered where the money came from. We thought we had the real answer to publicity this time, and we all sat back and started guessing and betting among ourselves on the number of requests we would get for our million-dollar book. The estimates ranged from 2,000 to 20,000 copies, but we were due for another disappointment, as only two copies of the book were sold in spite of our seven-day free trial offer.

It was about this time that we got our first really active girl member, Marty Mann, who took the AA program while under restraint at Blywood Sanitarium. Marty's efforts on behalf of women alcoholics in the early days were of inestimable value and today she is one of the most indefatigable workers on behalf of AA in the country.

It was also in June of this year that we made our first contact with the Rockerfeller Foundation. This was arranged by Bert Taylor, one of the older members, who had known the family for years in a business way. Dr. Richardson, who had long been spiritual advisor for the Rockerfeller family, became very interested and friendly, and Bill and Hank made frequent visits to him, with Hank on one side asking for financial help and Bill on the other insisting on moral support only.

Our first national publicity was arranged through one of our new members, Morgan Ryan in August 1939. This was a spot on the "We The People" radio program, which was then very popular. Again we were disappointed, for this publicity brought us only a dozen inquiries and one book sale. This was despite the fact that we sent out 10,000 post cards to doctors and ministers in the New York area announcing the broadcast. It was also in August that a real calamity befell Bill, for he and Lois were evicted from their home on Clinton Street. This had once been Lois' girlhood home and was AA's first home. Little did Bill and Lois know that for the next two years they would be homeless, dependent on the hospitality of other AA's.

About this time, too, another AA Group was launched in Cleveland, Ohio. The founder was Clarence Snyder who had received his AA Indoctrination with Dr. Bob in Akron. Clarence and his wife, Dorothy, obtained our first newspaper publicity, which was in the Cleveland Plain Dealer in September 1939. As a result of this publicity the Cleveland Group, within thirty days, became temporarily the largest group in the country.

Our first medical endorsement also came in September from Dr. Richard Smith, Superintendent of Rockland State Hospital in New York. His praise was the result of our work with alcoholics in the hospital there over a period of approximately six months. The first national magazine to give us a break was Liberty, in October 1939, with a two-page article labeled "Alcoholics and God". This article brought in about a thousand inquiries and sold possibly one hundred books. My guess would be that as a summary for the year 1939, we had three active groups with a total membership of less than 200 and a gross book sale for eight months of less than 500. By the end of 1939 also, AA was beginning to get some real recognition. At the end of December that year John D. Rockerfeller, Jr. issued invitations to some 200 of his closest associates and friends to a dinner to be held February 8th 1940 at the Union League Club in New York. The invitations stated that the purpose of the dinner was to have these people meet a group of people on whom Rockerfeller had become interested, no name announced. The dinner and the publicity were arranged by Rockerfeller's personal publicity man, Ivy Lee. Sixty actually attended this dinner, some of the more prominent being Dr. Fosdick, Owen Young, Wendell Wilkie, Sorenson of the Ford interests and Dr. Foster Kennedy, President of the Psychiatric Association. Before this dinner we felt it would solve all our problems, especially the financial ones, for Ivy Lee himself estimated the personal wealth of those present to be well over two billion dollars. Fate was against us again despite glowing talks by Dr. Fosdick, Kennedy, Nelson Rockerfeller and Bill, the total contributions to Alcoholics Anonymous were less than \$1,500, \$1,000 of which came from the Rockerfeller Foundation. (All of these contributions were later returned in full.)

Still we learned later that we had gained a great deal more than money from this dinner, for thereafter the Rockefellers allowed their name to be publicly used in connection with AA. It has always been my contention that this was the real turning point in the history of AA.

During the next six months practically the whole country was spotted with AA groups. Between February and June 1940 Fitz and myself started groups in Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore. About the same time Earl Treat migrated from the Akron Group to start one in Chicago, and Arch Trowbridge also went from Akron to Detroit. It was also during these months that Larry Jewell left Cleveland and organized a group in Houston, Texas. Kay Miller, a non-alcoholic but the wife of one of the early Akron members moved into Los Angeles and started their group. In the Fall of 1940 a Jewish member named Meyerson, a traveling salesman, started AA groups in Atlanta, Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida.

The next outstanding event in Alcoholics Anonymous growth was the publication of the Saturday Evening Post article. This was mostly arranged through the efforts of two well-known Philadelphia physicians, Dr. C. Dudley Saul and Dr. A. Wiese Hammer. They had gained the interest of Judge Curtis Bok, one of the owners of the Saturday Evening Post and in the early days of Philadelphia AA, Judge Bok had been a constant visitor to the group. It was in a large part due to his interest that Jack Alexander was assigned to do a feature article on Alcoholics Anonymous in August 1940. We were later told that the editors also thought Alexander would be a good man to possibly "expose" this new "screwball" organization. However, Alexander did promise that he would not write his article until he had visited groups and seen AA in action. He traveled from New York and Philadelphia as far West as St. Louis and attended AA meetings. His experience with these groups made him so enthusiastic over the AA setup that the article he wrote was responsible for the largest sale of a single issue of the Post in its history. The Alcoholic Foundation office in New York reports that over 10,000 inquiries were received from this one article. Even today people coming into AA groups in various parts of the country tell us that their first knowledge of Alcoholics Anonymous was the Saturday Evening Post article by Jack Alexander.

It is my guess that in March 1941 there were less than 1,000 active AA members in the Country and the following year we added at least seven or eight thousand members.