

September 1977

A Treasury of AA History

by Nell Wing

A nonalcoholic who has served AA almost from the beginning writes of her new work as AA archivist

I CAME TO WORK for the Alcoholic Foundation (the old name for the AA General Service Board) in March 1947, when AA was only twelve years old. The Fellowship then was barely out of its infancy, with a membership of about 40,000 in some 1,200 groups.

There were thirteen people, including Bill W., in our three-room office at 415 Lexington Avenue, directly across from Grand Central Station in New York City. Before I arrived on the scene, an office manager had been brought in to shape up the rather freewheeling office crew, who had divided up the jobs among themselves and turned rebellious at the first hint of discipline. Indeed, they shortly quit en masse.

Today, some thirty years later, there are seventy-three employees occupying three and a half floors. It seems incredible that, whereas it took twelve years to garner 40,000 mem-

bers, today it is estimated that about 100,000 new people join AA in one year. Today's estimated membership stands at more than a million—enough to boggle the mind of even a nonalcoholic!

The year I came to the foundation – in fact, that entire decade, 1945 to 1955 – was an exciting and important time in AA history, probably the most productive period of growth and development we've seen to date.

What was happening? The Big Book was earning money, and had been since 1942. Old debts had been repaid. The trustees were passing resolutions about making AA self-supporting. By 1945, the groups were contributing to the support of the office. During 1946 and 1947 especially, the public became much interested in AA, and various Hollywood studios were in contact with our Headquarters, wanting to make a movie about AA. There were good



At her desk in the sunny main room of the archives, Nell Wing welcomes visitors and answers questions on AA history from AAs around the world.

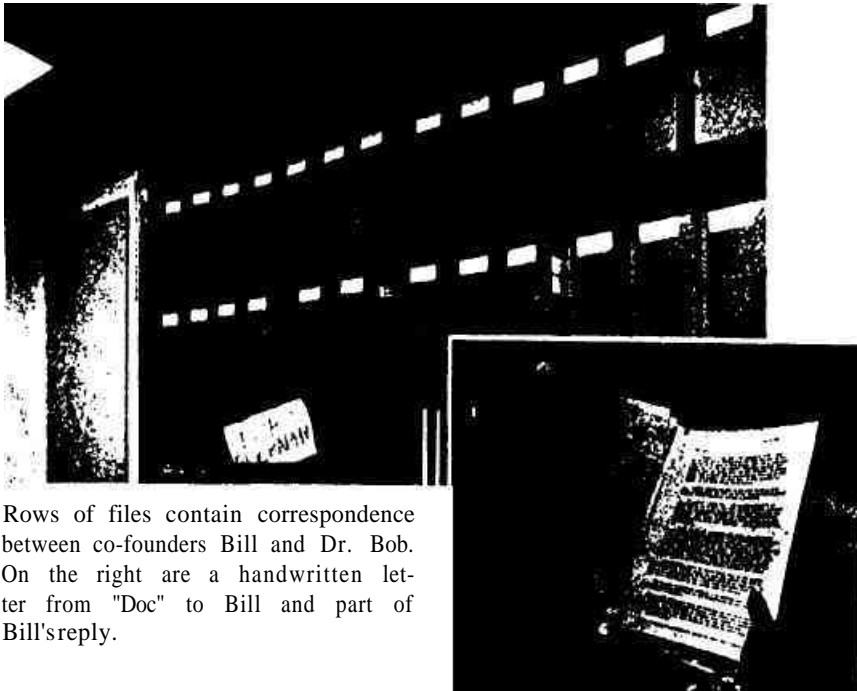
radio programs, newspaper articles, and two excellent documentary films on AA. *Time Magazine* and the *Reader's Digest* carried articles, and the latter brought in more than 3,000 inquiries in one month alone. The medical profession gave AA the Lasker Award in 1951 and recognized alcoholism as a disease in 1956, and the Veterans Administration began to open the doors of its hospitals to AA.

Inside AA, too, things were popping! Bill was writing the Twelve Traditions, and they were being published in the *Grapevine*. The *Grapevine* itself was evolving, beginning to be recognized as the international journal of the Fellowship. Intergroup offices were being established in localities where there were many groups, and AA was growing

steadily in Canada and overseas.

Lone Members were touching and changing the lives of suffering alcoholics all over the world. Captain Jack S., soon to be the founder of a group of AA seamen, the Internationalists, was seeking out alcoholics in various ports of call, leaving behind pamphlets and books and potential members. American AA servicemen stationed in foreign countries were following in the footsteps of earlier Loners who had dropped AA's message into fertile soil along the East Coast and in the Midwest of the United States in the 1940's.

At Headquarters, Bill was working on plans for a future General Service Conference, and he and the trustees were hotly debating the merits of this idea. The issue caused much concern



Rows of files contain correspondence between co-founders Bill and Dr. Bob. On the right are a handwritten letter from "Doc" to Bill and part of Bill's reply.

and bitterness, with many board members threatening to resign and some doing it (though all took back their resignations later on). Bill finally won the approval of Dr. Bob and the majority of the trustees for his idea, and in October 1950, the board empowered Bill to proceed to organize the Conference, which held its first meeting in 1951.

In the late 1940's, controversy also developed over implied participation by AA in the fund-raising activity of an outside agency, causing the trustees to issue a policy statement declaring that AA would ask no endorsement and solicit no funds from non-AA sources. To lessen the chance of misinterpretation, the trustees passed a firm resolution, in 1949, to accept contributions from AA

groups and members *only*, all others to be declined.

At the 1950 International Convention, the Twelve Traditions—defining and describing the principles of AA unity—were accepted by the membership. And at the 1955 Convention, Bill formally turned over the guidance of AA's affairs to the Fellowship.

The 1940's had been years of creation and change, establishing basic structure and tradition. The 1950's were years of consolidation. Groups and members communicated not so much via long, newsy letters as through more businesslike letters from groups to GSO. GSO became more of a real service office, less an advisory entity.

During the 1960's, general service



A cabinet (left) contains the Lasker Award, given to AA in 1951, copies of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Liberty* Magazines that ran articles on AA, a manuscript copy of the Big Book, and other memorabilia. Below, the microfilm viewer is used by an AA member to look over some historical documents.



archives, a project that got under way about four years ago. With the advice of a professional librarian, I set about wading through and organizing mounds of accumulated correspondence and historical records. In the fall of 1973, the Archives Committee was set up as a standing committee of the General Service Board. It deliberates on matters of policy and budget, guards the integrity and confidentiality of all archives material, and considers requests from individuals who want permission to use the archives for research projects. But the main purpose of the committee is to help keep the record straight.

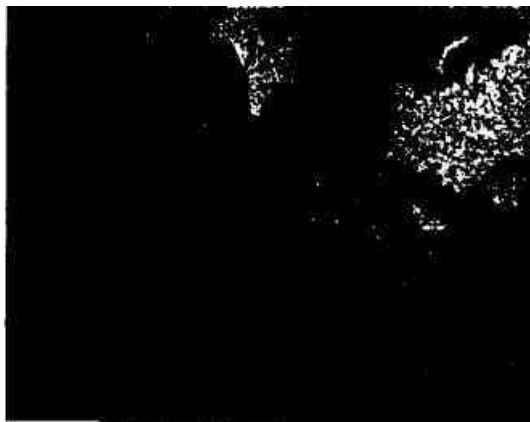
The archives occupy three rooms on the eighth floor at 468 Park Avenue South, where the General Service Office is located. There, on any working day, you'll find me and my two AA assistants hard at work—sorting out historical material, processing the new material we receive daily, and answering the many inquiries and other correspondence that come across our desks.

Archives material consists of documents and other records of AA's

offices were proliferating in other countries; literature distribution centers opened around the world; general service boards and conferences were being organized abroad. Everywhere, AA was steadily growing and maturing. And of course, the growth of AA since 1970 is a story in itself.

Now, it's time to talk about the

A large wall map (right) shows the location of general service offices, central offices, groups, Loners, and literature distribution centers. Below, one wall displays pictures of all International Conventions from 1950 to 1975. On table are bulletins, Conference reports, and AA directories.



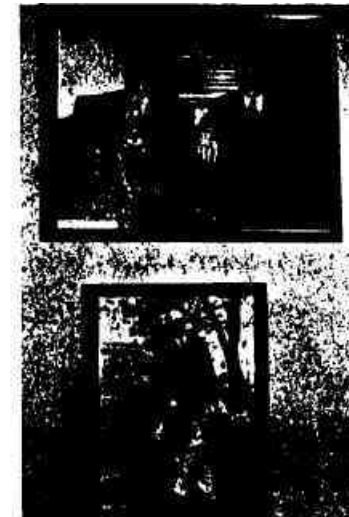
history, divided into three principal categories: Bill's and Dr. Bob's letters and records; historical records of early groups (1940 to 1945); and Alcoholic Foundation-GSO records (1937 to 1955). All of this has been microfilmed, indexed, and placed in coded storage boxes, with everything done in duplicate.

Along with organizing and micro-filming already available material, we've been engaged in creating and continuing to build an oral-history section. Interviews with many early members, some done by Bill W. in the early 1950's and others taped more recently, make up the bulk of this section, and new tapes are constantly being received. So far this year, we've interviewed about thirty people—AAs and non-AAs. We're also retaping some old materials in a format of better quality and greater durability, making them more useful for researchers and others.



We're accumulating state, provincial, and overseas AA histories, encouraging individuals knowledgeable about their areas to write them up. Many have been received, and more are in the works.

An exciting current development, we think, is the enthusiasm expressed for establishing local archival and tape centers. Now being set up in many areas of the U.S., Canada, and other countries, they will be a wonderful means of ensuring the preser-



The early days of AA come alive in photos of the co-founders; Bill's and Lois's Brooklyn home, where the first New York meetings took place; and Dr. William D. Silkworth.

vation of area history and making the whole archival project more comprehensive.

Bill W.'s widow, Lois, who is currently writing her autobiography, has been helpful and interested, and has contributed valuable information from her own files. These include a duplicate of an early scrapbook and copies of her correspondence with Bill in 1935, when he went to Akron and first met Dr. Bob. Especially interesting are copies of her diaries dating from 1937 to 1954. These contain intimate and affecting glimpses of events and her reactions to them during the early, struggling years of AA.

What else can you expect when you

visit the archives? You'll see photographs of people, places, and events in AA history; the Lasker Award, presented to AA in 1951; bulletins, directories, and reports from early years to the present; early and current Grapevines; different editions and printings of the Big Book and other literature; phonograph records, scrapbooks, and memorabilia. Eventually, we hope to give visitors the opportunity to hear the voices of the two co-founders, along with tapes of many others who are a part of AA history, alcoholics and nonalcoholics alike.

We hope to give you a real sense of the whole span of AA history, new insight, and new appreciation of AA's beginnings and development. For AA history doesn't stop—it keeps on growing and becoming. As Bill and the early members used to say, "AA isn't an achievement; it's a process, a continuing process."