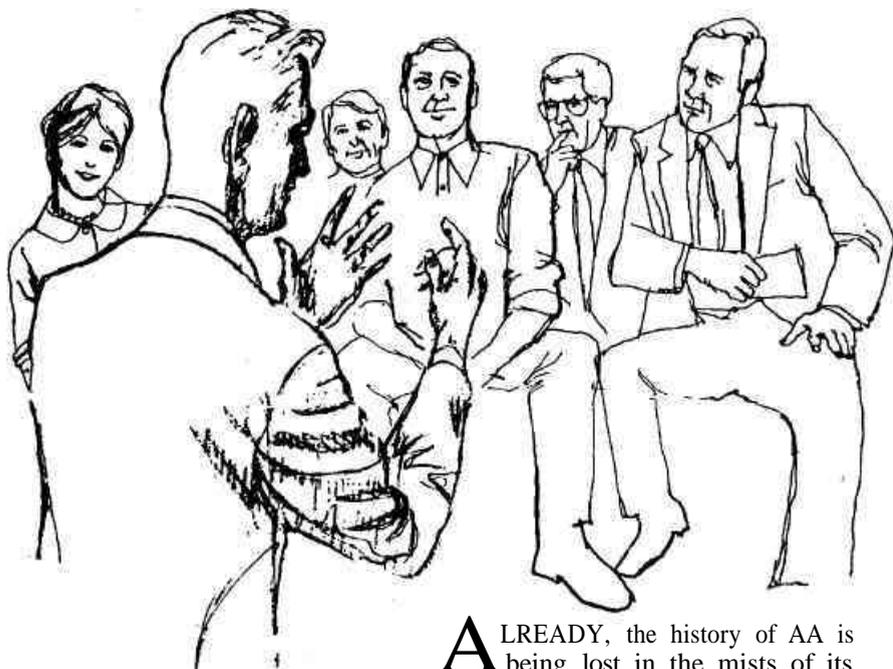


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Carrying the Message in 'Fifty-Five

by Bill W.



ALREADY, the history of AA is being lost in the mists of its twenty-one years of antiquity. I venture that very few people here could recount in any consecutive way the steps on the road that led from the kitchen table to where we are tonight in this Manhattan Group.

It is specially fitting that we recount the history, because at St. Louis this summer, a great event occurred. This Society declared that it had come of age, and it took full possession of its Legacies of Recovery, Unity, and Service. It

marked the time when Lois and I, being parents of a family now become responsible, declared you to be of age and on your own.

Now let's start on our story.

First of all, there was the kitchen table which stood in a brownstone house which still bears the number 182, Clinton Street, Brooklyn. There, Lois saw me go into the depths. There, over the kitchen table, Ebby (one alcoholic talking to another) brought me these simple principles now enshrined in our Twelve Steps. In those days, there were but six steps: We admitted we couldn't run our own lives; we got honest with ourselves; we made a self-survey; we made restitution to the people we had harmed; we tried to carry this story "one to the next"; and we asked God to help us do those things. That was the essence of the message over the kitchen table.

In those days, we were associated with the Oxford Group. One of its founders was Sam Shoemaker, and you have just left Calvary House [connected with the Reverend Samuel Shoemaker's Calvary Church] to come over to these larger quarters, I understand. Our debt to those people [the Oxford Group] is simply immense. We might have found these principles elsewhere, but they did give them to us, and I want to again record our undying gratitude. We also learned from them, so far as alcoholics are concerned, what *not* to do — something equally important. A great Jesuit friend of

ours, [Father] Ed Dowling, once said to me, "Bill, it isn't what you people put into AA that makes it so good — it's what you left out." We got both sets of notions from our Oxford Group friends, and it was through them that Ebby had sobered up and became my sponsor, the carrier of this message to me.

We began to go to Oxford Group meetings right over in Calvary House, where you've just been gathering, and it was there, fresh out of Towns Hospital, that I made my first pitch, telling about my strange experience, which did not impress the alcoholic who was listening. But something else did impress him. When I began to talk about the nature of this sickness, this malady, he pricked up his ears. He was a professor of chemistry, an agnostic, and he came up and talked afterward. Soon, he was invited over to Clinton Street — our very first customer. We worked very hard with Freddy for three years, but alas, he remained drunk for eleven years afterward.

Other people came up to us out of those Oxford Group audiences. We began to go down to Calvary Mission, an adjunct of the church in those days, and there we found a bountiful supply of real tough nuts to crack. We began to invite them to Clinton Street, and at this point the Groupers felt that we were overdoing the drunk business. It seemed they had the idea of saving the world; besides, they'd had a bad time with us. Sam and his associates,

*From a talk at a
New York AA meeting
during the twenty-first
year of AA's existence*

Part I of a two-part article

he now laughingly tells me, were very much put out that they had gathered a big batch of drunks in Calvary House, hoping for a miracle. They'd put them upstairs in those nice apartments and had completely surrounded them with sweetness and light. But the drunks soon

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imported a flock of bottles, and one of them pitched a shoe out the apartment window right through one of those nice stained glass affairs of the church. So the drunks weren't exactly popular when the W——s [Bill and Lois] showed up.

At any rate, we began to be with alcoholics all the time, but nothing happened for six months. Like the Groupers, we nursed them. In fact, over in Clinton Street, we developed in the next two or three years something like a boiler factory, a sort of clinic, a hospital, and a free boardinghouse, from which practically no one issued sober, but we had a pile of experience.

We began to learn the game, and after our withdrawal from the Oxford Group — oh, a year and a half from the time I sobered, in '34 — we began to hold meetings of the few who had sobered up. I suppose that was really the first AA meeting. The book hadn't yet been written. We

didn't even call it Alcoholics Anonymous; people asked who we were, and we said, "Well, we're a nameless bunch of alcoholics." I suppose the use of that word "nameless" sort of led to the idea of anonymity, which was later clapped on the book at the time it was titled.

There were great doings in Clinton Street. I remember those meetings down in the parlor so well. Our eager discussion, our hopes, our fears — and our fears were very great. When anyone in those days had been sober a few months and slipped, it was a terrific calamity. I'll never forget the day, a year and a half after he came to stay with us, that Ebby fell over, and we all said, "Perhaps this is going to happen to all of us." Then, we began to ask ourselves *why* it was, and some of us pushed on.

At Clinton Street, I did most of the talking, but Lois did most of the work, and the cooking, and the loving of those early folks.

Oh my! The episodes that there were! I was away once on a business trip. (I'd briefly got back to business.) One of the drunks was sleeping on the lounge in the parlor. Lois woke up in the middle of the night, hearing a great commotion. He'd got a bottle; he'd also got into the kitchen and had drunk a bottle of maple syrup. And he had fallen naked into the coal hod. When Lois opened the door, he asked for a towel to cover up his nakedness. She once led this same gentleman through the streets late at night look-

ing for a doctor, and not finding a doctor, then looking for a drink, because, as he said, he could not fly on one wing!

On one occasion, a pair of them were drunk. We had five, and on another occasion, they were all drunk at the same time! There was the time that two of them began to belabor each other with two-by-fours down in the basement. And then, poor Ebby, after repeated trials and failures, was finally locked out one night. But lo and behold, he appeared anyway. He had come through the coal chute and up the stairs, very much begrimed.

So, you see, Clinton Street was a kind of blacksmith shop, in which we were hammering away at these principles. For Lois and me, all roads lead back to Clinton Street.

In 1937, while we were still there, we got an idea that to spread AA we would have to have some sort of literature, guide rails for it to run on so it couldn't get garbled. We were still toying with the idea that we had to have paid workers who would be sent to other communities. We thought we'd have to go into the hospital business. Out in Akron, where we had started the first group, they had a meeting and nominated me to come to New York and do all these things.

We solicited Mr. [John D.] Rockefeller [Jr.] and some of his friends, who gave us their friendship but, luckily, not much of their money. They gave S——[Dr. Bob] and me a

little boost during the year of 1938, and that was all; they forced us to stand on our own.

In 1938, Clinton Street saw the beginning of the preparation of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The early chapters were written — oh, I should think — about May 1938. Then, we tried to raise money to get the thing published, and we actually sold stock to the local drunks in this book, not yet written. An all-time high for promotions!

Clinton Street also saw, on its second floor, in the bedroom, the writing of the Twelve Steps. We had got to Chapter Five in the book, and it looked like we would have to say at some point what the book was all about. So I remember lying there on the bed one night, and I was in one of my typical depressive snits, and I had an imaginary ulcer attack. The drunks who were supposed to be contributing, so that we could eat while the book was being written,

"I was rather pleasantly surprised that, when numbered, they added up to twelve"

were slow on the contributions, and I was in a damn bad frame of mind. I lay there with a pad and pencil, and I began to think over these six steps that I've just recited to you, and said I to myself, "Well, if we put down these six steps, the chunks are too big. They'll have to digest too much

all at once. Besides, they can wiggle out from in between, and if we're going to do a book, we ought to break those up into smaller pieces."

So I began to write, and in about a half an hour, I think, I had busted them up into smaller pieces. I was rather pleasantly surprised that, when numbered, they added up to twelve — "That's significant. Very nice."

At this point, a couple of drunks sailed in. I showed them the proposed Twelve Steps, and I caught fits. Why did we need twelve when six were doing fine? And what did I mean by dragging God from the bottom of the list up to the top?

Meanwhile, the meetings in the front parlor had largely turned into hassles over the chapters of the book. The roughs were submitted and read at every meeting, so that when the Twelve Steps were proposed, there was a still greater hassle. Because I'd had this very sudden experience and was on the pious side, I'd larded these Steps very heavily with the word "God." Other people began to say, "This won't do at all. The reader at a distance is just going to get scared off. And what about agnostic folks like us?" There was another terrific hassle, which resulted in this terrific ten-strike we had: calling God (as you understand Him) "the Higher Power," making a hoop big enough so that the whole world of alcoholics can walk through it.

So, actually, those people who

suppose that the elders of AA were going around in white robes surrounded by a blue light, full of virtue, are quite mistaken. I merely became the umpire of the immense amount of hassling that went into the preparation of the AA book, and that took place at Clinton Street.

Well, of course, the book was the summit of all our hopes at the time; along with the hassling, there was an immense enthusiasm. We tried to envision distant readers picking it up and perhaps writing in, perhaps getting sober. Could they do it on the book? All of those things we speculated on very happily. Finally, in the spring of 1939, the book was ready. We'd made a prepublication copy of it; it had got by the Catholic Committee on Publications; we'd shown it to all sorts of people; we had made corrections. We had 5,000 copies printed, thinking that that would be just a mere trifle — that the book would soon be selling millions of copies. Oh, we were very enthusiastic, us promoters. The *Reader's Digest* had promised to print a piece about the book, and we just saw those books going out in carloads.

Nothing of the sort happened. The *Digest* turned us down flat; the drunks had thrown their money into all this; there were hardly a hundred members in AA (Akron, Cleveland, New York City, and a sprinkling down around Washington and Philadelphia). And here the thing had utterly collapsed.

(to be concluded)