

September 1951

GROUP MEETINGS

A STRANGER sat on the edge, of the bubbling fountain in the foyer of the Medical Arts club-rooms on Wabash Avenue in Chicago's Loop. The newcomer, a somewhat bleary looking gent named John D., seemed out of place in the comparatively lavish surroundings. But he was the center of a little cluster of AAs who had just finished their weekly meeting in the clubrooms that the depression had turned into a public meeting hall. They were listening to John's "story."

John's story was "different." A very successful business man, he had been a teetotaler until he was 50. Then he retired and began to drink socially. In the next two and a half years he drank his way into the gutter.

But to us "old timers" at the meeting, John was a symbol and a portent. (With one exception, none of us "old-timers" had been in AA more than a year and a half.) That night John was one of twelve — count 'em — AA neophytes! What we had both hoped and feared had come to pass — drunks were joining AA in droves.

What to do? The cozy and healing intimacy of our fellowship seemed about to be destroyed.

Secretly, some of us had wondered if AA would continue to work when it got big. How could we give

all these rummies proper sponsorship? How could we be sure even that some of them would not be completely neglected after coming to a meeting and maybe not come back?

Adding to our panic was the knowledge that Jack Alexander's piece was due to come out in the Saturday Evening Post the next week.

We had visions of being deluged by hundreds of palsied sobriety-seekers. And they could hardly be expected to "get" AA by themselves — or "carry the message" to each other before they had a chance to get the message themselves.

Out of that panic came an idea that set the future pattern for Chicago metropolitan AA. Because of it all Chicago AAs have the benefit of intimate, closed neighborhood meetings that never grow big because of a tradition of division and subdivision. At the same time, it binds the 5000 AAs of the area together in one unified over-all metropolitan organization.

The idea hatched long after midnight that Tuesday night early in 1941 when two of us stopped at a restaurant for a nightcap of coffee. We had just shepherded two newcomers home after a three-hour kaffee-klatsch that followed the Loop meeting.

We wondered if the rest of the neophytes were getting proper attention. Or even if some of them, feeling neglected and rejected, were not at that moment slaking their resentment at some bar.

One of us said to the other: "How about inviting two or three of the new babies over to your apartment some night this week. We could also ask two or three old timers, feed 'em all doughnuts and coffee and give these guys the real treatment."

And the reply: "Sure, sure . . . and George and Hank could do the same thing and that would take

care of quite a few of the new babies."

"But maybe they'll come in too fast..."

"If they do we'll just have to ration one or two AAs to eight or 10 new babies until we get things under control."

Well, they didn't come in that fast, but we did have that small gathering the next Thursday evening at Bill's apartment on the near north side.

It was a combination of get-acquainted social and AA primer! course. The evening was a great success because everybody got to

Tuesday night scene at the Georgian Hotel where many AAs gather in Evanston





Typical neighborhood group meeting. Two hundred of these are held weekly on Thursday and Friday nights.

talk a lot (there were only 10 of us and we weren't listening to a "speaker".) And one of the two neophytes at the closed meeting came up with the most fantastic drinking history yet heard in these parts. That was a test of humility for the "old timers."

The Chicago group routine until that evening consisted of the Tuesday night meeting — at which alcoholics and their wives and/or husbands were welcome — which had moved to the Loop hall after the gang got too big for anyone's living room. And the Sunday open houses, purely social affairs. The open houses were held in haphazard ro-

tation at the homes of members. They started shortly after noon on Sunday and lasted until after midnight. Entertainment consisted of card games, conversation and food.

There were no other regular gatherings — but on other days and evenings AAs visited each others' homes and made "gang" Twelfth Step calls.

Now something new was being added - the Thursday night closed neighborhood meeting. We didn't have to urge others in the group to hold "extra" meetings for the induction of newcomers such as we had done at Bill's apartment. News of the "new type" closed meeting

spread through the group via the grapevine and everybody wanted in.

The next week, two other members announced "closed" meetings for Thursday night at their homes. This created a new problem — the new meetings held on a voluntary basis could become competitive and cause hard feelings and perhaps even slips.

Somebody came up with a sensible solution. A committee was appointed to obtain a big map of the city and suburbs and set up some geographical divisions. The committee members decorated the map with red pins — one for each AA member, nearly a hundred in all by that time.

Around each nine or ten pins a boundary was drawn. It came out with 10 "districts," some large and some smaller in area. And thus was inaugurated as a permanent, regular feature of group activity, a closed weekly neighborhood meeting.

In some neighborhoods, the closed meetings are held in the homes of members on a rotating basis. In other districts, the meetings are held in YMCA's or community houses or church recreation rooms.

A pattern was evolved early: Keep the neighborhood groups small; when a group gets as big as 18 or 20 it is time to divide the group. And the division is always on a geographical basis — that avoids "choosing" of members

and establishing of "leaders."

This setup has developed into more than 200 neighborhood groups. Most meet on Thursday evenings, some on Fridays and a few on other days. The neighborhood groups are tied together by sectional open houses and Tuesday night large "open" meetings, and by their common support of and interest in the central service office in the Loop.

A typical neighborhood "closed" meeting follows a traditional pattern: It opens about 8:30 P.M. with a quiet time in some member's living room. The host usually serves as a "moderator" and the discussion is invariably round table — with every member present getting a chance to express himself. This requires that no one talk more than five minutes. The topic may be anything relating to AA or alcoholism. Newcomers are encouraged to unburden themselves and a neophyte is less reticent because only alcoholics are present. The meeting usually closes about 9:45, when light refreshments are served and the meeting breaks up into conversation.

Chicago AAs non-alcoholic husbands and wives understand the value of the closed meeting in the recovery of the alcoholic. And they are not shut out from participation in group activities — the non-alcoholic members of the family are welcome at the Tuesday meetings and the open houses.