

August 1945

Modesty One Plank for Good Public Relations

By Bill W.

During its brief few years in the public eye, Alcoholics Anonymous has received hundreds of thousands of words of newspaper and magazine publicity. These channels have been augmented recently by radio commentators and, here and there, A.A. sponsored radio broadcasts. Hardly a word of criticism or ridicule has ever been uttered about us. While our publicity has sometimes lacked a certain dignity we can scarcely complain of that. After all, drinking is not such a dignified business!

We surely have reason for great gratitude that multitudes of writers, editors, clergymen, doctors - friends of every description - have continued so sympathetically and so enthusiastically to urge our cause. As a direct result of their efforts thousands of alcoholics have come to A.A. It is a good record. Providentially good, when one considers how many mistakes we might have made; how deeply, had other policies been followed, we might now be involved. In the "wet - dry" controversy for example. Conceivably we might even have fallen out with our good friends, religion and medicine. None of these things have happened. We have been unbelievably fortunate, thank God.

But by the Grace of God-

While this makes fine success story reading, it is not, to our way of thinking,

any reason for self-congratulations. Older A.A.s who know the record are unanimous in their feeling that an Intelligence greater than ours has surely been at work., else we would never have avoided so many pitfalls, could never have been so happily related to our millions of friends in the outside world.

Yet history records the rise, and let us not forget, the fall of any number of promising and benign undertakings - political, religious and social. While some did outlive their usefulness the greater part died prematurely. Something wrong or unsound within them always became apparent without. Their public relations suffered, they grew no more; they bogged down to a dead level or fell apart.

Personal glorification, overweening pride, consuming ambition, exhibitionism, intolerant smugness, money or power madness, refusal to admit mistakes and learn from them, self-satisfaction, lazy complacency - these and many more are the garden varieties of ills which so often beset movements as well as individuals.

While we A.A.s, as individuals, have suffered much from such defects, and must daily admit and deal with them in our personal lives if we are to stay sober and useful, it is nevertheless true that such attitudes have seldom crept into our public relations. But some day they might. Let us never say, "It can't happen here."

It Did Happen Then

Those who read the July *Grapevine* were startled, then sobered, by the account which it carried of the Washingtonian movement. It was hard for us to believe that 100 years ago the newspapers of this country were carrying enthusiastic accounts about 100,000 alcoholics who were helping each other stay sober; that today the influence of this good work has so completely disappeared that few of us had ever heard of it.

Let's cast our eyes over that *Grapevine* piece about the Washingtonians and excerpt a few sentences: "Mass meeting in 1841, at City Hall Park, New York City, attracted 4,000 listeners. Speakers stood on upturned rum kegs." "Triumphal parades in Boston. Historic Faneuil Hall jammed." (*Overdone self-advertising - exhibitionism? Anyhow, it sounds very alcoholic, doesn't it!*) "Politicians looked hungrily at the swelling membership...helped wreck local groups through their efforts to line up votes." (*Looks like personal ambition again, also unnecessary group participation in controversial issues; the hot political issue was then abolition of slavery.*) "The Washingtonians were confident...they scorned old methods." (*Too cock-sure, maybe. Couldn't learn*

from others and became competitive, instead of cooperative, with other organizations in their field.)

Like A.A., the Washingtonians originally had but one object: "Was concerned only with the reclamation of drunkards and held that it was none of its affair if others used alcohol who seemed little harmed by it." But later on came this development: "There was division among the older local organizations - some wanted wines and beers - some clamored for legislation to outlaw alcohol - in its zeal for new members many intemperate drinkers, not necessarily alcoholic, were pledged." *(The original strong and simple group purpose was thus dissipated in fruitless controversy and divergent aims.)*

Editorial Squabbles

And again, "Some of the Washingtonian local groups dipped into their treasuries to finance their own publications. Editors of local papers got into squabbles with editors of temperance papers." *(Apparently the difficulty was not necessarily the fact they had local publications. It was more due to the refusal of the Washingtonians to stick to their original purpose and so refrain from fighting anybody; also to the obvious fact that they had no national public relations policy or tradition which all members were willing to follow.)*

We are sure that if the original Washingtonians could return to this planet they would be glad to see us learning from their mistakes. They would

not regard our observations as aimless criticism. Had we lived in their day we might have made the same errors. Perhaps we are beginning to make some of them now.

So we need to constantly scrutinize ourselves carefully, in order to make everlastingly certain that we always shall be strong enough and single purpose enough from within, to relate ourselves rightly to the world without.

Now then, does A.A. have a public relations policy? Is it good enough? Are its main principles clear? Can it meet changing conditions over the years to come?

Now that we are growing so rapidly into public view, many A.A.s are becoming acutely conscious of these questions. In the September *Grapevine* I'll try to briefly outline what our present public relations practices are, how they developed, and where, in the judgment of most older A.A. members, they could perhaps be improved to better cope with our new and more pressing problems.

May we always be willing to learn from experience!