

October 1966

THE OLD  
24TH STREET  
CLUBHOUSE

Dawn was breaking into a full day of sunlight for AA. The disappointments, the scorns, doubts, obstacles and the waiting were fairly well dissolved. The Twelve Suggested Steps were down on paper and fully proved. The little band of starters and their leader (God bless them) left their rendezvous in Brooklyn and crossed the river into Manhattan.

There was no ribbon cutting, no long-stem roses. You just came to Eighth Avenue at West 24th Street and walked down the block toward Ninth Avenue to a doorway No. 334½. It was a rather artistic doorway, with a curved top and an eight or ten-inch wide arch, sculptured in fruits and flowers and painted a pinkish red. But it was just a doorway, squeezed between two three-story cold-water-flat buildings.

Of course, we didn't know it but outside was Fear and inside was Courage. I don't remember the kind of a doorknob it was *but it turned* and you entered a hallway about twenty feet long by nine feet wide, with a narrow bench running along both sides. Some called it "the last

mile." To others it was the tunnel of hope. At the end was the big room about 18 by 40 feet running across the back of two buildings. It was humble, very humble, clean but sort of threadbare, the walls and ceiling a subdued or faded blue, bare floor, bare walls except for a spot of wood paneling on the far side. An imitation fireplace was in the center and a little round table with a slender vase holding a paper or cloth flower. Like the curtains on the front doors I suspect this was the fine hand of Lois. There were folding chairs in five or six rows on the right and perhaps ten rows on the left. There was a narrow stairway on the near side, leading to the

ONE DAY TWENTY-SIX YEARS AGO . . .

thought this poor but proud project would grow into a worldwide Fellowship in a comparatively short time?

There are many things about the old 24th Street Clubhouse one could write about, its 12 to 12 open house, its good sense, its tolerance, its undeviating purpose, its example and, above all, its strictness of purpose — true fellowship. Even the drab walls and old furniture had a way of saying "courage, pal."

Like money makes a bank, people made AA. One man, two men, a hundred — then more and more, thousands more. One clubhouse, a few spotted east and west, then 28 groups when N. Y. Intergroup started and now you count them, worldwide.

People — what a motley crowd! One woman at the beginning (still on the job), a swanky Fifth Avenue men's tailor, a salesman who covered a Southern state territory, a guy who sold rope to the big ship owners, a couple of "low bottom drunks" — the woman raised hell but the man was boss, both did a wonder of good!

second floor, same size as downstairs with a big old-fashioned bathroom at one end and two tiny rooms partitioned at the other. The secretary occupied one corner with a rolltop desk, typewriter and telephone, and there was a lot of work to do on the buildup.

There were tables, chairs and benches where one could play cards or just loaf. No soft chairs, it was just "log-cabin luxury"; no radio, no concerts, just meetings. But even in 1940 coffee was a part of all meetings. The miniature kitchen at one end had a window where the cups came through with milk and sugar outside. Complete in arrangements but humble in setup. Who

*The original 24th Street Clubhouse closed its doors February 14, 1960, when the site was preempted for a New York housing development. The group, still called the Old 24th Street Clubhouse Group, now meets at 440 West 23rd, where many mementoes of the early days are on display, well worth a visit by out-of-town AAs.*

There were lawyers — two, perhaps more. One lived in Jersey, a proud guy with a lovely wife and son. The other legal boy had a sense of humor. He gave the writer a nickname that sticks even today. And the boy from the Bronx, and Cookie, and the gaunt bum who had been a locomotive engineer. He did a great job for the Seamen's Institute.

Every Tuesday an ambulance brought alcoholic patients from Rockland State and there was a little guy that brought a half-dozen boys from Creedmoor State.

Secretaries there were. One, then another, in the early years — both did a whale of a job. Bill called them the immortals. One secretary had a nonalcoholic husband. We made him treasurer. I knew him as the man who surely loved his wife. There were two other girls who did a yeoman job when we started the Intergroup. Remember the big fellow from the Harvard Club? What a job he did at Knickerbocker Hospital. And there were several others that also did a lot for AA at that same hospital for five long years.

I want to make note of the Wall Street broker who lost a future of seven figures (not fingers) and not only came back but did plenty for his local Club and the Foundation. Oh yes, the professor of Romantic Languages, and Doc who helped everybody but loved Bellevue Hospital. A special niche is carved for

Hank who died serving AA on the overseas setup.

There can be no order of importance in this crowd. There is Larry who has consecrated his life to the 24th Street Clubhouse and Julia who still lives in London Terrace and that even-tempered man who was man-of-all-work from broom to coffee to front door. He was even tempered — always mad, but had a heart big as a ten-story building. I understand he is now enjoying himself in Florida.

For a moment let's go back to the Clubhouse. At every meeting there was Bill. Once in a while when things got tangled he would unwind his long legs and stand up to put infinite accuracy into the meeting. Bill always sat on the stairs. The man from Vermont needed air and room. Lots of times when there was no meeting, Lois would add sunshine to the boys (I write that advisedly).

There was a member who died after a talk and a member from the Klondike who was seventy years old and had a wooden leg, *and* there was a real estate salesman who is now a clergyman dedicated to AA.

Dr. Silkworth never came to the Clubhouse. He hadn't time. But many guys knew him and know how he loved us all.

The 24th Street Clubhouse — like the grain of a mustard seed — has grown world wide. And we have grown with it.

*E. S., Brooklyn, N. Y.*