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Fragments of AA History

In the spring of 1971, newspapers around the country reported the passing of Bill W. in New York City, one of the two co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. The other co-founder, Dr. Robert S. of Akron, Ohio, had passed on some years earlier.

Shortly after Bill's death, the Akron Alcoholics Anonymous groups asked Henrietta Seiberling to speak at the annual Founders Day meeting in Akron, which is attended by AA members from all over the world.

Henrietta was not an alcoholic. She was a Vassar College graduate, a housewife with three children, a woman who had, as Bill W. later described it, "worked through many a hard problem and found her answers in the Oxford Groups. She understood deep suffering." It was through Henrietta that the two co-founders had first been brought together at the gatehouse of her family's estate in Akron.

At the time of the invitation to

address the Founders Day gathering, Henrietta was living in New York and did not feel up to traveling. In her place, then, a request was put forward to her son, John Seiberling. John agreed to speak; however, it was his conviction that what would really mean the most to those assembled would be to hear some of Henrietta's own words. For that purpose, he made a tape recording of her remarks and played a part of it at the 1971 Founders Day meeting which was held in the gymnasium at the University of Akron with a couple of thousand people present. What follow are Henrietta's own words, as taken from a transcript of that recording.

"I would like to tell about Bob in the beginning. Bob and Anne came into the Oxford Group, which, as you know, was the movement which tried to recapture the power of First Century Christianity in the modern world, and a quality of life we must always exercise. Someone spoke to me about

Bob's drinking. He didn't think that people knew it... So I decided to gather together some Oxford Group people for a meeting, and that was in T. Henry Williams' house.

"I warned Anne that I was going to have this meeting. I didn't tell her it was for Bob, but I said, 'Come prepared to mean business. There is going to be no pussyfooting around.' And we all shared very deeply our shortcomings, and what we had victory over, and then there was silence and I waited and thought, 'Will Bob say something?' Sure enough, in that deep, serious tone of his, he said, 'Well, you good people have all shared things that I am sure were very costly to you, and I am going to tell you something in turn which may cost me my profession. I am a silent drinker, and I cannot stop.' This was weeks before Bill came to Akron. So we said, 'Do you want us to pray for you?' and he said, 'Yes.' Then someone said, 'Do you want to go down on your knees and pray?' and he said, 'Yes.' So we did.

"And the next morning, I, who knew nothing about alcoholism (I thought a person should drink like a gentleman, and that's all), was saying a prayer for Bob. I said, 'God I don't know anything about drinking, but I told Bob that I was sure if he lived this way of life, he could quit drinking. Now you have to help me.' Something said to me (I call it 'guidance' — it was like a voice in the top of my head), 'Bob must not touch one drop of alcohol.' I knew that wasn't my

thought, so I called Bob and said I had guidance for him, and that it was very important. He came over at ten o'clock in the morning and I told him that my guidance was that he mustn't touch one drop of alcohol. He was very disappointed because he had thought guidance would mean seeing somebody or going someplace. And then he said, 'Henrietta, I don't understand it. *Nobody* understands it ... Some doctor has written a book about it, but he doesn't understand it. I don't like the stuff. I don't want to drink.' I said, 'Well, Bob, that is what I have been guided about.' And that was the beginning of our meetings, long before Bill ever came.

"Now let me recall some of Bill's very words about his experience.

"Bill, when he was in a hotel in Akron and down to a few dollars and owed his bill after his business venture fell through, looked into the cocktail room and was tempted and thought, 'Well, I'll just go in there and get drunk and forget it all, and that will be the end of it.' Instead, having been sober five months in the Oxford Group, he said a prayer. He got the guidance to look in a minister's directory, and a strange thing happened. He just looked in there and put his finger on one name: Tunks. And that was no coincidence, because Dr. Tunks was Mr. Harvey Firestone's minister and Mr. Firestone had brought 60 of the Oxford Group people down there for ten days out of gratitude for helping his son who drank too much. His son

had quit for a year and a half or so...

"So Bill called Dr. Tunks, and Dr. Tunks gave him a list of names. One of them was Norman Sheppard, who was a close friend of mine and knew what I was trying to do for Bob. Norman said, 'I have to go to New York tonight, but you call Henrietta Seiberling.' When he told me the story later, Bill shortened it by just saying that he called Dr. Tunks, but I did not know Dr. Tunks. Bill said that he had his last nickel and he thought, 'Well, I'll call her.'

"So I, who was desperate to help Bob in something I didn't know much about, was ready. Bill called, and I will never forget what he said: 'I'm from the Oxford Group and I'm a Rum Hound.' Those were his words. I thought, 'This is really manna from Heaven.' And I said, 'You come right out here.' My thought was to put these two men together... And so he came out to my house and he stayed for dinner. And I told him to come to church with me next morning and I would get Bob, which I did."

An account of what happened after that can be found in the March 1971 Grapevine, the issue marking Bill's death and dedicated to his memory:

"Henrietta called Dr. Bob's wife, Anne, on the telephone, only to be discouraged with the news that Bob was celebrating Mother's Day and had just brought home a potted plant that required his entire attention. As Bill subsequently explained, 'What Anne didn't say was that the plant was on the table and that Bob was

under it, so potted that he couldn't get up.' The meeting was deferred until the next day.

"Late in the afternoon, the shaky Akron surgeon met the Wall Street broker at Mrs. Seiberling's house. They talked late into the night. The unseen catalytic agents that had brought about this first fully successful 'AA meeting' were few but powerful. Both men were 'hopeless' alcoholics who had tried 'everything' to stop drinking. Both were middle-aged (although Dr. Bob was fifteen years older than Bill) and respectably married. Neither was the stereotyped, skid-row caricature of the town drunk generally accepted at that time. Both were professional men with intelligence, skill, and drive. Both were also individuals with enormous potential spiritual resources. Both — here coincidence merges into fate — were from the state of Vermont, and therefore the empathy they achieved was rooted in the soil of their birthplaces and the idioms they spoke."

Of the results from that meeting, Henrietta Seiberling's Founders Day remarks had this comment: "I feel that the whole wonderful experience of Alcoholics Anonymous came in answer to a growing great need in the world, and this was met by the combination of Bill, who was a catalyst and promoter, and Bob, with his great humility (if you spoke to him about his contribution, he'd say, 'Oh, I just work here'), and Anne, who supplied a homeyness for our men in the beginning."