



Fragments of AA History

The Hartford Blue Plate Group

In 1941 four towns in Connecticut had active AA groups: Greenwich, New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford. The Greenwich group was founded in 1939 and is the third oldest AA group in the country. Between 1941 and 1955, sixteen more Hartford area groups came into being, all founded by courageous men and women who were willing to take risks and devote the time and effort needed to help others and keep themselves sober.

The Hartford Blue Plate Group owes a debt of enduring gratitude to three men: Hal S. from the Cleveland, Ohio, AA Group, and Harold "Red" W. and Harold H., both from Hartford. In 1941, newly sober Hal S. came to Hartford to attend an insurance school. He wanted to attend a meeting while there but finding none, he did the next best thing and followed one of the prime suggestions of those early days: find a well-known

drinker to talk to. The man was Red W., and he was just coming off a binge. At the same time, Harold H. met an old drinking buddy at a family picnic and discovered that his friend had been sober a month, thanks to what he had learned about AA from the Big Book.

Red got a copy of the Big Book - as did Harold H. - and both tried unsuccessfully to establish their own AA group. Although neither man knew it at the time, they had a lot in common. Both were single, lived near one another, took the same bus to work, were exempt from military service, and, most important, each was staying off the bottle with the help of the Big Book.

After the AA office in New York sent Red the names of two other Big Book readers in the area, the first official AA meeting was held in a dentist's office on Main Street in Hartford. The time was December 1941,

April 1993

just at the time of America's involvement in World War II. There were seven people present.

This fledgling AA group soon moved from the dentist's office to various home meetings hosted by AAs and their wives. These meetings were casual, mobile, restricted in size, and served to convince the AAs that they had to do two things if AA in Hartford were to survive: repay the generosity of their many hosts and hostesses, and find larger and more permanent quarters.

They satisfied the first need through holding a buffet - and meeting - at the Blue Plate Restaurant, a tea room on Farmington Avenue in West Hartford. The second took care of itself when the tea room owners invited the group to use their banquet hall on Monday nights when the establishment was closed for business. These pioneering AAs had a first-anniversary celebration at the Allyn House Hotel in Hartford. It was quite a grand occasion, with local press coverage, support from congressmen, the governor, a U.S. senator and even a return visit from Hal of Cleveland, who came back especially for this event.

How Hartford Area AA Grew

During the 1940s, the Blue Plate members and other AAs carried the word to other alcoholics through open or public meetings at which local AAs and prominent personalities spoke. Some of the speakers were Charles Jackson, author of *The Lost Weekend*,

the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, and Bill W., AA's co-founder. Radio programs were used to spread the message of hope to still suffering alcoholics. This publicity led to the creation of an answering service staffed by AAs. Clubrooms located in area hotels were places where members could find coffee and companionship.

Early Strategies For Helping Alcoholics

During these pioneering years, there were few hospitals that would accept drunks, especially repeaters, since the illness was considered a moral failing or a lack of willpower rather than a disease or addiction.

With no detox facilities available, new members were sobered up in a hotel room by AAs standing watch and talking with them in shifts. Sometimes primitive treatment facilities were set up, such as one in a farmhouse in New Boston or at local hospitals. In those days, the rules required another AA member to be present when the detoxed alcoholic was released and on more than one occasion - especially as the number of patients increased - a newly sober AA had to stay an extra weekend in the hospital when his sponsor of record left town for a few days or forgot about him for a day or two. Things didn't always work perfectly.

It was not until 1947 that Sister Aquinas of St. Francis Hospital opened up "Ward 8" to detox up to eight persons at a time. With an AA committee of two men and one

woman to help supervise the fledgling program, a person could stay for a week for the sum of fifty-five dollars; a return was not allowed unless a repeater had been sober through attendance at AA meetings for six months or more. No one was released from Ward 8 unless two AAs were present to escort the individual home.

These first AA meetings had no set patterns or plan of organization until a comfortable routine naturally emerged. Members flew by the seat of their pants, or with the guidance of a divine providence, in working out what seemed best for them. Early meetings had one Big Book, a few sober good guys, and a lot of active drinkers. Members chaired meetings alphabetically, with one chair choosing a topic for discussion such as humility, gratitude, or sobriety. Collections were informal - a hat was passed for those who had some spare change to throw in.

How Did AA Work in the Early Days?

The first Blue Plate meetings, according to old-timers, generally lasted from 8:30 to 10:00 P.M. every Monday. Since the group wanted to be independent, their modest collection of coins (folding money was a rarity) was used to pay the rent and to get a five-gallon container of Howard Johnson's coffee. Newcomers were not asked to do any more than simple chores for their first six months, after which they could speak, if asked. A group secretary

chaired the meeting, but had to resign the post if he or she got drunk. Surnames, family names, addresses, and telephone numbers were common group knowledge. The group operated on a "buddy system" - a member absent for two meetings always got a checkup call to see if everything was okay or not.

The meeting was usually opened with a brief history of AA, including something of Bill W.'s and Dr. Bob's message of hope for the recovering alcoholic. The first speaker was then introduced to tell his story; if he was sober less than a year, it was usually a short one. One time a new man came to the Blue Plate meeting washed up, shirted and tied, ready to speak at his sponsor's suggestion. He had just said, "My name is Tom, I'm an alcoholic," when his sponsor cut in with "OK, Tom, that's enough for now."

There were official greeters to welcome newcomers, and as AA grew in size, techniques were developed to identify newcomers and to make them welcome. For example, the coffee, cream, and sugar were put in another room as a surefire way to identify a first-time visitor, who had to ask where they were. Also discussed early on was the utility of women sponsoring women and men sponsoring men.

Meetings made ample use of prayer to keep themselves going, along with a strong dose of camaraderie and team spirit. As new members joined AA, their personal strengths and life

stories influenced the evolution of AA. Some AAs had been in the military, were construction workers and union members, or knew firsthand the problems of street people, workers, and down-and-outers. These folks had a particular sense of empathy for those who, like themselves, needed a little more help to get on the road to sobriety.

Sometimes Twelfth Step work moved in strange ways. One Manchester drinker named Fred had sought help from his parish priest for years to help him get off the bottle. The priest told Fred that he couldn't help him anymore; it was, he said, a hopeless situation. But six weeks later, the priest was amazed to see Fred sober and cheerful and he asked him, "What happened?" Fred told him about attending AA in West Hartford, and to Fred's surprise, the priest - called Father T. - immediately asked, "Could I go to AA too?" This he did - with good results, we may thankfully add.

Early AAs sought help from physicians, clergy, politicians, business people - any quarter that could advance the AA cause. The Blue Plate

Group, for example, was founded with the help of nonalcoholic drinkers who didn't join the group and yet were sympathetic toward alcoholics. The person who collected the rent at the Blue Plate Restaurant, for example, sat quietly at the back of the room during meetings, a beer constantly at hand, while saying very little about the whole process that he had a hand in starting.

A close working relationship developed among AAs. They respected one another, cherished their new-found companionship and mutual concern, love and respect. They discovered that AA people were often well-positioned and well-educated, yet had a common problem, an addiction to alcohol. When they realized they were no longer alone, the next important lesson was that they were in it together and had to do their best to make it work for all not just some. Yesterday's lost causes eventually became the next day's winners, leaders, and service workers. They were learning that what goes around comes around.

*Francis F. and Wayne F.,
Farmington, Conn.*