

March 1994



### Minneapolis: the Nicollet Chapter

Most AA members in these parts know the story of Pat C., the drunken newspaperman who borrowed the Big Book from the Minneapolis Library, read it, and wrote to the Alcoholic Foundation [forerunner of the General Service Office] asking for help on August 9, 1940. The Alcoholic Foundation replied to Pat and sent his name on to the Chicago Group. Two members of that group came to see Pat in November of 1940. Pat took his last drink on November 11, 1940, and began working with others, and the first AA meeting in Minneapolis occurred shortly afterward. That is the history and the founding that we hear about most in the Twin Cities, and many AA groups all over the state can trace their beginnings back to Pat C. and 2218 First Avenue South, the first (and still operating) Alano Society in this part of the country.

We had other beginnings and other

pioneers, however, and this is the story of another Twelve-Step call, another pioneer, and another long-standing AA foundation stone in Minneapolis: There is a group that meets in Minneapolis, at 6301 Penn Avenue South, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in October 1993. The name of the group is the Nicollet Chapter and it began in 1943 when Barry C. left 2218 to start a new group, styled after the groups of his friend and AA's co-founder, Dr. Bob of Akron, Ohio.

It was a big deal when the Nicollet Chapter left 2218. Until that time, 2218 was the hub of all of the AA activity in this area. 2218 was mother and mentor to many AA groups, and most early groups asked for and got a lot of help in starting. But the Nicollet Chapter started, autonomous from 2218 and clearly wanted to stay that way, and it shook a lot of AA members up. Was this a fight? Was there a problem? Was somebody going to

get drunk? Barry and Pat both said no, but a rift was created between 2218 and the Nicollet Chapter that never quite healed.

Barry C. had quietly gotten sober in April of 1940, a few months before Pat, after a visit from a sober Chicago friend, Chan F. (who was also one of the two AAs who visited Pat in November). But Barry was chronically ill most of his life, and spent much of the first months of his sobriety incapacitated. Barry was in the hospital when Pat got sober and began working with others. He always had a much "lower profile" than Pat, and did not contend Pat's status as the founder of AA in Minnesota. Pat, however, made certain that Barry's part in our history was known, as witnessed in this 1941 letter to his fellow Minneapolis AAs: "Many of you, perhaps, don't know it but Barry C. was the first practicing AA in Minneapolis . . . Only the fact that he was hopelessly invalidated for a long time prevented Barry from getting out and organizing. You all know what he has accomplished since he has been able to get around. That guy has more ideas in five minutes than I have in five weeks, and we all owe him a note of thanks . . ."

Barry C. corresponded with Bob and others in Akron, Cleveland and Chicago, and the Nicollet Chapter resembled in many ways the early meetings in Akron. Barry believed that *all* of the alcoholics' solutions were in the Big Book. He believed that alcoholism was a family problem and that recovery must include the entire

family - the attendance of wives was *strongly* suggested. The Nicollet Group's most unusual characteristic was its intolerance of "slippers." Prospective members were asked if they were ready, willing, and able to practice the Twelve Steps. If not, they were asked to do their drinking outside of AA. Faith in the program was considered paramount, and once a member lost their faith, it was felt that it could not be easily regained.

These were the principles that the Nicollet Chapter started with, and stayed with. They hung with each other, did Twelfth Step work, helped start AA in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Winnipeg and Manitoba, Canada, which still have groups modeled on the Nicollet Group. Those groups still correspond today, and still believe that their way of practicing the teachings of the Big Book are the best way. In their ideology, the Nicollet Group members stayed to themselves. The growth of AA in Minnesota and nationwide did not change them. The adoption of the Traditions did not change their meetings, and the General Service structure did not concern them.

And, fifty years later, the Nicollet Groups' 100 or so members still stick to the original. Stepping into the meeting is sort of like stepping back in time. There is coffee, yes, and more food than usual at a meeting place. Folks know each other, and have no trouble spotting outsiders and greeting them. The Twelve Steps and the Serenity Prayer are prominently displayed everywhere, but the Tradi-

tions are not. Don't look for notices of upcoming conventions or round-ups - you won't find Nicollet Group members at these events. They have their own social gatherings. There also won't be notices of upcoming general service assemblies or district meetings, or notices of intergroup happenings. They do not participate in these events.

When I was newly sober, I asked an older AA member about our co-founders, Dr. Bob and Bill W. She told me about Dr. Bob wishing to keep AA simple, and about Bill the super AA promoter. She told me an old AA joke: that if Dr. Bob had his way, AA would never have made it out of the midwest, and if Bill had his way, it would be set up as an international franchise. She said that between the two of them, they created the balance between simple service and service organization that we needed to function and carry out our primary purpose.

I don't know if this is what Dr. Bob had in mind, but I thought of this when I visited the Nicollet Group. There was love there, and Twelfth Step work, and newcomers, and talk of the Steps, and families, and sharing, and picnics, and announcements to visit members in the

hospital. I met a man and his wife, in their late twenties, who were celebrating their one year membership in the group. I met couples who were 20 or 25 year members. I saw (and was given to pass on to our area archives) a wealth of historical materials - correspondence, articles, photographs - all telling of the miracles and the timelessness of alcoholics working together.

As a group, Nicollet is recognizing that in order to survive AA groups need to work together. For the first time in many years, the Nicollet Group is listed in our local intergroup directory. They know they need to work with others, as do we all. Autonomy is a valued possession, and we cannot deny the Nicollet Group theirs. There is a lesson in autonomy here for me as an AA member. I see our autonomy must end when others are affected, as it states in the Fourth Tradition. The Nicollet Group will be richer for interaction with the rest of us, and we will be richer for our interaction with them.

The Nicollet Group deserves recognition for their fifty years of meeting together, growing together, and staying sober together. They have contributed much to the fabric of AA.

*Anonymous, Minneapolis, Minn.*