

June 1996



The Thunder Bay Group

Alcoholics Anonymous began in the Lakehead region of North-western Ontario as it did in countless other places — out of the need of individuals, those who wanted a life free from alcohol.

From the roots of the Fellowship in Akron, Ohio, AA spread, eventually reaching Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Winnipeg, Ontario. It came to the Lakehead in 1947, when Jack G., a member of AA in Winnipeg, was transferred to the area.

It was a difficult time for Jack, isolated as he was. He knew he needed the help of others who were fighting

the same battle as he was; he tried to return to Winnipeg once a week to attend meetings and talk with his AA friends. He enlisted the support of Reverend R.A. Peden, a man he'd known in Winnipeg, who was now a minister living in Port Arthur.

Reverend Peden was there for Jack and for many others who needed him, but he tried to stand out of the limelight, for he never wanted to give the wrong impression of the Fellowship and drive away desperate men.

Jack's first opportunity to work with a fellow alcoholic came through a judge who knew of him and his sobri-

ety. The judge referred a young man name Bill G. who'd appeared before him with marital problems. Jack and Bill met for the first time at the public library in Fort William, and Alcoholics Anonymous was born in the Lakehead.

The two worked hard, visiting jails and spreading the word of AA. They travelled to Winnipeg and members there lent their support as Jack and Bill tried to get AA off the ground. For a period of time local AA worked without any publicity, then on February 19, 1948, it placed the first ad in the personals column of the *Daily Times Journal*. Two days later the first article about Alcoholics Anonymous appeared.

Meetings were held every Thursday night, with the first recorded meeting being on February 19, 1948. The first bank deposit, for ten dollars, was made the following day. In order to be self-supporting, members pledged the amount of money they would donate each month — one, two, or three dollars — and receipts were issued for donations at the end of the year.

The group was growing but still needed help. AA in Winnipeg had been helped along by members in Minneapolis, and these caring men were asked to lend their support to the few who were trying to start the group in the Lakehead. Barry C., Ed W, John H., and Obie O. came from the Nicollet Group in Minneapolis to help out — but also with the intention of getting in some fishing during the week-

end! Instead, they wound up with three days and nights of solid AA.

The Thunder Bay Group was born behind a barbershop on the corner of River and Cumberland, with a huge coffeepot on a wood-burning stove. Today the coffeepot is enshrined in gold and sits proudly at the front of the clubroom. Members were issued membership cards which were stamped every time the member attended a meeting. (The membership cards were dropped by the group by 1952, although many members preferred to keep theirs up to date.)

During these early years, members did a lot of travelling — back and forth to Minneapolis and Winnipeg — anywhere there was an AA "do" to attend. There was never any question about the wives attending meetings and gatherings. The women put on coffee, served sandwiches, and provided much-needed support. They were always there.

There was no intergroup or central office at this time and those needing help had only the ad in the personals column to turn to. Those who responded were wives, mothers, and suffering alcoholics. Here are a few selections from letters: "December 23, 1951: Dear Sir, Dropping you a line to see if you would come up to the jail, as I would appreciate a talk with you"; "January 1952: Dear Sir or Madam, my husband is an alcoholic and he wants to join your club. I wonder if it could be done by mail as we're living out in

the country. Kindly let me know because something has to be done." The following letter was written on a small scrap of paper but says so much: "Dear Sir, I've been drinking heavy, and I'd like to stop and I can't. Would you please give me your help and I hope to hear from you soon."

By the spring of 1951, the Lakehead Fellowship had grown considerably, and getting new quarters was high on the priority list. Members were urged to scout around and bring in suggestions. In October 1951, a committee was formed to investigate new quarters, with promising locations being over Toole's Furniture store and H & H Electric.

With 1952 came change. Lakehead AA found new, more spacious clubrooms, and a new group of Alcoholics Anonymous was begun in Fort William.

On January 30, the decision was made to lease the quarters above Toole's Furniture store for \$110 per month. Permission was given by the owner to install a coffee bar, and the group was also permitted to serve buffet dinners. It was wonderful.

Members were very excited about the new clubrooms, and everyone chipped in to make the quarters pleasant. During February it was recorded several times in the minutes of the meetings that there was no attendance: "apparently all [are] working at new quarters." It was a time for everyone to get involved. Chesterfields and chairs

were purchased and recovered, ashtray holders were made for the newly acquired wooden chairs, and coffee tables were made. (All of these now occupy the present clubrooms.)

Members also used their talents by making wall plaques and utilized their carpentry skills to fill the bare walls with the AA Slogans and the Serenity Prayer. Thunder Bay's medallion, given in recognition of sobriety, was designed by member Art W. The smaller portraits of Dr. Bob and Bill W. were brought from Winnipeg by Jack G. and presented to the group on May 14, 1951 by Lackie P. He explained that the frames had been made by a brother AA from Vancouver, Tom K., who'd been a visitor to the group on various occasions.

On March 3, 1952, the Thunder Bay Group held its first meeting in the new rooms. But it wasn't until Sunday, March 23, following the Fourth Anniversary dinner at the Royal Edward Hotel, that the clubrooms were formally opened. Approximately seventy-five were in attendance, including friends from Winnipeg, Minneapolis, and Duluth.

In those early days, AA members were not only involved with staying sober but they also socialized a great deal with each other apart from meetings. They held box socials and card parties. There were Christmas parties with skits and costumes, New Year's parties, and parties for the children. It was a family affair and no one was left

out. The gift of sobriety was shared and cherished by all. Members who moved out of town were presented with gifts so as always to remember their friends in Thunder Bay.

The entrance from the street was perfect and the group continued to grow. But as ideal as these new quarters were, they were not to be the group's home for very long. The owner of the building broke the lease, and the group was on the move again in just over a year. In July 1953, it took up residence

in Suite Eleven of the Zellers Block, with a rent of \$125 per month. It is here that Thunder Bay meets today.

Over the years, thousands of alcoholics have found refuge within Alcoholics Anonymous as it grew and blossomed in the Lakehead, and with the grace of God there will be thousands more. May we always remember those who have gone before us, and who carved a place for us that we too may enjoy the gift of sobriety.

Pat W., Thunder Bay, Ont.