

AA Grapevine, May 1983

Who Was That Masked Man?



NO, IT WASN'T the Lone Ranger. In fact, when this picture was taken, the subject was less a loner than he'd been in a long while. The man in the mask is an AA member of

1938, and his mask is one (rather awkward) solution to the problem of how to tell our stories to the public without breaking anonymity.

Press coverage in the early days of

Anonymity and other strange practices made for zest and humor in early media reporting on AA — but the message got across

AA was loaded with oddities. It had a kind of zest for one-liners that we just don't often see today.

ALCOHOLICS ALL: 150 MEET — AND IT'S WATER OR NOTHING (Chicago *Sun-Times*, December 1, 1940).

AA's need for favorable publicity was greatest in the very beginning. Bill and Bob, our co-founders, looked on the members of the press as important friends who offered the best way to carry the message to the many suffering alcoholics still outside the influence of the young program. In many ways, the message was well carried, but often by writers who regarded the sober alcoholics with understandable skepticism. Consequently, the good news of AA's existence was spread with ballyhoo and a fine eye for whimsical contrasts. It was safer, after all, to play for laughs and for the bizarre: MAN BITES DOG is still a more newsworthy head than MAN QUILTS HAIR OF DOG.

The famous Rockefeller dinner is an example. In 1940, John D. Rockefeller Jr. threw a \$100-a-plate dinner for AA. The founders hoped to raise money to help spread AA's influence, and they thought Rockefeller and his friends would be interested in

funding a program that was already doing such a wonderful job restoring the human resources of alcoholism victims. While dinner guests later gave modest sums and Rockefeller donated \$1,000, he felt any more would "spoil" the new Fellowship. Thus, the dinner was far less significant as the fund raiser that Bill and Bob hoped for than it was for two other things. One: it established AA's emerging resolution to be self-supporting. Two: it was an early break for them in the press, if not the actual beginning of some credibility for AA's claims.

Characteristically, the headlines focused on the paradox of John D. Rockefeller Jr., the symbol of American success and social propriety, throwing a dinner for drunks.

ROCKEFELLER DINES EX-SOTS NOW RUM FOES, sang the New York *Daily News*. 60 ON WAGON — AND ROOM FOR MORE, announced the New York *Post* on February 9, 1940.

Other, less colorful newspapers treated it straight with heads such as **ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS DINNER HAS JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER AS HOST**. But whatever the style, the headlines and the stories left little doubt as to what the writers felt was important —

not the existence of AA, but the fact that John D. threw the dinner for its members.

Where journalists treated it straight, they revealed a pretty strong show-me attitude. Note this sober (no pun intended) treatment in a *Newsweek* article: "Medicine usually claims to cure only about two percent of the cases of acute alcoholism it treats. Last week a nonmedical group appeared which made the unusual claim that twenty-five percent of its cases were cured. Called Alcoholics Anonymous, the group was a club composed of ex-drunkards and men trying to overcome the liquor habit who, for obvious reasons, prefer to remain anonymous. ..."

But to AAs, the writer's "obvious reasons" were obviously wrong. He misinterpreted our principle of anonymity, assuming that the members were worried about their reputations. But as all of us who have traveled the route to our first AA meeting know, reputation is one of the early casualties in the life of the active alcoholic.

That writer's confusion, however, is understandable. To this day, it is hard to explain to a nonmember that anonymity is our way of maintaining spiritual equality — or to explain why this spiritual equality should be such a critical factor in staying sober.

It is really the same principle expressed by the phenomenon of sponsorship among early AAs. For example, few "civilians" who know the story of AA's origin would have trouble understanding why Bob

might regard Bill as his sponsor. After all, Bill achieved sobriety before Dr. Bob did, carried the message to him, and had about six months' more sober experience behind him than Bob did.

But the same "civilians" might have great difficulty understanding why Bill continued to refer to Ebby as *his* sponsor in spite of Ebby's slips over the years. To most AAs, however, that situation emphasizes the permanent vulnerability of each individual and the main reason that we simply cannot afford to have any kind of hierarchy — even one based on length of sobriety. "The soberest person in the room," the old AA saying goes, "is the one who got up earliest this morning."

(All of that was obviously lost on the journalist who covered the second annual dinner held for Bill in Cleveland, November 9, 1942. His headline read: 1,000 PAY TRIBUTE TO CHIEF OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.)

The first generally conceded example of this principle, i.e., anonymity, apparently occurred when the press's "chief" finished writing the Big Book. After some debate, Bill decided not to sign his own name, and he also cast his vote for *Alcoholics Anonymous* as the title.

One of the *last* known examples of Bill's use of the principle occurred about three years before his death — by which time there was no shortage of favorable press interest in AA. *Time* magazine asked Bill to pose for a cover shot so the magazine could do

a feature on Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill refused out of hand.

Time then went back to the drawing board and came up with a compromise: If Bill would appear on the cover with his back to the camera, *Time* would still do the story. Bill admitted that he was tempted — but after a great deal of discussion and soul-searching, he turned the offer down.

"If I appeared on the cover this



This photo from the Dayton, Ohio, Journal-Herald in the late 1930s shows several members of the local AA group.

month with my back to the camera," he reasoned, "it wouldn't be long before some other drunk would be there with his face to the camera."

There was another side to anonymity in the early days that might well have worked for us in a strange manner. Anonymity has a way of appealing to the American imagination. Our history and folklore are shot through with anonymous characters such as vigilantes in lawless areas of the early West, and all those masked

or disguised riders, flyers, and fighters for justice from the Lone Ranger himself to Batman and Robin and Superman. Add to that the fact that most newspaper people tend to be suckers for underdogs. They were pulling for what appeared to them to be a plucky little band of people fighting against insurmountable odds.

The humor only made us more attractive — especially when the AAs

themselves did so much laughing about their condition. Peter Craig of the Atlanta *Journal* covered the first anniversary of the Atlanta AA Group, and he couldn't resist one of the signs he saw hanging over the clubhouse door. He turned it into his headline: "CAN'T BEAT DRUNKS WHEN SOBER," SAY EX-ALCOHOLICS.

The term ex-alcoholic, incidentally, had fairly common coin in the early days of press coverage — just another example of the misinforma-

tion surrounding the disease.

It really wasn't until the famous Jack Alexander article in the *Saturday Evening Post* of March 1, 1941, that people began to take the program seriously. It was a turning point for us. And perhaps the oddest thing about it is that it also represents a departure from the principle of anonymity at the media level.

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At that time, the founders were trying desperately to get some exposure for the program. Alexander wanted very much to do the article, but his editors balked at a story about people who wouldn't show their faces. They refused to publish unless they could show photographs of real AA members at a meeting.

And so Bill and several other alcoholics broke their anonymity by allowing themselves to be photographed at a meeting. The site selected was the old 24th Street Clubhouse in Manhattan.

The article was printed — and suddenly AA was on the map. The response was overwhelming, not only

from suffering alcoholics, but from civic and social groups, spiritual leaders, and doctors.

That incredible picture is lost, but reprints of it in the Alexander article and in a few subsequent newspaper articles can be seen under glassine at the AA archives in the General Service Office in New York City. Bill never again departed from the principle, and with the possible exception of Dr. Bob, he was its strongest advocate.

Some people may be upset by apparent contradictions such as Bill's breaking his anonymity. But I love them, because they reveal the evolutionary nature of the program. I also love finding out about the personal quirks and scrapes of the early AAs. I love Bob's passion for sporty cars. I love Bill's battles with his own promoter instincts. (Sometimes he lost.) And I love all the little things that keep them human to me.

These things remind me that AA is no set of tablets handed down to some latter-day Moses — but a continuing creative process in which we all take part, a perpetual journey from the known to the unknown, a truth ever-arriving through experience. That's what it was for our AA pioneers, as it is for me.

God bless those early headline makers — those who stayed sober and those who didn't. They are dear to me, not for the road maps they left (I must, after all, chart my own), but for the example of their courage.

C. S., Manhattan, N.Y.