HISTORY OFFERS GOOD LESSON FOR A.A.

A.A.s need to warn each other about becoming too confident. Over-confidence can have sorry consequences. Individual A.A.s need to take the warning to heart; A.A. as an organization of individuals can also profit from it.

All of us, attending meetings of our various groups, have heard, and taken part in, conversations like this:

"D'ja see that story about A.A. in this week's Squint?" "Not yet, but Joe was talkin' about it. Any good?" "Yeah, a pretty good piece. You know, those editors must think we got somethin'." "Sure, they wouldn't be giving us space, what with the war and all, if they didn't think a lot of their readers wanted to know about us."

Rosy contentment settles over speakers and listeners.

How many of the readers of The Grapevine have heard about the Washington Temperance Society?

It was quite an organization in its time - in the 1840's. Its organizers called themselves "reformed drunkards" and they set about "reforming" other drunkards.

Does the idea seem familiar?

Claimed 100,000 In 3 Years

They did all right, too. They got going in the spring of 1840, in Baltimore. In early 1843, they were claiming that they had persuaded 100,000 habitual drunkards to sign the pledge.

Older temperance organizations had to stand aside - or climb onto the bandwagon. The new society was getting the headlines. It organized a mass meeting in City Hall Park in New York City in 1841 that attracted more than 4,000 listeners - the speakers stood on upturned rum kegs - and it had 1,800 new members when it closed its campaign in that city.

There were triumphal parades in Boston - where historic Faneuil Hall was jammed to the doors to hear the speaker - and in other eastern cities. Speakers toured the West and South.

The press of the day gave the society uncounted columns of publicity. The society petered out.

The "why" contains a lesson - and a moral - for A.A.

There was no ONE reason, of course. A reason was that older temperance organizations hired some of the society’s better speakers. That reason couldn't have wrecked the society if it had had its feet solidly on the ground.

Another reason was that politicians looked hungrily at its swelling membership. Some of them climbed aboard the wagon (there is inference that in those times, at least, some politicians could qualify for membership) and they helped to wreck local groups through their efforts to line up votes.

The Abolition movement was gaining strength and there was division within groups as men took their stand on the issue of slavery.

The Washingtonians were confident. They rebuffed overtures of older temperance organizations, they scorned old methods. Local groups went their separate ways, made their own mistakes, learned their own lessons.

Some, with larger membership, dipped into their treasuries to finance their own publications. There was no over-all direction of educational policy. Editors of local society publications got into squabbles with editors of other temperance papers.

Factions Within

There was division, in those times, among the older organizations. Some of them plumped for total abstinence as a rule of conduct; others hedged and wanted to direct their efforts against use of spirituous liquors, accepting use of wines and beers as normal conduct. Some of the more hardy souls already were clamouring for legislation that would outlaw the traffic in beverage alcohol. All of these factions pulled and hauled on the society’s members.

Older temperance organizations were finding it increasingly difficult to interest the public in their aims. The Washingtonians with their unique methods - their missionary work among drunkards, their open-air parades and mass meetings, their "experience" programs that afforded a thrill-seeking public the opportunity of enjoying vicariously the degenerate experiences of
sodden sinners - were stealing the show. The older organizations borrowed
Washingtonian speakers and methods to
draw larger audiences to their meetings.

Because the Washingtonian
movement, in its beginnings, was
concerned only with the reclaiming of
drunkards and held that it was none of its
affair if others used alcohol who seemed
to be little harmed by it, the makers and
sellers of alcoholic beverages looked
upon the new movement with a tolerant,
even approving eye. The habitual drunk
was no more welcome in the nineteenth-
century grog-shop than he is in the
present day cocktail lounge.

One Fatal Omission

But in its zeal to increase its
membership as rapidly as possible, the
society pledged many persons to total
abstinence who were intemperate
drinkers, probably, but who were not
alcoholic in the present-day definition of
the term.

The Washingtonian movement
might have survived, however, might
have triumphed over its mistakes, and its
enemies (and well-wishers), except for
one fatal omission.

Its organizers believed they could
get along without a Higher Power.

It wasn't a particularly religious
time. And inebriates, then as now, had
generally lost touch with Him. Many of
them, in fact, were outspoken in their
denunciations of all of His works,
especially as demonstrated in the
activities and attitudes of so-called
Christian folk. The meetings of the
society's groups were conducted usually
without reference to Him.

Washingtonians were not atheists;
it just hadn't occurred to them that God
as we understand Him could help them
to stay sober. In fact, some of them
believed that if they invited God into their
councils, sectarianism also would push
its way in, and their movement would be
taken over by one or another of the
churches.

The society wasn't on God's side
and, consequently it disintegrated.

Source of Strength

An editor of that day wrote:

"That the exclusion of all religious
forms and the entire abstraction of
religion from temperance, was necessary
for the reclamation of the drunkard, we
have never believed...The drunkard may
have felt hostile to religion while in the
bar-room and amid the fumes of liquor,
and he may feel so after he has
reformed and been taught to believe that
he is better than a Christian, but never
did a poor drunkard go up in sincerity to
sign the pledge, without feeling himself a
prodigal, commencing a work of return to
his Heavenly Father, and needing that
Father's help; and who would not have
gratefully knelt and listened to a prayer
for that help on his new endeavors. And
we believe that if the hundreds of
thousands of signatures in our country
had been accompanied with prayer and
some religious enforcement, their power
and efficiency would have been
incomparably stronger."

Is it necessarily true that there's
nothing new under the sun," or that
"history repeats itself?"

A.A. IS new, a new partnership
with God in a useful endeavor. History
NEED NOT repeat, in the case of AA,
the sorry story of the Washingtonians' rise and fall.

There are, however, lessons to be
learned from history.


*The editorial quotation is from
John Allen Krout's book The Origins
of Prohibition, published by Alfred