HOW AA'S WORLD SERVICES GREW

We had started the year 1941 with 2,000 members, but we finished with 8,000. This was the measure of the great impact of the Saturday Evening Post piece. But this was only the beginning of uncounted thousands of pleas for help from individuals and from growing groups all over the world that have continued to flow into General Service Headquarters to this day.

This phenomenal expansion brought another problem, a very important one. The national spotlight now being on us, we had to begin dealing with the public on a large scale. Public ill-will could stunt our growth, even bring it to a standstill. But enthusiastic public confidence could swell our ranks to numbers of which we had only dreamed before. The Post piece had proved this. It was not only a big problem, it was a delicate one.

One hundred per cent anonymity at the Headquarters office became the focal point around which the AA Tradition was formed. By 1945, order had come out of what had been a chaotic public relations situation. On all sides, the leadership of our society asked for the experience and guidance of the New York office in these matters. So much success attended these efforts that the average AA member has always taken our excellent public relations record for granted. That was natural since these services were largely invisible to him. Nevertheless, this unseen public relations activity has surely been responsible for much of AA’s unbelievable growth.

Thus far in our Service story, we have seen the Foundation, the AA book, the development of pamphlet literature, the answered mass of pleas for help, the satisfied need of groups for counsel on their problems, the beginning of our wonderful relations with the public, all becoming part of a growing Service to the whole world of AA. At last, our society really began to function as a whole.

But the 1941-1945 period brought still more developments of significance. The Vesey Street office was moved to 415 Lexington Avenue, just opposite the famed Grand Central Terminal. Our new Post Office Box became 459, Grand Central Annex, New York. We made this move because the need for serving the many AA travelers through New York had become urgent. The moment we located near Grand Central, we were besieged with visitors who, for the first time, began to see Alcoholics Anony-
mous as a vision for the whole globe. These were only the vanguard of thousands of AAs, their families, their friends, their clergymen, their doctors and their employers who have since visited the New York Headquarters.

Leaving the imprint of her devotion upon our society for all time, Ruth had left, in 1941, to be married. She was followed at the office by Bobbie B., one whose immense industry was to acquaint her with uncounted thousands of AAs during the next ten years. Hers was to be a signal service in the exciting time of AA's adolescence, when no one could be sure whether we could function or even hang together at all.

The expansion of Alcoholics Anonymous soon became nothing less than staggering. Reaching out into Canada, the U. S. possessions and numbers of foreign lands, we got under full swing. This foreign development brought us a whole new set of dilemmas to solve. Each new beachhead had to go through its flying blind and its pioneering period just as we had done in the United States. We ran into language barriers, so more and more of our literature was translated into other tongues.

Then too, our foreign friends raised new and special doubts. Maybe AA was just a Yankee gadget that would be no good for Ireland, England, Holland, Scandinavia, Australia and the Pacific. Since their countries were so different, the alcoholics must be different too. Would AA work in their "cultures," they asked.

Again, we resorted to heavy correspondence. Sometimes we were helped by American members who could translate for us. We searched out and briefed AA travelers going abroad. By these means, we gradually made some headway. But it was long indeed before we knew that AA could surely cross all barriers of distance, race, creed or language. Nevertheless, the AA map shows us today in fifty-two countries and U. S. possessions. This is answer enough. We now know it is only a question of time when every alcoholic in the world will have as good a chance to stay alive and happy as we have had here in America.

Serving the foreign groups has therefore become a major activity, though we've scarcely scratched the total problem so far. If AA's Headquarters had never done anything else, this effort alone is worth many times its cost.

The year 1944 unfolded another development of immense value. Down in Greenwich Village, probably in an attic, a few literary news-minded AAs began to issue a monthly publication. They called it "The Grapevine." It was by no means the first local AA bulletin or magazine. But, from the start, it was such a fine job that it caught on nationally. After a time, it became the mirror of AA thought and action, country-wide. It was a magic carpet on which all of us could travel from one distant AA outpost to another. It became a wonderful exchange of our current thought and experience.

But the Grapevine founders, after awhile, discovered they had a bear by the tail. It was always fun to get in the material and edit the pieces. But licking all those postage stamps and mailing thousands of copies became impossible for them.

So the Grapeviners came to the Foundation and asked that we take over. The Trustees inquired of the groups if they would like to make the Grapevine their national magazine. The answer came back an emphatic "Yes." Forthwith, the journal was incorporated as "The A.A. Grapevine, Inc." Two Foundation Trustees

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were then seated on its five-man Board, along with the editors. Funds from the Foundation Reserve took up a mounting deficit and, of course, the necessary special workers were hired. But the editors and their successors have continued to serve as volunteers without pay to this day. In ten years, the subscriptions, coming from all over the world, jumped to 30,000. In this fashion, still another Headquarters World Service was born and has grown.

As early as 1945, mediating and giving suggestions by mail for the solution of group problems had put a tremendous volume of work on Headquarters. With most of the metropolitan AA centers, correspondence files had grown six inches thick. Seemingly, every contestant in every group argued at every point of the compass. With most of the metropolitan AAA centers, correspondence files had grown six inches thick. Seemingly, every contestant in every group argued at every point of the compass. Being at the center of things, we of the Headquarters would have to do the job. Aided by my helpers there, I set to work. The Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous which resulted were first published in the so-called "long form" in the AA Grapevine of May 6, 1946. Then I wrote some more pieces explaining the Traditions in detail. These came out in later issues of the Grapevine. (See April 1952 and subsequent issues.—ED.)

Meanwhile, at the Foundation, we had taken another significant action that was forthwith imbedded in these Traditions. In 1945, we had written Mr. Rockefeller and the 1940 dinner guests that we would no longer need their financial help. Book royalties would look after Dr. Bob and me; group contributions would pay the General Office expenses. Since that day when we declared for self support, the AA Headquarters has steadily refused "outside" contributions.

The first reception of the Traditions was interesting and amusing. The reaction was mixed, to say the least. Only groups in dire trouble took them seriously. From some quarters there was a violent reaction, especially from groups that had long lists of "protective" rules and regulations. There was much apathetic indifference. Several of our "intellectual" members cried loudly that the Traditions reflected nothing more than the sum of my own hopes and fears for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Therefore I began to travel and talk a lot about the new Traditions. People were at first politely attentive, though it must be confessed that some did go to sleep during my early harangues. But after a while, I got letters containing sentiments like this: "Bill, we'd love to have you come and speak. Do tell us where you used to hide your bottles and all about that big, hot-flash spiritual experience of yours. But for Heaven's sake, please don't talk any more about those damned Traditions!"

But time presently changed all that. Only five years later, several thousand AA members, meeting at the 1950 Cleveland Convention, declared that AA's Traditions, by then stated in the now familiar short form, constituted the platform upon which our Fellowship could best function and hold together in unity for all time to come. They saw that the Twelve Traditions were going to be as necessary to the life of our society as the Twelve Steps were to the life of each member. The AA Traditions were, the Cleveland Convention thought, the key to the unity, the function and even the survival of us all.

Of course I realized that I had not been the actual author of the Traditions. I had merely mirrored principles which had already been hammered out on thousands of anvils
Kennedy, the world-renowned neurologist. The Medical Society itself then endorsed the psychiatric profession, Dr. Kirby Coller, also a psychiatrist friend and an early advocate of AA, and Dr. Foster Tiebout, AA’s best friend in the medical profession. Dr. Harry Bob, the wonderful Sister Ignatia and the hospital’s staff presided over an alcoholic ward that had ministered to 5,000 alcoholics by the time Dr. Bob passed away in 1950. At New York, Knickerbocker Hospital provided a ward under the care of our first friend in medicine, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, where he was assisted by a red-headed AA nurse known as Teddy.

By 1954, 10,000 alcoholics had been referred to Knickerbocker by the New York Intergroup and had passed through this ward, the majority on their road to freedom. It was in these two hospitals and by these pioneering people that the best techniques of combining medicine and AA were worked out.

Since proper hospitalization was, and still is, one of AA’s greatest problems, the New York Headquarters has retailed this early hospital experience, along with the many subsequent developments and ramifications, to groups all over the world—still another very vital Service.

Meantime, too, the great tide of public approval continued to sweep in. Nothing contributed so much to this as did our friends of the press, radio and, in recent times, television. Long since, the Headquarters office had subscribed to several clipping services. Magazine articles and a never-ending deluge of news stories about us continued to feed the Headquarters scrapbooks. Writers asked us to check their manuscripts; members were helped to appear anonymously on radio and TV programs. Hollywood wanted to do motion pictures. Making arrangements for public relations became more than ever a primary effort of the New York Office. How many lives all this saved, how many years of misery were averted for thousands of alcoholics and their families, only God knows.

About this time a serious threat to our long time welfare made its appearance. Usually meaning well, members began breaking their anonymity all over the place. Sometimes they wanted to use the AA name to advertise and help other causes. Others just wanted their names and pictures in the papers. Being photographed with the Governor would really help AA, they thought. (I’d earlier been guilty of this, too.) But at last we saw the appalling risk to AA if all our power-drivers got loose at the public level. Already scores of them were doing it.

So Headquarters got to work. We wrote remonstrances, kind ones of course, to every breaker. Then about every two years, we sent letters to nearly all press and radio outlets, explaining why AAs shouldn’t break their anonymity before the public. Nor, we added, did AA solicit money: we paid our own bills.

In a few years the public anonymity-breakers were squeezed down to a handful; thus another valuable Headquarters Service had gone into action.

To maintain all these ever-lengthening Service lifelines, the office had to go on expanding. In 1950 we moved to 141 E. 44th Street, still close to Grand Central. Today, it has the "Do It Now" Henry G., as part time Manager, and the five fine Staff Secretaries, Helen,* Lib, Marian, Eve and Ann have been seen and heard by thousands on speaking trips, often requested by large regional meetings.

On its service staff, twelve non-alcoholics sparked by Grace and Dennis look after the office routines of bookkeeping, filing and stenography. The enthusiastic receptionist Dolores presides over the outer office. There the visitor sees the walls covered with sectional maps showing the world-wide stretch of our Fellowship. On a table stands a Winged Victory, symbol of the noted Lasker Award given to AA by the American Public Health Association in 1951.

The editorial offices of the Grapevine are on the same floor. Here, volunteer editors headed by Don G. met with a full time Managing Editor, Louise and her assistant Sarah, to hit the monthly deadline. Further downtown, where rents are cheaper,
there is a large floor space where Kitty and her staff look after Grapevine's 30,000 subscribers and their needs—as well as their complaints!

Three blocks away from the main office, we have a good sized loft space where all our shipping and mailing is done. Six busy lads do nothing but this. Last year, they shipped about 40,000 books, hundreds of thousands of pamphlets, many of these newly designed and brought out. They mailed about 30,000 letters and bulletins and did huge quantities of mimeographing. Like our three other offices, this place has the best of modern equipment—and needs it!

Down one side of the long packing room, there are shelves reaching to the ceiling. On these can be found, boxed up, tons of the old files of our Headquarters, going clear back to the old days at Vesey Street. The whole world story of AA is hidden in these boxes, waiting only to be dug out. In fact, we have just begun this two-year job. In a partitioned-off corner office near those files, I now have two tireless assistants, Ed and Nell, researching the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. I hope the day will come when I shall be able to write it. In any case it is now sure that the story of AA can never become distorted. Such is our newest vital service.

Money-wise, our present array of Services may look like big business to some. But when we think of the size and reach of AA today, that isn't true at all. In 1940, for example, we had only one paid worker to every 1,000 AAs; in 1947, one paid worker to every 3,000 AAs. Today, one paid Headquarters worker serves 6,000 AAs. It therefore seems sure that we shall never be burdened with a bureaucratic and expensive service set-up.

Here's another illustration of how really small, physically and financially, our Headquarters world operation really is. An AA friend of mine owns a garage, filling station and a small car agency in a suburban town. His building is a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, about the same total floor space that we have at Headquarters. His showroom holds only two cars for exhibit. His mechanics do repairs out back, and, in front, stand four gas pumps. This is hardly big business.

Yet my friend tells me that on car sales, repairs, gas and oil, his business takes in and pays out more money yearly that AA's whole world Headquarters, the AA Grapevine, AA Publishing and the AA General Service Office all put together.

Therefore, our Headquarters is hardly big business either. My friend's garage serves a small community; but AA's Headquarters serves 150,000 members and nearly 6,000 Groups. And these services, well maintained, will continue to make the difference between sickness and health, even life or death, to uncounted alcoholics and their families who haven't yet found AA. So let's now have an end to all that talk of big expense and big business at the New York Headquarters!

When we first opened for business at Vesey Street, $1.00 per member per year was required to do the overall job. But at that time, a dollar was a dollar. Today, a dollar is only fifty cents. If AA's present membership actually sent us a dollar apiece every year, we would still have enough funds to run our Headquarters in spite of the watered dollar. And we could pay all expenses of the General Service Conference besides. But we still have to ask our contributing Groups to give two dollars per member per year for the distressing reason that only about half of AA's Groups give their World Headquarters any support whatever. In fact Group voluntary contributions have fully paid office expenses in only five years out of the last fifteen. That Headquarters reserve of "book money" has had to foot the ten deficits. We have grown so fast that the average member has lost touch, and does not understand his World Headquarters and what it does. So I deeply hope that this picture of mine, plus the great work the Conference delegates and committeemen are now doing will be graphic enough to arouse in non-contributors a continuing desire to help. Indeed, I'm certain that it will.

Until 1951 our Headquarters was constantly over-hung with even a greater threat to its existence. While this danger still loomed, and if the problem it posed wasn't solved, our whole world service structure might someday wind up in complete collapse.

The danger was this: during our infancy and adolescence, the Board of Trustees, all friends of Dr. Bob and mine, had been entirely responsible for the conduct of AA's services—services which had accounted for at least half the size of Alcoholics Anonymous and for much of its unity. As early as 1945, some of us felt that our virtually unknown Board of Trustees had to be securely linked to AA. None but a trifling fraction of our membership even knew who their Trustees were. The main linkage of Headquarters to the movement was through Dr. Bob and me, and we were perishable. The Board of Trustees had become an isolated island in the middle of a fellowship sprawled through fifty-two countries. Hence, we began to debate the desirability of some sort of an advisory board of AAs. Or, maybe we needed a Conference of larger numbers elected by AA itself; people who would inspect Headquarters yearly, a body to whom the Trustees could become responsible, a guiding conscience of our whole world effort.

But the objections to this were persistent and nothing happened for several years. Such a venture, it was said, would be expensive. And worse still, it might plunge AA into disruptive political activity when Conference Delegates were elected. These objections had considerable merit. Therefore, the whole project hung fire until about 1948. But by this time, group contributions nowhere near supported the growing AA office. The Grapevine was losing $1,000 a month, and voluntary contributions for office ex-
penses were in the frightening arrears of $2,000 a month.

Then Dr. Bob fell ill, mortally ill. Finally, in 1950, spurred on by the relentless logic of the situation, the Trustees authorized Dr. Bob and me to devise the plan with which this booklet* deals. It was a plan for a General Service Conference of AA, a plan by which our society could assume full and permanent responsibility for the conduct of its most vital affairs.

(to be continued)

*Third Legacy Manual. This is the second of three installments in which AA's co-founder Bill tells "How We Learned To Recover—To Stay Together—and To Serve." Part three, "How We Learned To Serve," will appear in the July issue.