

October 1990



55 Years- One Day at a Time

“People, people everywhere, and not a drop to drink!” commented Trish from Florida. “It was too great for words.” It was AA’s 55th Anniversary International Convention in Seattle, Washington, our largest-ever birthday party, and as international a gathering as anyone could imagine. AAs, Al-Anons and Alateens from 75 countries virtually took over the city, to celebrate the Fellowship’s 55th birthday. And celebrate they did, from July 5 to 8, 1990 — crowding into the meeting rooms

and sprawling on the lawns at Seattle Center, filling the Kingdome with applause and laughter and the silence of total identification, traveling back and forth by foot and monorail and shuttle bus, going to the top of the Space Needle and Mount Rainier, strolling on the waterfront and in Pike Place Market. In hotels and motels and dormitories all over the city and its outlying areas, somewhere between 47,000 and 48,000 sober drunks and their families and guests gathered for a long weekend: happy, joyous, and free.

Drunks and their families and friends streamed into Seattle in carloads, busloads, trainloads, plane-loads, and boatloads. Bob and Betty from San Jose, Costa Rica, “filed a claim for having driven farthest from our home district to this convention — over 5,000 miles. Central America, Mexico, and the heat of the southern part of the United States were great, because we were where we should be.” There were AAs and Al-Anons from far continents and from just around the corner. Kathy T., from Kent, Washington, volunteered to work on the registration at her first International Convention. “Just driving to Seattle yesterday from about 25 miles south, I wept as I saw cars from other states with AA stickers heading into town. And then issuing badges to people from all over the U.S. and the world! I can’t even keep a dry eye writing this.”

Ed B. flew from New York, wearing an “I am a Friend of Bill W.” pin

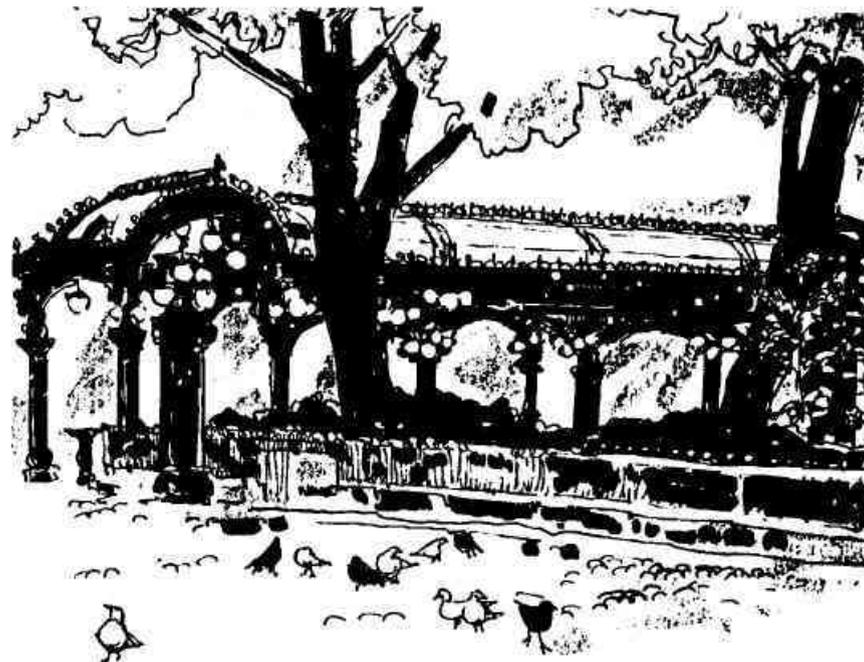
on his lapel, and the flight attendant on his plane stopped him for a moment and quietly said, "I'm a friend of Bill W., too." Bill, from Arizona, reflected on the "happy scene as nearly 48,000 recovering alcoholics, Al-Anons, and Alateens came to the city built on seven hills, literally starting at Alki Point(!), to celebrate freedom." And Don from Illinois summed up the spirit of most participants: "My flight was cancelled, my luggage was lost, but it couldn't take away from the emotion I experienced."

Whether Convention-goers planned for months in advance or simply turned up, it all seemed to work out. More than 12,000 registered on site instead of the anticipated 6,000, and the hall was so crowded that several times during the weekend, eager registrants had to be kept outside the doors and admitted in batches to conform with the fire laws. Mike from Florida writes that, "As I waited in line, with hundreds of others, for on site registration, I noticed that the preregistration lines had only three to four people in them. I struck up a conversation with a gentleman, who mentioned that this was his fourth International Convention, and asked him why after three previous Conventions he didn't preregister. With a twinkle in his eye, the old-timer said, 'At my age I wasn't so sure if I would be here or not, and I could imagine how long it might take my wife to get a refund.'"

It must have been easy to get caught

up in the enthusiasm that enveloped the city of Seattle, because on July 4, when new citizens were scheduled to be sworn in at the Flag Pavilion at Seattle Center, one of the citizens-to-be, a man from China, turned up in the Convention registration line by mistake. He duly paid his \$55, but looked thoroughly bewildered when asked whether he needed an AA or an Al-Anon badge. His money was refunded, of course, and two host committee volunteers walked him over to the Flag Pavilion to become a U.S. citizen.

The Convention opened officially on Thursday night, with dances in several places around the city — but even before that, we needed our meetings. On Wednesday, when the delegates reunion at the Sheraton ended, some of the host committee greeters at the hotel decided to see how much it would cost to rent the vacant rooms and supply coffee for an impromptu AA meeting. The hotel let them use the rooms free of cost, while coffee was supplied at the Convention rates. Signs were posted, greeters told the visiting AAs, and at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday the meeting rooms opened and ran continuously until midnight Thursday, when the scheduled marathon meetings began. Even though the first batch of coffee had to be charged to an individual AA member's room, the Seventh Tradition prevailed. Contributions paid for the coffee, provided a gratuity for the hotel staff, and left enough for a \$200 donation to GSO.



Lee from Arizona saw it this way: "I am here in Seattle enjoying the Big Meeting — the one taking place on sidewalks, in restaurants, on bus seats, in hotel rooms, and just about everywhere. This is a miracle." Many gathered at what came to be known as the "meeting tree" on the lawn at Seattle Center, where there was virtually a continuous meeting all weekend long.

The scheduled program began on Friday, and from morning till evening on Friday and Saturday, workshops and panels provided a tantalizing array of AA fare. While most were in English, some meetings were held in Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Japanese, and there was something for every need and every interest: Steps, Traditions, Big Book, all aspects of service, program principles

and AA history, and of course the traditional marathon meeting that began at midnight Thursday and ended at 8:45 a.m. on Sunday. There were events for women, minorities, young people, gays, doctors, lawyers, pilots and airline attendants, and nonalcoholic guests shared their perspectives. Many workshops were packed to the doors, but Convention-goers who couldn't get into one could always find another just as appealing and informative.

In keeping with the international flavor, some of the best attended meetings were those that shared experience of AA in countries where the Fellowship is just getting started. The "Around the World Call-Up" meetings were especially crowded, and panelists from the U.S.S.R., Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and

the Ukraine in the "AA in Eastern Europe" meeting brought tears to the eyes of all who attended. The voices of alcoholics once doubly chained — to alcohol and oppression — now freed from these bonds, were a testament to the strength and universality of AA's message of hope.

It seemed as if every time you turned around, you spotted a blue badge from another country — as Tom from California phrased it, "the international textures of AA." Candan from Turkey remarked, after being asked to sign someone's Big Book for the umpteenth time, that with all this popularity, she really should head for Hollywood after Seattle.

On Friday night everyone flocked into the Kingdome, arriving early to line up for hot dogs, hang out, greet friends old and new, and listen to pre-meeting music and entertainment. Then the lights went down and the flag ceremony began, with AAs from 75 countries, some in their national costumes, marching down proudly one by one to plant their flags in front of the dais. For the flag bearers, chosen at random from AAs who had registered for the Convention, it was a charged moment.

Marian M. from Canada wrote when she was asked to carry her country's flag: "I received your letter asking if I would carry the flag for Canada... The answer is YES! YES! YES! I'm so excited to have the opportunity to participate. I will have almost three and a half years of sobri-

ety, God willing, by the time of the Convention. The last year has been difficult. We just recently had to deal with our 16-year-old daughter's addiction to drugs and alcohol. She is now in a youth treatment center, and may be out in time to accompany us to Seattle. So at a time when I was down and feeling overwhelmed this wonderful news came and I have renewed faith that my higher power is listening to my prayers."

Fran from New Orleans was moved: "During the traditional flag ceremony, all countries were applauded as their banners were presented. But the fervor seemed to intensify, and the applause grew louder with the naming of each country suffering repression or inner strife, or having recently won independence. It was as though those present, having gone through their own personal forms of hell, identified and were supportive."

In addition to three inspiring talks by Raymond M. from Scotland, June G. from California, and Jack F. from British Columbia, the Big Meeting provided an occasion for recognizing the contributions of several nonalcoholics instrumental in the development of the Fellowship. Michael Alexander, nonalcoholic chairman of AA's General Service Board, and Ruth J., who chaired the meeting, paid tribute to past trustees Dr. Jack Norris and Dr. Milton Maxwell, both represented by their widows, and the ten millionth copy of the Big Book was presented to Nell Wing, for many years Bill W.'s secretary and later

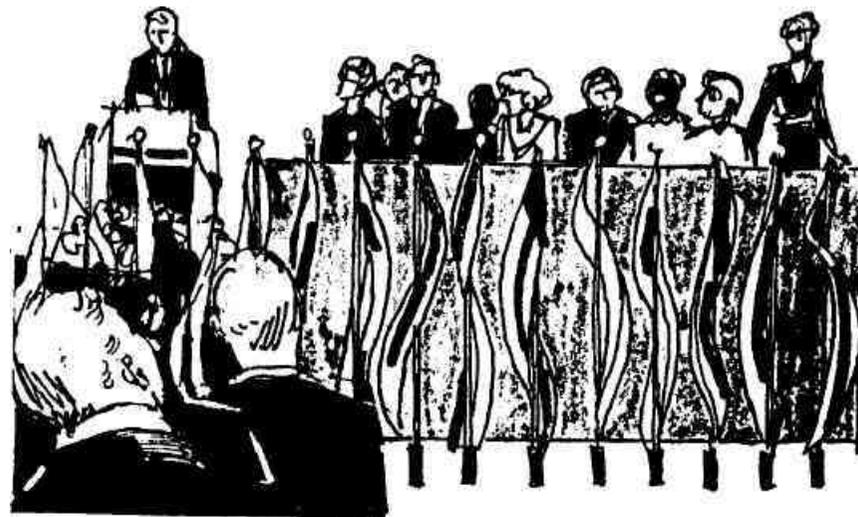
GSO archivist. And of special significance to many, Bob S. and Sue Windows, Dr. Bob's children, were present on the dais.

Wini from Texas imagined herself looking out through the eye's of Dr. Bob's son and daughter "at the spectacle of massed humanity, close to 50,000 strong, recovered and recovering AAs, Al-Anons, and assorted associates. Smitty and Sue Windows had seen AA before it had a name or a book or a program, and its total membership was two. And now — wow! A buddy of mine sitting beside me said quietly, 'We have changed the world.' As I watched AAs from all over the world, many in colorful native costume, plant their national flags in front of the platform, I thought in awe, 'And we're still doing it.' Making a head count of an anonymous Fellowship has its humorous

aspects, but it sounds good to me: from two to two million in a scarce 55 years."

Saturday night, the Kingdome saw a different kind of meeting, the Big Show, with a vocalist, a singing group, and the ensemble group Up With People — in and out of the aisles, all around the Kingdome, bringing the audience on stage to participate in the fun.

And Sunday morning's Spiritual Meeting was, for many, the high point of an indescribable weekend. Moderator Wayne P., after words of appreciation for the work of the host committee greeters, introduced Eric B. (host committee chairperson for the Convention), who chaired the meeting. "How It Works" and the Traditions were read by Dr. Carl A. and Lonnie W. from Washington. Jaime H. from Colombia, Eve M.



from Florida, and Don P. from Colorado evoked in their stories that basic reality: what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. And as Bill from Arizona wrote: "It all evolved toward an incredible spiritual awareness during the solo gift of 'Amazing Grace.' One hundred thousand tear-filled eyes expressed deep gratitude as hands reached out for the closing Lord's Prayer. There is no other 'high' that even comes close to this, inside or outside the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous."

Both the Big Meetings at the Kingdome were signed for the hearing impaired and simultaneously translated into Spanish, French, German, and Italian. Don from San Francisco, who has a "significant hearing loss," was particularly grateful for those services: "I always wear a hearing aid, but have to sit close to the speaker so I can augment what I hear with lip reading. I still avoid meetings where it is too difficult for me to hear.

"I was very pleased to find a special area reserved for deaf signing at the Big Meeting on Friday night, and was about to sit down when I saw the equipment for simultaneous translation on the other side of the Kingdome. I asked if one of the channels carried English — there was one! — so I got a headset and sat down in the section for non-English speaking participants. Using the headset was an exciting experience because I heard so much more of the speaker's remarks than I usually do. It was like listening to a tape — this time I could laugh

and cry at the appropriate times. I've never felt more 'with it' in the nineteen years I have attended meetings. Thanks!

"I also attended the special meeting for deaf and hard-of-hearing alcoholics, and sat in wonder at how accurately and rapidly the message can be translated by signing."

While the Big Meetings were the high points, like all the Conventions that have gone before, this one will be remembered for the little things: Like Pam from Colville, Washington, who said, "I was given and gave hugs to people from 23 nations and 49 states. What a gift to come home with!" And the two AAs from Texas who were on the monorail when it broke down during the rainstorm: "Instead of panic, it became a 29-minute interlude in which they learned they were sitting near some friends they had known in another city." The Fun Run on Sunday morning, with about 750 completing the hilly three-mile course — singing marching songs and applauding the Seattle police who were looking after them. The tee-shirt vendors doing a brisk business in "unofficial souvenirs" at the gas station across the street from the Exhibition Hall.

The feelings — from anticipation to fear. Lincoln C. from California had some apprehension at first: "I want to share with you the joy I had in attending the Convention in Seattle, and the fear, because for me, as the Big Book says, fear is like a fiber in a garment, and part of the alco-

holic. I felt like a wind-up toy; I felt exhilarated and afraid. Those crowds! The noise. Stop, don't go. But I stopped and asked my higher power to give me an intuitive thought, and the slogans of AA kicked in: Easy Does It, Rule #62, Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously, Just Do It. And I suited up and joined my fellows in attending the 55th Anniversary Convention."

Morghan from Kansas: "I came alone, but have met and talked with people from all parts of the world. I have never felt alone during my stay." David from Ottawa shared the same feeling: "How to describe the Convention — WOW! I am 26 years old and I am spending the weekend with

more than 40,000 friends who understand and accept me."

And when has there been an AA gathering without a multitude of "coincidences"? Judy from Oregon had a recurring coincidence: "The Convention started off with a bang as I was trying to parallel park in front of our hotel, and ran into the car in front of me. A fellow got out of that car, saw my One Day at a Time license plate holder, and said, 'It's a good thing I'm in the program.' I looked at him and realized he was the same man from Molokai I had met in my shop in Portland two days earlier, when we had exchanged addresses and he invited me to Molokai anytime. Then, after the Convention, I



was chatting with a girl I sponsor, who said she was sorry she couldn't make it to the Convention, but she'd been lucky enough to sell her two registrations to Steve from Molokai — yes, the same fellow."

Diane from California came to Seattle hoping "to meet some of the people that my late husband David, who died in 1986, had met in Montreal five years before. I was in the Florida hospitality room, and happened to mention that I had sobered up in central New York in 1975, and a man at a nearby table overheard me, and asked where. When I told him, he asked, 'Did you know Dave O.? I

sobered up with him and wondered whatever became of him.' With so many present, it was a special miracle to run into the one person who knew and remembered my late husband."

Probably everyone who went to Seattle reflected on their drinking days, and came away changed somehow. Kate from Putnam Valley, New York, seized the opportunity to make amends to her long-estranged brother, and through that action lost her fear of strangers. "In the Big Book it says that if we are painstaking about our amends then the promises will come true. That fear of people did leave, and I did feel the other promises, too.

I truly believe that if I had not made the amends, I would not have enjoyed and appreciated all the Convention had to offer; I would have been terribly lonely in a crowd of 48,000 alcoholics."

Wally, from an unknown location, put it this way: "*'I made it to the top in Seattle in 1990. 'Soreads asouvenir from the Space Needle. I'm 69 going on 17. Mentally, spiritually I feel 17, and I'm growing. But physically the steep streets tell me I'm 69. Every evening as I return, pausing at each post, I recall younger days on the flat streets of Chicago, pausing at each lamp-post, in a drunken stupor, wondering*

how I could sink so low." Keith from Pennsylvania writes of "walking in the Pike Place Market and saying 'hi' to complete strangers as if I had known them all my life, stopping and talking as if we were old friends. I can remember when I was drinking and I would meet so-called friends on the road, and they would just turn and walk away." Raymond from Scotland, who spoke (wearing a kilt) at the Big Meeting, took a humorous view: "Twenty-one years ago, I would never have dreamed that I could stand up in front of 40,000 people without my trousers on."

Pat from Ireland was attending his

No one who was in Seattle will ever forget those wonderful host committee greeters in green vests and white cowboy hats. Stationed at the airport, on street corners, in hotels and dormitories, at the Seattle Center and the Kingdome — they were ubiquitous, apparently tireless, and always ready to answer questions and offer help.

Stuart from Sedro Wooley, Washington, was among them: "My story started late in 1989 when my sponsor 'suggested' that I attend the kickoff organization meeting for the host committee. I thought of what I would have done in the past, and then did the opposite — 'Of course,' I said. There was talk of captains and coffee, registration and reminiscing about Montreal five years before. I left the meeting feeling that perhaps this volunteering business wouldn't be so bad.

"For some months, nothing happened. Then in the spring of 1990 the first symptoms of registration fever began to appear, soon followed by site-specific training on June 24, and suddenly a final shuffling of names, and we were as ready as we could be."

And Linda, from the same nearby town: "Contributing my time and energy to coordinating the greeters at a downtown Seattle hotel was more gratifying than I can express. Everyone on the host committee traveled many miles and attended many planning meetings for months before the convention.

Sunday afternoon was hotel check-in time, and we spent that eve-

ning organizing green vests, greeter packets, and all the resource material we could find. Opening time for the information table was 8:00 a.m. Monday, but the greeters started appearing and answering questions around 7:30. With four-hour shifts already assigned, many greeters helped out on almost a 24-hour basis, and many left their vests on even after their shifts so they could continue to shake hands and give directions as they went about their own ventures. The stations were manned until midnight, but were never completely closed down most nights until about 1:00 a.m. After a few hours sleep, it was up and at 'em again.

"Most of the greeters were sorry when Saturday afternoon came along, and with it the end of the scheduled shifts. Some of them just couldn't stop greeting, so they continued their job right through Sunday morning! And it was contagious — some of the visitors had donned green vests and white cowboy hats and were shaking hands, giving hugs, receiving love, and answering questions. I know that many of our vests and hats have ventured to other countries, carrying their sharing and caring around the world.

"By Sunday morning, as I sat through the spiritual meeting in the Kingdome, a flood of gratitude washed over me, and I could not speak without crying. I had an overwhelming realization that, God willing the day may come when every alcoholic in the world will know he never has to drink again.



first Convention, and wrote: "I never thought I would be in America, let alone the World Convention of AA. I've made so many new friends and picked up so many new suggestions on how to better apply the program." And for Sue from Texas "it was not only Bill W.'s family reunion, it was my family's reunion. My two aunts with fourteen years in AA and eleven in Al-Anon, together with my cousin who, like me, is three years sober, celebrated our recovery. Ironically, the day I arrived in Seattle I was notified that an uncle had died of this horrible disease. That brought me to my knees in gratitude — thank God he got me to this program when he did."

For Rick from Alberta, there was a sense of renewal: "Just before coming to this Convention, I had had my fill of AA. The politics of personalities, mine, was coming to the surface again. Being here reaffirmed my belief, strength, and hope in the worldwide Fellowship of AA. In short, this meeting of fellow alkies has brought my life back once again. Thank you, AA!" And for Rod from Australia, it was much the same: "Six years sober. After a year of being unsettled, I think and feel motivated again. At the end of the Lord's Prayer last night at the Big Meeting, I cried in the arms of a big man — me! of all people! He said to me, Thank you." And this

from Erik of California: "I am 17 years old, and I feel very privileged to have attended the 1990 Convention. It really changed my outlook on a lot of things, and the greatest message it carried was: I am responsible."

Perhaps the most important effect of the Convention was its powerful demonstration of how AA works — a message that came home to AA members and the general public alike. Elizabeth from Oklahoma was attending "my fifth AA International Convention, but my first in an electrically powered wheelchair, and I soon learned that AA loving kindness is even deeper and richer than I knew. My roommate had misgivings about my plan to take the monorail unaccompanied. 'Are you sure you'll be all right going alone?' she asked.

"I won't be alone. There are more than 40,000 AAs and Al-Anons out there, eager to help me if I need it.'

"What I enjoyed most was talking with my fellow AA members — the woman from California who walked me to the monorail; the charming young German woman who shared a table with me at lunch; and then there was the burly, laughing, leather-clad crew of motorcyclists who offered to sign me up. I accepted.

"And marvelous Seattle, with wheelchair ramps everywhere and green-vested volunteers exuding helpfulness. Either Seattle people are among the world's nicest, or AA friendliness rubs off. One of the bellmen at my hotel, who seemed to make my comfort his responsibility

during my stay, was seeing me into the taxi when I left. He had my chair loaded, and me installed in the front seat, but looked a little puzzled, as if there was one more thing he ought to do. Then he put his head through the window and kissed me.

"Where, except at an AA Convention, could a gray-haired lady be sped on her way with a farewell kiss from a hotel bellman, and both perceive it as a natural and proper action?"

In restaurants, hotels, taxis throughout the city, Seattleites responded to their friendly visitors. Jamie from Pumpkin Hook, New York, went out for dinner with a friend on Saturday night and, when the waitress noticed their blue badges, she brought them a special "drinks" menu that listed seltzers, fruit juices, coffees and teas — nothing alcoholic. And then there was the waitress at a restaurant on the waterfront who couldn't remember the name of one of the desserts, and happily accepted the suggestion of "Easy Does It Cake." And the monorail conductor who stood up on a crowded car and announced, "My name is——, and I am an alcoholic," to a chorus of cheers and clapping.

Possibly the only people who weren't thoroughly enjoying themselves were the active drunks. One AA met on the street "a transient in an alcoholic fog, who stopped my son and me and said, 'I know Bill W.... the Steps. I live in the alley, but don't worry, I'll be back. I got one more man to get — see this scar? That's where he knifed me.'"

There was a far happier ending for the drunk who got into conversation with one of the host committee volunteers at a downtown hotel. Stuart Y. tells the story: "George H. and I were standing on the steps of the hotel, and a man I remembered seeing



earlier stepped up to me. There was something familiar about him — his eyes darting away, a few razor nicks from shaving that morning, and then I stepped a little closer and part of my mind said, 'Ah! Scots whiskey; hello, old friend.' 'Hello,' I said, 'my name is Stuart, and I'm an alcoholic.' We stood there and talked, and he blurted out: 'I was on my way to the bar down the block, but I wanted to talk to you.' Obviously distressed, he was trying to blink away his tears. He talked, and I just listened and smiled, and eventually I suggested we might go upstairs and have a coffee. I said there were meetings going on right now, if he'd like to come and see what AA was like. After all, the bar would still be open for some time.

"Are you sure they won't mind?" he asked.

"No problem."

"Toward the end of the meeting, Bud leaned a little closer and whispered, 'Should I tell them that I too am an alcoholic?'"

"I don't know. Do you honestly think they will believe you?"

"He thought a moment, and as the next person finished speaking, Bud raised his hand, stood up, and said, 'My name is Bud, and I am an alcoholic. This is my first meeting.' Smiling faces everywhere, and shouts of welcome. He decided to stay for the next meeting.

"The next morning, there he was, promptly at eight. In my head I could hear my sponsor talk of the healing power of service, so we gave him a

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green vest, cowboy hat, and host button, then sent him off with one of the other greeters. He stuck to his task for the remainder of the Convention, usually working sixteen hours a day, and when the rest of us went to the Kingdome on Friday night he worked the hotel and Convention Center directing late arrivals. There was a visible change in him; he had purpose and a new hope."

Perhaps Bud will be in San Diego in 1995. Like Lamar J. from Houston, whose first day sober was in Montreal, where he blew out the marathon candle. He and his whole family came to Seattle to celebrate his five-year anniversary. And Henry L., from Victoria, B.C., who "sobered up on Canada Day, when AA's 50th Anniversary was held in Montreal. This weekend, in joy, humility and sobriety I am here in Seattle, sharing AA's 55th birthday and my fifth."

As a matter of fact, there was a

whole lot of twelfth-steppin' goin' on. Stan and Marge from New York City took a cab to Seattle Center one day, and began chatting with the woman driver, who commented on how nice the people were. The two AAs responded, "Do you know why? Because we're all sober." It turned out that the driver's daughter was into drinking and drugs, and at the end of that mobile twelfth step call, she had new hope for the future and a source of help — Al-Anon — for herself.

Carolyn from California was struck most deeply during the Convention by "our unity and bonding with each other — coming together as one and sharing with each other as well as whenever asked. We had people stop us on the street to tell us of relatives and loved ones who just couldn't stay sober. And the high point of one afternoon was twelfth-stepping the maid in our hotel. She wanted what we had!"