

June 1993

A Firm Foundation

*One of the five AAs who were present at
Newfoundland's first meeting,
at the Glynmill Inn in Cornerbrook, October 1949,
shares memories of early AA in that province.*

About three weeks after that first meeting, Jerry E. called me and suggested we have a meeting at my home the next night and that I should share some of my experiences before and after my two months sober in AA. I lay awake all that night, trying to put together some thoughts.

That night five of us gathered in my living room. My wife and her cousin, who lived with us, were in the kitchen. I secured the door from the living room to the kitchen, placed a rug against the door to block the noise, and warned them that no matter what might happen we were not to be disturbed, because we were talking very important business.

In December of that year, I had to visit St. John's for a business trip. I broke the news to my wife Madge, and she started to cry. "My God, just

as we were beginning to get our hopes up for a decent family life, now you are going to throw it all away again. You know you cannot go to St. John's and meet all your old drinking pals without getting drunk again." That night I had a call from Jerry E., who was also worried about my going to St. John's and was coming over to talk about it.

Jerry came again the next morning, drove to the station with me, gave me some good advice about carrying the message, and wished me good luck and a safe return. The business deal didn't take very long, and within a few hours my crusade to dry up all the drunks in St. John's was in high gear.

One of these prospects was Paddy H., a lawyer, who felt no need for AA, but he knew about Peter C., who

had mentioned that he was thinking about sending away to New York to get information about AA. Paddy agreed to call Peter and introduce me.

Peter and I had lunch together, and in his bombastic style he declared that he was on board, and we would be getting our next new member that evening. That night we met at Sudbury Hospital at the bedside of a patient named Malcolm H., and whether he really wanted it or not, he was subjected to an hour of the AA story and what a wonderful thing it would be for him. Not only did Malcolm get the story, but so did about twenty other patients on the ward, because Peter was one of the most effective orators in Newfoundland. Every time Peter would mention alcohol, Malcolm would hold a finger to his lips and say "hush," as he did not want the other patients to know why he was there. Peter did get Malcolm to agree to be a member, and that was the beginning of the first AA group in St. John's.

Peter and Malcolm, both politicians, started one of the greatest crusades ever seen in the Fellowship. They solicited the cooperation of a well-known psychiatrist and filled almost every available bed at the Waterford Hospital; after release, efforts were made to find suitable employment, and patients were given other help toward rehabilitation. The two AAs were actively involved in the political scene, and their combined forces enabled them to acquire funding from the government. Soon the

AA clubroom on Cochrane Street was flourishing - it was sometimes referred to as one of the great achievements of the current government.

I vividly recall visiting St. John's and attending a meeting at that clubhouse. The meeting area was crowded with people, but as the meeting was called to order, most of them moved upstairs to the card and recreation rooms. I'm not sure if the AA Traditions had been written at that time or if they were available, but the brief history of Cochrane Street AA certainly showed the need for them. About two years later, during a visit to St. John's, I called a friend to ask about the time and place for a meeting, and he told me there were no longer any regularly held meetings. Some time elapsed before the Fellowship once again established a firm foothold in St. John's.

During the early 1950s there was good progress in the Cornerbrook area, despite considerable stigma at the public level. As the group membership grew to the point where we needed space to conduct regular meetings, we had real problems retaining meeting places. We started first in individual members' homes. Then we rented a room over the Palace Theater, and set about with great enthusiasm painting and cleaning at our expense, and we paid the required rent in advance. But lo and behold, in the second month of occupancy our landlord said that in the event of fire his insurance would be nullified because his premises were being used by a bunch

of drunks. At least two volatile new members got drunk and suggested that somebody should burn the Palace down just to get even. But common sense prevailed, and just as there seemed to be no solution, Sid the barber, who was awful sick, asked for help, and we used his barbershop as a meeting place for two months. By this time, though, membership was growing, and the shop was bursting at the seams. One of our members managed to put together a rental deal for the use of a nice place at the Knights of Columbus clubrooms; it was really posh, with plenty of chairs, washrooms, a kitchen, and rent that was within our means.

We were really rolling along, then bang! When we went to pay our rent for the fourth month, we were advised that we could no longer use the premises. We went from there to a bingo hall for two months, until we were asked to leave.

Despite all these problems, there was never any incident in any of the places to warrant our being expelled. But bear in mind that at that time public awareness of alcoholism was practically nil; there was also little cooperation of organized religion in our area, and regrettably the medical profession was no better informed than the clergy. During our drinking days a lot of us had done plenty of harm, so the problems really were of our own making, and in retrospect, maybe it was best that way.

In the first couple of years, we spent a great deal of time arguing and

debating procedural rules and regulations, such as how bad a drunk had to be to qualify for membership, and how many slips were permitted to qualify for renewal of membership. Gambling and card playing in the meeting places soon reared its head.

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This common AA problem eventually went away, but not before driving some of our members back to the bottle.

I can recall a rather unique situation at a meeting one night. The group needed some extra cash - not a great lot. The problem triggered some heated discussion, which brought forth an offer from one of the members present to donate \$200, actually more than we needed. By this time

we had learned that each group should be self-supporting, and the group rejected the member's offer. He stormed out of the meeting, never to return, as a result of our decision. I was one of his pallbearers about two years later, after he had died on a drunk.

In Cornerbrook, as elsewhere during this early period, there was a great spirit of fellowship and enthusiasm among most members. Nearly everyone who approached the group was quite well known in the community. The most conspicuous in our town was a fellow by the name of Bobby B. He had taken a terrible beating from alcohol, and been written off by almost everyone in the community. I believed that if AA could only snare Bobby, the balance of the drunks in town would surrender or grasp the program soon after. This idea cost me quite a bit of money for about two years, because every time Bobby and I met he would put the arm on me for the price of a beer. This would give me ten minutes to talk to him on the merits of AA and the fact that several of his friends had joined.

One morning Bobby staggered into my office, looking like the wrath of God, and to my surprise he didn't ask for the price of a beer. In his very gruff Scotch voice he said, "Where are those damn meetings, and what goes on there?" He agreed to come to a meeting that night, and to my surprise he just sat and listened. When I dropped him off he said, "I think you can pick me up for your

next meeting."

A prominent union organizer had just built a new union headquarters, and in appreciation for what AA had done for several of his members, he gave us the old clubhouse for a dollar - the first meeting place of our own. It was not a very fancy place - no running water or toilet facilities - but we had a fine old coal stove and table and chairs. Our next door neighbor was one of the most popular taverns in the city, and the location undoubtedly posed some tough decisions for some of our prospective members.

One night, I suggested that it might be nice if we were to invite our wives and sweethearts to some form of social evening. The suggestion almost broke our group apart, and I was shouted down. Some weeks later, I brought it up again, and we agreed (by a very close vote) to invite the women to one trial social get-together, outside of the AA meeting. It worked out so well that its opponents expressed the opinion that it was a wonderful evening, which should become a permanent and frequent part of our group.

AA continued to prosper and grow in Cornerbrook, and about five years after the formation of the first group, we were blessed by the arrival of the first woman alcoholic, Ruth K., as a member of our group. She proved of tremendous help to all us male members, and to the many female members who eventually followed.

*Ed K.,
Victoria, British Columbia*