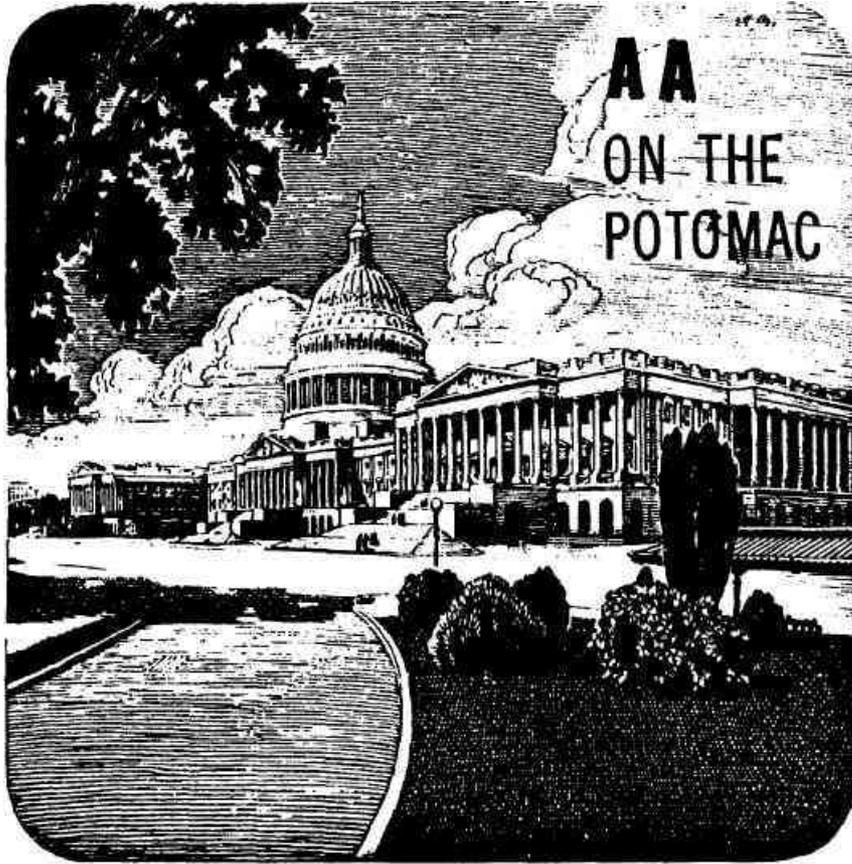


June 1952



IN the Spring of 1940 a friendly medical man tipped off a reporter on *The Evening Star* that a good feature might be developed around a group of desperate drunks who amazingly had found a way to sober up and stay that way. Most of these drunks, the doctor said, had been diagnosed as compulsive, some as hopeless, who had found a "cure" after other methods had failed and who were imbued with a passionate itch to carry their message of recovery to all the problem drinkers in Washington, D.C., and the country round-about.

They had a Big *Book* written by a fellow named Bill in Brooklyn and some of the alcoholics he had helped to sobriety, and Twelve Steps of recovery. They needed no pills, took no powders, subscribed to no diet regimens, rest cures, or psychiatric travail or comfort; instead

they attributed their recovery to the Book and the Twelve Steps, to the group therapy of meetings, to understanding help extended to similarly sick drunks, and aid from a Higher Power. They called themselves Alcoholics Anonymous.

"What's anonymous about a drunk?" the scrivener, one of a craft that traditionally has been in nowise notable for tee-totalism, wanted to know.

"Not much, generally," the M.D. admitted, "but these men have found something that works, so far, where everything else has failed."

"White ribboners? Crack pots? Reformers? Do-gooders?" queried the reporter.

"Not in a thousand years," the doctor replied firmly. "Maybe you better have a look. I'll lend you the book and take you to a meeting."

So Robert A. Erwin, non-alcoholic newsman, wrote six articles which the *Evening Star* published serially in May, 1940 and brought the story of the infant AA movement to a wide circle of readers in the Nation's Capitol where the per capita alcoholic intake was statistically the highest in the country.

The medical man was Dr. Joseph A. Mendelson, former colonel in the Army Medical Corps, who had long been stumped and saddened by the human wastage he saw in alcoholism and the inability of his profession to do much about it. He is now superintendent of the Ohio State Hospital in Dayton. His early

contributions to the AAs in Washington, professionally and as a confidant and friend, unfortunately escape exact indexing 12 years afterwards but they were of memorable proportions.

Bob Erwin occasionally attends a meeting where he finds some solid old friends. He would scorn a medal, because, he says, the results of his stories afforded him some of the deepest satisfactions he has ever known. He since has written similar AA articles for newspapers in Jacksonville, Florida, and Louisville, Kentucky.

Alcoholics Anonymous had already been, more or less, organized in Washington since December 1939. Earlier attempts to get the movement going had proved unsuccessful, but from a gathering of a handful of drunks in a room at the YWCA on that early winter night AA has marched on its own, at first uncertain, but soon stalwart feet.

There have been on the District AA records the names of some 3,500 candidates for recovery. There are from one to four meetings each night in the week somewhere in the Washington area, not counting the numerous sessions of squads, the lessons, and the discussion groups, and to them come alcoholics from every strata of the Capitol's diverse society. A newcomer with a spot in the *Social Register* occasions no surprise, neither does a visitor in workhouse overalls, a refugee from Gallinger

Hospital, or an assignee from the District clinic or the Municipal courts. In the Capitol City of the richest nation in the world there are bound to be some snobberies, but AA remains a robust social leveller, here as elsewhere.

The successful start of AA in Washington was due in large part to the presence of three of the early alcoholics who had found reprieve through personal contact with Bill in New York. One of them, Fitz. M., who wrote the chapter, *The Southern Gentlemen*, in the Book, was one of the sweetest, in the sense that the heart of a sturdy old oak is sweet, humble, patient, zealously intelligent men Washington AA has known. His memory is cherished closely by the Old Timers who pay pilgrimages to his grave in a Maryland churchyard.

Another was a lawyer, a Yale graduate, who despite the predictions of his medical and psychiatric advisers, found recovery, and with a prayer, "Oh God, don't let me think this way," passed the temptations of familiar bars until his disease was arrested, and he was on solid ground. And there was a woman, among the first to accept the AA program.

They became the leaders, the way-showers and the construers of the Twelve Steps and slowly the group grew. The articles in *The Star* helped swell the AA ranks in the pre - Jack Alexander - *Saturday Evening Post* days, but all the

newspapers in Washington have been helpful, observing meticulously the anonymity of members and spreading AA work in feature and news articles and in its specialists' columns. It has been the best of public relations — by attraction, not promotion, and it has extended to the radio stations.

Today the activities of AA center in the big Area Headquarters at 1410 Columbia Road N.W., which once housed the parishioners of the Mount Pleasant Congregational Church. It is operated by an Area Group Committee representing each of the satellite groups in the Metropolitan District.

The red-brick, high-windowed edifice on a tree-lined street houses an office, a meeting room that will seat 600 persons, a coffee bar, lounges, conference and recreation rooms, and kitchen. It has been occupied as Area Headquarters since August, 1950, and marks not only a sort of dream come true, but an AA home of our own after progressive moves from six previous central-city meeting places.

Richard Harding Davis once wrote that if an individual sat on the terrace of the Cafe de la Paix long enough he could see everybody in the world who mattered. Washington during the last 20 years has become something like that. Everybody comes here, at least once, and for a growing number of visitors AA in the Capitol has afforded a refuge and a haven of

safety for the folks away from home groups. On the other hand many members come into AA here, seat of Government and the Defense Establishment, and then are transferred to other parts of the world. Washington members have been relocated in Egypt, India, Japan, Hawaii, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, France, England, and Germany. One active member latched on to AA in Guam.

In the recollection of Old Timers there linger reverberations of things pleasantly experienced in some of the early meeting places, or clubs, ..that on 17th Street over a bar, the one on Massachusetts Avenue, reached through a sub-street level passage of Stygian darkness when the single bulb was burned out, on 14th Street, Euclid Street, H Street and the others.

Out of a little nostalgic glow memory registers those first exercises in a new-found humility, of growing faith and gratitude, of giving the broke, scared and bewildered guy or gal an unselfish lift up toward sanity and sobriety, of escape from the overblown pretensions and timid jitters of sick egos, of, in short, participating in many minor miracles. Our past, in retrospect, seems like that today ... warm exciting and electric.

But it was not all even sailing. In any clear, objective record of the past there can be recalled plenty of differences, some pretty acrimonious and harsh. If there is

one single element in human relationships that the arrested alcoholic must never forget it is that these other positive AA guys are alcoholics, too ... individuals in their own right and branded often with the alcoholic mark that in some way somehow made us believe we were "special guys," only other people were too smug, stubborn, obtuse, uncharitable, or too indurated with their own moralities, to recognize it, we used to feel, even while we admitted that some drunks were not only sick, but often unmitigated nuisances.

Now Washington for one thing is a Southern City. It margins the so-called Bible Belt although it enlists its population from all parts of the nation. So in the early days the evangelistic zeal of some of the newly recovered stirred sharp resentments. There was no occasion, some of us felt, why anyone should drag in a professional temperance lecturer to address us; he didn't know our problems because he hadn't experienced them, and the shouted menace of Hell fire had proved no active deterrent from whisky in the past. We wanted to help the Salvation Army folks — and we do, but we could handle our own problems with the help we knew, and we didn't want our sobriety on an emotionally evangelistic and scared basis.

About a telephone! How can a group be anonymous and have a public telephone? The "dispatch-

ers," those selected members who took over the assignment of the Twelve Step crews week by week, had telephones in their homes, didn't they? One of them could always be reached. "You put a telephone here in the club and the first thing you know everybody will know who everybody is in the group!" or "While so far as I am concerned I'd just as soon the White House knows I belong to Alcoholics Anonymous, but some of the fellows have to be protected!"

We put in a telephone and it was listed in the directory, but this was not until after Jack Alexander's first article on AA had appeared in March, 1941. It seemed for some weeks thereafter that almost everyone in Washington, even if he or she were not an alcoholic, knew some one who needed our help, right away. The calls for straight police work in the guise of Twelve Stepping were heavy, and at first we took a lot of these calls.

The time was to come, however, when some substantial horse sense was to slow down the early Twelve Stepping fever that saw AAs rushing about the city and country-side day and night in search of drunks, some of us dangerously administering medication, turning our homes into hospitals and free pensions, passing out money we could ill spare to get alleged alxies off creditors' hooks, dragging reluctant drinkers out of bars, wet nursing generally. Too much zeal, too little

thinking! But unless some drunk should miss his chance at recovery, many similar efforts are still going in Washington, except for medication; our amateur physicians and psychiatrists now call a doctor or seek hospital care where that is indicated. Only somewhere in the middle years a policy of cold turkey treatment came along, and was generally, although certainly not entirely, accepted. There was the case of the Twelve Stepper who was conked into unconsciousness with a milk bottle; there were the cases of stolen clothing and the kited checks, there was the fellow who offered his home as an asylum to sober up a drunk who refused to move out until the AAs exasperated wife sued for a divorce, and there were the itinerant callers who having wangled generous handouts in Washington promoted other handouts in neighboring cities as they made AA regular ports of call in their travels.

Don't make a mistake here. There was no question as to the good Twelve Stepping does the alcoholic who takes the call. There was no hard core of uncharitableness or smugness in the shift of policy and no withholding of the helpful hand when an honest desire for recovery was evident. Instead there was some consistent thinking about maintaining one's own sobriety because there were far too frequent instances when the AA, worn to a nub by fatigue and

frustration, slipped himself, and had to begin the road back all over. Some few didn't come back. There were, in short, a lot of questions for which answers had to be found within the spiritual resources and physical energies of the group.

Bill and Marty M. came down from New York occasionally with advice and encouragement, Jim B. from Philadelphia did the same. Early in AA's Washington history members motored to Baltimore once a week to help start a budding group there. We tried to help in Richmond and Charlottesville and elsewhere, as far as Atlanta. There was a bracing climate of helpfulness everywhere.

In its second or third years the Washington AAs extended their meetings to the district jail and the workhouse at Occoguan. They were warmly received. Members also reported to the municipal courts and offered to assist probation officers. They still do. Some of the solidest AAs in the Capitol City came into the groups through the efforts of these volunteer workers. A recent group was started in the Federal Penitentiary at Lorton.

Now the AA program is a simple one. Speaker after speaker has voiced this conviction. On the other hand the mentality of the alcoholic is apt to be pretty complex, and soon after Jack Alexander's first article, AA in Washington had grown from the initial handful into the hundreds. Moving into new quarters

at 14th Street and Rhode Island Avenue late in 1941, more than 300 persons were at the opening meeting.

There were some individuals so constituted, however, they simply had to go doctrinaire as they explained the Steps of Recovery to the new-comer. "Either you take it the way I tell you, or else!" represented an attitude in an organization that certainly has no closet room for bigotry. The individual who argued that so long as the Higher Power had got him sober that this Power could make him a controlled drinker, needed class instruction.

The classes were started in 1944 by a couple of Old Timers who again elected to lay down the Twelve Steps cold turkey, and this instruction remained a regular Monday night feature on the schedules at Area Headquarters. The teaching AAs are carefully selected, both for their grip on the program and for ability to construe and explain the Steps and each takes over three of the Steps in an evening. Four Monday nights are required for the "Course" and thereafter the class members generally form discussion or closed meeting squads, or join up with one of the established groups. The classes have proved eminently successful.

During the war years feeling was mounting that Alcoholics Anonymous in Washington was outgrowing a single meeting place. Something of the old helpful personal re-

lation that had marked the first years was missing in the welcome to newcomers, because they were coming so fast and because the work of the seasoned AAs had to be spread out so thin. Besides the gas and tire rationing made trips to the central meeting place inconvenient.

So without any dropping of allegiance to the original AA outfit some members in the far northwest section of the city and suburban Maryland launched the Chevy Chase Group. At about this same time, Virginia members also started a group in nearby Arlington, across the Potomac. They still remained members of the parent group, but the values of closer, more compact neighborhood meetings soon were proving out well.

The Georgetown, Friendship and Bethesda meetings were off-shoots of Chevy Chase; Alexandria, Falls Church, Ballston, Vienna, grew out of Arlington. There are now 19 organized groups in the Metropolitan Area, including a fine negro group, and there are numerous squads, meetings for discussions, and neighborhood classes.

One should not attempt a viable record of AA in Washington without tribute to the wonderful women who have found recovery on the program. It would be like writing a history of the American Revolution and leaving out Yorktown. At one time the percentage of AA women in the District of Columbia was

larger than in any other locality in the country, the Foundation office said.

They have organized their own groups, have been tireless, intelligent and compassionate in Twelve Step work, have toned down differences within the organization, have lent their hands to the decoration and adornment of the meeting places, and have, in fact, expressed a sense of gratitude that can make some of us sterner members thoughtful. And again the gals come from every diverse strata of Washington's big population. The impact of women, both alcoholic and the wives of alcoholics, on the movement in Washington merits an article of its own, and one of larger length than is here possible.

And so this is a history of AA in Washington, violently foreshortened, but seeking to touch the saliences that have marked its growth. It aims principally to cover fundamentals in the group thinking, and it omits inclusion of many things that in a proper definitive chronicle should be present, as it omits the identification of many who were in all worthy respects the leaders.

The stories of broken, hopeless lives coming back into grip and proportion with society must be implicit all through it. A news-writer in the group once wrote, "We have tried to make of ourselves fitting habitations for the Spirit." That, in all good conscience, is enough.

—Anonymous, Washington, D.C.