

October 1985

CELEBRATION!

AA's 50th Anniversary International Convention, Montreal, Quebec, July 4-7 1985

This is the story of AA's 50th birthday party. It must be told in many voices, for no individual's words or perceptions could capture the reality of the experience. The pages that follow contain the reflections of numerous AA members who attended the Convention.

The Grapevine editors have simply given shape to a mosaic, fashioning the generous contributions of many into an impressionistic account of an indescribable event.



THE THEME WAS "Fifty Years with Gratitude," and gratitude walked the streets of Montreal, burst the seams of hotels all over the city and outlying areas, roamed the corridors and bounced off the walls of the Convention Center, and filled the Olympic Stadium with wave after wave of cheering AAs and Al-Anons, flinging their arms wide in the sheer joy of sobriety.

It was AA's largest International (registration was over 44,000, from

trailer, by boat (on special pre-Convention cruises without booze), by any conveyance whatever that would get them there. They shared bumper-sticker stories from different highways. Some drove back and forth from Vermont or upstate New York each day, while others were housed as much as sixty miles out from the city and commuted cheerfully. A favorite memory for many will be the sight of the Fifth Chapter Motorcycle Club gathered in front of the Convention



fifty-four countries), and by far the most exuberant. One member called it "a weekend in a perfect world, a foretaste of what the world could be if everyone cared enough." Others described it as "wall-to-wall drunks, all vertical," and "one big love-in." A newspaper account began: "Forty-four thousand alcoholics converged on Montreal this weekend looking for a good time, and nobody had a hang-over."

Members chatted about how they arrived—by plane, train, bus, car, or

Center plaza, the gang of ex-toughs adding a picturesque note to a generally more conventional crowd.

There was the AA from Scotland who flew from Glasgow to Boston with his bike, then cycled the rest of the way. And a rather dusty girl from Maine said she had no money so she walked, three days' worth. To "Where's your gear?" she replied, "You're looking at it — except for a sleeping bag that I stashed in a new friend's car just now."

"What did you do when it

rained?"

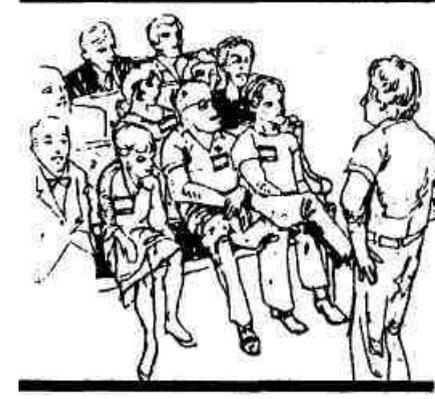
"Pine trees give the best shelter. I just got under one."

For travelers who wanted more than a pine tree, accommodations were often the first order of business. All the hotel space set aside for the Convention had been filled for months, and the overflow crowds had reserved other rooms or booked into university dormitories or planned to camp out in trailers. Others arrived with no reservations, just a profound faith that their higher power would step in. A planeload of forty-one AAs from Northern Ireland "took a flyer" and came with no reservations, and eleven AAs and Al-Anons who flew in from Mexico told others, without worry, that they had no hotels. Last-minute cancellations took care of some; the Convention housing crew of others; and others brought sleeping bags and crowded by the dozen into hotel rooms or suites; some even slept in lobbies, or on the floor of the Regency Ballroom at the LeGrand, where the marathon meeting was held.

One member reported: "I think God wanted my judgmentalism to be punctured a bit. I have sometimes felt smug and superior to the 'quiet' AA folks. My upbringing in sobriety has been in a rather extroverted town, AA-wise. But there I was in Montreal, a victim of an overbooked hotel, and I told the sad tale to some quiet AA folks I'd just met on the charter bus ride to the Convention. Without a word, they handed me the

spare key to their room. Actions speak louder than words, don't they?" (A member from Massachusetts wrote of a different lesson in humility, when she met the creator of Victor E. at a Grapevine workshop. "Funny — I used to be a place-and-name-dropper because I traveled a lot. Now, being able to say that I talked with the man who draws Victor means more than any of them.")

There were touches of humor. One woman had innocently checked into a



motel only to find out at checkout time the next morning that she had been charged by the hour — she had happened into one of *those*. A couple reported that shortly after arriving at a Montreal hotel, and being warmly greeted as AA visitors, a room service waiter arrived at the room with a gift, compliments of the house. It was a large chocolate bar, filled with whiskey. (The "candy" went down the drain, but the wrapper remains as the souvenir of a thought that counted.)

And of course, there were the "co-

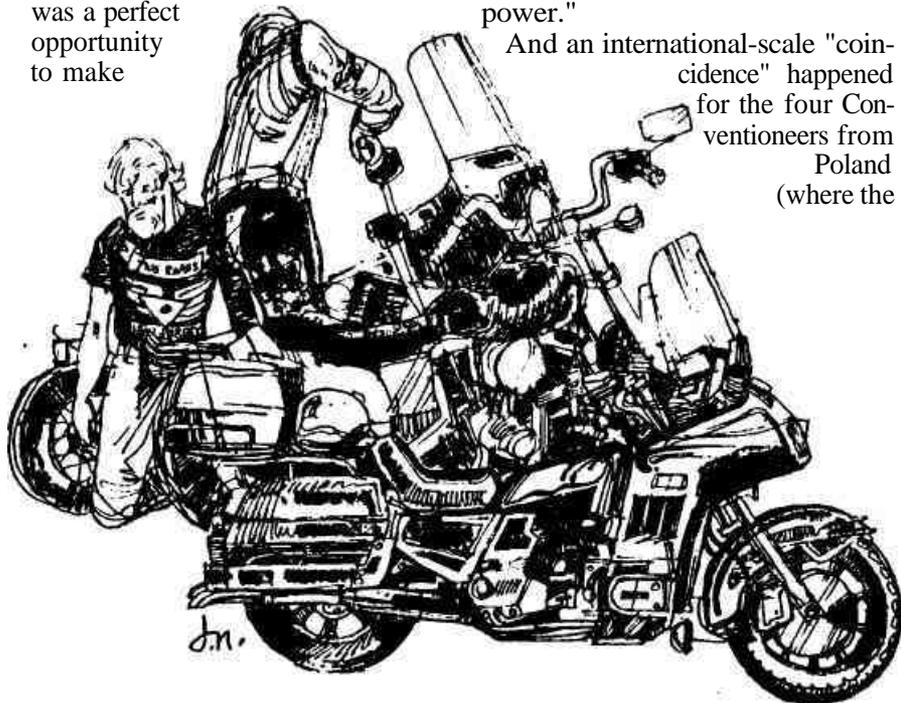
incidences" — the kind that AAs speak of with emphasis on the quotation marks. A New Mexico member shared in a triple-duty coincidence Tuesday night before the Convention:

"There were about twenty of us sitting around the lobby of our hotel, and we decided to have a meeting. It was one of those meetings where you literally feel the spirit. One woman came into the lobby distraught: she had come to Montreal with no place to stay, sure only that God wanted her to be there. A little later, a man from Ireland spoke up, and told us that he had been in Montreal several years before and had harmed some close friends. Now, sober, he felt it was a perfect opportunity to make

amends, and was late in joining the meeting because he had spent so much time with these friends. They had welcomed him warmly and offered him a place in their home — the same home he had been evicted from many years earlier. His only remaining difficulty: to explain to his hotel that he had somewhere else to stay and wanted his money back. The woman in need of a room solved that problem.

"But that wasn't all. A new woman had come to the meeting with me, someone who had been having trouble finding a God of her understanding. As we left, she squeezed my hand and confided with joy that now she had felt the presence of her higher power."

And an international-scale "coincidence" happened for the four Conventioneers from Poland (where the



first AA group was started in 1981). It was the first time a Polish contingent had attended a Convention, and out of the fourteen who wanted to come, only four could afford the journey. Rooms had been reserved for them at a local university, but when the men arrived, they didn't know where to go; they found (and paid for) other rooms. When two of them turned up at the registration windows at the Convention Center to get the situation straightened out, the first member of the Host Committee they turned to for help turned out to be a native French-Canadian and second-generation Pole. He was not only able to speak to them in Polish but also brought along his nonalcoholic parish priest to help.

As more and more AAs arrived, the city's newspapers, TV, and radio pitched in to help, and when it became known that some visitors were sleeping in their cars, thousands of residents offered housing. "I'm appalled," said one Montrealer encountered at the Picasso exhibition, "that they didn't ask us to open our homes as we did for Expo."

Montreal opened not only its homes but its heart. A local radio reporter compared the city during the Convention to the scene in a recent science fiction movie. He said that Montreal had been invaded by tens of thousands of benevolent aliens. Wearing blue badges, they were wandering throughout the city, happy, smiling, and greeting passersby. The citizens of the city, he went on, had



been touched by this strange new spirit and were smiling back and returning the greetings.

Citizens and "aliens" alike were good-humored in the Metro (subway), which was jammed to the doors before and after events at Olympic Stadium. All joined in the spontaneous bursts of singing and laughter, in the conversations that sprang up between friends-just-met, and in the cheering as overcrowded subway trains came into overcrowded stations — and in a generous gesture, the city allowed the crowds to ride free coming back from the stadium after the big meetings. A New York State AA was moved after the Saturday night entertainment when, a "country girl" frightened by the subway, she joined in with a crowd that sang through the turnstiles, onto the platform, and into the train. After running through most of the usual group songs, there was a moment of silence as they tried to think of what to sing next. Then someone started to sing "Amazing Grace," very softly, and as the song was picked up by the rest of the crowd, tears came to her eyes

at the special meaning of the words, "I once was lost, but now am found."

Other stories abounded. "They wouldn't bring the wine I ordered for my Al-Anon wife," said an AA from Massachusetts. He felt good about that: "They meant to protect me." ... At the five o'clock Saturday Mass at Mary Queen of the World Cathedral, the priest added the Serenity Prayer to the liturgy, and assured Conventioneers that they would always be welcome.... In a pre-Convention show of hospitality, the male purser on an Air Canada flight liked the AAs who traveled with him so much that he rented a van and took about a dozen of them sightseeing — on his day off.... And a tour guide was startled when he announced to a busload of AAs, "My name is Mario, and I'm your guide for this afternoon," and was greeted by a shouted "HI, MARIO!"

Only the bars and liquor stores were left out, along with a few hotel bartenders who complained gently that they had been pressed into service as waiters, and the tips weren't as good. The House of Seagrams took the invasion both philosophically and humorously: its Montreal headquarters building flew three flags at half-mast during the entire weekend.

Once settled in, most Conventioneers headed for the Convention Center — to register, to pick up badges (blue for AA, red for Al-Anon), to buy copies of the souvenir booklet or *Best of the Grapevine* or La Vigne's

Convention special issue or Al-Anon's new spiritual booklet, or just to mill around and get into the action. Several days before the Thursday night welcome dances, the Convention Center floor was crowded with eager ex-drunks. It was reunion time, and meeting-new-friends time, and people-watching time par excellence. An Oklahoma member commented:

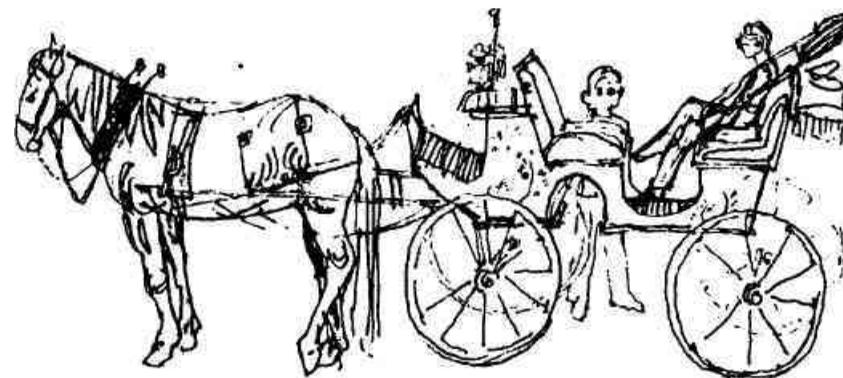
"Someone asked me what I planned to do over the Fourth of July. 'Oh,' I answered airily. 'I'm going to Montreal to spend the weekend with 40,000 close friends.'

"And that's how it was. Most of the men and women I smiled at, talked to, shook hands with, I'd never seen before and won't see again, but we were friends, close friends, because of our common problem, and the solution to it we were sharing.

"Each of us, probably, brought home vivid memories of individuals who stood out from the crowd for an indelible moment. The young man I remember best wasn't near enough for me to read his name card, so I don't know his name or home, but I feel sure many besides me carried away a misty-eyed memory of that unforgettable face. He was thin, dressed in blue jeans and a cotton shirt, immaculately clean but so worn as to be almost ragged. He made his way through the throngs at the Convention Center on crutches, for he had only one leg. Of all the happy faces I saw in Montreal during those three days, his was the most radiant."

From Delaware comes this remembrance: "One of the familiar sights at any AA event greeted us when we reached the Convention Center: AA people exchanging autographs and sobriety dates. A woman member asked an AA man to sign her copy of the blue souvenir booklet, *Fifty Years with Gratitude*. When he did so, he was startled to see her eyes fill with tears. They shared the same sobriety date: September 20, 1954."

wonderful straw hatters." The smiling faces under the white straw hats with blue and red trim greeted everyone at the door with a hearty "Welcome to Montreal." One description is typical: "They were everywhere. They knew everything. A woman from Verdun, a member of the Host Committee, even plonked down on the floor to try and straighten a bent spoke on my wheelchair. They stood and worked all day, while we were

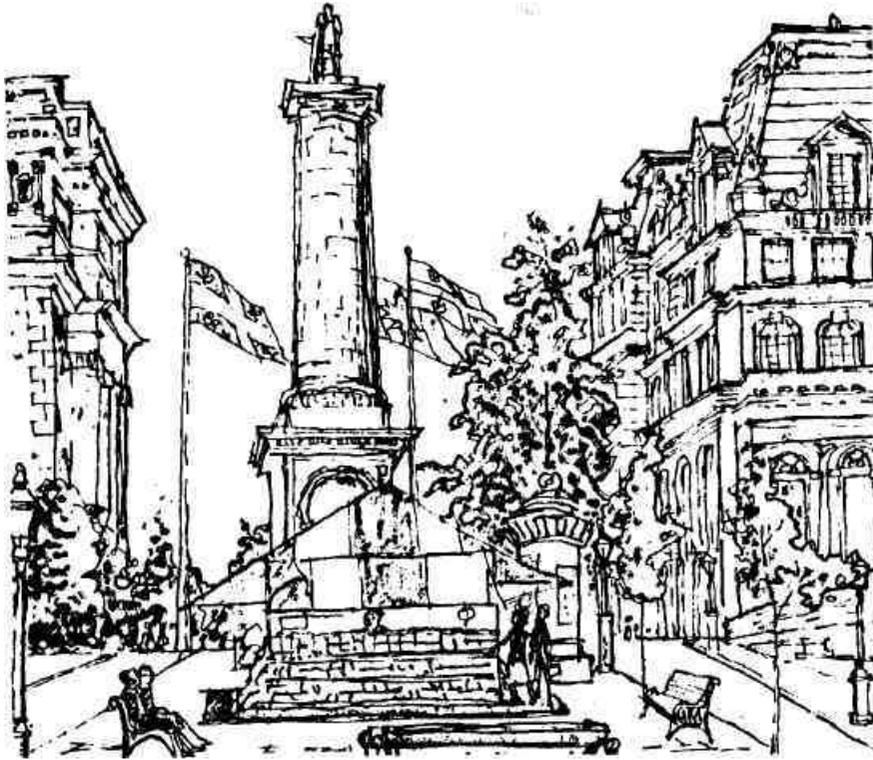


Another familiar sight is that of enthusiasts handing out souvenirs of their own. These generous souls prompted someone to write: "At the 1990 Convention, I want to be one of those giving everyone a card, or a button, or a ribbon, or a slogan. Like one Al-Anon lady from Mexico, who was handing out a tiny green turtle with a yellow head and flower on his back — Easy Does It, perhaps?"

That first trip to the Convention Center was everyone's introduction to some of the most important people there, the volunteer Host Committee of 3,000 Montreal AAs — "those

free to enjoy the rich program of meetings on the agenda. I don't think we could possibly thank them enough."

Scheduled events began Thursday night, with two overflowing welcoming dances, one with the "big band sound" and the other with a disco beat. Then, all day Friday and Saturday and through both nights, the fourth floor of the Convention Center and the meeting rooms of several hotels were filled with workshops, panels, marathon meetings, red ball meetings, newcomers meetings — the only problem was deciding where to



be, when, with a wide choice of events at any hour of the day or night.

It was forty thousand people (give or take a thousand or so) speaking the language of the heart, from platforms, in the corridors, on lines waiting for lunch at the restaurants and refreshment stations— It was the impromptu speakers at the Around-the-World Call-Up meeting, where there was no language barrier between AAs from many countries— It was the deaf member who told her story entirely in sign language, with virtually no need for a voice interpre-

tation.... It was the old-timers, "golden oldies in AA," with their reminders of the roots of the Fellowship and the reality that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

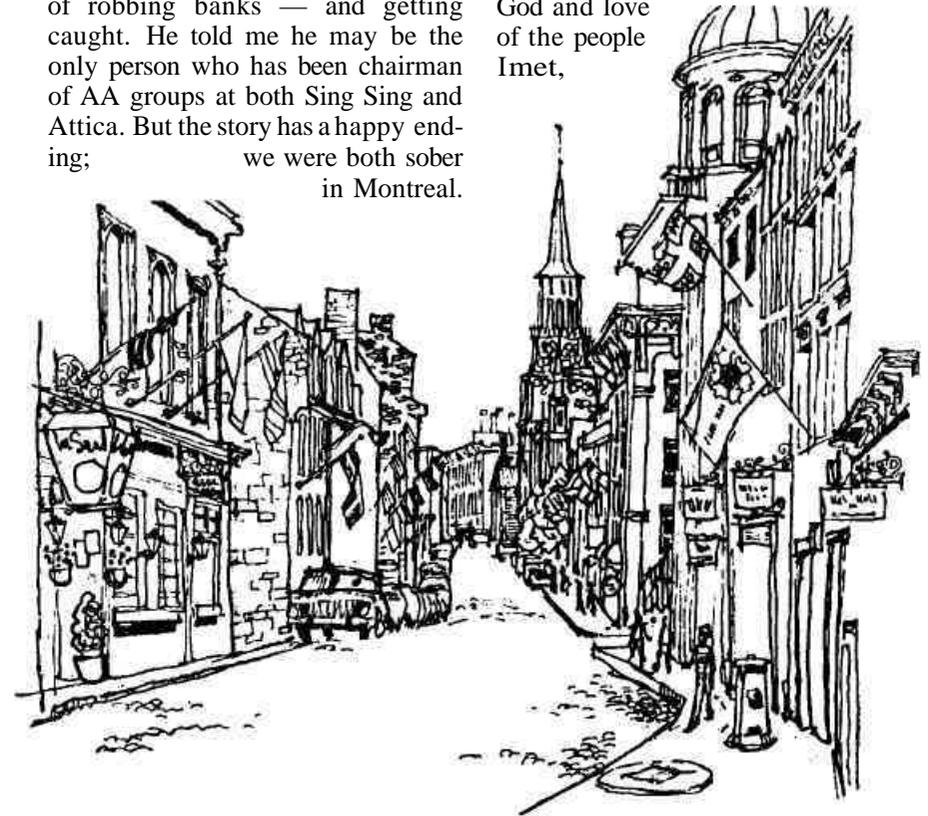
It was proof piled on proof that the program works. It works in prisons: At the Friday afternoon workshop on AA and Prisons, two speakers told how they had "met" through participating in the Institutions Correspondence Service (sponsored by the General Service Office), and met in person for the first time two days before. When the "outside" sponsor

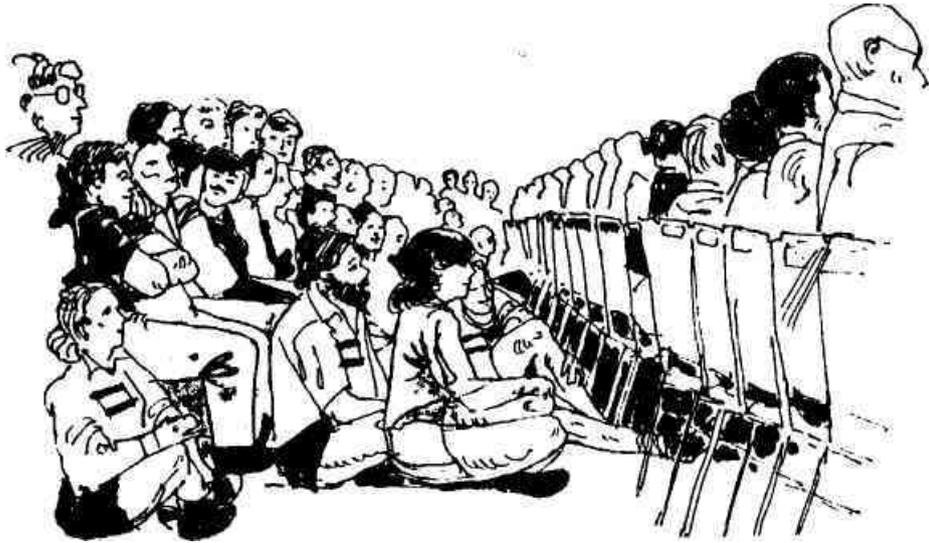
drove to the airport to meet his former-inmate sponsee, now active in AA on the outside for nearly a year, they knew each other immediately. (See the July 1984 Grapevine for the story of their friendship through the mail.)

Another former inmate found a surprise: A New York AA reported that "out of a sea of faces, one jumped out of the crowd. His badge said 'Don from Syracuse,' and he asked, 'Do you remember me?' After a moment, I did. Don had twelfth-stepped me in 1961, but slipped after that. He also developed the bad habit of robbing banks — and getting caught. He told me he may be the only person who has been chairman of AA groups at both Sing Sing and Attica. But the story has a happy ending; we were both sober in Montreal.

He has been sober ten years now, and is active in AA."

The story of AA's fiftieth birthday party, like the story of AA itself, is made up of thousands of personal experiences along the collective road to recovery. For four magical days, the road to recovery was the streets of Montreal and "the many one-to-one mini-meetings held at strange tables and in new corridors, the smiles that came from deep inside." For one Conventioneer, it was at first "a sense of being alone in a crowd. I wanted to find everyone I knew from back home. Through the grace of God and love of the people Imet,





I soon realized that I was with thousands of people who could and would help me, if I would only let them."

From California, a member wrote: "Trudging through the throngs on Montreal's downtown streets, creeping uneasily into the underground world of the Metro, plodding along corridors in the Convention Center and the hotels where we talked to one another incessantly at nonstop meetings, I found that my predominant impression was that this was the most good-natured mass of people I had ever encountered. More than good-natured; they were good-humored, for the most part quietly well-mannered, moving with simple dignity and self-assurance, and all of them, even if seemingly aloof or timid, extraordinarily approachable.

"There were a few loud and raucous ones, of course, apparently bent on demonstrating how noisily they could have fun without resorting to

alcohol. But they were the exceptions. Most of us were just interested in everything that was going on, and pleased to be part of it."

And a lot was going on, between friends old and new. Many AAs found old friends in unexpected ways. A speaker at one of the meetings told the story of five drinking buddies from boarding school: she and one other who were sober in AA, one now dead, one still drinking, and a fifth whom she hadn't heard from in many years. At the end of the meeting, the fifth friend, now a sober member, came up and reintroduced herself.... Then there was the New Yorker whose drinking story of washing her hair Iroquois-style, along with an Indian friend, in the St. Lawrence Seaway had been met with skepticism in her home group — until a Montreal friend who had been her companion in that venture told the same story at a local meeting—

The "little things" stand out: The AA who sat down in the stadium Friday night, introduced himself to his neighbor, and discovered that he was sitting next to his niece's counselor at a rehab.... The member who celebrated his first year of sobriety, after twenty-five years in and out of AA, with a trip to the Convention... The young AAs from Massachusetts who turned up in beautiful red T-shirts labeled on the front, in white lettering, "Bill W.'s friend, Dick" (or Harry, or whatever).... The two old drinking buddies, one now a priest, who met for the first time in many years, made their mutual amends,

and spent the entire Convention together.

Some of the "coincidences" were Twelfth Step opportunities: Alex from Canada (via Scotland) talked in a small meeting at one of the hotels about falling casually into conversation with a fellow from Australia. The Aussie was able to tell Alex how to get in touch with his still-active brother, lost to him for nineteen years.... Another member noticed a blue badge with the name Ed S. and asked its wearer if he happened to know another Ed S., from a certain town. "That's my dad," was the reply. Both he and another son are in



the program and have tried, unsuccessfully, to talk to their father. Perhaps an old business friend will be more successful — the door is now open.... An AA from Nebraska was hunting for a cup of coffee late at night, "and the only place open was the hotel bar. I made some comment about drinking coffee at a bar, and the bartender replied that she drinks a lot of it, too. I asked her if she was a friend of Bill W., and she replied, 'off and on.' We got to talking a bit about AA, and after looking through the Convention program, found a meeting topic that caught her fancy, scheduled for late at night after the bar closed. We don't know what happened, and probably never will — but



we believe there was an unseen guest at the bar that night, who will finish the story."

The main events were peak mo-

ments, bringing order to the dizzying round of "happenings," large and small. A member who commented that "the first hour of the Friday night opening ceremony was worth the whole trip" probably expressed the thoughts of several thousand others. A Florida AA described Friday night's Big Meeting this way: "While the Stadium filled up with spectators, we reveled in human wave after human wave as people stood and cheered in the stands at Olympic Stadium. I danced in the aisle with countless others, young and old, to the beat of Michael Jackson tunes on the loudspeaker system. We cried during the Flag Ceremony. Witnessing and being a part of history, past and present, created a feeling of melancholy, a sense of sadness within our joy, because we knew this would never happen again."

After the impromptu dancing and cheering came the official opening ceremonies. First the Flag Ceremony, with flag-bearers from fifty-four countries marching in formation and stepping forward as their country's name was called. The meeting itself started off with a roar of laughter when Bob P., Convention chairperson, welcomed everyone to "the regular Friday night

meeting at Olympic Stadium." One AA wrote that "the panorama of AA history unfolded and became alive again as it was recounted before us by those living witnesses of its birth." The present and the past were represented on the dais: Sarah P., GSO staff member and Convention coordinator; the current trustees of the General Service Board: old-timers, alcoholic and nonalcoholic, including Bob Smith Jr., the only living person who was present when Bill W. and Dr. Bob met for the first time in Akron. Ruth Hock, Bill W.'s first secretary at the original Alcoholic Foundation office, who typed the manuscript of the Big Book, was presented with the five-millionth copy by Gordon Patrick, nonalcoholic chairperson of the General Service Board. And "the highlight," as one Nebraska member wrote, "was when Lois W. came into the stadium and everyone stood up. It was a sign of appreciation that only members of AA and Al-Anon would understand. When she reached the podium, I developed the largest tears I have shed since entering the Fellowship. So much of this program to me is a miracle; it was good to be reminded by Lois that our co-founders were just human beings, not gods as I sometimes picture them to be."

The three speakers — Guy from Quebec, Sybil from California, and Dave from North Carolina — evoked a sense of history and a spirit of present gratitude that sent the crowds off to the Metro with mixed feelings: of awe because they had been present at

the making of history, and of "down home" AA brought by members of the family we all share.

Saturday, it was meetings, meetings, meetings during the day, and out to the stadium again for the Big Show. There were more human waves (rapidly becoming a Convention "must"), and overwhelming enthusiasm for the Inkspots and the Mummies and the can-can dancers. There was also the reality of the rain that had threatened all day, and broke after the show. A member from Oklahoma shared this memory: "Saturday night at 11:30, and I was riding around with a busload of wet drunks! The love of this beautiful Fellowship was shining everywhere in Montreal, but I especially noticed it Saturday night, when we were all rain-soaked and running to catch our bus. No one grumbled about hair, clothes, or cameras — a far cry from the drinking days!"

Sunday opened with a 7:00 AM "Fun Run," from the LeGrand Hotel through Old Montreal, along the St. Lawrence River, and back to the LeGrand. Then it was off with the jogging suits and back out to the stadium for the wind-up and official closing of the Convention, the Spiritual Meeting. It was moments of inspiration from chairperson Betty L. of the GSO staff and speakers Walter from Guatemala, Liz from New Zealand, and Joe from Arkansas. It was blowing out the candle lighted at midnight on Thursday by the person with the most sobriety at the first marathon meeting. According to custom,

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the following members, who in reality are the writers of this article: J. H., Port Hueneme, CA; R. H., Citrus Heights, CA; B. M., Saratoga, CA; F. F., Wilmington, DE; C. C., Miami Beach, FL; T. K., Honolulu, HI; P. L., Crofton, MD; A. C., Brighton, MA; M. P., Dedham, MA; R. G., Salem, MA; R. W., Springfield, MA; T. S., Templeton, MA; R. P., Bellevue, NE; D. A., Snyder, NE; T. B., Delran, NJ; V. V., Freehold, NJ; N. A., Wenonah, NJ; C. P., Albuquerque, NM; J. M., Madrid, NY; D. O., Martville, NY; S. G., J. Y., J. S., D. D., E. B., and J. M., New York, NY; R. S., Edmond, OK; E. E., Tulsa, OK; R. K., Portland, OR; T. B., Kenora, ON; E. R., Austin, TX — and numerous others whose recollections could be included only if the Grapevine was a magazine-without-end. — *The Editors*

the person with least sobriety at the last marathon meeting blows out the candle, and this time it was Lamont C. from Texas, with three and one half days. (A member from Massachusetts reflected, "I wonder what it's like to have 40,000 sponsors.") And finally, it was more than 40,000 voices joining in the closing Lord's Prayer, and 40,000 faces wet with tears of gratitude.

For some conventions, extinguishing the candle and saying the closing prayer might have been the end, but what alcoholic ever stopped *anything* willingly? A Sunday afternoon tour on the St. Lawrence River turned into an AA outing.... An Oregon member planned to meet some Scottish friends at the Convention Center plaza; they were joined by others, and a group of ten or twelve AAs joined other groups of AAs meander-

ing through the city.... On Monday night, one of the local meetings was so mobbed that it had to move from the basement into the church itself.

The experience continued as Conventioneers went home. This recollection comes from an enthusiastic Massachusetts member: "For me, Montreal was like getting drunk on friendliness, a natural high on handshakes and hugs. Like a greedy alky, I wanted MORE, MORE, MORE. So I kept my badge on for four days in Quebec City, and I got MORE — from Texas and Washington and Oklahoma and Ontario and New Jersey. Tuesday night, a group in Quebec City happily accommodated the overflow from Montreal; they went from an average of about twenty members to eighty-two!"... "Returning by train from Montreal," wrote an AA from Ontario, "we were held up for four or

five hours in North Bay. Twelve of us AAs, some from as far away as Australia, left the train and headed for some ice cream at a nearby restaurant. Then we went to a local meeting. It turned into an international meeting, and the chairperson gave us all five minutes to speak. Gratitude became the theme, and it was expressed by people from the U.S., Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Canada, to name only a few."... Undoubtedly, there were many such mini-Conventions in those first weeks of July, held by AAs who couldn't, or wouldn't, let the experience end.

One of the many grateful AAs who

wrote the Grapevine, a member from California, summed it up this way: "Once in my youth, I was told that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Never was this more true than at the International Convention in Montreal. By their very presence, AAs streaming in from all corners of the world brought to me the clear and comforting message, 'I can't, but we can!' The open fellowship in the streets, in the meetings, and in the Convention Center and Stadium proved to me once again that in our diversity lies our strength."

