

July 1960

Now that we're celebrating our twenty-fifth birthday, many of us naturally like to look back through our history to AA's beginnings. How much of this is good for us, both as individuals and as a movement?

Inevitably, many fine human beings have been involved in all stages of that history, from its very earliest roots to the present day. They deserve our recognition and gratitude. However, as we honor our heritage we must, in my opinion, be careful to keep those personalities, as wonder-

ful as they were and are, subsidiary to the eternal principles of AA.

For example, monuments to the memory of historic people are an accepted part of our national life, with undeniable inspirational and aesthetic value—a good way of reminding us of our political freedoms and their history. So suppose some of us in AA got together the funds to buy the house on Brooklyn's Clinton Street where a sober Ebby T. found his drinking friend Bill W., and suppose we preserved it as a monument to them—anonously, of course. I'm sure that many an AA now and

later would find it a thrilling and helpful thing to be reminded in this way of the history of his own freedom from the killing compulsion to drink.

Other places, too, of course, should be considered. Perhaps our fellow members in England, say, would decide to honor their first anonymous member by marking the site where he first heard the message. And Ohio, Texas, and California members would have a good case for paying tribute to the early members who carried the message in those states, by putting velvet ropes around the sickbeds from which those "founding fathers" first arose to walk in the AA way.

Scores of members—and maybe non-members, too—would use such places to improve their conscious contact with God through their prayers of thankfulness for the existence, wisdom, and work of those people. In that way, such sites would have real value, and could be good things for many of us. And therefore dangerous, I think. It has so often been proved in AA that the good in the short run is the enemy of the best in the long run.

We could easily slip into a binge of competitive monument-building, glorifying people all over the place. Although protecting the letter of anonymity, we could thus subtly avoid its spiritual implications, and undermine one of the precious keystones of our fellowship. The AA landscape would be littered with honorary sculpture for us to stand and

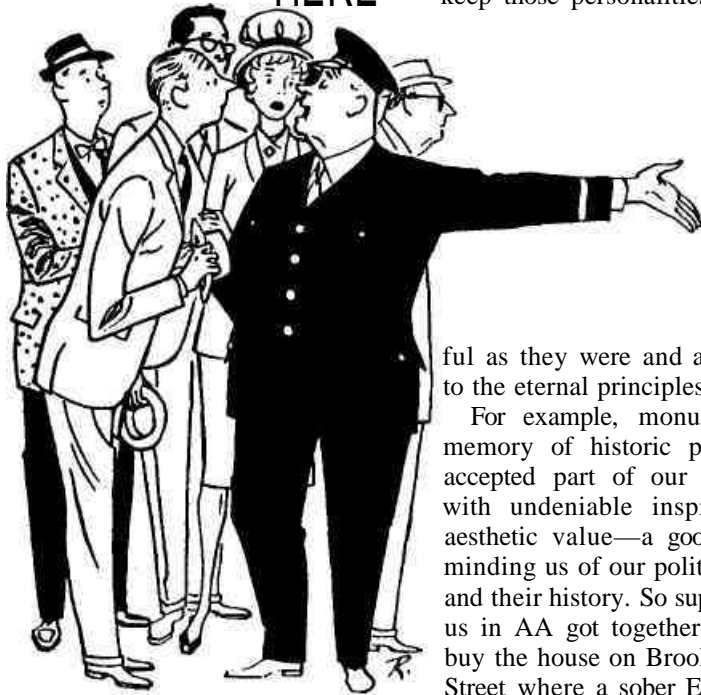
marvel at, while the live green growth of AA as we know and cherish it simply withered away. We'd be so busy admiring our statuary that we could not hear or heed the crying voices of drunks all around us dying for lack of our help.

Years ago Dr. Bob quashed what might have been the beginnings of just such a disaster when he discouraged the idea of erecting a big monument to him, by saying to Bill, "Why can't we just get buried like other folks?"

It set an example for all of us, and incidentally made it clear to the world that we in Alcoholics Anonymous feel our work is more important than our persons, that AA members do not seek prestige as a reward for their AA activities, or any preeminence or power within AA itself. Contrary to so much in the non-AA world today, this attitude distinguishes us now from the power-drivers and money-grubbers we used to be, and keeps the lid on these tendencies in us now, for the protection of our fellowship. Surely this is one of the strengths and glories of our movement, and one of the most valuable lessons its history teaches us.

Other examples have been established for us, too. One of our greatest universities wanted to confer on Bill an honorary LL.D. for his work in behalf of alcoholics. Technically, the university intended to respect the letter of the tradition of anonymity by using only the name "Bill W." Even so, Bill turned it down.

ANONYMOUS SLEPT HERE



Bill would have been other than human had he not wanted it. In my opinion, he richly deserved it, just as a dozen or maybe a hundred other good AAs around the world deserve honors from their townsmen, from legislatures, from industrial and health associations, for the tremendous work they have done in combating this public health problem. They all have every right to such benefits, except one: they owe their lives and sobriety to AA, and what would happen to AA if such a business ever got really going? We'd have authorities, and competition, and slips all over the place, I fear.

It can be argued that such honors would hasten the public's recognition of alcoholism as a disease, would encourage the public to support worthy programs in the general field of alcoholism, and probably would attract many new members to us and thus save many lives.

All good results, I agree. But which is the better result for the welfare and future of our beloved fellowship: maintenance of the spirit of Tradition Number Twelve, or the establishment of a caste of "honored" drunks among our members?

Our founders faced the same dilemma in 1951 when the 12,000 physicians of the American Public Health Association proposed to present the Lasker Award to them. It was respectfully declined. If any AA, even a founder, is rewarded publicly for his work, aren't there scores of others also deserving? Could not a

chain-reaction of honor-getting seriously damage our whole society?

That is why the Lasker Award that year, for the only time in its history, went not to an individual, but to our fellowship as a whole.

Here's another example. New York's historic old AA clubhouse on Twenty-fourth Street was condemned to make way for new housing, but some good AA members set out to raise funds from other members to save the old building and move it to a new site close by.

Some of the first reactions were negative. "Should we in AA of all places turn our faces to yesterday? Isn't it contrary to our spiritual principles to spend time and money and energy preserving relics of the past? Doesn't it violate the spirit of our Twelfth Tradition to preserve in honor the room where Bill slept?"

I've tried to examine my own reactions closely, inquire deeply into my own motives, and assemble all the pertinent facts before coming to any conclusion.

The facts are: that old building saw some important AA history made. The lessons of many of our Traditions were bitterly forged out in practice there, before they were distilled into writing for the guidance of those of us who came later, to save us many griefs and troubles. When Jack Alexander's original *Saturday Evening Post* piece about AA came out in 1941, and thousands of sufferers wrote New York for help, night after night volunteers slaved away in

the old Twenty-fourth Street clubhouse to answer those pleas. These members were really functioning for the first time at a worldwide service level, doing the work now carried on by your General Service Office.

Perhaps it is even more significant that the old building with its long "last mile," its mantelpiece where early speakers leaned, and its narrow stairway leading to the tiny bedroom upstairs, remained a beehive of AA activity up to the last minute. Some eighteen groups were meeting there weekly. New drunks were finding AA there every day.

On the basis of that record, I've had to reach this decision: if those who want to preserve the old place want to further the good work started there, and if visiting it helps members appreciate more and more the lessons of AA's *past*, that can perhaps be a good thing. But if it is to be a profit-making enterprise, soliciting AAs to save the clubhouse as a monument to glorify a person, that's quite another matter. Maybe that's a pretty good rule of thumb for weighing any perpetuation of our history, or any such project connected with it.

There's a lesson here, I think, for my own AA growth. Once every few years I go look at the old church building on Forty-first Street in Manhattan where I first found an AA home. It renews my gratefulness for the existence of AA and the uncounted blessings it has brought me. It strengthens my feeling of responsibility: I must pass on unstintingly, in

every way I can, the gift of sobriety. I need to work harder at AA today. There is no time for misty-eyed sentimentality or nostalgia for yesterday, with all the AA jobs around me that need doing today.

I get even more of a wallop when I read the book "AA Comes of Age." I find it an awesome experience, and the word *gratitude* is inadequate to express what I feel. If it were not for that history, where would most of us be today? That history is a precious heritage, nourishing our AA life of today with the strength, the shared experience of the past.

That book teaches me that perhaps the most precious legacy I have inherited from the earliest members is the third one—the responsibility for giving service. That third legacy makes possible the other two, if I participate in it. It continually makes sure of my own recovery. It unites me with my fellow alcoholics in a bond of giving.

Today's opportunities for service are sure tools for preserving and improving my own sobriety—in personal Twelfth Step work, in group service, in helping with Intergroup work, and in supporting the worldwide Twelfth Step work carried on through the Conference structure by the General Service Office.

Older members told me my first day, "The only way to keep sobriety is to give it away." Could there be a better way to honor our AA heritage and those who have given it to us?

Anonymous, New York City