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Book Publication Proved Discouraging Venture

By Bill

(Second in a series of articles recording the history of A.A.)

During the summer of 1938 we solicited the well-to-do for contributions to fill that brand new receptacle, our Alcoholic Foundation. Again we encountered a strange indifference to drunks. Nobody was interested. We didn't get a cent that I can remember. We were pretty discouraged; apparently providence had deserted us. With the modest fund from Mr. Rockefeller running out, it looked like a lean winter ahead. There could be no book, no office. What good, we complained, was an Alcoholic Foundation without money!

By this time there had been roughed out what are now the first two chapters of the book now known as *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Our friend Frank referred us to a well known publisher who suggested the possibility of advancing royalties to me so the book could be finished. That made us feel fine until it was realized that if I ate up a lot of royalties while doing the book, there could be no more payments for a long time afterward. We saw, too, that my 10 per cent royalty would never carry the office expense of answering the pleas for help that would surely follow publication. Nor might a commercial publisher, anxious for sales, advertise it as we would like it.

Publishers Without a Book

These reflections led us straight into a typical alcoholic fantasy! Why not publish the book ourselves? Though told by almost everybody who knew anything of publishing that amateurs seldom produced anything but flops, we were not dismayed. This time, we said, it would be different. We had discovered that the bare printing cost of a book is but a fraction of its retail price and a national magazine of huge circulation had offered to print an article about us when our book was furnished. This was a clincher. How could we miss? We could see books selling by hundreds of thousands - money rolling in!

What a promotion it was! An A.A. friend and I hastily organized the Works Publishing Co. My friend Hank P., then bought a pad of stock certificates at a stationary store. He and I started selling them to brother alcoholics and any who would buy at the bargain price of \$25 a share. Our confidence must have been boundless. Not only were we selling common stock on a book to cure drunks - the book itself hadn't yet been written. Amazingly enough, we did sell that stock, \$4,500 worth, to alcoholics in New York, New Jersey, and to their friends. No one of the original 49 subscribers put up over

\$300. Almost everybody paid on monthly instalments, being too broke to do otherwise; save, of course, our good friends at Rockefeller Center.

Our agreement with the Works Publishing subscribers was that out of the first book income they were to get their money back; also that The Alcoholic Foundation was to receive the 10 percent royalty I might have had from the publisher. As for the shares of Works Publishing, the 49 cash subscribers were to have one third, my friend Hank one third, and I one third. We also obtained a loan of \$2,500 from Charles B.T., proprietor of a nationally known hospital for alcoholics. A friend indeed, he was to wait years to get his money back.

But, as anyone could then see, everything was all set - everything, of course, but writing and selling the book! Hope ran high. Out of the new financing we could keep a small office going at Newark, New Jersey. There I began to dictate the text of *Alcoholics Anonymous* to Ruth H. (our first national secretary). Rosily we saw scads of money coming in, once the book was off the press. Still more, we expected the new book would turn right about and help finance our poverty stricken Foundation - which, strangely enough, it really did years later.

Finally came 1939. The book was done. Tales of recovery for its story section had been supplied by Dr. Bob and his Akron brethren. Others were supplied by New Yorkers, New Jerseyites. One came in from Cleveland and another from Maryland. Chapters had been read and discussed at meetings. I had though myself the author of the text until I discovered I was just the umpire of the differences of opinion. After endless voting on a title for the new work we had decided to call it *The Way Out*. But inquiry by Fritz M., our Maryland alcoholic, at The Library of Congress disclosed the fact that 12 books already bore that title. Surely we couldn't make our book the 13th. So we named it *Alcoholics Anonymous* instead! Though we didn't know it, our movement then got its name - a name which because of the implication of humility and modesty has given us our treasured spiritual principle of anonymity.

Five thousand copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* lay in the printer's warehouse, except the few we joyously passed around. Each stockholder and each story writer got one free. *The New York Times* did a good review. We hastened to the national magazine to tell them we were ready for their promised article. We could see A.A. books going out in carload lots!

Things Weren't Rosy at All

What a debacle! At the office of the great monthly periodical we were gently told they had entirely forgotten to let us know, nine months before, that they had decided to print nothing about us. The editors had concluded that drunks were too controversial a subject! This stunning announcement left us in a daze. The whole Alcoholics Anonymous movement could buy less than a hundred books, as it had only one hundred members. Besides, we had given away 79 free ones! What were we to do with those other thousands of books? What could we say to the printer, whose bill wasn't half paid? What about that little loan of \$2,500 and those 49 subscribers who had invested \$4,500 in Works Publishing stock? How could we break the awful news to them? How could we tell them that since we had no publicity we could sell no books? Yes, that A.A. book venture was, I fear, very alcoholic.

Thus was the good book *Alcoholics Anonymous* born into bankruptcy. Some of the creditors got restive; the sheriff actually appeared at our Newark office. The promoters were very low - financially and otherwise. The house in which my wife and I had lived at Brooklyn was taken over by the bank. We took up residence in a summer camp loaned us by an A.A. friend, Horace C.

and his family. My friend Hank fared no better. Things certainly looked bleak. Still only three active A.A. groups, we had acquired besides a bankrupt A.A. book, one unpaid but loyal secretary, a tiny Central Office that might have to close any day and an Alcoholic Foundation with no money in it. That was the score after four years of Alcoholics Anonymous.