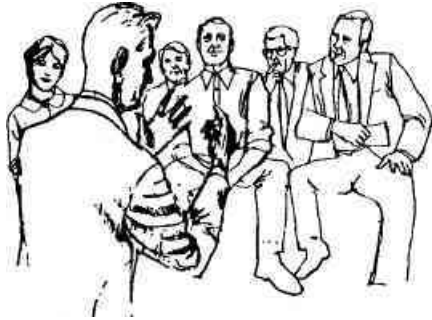


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Carrying the Message In 'Fifty-Five



by Bill W.

Part II of a two-part article

AT THIS juncture, the meeting—the first meeting of the Manhattan Group, which really took place in Brooklyn — stopped, and it stopped for a very good reason. That was that the landlord set Lois and me out into the street, and we didn't even have money to move our stuff into storage. Even that and the moving van — that was done on the cuff.

Well, it was then the spring of 1939. Temporarily, the Manhattan Group moved to [New] Jersey. It hadn't got to Manhattan yet. A great friend, Horace C——, let Lois and me have a camp belonging to himself and his mother, out at Green Pond. My partner in the book enterprise, old Hank P——, now gone, lived at Upper Montclair. We used to come

down to 75 William Street, where we had the little office in which a good deal of the book was actually done. Sundays that summer, we'd come down to Hank's house, where we had meetings which old-timers — just a handful now in Jersey — can remember.

The Alcoholic Foundation [AA's board of trustees, now called the General Service Board], still completely empty of money, did have one small account called the "Lois B. W——Improvement Fund." This improvement fund was fortified every month by a passing of the hat, so that we had the summer camp, we had fifty bucks a month, and someone else lent us a car to try to revive the book *Alcoholics*

Part I of this article (July Grapevine), from a talk by Bill at a New York City AA meeting in 1955, told of twelfth-stepping and early meetings at the Brooklyn home of Bill and Lois, "hassles" over the writing of the Big Book, financial risks in getting it printed, and, after its publication, optimistic publicity plans — which suddenly fell through.

Anonymous and the flagging movement.

In the fall of that year, when it got cold up there at the summer camp, we moved down to Bob V——'s. Many of you know him and Mag (old-timers over in Jersey). We were close by the Rockland asylum. Bob and I and others went in there, and we started the first institutional group, and several wonderful characters were pried out of there. I hope old Tom M—— is here tonight — Tom came over to the V——'s, where he holed up with Lois and me, then put in a room called Siberia, because it was so cold. We bought a coal stove for four dollars and kept ourselves warm there during the winter.

So did a wonderful alcoholic by the name of Jimmy. He never made good. Jimmy was of the devious type, and one of our first remarkable experiences with Jimmy was this. When we moved from Green Pond, we brought Marty with us, who had

been visiting, and she suddenly developed terrible pains in her stomach. This gentleman Jimmy called himself a doctor. In fact, he had persuaded the authorities at Rockland that he was a wonderful physician. They gave him full access to the place. He had keys to all the surgical instruments. (Incidentally, I think he had keys to the pill closets over there.)

Marty was suffering awful agonies, and he said, "Well, there's nothing to it, my dear. You've got gallstones." So he goes over to Rockland. He gets himself some kind of fishing gadget that they put down gullets to fish around in there, and he fishes around and yanks up a flock of gallstones, and she hasn't had a bit of trouble since. And, dear people, it was only years later that we learned the guy wasn't a doctor at all.

Meanwhile, the Manhattan Group moved to Manhattan for the first time. The folks over here started a

meeting in Bert T——'s tailor shop. Good old Bert is the guy who hocked his then-failing business to save the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939. In the fall, he still had the shop, and we began to hold meetings there. Little by little, things began to grow. We went from there to a room in Steinway Hall, and felt we were in very classic and good company that gave us an aura of respectability.

Finally, some of the boys — notably Bert and Horace — said, "AA should have a home. We really ought to have a club." And so the old 24th Street Club, which had belonged to the artists and illustrators and before that was a barn going back to Revolutionary times, was taken over. I think Bert and Horace signed the first lease. They soon incorporated it, though, lest somebody slip on a banana peel outside. Lois and I, who had moved from the V——s' to live with another AA, then decided we wanted a home for ourselves, and we found a single furnished room down in a basement on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village.

I remember Lois and me going through Grand Central wondering where we'd light next, just before the Greenwich Village move. We were very tired that day, and we walked off the main floor there and sat on one of those gorgeous marble stairways leading up to the balcony, and we both began to cry and say, "Where will we ever light? Will we ever have a home?"

Well, we had one for a while in Barrow Street. And when the club was opened up, we moved into one of those rooms there. Tom M—— came over from the V——s', and right then and there a Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous was generated. It seemed that volunteers had been sweeping the club; it seemed that many of the alcoholics had keys to the club; and they came and went and sometimes stayed; and sometimes they got drunk and acted very badly — doing we know not what. There had to be somebody there to really look after the place. So we thought we'd approach old Tom, who had a pension as a fireman. We said, "Tom, how would you like to come and live at the club?"

Tom says, "What's on your mind?"

"Well," we said, "we really need somebody here all the time, you know, to make the coffee and see that the place is heated and throw some coal on that furnace over there and lead the drunks outside if they're too bad."

"Ain't ya goin' to pay me?" Tom says.

"Oh, no," we said. "This is Alcoholics Anonymous. We can't have any professionals."

Tom says, "I do my Twelfth Step work, I don't charge 'em nothin'. But what you guys want is a janitor, and if you're going to get me, you're going to pay, see?"

Well, we were very much disturbed about our own situation. We

weren't being exactly paid — they were just passing the hat for us, you understand. I think that we went for seven years of the history of this Society with an average income of seventeen hundred bucks a year, which, for a former stockbroker, is not too big. So this question of who is a professional and who isn't bore very heavily at the time on Tom and me. And Tom began to get it settled. He began to show that if a special service was asked from anybody full-time, we'd have to pay or not get it. So, finally, we haggled Tom down on the theory that he already had a pension, and he came to live there. Tom and Lois and I lived there, and meetings began in that old club.

That old club saw many a terrific development, and from that club sprang all the groups in this area. The club saw the passage of the Rockefeller dinner, when we thought we'd all be rich as a movement, and Mr. Rockefeller saved us by not giving us money. That club saw the *Saturday Evening Post* article published. In fact, the *Post* at that time said, "No pictures, no article." If you will look up the March 1, 1941, issue of the *Saturday Post*, you will see a picture of the interior of the club, and a flock of us sitting before the fire. They didn't use our names, but they insisted on pictures. Anonymity wasn't then quite what it is today. And with the advent of that piece, there was a prodigious rush of inquiries — about 6,000 of them.

By this time, we'd moved the little

office from Newark, New Jersey, over to Vesey Street [Manhattan]. You will find in the old edition of the book [*Alcoholics Anonymous*] "Box 658, Church Street Annex." And that was the box into which the first inquiries came. We picked out that location because Lois and I were drifters, and we picked it because it was the center of the geographical area here. We didn't know whether we'd light in Long Island, New Jersey, or Westchester, so the first AA post office box was down there, with a little office alongside of it.

The volunteers couldn't cope with this tremendous flock of inquiries — heart breakers, but 6,000 of them! We simply had to hire some help. At that point, we asked you people if you'd send the foundation a buck apiece a year, so we wouldn't have to throw that stuff in the waste basket. And that was the beginning of the service office and the book company. That club saw all those things transpire.

But there was a beginning in that club at that time that none of us noticed very much. It was just the germ of an idea. It often looked, in after years, as though it might die out. Yet within the last three years, it has become what I think is one of the greatest developments that we shall ever know, and here I'm going to break into my little tale to introduce my partner in all this, who stayed with me when things were bad and when things have been good, and she'll tell you what began upstairs in

that club, and what has eventuated from it — *Lois*.

[Lois then spoke about the formation and early days of Al-Anon Family Groups.]

So, you see, it was in the confines of the Manhattan Group of those very, very early days that this germ of an idea came to life. Lois might

"AA is something more than a quest for sobriety."

have added that since the St. Louis conference [the Second AA International Convention, in 1955], one new family group has started every single day of the week since, someplace in the world.

I think the deeper meaning of all this is that AA is something more than a quest for sobriety, because we cannot have sobriety unless we solve the problem of life, which is essentially the problem of living and working together. And the family groups are straightening out the enormous twist that has been put on our domestic relations by our drinking. I think it's one of the greatest things that's happened in years.

Well, let's cut back again to old 24th Street, One more thing happened there: Another Tradition was generated. It had to do with money. You notice how slow I was on coming up with that dollar bill tonight? I

suppose I was thinking back — some sort of an unconscious reflex. We had a deuce of a time getting that club supported, just passing the hat, no fees, no dues, just the way it should be. But the "no fee and due" business was construed into no money at all — let George do it.

I'd been, on this particular day, down to the foundation office [forerunner of the AA General Service Office], and we'd just put out this dollar-a-year "measuring stick" for the alcoholics to send us some money if they felt like it. Not too many were feeling like it, and I remember that I was walking up and down the office damning these drunks. That evening, still feeling sore about the stinginess of the drunks, I sat on the stairs at the old 24th Street Club, talking to some would-be "convert." Tom B— was leading that meeting that night, and at the intermission he put on a real plug for money, the first one that I'd ever heard. At that time, money and spirituality couldn't mix, even in the hat. I mean, you mustn't talk about money! Very reluctantly, we'd gone into the subject with M— [the retired fireman] and the landlord. We were behind in the rent.

Well, Tom put on that heavy pitch, and I went on talking to my prospect, and as the hat came along, I fished in my pocket and pulled out half a buck. That very day, I think Ebby had come in the office a little the worse for wear, and with a very

big heart, I'd handed him five dollars. [Ebby had first carried the message to Bill, across the kitchen table at Clinton Street.] Our total income at the time was thirty bucks a week, which had come out of the Rockefeller dinner affair; so I'd given him five bucks of the thirty and felt very generous, you see.

But now comes the hat to pay for the light and heat and so forth — rent — and I pull out this half dollar and I look absent-mindedly at it, and I put my hand in the other pocket and pull out a dime and put it in the hat. So I have never since railed at alcoholics for not getting up the money. There, you see, was the beginning of two AA Traditions — things that had to do with professionalism [Tradition Eight] and money [Tradition Seven].

Following 1941, this thing just mushroomed everywhere. Groups began to break off out into the suburbs. But a lot of us still wanted a club, and the 24th Street Club just wouldn't do the trick. We got an offer from Norman Vincent Peale to take over a church at 41st Street. The church was in a neighborhood that had deteriorated badly — over around Ninth Avenue and 41st. In fact, it was said to be a rather sinful neighborhood, if you gather what I mean. The last young preacher that Peale had sent there seemed very much against drinking and smoking and other even more popular forms of sin; therefore, he had no parishioners.

Here was this tremendous church, and all that we could see was a bigger and bigger club in New York City. So we moved in. The body of the church would hold 1,000 people, and we had a hall upstairs that would hold another 800, and we visioned this as soon full. Then there were bowling alleys downstairs, and we figured the drunks would soon be getting a lot of exercise. After they warmed up down there, they could go upstairs in the gymnasium. Then, we had cooking apparatus for a restaurant. This was to be our home, and we moved in.

Well, sure enough, the place filled up just like mad! Then, questions of administration, questions of morals,

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questions of meetings, questions of which was the Manhattan Group and which was the club and which was the intergroup (the secretary of the club was also the intergroup secretary) began to get this seething mass into terrific tangles, and we learned a whole lot about clubs!

Whilst all this was going on, the AA groups were spreading throughout America and to foreign shores, and each group, like our own, was having its terrific headaches. In that violent period, nobody could say

whether this thing would hang together or not. Would it simply explode and fly all to pieces? On thousands of anvils of experience, of which the Manhattan Group was certainly one (down in that 41st Street club, more sparks came off that anvil than any I ever saw), we hammered out the Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, which were first published in 1946 [April Grapevine]. We hammered out the rudiments of an intergroup, which now has become one of the best there is anywhere, right here in New York.

Finally, however, the club got so big that it bust. The intergroup

moved. So did the Manhattan Group, with \$5,000 — its part of the take, which it hung on to. And from the Manhattan Group's experience, we learned that — although the foundation needs a reserve — for God's sake, don't have any money in a group treasury! The hassles about that 5,000 lasted until they got rid of it somehow.

Then, you all moved down to dear old Sam Shoemaker's Calvary, the very place of our beginning. Now, we've made another move. And so we grow, and such has been the road that leads back to the kitchen table at Clinton Street.