

October 1980

*Forty-Fifth Anniversary  
AA International Convention*

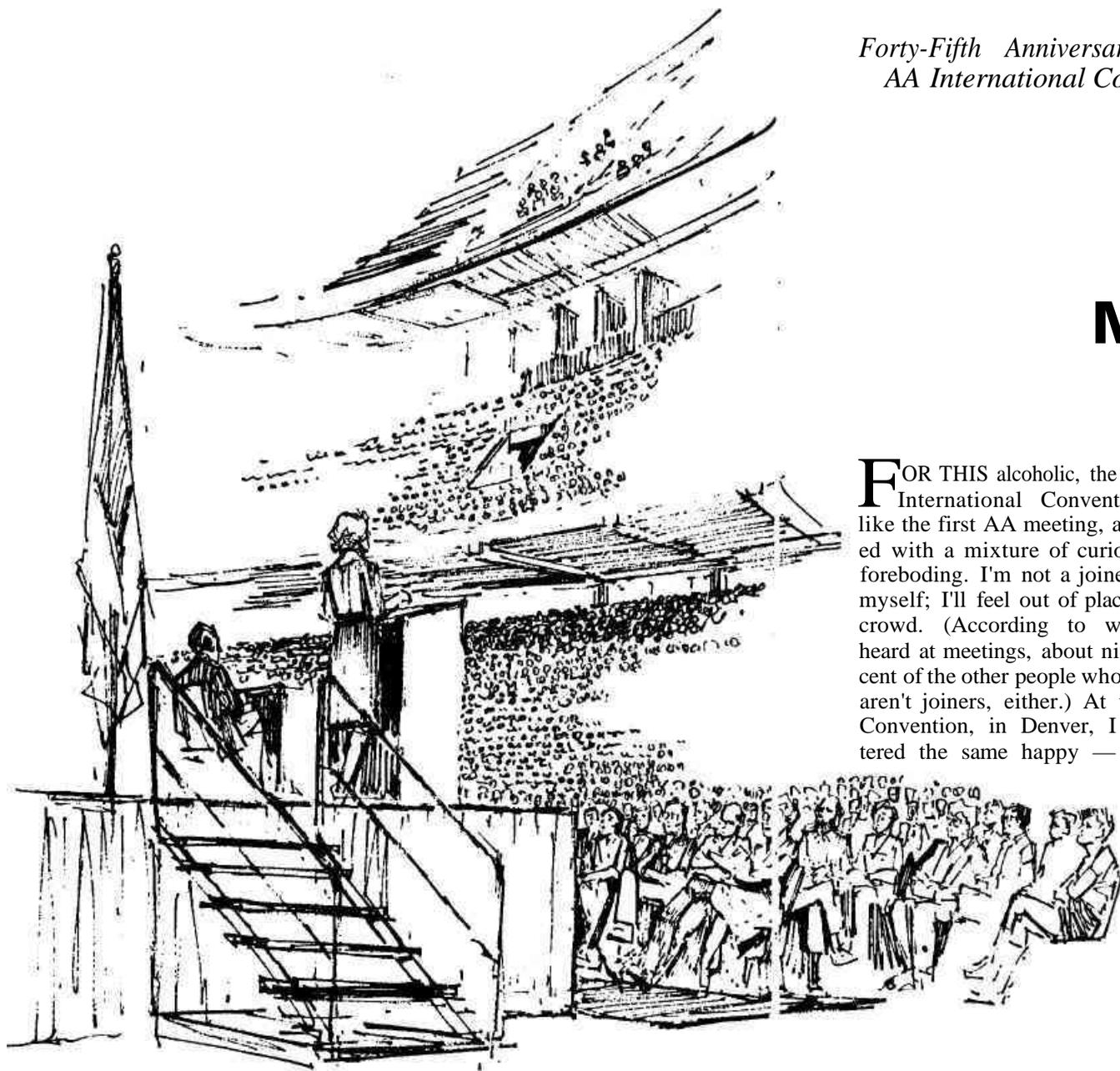
## Super Meeting

**F**OR THIS alcoholic, the first AA International Convention was like the first AA meeting, approached with a mixture of curiosity and foreboding. I'm not a joiner, I told myself; I'll feel out of place in that crowd. (According to what I've heard at meetings, about ninety percent of the other people who join AA aren't joiners, either.) At the 1975 Convention, in Denver, I encountered the same happy — if over-

whelming — surprise that I enjoyed on first walking into my home group.

Going to New Orleans for the Forty-Fifth Anniversary AA International Convention, July 3-6, 1980, was like returning to my home group after a long absence. The curiosity remained; I knew I'd find familiar faces outnumbered by unfamiliar, as I do in my growing group. But the foreboding was replaced by anticipation.

Flying over the green, water-scribbled delta, looking down on the buildings clustered along the milk-chocolate curves of the Mississippi River, I knew that New Orleans would not be a city of strangers. Sure enough, I got off the bus from the airport saying goodbye to a California AA I had never seen before and promising to deliver his message to a New York friend: "Tell her hello



from Square Foot." The Californian was a CB enthusiast, too subtly named. "Nobody gets it. Square Foot — Twelve by Twelve!"

For all the miles between Denver and New Orleans, I was back in *our* town as soon as I set foot on the streets. Practically all the passersby seemed to be wearing the sunny yellow badges that were headed "The Joy of Living," the Convention theme, and decorated with a line of prancing jazzmen, symbol of New Orleans.

In key with the location, a July 3 reprise of the Mardi Gras parade greeted Convention-goers inside the Rivergate Convention Center Thursday evening. A welcoming dance followed, while young AAs stepped to their own rhythms at the Crawfish Crawl, held at a nearby hotel. And immediately after that began the AA meetings that went on all over town all during the Convention: state, provincial, and special-interest alkathons; midnight meetings; a marathon meeting that kept going for fifty-six hours, with thirty-eight speakers. "Do I *have* to go to all those meetings?" No one person could have, but it seems we can't get enough of them; after the whole Convention was over, somebody at the motel where I stayed posted a slip of paper beside the elevators, with the penciled announcement: "AA meeting tonight at 6:00 beside the swimming pool."

July 4, Independence Day for the U.S.A., found Convention-goers of

forty nationalities looking back to a date that promised another sort of independence for the alcoholics of the world: June 10, 1935, when Dr. Bob had his last drink and came to believe that he and his sponsor, Bill W., could keep their gift of freedom by sharing it.

Now, forty-five years later, thousands of alcoholics streamed toward the Louisiana Superdome to celebrate their sobriety. On first seeing the Superdome, you might think that the mother ship from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was parked in New Orleans. Its walls enclose the largest indoor sports arena in the world. The meeting rooms where our workshop sessions were held spread around its circumference.

And around and around . . . The curving corridor held an endless parade of AAs and their families and friends, shouting "Hi," pausing for impromptu meetings, sitting down to rest tired feet, grabbing coffee or cola, asking, "Is 'Loners and Internationalists' in this room?" or "Where's 'Public Information'?"

Whatever your AA service interest, you would have found it being explored somewhere along the way. Two workshops focused on "The Grapevine — How It Works." "What the editor thinks doesn't matter," said one panelist. "If the Grapevine reflected only one member's opinion, that would be the end of it." Another, a regular GV contributor (unpaid, of course), said, "Writers who have won Pulitzers

tell me I get more out of writing for the Grapevine than they do from writing syndicated stuff." And a third AA reported, "My involvement as area Grapevine chairman was the best tool I had in my personal sobriety."

Still another panelist recalled, "Three years before I stopped drinking, I stole a ragged, coffee-stained copy of the Bill W. memorial issue from a facility — and here it is at the Convention!" (Packets containing reprints of that Grapevine and the Dr. Bob memorial issue were on sale at the Superdome.)

Another Grapevine, once placed in the hands of a Zulu in South Africa, symbolized AA hope for him. So he told us Friday night at the Big Meeting, in a setting that dramatized the worldwide extent of our Fellowship. Across the center of the vast Superdome arena stretched a stylized map of our planet, with winking white lights to mark all the countries and remote areas where AA can now be found, from Greenland to Antarctica. Hung bannerlike at each side of the map were huge covers of Big Books in many languages. And the meeting opened with a grand march of spotlighted flag-bearers down the aisle.

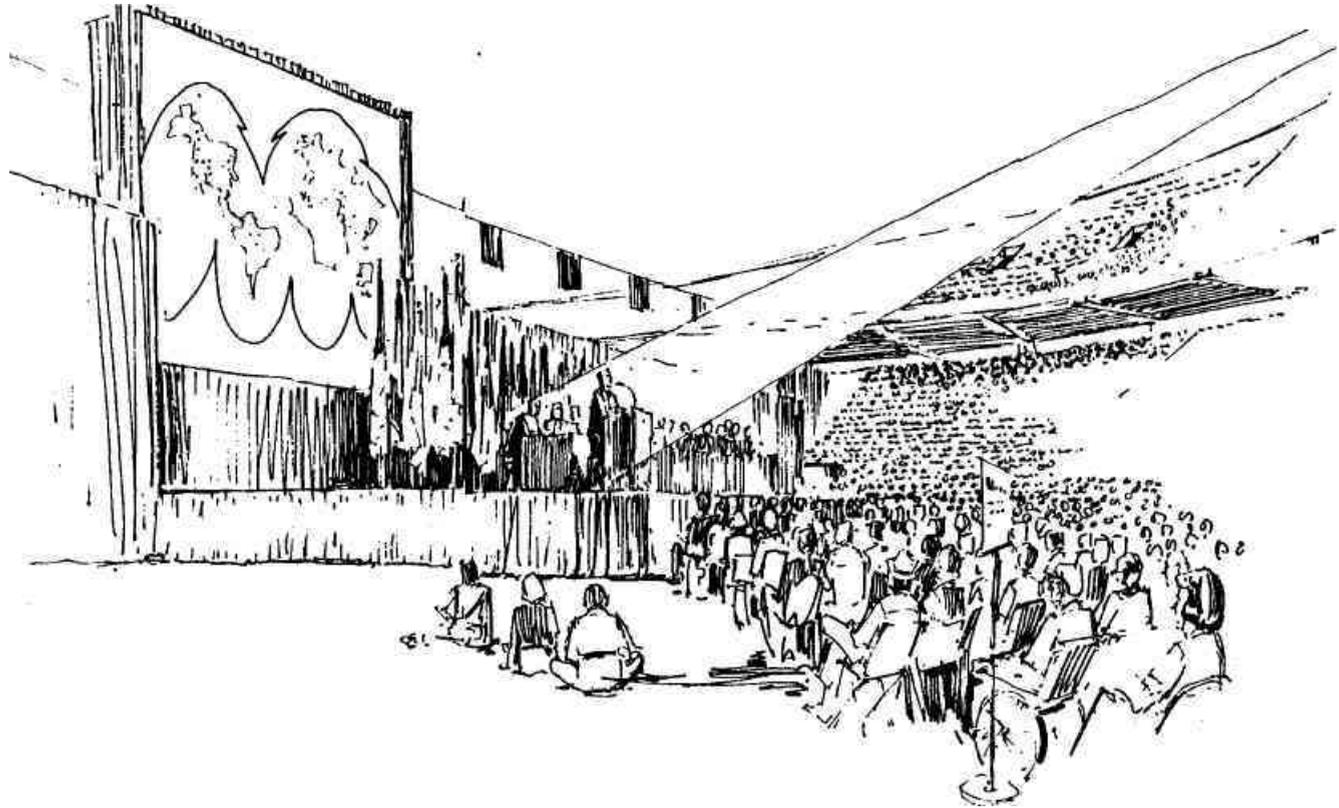
The total of registrants, about 22,500, was not quite as large as the rapid growth of AA had led us to expect; this summer, economic conditions caused a reduction in the scope of most conventions in the U.S. But the three stories that held us enthral-



ed Friday evening were the real message of our Convention: The AA program can work for you, whether you're in Africa or North America, black or white, woman or man.

Back to the Superdome circuit on Saturday, to sample another bewildering array of workshops. And the alkathons went on. And the marathon went on. An International Convention is a great place for learning — as all of life should be. But it isn't a working occasion (like the General Service Conference, for example); its chief purpose is simple enjoyment of the sober life, giving AAs and their families and friends the sheer pleasure of one another's company on a big scale. Saturday evening, the Big Show at the Superdome provided a lively range of family entertainment.

New Orleans is a wonderful place to savor "The Joy of Living." It's an "Easy Does It" town, though it usually isn't full of people wearing T-shirts that say so. We crowded the evening pedestrian mall of Bourbon Street from one end (neatly picturesque) to the other (gaudily honky-tonk). We heard the beat of undying classical jazz on its native ground. We strolled toward the river, through the lovelier old streets of the French Quarter, with lampposts lighting the lacework of the balconies and calling up the serenity that our imagination attributes to the past. Come to think of it, that supposedly idyllic past would have been a terrible time to be a drunk —



in any era before the year 1935.

Splendid coffee is a New Orleans specialty, but it isn't the only beverage to be found in this good-time town. Yes, we saw a fair number of prime prospects for our Fellowship. Wonder what they thought of all those badge-wearing nuts who were actually enjoying life without drinking.

On Sunday morning, we found out what one of them thought. The Convention, as always, closed with a Spiritual Meeting, to remind us that AA offers much more than coffee and camaraderie. In front of the world map, an Italian AA presented

the first Big Book in his language to Lois W., widow of one co-founder; Robert S., son of the other, greeted us; AAs from England, Canada, and the U.S. told how a power greater than themselves had led them to recovery.

But the most heart-catching moment was entirely unscheduled. At the start of that fifty-six-hour marathon meeting, a candle had been lighted. Still burning inside its tall glass cylinder, it was brought from the hotel to the podium. Then came the moment.

One evening outside the hotel, a passerby had stopped one of our

members to ask, "What's that badge?" On being told, he blurted, "I don't know how to stop drinking!" Young Pete from Montana was quickly introduced to some New Orleans AAs, and on Sunday morning, he came to the podium to blow out the candle.

Each of our International Conventions celebrates a beginning, the same kind that we see many times in our home groups. Looking at this beginning (through a slight mist), I knew that for each of us, the true home group is the whole AA Fellowship.

*J. G., Manhattan, N.Y.*