

March 1985

Gifts from the Past

A slice of history as British members form their AA archives

IT WAS IN the early 1960s that I first visited my sponsor's private rooms in Dublin, Ireland. My first

impression was that Sackville M.'s natural habitat resembled an Old Curiosity Shop or, to put it bluntly, the back room of a purveyor of junk.

It was full of piles of old books, magazines, and pamphlets, often covered with dust, and a myriad of knickknacks and pieces of bric-a-brac, which seemed to have no connection with him, his personality, or his character. I knew but little, it developed. As my visits to him contin-

ued, this tangled mass of paraphernalia, which obviously meant so much to him, began bit by bit to take me over. These were his memorabilia, collected during his years of active membership in Alcoholics Anonymous. Slowly, he began to introduce me to each book, each signed photograph, each piece of his collection:

"This is a signed photograph of Bob." ... "Here is a photograph of Bill with his violin — you knew, of course, that we both played the violin." ... "This prayer book was given to me by Sister Ignatia. You may care to see what she has written on the flyleaf." ... "Here is a photograph with some friends in Oklahoma visiting an Indian reservation, trying to set up a new meeting." ... "This bundle of letters came from Father Eddy Dowling. Did you know he came and spoke to us at the Country Shop here in Dublin?" ... "That Indian headdress was given to me on my second visit to America by the group I told you about, that we started on my first visit. Did you know they made me an honorary chief?"

During these early visits I felt a great change coming about in me. For the very first time, *AA Comes of Age* became a living book. Bit by bit, I began to be emotionally captivated by what I had first viewed as a load of junk, until I started to handle each item with a reverence that I had never shown toward any material substance before. This pile of junk had become a storehouse of treasures. It was no

longer just his; it was my roots and my history as well. For the first time, I began to feel in touch emotionally with the early members of AA. I suppose this was the beginning of my involvement with others.

Seeing that I was hooked, Sackville began to encourage me to collect, starting with simple items — menus of dinners, programs of conventions, photographs — and to make notes of dates. I think he knew that in fact he was performing a very valuable Twelfth Step.

One of the first things I did on the death of my sponsor in 1979 was to gather all the letters, photographs, and convention and anniversary programs, together with memorabilia that I had relating to Sackville's involvement with the formation and growth of Europe's first AA group. Encouraged by what I had, I began to collect anything relating to the start of AA, not only in my own area, but also in the whole of England. I tried to contact people who I felt might be interested in joining me in this work; regrettably, there was no response.

I tried unsuccessfully to "twelfth-step" the secretary of my group into this work. She could see neither the point nor the need of gathering material. I was fortunate that year (1980) to attend the International Convention in New Orleans with her. I persuaded her to attend an early morning workshop led by Nell Wing (a nonalcoholic), archivist at the AA General Service Office. Our secretary went reluctantly — but that was the



turning point. She left that workshop completely converted, full of enthusiasm for archives. I am delighted to say that in the years since, her enthusiasm has never waned.

We formed a little committee, and our work began in earnest. The following year, we were able to hold, at the Bristol Reunion, our first archives meeting. The 1982 and 1983 Bristol Reunions saw larger archives meetings, and an archives room, with our growing collection, was on display each year. As a result, we were able to involve other members in other parts of the country. We received great cooperation from our friends in Ireland and also great encouragement from Nell and from the AA who became archivist after Nell's retirement. We were really on our way.

Then came a bonus. Like most bonuses in recovery, it was never envisaged by me, never asked for, and it came as a true gift. It happened this way:

Our little committee's first priority was always to trace back a group's origins, as far as we could go. We would talk with surviving early members, tape their recollections, and piece together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Rather, it was like joining together unrelated pieces of material to make what eventually has turned out to be the most exquisite patchwork quilt of recovery. Very often, the pieces were only names. We had difficulty in tracing some of them. Some had died; many were lost in the mists forever; but a few we eventually got

through to in all kinds of situations.

They were living in homes for senior citizens, homes for retired officers, and geriatric hospitals. Their ages ranged from seventy-five to ninety-four. Most of them had not had active contact with the Fellowship for years. Nearly all were extremely cooperative and most willing to help our project. We just sat with them, started the cassette recorder, and gently encouraged their recall.

Slowly, it began to flow — names, places, people. Very often, names mentioned would be those of people we had already seen. Then, the old-timer would be delighted to know that they were alive and to have news of them, and nearly always asked whether it was possible to contact these other "ghosts of the present," who were still very much alive and active members of AA in the speaker's memory.

I saw miracles begin to happen before my eyes: long-forgotten members being contacted by their old groups; isolated, institutionalized members once again, through archives involvement, being stimulated in such a way that they again wanted to be a part of our whole. Because of financial and health considerations, they were sometimes unable to make direct contact themselves and used me as a messenger boy extraordinary, conveying their very special messages of experience, strength, and hope to one another. Their vitality was rekindled once they were needed.

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