



How AA STARTED IN

Panama

The following article is based on a 1954 memoir of the General Service Office in Panama, written by an early AA member there.

When I left Hospital Panama in November 1945, I wrote to AA in New York, having no idea of what would happen. What I did know was that I was desperately anxious not only to stop drinking but to stay sober.

Miracle number one happened six days later, when a bulky envelope arrived. It had a wonderful personal letter from the secretary, some literature, and the name of an ancient member of the New York Group whose last known address was in Cristobal, Canal Zone.

We didn't waste any time and sent a letter to Cristobal. Contact was established, and several days later we made a personal call. The contact was a big disappointment since the person had a very polemic attitude to the program, and evidently (this was later con-

firmed) had become addicted to barbiturates.

In spite of arguments that publicity of any kind was not allowed, I looked for and got help from the editor of the Pan-American. He generously let us use the Letters to the Editor column.

In the summer of 1946 we were informed of a lady alcoholic who had some AA experience in the United States. Her sobriety had been marked by many relapses, and when we finally reached her, she was in the process of recuperating from a gigantic drunk.

We had nothing resembling a solid AA group. Although a great number of known drunks existed, none of them showed up or demonstrated any interest in finding what this was all about. There were a couple of confused wives, trying to find a miraculous cure for

some unprepared husband. There was also a call from a weekend drinker trying to get in shape for work on Monday morning. We had one drunk who had left the hospital several weeks before. We had a second who was apparently sober but had other problems. A third was the woman who had just come out of her last binge. And finally, there was myself. It's got to be one of those miracles of God that AA survived in the Canal Zone during those first months.

One of our first steps was to buy the Big Book. The lady from our small group had one. Our friend from Cristobal didn't desire to have one. We began to read and study the book, hanging onto each word, because it made sense and because we had nowhere else to turn.

In the meantime, the AA office in New York supported us with a lot of solid literature. Then, just when we thought things were shaping up, our lady friend had a relapse. Our friend from Cristobal tried to help, using his own version of the program for such a situation. The result was that we had a great problem trying to get our lady friend back in.

During this struggle to keep AA alive, miracle number two happened. Our correspondence in the Pan-American gave us our chance to begin Twelfth Step work. We called on our first real prospect, whom we found to be in very bad shape. Truly, we prayed to God to give us strength to make the

call. The man was a nervous wreck and was feeling miserable, guilty, and inadequate. We weren't surprised nor did we lack words when we talked to him. It wasn't easy or agreeable to come close to the drunk when one is trying to come out of the gutter oneself. Our first prospect was in very bad shape, but apparently he didn't need to be hospitalized. (Later on we got enough experience to recognize that cases of DTs required hospitalization.) Filthy, weak, and incoherent, he acted with the usual scorn of the alcoholic toward anything vaguely related to spirituality. And besides, he was too confused to think.

Bob was our first solid convert. Many has he helped in all the years since. After Bob came into AA, our group began to expand. With expansion, problems arose. Looking back, it's apparent that our problems were caused by too much enthusiasm rather than the lack of it. We were condescending when we should have been firm. Nobody can say we were indifferent or neglected the group. We almost became like crusaders, to the point of going into bars to look for new recruits. We invested freely of our time and money. Nobody has ever regretted it.

One of our members went so far as to create an operating fund of \$2,500 in order to have a meeting place. Either because of the sudden prosperity, or to prove that AA doesn't function when there's a lot of money involved, the situation turned into chaos, bigger

than a two-month drunk. In fact, that's just what happened to two of our members. The only solution was to return what was left of the money and return to our old ways of meeting in the house of members.

Relapses and personality conflicts between the new members brought about a lot of resentments and frustrations. Nevertheless, most of us remained sober.

We sat up nights with alcoholics only to realize afterwards that they used us to enjoy the booze we furnished or to share their family problems or to try to save their jobs.

Now that we better understand the program, we realize that our methods were wrong. Later we realized that not all drunks want to get sober. We weren't looking for sincerity or honesty. We were trying to mother everybody. That was perfect to feed our egos, but was not a solid foundation for an AA group.

Anyhow, with knowledge and experience we were able to make it, little by little, and firmly created a new era in AA. A greater acceptance of our group was accomplished when the governor of the Canal Zone allowed us to use a building for our meetings.

Previously a little cabin that shel-

tered a construction office had been used by AA once in a while, and it became what we today call "the AA home outside AA."

When we occupied it for the first time it had nothing — no facilities such as a bathroom, running water, etc. We had to build everything. The roof leaked and the building needed painting. There was no furniture. But in a short time we had everything and without any outside help. Later we got a telephone and were listed in the telephone directory.

Major respectability was achieved when doctors and the general public became interested in the AA program. A hospital offered us their facilities and showed a more understanding attitude toward the alcoholic patient, especially if the patient was endorsed by AA.

In the midst of this streak of luck, tragedy touched our group. One of our lady members tried to commit suicide two times. The second time she succeeded. Faced with impossible circumstances to solve, she'd married a man who showed her little support. He ridiculed her as much as he could, and she resorted to the only way out she could think of, an overdose of barbiturates.

*Later we
realized that
not all drunks
want to get
sober.*

Then came an epidemic of the so-called "cures" expressed in a number of magazines. None of them proved effective, not even the famous Antabuse. Usually these cures were the by-products of scientists and nonprofessional persons. We were able to witness in our group some of these "cures" with drugs, followed by failure.

On our fifth anniversary in 1950, we had forty active members including a small group on the Atlantic side. Our efforts had been crowned with success. We realized there were fewer relapses and the average age was getting lower. Young people, twenty years old, were coming for help. Those that had one or

more relapses returned, and many of them acquired (perhaps because of the relapses) a much deeper knowledge of the program and a better possibility for success. From our original group of four, two remained.

Our first contact, the difficult member from Cristobal, became addicted to barbiturates and was finally sent home to the United States. Our first lady member also returned to the States and died of apparently natural causes.

We never kept records with regards to members, but we calculate the number of AA members who came to us in the Canal Zone was between 300 to 400 alcoholics. ☹



Fast Facts — AA Around the World

The Big Book has been translated into 32 languages, including Russian, Filipino, Icelandic, Hindi, Chinese, Arabic, Lithuanian, Persian, and Vietnamese.

Other AAWS literature such as the Twelve and Twelve, "Living Sober," and the pamphlet "44 Questions," has been translated into 19 languages, including Croatian, Turkish, and Korean.

At least 34 AA magazines are published around the world, in as many as 14 different languages, including Belgium's "Partage," Canada's "La Vigne," Guatemala's "Compartimiento," Italy's "Insieme in AA," Finland's "Ratkaisu," India's "The Twelfth Step," and Trinidad and Tobago's "Pumpkinvine."