

May 1955



Part I

SOMEDAY the history of Alcoholics Anonymous will be written. Only then will most of us finally understand what over-all national and international services have meant to our Society, how difficult they were to create, and how vital it is to maintain them over future years. For the purpose of this Manual,* we can only supply a brief historical run-down, a simple timetable of the events that have brought our world services and AA Traditions into being, plus a condensed report of the total accomplishment.

One day in 1937, at Doctor Bob's Akron home, he and I added up the score of nearly three years' work. For the first time we saw that wholesale recovery for alcoholics was possible. We then had two small but solid groups, at Akron and at New York City, plus a sprinkling of members elsewhere. How could these few recovered ones tell millions of alcoholics throughout the world the great news? That was the question.

Forthwith Doctor Bob and I met with eighteen of the Akron Group at the home of T. Henry Williams, a steadfast non-alcoholic friend. Some

of the Akron Group still thought we ought to stick to the word-of-mouth process; but the majority felt that we now needed our own hospitals, with paid workers and, above all, a book for other alcoholics that could explain to them our methods and results. This would require considerable money—millions perhaps. We didn't then know that millions would have ruined us even more than no money at all. So the Akron meeting commissioned me to go to New York and raise money. Arrived home, I found the New York Group in full agreement with this idea. Several of us went to work at once.

Through my brother-in-law, Dr. L. V. Strong, Jr., we made a contact with Mr. Willard S. Richardson, a friend and long-time associate of the Rockefeller family. Mr. Richardson promptly took fire and interested a group of his own friends. In the winter of 1937, a meeting was called at the offices of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Present were Mr. Richardson and his group, Dr. William D. Silkworth, alcoholics from Akron and New York, Doctor Bob and myself. After a long discussion, we convinced our new

friends that we urgently needed money—a lot of it, too.

One of them, a Mr. Frank Amos, soon made a trip to investigate the Akron Group. (Frank has, by the way, remained a friend and trustee of Alcoholics Anonymous to this day.) He returned from the West with a very optimistic report on the Akron situation, a digest of which Mr. Richardson quickly laid before John D. Rockefeller, Jr. This was early in 1938. Though much impressed, Mr. Rockefeller declined to give any large sum for fear of professionalizing AA. He did, however, donate \$5,000. This was used to keep Doctor Bob and me going during 1938. We were still a long way from hospitals, missionaries, books and big money. This looked mighty tough at the time but it was probably one of the best breaks that AA ever had.

In spite of Mr. Rockefeller's views, we renewed our efforts to persuade his friends of our crying need for money. At length, they agreed that we did need more money, certainly enough to prepare a textbook on our methods and experience.

This decision led to the formation of the so-called Alcoholic Foundation in the spring of 1938. The first Board of Trustees consisted of three of our new friends—Mr. Richardson, Mr. Amos and Dr. L. V. Strong. The alcoholics were represented by Doctor Bob and a New York member. Supplied with a list of prospects by our new friends, we alcoholics at New York began to solicit funds. Since the

Alcoholic Foundation was tax-free, on charitable grounds, we thought the rich would contribute lavishly. But nothing happened. After months of solicitation, we failed to turn up with even a cent. What could we do next?

In the late spring of 1938, I had drafted what are now the first two chapters of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Mimeographed copies of these were used as part of the prospectus for our futile fund-raising operation. At Foundation meetings, then held nearly every month, our non-alcoholic friends commiserated on our lack of success. About half of the \$5,000 Mr. Rockefeller advanced had been used to raise the mortgage on Doctor Bob's home. The rest of it, divided between us, would of course soon be exhausted. The outlook was certainly bleak.

Then Frank Amos remembered his old-time friend, Eugene Exman, Religious Editor at Harpers. He sent me to Harpers and I showed Mr. Exman two chapters of our proposed book. To my delight, Mr. Exman was impressed. He suggested that Harpers might advance me \$1500 in royalties to finish the job. Broke as we then were, that \$1500 looked like a pile of money.

Nevertheless our enthusiasm for this proposal quickly waned. With the book finished, we would be \$1500 in debt to Harpers. And if, as we hoped, AA then got a lot of publicity, how could we possibly hire the help to answer the flood of inquiries—maybe thousands!

There was another problem, too, a

*A Manual on the Third Legacy which Bill is now writing. This is Part I of its historical section which we'll run serially for 3 months.—Ed.

serious one. If our AA book became the basic text for Alcoholics Anonymous, its ownership would be in other hands. It was evident that our Society ought to own and publish its own literature. No publisher, however good, ought to own our best asset.

Yet the moment this idea was broached, opposition rose on all sides. We were told that amateurs should never go into the publishing business. They almost never succeeded, it was claimed. But a few of us continued to think otherwise. We had discovered that the printing cost of a book is only a fraction of its retail price. If our Society grew, so would the book sales. With such a big profit margin, real money would surely come in. (Of course we conveniently forgot all the other heavy costs of book production and distribution!) So went the debate. But the opposition lost out because the Foundation had no money and wasn't likely to get any, that we could see. That was the clincher.

So two of us went ahead. A friend and I bought a pad of blank stock certificates and wrote on them "Works Publishing, par value \$25." My friend, Hank P., and I then offered shares in

the new book company to alcoholics and their friends in New York. They just laughed at us. Who would buy stock, they said, in a book not yet written!

Somehow, these timid buyers had to be persuaded, so we went to the Reader's Digest and told the managing editor the story of our budding Society and its proposed book. He liked the notion very much and promised that in the spring of 1939, when we thought that the book would be ready, the Digest would print a piece about AA, of course mentioning the new book.

This was the sales argument we needed. With a plug like this, the proposed volume would sell by carloads. How could we miss? The New York alcoholics and their friends promptly changed their minds about Works Publishing stock. They began to buy it, mostly on installments. Our biggest subscriber put in \$300. In the end we scraped up forty-nine contributors. They came up with about \$4500 over the next nine months. We also got a loan of \$2500 from Charles B. Towns, proprietor of the hospital where I had often gone. This kept friend Hank, myself and a secretary named Ruth going until the job was finished.

Ruth typed away as I slowly dictated the chapters of the text for the new book. Fierce argument over these drafts and what ought to go into them featured New York and Akron Group meetings for months on end. I became much more of an umpire than



I ever was an author. Meanwhile, the alcoholics at Akron, New York, and a couple at Cleveland, began writing their personal stories—twenty-eight in all. Out west, Dr. Bob was greatly helped in assembling the tales by a newspaperman member... and here in New York, Hank and I kept prodding the amateur writers on.

When the book project neared completion, we visited the managing editor of the Digest and asked for the promised article. He gave us a blank look, scarcely remembering who we were. Then the blow fell. He told how months before he had put our proposition to the Digest Editorial Board and how it had been turned down flat. With profuse apologies, he admitted he'd plumb forgot to let us know anything about it. This was a crusher.

Meanwhile, we had optimistically ordered 3,000 copies of the new book, largely on a shoestring. The printer had relied on the Reader's Digest, too. Soon there would be 5,000 books in his warehouse and no customers.

The book finally appeared in April, 1939. We got the New York Times to do a review and Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick supplied us with another really good one but nothing happened. The book simply didn't sell. We were

in debt up to our ears. The sheriff appeared at the Newark Office where we had been working, and the landlord sold the house where Lois and I lived. She and I were dumped into the street and then onto the charity of AA friends. We thought the printer, the Cornwall Press, might take over the book. But Edward Blackwell, the President, would have none of that. He continued to have faith in us, quite inexplicably. But certain of the alcoholic stock subscribers didn't share his faith. Sometimes they used strong words, not in the least complimentary. Such was the sorry state of our publishing venture.

How we got through the summer of 1939, I'll never quite know. Hank had to get a job. The faithful Ruth accepted shares in the defunct book company as pay. One AA friend supplied us with his summer camp, another with a car. We canvassed magazine publishers in a strenuous effort to get something printed about our Society and its new book.

The first break came in September 1939. Liberty Magazine, then headed by our great friend-to-be, Fulton Oursler, carried a piece called "Alcoholics and God" written by one Morris Markey. There was an instant response. About 800 letters from



alcoholics and their families poured in. Ruth wrote every one of them, enclosing a leaflet about the new book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Slowly the book began to sell. Then the Cleveland Plain Dealer ran a series of pieces about Alcoholics Anonymous. At once, the Cleveland Groups mushroomed from a score into many hundreds of members. More books sold. Thus we inched and squeezed our way through that perilous year.

We hadn't heard a thing from Mr. Rockefeller since early 1938. But in February of 1940, he put in a dramatic appearance. His friend, Mr. Richardson, came to a Trustees' meeting, smiling broadly. Mr. Rockefeller, he said, wanted to give Alcoholics Anonymous a dinner. The invitation list showed an imposing collection of notables. We figured them to be collectively worth at least a billion dollars. Mr. Richardson told how John D., Jr. had been watching our progress with deep satisfaction and now wanted to lend a hand. Our money troubles were over—so we thought.

The dinner came off the following month at New York's Union League Club. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke in praise of us and so did Dr. Foster Kennedy, the eminent neurologist. Then Doctor Bob and I briefed the audience on AA; Akron and New York alcoholics scattered among the notables at the tables responded to questions. The gathering showed a rising warmth and interest. This was it, we thought; our money problems were solved.

To speak for his father, who was ill, Mr. Nelson Rockefeller then rose to his feet. His father was very glad, he said, that those at the dinner had seen the promising beginning of the new Society of Alcoholics Anonymous. Seldom, Nelson continued, had his father shown more interest in anything. But obviously since AA was a work of pure good will, one man carrying the good news to the next, little or no money would be required. At this sally, our spirits fell. When Mr. Nelson Rockefeller had finished, the whole billion dollars worth of capitalists got up and walked out, leaving not a dollar behind them.

Next day, Mr. Rockefeller wrote to all those who had attended and even to those who had not. Again he reiterated his complete confidence and high interest. Once more he insisted that little or no money was needed. Then at the very end of his letter, he casually remarked that he was giving Alcoholics Anonymous \$1,000!

When the public read the press stories about Mr. Rockefeller's dinner, many rushed to the bookstores to buy the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The Foundation Trustees solicited the dinner guests for contributions. Knowing the size of Mr. Rockefeller's gift, they acted accordingly. About \$3,000 came in, a donation which, as things turned out, we solicited and received each year for just four years more.

Much later we realized what Mr. Rockefeller had really done for us. At risk of personal ridicule, he had stood up before the whole world to put in a

plug for a tiny society of struggling alcoholics. For these unknowns, he'd gone way out on a limb. Wisely sparing of his money, he had given freely of himself. Then and there John D. Rockefeller saved us from the perils of property management and professionalism. He couldn't have done more.

As a result, AA's 1940 membership jumped sharply to about 2,000 at the year's end. Doctor Bob and I each began to receive \$30 a week out of the dinner contributions. This eased us greatly. Lois and I went to live in a tiny room at AA's number one clubhouse, 334½ West 24th Street in New York.

Best of all, the increased book sales had made a National Headquarters possible. We moved from 75 William Street, Newark, New Jersey, where the AA book had been written, to 30 Vesey Street, just north of the Wall Street district of New York. We took a modest two-room office right opposite the downtown Church Street Annex Post Office. There the famous Box 658 was ready and waiting to receive the thousands of frantic inquiries that would presently come into it. At this point, Ruth Hock became AA's first national Secretary and I turned into a sort of Headquarters handy-man.

Through the whole of 1940, book sales were the sole support of the struggling New York office. Every cent of these earnings went to pay for AA work done there. All requests for help were answered with warm personal letters. When alcoholics or their

families showed continued interest, we kept on writing. Aided by such letters and the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, new AA groups began to take form.

More importantly, we had lists of prospects in many cities and towns of the United States and Canada. We turned these lists over to AA traveling business men, members of already established groups. With these traveling couriers, we corresponded constantly and they started still more groups. For the further benefit of these travelers, we put out a Group Directory.

Then came an unexpected activity. Because the new-born groups saw only a little of their traveling sponsors, they turned to the New York office for help with their innumerable troubles. By mail we retailed the experience of the older centers on to them. A little later, as we shall see, this became a major activity.

Meanwhile, some of the stockholders in the book company, Works Publishing, began to get restive. All the book profits, they complained, were going for AA work in the office. When, if ever, were they going to get their money back? We had to find a way, too, of paying Mr. Towns his \$2500. We also saw that the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* should now become the property of AA as a whole. At the moment, it was owned one-third by the forty-nine subscribers, one-third by my friend Hank and the remainder by me.

As a first step, we had the book company, Works Publishing, audited and legally incorporated. Hank and I

donated our shares in it to the Alcoholic Foundation. This was the stock that we had taken for services rendered. But the forty-nine other subscribers had put in real money. They, and Mr. Towns, would have to be paid cash. But where on earth could we get the money?

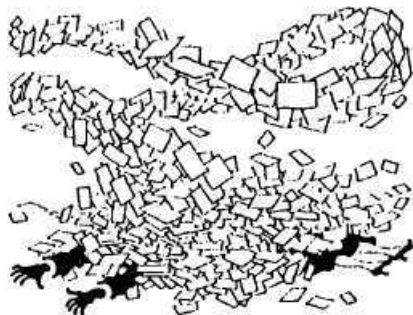
The help we needed turned up in the person of Mr. A. LeRoy Chipman. Also a friend and associate of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, he had recently been made a Trustee of the Foundation. He persuaded Mr. Rockefeller, two of his sons and some of the dinner guests to loan the Foundation \$8000. This promptly paid off Mr. Charles B. Towns, settled some incidental debts and fully reimbursed the forty-nine original subscribers at par. They then turned their shares in to the Foundation. Two years later, the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* had done so well that we were able to pay off this whole loan. Impressed with this considerable show of financial responsibility, Mr. Rockefeller, his sons and some of the 1940 dinner guests gave half the money they'd lent us back to the Foundation.

These were the transactions that put the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in trust for our whole Society. Through its Foundation, AA now owned its basic textbook, subject only to royalties payable to Doctor Bob and me. Since the book income was still the sole support of our Headquarters, the Trustees quite naturally assumed the management of the AA office at Vesey Street. AA's structure of world ser-

vice had even then commenced to take on form and substance.

The spring of 1941 brought us a ten strike. The Saturday Evening Post decided to do a piece about Alcoholics Anonymous. It assigned its star writer, Jack Alexander, to the job. Having just done an article on the Jersey rackets, Jack approached us somewhat tongue-in-check. But he soon became an AA "convert," even though he wasn't an alcoholic. Working early and late, he spent a whole month with us. Dr. Bob and I and elders of the early groups at Akron, New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Chicago, spent uncounted hours with him. When he could feel AA in the very marrow of his bones, he proceeded to write the piece that rocked drunks and their families all over the nation. It was the lead story in the Saturday Post of March 1st, 1941.

Came then the deluge. Frantic appeals from alcoholics and their families—six thousand of them—hit the New York office, P. O. Box 658. At first, we pawed at random through the mass of letters, laughing and crying by turns. How could this heart-breaking mail be answered? It was a cinch



that Ruth and I could never do it alone. Form letters wouldn't be enough. Every single one must have an understanding personal reply.

So volunteers with typewriters came to New York's old 24th Street club. They knew nothing of selling AA by mail, and naturally enough, they weakened in the face of the avalanche. Nothing but full-time paid help could possibly meet this emergency. Yet the AA book income would never pay the bill. Again—what to use for money?

Maybe the AA groups themselves would help. Though we'd never asked anything of them before, this was surely their business, if it was anybody's. An enormous Twelfth Step job had to be done and done quickly. These appeals must never hit the waste basket. Money we must have.

So we told the groups the story and they responded. The measuring stick for *voluntary contribution* was then set at \$1.00 per member per year. The Trustees of the Foundation agreed to look after these funds, placing them in a special bank account, ear-marking them for AA office work only. While the first returns weren't up to full expectations, they proved to be enough. The AA office took on two full-time workers and weeks later we caught up.

But this was only a starter. Soon the pins on our office wall map showed AA groups springing up like mushrooms. Most of them had no experienced guidance whatever. Their worries and problems were endless. Moochers mooched, lonely hearts pined, committees quarreled, new clubs



had unheard-of headaches, orators held forth, groups split wide open, members turned professional, selling AA by the copy, sometimes whole groups got drunk, local public relations went haywire—such was our truly frightening experience.

Then the amazing story got around that the Foundation, the New York office and the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* were nothing but another racket for which John D. Rockefeller had foolishly fallen. This was just about the limit.

We had thought we'd proved that AA could sober up alcoholics, but we were certainly a long way from proving that alcoholics could work together or even stay sober under these new and fantastic conditions.

How could AA stay whole, and how could it ever function? Those were the anxious questions of our adolescence. It was to take another ten years of terrific experience to provide the sure answers that we have today.

(to be continued)