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Last Seven Years Have Made A.A. Self-Supporting

By Bill

(Third and concluding article in a series recording the early history of A.A. In later issues, the series will be resumed with articles recording recent A.A. development and growth.)

How we ever got the book and our office through that summer of 1939 I shall never quite know. Had it not been for a truly sacrificial act on the part of Bert T., an early N.Y. A.A., I'm sure we couldn't have survived. Bert loaned the defunct Works Publishing Co. \$1,000, obtained by signing a note secured by his own business. This act of faith was followed by two more pieces of good fortune which barely got us through the year. In the fall of 1939 *Liberty* magazine published a piece about us. This produced a flood of inquiries and some orders for the A.A. book. Those few book receipts kept our little Central Office going. Then came a burst of articles in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. This started a prodigious growth of A.A. out there and created a little more demand for the A.A. book.

Nor were our friends at Rockefeller Center idle. One day in February, 1940, "Dick" R. reported that Mr. John Rockefeller Jr. had been following our progress with intense interest; that he would like, for the inspiration of his guests and for the benefit of Alcoholics Anonymous, to give a dinner. We regarded this as a ten strike.

'Launched' at Dinner

In March, 1940, the dinner came off. Mr. R's friends turned out in force. An A.A. member was placed at each guest table. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, who had superbly reviewed our book, spoke of A.A. from the spiritual viewpoint. Dr. Foster Kennedy, noted neurologist, gave his hearers the medical outlook. We alcoholics were asked to talk also. At the conclusion of the evening Mr. Nelson Rockefeller, explaining that his father had not been able to come because of illness, went on to say that few things more deeply affecting or promising than Alcoholics Anonymous had ever touched his father's life; that he wished his friends to share this experience with him.

Though great wealth was present at the dinner meeting that night, little was said about money. Hope was expressed that A.A. might soon become self-supporting. But the suggestion was made that until A.A. became self-supporting a little financial help might be needed. Following the dinner meeting Mr. Rockefeller wrote a personal letter to each guest, expressing his feeling about A.A., and concluding with the observation that he was making us a modest gift. Accompanying each letter was a reprint of the talks given at the dinner and a copy of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

On receipt of Mr. Rockefeller's letter, many of his guests responded with donations to the Alcoholic Foundation.

This so-called "Rockefeller dinner list" has since been almost the only source of "outside" money gifts to The Alcoholic Foundation. These donations averaged around \$3,000 annually and they were continued for about five years - 1940 to 1945. This income The Foundation divided between Dr. Bob and me to enable us to give A.A. a good part of our time during that critical period. Not long since, The Foundation Trustees were able to write the original dinner contributors, with great thanks, that their help would no longer be needed; that The Alcoholic Foundation had become adequately supported by the A.A. Groups and by income from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*; that the personal needs of Dr. Bob and myself were being met out of the book royalties.

The significant thing about Mr. Rockefeller's dinner, of course, was not only the money it raised. What we did need then, even as much, was favorable public recognition; we needed someone who would stand up and say what he thought and felt about Alcoholics Anonymous. Considering the fact that we were then few in number; that we were none too sure of ourselves; that not long since society had known us as common drunkards, I think Mr. Rockefeller's

wisdom and courage was great indeed.

The effect of that dinner meeting was instantaneous; the news press wires all carried the story. Hundreds of alcoholics and their families rushed to buy the book. Our little Central Office was flooded with pleas for help. It soon had to be moved from Jersey to Vesey Street, New York. Ruth H. got her back pay and forthwith became our first National Secretary. Enough books were sold to keep the office going. So passed 1940. Alcoholics Anonymous had made its national debut.

Rapid Growth Underway

Just a year later, the *Saturday Evening Post* assigned Jack Alexander to do a story about us. Under the impetus of Mr. Rockefeller's dinner and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* pieces, our membership had shot up to about 2,000. Our Clevelanders had just proved that even a small group could, if it must, successfully absorb great numbers of newcomers in a hurry. They had exploded the myth that A.A. must always grow slowly. From the Akron - Cleveland area we had begun to spread into other places - Chicago and Detroit in the mid-west. In the east, Philadelphia had taken fire. Washington and Baltimore were smouldering. Further west, Houston, Los Angeles and San Francisco were taking spark. Growth continued at Akron and New York. We took special pride in Little Rock, Arkansas, which had sprung up with no personal contact with A.A., having caught on through books and letters from the Central Office. Little Rock was the first of

the so-called "mail order" groups now commonplace all over the world. Even then, we had started correspondence with many isolated alcoholics who were to form groups later on.

Despite this progress, the approaching *Saturday Evening Post* piece worried us. While our Cleveland experience had given assurances that our few established groups would survive the impact of heavy publicity, what could we possibly do with the thousands of burning appeals that would now swamp our little New York office then staffed by Ruth H., a typist and myself? How could three people handle the thousands of frantic inquiries we expected? We needed more office help - and quickly - or prepare to throw heartbreaking appeals into the waste basket.

We realized we must, for the first time, ask the A.A. groups for assistance. The Alcoholic Foundation still had no money save the \$3,000 a year "dinner fund" which was helping to keep Dr. Bob and me afloat. Besides, some of the creditors and cash subscribers of Works Publishing (the A.A. book company) were getting anxious again.

\$1 Per Member from Groups

Two of the alcoholic members of our Foundation travelled out among the A.A. groups to explain the need. They presented their listeners with these ideas: That support of our Central Office was a definite responsibility of the A.A. groups; that answering written inquiries was a necessary assistance to our "12th Step work;" that we A.A.s ought to pay these

office expenses ourselves and rely no further upon outside charity or insufficient book sales. The two Trustees also suggested that The Alcoholic Foundation be made a regular depository for group funds; that the Foundation would earmark all group monies for Central Office expenses only; that each month the Central Office would bill the Foundation for the straight A.A. expenses of the place; that all group contributions ought to be entirely voluntary; that every A.A. group would receive equal service from the New York office, whether it contributed or not. It was estimated that if each group sent The Foundation a sum equal to \$1 per member per year, this might eventually carry our office, without other assistance. Under this arrangement the office would ask the groups twice yearly for funds and render, at the same time, a statement of its expenses for the previous period.

Our two trustees, Horace C. and Bert T., did not come back empty handed. Now clearly understanding the situation, most groups began contributing to The Alcoholic Foundation for Central Office expenses, and have continued to do so ever since. In this practice the A.A. tradition of self-support had a firm beginning. Thus we handled the *Saturday Evening Post* article for which thousands of A.A.s are today so grateful.

The enormous inpouring of fresh members quickly laid the foundation for hundreds of new A.A. groups and they soon began to consult the Central Office about their growing pains, thus confronting our Service Headquarters with group problems as well as personal

inquiries. The office then began to publish a list of all A.A. groups and it furnished travelling A.A.s with lists of prospects in cities which had none. Out-of-towners we had never seen before began to visit us, so starting what is today the huge network of personal contact between our General Office staff at New York and A.A. groups throughout the world.

The year 1941 was a great one for the growing A.A. It was the beginning of a huge development to follow; our Central Office got solid group backing; we began to abandon the idea of outside charitable help in favor of self-support. Last, but not least, our Alcoholic Foundation really commenced to function. By this time linked to the A.A. Central Office because of its responsibility for the group funds being spent there, and to Works Publishing (the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*) by partial ownership, the trustees of our Alcoholic Foundation had already become, though they did not realize it, the custodians for Alcoholics Anonymous - both of money and tradition. Alcoholics Anonymous had become a national institution.

Quietly, but effectively, the evolution of our Foundation has since continued. Several years ago the trustees had a certified audit made of The Alcoholic Foundation and Works

Publishing from their very beginnings. A good book-keeping system was installed and regular audits became an established custom.

About 1942 it became evident that the Foundation ought to complete its ownership of Works Publishing by calling in the stock of the outstanding cash subscribers of Works. Several thousand dollars were required to do this and, of course, group funds could not be used for this purpose.

So the trustees, spearheaded this time by our old friend "Chip," turned again to Mr. Rockefeller and his "dinner list." These original donors most gladly made the Foundation the necessary loan which enabled the Foundation to acquire full ownership of our A.A. book (Works Publishing Inc.). Meanwhile, Works Publishing, being now partly relieved of supporting the Central Office, had been able to pay its own creditors in full. Later on, when out of A.A. book income the trustees offered to pay off the Foundation debt, several of the lenders would take only a part payment - some none at all. At last we were in the clear. This event marked the end of our financial troubles.

Now Worldwide in Scope

The last few years of A.A. have been phenomenal. Nearly everybody in America knows about A.A. Seemingly, the rest of the globe will soon learn as A.A. travellers go abroad and our literature is translated into other tongues. Today our General Service Headquarters

has a staff of twelve. Because of our prodigious growth and the continuous entry of A.A. into more foreign countries, the headquarters will presently need twenty. Popularly known to thousands as "Bobbie," our A.A. General Secretary now serves world A.A. On the Board of The Alcoholic Foundation three of the early trustees, whose contribution to A.A. is incalculable, remain. New faces are seen at the quarterly meetings, each as anxious to serve as the original group. The A.A. *Grapevine*, our national monthly periodical which made its appearance three years ago, is now taking its place among our General Headquarters' Services and is almost paying its own way already. Out of its Works Publishing income, the Foundation has accumulated a prudent financial reserve for the future. That reserve now stands at more than a full year's Headquarters expense, which still remains not much above the very low figure of \$1 per A.A. per year. Two years ago the trustees set aside, out of A.A. book funds, a sum which enabled my wife and me to pay off the mortgage on our home and make some needed improvements. The Foundation also granted Dr. Bob and me each a royalty of 10% on the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, our only income from A.A. sources. We are both comfortable and deeply grateful.

This account of the stewardship of Alcoholics Anonymous during its infancy brings us to the present - the year 1947 - with continued A.A. growth and A.A. service the future's promise.