

February 1952

SAN FRANCISCO

IT is tough for a Californian not to be a little grandiose, in spite of himself and his AA philosophy. So when San Francisco claims that it undoubtedly fathered the first prison group, perhaps initiated the first Skid Row group that "took" and probably officiated at the first AA wedding, it will be running true to climate and environment.

San Francisco AA doesn't claim to be mature . . . yet, but it knows that it is growing . . . growing in numbers and growing *up*. It believes

that it isn't complacent and that it is tolerant of its mistakes as it tries philosophically to plod along, seriously carrying the message.

The first months of AA in San Francisco are hazy and hectic. The stories of the early beginnings are hazy, the stumbling pursuit of the prospect hectic but inspired. The bewildered interpretations of the juvenile clashes over procedures all added up to the growing pains felt by any new group in the world, then or now.



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Although the files of The General Service Office show that there was an inquiry from San Francisco as early as June, 1939, it appears that



In San Francisco, the first "inside" group. . .

the real impetus toward some more formal group came after the Fulton Oursler article which appeared in Liberty Magazine in September, 1939.

An early letter in the General Service file, dated November 9, 1939, refers to this inquiry made in June, 1939 ... it reads in part:

"Pursuant to our correspondence of June of this year regarding AA, one of our New York members is arriving at San Francisco on November 14, for a stay of ten days, during which time he will endeavor

to get some of these people together to form the nucleus of a group to work together to aid the many who have written to us from San Francisco and vicinity requesting assistance. We would like very much to have the man you wrote to us about get in touch with Mr. Ray W., c/o Clift Hotel, San Francisco."

The New York AA was given books and set out for the Coast.

According to other letters in the General Service files, he contacted several of the men who had made inquiries who . . . "got together for a talk and to try to make a beginning toward a Fellowship of AA in San Francisco."

After the visit of the New Yorker the late Ted C. seems to have become the main contact between the General Service Office and San Francisco. Ted, an invalid, lived in the home of Mrs. Z.W. Oram, an understanding non-alcoholic, who, as the beginning of AA is remembered in S.F., was believed to have first contacted New York and ordered the first Big Book for her lodger. So the question of "Who brought The Book over the mountain?" seems to be moot, but not too important. The important thing is that The Book did get over the mountain.

It was, however, Mrs. Oram who invited those early, faltering AAs to meet in her home . . . possibly the first real meeting of the little group. Thus the landlady, Mrs. Oram, became one of the founders of AA in San Francisco. Early mem-

bers have long since lost touch with her, but she is believed to be living on a ranch near Sacramento.

Although the date is lost and most all the members present are gone, there is memory of a meeting held sometime early in January, 1940. Present at that meeting was a man who had had some AA in Cleveland. He had contacted the few AAs in San Francisco through the New York Office and with his coming the first small effort toward more formal procedure was made. The ex-Clevelander, who is still around S.F., became the first informally appointed secretary.

In those early days the uncer-

tain San Francisco Group came by its members through happenstance . . . they had no means of direct contact with those searching for help. It was through one of these happenstances that San Francisco gained a woman member, another man and a "foster-father."

It was probably in February or March, 1940, when this man and woman, who happened to be sober for the moment, called on a woman in the psychopathic ward of the San Francisco Hospital. This poor woman, whose capers had brought her into public print, never recovered but unknowingly became a factor in AA growth.

San Francisco's waterfront presented another need ... the Seven Seas Club was organized



Her visitors met Dr. Poliak, who had recently come to the Coast from Bellevue Hospital in New York. The doctor had met Bill W. and several others. He had become impressed with their philosophy. It was he who told the man and the woman about AA and who lent them

Steps One and Twelve . they attacked gleefully



his own copy of The Big Book. They contacted the little group, survived the first hectic years and are still around.

So it was in the Spring of 1940, that San Francisco boasted an AA group of undetermined numbers, an interested doctor, a woman member who could take on some secretarial duties because she had a telephone. The next move was the formal election of a secretary, a two-fisted drinker who had roared into AA through the Liberty article and a patient sponsor. The little band slipped and slid through the Spring of 1940, but continued to grow in typical AA fashion . . . new pigeons

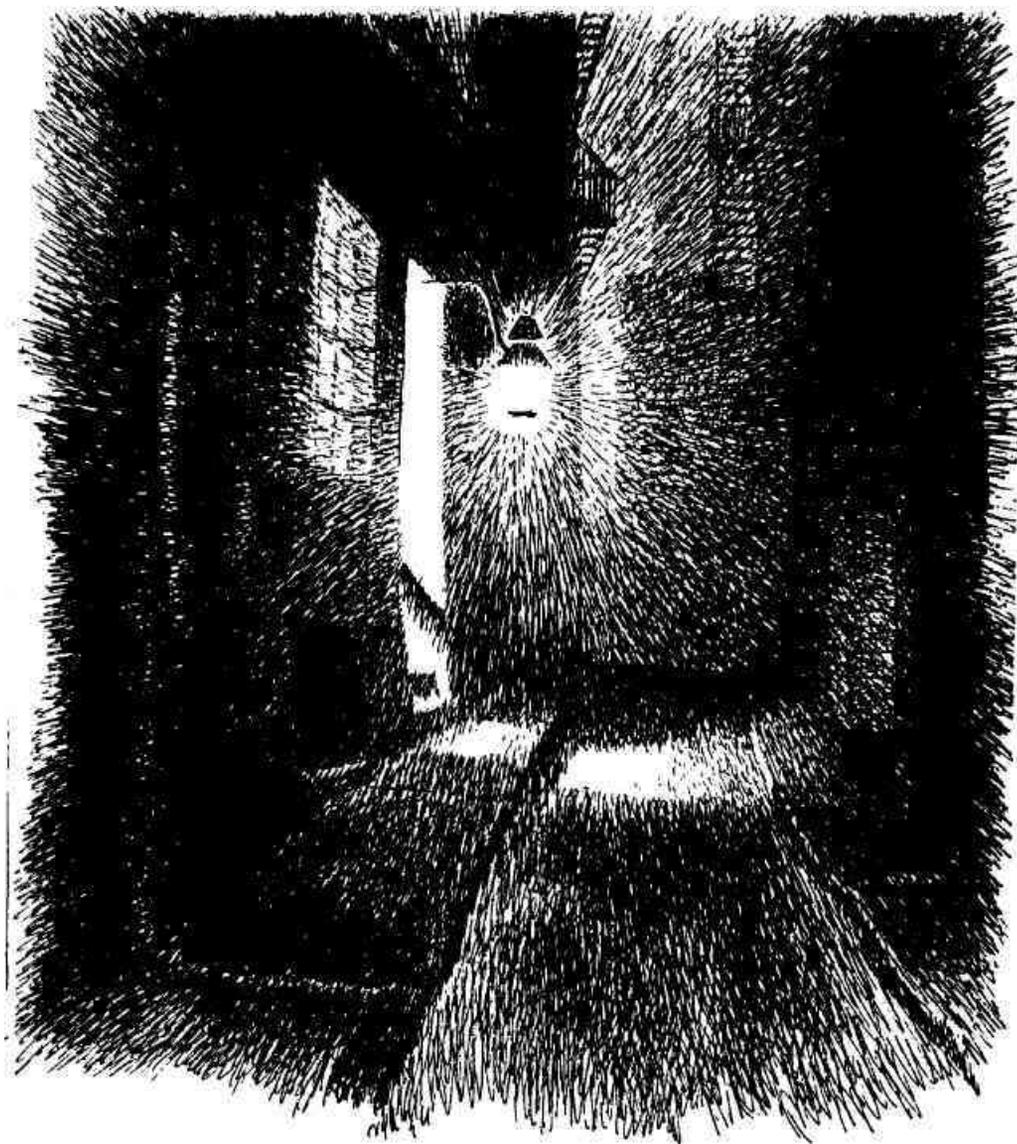
appeared . . . home living rooms were out-grown. The time had come when a regular meeting place was needed.

So in the heart of an art colony and the Italian wine-tipping neighborhood of what is known as Telegraph Hill or North Beach, the San Francisco Group found its first real home . . . a room in the Telegraph Hill Community House at 1736 Stockton Street. The place is typically San Francisco; a rustic, informal, arty affair, entered through a patio. Here at the bottom of the long stairway leading to the first AA meeting place many a newcomer has gazed upward, for the first time, with hope newborn. Over the old rooftop benignly peer the twin crosses on the spires of the nearby Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul.

What a crew it was that first met at the Community House. These neophytes would readily make the admission of the First Step then skip blithely on to that portion of the Twelfth Step that refers to "carrying the message." How they liked that Twelfth Step. They attacked it gleefully!

But what of the Steps in-between? "Oh," they'd answer, "in the East they talk about those Steps, but we in the West are more liberal. We have nothing against them and if you like them, OK."

Then one night the late Ted C. returned from a "vacation" in the Mendocino State Hospital. He open-



At the end of a dead end street was San Francisco's first clubhouse . . . 137 Harlan Place. A light burned over the door, a beacon to many a frightened newcomer . . .

ed his Big Book and began talking about God. He stayed sober for several months with that "God stuff" and the first effective impression of AA's spiritual values was made on the little band of path-finders.

In those days the meetings closed with the recital of the Lord's Prayer, but the members remained seated. One night some visiting AAs attended the meeting and rose during the Prayer. The San Franciscans rose with them . . . they were shamed into it! (It was more than two years later, in 1943, before the opening moment of silence was introduced by a member who had visited several Eastern groups.)

Right on the heels of the first feeble reachings toward the spiritual values came the first serious battle. The melee was caused over a proposed open meeting. Tempers were short and the arguments bitter . . . three members walked out. Only one ever returned. When the smoke cleared and serenity regained, the open meeting was held. The chairman and the two speakers that night are still active.

Unstable and small though the group was, it was about this time that it received its first recognition from the local newspapers and gained two more non-alcoholic friends who helped "carry the message." These two friends were



Anita Day Hubbard of the Examiner and the late John D. Barry of the News. Mr. Barry published an essay, "Just for Today," copies of which were mimeographed by the group and distributed by the hundreds.

It was in the winter of 1940 that San Francisco's first claim to AA fame occurred and the General Service Office was put briefly into the role of Dorothy Dix . . . giving advice to the lovelorn. The couple who had joined the group through Dr. Poliak, decided that their romance was serious . . . but what were the prospects for a successful marriage in AA? A letter asking for advice was sent to Ruth H., then General Secretary of the Headquarters Office. Ruth replied with congratulations saying that the marriage would be the first AA marriage on record, to her knowledge. The letter is still a cherished memento of the couple who were mar-

ried on December 31, 1940.

So upon that note of cheer and happiness the first mad era of AA in San Francisco came to an end.

When Jack Alexander's article appeared in the Saturday Evening Post in March, 1941, only two members of the San Francisco Group had acquired a year of continuous sobriety. Half a dozen more had had varying success but all were ready to answer the bell when the article appeared and brought with it a flood of calls for help. A Post Office Box was opened and the rush was on . . . from 30 to 40 inquiries were received daily, and every one was answered . . . even though some of the sponsors were almost as shaky as the prospects.

Growth and progress had begun. Four members from the San Francisco Group who lived in the East Bay started the Oakland Group, another member who lived in Palo Alto inserted an advertisement in



the local newspaper and waited for calls. He was about to give up when his first baby appeared.

The slow march of AA through Northern California and along the Peninsula was on!

Still somewhat from happenstance the whole area became speckled with AA groups ... a worried sister from Sacramento bundled her brother into a car and drove him to

miles, round trip, to San Francisco until they learned of two fellow townsmen who had been in touch with New York . . . Vallejo and Santa Rosa ... from a hospital call in Oakland. Then northward to Marin County ... A traveling man came to AA in S.F. and after three meetings was sent on a long trip to the north . . . did he have the nerve to start a group in Eureka? Eureka! He did. All highlights, these, of the pioneers who plodded along seriously carrying the message.

Meanwhile the San Francisco Group, itself, slowly groped its way at the Telegraph Hill Community House. After two years it was decided to move to the center of town. During this period they made two moves then news came from New York. Bill W. was to make his first trip to the Coast. This was in November of 1943.

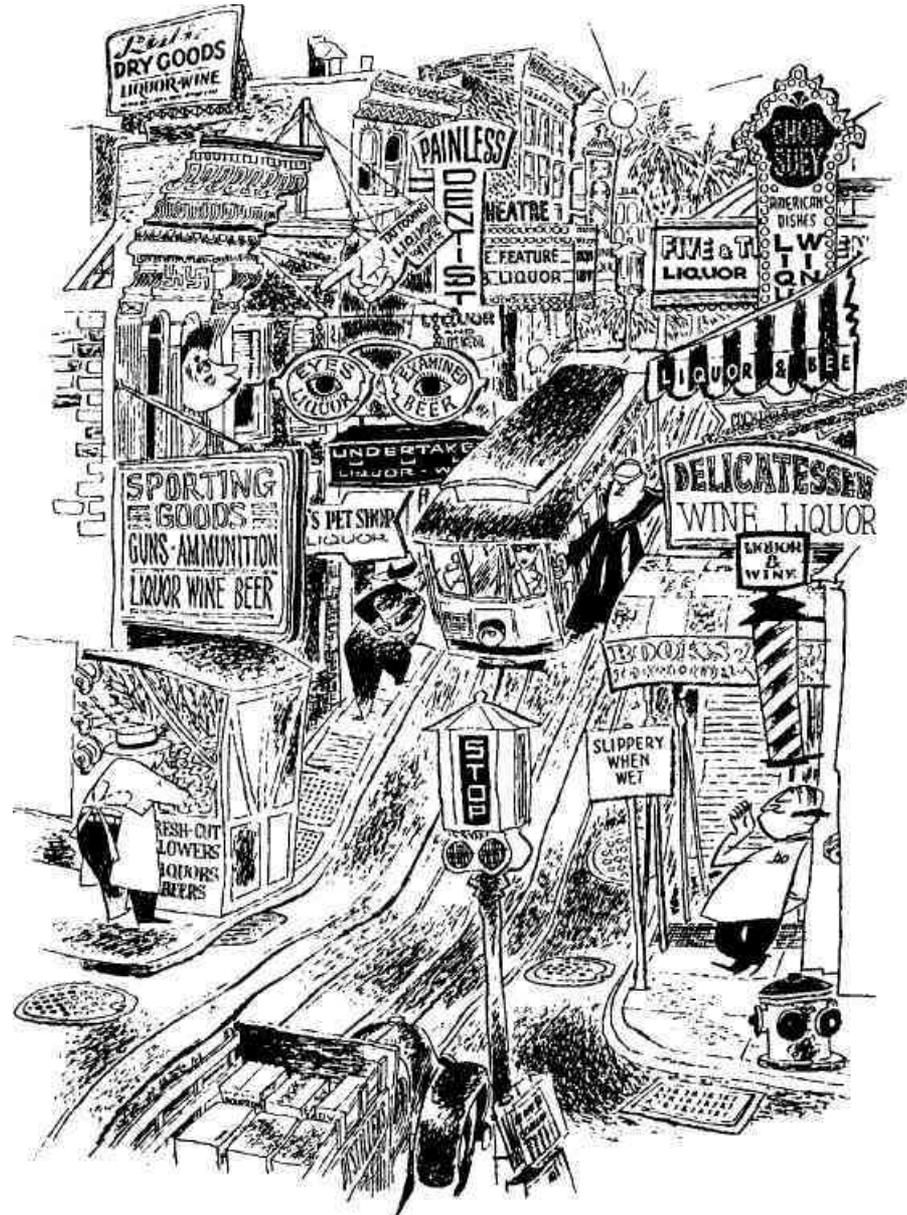
In order to have a place large enough for the visit, the group moved to Native Sons Hall. Here, at a closed meeting, Bill spoke to a record crowd. Fifty members were present. He spoke, also at an open meeting before an audience of 250. The group was elated! He was later to return in 1948 and twice in 1951, to speak before 3000 each time.

It was inevitable that sooner or later someone would suggest a club. Naturally, there was little cash in the till but that was a detail to be easily surmounted. The hat was passed. An ideal place was found



Closed Meetings Were the Early Trend. . . .

a meeting in Oakland. . . result. . . the several Sacramento groups. A Stockton drunk went to Sacramento out of curiosity . . . the Stockton Groups! And so it goes all up and down the area . . . San Jose, Watsonville, Salinas and Monterey . . . a San Francisco member bought an hotel in Fresno and took AA with him. Richmond and Santa Cruz . . . two men drove twice a week, 146



Graphic Business Survey of San Francisco (by an alcoholic visitor)



The San Francisco Alano Club occupies comfortable, roomy and beautiful quarters on the third floor at 111 O'Farrell Street. Here are some interior views, showing the fireplace and the coffee bar. The library and television room cannot be seen.

... a cozy little studio that had been a blind pig during the 1920's. Located at 137 Harlan Place, at the top of a dead-end alley, its entrance was marked by a light in an old-fashioned iron frame. The light that had guided many a drunk to the old blind pig now became a beacon of hope for many.

The first meeting was held here

in February, 1944, with 35 present. Before the year was out the group had outgrown the hall and a movement began to find a larger place. While plans were going forward for an expansion move, the group was bitten by another bug . . . the incorporation and by-law bug.

The by-law movement, started in the summer of 1944, became a reality on January 3, 1945, when Alcoholics Anonymous, San Francisco Fellowship, acquired a State Charter. The awesome document was ratified by solemn vote of the "voting members" on March 6, 1945.

The expansion movement ended in a cavern-like, second story loft at 143 Bush Street. The big hall, reached by a forbidding flight of stairs was later to care for crowds up to 350. The first meeting was held here April 13, 1945, and from then on the Fellowship mushroomed. From it developed the neighborhood groups and the real growth began.

In the winter of 1947, a new need became apparent. One Sunday night two men, just released from the County Jail visited 143 Bush Street. They were uncomfortable and lost. Thus began the South of Market or Skid Row Group. It first met in the Salvation Army Hall, in the heart of Skid Row. It now meets and has its own clubhouse in a shelter conducted by the St. Vincent De Paul Society, 235 Minna Street. A year later another need was met with the formation of an inter-racial body, the Fillmore Group.

The Alano Club is now housed in a convenient and beautiful new home at 111 O'Farrell Street. The Central Meeting is now held in the downstairs auditorium of the same building.

Other needs have been met . . . other facilities developed. There is the Seven Seas Club at 9 Mission Street, conducted by the Maritime Group; the Mission Day Group



opened the Twelfth Step House at 25th and Alabama Streets and a new group opened Tradition House at 505 Market Street . . . these are all designed to help the sick alcoholic. To help bind all together, the Fellowship started a monthly newspaper, *Good News* and the city, too, has lent its hand by opening a free clinic for alcoholics at 150 Otis Street.

Out of the hectic, tumultuous days of the past has come the San Francisco Fellowship, moving along now quietly, unsensationally and steadily. The varying elements have settled down into suitable channels or they have developed their own.

The San Francisco Fellowship has set out to live and progress according to Tradition . . . that AA is a program of principles and not personalities.

The first of the neighborhood groups was the Mission, followed

a few months later by Midtown-Sunset-Parkside-Richmond and Golden Gate . . . this was the first "open" group. From these four pioneers stemmed all the present neighborhood groups. There are now 34 and the Family Group, a group of non-alcoholic wives and husbands, also started in October, 1945.

The Fellowship and the clubhouse went along as one for another year and a half with the strain becoming greater each month. Drunks and panhandlers, wolves and Red

Ridinghoods considerably upset the equilibrium.

Again the inevitable happened. In the Fall of 1946, a move was started to separate AA and the club. Tempers were lost, relationships strained and general chaos reigned. After months of pyrotechnics, the separation was completed. The newly incorporated Alano Club of San Francisco took over the quarters at 143 Bush Street on January 27, 1947. The AA Fellowship moved its offices and is now located at 406 Sutter Street. Undaunted by the

side issues, AA in San Francisco moved along. Groups outgrew their meeting places, the Friday Night Discussion meeting was taken over by a neighborhood group, formed for that purpose. New neighborhood groups sprang up and a Central Committee was formed in the Spring of 1947. This committee conducts the Central Office, the Central Meeting and the over-all business of the Fellowship. Each group was declared an autonomous entity, functioning in harmony with the Twelve Points of Tradition.

Another interior view of the San Francisco Alano Club ...

