

June 1951

Home from the Conference

THE CHAIRMAN ...

discusses the Grapevine

STANDING room only," laughed the secretary of the regular Mid-Week closed meeting as the door to the clubroom opened and several more members entered the crowded room. "But come on in, we'll find you seats." He motioned to a couple husky characters to round up some more chairs.

The Mid-Week group was host tonight to several neighboring groups, as the Chairman was scheduled to give a report on the first General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous which he had attended recently in New York City.

"It speaks well for your interest in AA that so many of you turned out tonight," the Chairman began, "because this AA Conference marks another milestone in the unique history of our movement."

Following a brief resume on the Conference sessions relating specifically to the activities of the Alcoholic Foundation, the Works

Publishing Co. and the General Service Headquarters, the Chairman paused to light his pipe.

"Now we come to a service that is a typical AA story, typical in its phenomenal growth and the fact that it was created to meet a specific need. I'm talking about the A. A. *Grapevine* magazine.

"My personal impression is that the sessions devoted to the AA magazine produced more discussion than any of the other meetings. Because while the delegates were familiar with the publication, it was not until the Editor completed his presentation of the origin, growth and current status of the *Grapevine*, that they realized here was one of the three most important principal AA services, nationally and internationally. The delegates were frankly amazed at the scope of the operations involved in producing the *Grapevine* every 30 days. I can

report after sitting in the Conference sessions, visiting the publication office and talking with members of the staff, that we AAs are getting a truly professional job in every department.

"The value of the magazine, its importance to members of AA and the specific ways it serves our Program of Recovery as pointed out in the Editor's talk, I will discuss later.

"And if I may digress for a moment, let me pay tribute to the caliber of the men chosen to sit in conference and assume direct responsibility for the guidance of your principal AA services. To watch them in action, to feel their earnestness, sense their thoughtful approach to AA problems, it is difficult to believe that not too far back these men had been classified as hopeless drunks. Like any other group of AAs their seriousness was tempered with flashes of humor.

"Let's remember that the future of AA's services depends upon the wisdom and foresight exercised by this body of state and provincial delegates, who make up a cross section pattern of the AA total.

"As usual in this meeting, any questions will be welcomed. . . . Now for the *Grapevine* story. It was started in Greenwich Village in the spring of 1944 by a little group of AAs who felt the need for a publication reflecting and describing the progress of the movement in metropolitan New York."

The Chairman unfolded a copy of an early *Grapevine* and held it up. "By June about 1200 copies of this tabloid-size newspaper were being printed. Many of them went to GIs overseas. In 1945 upon the vote of groups throughout the country, the *Grapevine* was made the national AA periodical. To meet legal requirements it was incorporated. Its editorial and business policies were directed by a seven-member board of Directors, which included two trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation — one an AA and the other a non-alcoholic. The Foundation contributed substantially in making up deficits incurred by the magazine's rapid growth." "In September 1948 the *Grapevine* went pocket-size, making it easier to handle and read. It now had 32 pages and a completely anonymous cover.

"The September 1949 issue marked two forward steps; first, a money saving one in the adoption of a more flexible method of printing and secondly, the addition to the staff of two top-flight artists and layout men who injected a new attractiveness to the magazine. The number of pages was increased and today the *Grapevine* runs 48 pages a month. Recently two more high caliber artists joined the crew.

The Chairman held up a current copy of the *Grapevine* and thumbed its pages. "This is what your *Grapevine* looks like today. After seven years of publication its cir-

ulation is crowding 25,000 copies a month."

"May I interrupt a second?" asked Frank, one of the founders of Mid-Week group. "In publishing circles is this considered a good circulation percentage? Latest figures estimate AA membership at 120,000, I believe."

"Good question, Frank. But you see up until now no promotion of the *Grapevine* has been done. I mean sale of subscriptions in the terms of other national magazines promotional activities. The sale of the *Grapevine* has depended upon the hit-or-miss efforts of any member who happened to be interested in it."

"But, Mr. Chairman, the *Grapevine* is a different breed of periodical. Its the only international magazine that deals with our problem, and must depend upon AA members almost exclusively for its support. So I'd say the circulation figures should be larger in proportion to potential readership."

The Chairman nodded assent. "If you'll be patient a few minutes longer, I'll tell you the present status of the *Grapevine*. Then I think an open discussion will be in order." The Chairman relighted his pipe and continued. "In its early days the *Grapevine* was produced and mailed by a 100 per cent volunteer crew, working evenings and spare time. The growth of the magazine brought on additional mechanical problems, and it be-

came necessary to hire a small number of non-alcoholic workers on a full-time basis. Larger office space was rented and additional office equipment, including a Vari-Typer machine for setting type, were purchased.

"Improved quality of the publication in the nature of more attractive layouts and artwork plus the increased number of pages, eventually produced a situation where quality outweighed income. So despite the increased income from new subscriptions, the *Grapevine* is now operating at a monthly deficit of about \$600.00."

"May I interrupt?" asked Pete. The Chairman nodded assent and Pete said: "You didn't mention how many of the editorial staff are paid? This might affect the deficit."

The Chairman smiled: "Did you ever hear of 12thStep work? Well, the *Grapevine* staff is a fine example of AAs performing with no thought of reward other than to contribute to this AA service.

"The managing editor, Virginia, a former newspaper woman, is the only paid member of the editorial staff. She holds down the editorial office with John, who does the Vari-Typing and the mechanical production. John, too, is paid. The other editors, staff writers, artists and proof-readers give their time and efforts — for free! Your *Grapevine* staff is truly a professional one, including topfictionwriters, newsreel editors, newspaper reporters,

public relations and advertising men, working with top-hole art directors and illustrators. As Bill W. remarked: "If we bought all this brass at the full time rates they soak folks on the outside, we'd be paying them about \$10,000 a month"

"Does this staff preclude the use of contributions from us grassroots writers?" asked Tony who had the distinction of having had three pieces printed in the *Grapevine* to date.

"Absolutely not," the Chairman declared emphatically. "The Editor made a special plea to the delegates to encourage contributions from members in their respective communities ... So keep your opinions and ideas rolling toward the *Grapevine* office.

"On the business side the *Grapevine* has two business managers — one a non-alcoholic on a full-time work schedule, while the other is an alky, and treasurer of a publishing firm in New York. Kitty, is the non-alcoholic circulation manager and has three paid assistants who see that the records are kept straight and the magazine gets to you every month."

"While the *Grapevine* was never intended to produce a profit, we have to be realistic about its operation. Until now all deficits have been made up by drawing on the reserve of the Alcoholic Foundation. But such depletion of the Foundation fund should not be necessary. Furthermore, it may no-

longer be possible."

"Now for the \$64 question." The Chairman looked around the room and finally he saw Jack, manager of a local publishing firm. "Jack, you've had experience in this business. What would you suggest to eliminate the annual *Grapevine* deficit of about \$6,700?"

"Well, off the cuff, three ways seem to present themselves. One, reduce the present quality of the book. Two, cut down on the number of pages, and the third alternative, increase the subscription price. Any one of these would reduce the loss and possibly produce additional revenue, providing your circulation didn't fall off, which might happen if the present character of the book was reduced. For my money, it's a fine job and I wouldn't like to see its quality sacrificed."

The Chairman smiled: "You must have read my notes, Jack, because you've hit a couple of the *Grapevine* Editor's suggestions."

Nobby, circulation manager for one of the local newspapers spoke up: "As usual, Jack comes up with practical ideas. But what kind of a book are we going to have if we trim it to hell and gone? How about putting on a campaign for the sale of subscriptions? I never even knew such a magazine existed until I'd been in AA seven months."

"Isn't it against AA Tradition to promote?" questioned Dorothy. "Isn't our public relations policy

based on attraction rather than promotion?"

The Chairman leafed through his notes before answering. "Perhaps Dorothy has a point."

"Mr. Chairman, if we're going to get Tradition-Conscious, how about injecting the Fifth Tradition in support of a good promotional program for the *Grapevine*?" interposed Slim. "The primary purpose of each group is to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers... I've used the *Grapevine* successfully on two Twelfth Step occasions. Both these drunks were more impressed by reading yarns in the magazine that sounded like their story, than they were in hearing several speakers qualify themselves from the platform... let's not cut the quality of the book, but let's get behind a program to make the members of all groups more conscious of the service value of their magazine."

"Sounds to me like the pressure-group is going to work," cautioned Dorothy. "I'm inclined to go along with one of Jack's suggestions — raising the price. I'd pay 50 cents for a copy of the *Grapevine* rather than risk the effects of a subscription campaign."

Nobby directed his remarks to Dorothy: "You might better buy two copies for your half-buck, Dorothy, and give one to a guy who can't afford the price."

The Chairman rapped on the table as the meeting merged into an

undertone of conversation. "The right to air opinions — a good old fashioned American and, AA principle. But there still may be some doubt in the minds of AA members as to just what is the true value of the *Grapevine*, and its importance to AA as a whole. I'd like to have some of your ideas on the specific ways it serves our program of recovery."

Frank spoke first: "There will always be honest differences of opinion in the interpretation of the AA Program. It seems to me that the *Grapevine* provides a good forum for airing these opinions — not with the idea of dividing us, but rather as a place for the exchange of constructive suggestions."

"Good for a starter, Frank. Let's have another. Okay, Jim."

"To lots of newcomers — and old-timers too — the arrival of the *Grapevine* regularly each month is a sort of Twelfth Step job, reminding us that AA is at work, and that thousands of other AAs like themselves are being helped by the Recovery Program. For the newcomers its an introduction to AA on an overall scale," offered Jim.

"Don't you also think, Jim, that it's a constant reminder to AAs who have several years of sobriety, and may be tending toward complacency, that reading the *Grapevine* will be a sort of sobriety insurance, a warning suggestion that no matter how long we're dry, we never do know *all* the answers?" The Chair-

man looked around the room for another answer to his request.

Tony furnished the next idea: "If you check the variety of datelines in an average issue of the *Grapevine*, you'll see how it serves as a reporter on the progress of AA. Without this service thousands of AAs throughout the world would probably have little or no understanding of the growth of the movement. Without the *Grapevine* they would have no connection with the invaluable experience of other AAs.

"Wonderful, Tony. And be sure you keep *our* local dateline alive in the magazine."

"I've seen you use the *Grapevine* Mr. Chairman, on many occasions," smiled Dorothy. "And it has helped develop some wonderful meetings."

The Chairman replied: "That is one of the strong points that was brought out at the Conference... the use of the magazine for small groups, particularly where it is difficult to secure speakers for meetings. This is a vital service the magazine offers in presenting topics for discussion."

A member from one of the neighboring groups put up his hand. "Okay, Alex, what's your contribution?" asked the Chairman.

"Well, I was at sea when I found AA, and believe me the need of the isolated AA — or the 'Loner' as we call him, who has little opportunity to work with other alkie, finds a subscription to the *Grapevine* a darn good investment. It

helped me keep my sobriety more than once."

"That's one I was waiting for," said the Chairman. "And not only at sea, but in out of the way places on land — anywhere the mail reaches, affords the *Grapevine* an opportunity to serve...the Chairman laid down his pipe and looked earnestly at the members.

"I think we have covered very well what the *Grapevine* means to AA, and that we have unearthed a strong idea of its potential service for tomorrow. There is only one basic principle on which we need guidance in considering the *Grapevine*, and I quote the Editor of the magazine — 'How can we serve the membership best? How can we best serve the millions who still don't know?' The Chairman slipped his notes into his pocket and prepared to close the meeting.

"Well, how about it?" Nobby sang out. "You haven't told us what the Conference decided to do about the *Grapevine* deficit?"

Throwing up his hands in an attitude of despair, the Chairman smiled and said: "The delegates voted to leave the physical character of the *Grapevine* just as it is." He paused... "And to do — now get this word — and do some *mild promoting* on the sale of subscriptions... by which they hope to put your magazine on a pay-as-it-goes basis. After the meeting I'd like to discuss how much promoting, *mild* will allow us."