

August 1955

The Conference — Then

Memories of AA's "First Panel"

IN AA, time is a two-faced prankster. The man celebrating his first anniversary of sobriety looks back over that year as though through the wrong end of a telescope, at ancient history. On the other hand, his AA life has been so full of new activity, new interests, new friends and new ideas, that last year seems only yesterday.

So it is with the first General Service Conference. It seems almost impossible to believe it convened only four short years ago. Because, in the light of what has just taken place in St. Louis, that first Conference does indeed seem like ancient history. Something akin to the landing of the Pilgrims. And, in a small way, as significant.

It was small, that first Conference. Only thirty-seven delegates, the "First Panel," representing only the more populous AA centers in the U. S. and Canada. It was a quiet Conference. And, no pun intended, it was a sober one. It was an all-male cast.

Not until the Second Panel came in the next year did we get our first lady delegate.

The purpose of the whole conference concept had been plainly stated by Bill in the original Third Legacy pamphlet. This was to be the begin-

ning of the great body of AA's members, through these first delegates, taking over full responsibility for the services and affairs of Alcoholics Anonymous. At the time, it seemed like an awesome step. And those thirty-seven delegates approached it with awe and with almost a tender caution—as though they were being asked to guard the Holy Grail.

The atmosphere of dedication never wavered throughout the entire four days. Not a man missed a minute of any of the sessions and it's probably safe to say also, nobody missed a word, either. The agenda was largely "exploratory," aimed mostly at stating the problems rather than solving them on the spot. What happened was a revelation to all who were fortunate enough to witness it.

A great inter-change of knowledge, information and ideas had been set in motion. Upon looking back, it was like watching AA get acquainted with itself. The delegates heard, many for the first time, detailed descriptions of how their Foundation functioned, the Trustees, the (then) Works Publishing Company which published the AA book, the many services of the General Service Office and the Grapevine.

The Headquarters people heard, and saw, AA through the voices and attitudes of the delegates such as no amount of traveling and "visitin" could ever give. Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the spirit of that First Conference is to quote briefly from the June, 1951 issue of the Grapevine which reported the Conference.

Said Cliff W., the delegate from California, "Like so many AAs I was aware that our General Service Headquarters performed certain services for us, but what amazed me was the unbelievable extent of these services."

And from J.A.D., a Headquarters Conference Member, this: "My amazement grew when I failed to discover among the 37 a single one who seemed intent on making an impression—or for that matter, making a *speech!* I kept saying 'But this can't be—there's something wrong here—they're alcoholics even if they are selected—and

in 37 of them surely there must be a few 'Big Wheels' or 'Spotlight Seekers' or 'Front Runners' who will want the center of the floor.

"But I failed to find such a one up to the time the Lord's Prayer marked the end of the Conference on Sunday afternoon."

Yes, it was an humble but hardy little band that made the first big step toward taking over full responsibility of our beloved society and perpetuating it for "the millions who still don't know." These 37 delegates spoke of the "Collective Conscience of AA" and acted as though they understood clearly and forever that in our humility today may lie the salvation of generations of alcoholics yet unborn.

It was a brave beginning. May the delegates who chart our future course be endowed with the same selfless devotion of—the 37!

Al S., Little Neck, L. I.

—and Now

THE fifth (and last of the so-called "experimental") annual General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous held its final session on the great stage of Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, before an audience of 5,000 assembled at AA's Twentieth Anniversary Convention in July. (See page 20.)

In three days of intensive work preceding the anniversary celebration,

seventy-six AA Conference delegates from 48 of the United States and 9 Canadian provinces sat down with members of General Service Headquarters and Grapevine staffs, the directors of AA Publishing, and the trustees of the General Service Board of AA (formerly known to most AAs as the Alcoholic Foundation) to review the past year and plan for the

needs of the busy year to come.

The chief business of the Conference was to consider and declare its full approval of Bill W.'s proposal that the Conference—made up, each year, half of new delegates and half of "second-year" men and women—be the permanent link between AA groups in North America and the various service boards and committees which handle its national and international affairs.

Anticipating the approval of their thousands of fellow-members gathered in St. Louis to celebrate the Society's twentieth anniversary and to hear the proposal from Bill himself, the Conference delegates adopted Bill's resolution unanimously. (For the full text of the resolution, turn to page 32.)

Another important action of the Conference was the formal presentation of the completed new edition of the "Big Book"—*Alcoholics Anonymous*—and the setting of its retail price at \$4.50. A bulletin is being mailed to all groups from General Service Headquarters giving full details.

At eight other morning, afternoon and evening sessions in St. Louis the hardworking delegates also:

- *recommended to the trustees that they take appropriate action to emphasize to all newspapers and other publishing outlets, radio and television stations, the significance of AA's Tradition of personal anonymity at the public level;
- *declined to create a special class of "AA servants" by (a) turning

down a proposal that delegates be listed in the AA World Directory and (b) rejecting a suggestion that ex-trustees of the General Service Board become permanent members of the Conference with the privilege of attending meetings at their own expense;

- *voted to discontinue the making of a special yearly appeal exclusively for the General Service Conference Fund, indicating confidence that the groups would assume the cost of the Conference through their regular voluntary contributions to General Service Headquarters;
- *endorsed a plan for selecting AA trustees from outlying areas, based on rotation of the areas from which future trustees are chosen;
- *encouraged the Fellowship's publishing company to "hold the line" on pamphlet prices and to prepare several needed items;
- *urged that all delegates support efforts to increase the circulation and value of the Grapevine;

and other actions, too detailed for inclusion here, which may be read in the full Report of the Conference and "Conference Highlights," available through General Service Headquarters. An important feature of the Conference was the hearing of a detailed analysis of the financial status of the General Service Board, the AA Publishing Company, and the AA Grapevine, and of reports from Headquarters staff members directly responsible for AA's worldwide Twelfth Step work.