

AA Grapevine, June 1977

*How an understanding psychiatrist
came to give Bill W. and
five other AAs the
"run of the ward"*



The First Hospital Group

IT SOUNDED like a death sentence: "The medical profession has nothing for you. The clergy has nothing for you. There's nobody in God's world can help you. You're a chronic alcoholic, period!"

Those words were spoken by a psychiatrist, the medical superintendent of a New York State mental hospital early in 1939. They were directed at a patient who had been committed to the institution following his conviction of a serious crime perpetrated during a blackout.

Then, indicating half a dozen men assembled in the office, the doctor added, "Maybe these men and this book can help you."

The men were Bill W. and five other recovered alcoholics. The book was the newly published first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The patient was a man named Joe, whose drinking, by his own later estimate, had led to probably seventy-five arrests and thirty-five admissions to New York's Bellevue Hospital.

The doctor's doleful "maybe" became an incredible reality. When the second edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published in 1955, Joe had attained well over eleven years of continuous sobriety, and his story, "Joe's Woes," had become a part of the new Big Book.

But Joe's recovery, like that of many other seemingly hopeless alcoholic patients, was not entirely the result of "these men and this book," even though one of the men was AA's co-founder. Bill gave much credit to a psychiatrist, Dr. Russell E. Blaisdell, who permitted these early AA members to talk to the alcoholic patients in the hospital, giving AAs, in Bill's words, "the run of their ward."

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill writes that under Dr. Blaisdell, Rockland State Hospital was the first to enter into full-scale cooperation with AA and provide facilities to start "the first mental hospital group."

Today, thirty-eight years later, there are AA groups in more than 1,280 hospitals, including mental hospitals and other medical facilities providing treatment for alcoholic patients. In practically all of them, the success of those early days in

Rockland is recreated again and again. Chronic repeaters, mentally and physically sick alcoholics, first reach out dimly for help, grasp the basic principles of the program, and then in turn carry the message to other patients. And, as it was in Rockland in 1939, their recovery through AA is made possible by the cooperation and encouragement of hospital medical and administrative staffs.

In December 1939, before the end of AA's first year of participation at Rockland, Bill was invited to speak before the hospital board of physicians and administrators. Bill had been sober five years; most of the other AAs, considerably less. He apologized for not being able to supply the hospital staff with the exact recovery figures they would like to have, then explained: "We have been so busy trying to get people well that we haven't bothered with card indices and so on."

He estimated a total AA membership of 350,* including the Middle West, "where there is more activity than here [on the East Coast]."

Dr. Blaisdell was so impressed by AA's results that he permitted busloads of patients to attend regular AA meetings outside the hospital, in the care of persons with no more credentials than periods of sobriety in AA. As Bill describes it in *AA Comes of Age*, Dr. Blaisdell "went way out on a limb" professionally with this policy. Meanwhile, an AA meeting had been established on a regular basis in Rockland Hospital itself. "The grimmest imaginable cases began to get well and stay that way when released," Bill wrote. "Thus began AA's first working relationship with a mental hospital. . . . Dr. Blaisdell had written a bright page in the annals of alcoholism."

Sharing in the work with Rockland patients at that time were two early

*1977 estimate of AA membership worldwide: over 1,000,000

members, Bob and Mag V., who held AA meetings in their house in nearby Monsey, N.Y. Buses from the hospital also hauled patients to meetings in New York City, thirty miles away, and in South Orange, N.J.

Physicians friendly to AA in the Greystone and Overbrook Hospitals in New Jersey had previously released three or four alcoholic patients into AA; but according to Bill, Rockland was the first to enter into *full-scale* cooperation with Alcoholics Anonymous.

Even before the Rockland meetings, a precedent had been set for sober alcoholics to work with hospitalized drunks. Bill had been treated at Towns Hospital in New York, and as he explained to the Rockland board, "I got into the habit of going back there and talking to the patients." Bill and Dr. Bob had worked with hospital patients in Akron, with the incalculable aid of Sister Ignatia. After Bill returned to New York,

Bob and other AAs expanded this work.

The procedure as Bill described it to the board thirty-eight years ago is still prevalent and proves effective today in hundreds of hospitals all over the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. "We have the patient's doctor introduce us into the picture as a man who has recovered, as one who wishes to be helpful in order to help himself."

Purists may object that the AA meetings at Rockland in 1939 did not constitute an autonomous AA group as it is defined today, even though Bill called it a "group." Technicalities aside, evidence that the 1939 meetings were effective is shown by a letter, dated December 23, 1939, in which alcoholic patients thank Dr. Blaisdell for enabling them to meet with AA members.

Documentary evidence of a "formal" AA group is found in a letter

to the Alcoholic Foundation (now the General Service Board) dated December 19, 1946. The letter states that a new AA group was starting at the hospital, with "the first meeting to take place tonight."

So much for "ancient history." What about today?

AA is still "in" at Rockland. Jim T. of Nanuet, N.Y., takes outside AAs to Rockland for two meetings each week, as he has for the past sixteen years. At least four years prior to Jim's work, Manhattan's Park Madison Group took meetings into the hospital.

In the detox unit at Rockland, three AA meetings are held each week, and there are two in the rehabilitation unit. In addition, volunteer AAs conduct closed AA meetings in the alcoholic ward on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Busing to outside meetings still continues. Three minibuses, driven by recovered alcoholics, take patients

to meetings in three counties—Putnam, Westchester, and Rockland.

The hospital psychiatrists recognize that the highest therapeutic benefit comes from these outside meetings. Patients, perhaps ten or fifteen, find themselves in the midst of as many as 180 sober alcoholics and their families. They see the effect of AA, its power to produce and maintain sobriety, fellowship, and happiness. The impact on the patients is tremendous, states a hospital staff member, himself a recovered alcoholic.

What Bill told the hospital board that first year still applies today, not only in Rockland but in the 1,280 other hospitals: "We don't feel that our approach is in any way competitive. We find the doctor, the hospital, the psychiatrist and psychologist are all playing an important part. . . . Our various efforts supplement each other."

L. H., Manhattan, N. Y.