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The Good Old Times

"... The alcoholic himself didn't ask for help. He didn't have anything to say about it."
 "We didn't know anything about a program of "attraction," said Warren C., speaking of the hectic days of twelfth-stepping in Cleveland in the fall of 1939."
 "... our co-founders would lock Eddie up in a second-floor room of his house in an effort to keep him sober."
 "They made him get down on his knees at the side of the bed... and pray and say that he would turn his life over to God."

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I crawled back to AA after a slip lasting more than a year. Along with a deep thankfulness for being home again, I've occasionally experienced some irritation (perhaps a stab of false pride) on being told by another member, "I don't have to drink again — you did it for me!"

That slip brought me closer to physical, mental, and spiritual hell than I like to think of today; yet out of it came a new and intimate knowledge of gratitude, never experienced in seven previous years of sobriety. That might account for my strong reaction to — and identification with — much of the early AA history told in *Dr.*

Bob and the Good Oldtimers.

The founding members made every mistake in every book — every "mistake," that is, by 1985 standards. But they indeed made them *for us*. Out of those monumental errors came a Fellowship that is now more than a million strong. And out of them came, also, the Twelve Traditions, our safeguard against the same mistakes in the future.

As I read Dr. Bob's biography, and chuckled over practices we have so far outgrown today as to find them ludicrous, I was swept with a sense of

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gratitude for being a part of Alcoholics Anonymous. I belong — we all belong — to a group of people who, almost uniquely in history, have been able to profit from the lessons of the past and to remain grateful and teachable in a radically changing present.

Today we can look back and laugh at the infant antics of our co-founders and the other early members, and the laughter is all the heartier because we know that in essence we're laughing at ourselves and with ourselves.

For instance, we can chuckle at the recollections of Dr. Bob's son:

"Young Smitty, who noted that Bill and his father were 'determined to make a convert out of somebody at that time,' recalled that our co-founders would lock Eddie up in a second-floor room of his house in an effort to keep him sober.

"One time, Eddie slid down the drain spout and was heading merrily

up the street, Dad and Bill hot after him — Dad in his car and Bill running him down on foot.... Just before Bill gave out, Eddie did, too, and Bill cornered him and took him back to the house.' "

Eddie was one of the earliest prospects, before Bill D., AA Number Three, got sober in Akron City Hospital. At the time, Bob and Bill gave up on him (the last straw was the day he chased Dr. Bob's wife, Anne, upstairs with a knife), though he did get sober through the program some years later.

The painting "Man on the Bed" depicts the two co-founders visiting Bill D. in the hospital, but that wasn't quite the beginning of the story. They heard about Bill D. from the admissions nurse at Akron City Hospital, who obligingly kept an eye out for prospects (Bill D. was "a dandy").

"Dr. Bob and Bill did not visit Bill D. right away. First, he was in no



condition to see anyone. Second, they thought it a good idea to have a preliminary talk with his wife. And this became part of the way things were done in the early days: Discuss it first with the wife; find out what you could; then plan your approach. It should be noted, as well, that the alcoholic himself didn't ask for help. He didn't have anything to say about it."

After talking with the wife, Dr. Bob would talk with the prospect himself: "If you are perfectly sure you want to quit drinking for good, if you are serious about it... you can be relieved."

"In Cleveland or Akron, you couldn't just walk into AA the way you can today," said Cleveland's Clarence S., one of those early members. 'You had to be sponsored. The wife would call, and I would go to see her first. I told her my story. I wanted to find out several things about the prospect and his relationship with her. Is he a chronic or a periodic? Then I would know how to approach him, figure out how to reach him. I might set some kind of trap for him. I had a lot of whammy working.' "

Then the twelfth-stepper would talk to the prospect. "We had great enthusiasm in those days, a dedication that sold this program... By the time we were through, most of them at least wanted to try it' [said Warren C.].

"But not all of them,' he added. I have been kicked out of some of

the finest homes in this man's town. "What? Me an alcoholic? Get the hell out of here! "

"Following this preliminary questioning, the new prospect would be hospitalized and 'defogged.' " (Hospitalization was the rule, and few were "allowed in" without it — an interesting reflection for some members today who bemoan the prevalence of hospitals and rehabs.)

Paradoxically, along with an almost missionary zeal, the early AAs were easily threatened by new situations. I smile when I think of the thousands of young people active in AA today, then read an account of the way Bob E. came into AA, sponsored by his friend Paul S.:

"I did show up at Paul's office, and...he took me out to see Dr. Bob, who was at home with a cold. He was lying on a couch, covered with a blanket.

"He looked at me. I was only 32, and I was shaking so bad, I couldn't hold anything. I remember how I tried to hide my hands. "You're pretty young," he said. "I don't know if you can make it...I haven't got any time or strength to waste on this unless you're serious about it." ' "

Dorothy S., Clarence's wife, recalls her call to Dr. Bob:

"Right away, he wanted to know how old Clarence was. "Thirty-four," I said. "Impossible," he replied. "He hasn't suffered enough. There's never been anyone that young come into the Fellowship and recover."...



"'Dr. Bob was about to hang up on me,' Dorothy continued. 'But then he relented and said there was one man in Cleveland who might be able to help Clarence.' "

Women were another "minority group" that terrified many early AAs:

"In addition to Eddie, there were a couple of other alcoholics around in the summer and fall of 1935 who didn't jell. However, they still deserve to become a part of AA folklore.

"There was a man we'll call 'Victor,' a former mayor of Akron, and a lady we'll call 'Lil,' who was the first woman to seek help.

"Together, Victor and the lady known as Lil started out to write the 'thirteenth step,' long before the first twelve were ever thought of. What is more, they say it began in Dr. Bob's office — on his examination table —

while he was at the City Club engaged in his sacrosanct Monday-night bridge game.

"In any case, Victor decided it was time for him to go home — but Lil was loaded. So he called Ernie to explain the predicament. When Ernie arrived, he saw Lil grab a handful of little pills from Dr. Bob's cabinet.

"We started going around the examination table, and she was trying to get the pills in her mouth,' Ernie recalled. 'Then she made a dive for the window. I caught her halfway out. She was strong as a horse and used some profanity I never heard before or since.

"I got her quieted, and Doc came. We took her out to Ardmore Avenue [Dr. Bob's house] and put her in a room in the basement. She stayed there two or three days, and then her people took her home. Of course, they were never too kind

about it and thought we didn't handle her right. But we felt we had done all we could for her when she wasn't helping herself any.'

"They say Dr. Bob was leery of anything to do with women alcoholics for a long time thereafter, although he still tried to help as best he could with any who came along. And Bill Wilson, speaking with Sue Windows [Dr. Bob's adopted daughter] in the 1950s, recalled how they all were scandalized by the episode.

" 'As drunks, I don't know why we should have been,' Bill said. 'But we felt that the performance of some of those early people coming in would disrupt us entirely.—[‘Lil’], I guess, was absolutely the first woman we ever dealt with.' "

I am a woman, and I was younger than Clarence S. when I went to my first AA meeting. I was welcomed with warmth, not met with fear. Lil and Clarence were there *for me*. I never slid down a drainpipe to escape AA, but I slid swiftly and quietly out of many meeting rooms before I got the message. No one forced me back in; they let me find my own way. Bill W, and Dr. Bob and Eddie were there *for me*.

Perhaps the next time someone tells me I drank again for others, I'll know more deeply what that means. Perhaps the lesson of *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, for me, is that all my actions as an AA member affect other AAs and the Fellowship as a whole. A sobering thought.

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