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Fragments of AA History

The AA Fellowship is approaching its 55th Anniversary, and looking forward to an International Convention in July 1990 to celebrate. International Conventions — birthday parties for AA — have been held every five years since 1950, and since most alcoholics like to operate on a grand scale, it's not surprising that when AA has a party, it makes a bit of a splash...

Montreal, July 4th weekend, 1985: Almost 50,000 sober alcoholics from 54 countries celebrated AA's golden anniversary, saturating that picturesque city with the joy of sobriety.

New Orleans, July 1980: Not even a 100 degree-plus heat wave melted the enthusiasm of more than 22,000 AA celebrants from all over the world.

Denver, July 1975: Nearly 20,000 gathered and reminded themselves, "Let It Begin With Me."

The sheer numbers were not so impressive when Conventions began, at the first International in 1950, held in

Cleveland. About 3,000 AAs (out of a total membership of 97,000) gathered that year for more than a birthday party, for it was there that AA "came of age" and accepted the Twelve Traditions.

Bill W. described those three historic days in a September 1950 Grapevine article: "On AA's 15th Anniversary everybody knew that we had grown up. There couldn't be any doubt about it. Members, families, and friends spent three inspiring, almost awesome days with our good hosts at Cleveland.... Just what did we do? Well, we had meetings, lots of them." He goes on to describe the banquet, at which they had expected enough people to fill the Hotel Carter's ballroom and where enough "surging celebrants" turned up to fill two extra rooms.

And then: "Several thousand of us crowded into the Cleveland Music Hall for the Traditions meeting, which was thought by most AAs to be the high point of our Conference. Six

old-time stalwarts, coming from places as far flung as Boston and San Diego, beautifully reviewed the years of AA experience which had led to the writing of our Traditions." Then Bill summed up, and "Inquired if those present had any objections to the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous as they stood. Hearing none, I offered the AA Traditions for adoption. Impressively unanimous, the crowd stood up. So ended that fine hour in which we of AA took our destiny by the hand."

Bill writes of toasting "the absent ones," and movingly describes some or the AAs who traveled great distances to be there: the AA "from the Marshall Islands who, though all alone out there, still claimed his group had three members, to wit: 'God, the book Alcoholics Anonymous, and me.'" This man had traveled 7,000 miles and brought, from a stopover in Hawaii, "with great care and refrigeration," a cluster of leis, including one sent by the AA lepers at Molokai, "those isolated AAs who will always be of us, yet never with us."

It was Dr. Bob's last public appearance: "Earlier we thought he'd never make it, his illness had continued so severe.... He spoke in a strong sure voice for ten minutes, and he left us a great heritage...by which we AAs can surely grow."

The Fellowship claimed that heritage five years later, at St. Louis, where delegates approved the charter of the General Service Conference,

which took over the founding members' responsibility for the guidance and continuance of AA's world services. A Grapevine writer using the anonymous sobriquet "Altered Ego" wrote in the August issue that year: "Highlights? The moment when Bill asked us to take up responsibility for our very life, and we said Aye. This underlined for all our todays the principles of rotation and humility already unanimously reaffirmed by the delegates to the Conference, that the performance of special services for AA shall never create a special class of AA workers."

With the Twelve Traditions firmly in place, and the General Service Conference well launched as guardian of AA's world services, successive internationals have reaffirmed and celebrated AA principles. In Long Beach, Calif., in 1960, where the theme was "Recovery, Unity, Service," Bill closed the Saturday night meeting with a message of rededication "to an ever-deepening love of each other, love for the wondrous creation in which we live and serve, and love for its supreme author, God Himself." Nearly 10,000 listened as twelve AA members representing Australia, England, Norway, Belgium, Scotland, West Germany, South Africa, the Canal Zone, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador accepted copies of this rededication from AA's co-founder to take back to their home areas.

The Toronto Convention in 1965 saw the birth of the familiar Respon-

sibility Declaration: "I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that: I am responsible." Two major themes ran through the many Convention talks: the first was gratitude: the other was a concern over the possibility that success might lead AA to complacency about the size of the job still to be done. To that end, Bill W. stressed in his talk the need to cooperate with all who work on the problem of alcoholism. "We should very seriously ask ourselves how many alcoholics have gone on drinking simply because we have failed to cooperate in good spirit with these many agencies. No alcoholic should go mad or die simply because he did not come straight to AA in the beginning."

Our 35th Anniversary in Miami Beach was the last where Bill was able to appear, and the moment was described in the October 1970 Grapevine: "The man in the wheelchair reached up, gripped the lectern with both hands, and in one smooth motion hauled himself to his full six-foot-three-inch height. And in another

smooth motion the throng of 11,000 was on its feet in a standing ovation to Bill W., the surviving co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous."

The full realization of our co-founder's mortality may have been one reason why, in eleven different languages, the participants in that Convention looked to the future in a pledge of unity:

"This we owe to AA's future:

To place our common welfare first;

To keep our Fellowship united.

For on AA Unity depend our lives,

And the lives of those to come."

Over the succeeding nineteen years, Conventions in Denver, New Orleans, and Montreal continued to celebrate sobriety and give thousands of AAs the opportunity to rededicate themselves to the Fellowship's spiritual principles. Each year, more and more AAs have "gone to the meeting," and attendance at our 55th Anniversary celebration in Seattle in July 1990 is expected to be around 45,000. But whether there are 3,000 of us or 50,000, the spiritual decibel level will probably be about the same. Very high — on sobriety.

