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Fragments of AA History

AA Beginnings in Amarillo

In 1945 a doctor named George I. of Amarillo, Texas was back east on business and became acquainted with Alcoholics Anonymous. He returned to Amarillo sober, bringing with him several Big Books (he remained sober until he passed away in late 1956).

In March of the next year, George T., ex-Cadillac dealer and now real estate broker, was committed to St. Anthony's Hospital for the third or fourth time by his wife, Lucille. George T. had heard that George I. was staying sober and asked Lucille to have George I. stop by the hospital to see him.

The very next day George I. — Big Book in hand — was at the hospital to see George T. George T. read the entire book through without stopping, and the next day, he said to George I., "Why don't we start an AA group in Amarillo?" The two men ran a small article in the newspaper and also made direct contact

with several drunks who they thought might be interested.

A few weeks later the first AA meeting in Amarillo was held in George I.'s office in the Amarillo Building at Third and Polk Streets. At that first meeting there were four men. After a few weeks, there were ten men, including Squab P. and Bill "Old Scratch" K. Searcy W. came over from Lubbock.

As the group grew, the AAs had to seek larger quarters. They first moved to Judge Gee's 47th District courtroom, then to the old Amarillo City Auditorium. Amarillo College was then in the auditorium and the group met in one of their classrooms. As they grew and suddenly became a little more affluent, they rented an office in the old Johnson Building at 606 Taylor. They met there for quite some time and tried to keep it open during the day, serving coffee. During this time, some of the AAs had

attended meetings in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area and had heard about clubs. They began to discuss getting a permanent meeting place in Amarillo.

In March 1947, money was raised by individuals within the group as well as the community for the purpose of buying a permanent place. Very shortly there was enough money for a down payment on the old Dr. Wolflin home, a two-story frame building with a half basement, on Washington Street. One member had brought in two checks for \$5,000 from people in the community — not members of the group. Albert R., AA member and local building contractor, remodeled the building and they moved into it in April 1947.

After lengthy discussions concerning how to pay the mortgage, the AAs decided to open a drying-out place upstairs. Albert R. had an in-law who was a nurse and she was to oversee the "clinic." There were four beds for men and two for women. Some of the wives complained — especially after the rumor went around that there were two good-looking women in the clinic and two of the AA members had gone out and got drunk so that they could get into it.

It was then decided to put a battery of slot machines upstairs. The slot machines paid off the mortgage even though George T. complained bitterly about any kind of gambling in the club building. Years later, I asked George if it was true that he played the slots more than anyone else even though he objected to them. He said,

"You're damn right I did. I wanted to get that building paid for and get those things out of there."

At about this time the family group, or AA auxiliary, came into being in Amarillo. There was no Al-Anon at that time. The auxiliary met upstairs with the slot machines. It is said that my aunt, Irene B., had to be pried away from the slot machines to get her into a meeting. In 1950 or 1951, the mortgage was paid off and the slots were removed.

In March 1950, a corporation was formed under the name of Old Corral Club, Inc. Then they became two separate entities, the Old Corral Club and the Top of Texas AA Group of Amarillo on Washington Street.

Always present at the Sunday morning meeting was Vaughn G., who was an inspiration to us all. Vaughn could say more in ten minutes than any three convention speakers could say in an hour. The closed meetings were small, varying from about eight to ten people on Sunday morning to around twenty on Monday and Friday nights. The open meetings on Wednesday night usually had about thirty or thirty-five present. The auxiliary meeting on Friday night was usually attended by seven or eight women. It was years before there were any men in attendance.

In early 1957, the property on Washington Street was sold to the Gulf Oil Company. The money was used to purchase the old Christian Science Church on Taylor Street. Work was begun to remodel the build-

ing in May 1957 and the Top of Texas Group moved in June of that year.

Bob B., the president of the Old Corral Club, contributed many hours of his time — as well as hundreds of dollars — to the move and the remodeling. We had run out of funds and very few people knew this. Bob was never repaid nor did he ask to be. He did it out of love for AA and the club.

The club hired the Golden Light Coffee Company to design the kitchen. Dick M. and his wife opened a cafe there serving breakfast, lunch, and a late afternoon snack. Unfortunately, with such limited membership, Dick lost money and had to close up shop.

From 1957 to 1960, times were hard for both the Old Corral Club and the Top of Texas AA Group, but always in the nick of time closed pocketbooks would open and we'd see daylight.

Over the years, many new groups sprang up. Two are still active today — the Moss Lane Group and Hobbs Plaza. I have made meetings from Hawaii to Florida and visited clubs in between and have not found a city anywhere near the size of Amarillo that has three large clubs serving the needs of AA and Al-Anon and open all day, every day of the week, from seven in the morning to ten at night.

The history of AA in Amarillo, however, would not be complete without mentioning the famous "Ten-Day Hold" program at the Potter County Jail. Sometime around 1948 or 1949, several Amarillo AAs met with

Potter County Sheriff Paul Gaither to work out a solution to the problem of the alcoholic who could not sober up on his own and also to relieve the problems of drunks in jail. Sheriff Gaither came up with a solution: An AA member could commit an alcoholic to Potter County Jail for ten days. The alcoholic would not be booked or charged and the time in jail would not appear on his record. However, he couldn't get out until the full ten days had been served and until the AA member who had committed him came to get him out. He would be released to no other person — not his wife, mother, attorney, a judge, no one.

This program later came to be known as the "AA Hold." And it worked very well until 1956 when Whistle F. committed Ira W. Then Whistle left for Arizona on business and was gone for six weeks, completely forgetting about Ira. Ira called the club on the eleventh day to ask, "Where's Whistle? He was supposed to pick me up yesterday." Sheriff Gaither said Whistle put him in so Whistle had to get him out. After six weeks Whistle finally returned to retrieve poor Ira. However, there is a moral to this story: Ira is still sober thirty years later. Sheriff Gaither remained one of Amarillo AA's best and truest friends until his death in the mid-seventies. When I went into AA in 1956 over fifty percent of the sober members of the Top of Texas Group were alumni of the Potter County Jail Ten-Day Hold.

Johnny B., Amarillo, Tex.