



Fragments of AA History

The Washingtonians

On Thursday evening, April 2, 1840, six drinking buddies gathered, as was their daily custom, at Chase's Tavern in Baltimore. A well-known temperance speaker was lecturing that night, and four of them thought it would be a good joke to go and hear him. As they discussed the lecture later that evening, one of them proposed (still not quite seriously) that they form a total abstinence society, and on Sunday, April 5, while strolling and drinking, the six men did make a decision "to drink no more of the poisonous draft, forever."

Each of the six agreed to bring a man to the next meeting, and they wrote and signed a pledge not to "drink any spiritous or malt liquors, wine or cider." The name Washington Temperance Society was chosen

in honor of George Washington.

The Society continued to meet for a time in Chase's Tavern, but when the owner's wife objected to the loss of good customers, they switched to the home of one of the members, and finally rented a hall. In November, they held a public meeting which, with subsequent monthly meetings, proved such a success that by their first anniversary, the Baltimore Washingtonians counted "about 1,000 reformed drunkards and 5,000 other members and friends in the parade to celebrate the occasion."

The Washingtonians were zealous in carrying their message of hope beyond Baltimore. Several leaders turned out to be powerful orators who traveled widely, speaking to large crowds, and "by May 1842 the movement had penetrated every

major area of the country and was going particularly strong in central New York and New England."

At its peak, the Society's membership was estimated at anywhere from one to six million, of whom perhaps 100,000 to 600,000 were sober drunks. (One difficulty is the terminology — the Society claimed to have sobered up everything from "confirmed drunkards" to "hard drinkers often drunken" to "sots" to "tipplers in a fair way to become sots," and the distinctions were never too clear.) Others who joined up were friends and families (even very young children), as well as liquor dealers and tavern owners.

Abraham Lincoln (according to the February 1953 Grapevine) was "the foremost member of the Springfield, Illinois, Washingtonians. He had never taken whisky, but he had seen his business partner ... overcome by it." And the December 1948 Grapevine describes how "in Dedham, Mass., a Mr. Thompson proved himself such an eloquent speaker that the entire town joined— The leading liquor merchant gave up his business, signed the pledge, and was made President of the village society" and poured his entire stock of liquor on the ground.

Formation of the Washingtonians was tied in many ways to the temperance movement, which had been gaining strength since 1825, but was beginning to lose momentum. At first, the Washingtonians were notable for their differences. Unlike tem-

perance advocates, who considered the drunk a hopeless case (Justin Edwards said in 1822, "Keep the temperate people temperate; the drunkards will soon die, and the land will be free"), the Washingtonians treated drunks with love and won them over with "moral suasion." An 1842 document gave directions for organizing a Washingtonian Society, which included "Declaring that love and kindness and moral suasion are your only principles and measures."

Accounts of the early Washingtonians are in some ways remarkably similar to descriptions of AA meetings. The Washingtonians were the first to insist on the recounting of personal experience in their meetings (apparently this practice began as a pragmatic measure, when public meetings became popular and the Society's leaders had to think up a way to keep them interesting). In January 1949, Richard Ewell Brown wrote in the Grapevine: "The Washingtonian charter provided that only ex-drunks could address the meetings. Thus the 'benefits of experience spoken in burning words from the heart' were made available for all to hear... Debates, lectures and speeches were definitely out, and matters of business were limited to 'as few remarks as possible.' Politics and religion were both taboo as topics of discussion."

Brown went on to say: "Every effort was made to prevent the society from encroaching on anyone's prejudices, so that all people would feel

A major source for this article is "The Washingtonian Movement," by Milton A. Maxwell, Ph.D., Quarterly Journal of Alcohol Studies, September 1950. Other sources include Grapevine articles in the December 1948, January 1949, and February 1953 issues.

free to join the organization. One purpose, and one purpose only, was held in mind: to rescue men from the toils of drink." Another aspect was simplicity: "Responsibility was divided equally... and everyone was kept busy doing missionary work, bringing new members to the weekly meetings and helping old members who had slipped back into their former habits."

Yet by 1848, the Washingtonian movement had "destroyed itself completely and dropped out of sight. With it went the hope it had held out for thousands of drunks of that day," and the only tangible evidence remaining was its Home for the Fallen in Boston.

How did it happen? The similarities between Alcoholics Anonymous and the Washingtonian are too clear to be overlooked: alcoholics helping each other, weekly meetings, sharing of experiences, constant availability of fellowship with the group or its members, reliance on a Higher Power, and total abstinence from alcohol. Why is AA celebrating 55 years of growth, while its nineteenth century forerunner fell apart within only a few years? Most historians are agreed on the reasons: For one, the Washingtonians had no sustained program of recovery comparable to AA's Twelve Steps. But the real key to their self-destruction lies in the lack of any guiding principles like those incorporated in AA's Twelve Traditions. The Washingtonian movement "met its Waterloo in the conflicting aims of

its members.

Affiliation with outside enterprises; public controversy: From the beginning, the Washingtonians were closely allied with the temperance movement, and outside of Baltimore, the early "missionaries" were "invariably sponsored by temperance organizations." Temperance leaders looked upon the Washingtonians as a means of "sparking" their cause, and in the end, this became the chief interest of the Washingtonian leaders themselves. In many places, Washingtonians spoke in churches, and some came into conflict with the beliefs of religious entities. "Nothing can divide groups more quickly... than religious or political controversy. Strong efforts were made in the Washingtonian movement to minimize sectarian, theological and political differences, but the movement did not avoid attracting to itself the hostile emotions generated by these conflicts... it was still caught in all the controversy to which the temperance cause had become liable."

Singleness of purpose; membership requirements: Formed for the purpose of helping drunks, a Society whose membership encompassed alcoholics, their families, and nonalcoholics of many types could not provide that vital ingredient of AA's success: identification. "The nonalcoholic member soon grew tired of listening to an endless chain of ex-drunks expatiate on an experience that, in the final analysis, had no meaning for anyone but another alco-

holic." The movement's founding aim, helping drunks, "became an increasingly secondary interest of those whose primary interest was the furtherance of the temperance cause ... And as fewer and fewer men were reclaimed, the last distinctive features of the Washingtonian movement dropped out of sight."

Anonymity: In his discussion of AA and the Washingtonians, Milton Maxwell comments: "A comparison with the Washingtonian experience underscores the sheer survival value of the principle of anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous. At the height of his popularity, John B. Gough [one of the most prominent of the Washingtonian missionaries] either 'slipped' or was tricked by his enemies into a drunken relapse. At any rate, the opponents of the Washingtonian movement seized upon this lapse with glee and made the most of it to hurt Gough and the movement. This must have happened frequently to less widely known... Washingtonians. Public confidence in the movement was impaired. Anonymity protects the reputation of AA from pub-

lic criticism.

"Equally important, anonymity keeps the groups from exploiting prominent names for the sake of group prestige; and it keeps individual members from exploiting their AA connection for personal prestige or fame. This encourages humility and the placing of principles before personalities."

Bill W. cited the experience of the Washingtonians in a number of his writings, and he considered them both a forerunner of AA and an object lesson for the Fellowship's future.

In an article in the August 1945 Grapevine, he reflected on the lessons of the movement and emphasized the importance of being "strong enough and single-purposed enough from within" to be rightly related to the world: "We are sure that if the original Washingtonians could return to this planet they would be glad to see us learning from their mistakes... Had we lived in their day we might have made the same errors. Perhaps we are beginning to make some of them now."