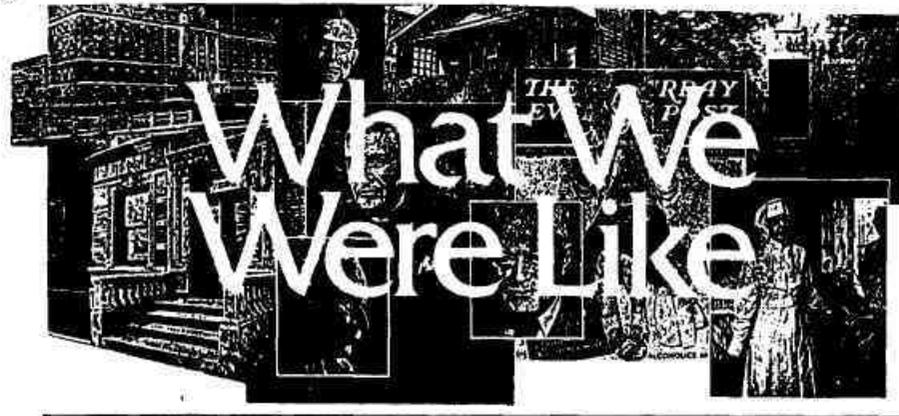


October 1989



Fragments of AA History

"Son, I've spilled more booze than you've drunk" — an old-timer's comment, once common in AA — is rarely heard today. It seems clear that while AA is growing older — the Fellowship is now in its fifties — its members are getting younger. And we are looking at a new definition of "young" and "young peoples' groups."

Historically, AA has always been concerned with young people. In 1939, the Big Book talked about "young" men: "Several of our crowd, men of thirty or less, had been drinking only a few years, but they found themselves as helpless as those who had been drinking twenty years."

In earlier days, some AA members believed that younger people had high bottoms or weren't "real" alcoholics at all. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* describes those people entering AA as "scarcely more than potential alcoholics. They were spared that last ten or fifteen years of literal

hell the rest of us had gone through."

But young people kept coming and by the mid-forties, several young peoples' groups had begun around the country.

In Philadelphia, a group of six (only three of whom had been sober for more than four months), met in January 1946. They wrote the Grapevine that "we were under the impression when we began this group that we were trailblazers in the field, but reports from some of our visiting AAs have indicated that it has been tried before, although with very little success."

In San Diego, a Young Woman's Group (under 35) and the Young Men's Group (under 40) were formed in 1946. The young men felt that there was a group of "old goats" telling newcomers that they "couldn't make the Program because they hadn't been kicked around enough." But the "old goats" came to the meetings long enough to see that these young



members were serious. And the meeting grew — like so many others.

By 1958, there were enough young people and groups to hold the First International Conference of Young People, in Niagara Falls, New York. This ongoing Conference (known as ICYPAA) now attracts over 4,000 participants.

Young people, according to one member from a San Francisco young peoples' group, have a problem in that "being young, we recover fast physically and some old-timers believe we're doing great. It often takes the closeness of a group setting to break down that barrier. But our insides still boil like mad." A young peoples' group allows members to share their *inexperience*, as well as "strength and hope."

In such a group setting, it is easy for young members to identify quickly with others who have short but desperate drinking histories. They are spared what one member from the Bahamas called the "listen to me my children and you shall hear

what you have spared" attitude sometimes found in older AAs.

At a 1961 Conference of Young People in AA in Milwaukee, members talked about groups that started with "high hopes and flood-tide energy, but little stable or wise leadership." Older members are needed — and are available — to share the structure that is the *cement* of the Fellowship. Groups give testimony to the strength lent by those "white-haired types" whose length of sobriety adds credibility in the community and stability within the group.

One of the continuing problems of young peoples' groups is that they are often poor. Many young people do not recover financially for several years. They lack an employment history so it takes longer to achieve some economic stability and this is reflected "in the basket." But rent and coffee and other responsibilities are somehow dealt with, and the groups flourish as young people come in increasing numbers.

And those who are coming are often

half the age of those who have traditionally been considered "young people." Newcomers today include pre-teens. In one area a young peoples' group (ages twelve to eighteen) was begun in 1981, because those nineteen-year-olds in the original group were declared "too old." It is difficult for such new members to identify with some of the stories they hear. One member who got sober at age eighteen in 1965 found that he had to identify with how people *felt*. He realized that "all those people in those meetings, whether seventeen or seventy," were just like him. And he vowed to concentrate on what he had in common with others, rather than on differences.

This continuing thread of remembering what alcohol did to us, instead of a recitation of how much and how long we drank, is found throughout the history of young peoples' recovery in AA, and in the continued

growth of their groups.

Young peoples' groups have truly "come of age" within the Fellowship, and they have provided trusted servants throughout the structure. Some recent delegates to the General Service Conference began their sobriety as members of such groups, often expressing their gratitude that young peoples' groups provided them with service opportunities early in their sobriety. One member explained that "because we wanted so badly to be accepted, we were always concerned with the Traditions and frequently read the back half of the 'Twelve and Twelve' to find solutions to group problems."

It is clear that young people continue to be the "promise and power of future leadership," and by sheer numbers, coupled with enthusiasm and dedication, they will surely become the old-timers and "elder statesmen and women" of our Fellowship.