

Big Book Fourth Edition — Reflects Today's Diverse Membership

In the 25 years since the third edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published, the Fellowship has grown from about 440,000 members in the U.S. and Canada to more than two million throughout the world, and sweeping changes have taken place in its membership. Because the personal experiences in our basic text are designed to help as many alcoholics as possible identify with those who have recovered, the 2001 General Service Conference approved a fourth edition of the Big Book, with a revised and updated section of personal stories (as always, the first 164 pages remain unchanged). The new edition, which comes off press in November 2001, contains the experience of 42 sober alcoholics — 24 new and 16 “keepers” from the third edition — and represents a wide spectrum of ages, beliefs, racial and ethnic groups, backgrounds, and occupations. The culmination of four years of development, more than 25 committee meetings, and untold individual hours of hard work and painful decision-making, the fourth edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* brings us a clear and accurate reflection of the Fellowship as it enters the twenty-first century.

Making Difficult Choices

When the first edition of the Big Book was written, the challenge was to find enough solidly sober members — who could write — to round out a representative section of personal stories.

When the story section of the fourth edition was being developed, the challenge was to single out approximately 24 personal stories from an impressive group of manuscripts submitted by more than 1,200 solidly sober, and very enthusiastic, A.A. members.

How is it possible to select the “best” when dealing with A.A. sharing? The subcommittee of the trustees' Literature Committee charged with the responsibility of developing the fourth edition would answer that ques-

tion quite simply: It is not. There is no such thing as “best.” Yet choices had to be made — not only in selecting new material, but also in deciding which stories to retain from the third edition and which to leave out.

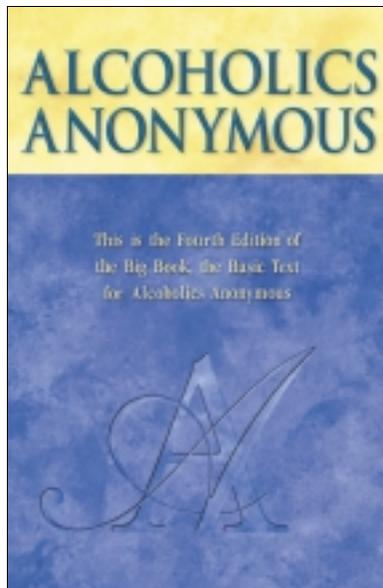
In developing guidelines, the subcommittee was mindful of A.A. co-founder Bill W.'s observation that “the audience for the book is people who are coming to Alcoholics Anonymous now. Those who are here have already heard our stories.” . . . “We are looking for straight personal narratives which describe the drinking history, how the newcomer arrived in Alcoholics Anonymous, how A.A. affected him, and what A.A. has since accomplished for him.” As they read, members of the subcommittee looked for a narrative of the progress of the disease, including the denial, the alibis, and the self-delusion; the crises that made the authors look at their drinking; a description of their introduction to A.A.; sponsorship, spiritual development, and how they

work the program.

Every story was exhaustively reviewed: each was read by individual members of the subcommittee, then by members working in pairs, and finally by the full committee. Before the 2000 Conference, they enlisted the help of the Conference Literature Committee and other members of the trustees' Literature Committee to help pare down a short list of 38 new stories to the needed 24. And before the manuscript went to the Conference, the stories were turned over to G.S.O.'s publications department for several rounds of editing.

The Conference-Approval Process

Development of the fourth edition actually began three years before the subcommittee was formed. Any piece of Conference-approved literature, new or revised, originates with an expressed need from the Fellowship, and in the case of the fourth edition, the need was carefully explored. It began in 1994, when the trustees' Literature



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Committee reviewed a number of requests for a fourth edition from members of the Fellowship and, because the need was not clear, asked all Conference delegates to go back to their areas and seek input.

The 1995 Conference reviewed the report of area responses and concluded that at that time there was no widely expressed need for a new edition. The same Conference also laid to rest any fears that the first 164 pages might be changed, by passing an Advisory Action which stipulated that “The first 164 pages of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the Preface, the Forewords, the Doctor’s Opinion, Dr. Bob’s Nightmare, and the Appendices remain as is.” (Underlining a strong consensus throughout the Fellowship, this action was affirmed by the 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 Conferences.)

Since there appeared to be some interest in a fourth edition, however, the idea was sent back to the trustees’ Literature Committee with the request that an outline for a possible fourth edition be prepared. And two years later, in 1997, the trustees’ Literature Committee asked the Conference to approve development of a draft fourth edition. The Conference approved that idea and requested a progress report for the 1998 Conference. Progress reports were subsequently presented to the 1998, 1999, and 2000 Conferences, and ultimately the final manuscript was approved in April 2001.

Second and Third Editions

Revising the story sections for the second and third editions was a considerably less time-consuming affair. Bill W. did most of the work on the second edition himself, requesting material from members whose stories seemed like possibilities and organizing them in the same three parts that delineate stories in the third and fourth editions: “Pioneers of A.A.,” “They Stopped in Time” (“high bottom” alcoholics, a new category in 1955), and “They Lost Nearly All” (“low bottom”). He was determined to include in the new edition the full

spectrum of A.A. membership; a letter enumerating all the planned changes asks, “Do these new stories afford the best possible variety — do they cover drinking experiences as well as they could?” The second edition included 38 personal stories, an increase from the first edition’s 29.

The third edition, published in 1976, contained a total of 42 stories (13 were new, and seven were dropped from the second edition). The new stories reflected the Fellowship’s changing membership and included teenagers, retirees, a Native American, and two ex-convicts, among others.

The project took about two years, beginning in 1974, when a committee was formed to implement it, and the selection of stories was completed by February 1975. Copies were mailed to the trustees’ and Conference Literature Committees.

In a June 14, 1954 letter to Bernard Smith, (nonalcoholic) chairman of the board, written when the second edition was being prepared, Bill W. wrote: “The story section of the Big Book is far more important than most of us think. It is our principal means of identifying with the reader outside of A.A.; it is the written equivalent of hearing speakers at an A.A. meeting; it is our show window of results. To increase the power and variety of this display to the utmost should be therefore, no routine or hurried job. The best will be none too good. The difference between ‘good’ and ‘excellent’ can be the difference between prolonged misery and recovery, between life and death, for the reader outside A.A.”

Watch the Mail For Your Big Book

The General Service Board is sending a complimentary copy of the fourth edition Big Book to each group, as a deeply-felt “thank you” for the thoughtful contributions that resulted in this new edition. These contributions came from individuals who donated their time and talent by sending their personal A.A. stories, as well as to groups throughout the U.S. and Canada whose basket money helps support the General Service Conference which deliberated over the fourth edition for the past four years.

Between mid-November and early December, the fourth edition will be sent to each G.S.R. or other group contact listed in our records as of October 19th.

We hope that this new edition will help continue carrying our message of recovery to the still-suffering alcoholic in the twenty-first century.

The Book Becomes a Reality

An idea that started out in large part as a money-making proposition became the book Alcoholics Anonymous, the basic text that is our primary means of carrying the A.A. message to the ends of the earth.

The story of A.A. is an amazing collection of more-than-coincidences. Somehow, all the right people were in all the right places at all the right times, and what by any objective standard should have been a tale of pure chaos and utter failure was transformed into a spiritual movement that has changed millions of lives and provided a model for scores of other recovery fellowships.

The series of events that led to the publication of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, were among the most incredible. The founding members, with Bill W. — the quintessential promoter — leading the pack, had grandiose ideas about a string of hospitals, hundreds of missionaries traveling far and wide, and generally a variety of projects that would have required huge amounts of money. Providentially, there was a conservative faction in the Fellowship that, with help from some wise nonalcoholic friends, reined in the promoters and reduced the projects to one that actually worked — a book that recorded the experience of the first 100 members and preserved the A.A. message intact for generations of alcoholics to come.

The Idea Is Born

Bill W. loved to spin “yarns” about A.A., and he told the story many times of the events that led to the writing and publication of the Big Book. In a talk he gave at a banquet in Fort Worth, Texas, in June 1954, he recalled how it happened.

“I suppose the book yarn really started in the living room of Doc and Annie S. On a late fall afternoon in 1937, Smithy [Dr. Bob] and I were talking together in his living room.” By then, the groups in Akron and New York were firmly established, “and the thing had leaked a little over into Cleveland and it began to move south from New York. But it was still flying blind — a flickering candle indeed, because it might at any minute be snuffed out. So we began counting noses. How many people had stayed dry in Akron, in New York, maybe a few in Cleveland? And when we added up that score, it was a handful, 35 to 40 maybe. But enough time had elapsed on enough really fatal cases of alcoholism that Bob and I foresaw for the first time that this thing was going to succeed.

“I can never forget the elation and ecstasy that seized us both. It had taken three years to sober up the handful, and there had been an immense amount of failure. How could this handful carry its message to all those who still didn’t know? Not all the drunks in the world could come to Akron or to New York. How could we transmit our message to them?” The two began mulling over the possibilities. Bill, always the entrepreneur, had big ideas. He wanted to create a chain of hospitals to sober up thousands of drunks, and send out missionaries (subsidized, of course) to spread the word.

“And, we reflected, we’d have to get some kind of literature. Up to this moment, not a syllable of this program was in writing. It was a kind of word-of-mouth deal, with variations according to each man’s or woman’s standing. In a general way, we’d say to a new prospect: ‘Well, the booze has got you down, and you’ve got an allergy and an obsession and you’re hopeless. You’d better get honest with yourself and take stock; you ought to talk this out with somebody, kind of a confessional, and you ought to make restitution for the harms you did. Then you pray as



Today the Big Book is translated into 43 languages, with more being done every few months.

best you can, according to your likes.' Now that was the sum of the word-of-mouth program up to that time.

"How could we unify this thing? Could we, out of our experience, describe certain methods that had done the trick for us? Obviously, if this movement was to propagate, it had to have literature so its message would not be garbled, either by the drunk or by the general public.

"Even then, Dr. Bob and I knew that we were not the government of A.A., so we called a meeting of the Akron group. The group conscience consisted of 18 men, good and true, and right away, they were skeptical about it all. Almost with one voice they chorused, 'Let's keep it simple. This is going to bring money into this thing, and create a professional class. We'll all be ruined.'

But Bill was adamant: "Even within gunshot of this very house, alcoholics are dying like flies," he insisted. "And if this thing doesn't move any faster than it has in the last three years, it may be another ten before it gets to the outskirts of Akron. We've got to take some kind of a chance — we can't keep it so simple that it won't propagate itself. And we've got to have a lot of money to do these things." He finally got a vote, a very close one, and by a margin of maybe two or three, the meeting agreed that Bill should go back to New York and try to raise some money.

That was the word he'd been waiting for. "So I scrambled back to the city and began to approach people of means and describe this tremendous thing that had happened. It didn't seem so tremendous to them. They said, 'Thirty-five or forty drunks sobered up? They've sobered up before now, you know. Wouldn't something for the Red Cross be better?' And I began to get blue."

Nobody had any money — not for A.A. projects, and not to live on, either. Dr. Bob had been unable to revive his medical practice; he was a surgeon, and even though he had been sober several years, people were still afraid of being cut open by an alcoholic doctor. Bill was spending all his time on A.A., and he and his wife Lois had taken in some of the New York drunks to live with them. "In those days, we never believed in charging anybody for anything, so Lois was earning the money, I was being the missionary, the drunks were eating the meals. This couldn't go on!"

A.A. and the Rockefellers

At that point, Bill went to see his brother-in-law, Dr. Leonard Strong, who in turn got in touch with his friend, Willard Richardson, an associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Mr. Richardson, who was to become a firm friend of A.A., arranged a meeting with Rockefeller and several other prominent businessmen. Dr. Bob and a few of the A.A.s from Akron came to New York for the occasion, Bill brought four or five of the New Yorkers, and Dr. Silkworth

of Towns Hospital was present as well. "Old Doc Silkworth testified to what he had seen happen, and each of us told our stories — the drinking and the recovery.

"And these folks listened. They seemed very definitely impressed, so I could see that the moment for the big touch was coming. I gingerly brought up the subject of the drunk tanks, the subsidized missionaries, and the question of a book." But instead of responding with an offer of generous contributions, as expected, these men said, "Gentlemen, up to this point this has been a work of goodwill only — no plant, no property, no paid workers. Just one person carrying the good news to the next — isn't that true? And may it not be that that is where the great power of this society lies? If we subsidize it might it not alter the whole character? We want to do all we can, but would it be wise?"

That question marked one of those more-than-coincidental turning points in A.A.'s history. Although Bill and his promotion-minded friends remained convinced for some time of the Fellowship's need for large amounts of cash, a roomful of nonalcoholics — financiers all — were wise enough to foresee the potential for trouble if A.A. came to rely on money. These nonalcoholic friends did step in from time to time with modest amounts of money that allowed Bill and Dr. Bob to support themselves and their families and concentrate on getting the struggling movement on its feet. But even as early as this initial meeting, they began to point the founding members in the direction of one of our most vital spiritual principles: self-support through our own contributions.

In the 1930s, our Seventh Tradition was far from the minds of the New York alcoholics. In May of 1938, they decided to form a foundation to raise money. They called it the Alcoholic Foundation, and its board of trustees was made up of four nonalcoholic friends and three alcoholics. All that summer "we solicited the rich," Bill said in the Texas talk. "Well, they were either in Florida or they preferred the Red Cross, and some of them thought we drunks were disgusting, and we didn't get a cent in the whole summer — praise God! In the meantime, we began to hold trustee meetings, and they were commiseration sessions on getting no dough.

"So one day, I produced at a Foundation meeting a couple of chapters of a proposed book, in rough and in mimeograph. As a matter of fact, we'd been using chapters of this book to try to put the bite on the rich, and we still had it kicking around.

"So Frank Amos (one of the nonalcoholic trustees) said, 'I know the religion editor at Harper. Why don't you take these two chapters down there and show them to Gene Exman, and see what he thinks about them?' To my great surprise, Gene looked at the chapters and said, 'Why, Mr. Wilson, could you write a whole book like this?'

" 'Sure,' I said. And the upshot was that Harper offered to pay me, as the budding author, fifteen hun-

dred dollars in advance royalties, bringing enough money in to enable me to finish the book.”

A.A. Takes Control of its Literature

In *A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill recounted the events that led A.A. to become its own publisher. “Again in the clouds, I left Harper to break the great news to the gang. . . but on the way there my elation was disturbed by disquieting thoughts. Suppose our embryo book were someday to become the chief text for our fellowship. Our principal written asset would then be owned by an outside publisher. . . . So I wondered if our fellowship should own its own book. And I thought about the \$1,500 of advance royalties. When the book was done, I would still owe Harper that sum, and a good many volumes would have to be sold just to get even. And suppose that when the book appeared there were to be heavy publicity, and thousands of cries for help from alcoholics and their families began to pour in. We would not have any money to cope with this quite possible situation.”

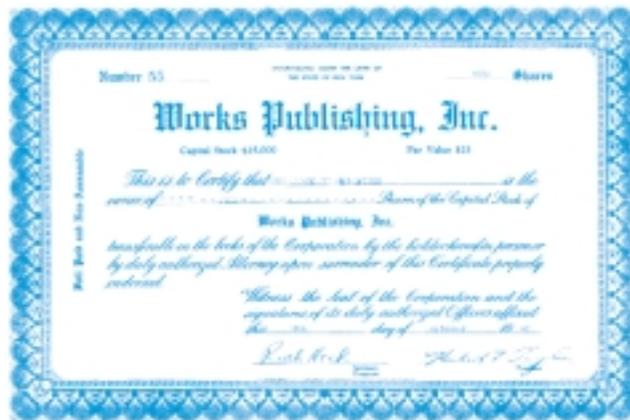
He tried to keep these misgivings to himself, out of respect for the trustees, but in the end he did reluctantly express them at a board meeting. The nonalcoholics on the board were not impressed with his reasons, and Bill was unhappy about the necessity of disagreeing with his good friends.

This was when Bill’s friend Henry P., whom he described to the Texas A.A.s in 1954 as “one of the most terrific power-drivers I have ever met,” stepped into the picture. Henry didn’t even want to bother with the trustees; instead, he proposed forming a stock company and selling shares to the New York A.A.s. “I told him the Trustees would never agree to our scheme, and I did not want to hurt their feelings. But Henry’s skin was thicker than mine. He was implacable; he said that it simply had to be done, and I finally agreed.

“Still much disturbed about the whole business, I went back to Gene Exman and frankly explained to him what was about to happen. To my utter amazement, he agreed, quite contrary to his own interest, that a society like ours ought to control and publish its own literature. . . . [This gave] Henry and me the kind of encouragement we so much needed.

“Henry wasted no time but started selling the (stock company) proposition to our New York members at once. He buttonholed them one by one, persuading, browbeating, hypnotizing. I trailed around in his wake, smoothing ruffled feelings and trying to dispel some of the suspicions that had been created about our motives.” After a couple of weeks, the New York members consented somewhat reluctantly, as did Dr. Bob.

Bill and Henry visited Cornwall Press, one of the largest printers in the country, and discovered that the book could be printed for only about 35 cents a copy. “If



An original copy of a stock certificate is in G.S.O.’s Archives.

we were to price our new book at \$3.50 . . . this would be practically all net profit. . . .” Henry had it all figured out. We would form a stock company with stock of \$25 par value, and he had prepared a prospectus that showed profits on estimated sales of anywhere from 100,000 to a million books.

“Our enterprise still lacked two essentials. It was not incorporated and it did not have a name. Henry took care of these matters. Since the forthcoming volume would be only the first of many such ‘works,’ he thought our publishing company should be called, ‘Works Publishing, Inc.’ This was all right with me, but I protested that we had no incorporation on which to base shares and that incorporation would take money. Next day I found that Henry had bought a pad of blank stock certificates in a stationery store, and across the top of each certificate was typed this legend: ‘Works Publishing, Inc., par value \$25.00.’ At the bottom there was a signature: ‘Henry P.——, President.’ When I protested these irregularities, Henry said there was no time to waste; why be concerned with small details?”

A Visit to the *Reader’s Digest*

Quite understandably, though, none of the New York alcoholics wanted to buy stock in a book that hadn’t yet been written. That didn’t faze Henry, either. He and Bill were convinced the book would sell, and he figured that if the others shared that conviction, they would go ahead and buy the stock. So he proposed going up to see the editors of the *Reader’s Digest* to see if they might be interested in running an article about Alcoholics Anonymous and its forthcoming book.

“Two days later. . . we sat in the office of Mr. Kenneth Payne, then managing editor of the *Digest*. We drew a glowing picture of our fellowship and its book-to-be. We mentioned the high interest of Mr. Rockefeller and some of his friends. Mr. Payne was interested. After a while he said, ‘I am almost sure the *Digest* would like to handle this story, though of course I’ll have to check it up with

the other editors. Personally I think it is just the sort of thing we are looking for. When your book is ready next spring, let me know and I think we can put a feature writer to work. This should be a great story. But of course I must check it up with the staff first. That's understood, isn't it?

"Henry and I reached for our hats and sped for New York. Now we had *real* ammunition." The shares began to sell. Nobody had any money, so they offered an installment plan: five dollars a month for five months for each share. The Trustees pitched in, too, as did other friends. "Soon we had a subscription of 200 shares which amounted to \$5,000, and a little actual money began to come in." Feeling much more secure, Bill began work in earnest on the manuscript of the book. (For that story, see "Words, Words, Words" p. 7)

Once the manuscript was completed, they went up to Cornwall Press, presented it to Edward Blackwell, president of the company, and told him they were ready to go. He asked how many copies they wanted, and though Bill and Henry were thinking in terms of carloads, the more experienced printer suggested 5,000. Then he inquired about payment. Bill wrote: "We cautiously let it be known that our cash was temporarily low. Pointing out what the *Reader's Digest* article would do for us, Henry mentioned a figure of \$500 for our first down payment. . . . Mr. Blackwell, having already caught the A.A. spirit, said with a twinkle in his eye, 'Well, I guess that will do. I'm glad to give you a hand.' So the presses were set to roll and Alcoholics Anonymous had found another wonderful friend."

The next hurdle was setting a retail price. Some of the members wanted to make it very low, but after several lively debates they settled on \$3.50, an amount that would enable them to make something on the deal, pay off the shareholders, and even set up an office. Then, "as a consolation to the contestants, we directed Mr. Blackwell to do the job on the thickest paper in his shop. The original volume proved to be so bulky that it became known as the 'Big Book.' Of course the idea was to convince the alcoholic purchaser that he was indeed getting his money's worth!"

The Book Enterprise Hits Bottom

By then, the money supply was down to rock bottom, but they were optimistic. Soon "the presses would roll, and 5,000 books would be ready when the *Reader's Digest* piece broke. Henry and Ruth [Hock, Bill's nonalcoholic secretary] and I divided the last hundred dollars among us . . . prosperity was just around the corner.

"I will never know why, in all the time during which the book was in preparation, none of us had thought of getting in touch with the *Reader's Digest*. Somehow the question of timing their article with the appearance of

our book had not occurred to us. . . . But why worry; it was just a question of time, anyhow."

When the two men appeared at the door of managing editor Payne's office, he did not quite remember who they were. So they brought him up to date, and he was very apologetic. Unfortunately, he explained, when he took the idea to the other editors, they had not liked the project. They didn't think readers would be interested in a society of alcoholics, and were also afraid that the subject would be too controversial. In short, no article was planned.

"This was shattering. Even the buoyant Henry was sunk. We protested, but it was no use. This was it. The book enterprise had collapsed." They had no idea what to do.

But when they got back to New York, "nearly everybody else took a sporting attitude and asked what had become of our faith." The trustees suggested holding weekly meetings to talk about getting the book into circulation, and Mr. Blackwell said he would see us through on printing costs until things got better.

"It was obvious that we had to get some publicity in order to move those books. We tried magazine after magazine with no result." The book was ready in April 1939, but that was the only good news. Henry was completely broke and looking for work. Ruth [Hock] . . . was given meaningless stock certificates in the defunct Works Publishing as pay. She cheerfully accepted these and never slackened her efforts. All of us were going into debt just for living expenses." And in the beginning of May, Bill and Lois were evicted from their house. The future did not look promising, but friends came to the rescue, lending Bill and Lois a place to live temporarily, and meanwhile the book was beginning to attract some positive attention.

A.A. Goes on the Radio

In April, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick had reviewed the book very favorably, chiefly for religious publications, as had the *New York Times*, but still no orders were coming in. Then Morgan, "our Irishman," announced that he knew Gabriel Heatter, and proceeded to set up an interview on his national radio program "We The People." Mr. Heatter was going to interview Morgan about his drinking and recovery, then ask him about A.A. and put in a plug for the book. This sounded like a wonderful plan. The program was just a week away, but there was one important question: Could Morgan stay sober? Experience told the New York A.A.s that he might not — so they decided to lock him up for the duration, and assigned members to stay with him around the clock. A week later, a sober Morgan went on the air, and did a superb interview.

In the interim, Henry had managed to scare up enough money for a mass mailing of postcards to about

20,000 physicians in the eastern U.S., asking them to listen to the broadcast and informing them about the book, “a sure cure for alcoholism.” The A.A.s managed to wait three days after the broadcast, then headed for the post office to collect the shower of replies that would come flooding in. Eagerly, they looked in the box, and found a grand total of twelve replies — only two of them orders for the book.

Finally, in July, events took a turn for the better. Charles Towns (of Towns Hospital, where many of the alcoholics had gone to sober up) “had been raising heaven and earth to get publicity for us and had succeeded.” He had talked to a feature writer, Morris Markey, who approached Fulton Oursler, then editor of *Liberty* magazine, with the idea of an article on Alcoholics Anonymous. Oursler had commissioned him to do a piece, and the article “Alcoholics and God” appeared in the September issue. “This time we really hoped and believed that we had turned the corner, and indeed we had.”

By October, book orders began to come in. “*Liberty* magazine received 800 urgent pleas for help, which were promptly turned over to Ruth and me. She wrote fine personal letters to every one of them, enclosing a leaflet which described the A.A. book. The response was wonderful. Several hundred books sold at once at full retail price of \$3.50. Even more importantly, we struck up a correspondence with alcoholics, their friends, and their families all over the country.”

About this time, they received another substantial book order, which Bill described to his Texas audience in 1954: “Right after the dinner, Mr. Rockefeller then approached the rather defunct Works Publishing Company and said he’d like to buy four hundred books, to send to all the bankers who had come to the dinner, and all who had not. Well, seeing that this was for a good purpose, we let him have the books cheap. He bought them cheaper than anybody has since — for one buck apiece, to send to his banker friends.

“Shortly after the *Liberty* article came out,” Bill went on in *A.A. Comes of Age*, “Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* ran its great series of pieces. . . . This brought in new book orders and new problems by scores. Alcoholics Anonymous was on the march, out of its infancy into adolescence.

“Our expansion had been immensely accelerated by the *Liberty* piece and the frantic growth at Cleveland. Tiny beginnings had been made in many other towns and cities, which we denoted by placing pins in our office wall map. By early 1940 we could estimate that about 800 recoveries had been made. This number was a big jump from the figure of 100 at the time the book was published in April of the year before. The book had expressed the hope that someday A.A. travelers would find a group at every destination. That hope had begun to turn into reality.”

Words, Words, Words

The text of the first 164 pages of Alcoholics Anonymous, unchanged since they first came off press in 1939, evolved from a process of furious debate and wise compromise.

In May 1938, when co-founder Bill W. began work on the first draft of what is now the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he had been sober about three and a half years. Dr. Bob was sober a few months less than three years, and the other 100 early members who contributed in one way or another to the writing of the book had been off the sauce for periods ranging from a couple of years to a couple of months

They were a contentious, cantankerous bunch of newly dry drunks, clinging together desperately to preserve their hard-won sobriety, and still figuring out how to do it by a process of trial and error. Yet this shaky, often fearful group of men and women somehow brought to publication, in April 1939, a blueprint for recovery from alcoholism that has been followed successfully for more than sixty years by millions of sober alcoholics in approximately 150 countries around the world.

In 1939 the Big Book was written primarily by a man who in the year 2001 would be considered a virtual newcomer, assisted by an unruly and opinionated collection of men and women who were newer still, the pages of our basic text somehow, miraculously, reflect the faith, the commitment, and the providential wisdom of 100 ex-drunks who were still groping their way toward an understanding of how to keep this “thing” they had discovered alive and well. For on doing that, they knew with absolute certainty, depended their sobriety and their very lives.

Hassles Over The Text

How did they manage to set forth a clear description of their experience that would stand the test of time? Bill tells the story most eloquently in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*. Early on, he had written a few chapters of a possible book to use in raising money, and after the *Reader’s Digest* expressed interest in an article on A.A. and its book, he was fired with enthusiasm to complete it. “At 17 William Street, Newark, New Jersey,” he wrote, “Henry had an office . . . (and) a [nonalcoholic] secretary named Ruth Hock, who was to become one of A.A.’s real pioneers. . . . Each morning I traveled all the way from Brooklyn to Newark where, pacing up and down in Henry’s office, I began to dictate rough drafts of the chapters of the coming book.”

Throughout, he consulted the group conscience, reading each chapter as it was finished to the New York group at its weekly meeting and sending copies to

Dr. Bob to share with the Akron group. From Akron, he reported receiving good support, but “the chapters got a real mauling” from the New York bunch. “I redictated them and Ruth retyped them over and over.” In spite of all this, the first few chapters went fairly easily, until he got to Chapter 5, when the alcoholics realized “that at this point we would have to tell how our program for recovery from alcoholism really worked. The backbone of the book would have to be fitted in right here.

“This problem had secretly worried the life out of me,” wrote Bill. “I had never written anything before and neither had any other member of the New York group. . . . The hassling over the four chapters already finished had really been terrific. I was exhausted. On many a day I felt like throwing the book out the window.

“I was in this anything-but-spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through. I lay in bed. . . with pencil in hand and with a tablet of scratch paper on my knee. I could not get my mind on the job, much less put my heart in it. But here was one of those things that had to be done. Slowly my mind came into some kind of focus.”

Up to that time, the A.A. program had been strictly word of mouth, using basic ideas evolved from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth. It came down to six steps: admitting powerlessness over alcohol, taking a moral inventory, sharing shortcomings with another person, making restitution, helping other alcoholics, and praying to God for power to practice these ideas. There were considerable variations on this general procedure, however, and at that point, nothing was in writing.

Bill goes on: “As my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definite enough. It might be a long time before readers of the book in distant places and lands could be personally contacted. Therefore our literature would have to be as clear and comprehensive as possible. Our steps would have to be more explicit. There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out. Maybe our six chunks of truth could be broken up into smaller pieces. . . . and at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation. So far as I can remember this was all I had in mind when the writing began.

“Finally I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know. I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangling emotions, I completed the first draft. It took perhaps half an hour. The words kept right on coming. When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant. Without any special

rhyme or reason I connected them with the twelve apostles. Feeling greatly relieved now, I commenced to reread the draft.”

At that point, a few of the New York A.A.s turned up at Bill’s house, read the new steps, and immediately began to voice the objections that were to be discussed and ultimately resolved in group discussions over the next several months. On the whole, the Akronites liked the new steps and supported the remainder of the text based on them. “But in New York the hot debate about the Twelve Steps and the book’s contents was doubled and redoubled. There were conservative, liberal, and radical viewpoints.” Some thought the book ought to be Christian in the doctrinal sense of the word; others, who had no problem with use of the word “God,” were totally opposed to any other theological proposition. “Spirituality, yes. But religion, no — *positively* no. Most of our members, they pointed out, believed in some sort of deity. But when it came to theology we could not possibly agree among ourselves, so how could we write a book that contained any such matter?”

Then there were the atheists and agnostics. At first, they wanted to take the word “God” out of the book entirely. They “wanted a *psychological* book which would lure the alcoholic in. Once in, the prospect could take God or leave Him alone as he wished. To the rest of us this was a shocking proposal, but happily we listened. . . .”

Bill, as the writer, was “caught squarely in the middle of all this arguing, . . . For a while it looked as if we would bog down into permanent disagreement.” He finally asked to be the final judge of what the book said, and recognizing that without such a point of decision they would get nowhere, the groups went along. . . .

“Just before the manuscript was finished an event of great significance for our future took place. . . . We were still arguing about the Twelve Steps. All this time I had refused to . . . change a word of the original draft, in which. . . I had consistently used the word ‘God,’ and in one place the expression ‘on our knees’ was used. Praying to God on one’s knees was still a big affront to [several of the alcoholics]. . . we finally began to talk about the possibility of compromise. Who first suggested the actual compromise words I do not know, but they are words well known throughout the length and breadth of A.A. today: In Step Two we decided to describe God as a ‘Power greater than ourselves.’ In Steps Three and Eleven we inserted the words ‘God as we understood Him.’ From Step Seven we deleted the expression ‘on our knees.’ And, as a lead-in sentence to all the steps we wrote these words: ‘Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a program of recovery.’ A.A.’s Twelve Steps were to be *suggestions* only. . . .

“God was certainly there in our Steps, but He was now expressed in terms that anybody — *anybody at all* — could accept and try. Countless A.A.s have since testi-

fied that without this great evidence of liberality they never could have set foot on any path of spiritual progress or even approached us in the first place. It was another one of those providential ten-strikes.”

The Personal Stories — And a Title

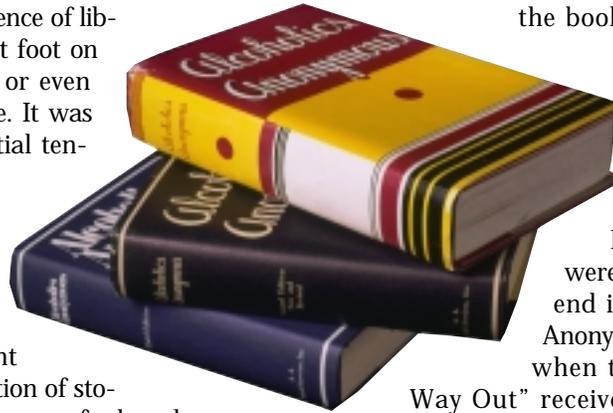
Quite early in the writing of the text, it had become evident that the book would need a section of stories detailing the personal experiences of sober alcoholics. “We would have to produce evidence in the form of living proof, written testimonials of our membership itself. It was felt also that the story section could identify us with the distant reader in a way that the text itself might not.”

Dr. Bob and the Akronites proved to be the leaders in this effort. One member of the Akron group was a former newspaperman, two years sober, named Jim. He and Dr. Bob “went after all the Akronites who had substantial sobriety records for testimonial material. In most cases Jim interviewed the prospects and wrote their stories for them. Dr. Bob wrote his own.” By January, eighteen stories were completed in Akron, including two from Clevelanders who had attended the Akron meeting.

It was a tougher road in New York, where there was no one with journalistic expertise available to do the actual writing. They decided that each member with substantial sobriety would write his own story, but when Bill and Henry tried to edit these “amateur attempts,” there was trouble. “Who were we, said the writers, to edit their stories? That was a good question, but still we did edit them. The cries of the anguished edited tale-tellers finally subsided and the story section of the book was complete in the latter part of January, 1939. So at last was the text.”

Up to this point, the book had no title. “The Akron and New York groups had been voting for months on possible titles. This had become an after-the-meeting form of amusement and interest. The title ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ had appeared very early in the discussion. . . . We do not know who first used these words. After we New Yorkers had left the Oxford Groups in 1937 we often described ourselves as a ‘nameless bunch of alcoholics.’ From this phrase it was only a step to the idea of ‘Alcoholics Anonymous.’ This was its actual derivation.”

Another popular title was “The Way Out.” Bill confessed that he began to be tempted: “If we gave the book this name, then I could add my signature. . . . I began to forget that this was everybody’s book and that I had been mostly the umpire of the discussions that had created it. In one dark moment I even considered calling



the book ‘The B.W. Movement.’ . . . Then I saw the temptation for what it was, a shameless piece of egotism. So once more I began to vote for the title ‘Alcoholics Anonymous.’ ”

More than a hundred titles were considered in all, but in the end it came down to “Alcoholics Anonymous” or “The Way Out,” and when the two groups voted, “The Way Out” received a slight majority. At this point, one of the A.A.s visited the Library of Congress, to research the number of books entitled “The Way Out,” versus those called “Alcoholics Anonymous.” As it turned out, there were twelve with the former title, none with the latter, and since nobody wanted to make the book the thirteenth “Way Out,” the problem was solved. “That is how we got the title for our book, and that is how our society got its name.”

A Little Help From Our Friends

In order to give the volume medical standing, Dr. William D. Silkworth had agreed to write an introduction. Bill often described Dr. Silkworth as “the benign little doctor who loved drunks.” Then physician-in-chief of Towns Hospital in New York, he was “very much a founder of A.A. From him we learned the nature of our illness. He supplied us with the tools with which to puncture the toughest alcoholic ego. . . *the obsession of the mind* that compels us to drink and *the allergy of the body* that compels us to go mad or die.” He was the man who told Bill that his “hot flash” spiritual experience was not a hallucination, but a life-changing experience he could build on. And he was one of the many nonalcoholic friends who, in the early days when A.A. was only a tiny, struggling movement, risked their own professional standing to give our Fellowship the support it so badly needed. His introduction, “The Doctor’s Opinion,” is part of the front matter of the Big Book.

In addition to discussing the text at meetings of the two groups, the A.A.s had decided to solicit comments from nonalcoholic friends, in order to be sure there were no medical errors or material that might prove offensive to those of different religions.

One of the most important for the future of the Fellowship came from a New Jersey psychiatrist. “He pointed out that the text of our book was too full of the words ‘you’ and ‘must.’ He suggested that we substitute wherever possible such expressions as ‘we ought’ or ‘we should.’ . . . I argued weakly against it,” Bill says, “but soon gave in; it was perfectly apparent that the doctor was dead right.”

The changes from that initial rather hard-line approach have undoubtedly helped make the book acceptable to many hard-headed alcoholics over the succeeding sixty-plus years. In the published version, for example, Chapter 5 begins “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path,” a great improvement over the original “. . . followed our directions.” Similarly, the sentence “If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it — then you are ready to follow directions” became “. . . then you are ready to take certain steps,” and “But there is One who has all power — that One is God — you must find him now!” was softened to read “. . . may you find Him now.”

Such phrases as “The first requirement is that . . .” no longer grace the text, and the words “Now we think you can take it!” preceding “Here are the steps we took . . .” were deleted. And providentially, the book no longer tells us, “If you are not convinced on these vital issues, you ought to re-read the book to this point or else throw it away!”

Concluding his description of the book-writing process in *A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill made it clear that all the hassles had been worth it. “It should here be emphasized that the creation of A.A.’s book brought forth much more than disputes about its contents. As the volume grew so did the conviction that we were on the right track. We saw tremendous vistas of what this book might become and might do. High expectation based on a confident faith was the steady and sustaining overtone of feeling that finally prevailed among us. Like the sound of a receding thunderstorm, the din of our earlier battles was now only a rumble. The air cleared and the sky was bright. We all felt good.”

Did You Know?

When was the Big Book approved by the General Service Conference?

In 1939, the Conference did not exist. Not until 1950, at the first trial session, did the Conference approve our basic text, along with several other pieces of recovery material that were in widespread use.

What is the origin of the name “Alcoholics Anonymous”?

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill tells us that the title “Alcoholics Anonymous” was one of the first suggestions for the book, appearing probably as early as October 1938. “After we New Yorkers had left the Oxford Groups in 1937 we often described ourselves as a ‘nameless bunch of alcoholics.’ From this phrase it

was only a step to the idea of ‘Alcoholics Anonymous.’ This was its actual derivation.”

Where did the “Big” Book get its nickname?

When *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published, the founding members wanted purchasers to be sure they were getting their money’s worth. Thus, they instructed the printer to run the job on the thickest paper he had. “The original volume proved to be so bulky that it became known as the ‘Big Book.’ ”

Where did the custom of reading from Chapter 5 at the beginning of meetings get started?

A drunk by the name of Mort J. sobered up in 1939 after reading the book. He moved to Los Angeles in 1940, and at his own expense, rented a meeting room in the Cecil Hotel. He “insisted on a reading from Chapter 5 of the A.A. book at the start of every session.”

Why does Alcoholics Anonymous publish its own literature?

The founding members’ decision to publish the book on their own, instead of going with Harper, has enabled A.A. to keep the message intact and use the income from book sales to carry the message. A.A. need never publish any piece of literature simply because “it will sell” — new material is developed only in response to an expressed need from a substantial portion of the Fellowship.

Who received the five-millionth copy of the Big Book?

At the 50th Anniversary International Convention in Montreal in 1985, the five-millionth copy was presented to Ruth Hock, who typed draft after draft of the original manuscript. The one-millionth copy was presented to President Richard Nixon in April 1973; the two-millionth to Joseph Califano in June 1979; the ten-millionth to Nell Wing, Bill W.’s longtime (nonalcoholic) secretary and A.A.’s first archivist, in July 1990. The 15-millionth was given to Ellie Norris, widow of former trustee chairman John L. Norris, M.D., in 1996; and in the year 2000, the 20-millionth copy was presented to the Al-Anon Family Groups.

How much has the price of the Big Book risen since 1939?

The original price of the Big Book was \$3.50; the hardcover Fourth Edition will be \$5.00.

Why was Works Publishing given that name?

Bill W. explained in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* that when they decided to form a stock company to sell shares in the book, the company needed a name. “Since the forthcoming volume would be only the first of many such ‘works,’ [Henry] thought our publishing company should be called, ‘Works Publishing, Inc.’ ”

Items and Ideas on Area Gatherings for A.A.s—Via G.S.O.

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2001

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. For any additional information, please use the addresses provided.

October

- 5-6—*Columbus, Ohio*. Fourth Area 53 Correctional Facilities Conf. Write: Ch., Box 1201, Columbus, OH 43216
- 5-7—*Snowflake, Arizona*. Area Con. Write: Ch., 481 South Main, Snowflake, AZ 85937
- 5-7—*Redding, California*. NCCAA 54th Annual Fall Conf. Write: Secy., 1723 Anamor St., Redwood City, CA 94061-2529
- 5-7—*Riverside, California*. 50th Southern California Conv. Write: Ch., 1308 E. Poppy Street, Long Beach, CA 90805
- 5-7—*Burley, Idaho*. Fall Assembly and Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1180, Twin Falls, ID 83301
- 5-7—*Lafayette, Louisiana*. 18th Annual Cajun Country Conf. Write: Ch., Box 3160, Lafayette, LA 70502
- 5-7—*Garden City, Michigan*. Tri-County Conf., Write: Ch., Box 152, Garden City, MI 48136
- 5-7 - *St. Louis, Missouri*. 18th Annual Woman-to-Woman Midwest Seminar. Write: Ch., Box 6144, St. Charles, MO 63302-6144
- 5-7- *Spearfish, SD*. Area 63 Fall Conf., Write: Ch., 35 Jackson Street, Deadwood, SD 57732
- 10-12—*Bulawayok, Zimbabwe*. National Conv. Write: Ch., Box 996, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
- 12-14—*Tracadie-Sheila, New Brunswick, Canada*. Roundup. Write: Ch., 19 rue Plante, Le Goulet, New Brunswick, E8S 2H7
- 12-14 -*Montgomery, Alabama*. Alabama/ Northwest Florida Area I Assembly. Write: Ch., 8121 Lillian Hwy, #45, Pensacola, FL 32506
- 12-14—*Petit Jean Mountain, Arkansas*. ARKYPAA Conf. Write: Ch., 14107 Ridgewood Drive, Little Rock, AR 72211
- 12-14—*Clear Lake, Iowa*. Fall Conf. Write: Ch., Box 712, Clear Lake, IA 50428
- 12-14—*St. Pete Beach, Florida*. Suncoast Conv. Write: Ch., Box 14182, St. Petersburg, FL 33733
- 12-14—*Toledo, Ohio*. East Central Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163
- 19-21—*Bilibago, Angeles City, Philippines*. Sixth Fall International Round Up. Write: Ch., Box 308, Manila 1099, Philippines
- 19-21—*Denver, Colorado*. 11th Annual Bridging the Gap. Write: Ch., 11551 10th Street NE, Hanover, MN 55341

- 19-21—*Mackinac Island, Michigan*. 13th Annual Fall Weekend. Write: Ch., c/o Lansing Central Office, 1500 E. Michigan Avenue, Lansing, MI 48912
- 19-21 - *Racine, Wisconsin*. 50th Annual Southern Wisconsin Conf., Write: Trsr., Box 081764, Racine, WI 53408
- 19-21 - *Rock Springs, Wyoming*. Fall Conf., Write: Ch., Box 1172, Rock Springs, WY, 82901.
- 21-23—*Austin, Minnesota*. 13th Annual Hiawathaland Get-Together. Write: Ch., Box 5792, Rochester, MN 55903
- 25-28—*Hagerstown, MD*. Area 29 Fall Conf. Write: Ch., Box 1762, Ellicott City, MD. 21041
- 26-28 - *Tucson, Arizona*. Totally Cool Big Book Weekend. Write: Ch., Box 35725, Tucson, Arizona 85725
- 26-28 - *Branson, Missouri*. 20th Western Missouri Conv., Write: Ch., Box 15, Highlandville, MO. 65669
- 26-28 - *Greensburg, Pennsylvania*. 56th Laurel Highlands Conf., Write: Ch., Box 6 Boward, PA, 15619-0006.
- 26-28—*St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands*. 15th Annual Caribbean Conv. Write: Ch., Suite 201 - PMB 420, 6501 Red Hook Plaza, St. Thomas, U.S.V.I. 00802-1306
- 26-28—*Bellingham, Washington*. 14th Annual Mount Baker Round Up. Write: Ch., Box 28231, Bellingham, WA 98228

- 2-4—*Jekyll Island, Georgia*. Fourth Gratitude Weekend. Write: Ch., Box 214911, South Daytona, FL 32121
- 2-4—*Mt. Vernon, Illinois*. 43rd Annual Tri-State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 132, Carmi, IL, 62821
- 8-11—*Wilmington, North Carolina*. NCCY-PAA V. Write: Ch., 5001 Wrightsville Avenue, Wilmington, NC 28403
- 9-10—*Alexandria, Egypt*. Third Annual Conv. Write: Ch., P.O. Box 4, Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt
- 9-11—*Goodyear, Arizona*. Dry Camp XIV. Write: Ch., Box 37341, Phoenix, AZ 85069
- 9-11—*Glenwood Springs, Colorado*. Winter Assembly. Write: Ch., 39551 Hwy. 82 #132, Aspen, CO 81611
- 9-11—*Fitchburg, Massachusetts*. 38th State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 6522, Holyoke, MA 01041-6522
- 15-17—*Huntsville, Alabama*. Southeast Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163
- 16-18—*McHenry, Illinois*. 12th Annual McHenry's Soberfest. Write: Ch., Box 717, McHenry, IL 60051-0717
- 22-25- *Warwick, Bermuda*. Annual Bermuda Conv. Write: Ch., Box WK 178, Warwick, WKBX, Bermuda
- 23-25- *San Antonio, TX*. Pockets of Enthusiasm Conf. Write: Ch., 8804 Tradeway, San Antonio, TX 78217
- 23-25—*Diamondhead, Mississippi*. 12th Gratitude Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 7851 Gulfport, MS 39507-7851

November

- 1-4—*Honolulu, Hawaii*. The 40th Annual Hawaii Conv. Write: Ch., Box 23434, Honolulu, HI 96823-3434
- 2-4—*Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada*. 57th Keystone Conf. Write: Ch., 208-323 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3C 2C1
- 2-4 - *Santa Barbara, California*, 17th Annual. Write: Ch., Box 91731, Santa Barbara, CA 93190-1731

December

- 8-9—*Austin, Texas*. Special Hispanic Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

Planning a Future Event?

To be included in the Box 4-5-9 Calendar, information must be received at G.S.O. three months prior to the event. We list events of two or more days. For your convenience and ours — please type or print the information to be listed on the Bulletin Board page, and mail to us:

Date of event: from _____ to _____, 19 _____

Name of event: _____

Place (city, state or prov.): _____

For information, write: (exact mailing address) _____

Contact phone # (for office use only): _____

Flip up this end of page - for events on reverse side

Cut along dotted line, and post this page on your group's bulletin board

24-26--*Copperas Cove, Texas*. Fifth Annual Christmas Alkathon. Write: Ch., 403 Sunset Lane, Apt. D, Copperas Cove, TX 76522

January

11-13--*Montgomery, Alabama*. Alabama/Northwest Florida Area I Assembly. Write: Ch., 8121 Lillian Hwy #45, Pensacola, FL 32506

11-13--*Garden City, Kansas*. Southwest Kansas Conf. Write: Sec., 916 Davis, Garden City, KS 67846

24-27--*Fort Walton Beach, Florida*. 12th Annual Emerald Coast Jamboree. Write: Ch., Box 875, Fort Walton Beach, FL 32549-0875

25-27--*Kansas City, Kansas*. 20th Annual Sunflower Roundup. Write: Secy., 10604 Bluejacket St., Overland Park, KS 66214