



Stepping Stones News

A publication of the Stepping Stones Foundation

Fall 1995

CELEBRATING BILL'S 100th BIRTHDAY

On the occasion of Bill W.'s centennial we take this opportunity to celebrate his life and work. Bill lived at Stepping Stones with Lois from 1941 until his death in 1971. Although many of you know his story it bears repeating. And we encourage those of you whose lives are the better for his, to celebrate, too.

William Griffith Wilson was born in East Dorset, Vermont, on November 26, 1895, after a birth so difficult his mother thought her baby boy might not live through the night. But he survived and grew strong and tall. As a boy, Bill displayed intelligence, perseverance and inventiveness, qualities which would help in forming Alcoholics Anonymous many years later.

While a World War I officer, Bill married Lois Burnham, the daughter of a prominent Brooklyn Heights, NY, doctor who brought his family to Vermont each year. During one vacation Bill and Lois met and a few summers later were engaged. Soon after their 1917 wedding, Bill was sent to Europe where "in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor. I forgot the strong warnings and the prejudices of my people concerning drink...I was very lonely and again turned to alcohol"

Upon his return, Bill and his bride moved to New York where he studied economics and law. He nearly failed his law course because he was too drunk to think or write during the finals. He concluded the law was not for him.

Undeterred, Bill decided to stake a claim on Wall Street becoming very successful selling operations information about companies to brokerage houses. What Bill initiated would later be called "field reporting". Until then, brokerage houses actually knew little about

the companies they were advising their clients to buy, and Bill's analysis of markets, common practice today, was an innovation Wall Street appreciated. As a result, Bill was a huge success — "I had arrived" he later wrote. During this time, Lois suffered a series of miscarriages which made it impossible for her to have children. This was a terrible blow to them as they both very much wanted a family.



Bill threw himself into his work and his financial success grew, as did his drinking which alarmed Lois and soon after his Wall Street associates. Once a welcome presence, Bill now became undesirable in business and was soon ostracized from the very people who had sought his advice so fervently. He hung around Wall Street for awhile, but when the market crashed in 1929, he knew he was finished.

However, instead of jumping out of windows which he said "disgusted" him, Bill retreated to the bars where the solution to all of his problems could be found — in drink. He notes that it was many years before he did an honest day's work again.

They lost everything and in 1930 were reduced to living in Lois' parents home depending on the Burnham's charity and whatever Lois could earn. She worked in department stores as a decorator while Bill often "stole from my wife's slender purse" regularly to buy cigarettes and alcohol. His drinking worsened, and he descended into chronic, nightmarish and desperate alcoholism.

Bill would get so sick that hospitalization was needed on three occasions, the last of which Lois was told her husband's death from alcoholism was inevitable. The place was Towns Hospital, a sanitarium in Manhattan, where, in December 1934, Bill had a spiritual experience

which transformed his life so much he never took another alcoholic drink as long as he lived. He would later describe the incident as "electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known...I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through...God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound."

Up until that moment, Bill had been a hard-bitten agnostic by virtue of upbringing and temperament. What had preceded his revolutionary hospital experience had been a series of visits by a long-time drinking friend, Ebby T., himself deemed "hopeless" and about to be confined to an insane asylum when some members of a spiritual organization, the Oxford Group, prevailed in their appeal to the courts and had Ebby remanded to their custody.

The Oxford Group members followed a simple program of surrender, self-examination, restitution and service. Popular in the early half of this century, the Oxford Group had no membership, dues, paid leaders, creed of theology. Its appeal laid in the application of certain principles in daily living namely, honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Oxford Groupers, as they were called, had success with people trying to give up drinking. Ebby was one of them, and when he, a constant daily drinker was sober two months, he was told to visit the worst alcoholic he knew to pass on his spiritual experience and its result. That alcoholic was Bill Wilson.

Strongly resistant to Ebby's spiritual program, Bill argued the existence of God and certain religious concepts. Exasperated, Ebby asked, "Why don't you chose your own conception of God?" It was that statement, translated later in AA's steps as "God as we understood Him", which enabled Bill and later others regardless of their religious beliefs or lack of them to avail themselves of "this simple program."

After leaving Towns Hospital sober, Bill tried for months to get others to stop drinking with stories of his spiritual experience and the Oxford Group. He had no success. Bill's doctor, William D. Silkworth, a psychiatrist at Towns Hospital, contended that alcoholism stemmed from an abnormal physical reaction, or allergy, to alcohol coupled by a mental obsession to it. He told Bill to concentrate on the medical aspects of alcoholism when speaking to alcoholics and keep the spirituality for later. (Dr. Silkworth's theory, quite new then, is widely accepted today. In 1935, the widely-held view was that alcoholism was a moral problem, not a medical one.)

Bill remembered Dr. Silkworth's admonition when he, just six months sober, went to Akron, Ohio, to lead a proxy fight and gain control of a tool making company. He was

confident of winning and becoming the company's president. However, the business went badly for Bill who returned deeply dejected to the Mayflower Hotel where he was staying. Standing in the hotel lobby, Bill heard the familiar sounds coming from the lounge and felt a strong urge to in. Realizing how insane that would be, he quickly called a minister whose name appeared on the church directory in the Mayflower lobby.

Saying he needed to speak to an alcoholic, Bill was directed to call a Henrietta Seiberling who held Oxford Group meetings in her home. Bill told Mrs. Seiberling that he was "a rum hound from New York" and hoped she could put him in touch with another alcoholic.

What Bill realized was something simple, yet revolutionary. That in order for him to keep his sobriety, he would have to speak to another alcoholic — not to convince the other person to get sober, but to maintain his own sobriety. That other alcoholic was Dr. Robert S. (Dr. Bob), the man who co-founded AA with Bill.

Dr. Bob later recalled Bill and that first meeting writing, "...he was the first living human with whom I had ever talked, who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience. In other words, he talked my language." (AA's founding date is June 10, 1935, the day of Dr. Bob's last drink which he took a few weeks after his initial meeting with Bill.)

At first it was just the two of them, and soon after a third and then a group in Akron followed by a group in New York and slowly the fellowship evolved and grew, expanding on the Oxford Group principles and eventually forming its own organization. There were many setbacks and many people who stopped drank again. But sometime in 1938, heads were counted, and they realized that about 100 people had recovered and were sober.

To accelerate growth and spread the message further, a book was written and, when no one would publish it, the group published it itself. The book was called *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and the organization, formerly nameless, adopted the book's title. The book sold so slowly at first it looked as if might be a failure. However, some favorable press, most notably a 1941 story in the popular weekly magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*, about a group of people who seemed to be beating alcoholism, spurred interest and the fellowship grew. Today, *Al-*

coholics Anonymous is acknowledged to be one of the most successful ventures in the history of publishing, with over 13 million books published in some 44 languages.

The fellowship grew and Bill continued to work with alcoholics for the rest of his life. He wrote other books including *AA Comes of Age* and *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in addition to numerous articles mostly for the *Grapevine*, AA's monthly magazine.

Today, that meeting in May 1935 has grown to include 87,000 groups worldwide with AA being a model for some 225 spin-off groups dealing with other illnesses, disorders and obsessions. AA remains the most successful method of helping men and women recover from alcoholism and is the central program in most rehabilitation hospitals and clinics.

So thorough has been AA's impact on individuals and society, that just sixty years after its founding, it is difficult to imagine a world without it.

Renowned British author Aldous Huxley called Bill "the greatest social architect of the century" and *Life Magazine*, a few years ago included him in their special issue saluting "The 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century." But most importantly, millions of people from all races, creeds, social positions and financial situations have been saved and changed because of his life, his vision, his dedication and his service.

Bill Wilson died in Miami, Florida on January 23, 1971, exactly 54 years to the day he married Lois Burnham. He was 75.

(For more on Bill's life, we suggest "Pass It On", an AA book, and "Lois Remembers", available from Al-Anon.)

From the archives...

Throughout his life, Bill was a prolific letter writer sending thousands of notes and letters to family, friends, associates and AAs all over the world.

At right is one of Bill's earliest attempts at corresponding. For an eight year old, he writes well. But what is of particular interest is the mentioning of his spiritual activities (which were abandoned for many years while drinking) and the referring to himself as "Your unknown friend."

Bill wrote many of his letters from the AA office and from the studio he built at Stepping Stones which he called "Wits End."

EAST DORSET, VT.
FEB. 29, 1904.

DEAR DOT:-

I AM A LITTLE BOY EIGHT YEARS OLD.
I HAVE A CAT. I HAVE A LITTLE SISTER,
AND HER NAME IS DOROTHY. I GO TO THE
CONGREGATIONAL SUNDAY-SCHOOL.
I TAKE THE CHILD'S HOUR AND LIKE
IT VERY MUCH. I AM WRITING THIS ON MY
TYPEWRITER. SO GOOD BYE,
YOUR UNKNOWN FRIEND,
WILLIE WILSON.

About the Newsletter

The Foundation publishes the Newsletter to share events at Stepping Stones, interviews with people who remember Lois and Bill, stories from the archives collection and so on. If you have a memory you would like others to read, please contact us. If you know someone else who would like to receive the Newsletter, just send us the information at:

The Stepping Stones Foundation
P. O. Box 452
Bedford Hills, N.Y. 10507

By the way, the logo chosen for our newsletter is a drawing done by Lois Wilson. Lois loved to sketch, even illustrating her diaries. The picture shown is of Lois and Bill contemplating their new home originally called Bil-Lo's Break and later Stepping Stones. This image was used by Lois for her bookplates and note cards for many years.

About the Foundation....

The Stepping Stones Foundation was created by Lois W. in 1979 some nine years before her death. It is run by a board of trustees which meets regularly to carry out the Foundation's mission which is to preserve Stepping Stones and its historic archives and to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the disease of alcoholism and its effect on the family and society.

The trustees, staff and volunteers are comprised of AAs, Al-Anons and individuals not belonging to either fellowship, but who want to be involved with Stepping Stones because of the work it does.

To Visit the House ...

Please call us at (914) 232-4822 ...we are open by appointment and will be happy to make one for you.

**The Stepping Stones Foundation
PO Box 452
Bedford Hills, NY 10507**

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