

Dr. Bob

"Simplicity, devotion, steadfastness, and loyalty; these were the hallmarks of Dr. Bob's character which he has well implanted in so many of us." - Bill Wilson.

ROBERT HOLBROOK SMITH, M.D.

1879-1950

Dr. Bob was born August 8, 1879, in St. Johnsbury, Vt., the only son of Judge and Mrs. W.P. Smith, who were prominent in civic and social activities of that city. Though often rebellious against the strict authority of his parents, "Rob," as his schoolmates called him, was willing to work hard to attain whatever he sincerely wanted; by the time he was nine, he knew he wanted to be a physician.

In his teens, he spent parts of his summers working on a Vermont farm and in an Adirondack summer hotel. Despite his dislike of school, he was a good student and graduated from St. Johnsbury Academy in 1898.

He spent four years at Dartmouth College, graduating in 1902. It was during these school years that drinking became a major activity, though in those days he was never involved in serious trouble because of it.

Three years later, having worked at various jobs in Boston and Montreal, he entered the University of Michigan as a premed student. Here, the pace of his drinking accelerated, and in his sophomore year he left school temporarily, feeling he couldn't complete his course. But he returned, took his exams, and passed them. In 1910, after further training at Rush Memorial College in Chicago, he received his medical degree and secured an internship in City Hospital, Akron, Ohio. Completing his internship in 1912, he opened an office in the Second National Bank Building in Akron, remaining there until his retirement in 1948.

In 1915, he married Anne Ripley, whom he had met while attending St. Johnsbury Academy. As time went on, his alcoholism progressed steadily, yet he was able to function, and few of his colleagues knew how serious his illness was.

Besides being an active member of the City Hospital staff in Akron, he often visited St. Thomas Hospital, also in Akron, where, in 1928, he met Sister Ignatia for the first time.

Later, in 1934, he became associated with St. Thomas and in 1943, became a member of the active staff.

In the early thirties, Dr. Bob, in desperate search for an answer to his problem, began to attend meetings of the Oxford Group, feeling he could benefit from its philosophy and other spiritual teachings. Though he continued to drink, he maintained his activity in the group, due in large part to Anne's deep interest.

In May 1935, a meeting with another alcoholic, Bill Wilson, led to his own permanent sobriety and to the formation of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is estimated that Dr. Bob, with the help of Sister Ignatia, guided some 5,000 fellow alcoholics to recovery during his 15 years of loving ministry to them.

What manner of man was Dr. Bob? According to his son: "He had tremendous drive, great physical stamina. He was reserved and formal on first acquaintance, but as you came to know him, he was just the opposite: friendly, generous, full of fun - he loved a good joke. Regarding A.A., he tried to make every decision in the best interests of the group, to the exclusion of any personal advantage. He never ceased to be surprised that so many people sought him out, but felt he had only been God's agent and so was not due any personal credit."

Bob and Anne lived simply; if he had any pride of possession, it was for cars. He played bridge expertly, always playing to win! An avid reader, he read for at least an hour each night of his adult life, "drunk or sober." He was a fight fan, succumbing finally to television so he could watch the fights.

He held three concepts in particularly high regard. One was simplicity - in his own lifestyle and in practicing the A.A. way of life. Second, he believed in tolerance of other people's ideas, in speaking out "with kindness and consideration for others," and in "guarding that erring member, the tongue." Third, he believed that one's job in A.A. was to "get sober and stay sober" and "never to be so complacent that we're not willing to extend that help to our less fortunate brothers."

Dr. Bob firmly believed that "love and service" are the cornerstones of Alcoholics Anonymous. He died of cancer at City Hospital, Akron, November 16, 1950.