

Anne Ripley Smith, wife of Dr. Bob, Mother and Co-Founder of A.A.

Pioneer A.A.'s Most Ignored, Forgotten, yet Critically Important Resource

by Dick B.

Let's meet the woman Bill Wilson and others frequently called the "Mother of A.A." (See Dick B., Anne Smith's Journal 1933-1939: A.A.'s Principles of Success, 3rd ed, pp. ix, 10, 54, 137, 139; Sue Smith Windows and Robert R. Smith, Children of the Healer, pp. 29, 43, 152; Women Pioneers in Twelve Step Recovery, Hazelden, 1999, p. 2). I'd been going to A.A. meetings regularly for about four years and had never heard Anne Smith's name mentioned. In fact, when I went to the Seattle Convention in 1990, I never heard it mentioned by the diligent historians and archivists attending archives meetings there. I had been advised to read Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers, and she was mentioned there.

However, I was to learn from Dr. Bob's son that even this mention occurred under strange circumstances. A.A.'s New York archivist suggested to Niles P. that he interview oldtimers. When Niles approached Dr. Bob's son, the son asked, "Are you going to write about my mom?" The answer was, "No." Smitty then said he wouldn't tell the staff writer anything at all, and he asked his sister Sue to do likewise. Later, the staff member returned and picked up such facts as did wind up in the Conference Approved biography of Dr. Bob that was published by A.A.W.S. in 1980.

Now I've been to Akron several times to interview Dr. Bob's daughter, to attend Founders Day Conventions, to interview archivists and historians and oldtimers there, to visit the Intergroup office and Dr. Bob's home where A.A. was born, the King School Group which was A.A.'s first group, and to interview early participants in the founding years of A.A. such as former Congressman John F. Seiberling, son of A.A. co-founder Henrietta Seiberling.

Despite all those visits, I have yet to see any significant, specific, account of Anne Smith's contribution to early A.A. Her precious journal is not present. On the stage at the Conference are pictures of Bob, Bill, and Sister Ignatia; but there was none of Anne Smith on the occasions I attended. So, like so many other quests for our history that I undertook, this one had to begin outside the borders of my own fellowship.

On the plane to Akron for my first interview with Dr. Bob's daughter, I was preparing by reading Ernest Kurtz's Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In an obscure reference in footnote 32, on page 275, of the 1979 edition, Kurtz cited an "extensively annotated copy of Anne Smith's OG "workbook" in A.A. archives." Oddly, Kurtz stated in another footnote, "This writer [Kurtz] was struck in his interviews of 6 and 7 April 1977, that both Lois [Wilson] and Henrietta Seiberling stressed that Anne Smith's role in the beginning of A.A. has been much underrated" (footnote 15, pp. 264-65). Kurtz seemed to give little attention either to the Bible, Quiet Time, Shoemaker, the Oxford Group, or early A.A. literature; and that may explain why he did not publish any significant information about Anne Smith, her role, or her vitally important journal (which Kurtz called a "workbook").

Whatever the reason, I did not yet grasp the significance of Anne Smith at that point.

Later, as I was reading pages 115-16 of Mary Darrah's Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous, I saw a reference to Anne's "Oxford Group journal."

Darrah seemed to have inspected a portion or portions of Anne's "journal;" observed its relevance to A.A.; but then moved on with her rendition of Akron history. Not surprisingly, she focused on her own view of Ignatia's importance, and Anne's journal received no significant attention.

Only later did I realize the treasure that needed to be unearthed. Working with author Bill Pittman, A.A. archivist Frank Mauser, Wilson's former secretary Nell Wing, Paul L. who was the archivist at Stepping Stones, and Dr. Bob's daughter Sue Smith Windows, I resolved to obtain Anne's journal and to learn as much of the specifics about her as possible. Sue wrote a letter to A.A. General Services requesting that a copy of Anne's Journal be provided to me. Frank Mauser submitted the request to the Trustees Archives Committee.

Approval was granted. And I obtained from GSO a copy for myself to use in my Anne Smith's Journal, a copy for Dr. Bob's Home, a copy for Bill Pittman, and a copy for Sue Smith Windows. Sue believes that many pages are missing from New York's document, and I believe I recently may have found some of them.

The important thing in this introductory part is to introduce you to Anne Smith. So let's begin with these facts. Anne came from the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois. She was one of four children. Her son Robert informed me of the brilliance and business successes and accomplishments of her brothers.

Anne herself won a scholarship to Wellesley College. After graduation, she returned to Oak Park, Illinois where she taught school. She met Dr. Bob at a dance at St. Johnsbury Academy where Bob was a senior. Her son likes to say that they finally married after a "whirlwind courtship" culminating many years later with their marriage on January 25, 1915. She returned with Bob to Akron; and I have been told they first lived down the street from their ultimate home at 855 Ardmore Avenue, in Akron, now called the "birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous-where it all began."

Anne died before Dr. Bob did. The date was June 1, 1949. Bill Wilson asked for letters from fellowship people, telling some of the Anne Smith story. Bill promised to publish them-something he never did. But Anne's daughter-in-law Betty Smith obtained those letters and graciously provided them to me for inclusion in my Anne Smith book, and some were!

Regrettably, almost every discussion of Anne has talked more about Dr. Bob, about the fellowship, and about their love for each other, than about Anne's specific importance and contribution to A.A. I have now revised my book on her journal three times. See Dick B., Anne Smith's Journal, 3rd ed., and I hope to publish the actual contents of journal itself in full before very long. I know it will provide immense assistance to those in A.A. who really want to know and understand what early AA's heard and read and were taught.

Each morning, in the developmental days, AA's came to the Smith home at the crack of dawn for what they joshingly called Anne's "spiritual pabulum." Anne had a Quiet Time with "the guys," as her daughter put it, every morning. On those occasions, they would read the Bible, pray, seek God's guidance, and sometimes consult a devotional such as The Upper Room. Of great significance is the fact that Anne shared the contents of her journal with the men and invited discussion.

From 1933 to 1939, Anne was writing down materials from the Bible, from the literature she and Bob were reading about the Bible, Jesus Christ, prayer, healing, the Oxford Group, and Sam Shoemaker's views. Her journal is 64 pages, some written in her own hand and some typed for her by her daughter.

As a recent chapter on Anne said (apparently paraphrasing my material in Anne Smith's Journal):

Bill W. once called Anne Smith "the mother of AA." This may have been not only because of her actions, but because of the direct influence of her thoughts and writings on the Twelve Steps and other AA literature. Anne attended Oxford Group meetings from 1933 (two years before her husband's recovery) until 1939, during which she kept a workbook, or "spiritual journal." Its notes on the Oxford Group principles and her own comments reveal a close, unmistakable similarity to the wording in the Big Book. For example, Anne writes of an Oxford Group prayer, "O Lord, manage me, for I cannot manage myself."

Note the comparison in the Big Book, Step One (p. 59), the "pertinent ideas" (p. 60), and the Third Step prayer in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, or Twelve and Twelve. Another example: Anne writes in her journal, "We can't give away what we haven't got." Recent scholars cite dozens of similar comparisons (Women Pioneers in 12 Step Recovery, Hazelden, 1999).

Although I contributed to Women Pioneers a chapter on Henrietta Seiblerling, I was not asked to do the Anne Smith chapter. If I had, there would have been specific references to, and quotations of, the "dozens" of familiar expressions to which that book's statement refers. But that material has yet to be published in its entirety. Much is covered in my Anne Smith's Journal title.

This material needs to be presented by someone who realizes that Anne was not merely summarizing "Oxford Group" principles--quickly to be discarded. Rather, it is a compendium of A.A. sources, teachings, and ideas of the pioneer years.

It covers all six of our major sources: (a) Bible. (b) Quiet Time. (c) Sam Shoemaker's teachings. (d) Oxford Group principles and practices. (e) Anne's own detailed suggestions for Quiet Time, for working with new people, for daily surrenders, for reading, for Bible study, etc. (f) The specific Christian literature early AAs read and from which they borrowed basic, biblical ideas for their program.

In ensuing segments, I will try to provide you with specifics from Anne's Journal. I'll set out comments about Anne from manuscripts and letters about her. And I'll challenge you to consider what a great day it would be if, in A.A. and other 12 Step meetings today, members were privileged to hear Anne's Smith's Journal read, to see it in print in "Conference Approved" literature, and to know that it has been removed from the shadows and locked archives and made available as one of the most important tools for recovery in A.A. that has ever been written!