

JIM BURWELL  
THE AGNOSTIC & AUTHOR OF "THE VICIOUS CYCLE"\*

\*Which first appeared in the second edition of the personal stories and continues to appear in the  
AA Big Book.

By Ron Long

As a former atheist, when I initially came into Alcoholics Anonymous I reacted to use of the word "God" with an attitude of contempt prior to investigation. Thank God I stayed sober long enough to investigate the matter. As a result, I am a recovered atheist in my 19th year of sobriety. I owe a world of gratitude to Jim Burwell, who helped pave the way for alcoholics like me.

Jim Burwell's influence on Bill Wilson in the writing of the Big Book was described by Wilson himself in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age. Jim militantly opposed the usage of the word "God" in consistent adherence to his agnostic philosophy. A compromise was negotiated between Wilson and Burwell with the literary employment of such terms as "power greater than ourselves."

Jim Burwell expressed in a 1957 recording at Sacramento that his agnostic stance had mellowed out over the years. However, his early militancy was a perhaps spiritual wonder! The compromise between him and Bill Wilson established an enduring principle in Alcoholics Anonymous, that of flexibility and acceptance of differing viewpoints on spiritual matters. That vital principle paved the way for hope for all suffering alcoholics seeking sobriety and recovery from a seemingly hopeless state of body and mind. One's religious affiliation, or lack of it; one's philosophical preferences, or none; one's theistic, or agnostic, or atheistic, or pantheistic, or virtually any relatively held notion or concept of a power greater than ourselves, could bare no relevance on one's membership the Fellowship of the Spirit. Thanks to Jim Burwell.

Born on March 25, 1898, Jim Burwell lived in San Diego for a number of years, following his initial association with Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob Smith, Bill Dodson, Henry ("Hank") Parkhurst and a few others, who comprised a group of sober drunks that a year later would be known as Alcoholics Anonymous. Following his decline on January 8, 1938, to a hard bottom, Jim got sober on June 15, 1938. Jim and Rosa lived at 4193 Georgia Street in San Diego.

Jim was often in a wheelchair and constantly smoked a pipe. AA rooms were always filled with smoke. He was a small man with red hair and weighed about 130 pounds. Jim and Rosa Burwell were involved in service and were elected to many AA positions many times. When not holding any elected positions, they were volunteers in any area of need. They were very active. Jim and Rosa were known as "Book People." If a line was not in the Big Book or AA Literature, they would not use it.

Following a long illness, he was admitted to the Veterans Administration Medical Center, La Jolla, California. He missed those meetings. However, that did not prevent him from being active. Jim started a new meeting there at the VA! The Torrey Pines Thursday Night Discussion Group of Alcoholics Anonymous still meets at 3350 La Jolla Village Drive, Room 2011. Jim Burwell died in the VA on September 8, 1974. He touched the lives of many. He was apparently a human being, capable of being criticized by some and adored by others. He died sober. That is as close to perfection as we will ever achieve.