

## LOIS BURNHAM WILSON: BILL WILSON'S WIFE

*"I believe that people are good if you give them half a chance and that good is more powerful than evil. The world seems to me excruciatingly, almost painfully beautiful at times, and the goodness and kindness of people often exceed that which even I expect."*

Lois Burnham Wilson

Lois Burnham, the co-founder of The Al-Anon Family Groups, was born on March 4, 1891 at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn Heights, New York. Brooklyn Heights at that time was in character much the same that it is today, one of the most lovely areas in the Greater New York area and a desirable place to live.

Her father, Clark Burnham, was a gynecologist and surgeon, and Matilda Spellman, her mother, a young woman of refinement. Dr. Burnham brought his bride to the fashionable brick-front row house upon their marriage in 1888. Dr. Burnham had been renting part of the house as offices but leased the entire five-floor house upon his marriage.

Lois was the first of the Burnham's children. A daughter, Matilda, would die in infancy leaving three girls -- Lois, Barbara and Katherine -- and two boys, Rogers and Lyman. In her memoir, *Lois Remembers*, published by Al-Anon, Lois recalls her childhood as "idyllic", and it seems that this is an accurate assessment.

Lois' parents were different from parents in the Victoria era in that they were affectionately demonstrative with each other in front of the children. These open displays of affection were rare in those days and attest to the deep love the two had for each other and that it was regarded as natural and good. Indeed, in many photos of the two, even into old age, the couple seem engaged with each other and truly enjoying each other's company.

The Burnham household seems to have embodied so many wonderful elements. The children were respected and deeply loved by their parents and were brought up to be loving and thoughtful towards others. They were given excellent educations and all sent to college. Lois was a graduate of The Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn. All the children went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn which was one of the first schools to have a new type of preschool started in Germany called "kindergarten". Later, they were enrolled in the Quaker's Friends School.

Lois' primary interests were mostly artistic. She would later become interested in interior decoration, but also showed interest in fine art. After graduating from Packer Institute, she took drawing classes at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art.

Lois' memories of childhood are a rich pastiche of the best of the turn-of-the-century family life and infused with stories of warm gatherings with her relatives, admiration for her intelligent and artistic mother and her energetic and confident father. Most of all, she remembers how loving and warm her parents were and how much she wanted to one day have a home like the one from which she came.

The Burnhams taught their children to be thoughtful and caring of others and to be of use in the world. The impressions of her home life are ones of excitement and lots of fun. Lois was particularly adventuresome and cared little for how she looked and was often referred to as a "tomboy."

This aspect of her personality was given its fullest expression during the Burnhams long sojourns in southern Vermont. Each year, the family spent half a year in the Manchester, Vermont area where Dr. Burnham's New York patients also spent long periods. Her parents were fully part of the upper-class social life there and were friends with many well-known people of the day, including Abraham Lincoln's son whose children were among the younger Burnham's playmates.

One of the children the Burnham's played with, especially Rogers, was a boy who came each summer with his prominent family from Albany, New York. His name was Edwin or "Ebby" Thacher who would also become a close friend of Lois' future husband, Bill Wilson, and be instrumental in Bill's getting sober.

Rogers also found a pal in Bill Wilson, and in 1913 introduced him to his sister. Lois was over four years older than Bill, and being 22 at the time, did not regard him as anything other than her brother's friend. But as the summers went on, she and Bill more and more found many common interests and gradually fell in love. They were both intelligent, athletic and fun-loving. Lois encouraged Bill at his studies and thought him to be a most remarkable young man. Her

family shared this assessment. And so, in 1915, the couple became secretly engaged and married on January 24, 1918, just days before young officer Wilson shipped off to Europe in the First World War.

When Lois married Bill, she wed an upstanding young man of good character filled with exciting ideas about his future. What Lois did not marry was a drinker. On the contrary, Bill has a disdain for liquor partly because he believed it had played a part in his parents separation and divorce. It was a great shock to Lois some months later when, visiting her husband at his New Bedford, Massachusetts station, his soldier friends told her about Bill getting so drunk one night they had to carry him back to barracks. Lois could not believe they were speaking of her husband.

Bill shipped off to England, and Lois found work as an occupational therapist. As an educated woman, Lois believed in being independent and making her own living. She worked at the YWCA and was promoted several times within the organization leaving in 1917 to assist in a school her aunt had established in Short Hills, New Jersey. She left that position to marry Bill.

When Bill returned from the war, Lois hoped to start the family she always wanted. However, a series of miscarriages made childbearing impossible. This was a devastation for her. All Lois wanted out of life was a family and a home. Now she would not have the family. She and Bill tried to adopt, but they were unsuccessful. She later found out why -- agencies performing routine background checks would eventually be told about Bill. Stories about his drinking would surface and be enough to make adoption impossible as well.

Bill's drinking alarmed Lois very much. At first, she tried not to be concerned, but his drinking progressed during the early years of marriage to the point where he would see all his ambitions dashed and his wonderful opportunities for employment and advancement shattered. He became a broken man who eventually had to seek refuge with his wife in the house of his in-laws.

Lois employed many tactics over the years to help Bill get sober. She really thought she would be able to help him stop drinking. She would realize later how futile this was. Bill did stop in 1934, but it was not due to the efforts of his wife.

In 1939, Bill and Lois were forced to leave the Burnham's house. Her father and mother had died, and the Wilsons could not afford to go anywhere except to the homes of various friends which they did for the following two years. Over the years, Lois had been the breadwinner bringing in a modest income from her work in department stores as a decorator and also from her consultations with private clients. While working at Macy's she wrote an article on venerated furniture that was published by the popular *House and Garden* magazine.

Living as Lois once wrote "from pillar to post" was difficult for Lois. Not having children was a deep loss, and now, not to have a home was quite painful. She did her best and maintained her dignity throughout the ordeal but sometimes despaired that they might be homeless for a very long time.

But in 1941 an extraordinary thing happened. A generous offer was made by an acquaintance for the Wilsons to purchase a home in Westchester County. Due to this magnanimous gesture, the Wilsons moved into their first and only real home -- Stepping Stones in Bedford Hills, New York. It took them 23 years, but they finally had a home of their own.

In 1951, Lois followed the suggestion made by her husband who had crafted the 12 steps of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous to create a similar 12-step program for the family and friends of alcoholics. In truth, there had been several family groups around the country that Bill had become aware of and Anne Smith, wife of AA co-founder Dr. Bob, had been involved in working with wives and families from the very first.

Bill thought the groups could be consolidated and that Lois be the one to take it on. (Anne Smith had died in 1949.) Lois was reluctant, not because she did not recognize the need, but because she was 60 and wanted to enjoy life at Stepping Stones tending her garden and involving herself in artistic projects. Lois' strong sense of service prevailed, and at the end of the 1951 AA General Service Conference, she gathered the delegates' wives and local family groups members at Stepping Stones to discuss going forward with a formal organization.

Working from Lois' upstairs desk at Stepping Stones, Lois and Anne B., a nearby friend whose husband was in AA, wrote to 87 non-alcoholics who had written to AA asking for information about alcoholism. The letters had come from the U.S., Canada, Ireland, Australia and South Africa. Forty-eight people wrote back and eventually the organization known as the Al-Anon Family Groups was formed. It now has over 29,000 groups worldwide and a membership of over 387,000.

Lois Wilson died on October 6, 1988 at 97 years old. She was present and energetic throughout her latter years and enjoyed good health for most of them. She wanted to live to be 100 and almost did.

Lois was one of the 20th century's most important women. Her life has been somewhat overshadowed by that of her husband, but, in recent years, she has emerged more visible than before for her unique contribution to humanity. It is through her tireless efforts and vision that Al-Anon is the strong organization it is today and why it continues to attract members through its message of hope and renewal.