

In AA's First Five Years

Lois Wilson, wife of AA's co-founder, Bill Wilson, recalls the time in AA when there were few members and no Big Book. From the January 1967 AA Grapevine.

In the early days of AA things were really different. For five years there was no Big Book. The only way to communicate with other people was to go and tell them, so that's what we did. Of course, all of the meetings were held in people's homes, the homes of those who were lucky enough to have them. Anybody who had one made it wide open to whomever the boys brought in. Our houses, Dr. Bob's in Akron and ours in Brooklyn, were just filled with drunks, either drinking, or stopped temporarily, or well on the way to real sobriety.

Yes, AA was quite different in those days for many reasons. One was that there were no people in AA except those who had gone to the very bottom. Only these would listen to the story that one drunk was telling another. When AA first started, before there was a book, it was more anonymous than it is now, because even the Fellowship was without a name. AA didn't have a name until the book was written. Before that it was just a bunch of drunks trying to help each other, a bunch of nameless drunks. They had to be worked with over and over; families and everybody did what they could to help.

There were many, many sad things that happened, many very humorous things, and inspirational things, too.

Several are coming to mind right now. Bill, as you know, came from Vermont and someone sent him some maple syrup from there. It came in a whiskey bottle. One of the boys saw this attractive container in the kitchen and he was so drunk at the time that he gulped the whole bottle of syrup, thinking it was whiskey.

We had a rule that no one could come into the house when he was drinking. One night one of the boys came home drunk. We wouldn't let him in so he pried open the coal chute and slid into the cellar. Since he was very fat it was surprising that he could slide down it, yet somehow he made it. But this same fat man did get stuck one night in the washtubs. He lived in the basement apartment. Old city houses used to have stationary tubs in the kitchen. He thought he'd try to take a bath in one. But after getting in he couldn't get out so one of us (and I think it was I) had to pull him out.

There were many other things...a man committed suicide in our house after having pawned our dress clothes, left over from more prosperous days. These included Bill's dress suit and my precious evening cape. We have never owned such articles again.

AA was always thrilling. The families were included in all of the meetings; wives and parents (there weren't many alcoholic women then), and the children came too. The children were vitally interested in everything that went on. They would inquire about all the members and want to know how they were. They'd learn the Twelve Steps and really try to live by them. I don't think youngsters can be too young to be thrilled by the AA program and be helped by it.

One of the first women who came in was the ex-wife of a friend of Bill's. She had been in Bellevue and had come from there to our house. At that time there was a wonderful man - I think he was the fourth or fifth AA - who was trying to start a group in Washington, D.C. This woman went down to help him and she stayed sober for quite a long time. Then she married a man they were trying to bring onto the program. He really didn't go along with the idea himself and used to say to her every once in a while, "Florence, you look so thirsty." And so she did something about that, Florence disappeared. Everybody looked for her everywhere and couldn't find her. After a couple of weeks they found her in the morgue.

At that time each group used to visit every other group. New York members would go to New Jersey or Greenwich, Philadelphia or Washington or even Cleveland or Akron. Those were the groups I recall were in existence in the first five years.

If anybody had a car a bunch of us would pile in and we'd go wherever we knew there was a meeting. Families were just as much a part of AA as the alcoholics and we did feel we belonged.

But after a while the AA's thought that they should have an occasional meeting - at least one every week - of just alcoholics so that they could really get down to business. When this occurred the wives thought they'd meet together, too, at the same time. At first these little gatherings of wives didn't have any particular purpose. Sometimes we'd play bridge and sometimes we'd gossip about our husbands.

Then a few of us began to see that we really needed the AA program just as much as the alcoholics. The famous case of my throwing a shoe at Bill started me wondering about myself and realizing that I needed to live by the Twelve Steps just as much as he did. He was getting way ahead of me. I always thought of myself as being the moral mentor in the house, but Bill, who never was a mentor, was certainly growing spiritually while I was standing still. Or perhaps there is no standing still - if I wasn't going ahead, I must be going backwards.

I decided I'd better live by the Twelve Steps. Annie S. and a number of other people had come to the same conclusion. So, whenever we visited another group, we would tell the wives and families how we found that we, too, needed to live by the Twelve Steps of AA. Little groups of wives and families all over the country began to feel the same need for something to help overcome their frustrations and help them become integrated human beings again.

That's the way Al-Anon started. We followed the AA program in every principle. I want to thank AA's so very much for showing us the way. Without your leading us we would still be the unhappy folks we were.

In our meetings we tell our own experiences just as AA's do. We tell how we came to find that we needed Al-Anon and what Al-Anon has done for us. And we seek to help other families that were, or are, having the same sort of experience.

In 1950 Bill traveled all over Canada and the United States to see how AA's would react to the idea of a general conference for Alcoholics Anonymous, and in doing so he discovered quite a few types of groups of the family of alcoholics. He thought that they should have a Central Office here in New York, just as AA did, so that they could be unified in their use of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions - a place where inquiries could be received, literature prepared and the public informed so that those in need would know where to turn.

A good friend and I started a small office in Bedford Hills. By then AA had had eighty-seven inquiries from wives or groups who wished to register. As AA was not equipped to handle the families of alcoholics it handed over this list to us and we wrote to them. Fifty groups responded and were registered with us. That was in '51. Today (1967) there are over 3,000 Al-Anon groups.

The numerical potential of Al-Anon is greater than AA's because it is composed not only of mates of alcoholics, but children, parents and other relatives and friends. It is estimated that five people are seriously affected by one alcoholic.

Though we have barely scratched the surface, the future is bright, thanks to you AA's for your wonderful example and inspiration.