

Archives Workshop Presentation at the Northeast Regional Convention

"A.A. in Northern New Jersey, 1939 - 1944" by Greg T.

Saturday, October 20, 2001



Opening remarks: State sobriety date, home group, service position. Formative service experience with the South Orange Sunday Night Group 50th Anniversary in 1989.

A note on the sources: In addition to A.A. Comes of Age and Pass It On, two of our General Service Conference-approved books, I was fortunate to gain access to the archives housed in our Northern New Jersey Intergroup Office and in the General Service Office in New York. Special thanks to Judit Santon, GSO Archivist, her assistant, Erin Lang, and Bob C., Chair of the Joint Intergroup-Area 44 History and Archives Committee, for their help and support. I should also like to thank our Area Committee Chair, Debbie H., for asking me to present this information this morning.



The stories of the A.A. members and A.A. groups of Northern New Jersey are typical, garden-variety experiences that illustrate what we alcoholics were like, what happened, and in a very real sense tell us why we are what we are like now. We can look back and see the early struggles and doubts, the comraderie and fellowship and willingness to go to any length to stay sober and to help other alcoholics. We see the strength of the home group and the fractures that occur over personality, money, style, and geography.

What a time it was! From mid-1939 through the end of 1944, which is the focus of my presentation, Alcoholics Anonymous as a concept and a loosely connected confederacy of groups from Akron, Ohio, to New York City, was being born and stumbling through its first nine years - those awkward, pre-double-digit years that all of us are very familiar with. The Twelve Steps were developed, that is, were lived and utilized by hundreds of men and women to help them get and stay sober. The Twelve Traditions were still a decade away from codification, but were also being experienced, through the trial-and-error process that we alcoholics find so necessary in our stubborn self-centeredness. (Oops, perhaps I should speak of myself, rather than "we.")

The first A.A. meeting in New Jersey was held at the Montclair home of Hank P., in the summer of 1939. Hank had been referred to Bill W. by Dr. William Silkworth in 1937. Pass It On describes the relationship in this way: "Hank was full of ideas, and Bill now became associated with Hank on one of his many entrepreneurial ventures. This was a plan to organize gasoline dealers in northern New Jersey to form a cooperative buying organization. It had a name - Honor Dealers; an address - 17 William Street, Newark; and a secretary - Ruth

Hock." [p. 191] Bill W., a co-founder of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement and primary author of the Big Book, its basic text, had begun writing the book in March or April 1938, and the process continued throughout that year, until January 1939.

The Newark office became not only our first service office but the headquarters of a "spiritually entrepreneurial" venture called Works Publishing, Inc., which offered shares in the publication of the book. Manuscript pages were carried or mailed from Newark to the groups in Akron and New York for their critique, which was not long in coming, nor particularly gentle. In Pass It On we learn that Bill drafted the Twelve Steps, he claimed, "while lying in bed at 182 Clinton Street [Brooklyn] with pencil in hand and a pad of yellow scratch paper on his knee." [p. 197] Then he brought the nearly complete step-program to Ruth in the Newark office and shared it with local members. The well-known "God arguments" ensued. By April 1939, the first edition of the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, was published. By October 1939 the first A.A. group in New Jersey had begun to meet on a regular basis, at Hank P.'s home in Montclair, on Sunday nights.

Bill and Lois W. had by this time lost their home and had temporarily relocated to Green Pond, New Jersey, from where they ventured to meetings in Montclair and South Orange, where the "Jersey Group" then relocated for its regularly scheduled 5:30 p.m. Sunday meeting in the rambling wooden structure known as the South Orange Community House.

One of the most interesting documents in the General Service Office Archives in New York City, is one titled "Survey of Jersey Group Made by G.M. - Jan. 1st 1940." This survey, likely the very first "membership survey" in Alcoholics Anonymous, lists the current group membership as "Total no. contacted," which is 41 members. Of these, 19 had taken no drink since joining the group, and 7 had had "only 1 slip" since joining. Those failing to get sober but "still members" were 6, and those who had failed to get sober and "dropped out" were also 6. The percentage of so-called "complete success" was 46.3%! Percentage of just plain "success" (one slip or none) was 63.4%, leaving the failure rate at 36.6% Unscientific, but fascinating.

More tidbits from this group survey include the "total sober time achieved by Jersey Group as a whole," 21 years. Henry P. is listed as a group member with the longest continuous sobriety of five years (living in East Orange at this time). There were only four women, by my count (based on the names) of the total 41 names. The growth rate was put at 400%, that is "from 10 to 40 in the last 9 months." And membership was spread over twenty-three Northern Jersey towns, including East Orange, Montclair, Roselle, Hackettstown, Plainfield, West Orange, Morristown, Irvington, Hoboken, Ridgewood, Verona, Caldwell, Glen Ridge, Millburn, Bogota, Congers (N.Y.), Westwood, Belleville, Newark, Bloomfield, Monsey (N.Y.), Jersey City, and Orange.

This last statistic in particular shows how quickly and widely the A.A. message of recovery was spread by enthusiastic members who thrilled in "recruiting" others. Also, Bill W. and Lois were living in Monsey, New York, just over the New Jersey border, at this time, so one can assume that he brought in that prospect himself on his visits to the meeting.

A year and a half later, on September 25, 1941, another listing of members by name, telephone number, and address, was sent to the service office, which was now established at 30 Vesey Street in New York. There were eighty-two names on the list, but no sobriety dates. Some significant comparisons between the two lists: there are a dozen names that appear on both, including Charles S. (sober since June 1939), Gordon M. (sober since April 1939, and compiler of the original "survey"), and Helen P. of Bloomfield (sober since November 1939), who had served as the group's corresponding secretary since at least February 1941.

There was much to correspond about. There are numerous letters between the Jersey Group and the New York office, almost from the very beginning. Information, copies of the Big Book (and later pamphlets), and, most importantly, referrals of need and interest were exchanged. Here is an example, a letter from Ruth Hock to George S. of Montclair, sober about eighteen months (based on the "survey" listing) at the time. The letter is dated December 19, 1940:

Dear George,

You will remember we talked about an alcoholic suspect in Ridgewood, New Jersey when you were in the office the other day. He is Mr. name , address , Ridgewood, N.J.

As I told you, he has a book which Bill agreed to loan [sic] him for a while but which he said he would pay for within a month. He did come to one New York meeting but has not been heard of since, so I would appreciate it if you would have one of the boys look him up and as you said, "at least we can get the book."

Thanks a lot.

More often than "suspects," the drunks were called "prospects," as in correspondence between one William R. of Hackettstown, also in December 1940, and others. Also, the letters shared information about new groups within the movement: A meeting in Camden, New Jersey was begun in May 1940, sponsored by the Northern New Jersey members, with help from A.A.s in Philadelphia, as well.

At about this time, the Jersey Group also began twice yearly contributions to the service office in the amount of \$75, each of which was promptly and gratefully acknowledged with a letter. And another name, Margaret

R. "Bobbie" Burger began to appear on the correspondence as the New York office secretary.

The year 1941 was a significant one for the Jersey Group, beginning on the high note of growth and ending with the devastating surprise attack on Pearl Harbor that signaled the U.S. involvement in World War II. Frictions and fractures also began to appear within the Jersey Group, but it would remain more-or-less unified and retained that name until 1941, but not beyond.

On March 18, 1941, Dr. Malcolm T. had written to express his desire to start a group in Morristown. By November 14, the Bergen County group had been formed; a group roster was submitted to the New York office by Dorothy M., listing fourteen members, one of them cross-registered with the South Orange-based group. For each potential group, the office helped by forwarding literature to the group secretary, and the groups paid for books and pamphlets and contributed to cover office overhead. There is a spirit of cooperation and closeness much evident between the lines in these letters, one can even say deep affection.

Perhaps the watershed event of 1941, which affected the New Jersey movement, as well as A.A. as a whole, was the article by Jack Alexander in the March 1 issue of the Saturday Evening Post. (An interesting side note for us: Pass It On calls Jack Alexander a "hard-nosed" reporter who had "just completed a major expose of the New Jersey rackets." [p. 245] I don't think that refers to the Jersey Group.) For months thereafter, there was a steady stream of inquiries and referrals stemming directly from the article.

In the extant correspondence in GSO Archives, there are scores of such referrals, reflecting thousands nationwide. It is clear that the office had difficulty keeping up with the volume, but the workers there and the group secretaries kept in frequent touch, with local members responsible for the follow-up contacts with drunks and family members who had written to New York about this phenomenon now called Alcoholics Anonymous. The Northern New Jersey groups remained in close and frequent contact with the New York office throughout the war period, '41-'45.

Let us continue our march, through 1942 and '43, years of continued growth in membership and testing of the spiritual principles that are the foundation of the A.A. home group as we know it today.

The Montclair Group was founded at this time. It may be worthwhile to present the announcement from the group secretary, addressed "To All A.A. Members in New Jersey," dated April 10, 1942. In the words, and between the lines, you will hear very clearly, I believe, an expression of the very real tensions and aspirations of these members of the time:

As you may know, there is in the process of formation another A.A. group which met for the first time in Montclair on Sunday March 28. This letter

is written to you for the purpose of making known our aims and to cordially invite your co-operation and understanding.

This will probably be known as a Montclair group but has not as yet located a central meeting place. For the present, we are meeting at the homes of members, whose addresses are in Montclair, Verona, Glen Ridge, Caldwell and surrounding Essex County, as well as in Morris County. A central meeting place convenient to these territories is to be obtained as quickly as possible and our group expects to embrace this general region. However, AAs from any other territory will be sincerely welcomed either as guests or as members of this group.

We are in no sense a rival group of any other group or groups; we offer our support and cooperation to all in A.A. Our group is being established on the basis of fundamental principles as set forth in the book ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS and to function in accordance with the Twelve Steps as outlined therein, without modification, addition or subtraction.

There are to be no executives or other officers with the exception of a secretary and a treasurer. Meetings will be kept informal and friendly in the true A.A. tradition, our belief being that individual work with individuals, as set forth in the book, having succeeded best in the past, will always succeed. We believe that all AAs were created free and equal and that if the principles of honest, humility, sincerity, brotherly love, and the reliance on a Higher Power are adhered to we can not help but progress in the freedom from our common trouble and in that sense of happiness and tranquility which accrues to all who work together in harmony for the common good.

We have no quarrel with anyone excepting John Barleycorn. We grant to all the right to their own opinions as we believe we have the right to ours. Our opinions are as set forth in this letter. We are for A.A., pure and simple and undiluted, with no malice or rancour and with only good thoughts and wishes for all AAs everywhere.

THE MONTCLAIR AAs

I think we may delineate some familiar themes from this announcement to the A.A. members of New Jersey. The home group ought not to be over-organized or "top-heavy" with officers. The group ought to focus on the one-to-one work with the still-suffering alcoholic as much as possible. One group should not compete with another group, but cooperate. And, perhaps, one group ought not to become so large as to lose touch with its primary purpose of welcoming and helping the drunk who might find his way in. Further, the Twelve Steps are the basis for recovery and unity within a group, as long as they are fully followed.

There are some negative vibes, as well, perhaps some simmering resentments and interminable arguments that led to the split from the original "Jersey Group" now meeting in South Orange. The mention of A.A. "pure and simple and undiluted," and the Twelve Steps "without modification, addition or subtraction" leads one to think there were debates and divisions within the first group about these very issues, which were not resolved to the satisfaction of all.

Sound familiar? Perhaps to those of you not from Northern New Jersey, these contentions will seem strange and foreign!

Before that first organizational meeting in Montclair, an anniversary dinner was held on March 14 in East Orange at a cost of \$2.50 per person. And some of the correspondence with the service office tells us of other matters of concern in the Garden State. Herman G., the secretary-treasurer of "Alcoholics Anonymous of N.J.," which in itself is telling, writes on April 18, 1942 to report on three meetings, listing South Orange on Sunday at 5:30 p.m., Newark on Tuesday at 8:30 p.m., and Bloomfield on Thursday at 8:30 p.m. No mention of Montclair . . .

Gas rationing and other travel difficulties sometimes made it problematic for A.A. members to visit each other and to call on prospects, as reflected in some of the correspondence from this period. And the war itself loomed large in the minds and hearts of everyone on the home front. Bobbie Burger gave some reassurance to New Jersey members in her note from May 21, in which she writes, "We have listed Pvt. M.'s name in our 'service' file and thanks for giving it to us. So far he is the first one of our members at Fort Bragg and when there are more we will see that they have a chance to get together."

An October 1, 1942 letter from Herman G. to Bill W. in New York demonstrates how North Jerseyites held a somewhat proprietary attitude about Bill's proximity and availability. There are numerous letters inviting, begging Bill to come back for meetings and social gatherings, and, of course, he did. Herman concludes his scrawled note: "God has been good to me. Sometimes it's unbelievable but facts are facts. I hope you can come out to Orange very soon. We need you once in a while. It's a great way of seeing friends [who] would like to see you. Try and [make] some kind of arrangements to come out someday or Sunday. I would love to have you as my guest. We have a nice home and you could come for dinner and then to meeting." Dinner and a meeting with the co-founder, talk about a nice A.A. evening . . .

Based on the volume and intensity of material in both archives, 1943 saw roiling activity in North Jersey in A.A. circles. The first meetings of the "several groups of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut areas" - you might call it the first regional gathering - was held on September 28 in Manhattan: one of the first stirrings of what would eventually become General Service activity.

The busy secretary, Bobbie Burger, wrote to Harold S. of the Montclair Group on July 14, 1943, specifically in reply to his question about gas rationing and whether the office was able to help with special requests from A.A. groups. (It wasn't.) She noted that there were now eight thousand "listed membership" in A.A., putting the worldwide scope of the movement in perspective. And there is this interesting and important P.S.: "Understand that all is sweetness and light now between Montclair and South Orange. Are you going to the joint meeting?" That brought a smile to my lips when I read it.

Three more significant pieces of correspondence from this period: First, from Miss Burger to Hugh T. on November 2, 1943.

Had luncheon yesterday with Herman G. of your Group and was so happy to see him looking better. He gave me much first-hand information about the wonderful South Orange Group and its growth. Less than four years ago, all the Jersey people as well as those from Long Island and Westchester were meeting in one small room with the New York crowd at Steinway Hall. Hardly seems possible that there were only a handful of us in this whole area such a few years ago.

A lengthy, handwritten letter from John S. (known as "Jack") of South Orange - a member of that "wonderful" group - details yet another split among the original membership based in South Orange, by this time the acknowledged "mother group" of New Jersey.

November 27, 1943

Dear Bobbie,

There is general, perhaps universal, recognition by its membership that the group that has been holding Sunday meetings in the South Orange Community House has far outgrown its quarters and also that the time has come for the formation of small groups that will meet separately on frequent occasions and jointly, at stated intervals, at an adequate and more central place to be agreed upon.

At this point views diverge.

There are those who want a club house, most of them a specific building which can be had only by purchase.

Others, with numerical superiority, have misgivings about any club house for this group or this club house for any group. Most of these seem to favor a Newark hall which, it seems likely, can be acquired through political connections, in a public building at a nominal rental.

This plan contemplates also a business office with a paid secretary and an arrangement for medical and psychiatric advice.

Each of these plans presupposes a continuance of the present group as the parent body and the formation of the small groups as subsidiaries.

A third point of view has been advanced by those who believe that continuance of the present organization as a parent body will perpetuate the rivalry for domination that already has distracted attention and diverted energy from the main purpose of A.A. Those holding this view see the solution in the spontaneous formation of autonomous small groups joined together in a federation which shall have a place for regular joint meetings and, in due course, a business office under the control of a committee composed of delegates from member groups, membership in such federation, however, being open to any New Jersey group.

At the last business meeting it became regrettably manifest to several of us quite independently that as one group there was little likelihood that we would get anywhere but it was also apparent that as a number of less cumbersome bodies we could progress.

It seemed to each of us that someone should take the initiative. Those of us holding this view, or some of us, gravitated together and, finding ourselves in agreement with the federation idea, have formed a small group in the hope that others may be stimulated to do likewise.

We disclaim exclusiveness. We shall welcome members from any source but we shall not solicit them from any other group. We have no intention of attempting to build ourselves up by pulling others down. Our aim is to cooperate with any other group or groups in the advancement of A.A. with all that that entails.

We shall hold meetings at the South Orange Community House on Wednesday evenings at 8:30 and on Sundays at 5:30 at quarters that have been but experimentally selected.

Our motives will be impugned by some but while we disclaim any indifference to unjust imputations we are prepared to face them tolerantly because we are acting only at the dictates of our conviction that if the formation of other well-motivated groups results from our move the benefits inherent in A.A. will become more readily available not only to those who are not yet members but also to those who already are.

Sincerely yours,

And the reply from the office, dated December 1:

Dear Jack,

Thanks so much for writing fully on what has been going on in the South Orange Group. I feel sure, and I know Bill will have the same reaction when he knows of it, that everything is going to come out right. After all if we keep fairly close to the A.A. principles we can't go very wrong.

I presume that there will be some centralization developed in the future so that new people coming in will not be confused. And also if possible it will be good to have a central clearing place to receive inquiries.

Are you going under the name of the South Orange Group? or how will you be discriminated from the regular crowd who meet on Wednesdays and Sundays in the Community house?

Keep your eyes on the "12 steps" and your sense of humor well oiled. With this combination, how can you do anything but get along fine, not only among yourselves but also among the other groups.

Makes sense, even today . . .

The following year shows voluminous contact between the New Jersey groups and the office and reflects unceasing activity here in the northern section of the state.

There was a booming expansion in numbers and size of groups in Northern New Jersey. By the end of the year there were active groups in Passaic, Elizabeth, Orange, Livingston, Kearney, Plainfield, East Orange, Irvington, Paterson, Jersey City, among others, in addition to longer-established groups in South Orange, Newark, Montclair, and Bergen County. A year later there was to be a group started at the V.A. Hospital in Lyons.

The A.A. Grapevine is a source for some good news about growth on this side of the Hudson River. From the June 1944 inaugural issue of the Grapevine:

ELIZABETH, N.J. The group is one of many that started in South Orange. Captain Gus Steffens of the Elizabeth Police Dept. started trying to rehabilitate some local drunks known as the "Bottle Gang." Then A.A. stepped in. Result: a growing group. The Mayor and other officials furnished a perfect meeting place gratis. Now there is also the PLAINFIELD, N.J. group - an outgrowth of Elizabeth. So A.A. grows.

The same GV issue notes early corrections work in the area: an A.A. group among the inmates of the State Reformatory for Women at Clinton was sponsored by the Morristown Group. Bill W. himself had addressed corrections officers there in February 1944. Similarly, there was a meeting at the "experimental stage" at the men's State Prison at Trenton. Later in the

There is also evidence of early public information work in a Newark News article from January 29, 1944. It is headlined, "A Plan for Drunkards." The final paragraph reads as follows:

[Chief Magistrate] Masini declared AA rehabilitates habitual drinkers, returning them to a useful place in society. Its work is economical to the nation, he added, in that thousands of dollars are spent yearly for maintenance of persons confined to institutions as drunkards.

Such publicity was mother's milk to the groups. I can't help but quote this letter in its entirety, from the following year (October 12, 1945), from Henry R. of Jersey City:

Dear Bobbie and Bill,

Enclosed you will find a writeup that was in our local newspaper. This is the first good article about our organization that these papers have given us. Bobbie and Bill, the first drink never gave us in Jersey City the kick this writeup gave us. Our job in Jersey City is now starting. We are soon going to open a few more groups. In Union City and Bayonne.

I'm sure this writeup will make you as happy as it did me. See you at your dinner, folks.

Back to 1944 - the indefatigable Herman G. also noted that the non-alcoholic trustee, the editor and author Fulton Oursler, had spoken at a special meeting in his November 14 letter, noting, "and Fulton Oursler's talk was one of the greatest [that] I ever have heard." And that was on the same platform as Bill himself. Were the Jersey people tiring of hearing his story? Not likely.

Fast forward again to end of the year and the end of this presentation. A.A. not only survived into 1945 and beyond, but thrived in Northern New Jersey, as it has throughout the United States and Canada and virtually the entire world. Our experience in this little piece of geography, where this convention is being held, was typical of the experience documented elsewhere - and it helped to clarify the need for the Twelve Traditions and, eventually, the Twelve Concepts for World Service, which govern our world service structure and General Service Conference.

So, these cursory reflections only scratch the surface of a rich and varied history in our own backyard. When was your home group founded? From what other group or groups did the original members come? Has your group grown or declined, multiplied or gone defunct in the intervening years? It is held by the members of the South Orange Group, my home group, that we have not

missed having a meeting on Sunday night for sixty-two years. Our attendance these days ranges from twenty-five to fifty, at 7:15, in the third venue after the original Community House location. From the very first time I walked into that meeting, more than fifteen years ago, I was made to feel welcome and a part of A.A. as a whole. I hope you can say the same of your home group, wherever it is. If not, there currently exist more than a thousand registered groups in Northern New Jersey to choose from.