

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes to Philadelphia

By Jim Burwell
September 1st 1946

How it happened. The writer came to Philadelphia on a new job February 13th, 1940, having been dry in the original New York Group for about two years. Being in a new city, he knew he had to have other alcoholics to work and play with. On February 17th he contacted Charlie Bergner, whom he had met once, some two years before, at a New York AA meeting. This was the first contact. The same Charlie read over the new AA book, which had been published nine months before, and then and there we decided to start an AA group in Philadelphia. At this time there were only three other established AA Groups in the country – Akron, New York, and Cleveland.

Our next step was to see two of Charlie's potential Oxford Group prospects, Bayard Bowie and Edmund Posey. They were all for trying it out. In the meantime, the New York office sent us an inquiry from one George Sullivan, who also became enthusiastic. Then the writer, Jim Burwell, went to a Keswick meeting at 69th Street and hooked one of their converts, McCready Huston, who agreed to go along for the ride. This was our nucleus – each a completely different type of individual but all sincere.

Philadelphia Founders: Chas. Berger, Bayard Bowie, Jim Burwell, McCready Huston, Ed Posey, Fitz Mayo, Geo. Sullivan.

We had our first organization meeting at McCready Huston's room at 2209 Delancy Street, Thursday February 28th, 1940. Present were Charlie Bergner, Bayard Bowie, McCready Huston, Edmund Posey, George Sullivan, Jim Burwell, and a visiting AA member from the New York Group, Fritz Mayo. Of these seven, six have maintained their recovery from alcoholism.

At this February 28th meeting, we agreed to have our first Open Meeting at George Sullivan's home on the following Thursday night and to invite the families of those involved, as well as Bill Wilson, AA co-founder, from New York. Between these two meetings, an accidental encounter in a bookstore where the writer was trying to place copies of the new AA book, resulted in our introduction to Dr. A. Wiese Hammer who immediately caught fire and asked to become our Medical Advisor. Dr. Hammer and Dr. Saul, his associate, were the first medical men in the country to allow their names to be used publicly by AA. This was done in the article in the Saturday Evening Post, March 1st, 1941.

The first Open Meeting of the Philadelphia Group of Alcoholics Anonymous was held at George Sullivan's house on Thursday March 6, 1940, those present being Charlie Bergner, Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Bowie, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Burwell, Dr. and Mrs. A. Wiese Hammer, Mrs. Metzger, Mr. And Mrs. Edmund Posey, Mr. And Mrs. Gordon MacDougall and Mr. And Mrs. Herbert Debevoise of East Orange, N.J., Fitz Mayo and Mr. and Mrs. Bill Wilson from New York.

That night we talked AA informally, with Bill Wilson as the center of attraction. Coffee and doughnuts were served by Mrs. Sullivan. We passed the hat the first night, being determined to be on our own from the start, and collected \$17.50. We ended the meeting with the Lord's Prayer about 12:30 a.m. – everyone being very happy with this new fellowship.

The following Thursday evening, all of us AA's were invited to Dr. Hammer's home. There was one new prospect, George Bullock, as well as Jim Ashbrook, a non-alcoholic who immediately became a great friend and worker for A.A.

The third Thursday Open Meeting was held at Bayard Bowie's home, where Dr. Hammer first introduced us to Dr. C. Dudley Saul, who also asked to be allowed to act as Medical Adviser.

The fifth meeting, April 3rd 1940, was the first one really open to the City of Philadelphia, and was held at St. Luke's Hospital. This was arranged by Doctors Hammer and Saul. About thirty attended, including families. At this meeting we decided to have a committee of three, to be

changed monthly, who would handle all AA activities of the Group. The first committee was composed of Bergner, Bowie and Burwell, (hence the three B's) with Burwell acting as Secretary and Treasurer. Philadelphia AA's first publicity came on April 1, 1940 in the Philadelphia Record.

In April 1940, we convinced Dr. Wm. Turnbull, Superintendent of Philadelphia General Hospital that we could help him with some of his alcoholic patients and at the same time he would be helping us.

Around April 10th we made our first Saturday afternoon visit to the Psychopathic Ward to visit the alcoholics. On this trip we lassoed two of our best AA workers, Art McMasters and Bud Monihan. At the same time, we convinced Dr. Stauffer, Chief Psychiatrist, that we had something we both could use. Since this date, AA has never missed a Saturday visit to Philadelphia General Hospital. We estimate that at least 150 of our present members, both men and women, first had contact with AA while confined at this hospital during one of our visits.

In September 1940 we made our first visit to the House of Correction at Holmesburg. Our first convert here was Jack Dornan, who came in a couple of weeks later and has remained dry and very active in AA ever since.

In the fall of 1940 we concluded that a clubhouse would greatly help our AA fellowship which now numbered about 75, including three girls; so in November 1940 we opened our first clubhouse at 2036 Sansom Street. This was a store property about 18 x 60 feet, with two floors, rent \$60.00 a month. Our first steward was Bill Wells, who had recently become a member. At that time there was only one other AA clubhouse in existence – in New York. However, we went a step further than they by adding a lunch counter service and staying open from 8:00 AM to 1:00 AM daily. This is why Philadelphia claims to have the first complete AA Clubhouse.

Our plan for financing all these activities was for each of us who had been dry two months to pledge a weekly contribution. These were placed in small plain envelopes with name and date written in, and put in the hat at the Open Meetings at St. Luke's. No contributions were to be over \$1.00 a week. This plan was worked out by our Treasurer, Johnny Lee. Most of our original furniture and equipment was donated by members and friends and was not in too good condition. Mmes. Bowie, Burwell, David, Hammer, Lewis, Sauland Kearns were those who did most of the work and saw that we got what we needed.

On December 28th, 1940 we had our first monthly business meeting (another first for Philadelphia) and at that this meeting it was decided to hold a closed weekly meeting for AA members and prospects. These were to be held each Monday night at the clubhouse and were to be supplemented by the regular open Thursday meetings at St. Luke's for families and friends. These Monday closed meetings have continued without a break since. It was also decided at this first business meeting that we would help Major Baggs at the Salvation Army Rehabilitation Center by having a group of AA's visit there and hold weekly meetings with their alcoholic prospects. Dick Gibbs was the first AA to come out of this Center.

AA left the clubhouse at Sansom Street in May 1941 for larger and more elaborate quarters at 1537 Pine Street. There we were flooded with AA prospects as a result of the Saturday Evening Post article. Our active membership at this time was about 125, with about five active girls, the most solid being Fanny Levy.

AA carried on at the Pine Street Clubhouse with about the same activities, continuing our open meetings at St. Luke's Hospital until November 1942 when we switched these to a more central spot at Crozier Hall, 1420 Chestnut Street. The open meetings were held there until July 1943.

July 15th 1943 we took over the Alpha Chi Rho Fraternity House at 219 S. 36th Street, adjoining the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. This arrangement was made at a monthly rental of \$175 with two months free rent though Jim Anderson, our then Secretary, who was also president of the fraternity. AA landed at 36th Street with an active membership of about 250 and exactly \$50.00 in the bank.

When we moved the club to 36th Street we found that in these new, well-furnished quarters out type of membership greatly improved, and we started to get many men and women who had not hit "bottom" as hard as some of us older members.

To continue with our real work, we decided when we moved into the new Clubhouse to form a House Management Committee who would handle the financial and administrative affairs of the club, but who were to leave all AA meetings and actual AA work to the Monthly Operating Committee which had been so effective. No member could serve on this Management Committee who had not been dry at least a year. This plan worked out very satisfactory. AA remained at 219 South 36th Street until April 1, 1946, when the fraternity cancelled our lease in order to return the building to the university students.

During the time we occupied the 36th Street Clubhouse, we held our closed Monday meetings at the club and our open meetings on Thursdays either at the club or across the street at the University of Pennsylvania Christian Association.

In April 1945 Bob Moorman and the writer made arrangements with Dr. Wilson, Superintendent of Episcopal Hospital, whereby they would give us four beds for the hospitalization of AA prospects for de-fogging. Treatment was to be administered by Dr. J. H. Arnett at a cost of \$10 a day including medical fees and no visitors were permitted to patients except A.A. members. A \$500 Hospital fund was created by voluntary subscription, as a revolving fund to assist the newly organized Hospital Committee headed by George Roberts. These funds were used to assist likely prospects that were unable to pay for hospitalization. The plan worked out very well and we estimate that about 50% of those hospitalized under this plan became active AA members.

Several new activities got underway during 1945 while we were at the 36th Street Clubhouse. In April we also decided it was imperative to have a full-time secretary, so Helen Snyder was employed as a paid secretary. In September 1945, the Women's Group, then numbering about twenty-five, began to hold a closed monthly meeting for women alcoholics and prospects only. These meetings continued and have proved to most successful, both in bringing new women into the group and creating closer cooperation with the Women's Group.

In November 1945 a third weekly Clubhouse meeting was inaugurated on Sunday afternoons from three to four, especially for new people and night workers. This meeting was initiated by Ed McGee.

Due to our tremendous growth and the responsibilities that our expansion was putting on the Management Committee, in January 1946 the members voted to incorporate. This we did, as Alcoholics Anonymous of Philadelphia (a non-profit corporation) and a complete new set of by-laws was enacted. The first officers elected were Bill Jennings, President; Jack Hurlburt, Vice President; Pat Riley, Treasurer and Johnny MacDowell, Secretary. It was also voted to change the name of "Management Committee" to "Board of Directors". This Board was to be composed of one representative of each neighborhood group and was to serve for six months while the corporation officers were to serve for one year. This Board and office control all AA finances and club administration, while the monthly Operating Committees continue in control of AA meetings and activities.

In March 1946 we purchased our first Clubhouse at 4021 Walnut Street for \$27,500, from the Philadelphia Fidelity Trust, who immediately gave us a first mortgage of \$15,000. The remaining \$12,500 was raised by popular donation through our own membership only, with practically nobody giving over \$100.00. However, due to OPA (Government war-time) regulations we could not get immediate occupancy of the new Clubhouse, so on April 1, 1946 we moved into temporary quarters in the ballroom of the Covington Hotel, 37th and Ludlow Streets. Our membership was now around 600.

We are continuing at the Covington with our open Thursday meetings and all other club activities, but the meetings have grown so large that at present we are looking around for a more capacious place to hold these.

One of the most satisfactory developments of our growth in Philadelphia has been the establishment of neighborhood groups. The first of these was started in March 1945 in Jenkintown by George Roberts and Warren Cornell and since then others have sprung up in Camden, N.J., Ardmore, 69th St, Frankford, Germantown, Central City, and Roxborough. All these groups have their own closed weekly meetings, usually on Monday, and are a great help in making closer contact with the new people from their respective sections. All remain an integral part of the Main Group, attend the weekly open meeting at the club and contribute to the support of the Clubhouse. At the present time, the monthly Operating Committees are composed of one member from each of these neighborhood groups, including the Women's Groups and Young People's Group (of which more later) and each Thursday the open meeting is sponsored by a different local group with the Committee member from that group presiding. Each Operating Committee member serves for one month only and cannot serve again for several months, and it was the writer's opinion that this monthly changing of committee personnel has been the secret of the cooperation and success of the Philadelphia Group.

The Young People's Group, which was started around February 1946 by Bates McLean and Art Leonard, both under thirty, is one of the most encouraging things ever to happen in AA. These two members decided that AA was not doing too good a job with younger prospects so they started a weekly Monday meeting of their own, to be made up of only members under 35. They are doing a remarkably fine job, and with the ever-increasing number of younger people who come to AA for help, we feel that these younger members are just the answer to the problem of educating the alcoholic to understand his problem before he has suffered too much. The Young People's Group, which numbers a few ladies also, are solving the problem of a substitute for their social drinking, by organizing picnics, parties and other social activities as well as their AA group therapy.

1946 saw the establishment, on June 20th, of the first private Alcoholic Clinic for the education and treatment of alcoholism. This was established, as a separate annex by St. Luke's Hospital and is located across the street from the hospital at 1242 North 8th Street. This Clinic was the realization of the efforts of two of AA's best Philadelphia friends and medical advisers, Dr. C. Dudley Saul and Dr. C. Nelson Davis, with the latter in full charge. Johnny Lee, one of our oldest members (in point of sobriety) acts as business manager. The present capacity of the clinic is 18 beds and they are now handling over 50 alcoholic patients a month. The average stay is five days and the cost is \$10 a day plus \$15 for medical services. AA in Philadelphia is cooperating wholeheartedly with this clinic and all the patients there are advised to investigate and join AA. Dr. Davis holds an informal forum on alcoholism each morning which is attended by past and present clinic patients, as well as members of the public who are interested.