

THE OXFORD GROUP CONNECTION

The following article was written by Ray R. (8/25/59)

This article is an effort to put together in sequence the various events that took place in the years from 1908 to 1935 that made possible the meeting in Akron, Ohio between the AA co-founders, Dr. Bob Smith and Bill Wilson, and which resulted in the subsequent birth of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is an assemblage of facts gleaned from the following publications:

- Alcoholics Anonymous
- AA Comes of Age
- Pass It On
- Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers
- Not God (by Ernest Kurtz)
- For Sinners Only (by A.J. Russell)
- On the Tail of a Comet (by Garth Lean)
- Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous (by Dick B.)
- The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous (by Dick B.)

Do you know any of these names? Frank Buchman--Sam Shoemaker--Rowland Hazard--Jim Newton--Eleanor Forde--Ebby Thacher--Shepard Cornell--Henrietta Seiberling--Rev. Walter Tunks--Norman Shepherd--Russell Firestone--T. Henry & Clarace Williams?? All of these people were instrumental in a scenario that contributed to making possible that historic meeting at the Gate House of the Seiberling Estate in Akron that became the birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous. If it were not for these people, that meeting could never have taken place, and the fellowship to which we all owe our lives today might never have been born.

Where did the steps originate? In AA Comes of Age, (p.39), Bill wrote:

"Early AA got it's ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and nowhere else." (1)

We prepare to start this history with the story of Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group. You will see as we trace the paths of Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson in the years before they met, that the Oxford Group and the aforementioned cast of characters played a part in every twist and turn of the path that led Bill Wilson to Akron.

FRANK BUCHMAN AND THE OXFORD GROUP

Who were the Oxford Group (2)? In 1908, a YMCA secretary named Frank Buchman had a spiritual transformation that changed his life (3). Upon graduating in June of that year, he started a street side church in Philadelphia (Church of the Good Shepherd) with a donation of seventeen dollars. The church flourished, and he started a hospice for young men that spread to other cities, and then he started a settlement house project. Frank had a violent argument with his trustee committee because they cut the budget and the food allotment. He resigned and went to Europe, ending up at a large religious convention in Keswick, England. The spiritual transformation occurred when he heard a woman speaker talk simply about the cross of Christ. He felt the chasm separating him from Christ, and a feeling of a will to surrender. He went back to his house and wrote these words to each of his six trustees in Philadelphia: "My dear friend. I have nursed ill feelings against you. I am sorry. Will you forgive me? Sincerely, Frank." Feeling an urge to share this experience, he went to nearby Oxford University and formed an evangelical group there among the student leaders and athletes.

Later the movement spread, and groups formed over the next twenty years in England, Scotland, Holland, India, South Africa, China, Egypt, Switzerland, and North and South America. Many of the basic things they did have carried over directly into our program. They practiced absolute surrender, guidance by the Holy Spirit, sharing bringing about true fellowship, life changing, faith and prayer. They aimed for absolute standards of Love, Purity, Honesty, and Unselfishness, which were an integral part of the first AA programs in Akron and Cleveland and New York. Above all the group was a fellowship: "A First Century Christian Fellowship." They carried the message aggressively to others. They met in churches, universities, and homes.

The Oxford Group and their principles were carried to the United States so that in both New York City and Akron, Ohio an Oxford Group was in place and functioning when Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith hit their respective bottoms. These two groups would befriend and teach their principles to our co-founders before they ever met, and then go on to host the fledgling groups of newly dry and nameless drunks as they came together.

Here is how the Oxford Group came to the United States. One early member at Oxford, Ken Twitchell, had attended Princeton University and had a brother in New York City who was a mainstay in the Calvary Episcopal Church. This becomes one of several amazing coincidences. In 1918 during his travels, Frank Buchman met a young YMCA worker, Sam Shoemaker, in China and converted him to the Oxford Group principles. Years later, Sam became the minister of that Calvary Church in New York, and that same church became the titular headquarters for the Oxford Group in the United States. (The name was changed in 1928 from "A First Century Christian Fellowship" to the "Oxford Group.")

The groups' popularity peaked during this period. There were 10,000 people at one meeting at Stockbridge in the Berkshire Mountains. Business teams began to have their "house parties" in various cities (4).

In 1931 in England, a London newspaper editor, A. J. Russell, attended an Oxford Group meeting with the intention of exposing the group. But he wrote, "I came as an observer and became a convert!" (Russell later edited "God Calling", which may have found its way into material used by the early AA's.) Some 9 years later, in 1940, Richmond Walker of the Quincy, Mass. group wrote the 24-hour book still used by us today. This was modeled after Russell's "God Calling" but was slanted away from all spirituality to more of a 24-hour not drinking theme. Russell's book, "For Sinners Only", described his journey from prodigal son to the Oxford Group and became a best seller in the early 1930s in England and the United States, and was printed in eight languages.

One chapter of the book was devoted to Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City and its rector, Sam Shoemaker. Calvary Church became the virtual American headquarters for the Oxford Group during the 1930s. And it was here, (in the church's mission), that Bill Wilson's sponsor, Ebby Thatcher, was living at the time of Bill's last drunk.

HOW THE MESSAGE CAME TO BILL

In 1932 and 1933, a man named Rowland Hazard, son of wealthy Rhode Island mill owners and a State Senator, had become a hopeless alcoholic, and in his quest for help had sought out the world famous psychiatrist, Carl Jung. Jung told him there was no hope for him there, and to go home and possibly find a conversion through some religious group. He did this in the Oxford Group in the United States and became sober. They taught him certain principles that he applied to his life. This story is documented in our Big Book.

In 1934, Ebby Thacher, childhood friend of Bill Wilson's, was about to be locked up as a chronic drunk in Bennington, Vermont. He was visited by three men from an Oxford Group, Shep Cornell, Rowland Hazard, and Cebra Graves. (A precursor to our Twelve Step work!) They later sent Rowland Hazard back alone to see Ebby. He acted as a sort of sponsor and told his story. He taught Ebby the precepts he had learned from the Oxford Group. Later, as we know, in December of that year, Ebby had his chance to relay these precepts to Bill Wilson. Here they are, transcribed from a tape of one of Bill's AA talks:

- We admitted we were licked.
- We got honest with ourselves.
- We talked it over with another person.
- We made amends to those we had harmed.
- We tried to carry this message to others with no thought of reward.
- We prayed to whatever God we thought there was.

(We also have Bill's handwritten copy of the above.)

Now we begin to see the emerging pattern of events in Akron and in the New York area in the ten-year period before the start of AA. We see how, through the machinery of the Oxford Group and its key leaders, Frank Buchman and Sam Shoemaker, events conspired to make possible this meeting between Bob and Bill in Akron in 1935. Shep, Cebra, and Rowland were all three Oxford Group members. They were part of the business teams that were working around the country in various cities. In November of 1934, Ebby surrendered his life to God at the Calvary Episcopal Church mission run by Sam Shoemaker. (Sam had met Frank Buchman in China in 1918, and by 1934 was regarded as a major leader of the Oxford Group movement in the United States and was hosting their headquarters.) Ebby is staying at his mission. Bill W. shows up there drunk looking for Ebby, can't find him, and goes to Towns Hospital.

Bill Duval recalls in a letter, "Bill W. told us at the mission that he had heard that Ebby, on the previous Sunday at the Calvary Church, had witnessed that with the help of God he had been sober a number of months." Bill said that if Ebby could get help here, then he (Bill) needed help, and he could get it at the mission, also. Bill looked prosperous compared to our usual mission customers, (actually, he was wearing a Brooks Brother's suit purchased at a rummage sale for \$5.00!), so we agreed that he go to Towns Hospital where Ebby and others of the group could talk to him.

After his spiritual experience at Towns, Bill immediately made a decision to become very active in Oxford Group work, and to try to bring other alcoholics from Towns to the group. He visited the mission Oxford Group meetings and the hospital daily for four or five months, right up to the time of the Akron trip. No one stayed sober.

BILL W. AND THE OXFORD GROUP WORK (Jim Newton enters the scene)

Rowland Hazard, who rescued Ebby in August 1934, had a thorough indoctrination in Oxford Group teachings and he passed many of these along to Ebby and Bill W. Soon after his release from Towns Hospital at the end of 1934, Bill and the rest of the alcoholic contingent of the Oxford Group began gathering at Stewart's Cafeteria in New York following their regular meeting. Shep Cornell, then a member of the Oxford Group business team that included Rowland, Sam Shoemaker, and Hanford Twitchell, was also a recovering alk. Lois Wilson talked of regular attendance at the Oxford Group meetings with Bill, Shep, and Ebby. James Houck, a nonalcoholic Oxford Group member in Frederick, Maryland, stated that Bill W. went to many Oxford Group meetings at the Franc is Scott Key Hotel in Frederick and always centered on alcohol. He was obsessed with the idea of carrying the message. The conclusion is that Bill had a wide acquaintance in Oxford Group circles, not just confined to Sam and Calvary House.

Bill told Houck that he worked on 50 drunks in the first 6 months with no success. Calvary House was Sam's residence and contained an Oxford Group bookstore. Calvary Mission was at another location in the "gas house" district. Thousands of people passed through the mission where they offered lodging, free meals, and Oxford Group meetings every night. Tex Francisco was its superintendent in 1934 when Bill showed up there.

Now enters the man most certainly responsible for the fateful Akron meetings between Bill and Dr. Bob. Jim Newton was surely the sole catalyst that ordained the Oxford Group would be in place in Akron, Ohio when Bill showed up there in 1935. This amazing string of circumstances plays out as follows:

Jim, at age 20, was a luggage salesman in New York who had come upon an Oxford Group meeting by accident (actually, he was looking for fun and games that night!) in Massachusetts in 1923 when he was 18 years old. He was converted at the party, got on his knees and gave the direction of his life to God at that time. He met a lady named Eleanor Forde who greatly influenced his thinking about the movement. (He and Eleanor were to meet and marry 20 years later in 1943.) (5)

Several twists and turns of fate placed Jim Newton in Akron, Ohio and installed our next cast of characters. These were both Oxford Group members and regular attendees at Oxford Group meetings. We will be talking about the intertwined relations of Henrietta Seiberling, Dr. Walter Tunks, Harvey and Russell Firestone, Sam Shoemaker, Frank Buchman, T. Henry and Clarace Williams, and Anne and Dr. Bob Smith.

Jim Newton went to Ft. Myers, Florida in 1926, at age 21, to visit his father, and they bought a 35-acre tract of land across the road from the Thomas Edison estate (6). Jim Newton became as an adopted son to Mr. and Mrs. Edison, and often acted as host and toastmaster at Edison's famous birthday parties that were attended by Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and many world-renowned business leaders and public figures.

Here begins another key circumstance to set the stage in Akron, Ohio. Harvey Firestone, Sr., offered Jim a job as secretary to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in 1926, and moved him to Akron, Ohio putting him in residence at the Portage Country Club adjacent to the Firestone Estate (7) Jim worked for Firestone eleven years and was being groomed as president of the company when he resigned and went full time with the Oxford Groups. Firestone's clergyman was Rev. Walter Tunks. Jim joined Tunks' church and became active in raising funds for their birthday committee.

Jim had been in New York for the Jack Dempsey vs. Gene Tunney fight. While there he confessed to Frank Buchman that his life was in turmoil and he was about to take a "geographical cure". Buchman sent him to meet Sam Shoemaker at the Calvary Church and he made an Oxford Group confession to Sam and was led to join one of the Oxford Group business teams.

These were groups of important men who made attempts to convert others to the Oxford Group method of spirituality. Jim frequently met with the aforementioned Shep Cornell and Rowland Hazard. He met T. Henry and Clarace Williams, husband and wife Oxford Group members from Akron and members of Walter Tunks' church. The business team put on house parties in various cities at the finest hotels and clubs. In January of 1933, Frank Buchman, leading a team of thirty men and women, descended on Akron for the first time to give testimonials at the Mayflower Hotel and in Akron churches, and initiate the townspeople in the experiences of the Oxford Group. Here we can clearly see input from Jim Newton's parties with Firestone and Tunks' Episcopal Church group to influence the choice of Akron as the site of this endeavor, rather than some other city. Had Jim not already been a business team member and in place in Akron, it is very unlikely that Buchman would ever have chosen this small, rather unknown city as a place to pursue his evangelistic efforts. Jim was the spokesman who introduced Buchman at all the affairs that week in Akron.

Now our cast of characters is nearly complete and in place. Still to appear on the scene, however, are Henrietta Seiberling, Anne and Bob Smith, and T. Henry and Clarace Williams.

When Jim first arrived in Akron he had been welcomed into the Firestone family, and had become fast friends with a son, Russell (Bud) Firestone. Bud had a very bad drinking problem and had already been sent to several hospitals to no avail. Jim went with Bud to still another drying-out place, on the Hudson River in New York, and stayed through the entire 30-day program. Then he took Bud to an Episcopal Conference in Denver to which the Oxford Group people had been invited. On the train East again after the party, he was able to introduce Bud to his old Oxford Group minister, Sam Shoemaker. Alone with Sam, Bud surrendered his life to God in a private car on the train. His life changed, and his family situation and marriage were saved.

"Now Akron was the place where AA was to be founded. Jim Newton had helped bring to the city the Oxford Group message of his alcoholic friend, Bud Firestone. The message led to Bud's "miraculous" recovery that lasted for a time. The message and the recovery were broadcast to an interested community by a grateful father, Harvey Firestone, Sr., and by widespread press accounts." (7)

Clarace Williams was there, and joined the Oxford Group along with T. Henry Williams, and began regularly attending the meetings. About the same time, a lady named Henrietta Seiberling, the wife of John Seiberling of the Seiberling Tire and Rubber Company, found herself with personal and marital problems, and separated from her husband. She turned to the Oxford Group and attended the first meetings at the Mayflower Hotel. She went with a woman named Anne Smith, the wife of a well-known Akron surgeon who was in deep trouble with his drinking.

The progenitors now assume their roles. A kindly and missionary-oriented couple, the Williams, had been impressed with the Oxford Group message, and had a home to offer for a meeting place. A gifted and compassionate lady named Henrietta Seiberling, who had mastered some of the Oxford Group principles, had her eye on using the biblical principles to help her good friend, Dr. Bob Smith, with his drinking problem. Add to this mix the efforts of his wife

Anne, who assembled books and spiritual readings and principles from the Bible, the Oxford Group, and various other Christian writings, all the while praying for a solution to her husband's seemingly hopeless drinking problem. The talented and very alcoholic surgeon became the focus of all these efforts. He did a lot of spiritual reading, attended a lot of meetings, but remained drunk.

Now all the earlier seeming coincidences converge, and this story merges into the facts we all know from our AA literature.

Onto this scene landed the "rum hound" from New York, moved by what both Bill Wilson and Henrietta Seiberling felt was the guidance of God. Bill had recovered from his disease, and was determined to stay sober by seeking out and helping another drunk. The "rum hound from New York", (Bill's self-description when he made the fateful phone call to Henrietta), "just happened" to bring to Akron some solutions heretofore never assembled in one place and delivered by just one person.

- 1 - Some important knowledge about the disease of alcoholism accumulated through the work of Dr. Silkworth at Towns Hospital in New York.
- 2 - An important spiritual solution to the problem that had been passed from Dr. Carl Jung to Rowland Hazard and then on to Bill by Ebby Thatcher.
- 3 - A validation of this spiritual solution by the scholarly studies of Professor William James.
- 4 - A linkage between the problem of alcoholism, and this solution that God could and would solve the problem if a relationship were sought with Him by using the Oxford Group's practical program of action, which was already proven by the results experienced by Rowland and Ebby when they followed the Oxford Group program.

In Akron, T. Henry and Clarace Williams and Henrietta Seiberling were attending Oxford Group meetings at the Mayflower Hotel and elsewhere. Dr. Bob Smith also attended with his wife, Anne. He shied away from talking about his problem publicly, and continued drinking. In her concern for Bob, Henrietta suggested to T. Henry that if they could set up a smaller, more private meeting perhaps Bob might feel more at ease and be able to make a confession in the Oxford Group fashion, and a commitment to sobriety. T. Henry's home was chosen for this special meeting and these meetings started on a Wednesday in April of 1935--just one month before Bill Wilson came to Akron. These meetings were usually led by T. Henry, Henrietta, or Florence Main, and at one of these Dr. Bob was able to confess that he was a secret drinker and needed help as he could not stop. This was the very place that was to become the home to the "about to begin" Alcoholic Contingent of the Oxford Group.

We can now see how all these characters contributed to putting Dr. Bob and Bill at a meeting in Henrietta Seiberling's home in the Gate House of the Firestone Estate, and make possible the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous.

AKRON - MAY 11, 1935

We can find no references anywhere to indicate that Bill Wilson considered or made any conscious effort to locate an Oxford Group member when he made his desperation phone call in the Mayflower Hotel in Akron. Henrietta Seiberling wrote as follows:

"Bill looked into the cocktail room and was tempted and thought, 'Well, I'll just go in there and get drunk and forget it all and that will be the end of it!' "

Instead, having been sober five months in the Oxford Group, he said a prayer. He received guidance to look at a ministers' directory board and a strange thing happened. He put his finger on one name--Tunks. The Rev. Walter Tunks was Harvey Firestone's minister, and Firestone had brought Buchman and thirty Oxford Group members to Akron for ten days in gratitude for their help for his son, Russell, a drunkard.

Out of the act of gratitude of this one father, this whole chain started.

R.R.

IN AN ATTEMPT TO PAY BACK JUST A LITTLE . . .

This article was written in an attempt to preserve and to "pass on" the accurate history of the beginnings of AA, before the sands of time obscure them completely as they have a habit of doing so well.

It was forwarded to New York and reviewed for accuracy before going to press. However, if you have any questions or comments, or would like permission to reprint, I would be delighted to hear from you.

Feel free to call, or better yet, visit me at my home group.

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- (1) See also "Language of the Heart", p.298
- (2) See "Pass It On", p.130
- (3)

See also "Life Changers" by Harold Begbie (Mills and Boon)

- (4) For further details of the Oxford Group in the U.S., see "Pass It On", p.127-32; p.168-74 "AA Comes of Age", p.39
- (5) The land was subdivided and exists yet today as a prosperous residential development called the Edison Estates.
- (6) Bill Wilson was also furnished quarters here seven years later after he started working with Dr. Bob!
- (7) This paragraph was taken from "The Akron Genesis and AA".
- (8) This writer, along with the Akron Archivist Ray G., had the good fortune to be able to visit Jim and Eleanor Newton at their home in Ft. Myers, Florida, in May of 1993. They are active and well, she at age 94, and he at 88. Eleanor was employed by Sam Shoemaker, who introduced her to Frank Buchman. She went abroad as an Oxford Group worker with Frank in 1926, and has remained active in the movement ever since.