

THE ORIGIN OF THE TRADITIONS

"A.A. must make everlastingly certain that we always shall be strong enough and single-purposed enough from within, to relate ourselves rightly to the world without." With this statement in the August, 1945 issue of the Grapevine, Bill Wilson made public for the first time the essential premise that led to the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. Eight months later, in the April, 1946 Grapevine, Wilson's article, "Twelve Points To Assure our Future," first presented (in long form and in their entirety) what were to become the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous.

FIVE EVENTS THAT ACCELERATED AND CHANGED OUR GROWTH

In 1937, two years after A.A. was founded, membership numbered 40, split between two groups, Akron and New York. Two years later, in April, 1939, when the first of the five events that forever changed A.A. occurred, membership totaled between 80 and 100. That event, the publication of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was followed in the span of two years by: (2) a series of articles in the newspaper, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, in September, 1939, coincident with the beginning of A.A. in Cleveland in June, 1939; (3) the publication of an article, "Alcoholics and God—A Frank Discussion," in September, 1939, in *Liberty*, Canada's then largest weekly magazine; (4) the Rockefeller dinner in New York, in February, 1940 (75 of 400 invited, attended. Rockefeller bought 400 copies of the Big Book and sent them, along with transcripts of the speeches made that night, to all invited); and (5) the Jack Alexander article, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in the March, 1941 *Saturday Evening Post*.

Prior to the publication of the *Saturday Evening Post* article, A.A. membership had grown to about 2,000. By the end of 1941, membership stood at 8,000. By 1953, when *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was published, membership had grown to 133,000. A.A. history tells us that, prior to 1941, the efforts of those in Akron and Cleveland were more successful than those in New York, in terms of sober members. However, because of the cumulative effect of the publicity that resulted from the five events listed above, A.A. was swamped with written requests for help. No longer could direct personal contact suffice as the means of carrying the message. Since New York was the publishing and distribution source for A.A., it became, in the eyes of the public, the "center" of A.A.

EXPERIENCE AND ACCEPTANCE GUIDE RAPID GROWTH

By 1944, A.A. had 360 groups and an estimated membership of 10,000. Much of Bill's work was taking care of correspondence. Many of the letters asked for assistance in forming new groups or requested advice on various problems and circumstances in the groups: membership, group autonomy, singleness of purpose, nonendorsement of other enterprises, professionalism, public controversy, and anonymity in its several aspects were common, consistent issues.

As the membership increased, so proportionately grew the correspondence directed to the New York City office. Many letters contained questions concerning procedure, practice and, on occasion, theory. Wilson devoted hours answering this correspondence, always in the same format: "If I understand correctly, your problem sounds similar to... On that occasion, these good people, now years sober, tried... Of course, it is for you and your group to work this out: I can only relate to you what we have seemed to learn from past experience. Perhaps you and your group will choose to follow this, but whether you do or not, please let us know how it comes out."

It was from answering the same questions again and again that the idea of devising clear guidelines for the groups first evolved. It was suggested by a friend of A.A. "that all this mass of experience might be codified into a set of principles which could offer tested solutions to all our problems of living and working together and relating our Society to the world outside."

"To say Bill Wilson was the sole author of the Traditions is both true and untrue. He was certainly not the sole author of the experiences from which they evolved, but he was the person who interpreted and culled meaning from these experiences. The meanings, as derived by Bill, subsequently became the backbone of the Traditions."

In June of 1944, the Grapevine was established as a local New York City newsletter, because six individual A.A.'s were concerned about what seemed to be "a lack of understanding" among groups in the metropolitan area. Mailed by the editors to all known groups in the U.S. and Canada, the Grapevine soon caught on nationally, and, in 1945, by vote of the groups, it became the principal journal of the Fellowship.

Bill Wilson used the Grapevine as a means of communication, ideally suited to his needs, to share with the rapid and ever-growing membership, his thoughts and beliefs about the trial and error process that resulted in A.A. spiritual principles of Recovery, Unity, and

Service. He also used it to articulate his vision of what the fellowship could become. Over 26 years he wrote more than 150 articles for the Grapevine, including 29 articles, beginning in August, 1945 through November, 1948, in which he defined the need for, explained, and subsequently offered to the membership, the Twelve Traditions.

The traditions were not met with overwhelming endorsement or acceptance. It was testament to his genius that he thought to call them, "Traditions." Had they been called laws, rules, by-laws or regulations they might never have been accepted by the membership. Bill knew his fellow alcoholics well; he knew no self-respecting drunk, sober or otherwise, would willingly submit to rules or laws!

During the period from 1947 to 1950, Bill traveled the country, "selling" the traditions to the groups, whether his audiences wanted to listen or not! Often, he remembered, they did not. He received letters like this: "Bill, we would love to have you come and speak. Tell us where you used to hide your bottles and tell us about that hot-flash spiritual experience of yours. But please don't talk any more about those damned Traditions!"

The Twelve Traditions had already been reduced from the "long form" to capsule statements which, in total length, more matched the 200 words of the Twelve Steps. Earl T., founder of the Chicago group, made the suggestion and worked with Bill on the revisions in 1947. The Grapevine carried the newly condensed Traditions in every issue, making every member Traditions-conscious.

In the summer of 1950, at the first international convention in Cleveland, several speakers presented the twelve traditions to the convention.

Bill Wilson then presented a summary and asked the convention for final approval, which was unanimous, thereby assuring unity for the future of a fellowship that was only fifteen years old.

Jack D.

The Home Group

Reference Sources:

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions
A.A. Comes of Age
Pass it on
Language of the Heart

Non-conference approved:

Not God

CHRONOLOGY

July, 1935 — First Group T. Henry/Clarace Williams Home; Smith's Home; Kings School.

September, 1935 — Second Group 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn

Fall, 1937 — New York withdraws from Oxford Group.

Summer, 1939 — Midwest Groups withdraw from Oxford Group via Cleveland.

April, 1939 — "Alcoholics Anonymous" published.

September, 1939 — Cleveland Plain Dealer Series of Articles

September, 1939 — Liberty Magazine Article

February, 1940 — Rockefeller Dinner

March, 1941 — Jack Alexander Saturday Evening Post Article

April, 1946 — "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future" in Grapevine.

December, 1947 - November, 1948 — Traditions Essays in Grapevine.

July, 1950 — Traditions adopted by membership - first International Conference at Cleveland.

June, 1953 — "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" published.

APPROXIMATE EARLY MEMBERSHIP

June, 1935 — 2

August, 1935 — 5

April, 1936 — 7

February, 1937 — 12

November, 1937 — 40

February, 1938 — 52

Fall, 1938 — 110 (70 Akron/Cleveland; 40 New York) Frank Amos report to John D. Rockefeller.

February, 1941 — 2,000

December, 1941 — 8,000

1944 — 10,000 (360 Groups)

June, 1953 — 133,000 (publication of "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions")

GROUP EVOLUTION 1935 — 1940

AKRON

July, 1935—Williams/Smith/Kings School

June, 1939—Cleveland (Abby G.'s home.
Clarence S.- Akron)

Mid- 1939—Chicago (Earl T.- Akron)
Sept., 1939—Denver (Mort J.- Big Book)
Oct., 1939—Cleveland (Borton Group)
Nov., 1939—Cleveland (Orchard Grove)
Nov., 1939—Cleveland (Lee Road)
Dec., 1939—Los Angeles (Frank R.- Arizona/
Big Book; Lee & Chuck.- East)
Cecil Hotel Group - first read
Chapter 5 to start meeting.

Sept., 1940—Toledo, Ashtabula, Dayton,
Wooster, Canton.

Oct., 1940—30 Groups in Cleveland.
Nov., 1940—Evansville, Ind. (J.D.H.- Akron)
Detroit (Archie T.- Akron)
Houston (Larry J.- Cleveland)
Austin (Ted- Houston)
Tampa (Roy Y.- Houston)
Dallas (Esther- Houston)
Atlanta (Irwin M.- Cleveland)
Minneapolis (Chan F., Bill Y.- Chicago)
Kansas City Ks & Mo (Johnny P.)
Pittsburgh (Jake H.- Akron)
Little Rock (Liberty Magazine)

NEW YORK

Sept., 1935—182 Clinton St. Brooklyn

Spring, 1939—Upper Montclair, N.J.
(Hank P.)
South Orange, N.J.
Youngstown, Ohio
(Jack D. - N.Y.)

Fall, 1939—Monsey, N.Y. (Bob V.- N.Y.)
1939—Greenwich, Ct. (Marty M.)
Blythewood San.
Flatbush, N.Y. (Harold S.)
72nd & Riverside
Rockland State Hospital
(first hospital mtg)

Feb., 1940—Bert's Tailor Shop/
Steinway Hall/334 1/2 Ravenna.
West 24th St. (1st club)
1940—Philadelphia (Jimmy B.- NY/
George S.- Liberty Mag.)
Washington, D.C. (Fritz M. - NY)
Richmond, Va. (Jack W.)
Charlotte, N.C. (Dave R.- NJ)
Miami (Fred K.- NJ)
San Francisco (Ray W.- NY)
Jacksonville (Bruce H.)
Buffalo
Boston

BILL WILSON'S TRADITIONS ARTICLES

from Language of the Heart

(originally printed in The A.A. Grapevine)

AUGUST, 1945	Modesty One Plank for Good Public Relations
SEPTEMBER, 1945	'Rules" Dangerous But Unity Vital
OCTOBER, 1945	The Book is Born
JANUARY, 1946	A Tradition Born of Anonymity
MARCH, 1946	Our Anonymity Is Both Inspiration and Safety
APRIL, 1946	Twelve Suggested Points for A.A. Tradition
MAY, 1946	Safe Use of Money
JUNE, 1946	Policy on Gift Funds
JULY 1946	The Individual in Relation to AA as a Group
AUGUST, 1946	Who is a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous?
JANUARY, 1947	Will AA Ever Have a Personal Government?
MARCH, 1947	Dangers in Linking AA to Other Projects
APRIL, 1947	Clubs in AA
JUNE, 1947	Lack of Money Proved AA Boon
AUGUST, 1947	Last Seven Years Have Made AA Self-Supporting
OCTOBER, 1947	Traditions Stressed in Memphis Talk
NOVEMBER, 1947	Incorporations: Their Use and Misuse
DECEMBER, 1947	Tradition 1
JANUARY, 1948	Tradition 2
FEBRUARY, 1948	Tradition 3
MARCH, 1948	Tradition 4
APRIL, 1948	Tradition 5
MAY, 1948	Tradition 6
JUNE, 1948	Tradition 7
JULY, 1948	Tradition 8
AUGUST, 1948	Tradition 9
SEPTEMBER, 1948	Tradition 10
OCTOBER, 1948	Tradition 11
NOVEMBER, 1948	Tradition 12