

## Letters from 1940s A.A. Groups Played Key Role in Traditions

The Twelve Traditions, which were adopted at the First International Convention in Cleveland in 1950, grew out of the struggles of the early A.A. groups. Referring to these troubles, Bill wrote: “This was the welter of exciting and fearsome experience out of which A.A.’s Twelve Traditions were drawn and first put to paper in 1946” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, page 96).

*“It seemed as if every contestant in every group argument wrote to us during this confused and exciting period....”*

Bill W.

Disputes revolved around who could be an A.A. member, group autonomy, singleness of purpose, endorsement of other enterprises, professionalism, public controversy, and anonymity. These disputes often became very personal, with the warring factions writing to the New York office for advice and to ask for support. Many of these letters were addressed to Bill W., who was seen as the ultimate authority. It was also the case that Bill personally knew many of those at the middle of disputes.

In the April 1946 issue of the Grapevine, Bill first published the 12 Traditions, writing: “Nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous. It grew. Trial and error has produced a rich experience. Little by little we have been adopting the lessons of that experience, first as policy and then as Tradition.”

The G.S.O. Archives holds file boxes of letters written by Bill in the 1940s in response to appeals from A.A. members all over the country. As Bill later wrote in *A.A. Comes of Age* (page 203): “It seemed as if every contestant in every group argument wrote to us during this confused and exciting period....” The letters Bill wrote back to these A.A. members were not simply short and polite responses. Instead, they are sometimes two and three pages long, as Bill took care to spell out his—and the New York office’s—experience on the knotty problems that prompted these A.A. members to turn to him.

Bill confessed in a letter in February 1950 to an A.A. member in Michigan that, “when letters describing the growing pains of the early groups came across my desk here at the office, I used to lie awake nights. It seemed certain that the forces of disintegration would tear our pioneering groups apart.... Yet nothing much happened except the movement continued to grow and so did the people in it.... We actually thrive on internal squabbles. It is part of the growing-up process by which individuals and groups mature.”

In looking back on these disputes, as he does in a letter he wrote in August 1950, Bill sums up growing pains in groups as “every A.A. Group starts... through the efforts of a single man and his friends—a founder and his hierarchy.... But when infancy is over, the original leaders always have to make way for that democracy which boils up through the grassroots.”

In that same letter, which he was writing in response to a local A.A. dispute, Bill refrained from taking sides or issu-



The Twelve Traditions, which came out of the problems that A.A. groups wrestled with in the first 10 years of Alcoholics Anonymous, were first published in the April 1946 issue of the Grapevine. The first page of that issue and the page on which the article about the Traditions was printed are shown here.

ing directives, meanwhile suggesting that all concerned in the matter show restraint and understanding of each other's foibles: "Maybe you think this advice disappointing; it would be natural if you did. Yet it has its origin in years of strenuous experience concerning these very matters."

In fact, Bill made it a point never to take sides, knowing, as he said, that doing so only made a situation worse. It was a policy he adopted early on. One letter addressed to Bill in March 1940 from an A.A. member in Washington D.C., describes a disagreement among members over how to organize their A.A. group. As with many others who wrote to the New York office, this A.A. member wanted Bill to lay down the law: "Some members say we should 'organize', elect a president and other offices and ... appoint committees to carry out definite assignments. ... Most of the old bunch including myself cannot seem to agree with the ideas of several of the 'new comers'.... It is for this reason that we all agree you must come to Washington and get us straight once and for all."

Bill writes: "our policy up here is not to interfere in local affairs unless some proposal or action is contemplated that might interfere with the work in other places." Bill then goes on to say that, "The New York chapter, in spite of the fact that it has more than a hundred members, finds that a single committee of seven men is sufficient to take care of all matters of business or policy which may arise.... Please don't take this as coming from me, I am merely reciting our experience so far."

In response to a letter from a member in March 1941 outlining the rancor among members in Cleveland, Bill writes: "I'm sorry—very sorry for what has happened in Cleveland.... The existence of all this hard feeling so strongly reflected in your letters is the deplorable fact with which you folks out there have to deal." But Bill then makes it clear the New York office cannot take sides. "The Trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation long ago came to the conclusion that they would never interfere with the local affairs of any group. I'm sure you can see the wisdom of this decision. To run groups from New York or umpire disputes at a distance

## Markings Welcomes Articles from Readers

Markings invites its readers to contribute articles for possible publication in the newsletter. A history of an area or a group can be the subject of an article. Markings particularly welcomes stories from A.A. archivists. Share your experiences with us, your successes, and those issues that make your job a challenge. Among our readers are A.A. archivists new to that role and the accounts of those with more experience can be valuable.



*A.A. members around the country saw Bill W. as the ultimate authority on all matters pertaining to Alcoholics Anonymous and would appeal to him for guidance and support. They sent their letters to the Alcoholic Foundation's offices at this building on Lexington Avenue in New York City.*

would surely be disastrous. The Trustees look upon themselves as mere custodians of national funds and have assumed authority only upon those matters which touch the national interests of all groups."

Bill is writing here of the principles that would later embody Tradition Four ("Every group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.").

Some of those writing to the New York office had big ideas on improving the way A.A. was organized. One such letter, dated May 5, 1943, was sent from three members in North Brookfield, Mass. They recount problems in their "nearly two year old" group, the "Worcester Chapter," which they attribute to the domineering actions of the group's founder. "This unhappy friction, which is inevitable in the absence of established rules, has caused members to return to drinking...."

The A.A. members from Worcester offer a solution: "We believe that individuals joining an organization like the A.A. are entitled to have their rights protected. It is a shocking condition when an individual, as maladjusted as is the average alcoholic, joins an organization like the A.A. to achieve normal living, and upon arriving at a state approaching normalcy, finds that he is associated with a group which is

not constituted along normal and democratic lines. It has put members back on the bottle....

“It is our joint suggestion that the board of trustees consider the matter of adopting a plan for granting charters, together with a constitution which will harmonize group action and reward members with positions of trust based upon periods of sobriety.”

Though A.A. was still in its formative years, there had been enough experience of these problems that Bill could confidently offer reassurance: “Let me give you this assurance, The Worcester Group will not disintegrate—problems and charters and personalities to the contrary. In fact, there isn’t the slightest chance of it.... I say this so positively because I have been through these same troubles with lots of groups and I have found these growing pains beneficial in the long run. These situations always right themselves somehow. They have to.”

Bill goes on to say that the group members will either work it out or form a new group. “Whichever way you choose will matter little in the long run. In two or three years, members of differing groups will get together and laugh over the differences....” Addressing the particular suggestion the A.A. members made in their letter, Bill writes: “About charters: Frankly a great many have been tried but none work. They all go into the ash can because somebody has to draw up and enforce a charter. Alcoholics won’t stand for enforcement... To issue charters from this office would be impossible. A great cry would go up about dictation from New York. We have found here that our slightest interference in a local situation is resented.” Bill’s response touches on what was to be Tradition Nine: “A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.”

In a letter from April 1942, a member in St. Louis writes: “For some time there has been a group within the St. Louis assemblage who felt that their objectives could best be reached thru weekly meetings open only to alcoholics, invited guests such as physicians, and prospects for A.A.” In his letters, Bill maintained an open mind to the way groups around the country conducted their affairs. In scores of letters Bill wrote around this time, he never once resorts to a veto. In his response he says: “I imagine many A.A.s would take some exception to the appearance of the exclusiveness of your charter when basically we are more on the inclusive side. But I would not for a minute try to discourage fresh experiments. All we have learned arises from trial and error and I hope it will never be otherwise.”

In 1945, an A.A. member from Ann Arbor, Mich., had for three months been writing a column about Alcoholics Anonymous in a local newspaper. In the column he invites readers interested in learning more about A.A. to contact him. He writes to Bill in November of that year to report that he has encountered opposition from other A.A. members and

to explain his position. Regarding the column, he says: “I felt that it was my best way to continue to carry the message to thousands of people every week.” His A.A. group, meanwhile, wanted to be able to edit his column and also to participate in answering the inquiries.

Bill responds: “While I would be the first to defend your legal right to print anything you please, the question whether you are doing the most useful thing in this case is something else again. The circumstances you cite also raise the question to what extent a single AA may act in a public relations manner without the general consent of the AA groups in the area to be affected. While your publicity may be bringing in new prospects, and so doing considerable good, it may also be causing such internal discord that the good you do is more than offset....

“Were I in your place I would be reluctant to publish articles about AA without a pretty general consent of the AAs in the area to be affected. I could not feel I had a moral right to enter into a public relations program without widespread consent for fear I would be setting a precedent for other people to do the same thing....

“Suppose, for example, that some other member of the Ann Arbor groups were to suddenly decide he ought to go on

## Recent Acquisitions

Items donated to the G.S.O. Archives add to the size and depth of our overall holdings. In 2010, we are fortunate to have received a wide variety of such items, for which we are very grateful. Here is a partial list of materials received thus far this year:

- A copy of *Your Faith* magazine from September, 1939, containing an interview with Dr. Bob.
- The book *We Carried This Message: A History of AA in the Harrisburg Area*.
- A special International Issue of *The Grapevine* from January 1988.
- A copy of the Big Book in Hungarian.
- Genealogical information and photographs pertaining to Captain Jack S.
- A 1995 commemorative edition of “Alcoholics Anonymous—The Australian Experience.”
- A thank you card and note from Sister Ignatia to a member
- Three cassettes of Dr. Jack Norris.

Of course, this is not a full list, and the year is not yet over. We welcome contributed items that can help improve our overall knowledge and understanding of A.A. history, adding insight into the past of our Fellowship.

the radio and tell his story to the wide world. Suppose that he could not tell his story well—that he talked AA very poorly. In a case like that both you and I would try to restrain him, wouldn't we?"

Often members of a group wrote to the New York office asking to be recognized as representing A.A. in their locale.

A letter dated Feb. 11, 1946 from a member identifying himself as the "public relations counsel" for A.A. in Detroit is written in a kind of rigid legalese: "I want to make it clear that any individual member contacting the New York Office from Detroit has no official standing unless he bears a letter of authority from the Central Committee through the General Secretary, Helen K.

"Concersely [sic] A.A. in Detroit will not accept any representations from any individual member unless authorized as aforesaid purporting to convey any information to us from the New York Office."

Bill says in his reply that: "It is with real distress that I have just finished reading you letter.... Naturally I feel badly to find so many people, all good friends of mine, arrayed against each other in what appears to be a rather serious split among the Detroit Groups."

Bill repeats what he has said to others, namely, that "we cannot—we must not—interfere in the affairs of any local group or aggregation of groups."

Bill then goes on to say that "this being our experience we cannot recognize the claims of one set of groups over another set of groups in a local situation" and that the New York office will recognize both parties equally and list them as such and respond to inquiries from both. "We have to be equally friendly and equally cooperative with every A.A. Group in the country who wishes a separate group listing. Regardless of its inconvenience our whole position as a National Service Committee depends upon painstaking adherence to this principle."

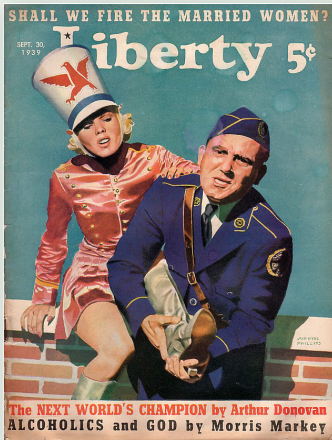
As Bill says in another letter to a member, groups have "the right to manage their own affairs as they like – they are actually guaranteed the right to be wrong, provided they don't seriously harm AA as a whole."

Bill, since he did know so many of those involved personally, could appeal to them very frankly, saying in one letter: "Come now, Chuck, let's try to wind up this nonsense. After all, this is Alcoholics Anonymous."

In a response written in May 1949 to a letter from an A.A. member in Detroit, Bill says: "Alcoholics Anonymous is in the process of evolution concerning its relations with the outside world. When you consider the vast army of screwballs that we really are, I think we have done astonishingly well." A big part of the reason that the Fellowship was healthy was that the groups learned from their mistakes, and the solutions to their problems were codified in the 12 Traditions.

## Items Available From the G.S.O. Archives

Did you know that the G.S.O. Archives will send you free of charge such items as



copies of the 1941 and 1950 articles from the *Saturday Evening Post*, the article from *Liberty Magazine*, Bill's Last Message, Dr. Bob's Farewell Talk, service material on "Researching A.A. History," or an article titled "A.A.'s Roots in the Oxford Group"? In addition, we have other materials, such as the prepublication manuscript (or multi-lith) of the Big Book or two sets of 10 photos each of A.A. historical interest, which we provide for a contribution. Also, the Conference-approved Literature Catalog contains items from the Archives, such as the A.A. Archives service piece, the *History of Service CD*, and the Archives DVD "Markings on the Journey." If you are interested in receiving any

of these items, or a list of what we make available, please contact us at [archives@aa.org](mailto:archives@aa.org) or at 212-870-3400, and we will be happy to help you.

