

The Evolution of the Chicago Area Service Office

Chicago's Central Service Office (CASO), the first in the nation, began simply in May 1941 in an office building at 127 N. Dearborn Street in downtown Chicago as a way to ensure that the one-to-one alcoholic connection would remain A.A.'s core mission. The group had outgrown its meeting place in suburban Evanston, Illinois, and needed a more central location that was accessible by public transportation.

Whether the decision to create a service office reflected Midwestern pragmatism or Chicago bravado, the innovation was later adopted nationally. It worked! Alcoholics in need could find help immediately by calling a single phone number or showing up in person. In a tradition that continues to the present day, the Chicago office was a welcoming place, providing a daily noon meeting for out-of-town visitors as well as workers in the city's "Loop," so-named for the elevated structure that rings the downtown business district.

Earl T., the Chicago area's first sober member, learned about A. A. directly from Dr. Bob in Akron, Ohio. As documents in the Chicago Area Archives Repository confirm, he and Sylvia K., the group's first female member, began holding meetings in September 1939. Grace Cultice (1889-1948), a nonalcoholic who had served as an unofficial secretary to Chicago A. A., was the first of fifteen men and women responsible for the day-to-day operations of the central office. As early members recall, her first desk was a kitchen table in an entryway to the group's "club room" on Dearborn Street in 1941. There she became a familiar figure, the public face of the central office, embodying its philosophy of "Service, Not Authority." For the next seven years, until her death, Grace worked tirelessly on behalf of Chicago A.A., confident that if prospects left the office with a smile, "You've given them something to cling to."

In a letter cherished by early Chicago A.A. members, Bill W., with his characteristic bluntness, asserted that it is "a hell of a job to get a group functioning in a new locality." Drawing on his own experience in New York and that of Dr. Bob in Akron, he counseled them not to be discouraged "if the going is slow at first," reminding them that men and women familiar with the Big Book "are likely to be good prospects." Chicago may have been the "Second City" after New York, but its very diverse population of more than 3 million people living within 230 square miles responded enthusiastically to the message of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill W.'s encouragement to Chicago members to educate "doctors, hospitals, and ministers" became a reality thanks in large measure to working journalists and editors who used their positions to spread the word about A.A. The newly sober "pigeons" in 1939 and the early 1940s included newspaper men, among them Bill L., Luke H., Chan F., Edwin L., Clem L., Elgar B., and Bill Y. Grateful for their continuing sobriety, they helped to shape the mission of Chicago area A.A. for decades to come. In addition to serving as speakers at meetings and contributing to publications that reached members, these journalists worked hard to ensure that Chicago's daily newspapers and weeklies regularly featured stories about Alcoholics Anonymous and secured free public service announcements on radio and TV.

While many A.A. offices in the United States and abroad include images of Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the meeting room of the current CASO at 180 N. Wabash Avenue features a rare photograph that appeared on the front page of the *Chicago Daily News* on June 7, 1943. Posing for the camera, three reporters with spiral notebooks in hand interview Bill W. about the growth and development of A.A. nationwide. Part of a tradition already established by 1940, the photo and long news story provided essential information—and hope—to alcoholics and their families.

From its beginning, the central office performed a critical function by answering all telephone calls and letters for help and responding with "old-fashioned Twelve Step Work." Writing to Grace Cultice in 1944,



127 N. Dearborn Street, in downtown Chicago, site of the first Chicago Area Service Office. The location of the office would change six times through the years.

Bill W. described the Chicago structure as “just about ‘tops’” and he pointed out that Chicago had “less need for The Foundation office because of your swell set-up.” In light of this situation, he regarded as “remarkable” Chicago’s continuing generosity in providing much-needed funds to New York.

A defining characteristic of Chicago A.A. was its rotating committee structure. In the late 1940s, the Chicago area was divided into North, West, and South divisions with six delegates representing each of the three geographic areas for nine-month tenures. The result was the rotating committee would always have at least a dozen “seasoned” members at any one time. Yet another innovation that emerged from Chicago’s central office was the monthly magazine known as *Here’s How*. First published in May 1949, “in the interests of greater unity of the 175 local groups,” it quickly emerged as a way to keep members in the sprawling metropolitan region informed.

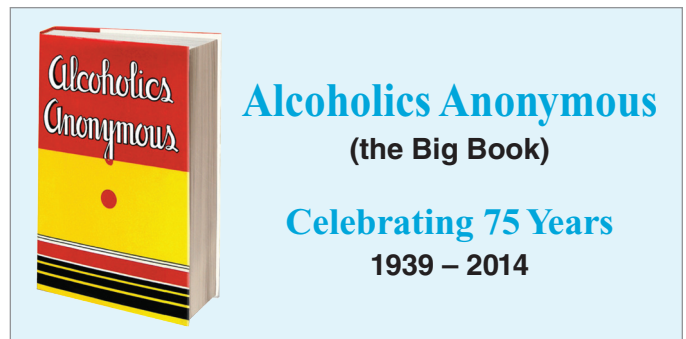
Earl T. later became CASO’s first paid central office manager. This caused some friction among members of the Fellowship at certain levels, but the salaried position eventually became the norm.

As A.A. grew, the central office continued to play a crucial role in maintaining what Earl T. referred to as “the unity that simplicity has brought us.” Every year, volunteers and staff members responded to calls for help, relaying thousands of names and addresses to secretaries of neighborhood groups. At a time when communication was limited to the telephone and the U.S. Mail, the goal remained the same: speed the search for a meeting so that alcoholics could begin their recovery by speaking to other alcoholics.

An effective approach to prevent potential members from “vanishing” was to divide the city and suburbs into ten geographic districts. One of the maps created by the central office hangs above the front desk, greeting newcomers and long-time members alike. A vivid reminder of the early days, it is now encased in a red frame and not one bit of nicotine has been scraped off.

Although CASO has changed locations six times through the years, staff and volunteers answer the phone and greet “walk-ins” at 180 N. Wabash Avenue just as Grace Cultice did in 1941, “selflessly, without fanfare, having no extensive authority and wanting none.”

This article, edited by Chicago historian Ellen Skerrett, is based on documents in the Chicago Archives Repository, located in the Chicago office, as well as interviews with past delegates, historians, and archives committee members. As CASO prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2014, the archives committee continues to seek more information about the group’s first twenty years. If you have relevant A.A. material, please contact Carol O. at chicagoarchives@gmail.com or Laura G., the office manager, at CASO@chicagoaa.org.



A Detective in the Archives

It’s amazing to me how much historical research can resemble a good detective novel. You start out with a fairly solid idea of where you think the story is going, but then discover that you’ve been diverted, step by step, down some strange side-paths, leading to completely unexpected conclusions.

When I’m doing research, those unexpected conclusions seem to come in two different “flavors.” First there are the wonderful “Ah ha!” moments when pieces of the puzzle fall into place, forming a new and unexpected picture of the story. (“Wow... so that’s what happened here... Nice!”)

Unfortunately, those lovely moments are more frequently tempered by less happy times when you discover some new piece of information that just refuses to fit neatly into the story line you’ve so carefully constructed about “what really happened here.” Situations like this can be maddening and, however much I might want to deny the truth of whatever has just been uncovered, those nagging, inconvenient facts refuse to go away and I am forced to wrestle with the contradictions until I can figure out another story line that accommodates and accounts for *all* of the data.

My own research at the G.S.O. Archives is focused on the writing of the Big Book; specifically the period between October 1937 (when the idea of a book was first mentioned) and April 1939 (when *Alcoholics Anonymous* was finally published) and, during my time in the G.S.O. Archives, I have certainly had more than my fair share of both joyful and frustrating moments.

Perhaps my favorite “Ah ha” moment occurred one day as I was sitting at the research table in the G.S.O. Archives reading an early-draft version of “Bill’s Story.” I had already noticed that the story published in the Big Book contained almost all of the Twelve Steps (in unnumbered format and slightly different language, but they are there) and here I was, all of a sudden, confronted with the fact that this late May 1938 version also contained all but one of the Steps found in that published version. (The Second Step reference on page 12 was added sometime after mid-February of 1939.)

Important? You bet! Bill frequently told the story of how he wrote the Twelve Steps in a furious half-hour of inspiration in

early December of 1938. But, here they were, in an almost complete form, in a document which Bill had written six months earlier, as he was trying to explain his own path of recovery.

Clearly, the story behind the creation of the Steps was more complex than the standard version that Bill has left us, and obviously I needed to do some serious rethinking about the proper timeline for the creation of the Twelve Steps as I was writing my book.

Unfortunately, these “Ah ha” moments are much less frequent than those times when inconvenient and contrary facts suddenly crop up.

My book will cover the 18-month period noted above and I have been writing for more than three years now (with at least two more to go). About a year-and-a-half ago, when I wrote the chapter covering the events of April 1938, I included a lot of details about the first meeting of the Alcoholic Foundation on April 11: there was the election of officers, a long discussion about money, Dr. Bob S.’s, involvement with the Foundation, Hank P.’s glowing report on the expanding Fellowship in the East, Bill W.’s unexplained absence from the meeting, and the dilemma of coming up with a legal definition for the word “alcoholic.” It was about six pages long and I was pretty pleased with the way it all came out.

Recently, I started to write about the second meeting of the Alcoholic Foundation, which took place five months later on September 18, and things quickly began falling apart. Something was seriously wrong; events just wouldn’t line up and the more I looked at the facts contained in a small collection of September letters, the less sense I could make out of it all. Contradiction piled up upon contradiction and I spent three very frustrating days trying to make any kind of logical narrative out of what I “knew” to be true.

In the end, it all came down to this. Either six or seven sequence/date mistakes had been made by four different people in their August writings, *or* the handwritten set of notes preserved in the Archives from the April 11 meeting was incorrectly dated. Accepting one error rather than trying to explain away a half-dozen others was the only reasonable way to resolve the dilemma, so I was forced to conclude that the first meeting of the Alcoholic Foundation had actually taken place on August 11

rather than April 11. Once that single mistake was acknowledged, all of the other facts fell into perfect relationship with each other and the contradictions disappeared.

Interestingly, I was not the first to notice this perplexing problem. In 1976, A.A.’s first archivist, Nell Wing, had written at the bottom of one of these initially troublesome August letters: “See April 11, 1938 = first-meeting minutes. These minutes, penciled draft as well as typewritten, seem to refer to events taking place at the Aug. 11 meeting. Perhaps ‘April’ was a slip of the pencil and got transferred to the typed notes.”

This discovery meant that I had to go back and delete all of those wonderful details I had already written about the April meeting, along with many references to the existence of the Alcoholic Foundation during the months of May through August (there was, it turns out, only an “Alcoholic Fund,” set up to deal with Rockefeller’s \$5,000 contribution) and transpose those facts into the new August 11 timeline (which, by the way, helped to make Hank’s glowing report on the number of new members in the East much more believable).

Any good researcher must start somewhere, but — like our detective in the novel — the fatal mistake is to think that you already “know” what happened. The A.A. Fellowship is blessed to have such a wealth of primary documents preserved and accessible to researchers in G.S.O.’s Archives; documents that continue to help historians clarify, explain and better understand the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous.

William H. S., Fairfield, Conn.

A.A. Meeting Sign

We are looking for an A.A. meeting sign (with circle and triangle logo) from the 1980s. If your group has a sign like this one and are willing to donate it to the archives, please send it to us at A.A. World Services, Inc., Attn. Archives, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

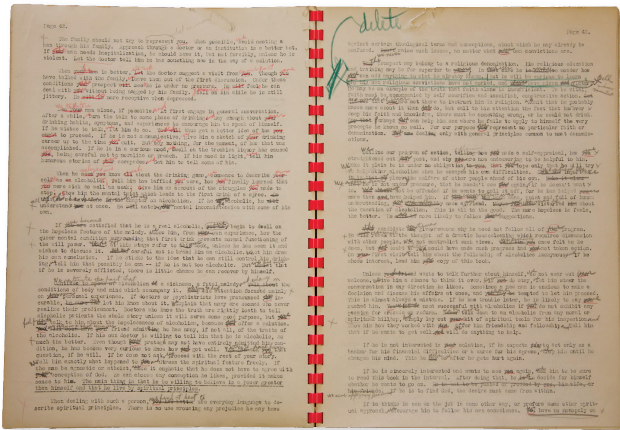


Ever wonder about the editing of the Big Book manuscript?

In mid-1938 Hank P., Bill W.’s business partner, met with Janet Blair (nonalcoholic), an editor he knew from Peekskill, New York. In November 1938, Hank wrote to Janet about Bill’s progress, revealing that Bill should be finished with the writing by December 19, 1938. Meanwhile, another editor, Tom Uzzell (also a nonalcoholic) who was a member of the New York University faculty, was contacted to work on the format.

New Name

You may have noticed our name has changed. *Markings* is now known as *Markings: Your Archives eNewsletter*. Just a reminder, *Markings* is only available electronically. To sign up for digital delivery, please register on the G.S.O.’s A.A. website, www.aa.org. *Markings* is also available in French and Spanish.



According to Bill, Tom Uzzell “sharpened up the English but didn’t change much of anything excepting to take my story out of the story section where it had been the number one story and insisted on using it to open the book. What is now Chapter 2; I had intended to be Chapter 1.” This quote is significant because it reveals to us that in the early manuscript, Bill’s story appeared in the “Personal Stories” section and it was Tom Uzzell who moved “Bill’s Story” to Chapter 1.

By February 6, 1939, Mrs. Blair had mailed Chapters 1 and 2 to Hank, with the other chapters to follow. Excerpts from her letter note that her suggested amendments to Chapter 1: “Mr. P., may I say a word about the continuity? It bothers me a little. Chapter 1, is Bill’s story. Right? Bill’s story includes a description of the terrible dilemma in which he was when his friend came to him; it includes what the doctors thought; it includes a brief account of the fellowship. It tells of the solution.

“When I started Chapter 2, I thought from the first line I was beginning the story of another man, as the first page is just that. On page 2, you leave him, and go on to tell of the fellowship and alcoholics in general. On page 8, you return to the man, and for about a page tell us more about him; the rest of the chapter is general. In Chapter 2, you never mention Bill or his friend, although the ‘solution,’ as you call Chapter 2, is given in Chapter 1.

“I’m not suggesting a change. Maybe I am the one who is befogged; but I am supposed to represent a reader, and I felt I should tell you this. At this moment, it seems to me it would have been smoother, to start Chapter 2 on page 2, ‘We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, know one hundred men who were once just as hopeless as Bill,’ and so on.”

Bill W. replied on February 8th, thanking Mrs. Blair for having “the perception to understand what it is I want to say and the ability to say it so well. You have certainly cleared up our manuscript.”

The editing of the manuscript was likely completed by the end of February 1939; the first printings of the First Edition was completed by April 10, 1939.

On April 21, Hank wrote to Janet Blair enclosing a signed First Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in grateful appreciation of her work.

A collection of letters to Janet Blair and the First Edition Big Book were graciously donated to the G.S.O. Archives by the Area 15, District 7 Archives at the 2012 National A.A. Archives Workshop.