

A Small Meeting 60 Years Ago Launched A.A.'s International Conventions



The First A.A. International in Cleveland in 1950, which attracted about 3,000 attendees, was a joint organizing effort of that city's A.A. Central Committee and A.A. Headquarters in New York.

On March 7, 1950, with A.A. cofounder Bill W. in attendance, members of Cleveland's A.A. Central Committee discussed a proposed big international meeting of the Fellowship. According to the minutes of that meeting, Dick S., who was to be the lead organizer of this event, said, "for some time there has been serious discussion of an International Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous."

Dick, who was an early member of A.A. and a trustee of the Alcoholic Foundation from 1946 to 1953, said that he had discussed such an event, "with several members of A.A. in Cleveland and that it had occurred to them that Cleveland's wish for a 15th Anniversary Observation and the desirability of an International Conference might be combined."

Those members, according to the minutes, "found on inquiry that both Bill and Dr. [Bob] S. would be free at the end of July and heartily approved the idea." And "checking the Cleveland Convention Bureau and the Public Hall they learned that hotels and Hall would be available on July 29 and 30."

Dick S. went on to say that if the Cleveland Central Committee wished to sponsor such an International Conference, the Alcoholic Foundation would cooperate. [Dick was referring to the Alcoholic Foundation in New York, the forerunner of the General Service Board.]

The moderator then introduced Bill W., who said "that in his opinion and that of Dr. [Bob] S., Cleveland was the logical place for an International Conference because of its geographical location and because of the contribution of the Cleveland Groups to the early growth of A.A." According to the minutes, Bill defined this special contribution as "the development of the sponsorship system, thus proving that A.A. could work on a large scale instead of only through the original members."

Bill said "that he agreed with Dick S. that in the event Cleveland

electd to sponsor such a conference, he would urge the Foundation to go along." The tentative plan for financing the event was that each A.A. group in Cleveland would be asked to contribute \$20 toward a goal of \$20,000.

The Central Committee discussed a possible program for the event, with Dick S. suggesting an "open mass meeting in the Public Auditorium on Sunday, July 30, addressed by Bill and Dr. Bob."

According to the minutes, "An extended discussion of these plans followed, culminating in these motions, moved and seconded and carried:

1. "That the sponsorship and facilities of Cleveland Central Committee be offered for a 15th Anniversary Conference of A.A.
2. That Dick S. be appointed General Chairman of this Conference.
3. That the Cleveland Groups underwrite the Conference to the amount of \$2,000, half of the amount to be in by April 1st.
4. That the delegates ascertain from the members of their Groups how they wish to contribute to this fund.
5. That Dick S. be authorized to employ a staff to administer the Conference."

As Bill reported in a letter to Dick S. a couple of weeks later, the Foundation agreed to help in the financing. Bill wrote that, "the Trustees did request that you mail Dr. Leonard V. Strong, Secretary of the Foundation, a formal application (in the name of the committee) for the \$3,000."

In that same letter, Bill said, that "the Grapevine will run my blurb about the conference as an editorial... This blast ought to shake things up enough so that you can get a pretty good preliminary idea how many people will attend."

Registration at \$1.50 and Hotel Rooms for \$2.75

Registration was set at \$1.50, with tickets for the banquet costing \$5. The registration form offered attendees the chance to buy box seat tickets for the Cleveland Indians baseball team for \$2 each.

Hotel rooms had been set aside at about two dozen hotels, with rates ranging from \$2.75 to \$8 for a single, and up to \$12 for a double.

In a letter that Dick wrote in early April, he said, "the First International Conference set up for Cleveland in July seems to be catching on very well, and scattered information indicates that there may be anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 attending. Personally, I hope it is a smaller number, as arranging meeting places for the larger number would be quite a task."

A communiqué to the Fellowship from the organizing committee spells out its idea of what the big gathering would accomplish, aside from providing an opportunity for A.A. members to celebrate the Fellowship: "We cannot impress you too much

with the importance of this Conference to you and the A.A. movement as a whole. The result should be to make it easier for the suffering alcoholic to find us and our being able to help him quietly, quickly and most important of all—effectively.”

In fact, many newspapers ran stories about the Convention, with several articles in the Cleveland and New York newspapers alone.

In one letter written in May or June, the organizers indicated they had only a very limited idea of how many to expect. “At this point it looks like anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000? If we know for sure—within 5,000—what the final number will be, we could lay out the whole Conference program, from meeting schedules down to the last third balcony usher. The big headache is ‘how many?’ There’s plenty of room in Cleveland, even if the whole 50,000 show up! But these accommodations have to be arranged far in advance! We can’t arrange space for 50,000 if only 10,000 arrive. And if we arrange for only 10,000 and 50,000 show—God help us!”

A frantic, importuning note crept into the appeals to local A.A. group secretaries: “We beg you to go all-out during the next week or so to get your group’s registration and reservations in. We ask you, not alone to help the Conference Committee, but for the sake of A.A. itself. For this Conference is bound to be ‘big news.’ An orderly well run Conference will gain us the kind of ‘public relations’ we need and want. A debacle, due to lack of advance cooperation and information, will net us headlines such as ‘Ex-Drunks Still Confused’—not to mention a lot of annoyance and inconvenience for A.A.’s who travel many miles to be here.”

As it turned out, attendance at this first international event of A.A. was to be around 3,000, with at least a few attendees from abroad. The Fellowship in 1950 had about 100,000 members.

Joint Effort Between Cleveland and New York

The thick file of correspondence in G.S.O.’s Archives between the Cleveland organizers and A.A. Headquarters documents how they worked together on the big event. An April 6, 1950 letter from Dick S. to staff person Virginia T. at Headquarters reads: “First, I want to say how much we appreciate the co-operation of all of you in the central office, which has been wonderful.... Any information you

may pick up either of criticism or otherwise, I would appreciate your passing along.”

In this letter Dick talked about “compiling a list of ‘key people’ in various locations throughout the country to which I will mail a couple of special letters in the next couple of months, giving them data on the progress of the First International Conference that they may pass along where they are speakers at various meetings... in spreading the word regarding the Conference.”

In response, a letter of April 13 from Helen B. at Headquarters says: “I am enclosing the names of six A.A. members in the six New England States—these people

are all quite active in the movement and good workers.”

That first Convention program had a session on “A.A. in Corrective Institutions” with Warden Clinton Duffy of San Quentin as principal speaker. Warden Duffy reported that an A.A. group had started in San Quentin in 1942 and that 65 other corrections facilities now had A.A. meetings. “I can say with authority that A.A. is the modern miracle of cooperative endeavor,” he said.

There were also sessions on A.A. for women, young people, A.A. in industry, and cooperation between A.A. and organized medicine. Those at this first international event voted to approve the short version of the Twelve Traditions.

At the Big Meeting on Sunday afternoon the only speakers were Dr. Bob and Bill W. Few in the audience knew Dr. Bob was dying of cancer. He spoke for only 10 minutes, holding his side in pain. It was the last time Bob spoke to a large A.A. gathering and he used the occasion to remark on the “simplicity of our program” and to say that “our Twelve Steps, when simmered down to the last, resolve themselves in the words ‘love’ and ‘service.’” He died that November. Bill spoke for an hour, closing the Convention.

Second International in St. Louis in 1955

The next Convention was held in St. Louis and became the setting for A.A.’s “coming of age,” the occasion when the Fellowship accepted the service structure and the General Service Conference that Bill W. had been promoting.

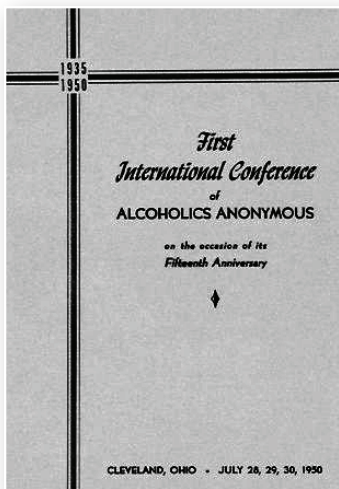
A press release from the Convention Committee reads: “A dramatic feature of the meeting will occur at Sunday afternoon’s closing session when Bill W., the surviving co-founder, will ask the movement to endorse a plan whereby he and other ‘elder statesmen’ of the society can yield their responsibilities to a representative body which has been functioning under a temporary charter for the past five years. This group, known as the General Service Conference of A.A., now includes 76 delegates from A.A. areas in the U.S. and Canada.”

The big meeting on Sunday afternoon also constituted the final meeting of the 1955 General Service Conference of A.A., which began its deliberations earlier in the week. Members of the Conference were seated on the stage. Speakers for that meeting were Bernard Smith, chairman of the General Service Board, Bill W., and Lois W.

The year before, the organizers had several cities under consideration for the setting of the Convention. Sig S., then chairman of the 20th A.A. Convention Committee, wrote to the other Committee members on June 8, 1954, that: Chicago would cost \$5,000 per day for Chicago Stadium and that, as regards Denver, “the only dates available in Denver are from May 22, 1955 to May 29, 1955—a disadvantage as this would prohibit many A.A. families attending because the school year would not be over by then.”

On balance, St. Louis looked good. It was available June 26 through July 3, “which would enable members to go to St. Louis with their families and as part of their vacations.”

All the International Conventions except for the first one in Cleveland have been held around the Fourth of July. A.A. Headquarters in New York organized the event and put together a 50-page manual detailing responsibilities and providing information, including how to look out for Bill W. “Every effort will be made to those associated with Staff to spare Bill from unnecessary burdens during the Convention. His room number, or location at Kiel when he is not on stage, is not to be given out. Nell



The program for the First Convention in Cleveland. Dr. Bob, who was dying of cancer, addressed the Big Meeting on Sunday for 10 minutes, while holding his side in pain.

will handle Bill's stenographic and secretarial requirements during the Convention."

In response to a request from an A.A. member who owned a printing business and was bidding for work, the chairman of the Convention Committee, in a Feb. 10, 1955 letter, spelled out the policy for that Convention and for the others to follow: "It has always been our practice not to award contracts to people or concerns because they are in some way connected with A.A. The difficulty is that if we did give business to one A.A., others would become resentful and sometimes antagonistic."

In the St. Louis file at G.S.O. Archives there is a thick folder of letters to and from Headquarters lining up speakers for the Workshop panels on such subjects as "Linking the Group to General Service Headquarters," "Problems of A.A. Clubhouses," and "Money and Its Place in A.A."

Bill was still the point person for many A.A. members with questions regarding the event. One member from Erie, Pa., wrote to Bill W. on Jan. 3, 1955 asking for permission to take "colored" movies of the proceedings of the Convention. In response, Henry G., chairman of the Convention Committee, wrote: "Unfortunately, this is something which could not be done in connection with any Convention meetings or activities."

The 3,500 attending this Convention were read the telegram from President Eisenhower offering his good wishes.

Long Beach, California, 1960, Site of Third Convention

The gathering in Long Beach is notable for a couple of reasons, one being that Bill addressed the crowd of about 8,900 for what Nell Wing, his secretary, said was the longest talk he ever gave—more than two hours. Bill spoke on the development of the Traditions. On Sunday, in the same stadium, Buster Keaton, Jane Mansfield, Dennis Day, and Peggy Lee entertained the crowd—and did so without charge.



Newsletters, such as this from the International Convention in Long Beach, Calif., were published daily during the gatherings.

in anything else. Like millions of alcoholics in my own time and countless millions throughout the ages, I was approaching a very bitter end."

A letter from April 1960 to the General Service Board of A.A. from Edward B. Towns of Charles B. Towns Hospital, the hospital Bill refers to in the press release, reads: "I am delighted to have the opportunity to address the Convention on July 1st.... I would appreciate a briefing session on the subject matter of my address so that I will cover the points you desire."

As with all the International Conventions, the organizing committee invited special guest speakers, such as Mr. Towns, and covered their expenses.

Toronto in 1965, the First International Outside the U.S.

At this first Convention held outside the United States, the principal speakers at the Friday and Saturday evening meetings were Bill W., Lois W., and Marty M., one of A.A.'s longtime sober women members. The other speakers were nonalcoholic trustee Bernard Smith, and board chairman Dr. John L. Norris. Bill W. spoke both nights, once to tell his story and the other time to review A.A.'s present and future.

At this Convention, which attracted more than 10,000 attendees, hotels were still a bargain, with prices ranging from \$7.50 for a single to \$12 for a double.

The organizers were mindful of the impression that A.A. would be making, as indicated by a memorandum from the Convention Committee to the Public Information Committee dated Feb. 11, 1964: "The Convention should be regarded as an important public information and public relations opportunity. It can provide a showcase for A.A.: its progress over 30 years, the scope of its services to alcoholics and its probable directions in the future. There are two publics to be reached: the membership itself, and alcoholics and those concerned with the problem of alcoholism outside the Fellowship." This same memo detailed other guidelines for the event, including that: "All speakers at the Convention should be restricted to not more than 40-minute talks."

The theme of the Convention was "Responsibility," and Bill and Lois led attendees in reciting the Responsibility Declaration at the conclusion of the gathering.

Miami in 1970, Bill W.'s Last Convention

This fifth International Convention was to be Bill W.'s last. Suffering from the emphysema that would take his life the following January, Bill made a surprise appearance at the Sunday morning Big Book meeting before a cheering audience of almost 11,000.

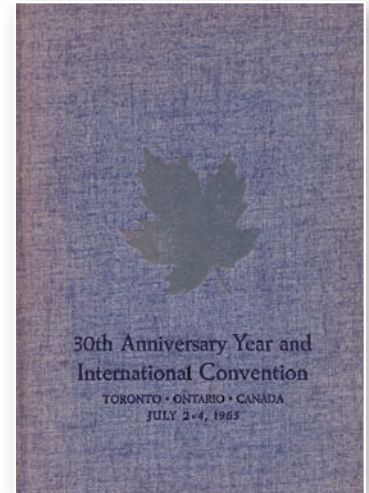
President Richard Nixon wired congratulations, and the film "Bill Discusses the 12 Traditions" was introduced.

These big gatherings attracted the interest of businesses. A letter from a major credit card company to the International Convention organizing committee in April 1970 states that: "Our world wide services are of special interest to the members of your organization. We are interested in a manned exhibit at your convention to be held at the Miami Beach Convention Hall." A letter in response from the G.S.O. explained that A.A. cannot accommodate any commercial ties to businesses.

The theme at the Miami Convention was "Unity," and the gathering embraced the "Declaration of Unity."

Denver in 1975, First Flag Ceremony

Almost 20,000 showed up for the 40th Anniversary International Convention, far surpassing expectations. Workshops and panel meeting rooms were so crowded that fire department representatives on several occasions stopped more from entering. The Flag Ceremony was held for the first time, with 29 countries represent-



Souvenir book for the Convention in Toronto, which was the first held outside the United States.

ed. It was also the first Convention at which neither Dr. Bob nor Bill was present. To satisfy the huge demand for coffee, the world's largest coffee maker—with servers on both sides of the balcony at the convention hall—was rigged up. It reportedly produced half a million cups daily.

New Orleans in 1980, “Markings on the Journey” Screened

A sort of Mardi Gras parade launched this seventh International Convention. More than 22,500 came to the event, with the Big Meeting held in the Superdome. The international aspect of the event was by now firmly established, with simultaneous translation into French, Spanish, and German—and 33 countries participating in the Flag Ceremony. An archives workshop was held for the first at an international convention, and the recently completed film “Markings on a Journey” was screened. The son of Dr. Bob addressed the crowd, noting that he was “probably the only person here who was present when Bill met Dr. Bob.”

Montreal in 1985, Ruth Hock Receives 5-Millionth Big Book



Attendance at this 50th A.A. Anniversary celebration was 45,000, double the previous turnout for a Convention—and setting a new record for the largest assembly ever for Alcoholics Anonymous. Hotels in Montreal and the surrounding area were so full that some participants stayed 75 miles away. Ruth Hock, who as Bill W.'s secretary typed the original manuscript of the Big Book in 1938, was presented with the five-millionth copy of the Big Book. Among the attendees was Sybil C., one of the first women members in Los Angeles and at the time the longest-sober living woman in A.A.

Attendance at Montreal was 45,000, more than double that of any previous International. Hotels were so scarce that some stayed as much as 75 miles from the Convention hall.

Seattle in 1990, Former Soviet Republics Participate

Seventy-five countries were represented at this International Convention, a number of them former parts of the Soviet Union. The 48,000 attended the gathering, the largest convention ever hosted in Seattle. The local host committee made up of Seattle A.A. members numbered 3,000. Nell Wing, Bill's longtime secretary and A.A.'s first archivist, received a commemorative 10 millionth copy of the Big Book. A candle, symbolically lighting the way to sobriety for the still-suffering alcoholic, burned from Thursday night to Sunday morning.

San Diego in 1995, Attendance Tops 50,000

As with all the Conventions, as they grew in size, planning for San Diego started nine years earlier when the General Service Conference considered bids from various cities. After the list of potential sites was narrowed to three, visits were made to those cities before the Board of Trustees chose San Diego. The attendance at San Diego was 56,000 the biggest ever gathering of A.A., and the biggest convention ever held in San Diego. The Old-Timers Meeting on Saturday night featured 129 members with 40 or more years of sobriety, 15 of whom told their stories.

Minneapolis in 2000, 87 Participants in Flag Ceremony

Fifty years after the first international gathering in Cleveland, 47,500 attendees came to Minneapolis to celebrate the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A. membership was now about 2 million worldwide and the Big Book was available in 40 foreign languages. Eighty-seven countries participated in the Flag Ceremony at the Minneapolis Metrodome.

Toronto in 2005, Mongolia, Cuba, and China Attend



A.A. members from Mongolia, Cuba, and the People's Republic of China attended this International Convention, the third time the event was held in Canada. Saturday night's big meeting was the Old-Timers Meeting, an old-timer defined as anyone with at least 40 years of sobriety. In a procedure established at previous Conventions, these longtime members dropped their names in a hat, and 12 were chosen at random to speak.

San Antonio in 2010, 75 Years Since Bill W. Met Dr. Bob

Every five years since 1950, an A.A. International Convention has marked the anniversary of the year in which Bill W. met Dr. Bob. That meeting set in motion the development of a society of alcoholics who discovered they can stay sober by helping one another stay sober. Tens of thousands of these recovering alcoholics are gathering the first weekend in July in San Antonio, Texas, to celebrate the simple truth of that way of life.

National Archives Workshop Will Hold Its Annual Event in September

The National Archives Workshop will hold its 14th annual meeting in Macon, Georgia, from September 23 to 26. Over the course of the event there will be workshops on various aspects of preserving A.A.'s history, plus an oldtimers panel. The authors Mel B. (who wrote *My Search for Bill W.*) and Bill B. (who wrote *The Lois Wilson Story*) will talk on the topic, “How to research and write the A.A. story.” The theme of the event is “Telling Our Story.” Registration is \$30. To register or for more information go to www.aanationalarchivesworkshop.com. The chairman of the event, Ross McC., can be reached at 706-778-0302 or by email at wrmcc@windstream.net. Or email the co-chair Dick A. at writtenby@mindspring.com.