

Jim B., One of A.A.'s Early Members

“When you get wrapped up in this history thing I’d like to bust this illusion that we were saints. We were a bunch of screwballs.” So said Jim B., one of the founding members of A.A., in an A.A. talk he gave in Monroe, Louisiana, March 11, 1962.

Jim wrote the Big Book story “A Vicious Cycle” and is credited with the wording used in Step Three: “God as we understood Him.” His actions and opinions also informed the spirit of Tradition Three: “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.”

Jim was introduced to what would become A.A. on January 8, 1938. In the same A.A. talk, he describes the events that brought him to sobriety: “Those last nine years I had thirty-eight jobs, I’d been in sixty jails, five psycho wards, three attempts at suicide. And this constant uselessness, hopelessness, worthlessness. I was at the end of a ten-day binge and in this ten days I’d lost my job, my car, my wife had walked out on me and I was locked out of my furnished apartment. I’d been in . . . hospital . . . for suicide; I’d been in jail. All of this in ten days. All of these things had happened before, but all of them hadn’t happened at one time.”

It was in this state that Jim was introduced to Jackie W. who talked to him for eight hours, gaining his confidence with his own drinking story. “I didn’t know the guy from Adam,” Jim said, “. . . but I knew he spoke my language. He’d been in 250 paid sanitariums. He was a spoiled brat like most of us are.”

In his Big Book story, “A Vicious Cycle,” Jim recalls that Jackie also talked about the group in New York, and “something about God or a Higher Power, but I brushed that off—that was for the birds, not for me.”

After a few days of helping Jim detox, Jackie got drunk. Still shaky, and with only a few days sober, Jim called Bill W., who suggested he bring Jackie back up to New York. Jim did so, and joined that first group of sober alcoholics who were then a part of The Oxford Group.

In a Grapevine article Jim wrote in May 1968, he recalls that, “Since both Bill and Dr. Bob had had almost overnight religious experiences, it was taken for granted that all who followed their way would have the same sort of experience. So the early meetings were quite religious, in both New York and Akron. There was always a Bible on hand, and the concept of God was all biblical.

“Into this fairly peaceful picture came I, their first self-pro-

claimed atheist, completely against all religions . . . I started fighting nearly all the things Bill and the others stood for, especially religion, the ‘God bit.’ But I did want to stay sober, and I did love the understanding Fellowship. So I became quite a problem to that early group, with my constant haranguing against all the spiritual angles.”

That group of men included Fitz M., a childhood friend of Jim’s who contributed the story “Our Southern Friend” to the Big Book, and Hank P., a former employer of Jim’s who had fired Jim eleven years before. Hank also wrote the story “The Unbeliever” in the Big Book. Jim stayed sober at the weekly meetings at Bill’s Brooklyn home for five months, working for Hank selling automobile polish, and speaking out about his agnostic convictions.

In his Grapevine story, Jim writes, “All of a sudden, the group became really worried. Here I had stayed sober five whole months while fighting everything the others stood for. I was now number four in ‘seniority.’ I found out later they had a prayer meeting on ‘what to do with Jim.’ The consensus seemed to have been that they hoped I would either leave town or get drunk.”



The original draft of “A Vicious Cycle,” as it was mailed to Bill.

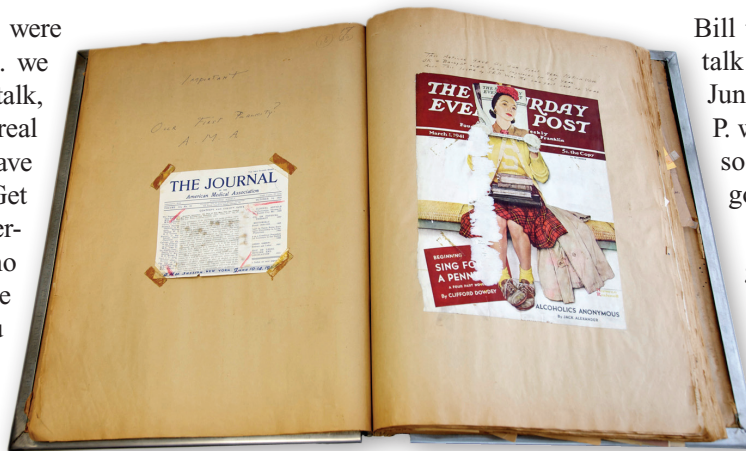
Those early days of A.A. were very different from the A.A. we know today. In his Louisiana talk, Jim recalls, “You see the real idea was that all you had to have was a spiritual experience. Get down on your knees, understand your problem and no more booze. We had no more idea in the world, I give you my word on this, in ’38, that the reason we were staying sober was that we were holding onto each other.”

He continues: “In April ’39 when the book came out . . . we had a hundred names so we put a hundred names down there as recovered; we were stretching things a little bit. A lot of the boys fell off the wagon. It was hard in one way, but then again we were going to change the world, we were fanatical, we thought we could help others . . . We began to see that only those going to meetings were staying sober.”

In a six-page memoir from the A.A. Archives called “Memoirs of Jimmy: The Evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous,” Jim writes about the A.A. days before he entered the Fellowship. After Bill spent time with Dr. Bob in Akron, he returned to New York and got “his first real New York convert, Hank P. . . . a red-haired, high pressure dynamo.” Jim adds, “From the time of their meeting and during the latter part of 1935 it was Hank and Bill who did all the ground-work.” The third New York member, Bill R., joined them in April 1936. The fourth man to join was Jim’s school friend Fitz M., in November 1936.

Bill, Hank and Fitz were “the spearheads in ‘drunk saving’ for the Oxford Group in the New York area.” In September 1937 they decided “their technique would work better if they would do their work with drunks outside of an affiliation with a religious organization,” and they broke off from the Oxford Group. This is when “the first completely alcoholic meetings” were held at Bill W.’s Brooklyn home on Tuesday evenings, with an average attendance of fifteen, including the alcoholics’ family members.

Jim joined this group four months later, in January 1938, reuniting with his friend Fitz, and taking a job with a side business selling automobile polish, started by Bill and Hank. By June 1938, during which time Jim had drunk again and returned to the group, the idea to write a book was introduced. Jim said in his Louisiana talk that “Bill was always a ‘do it tomorrow boy,’ and Hank was a promoter — he got



Bill to write the book.” In another talk Jim gave in Sacramento, on June 15, 1957, he adds that “Hank P. who did all these things, and as soon as the book was finished he got drunk.”

In that Sacramento talk, Jim gives an immediate insight into what the weekly meetings at Bill’s Brooklyn apartment were like: “When they did break away from the Oxford Group in New York we held a Tuesday night meeting at

Bill’s home. There were seven or eight men sitting around in a circle, with Bill W. in the center on a little three-legged stool, one of these old antique sewing stools. And he would do all the talking and we would do all the listening and answering the questions because he had all the book sense. Afterward that little three-legged stool became a symbol. It was a symbol that A.A. stands on three legs. It stands on religion, on medicine and on this understanding Fellowship. We need all three legs. It’s a balance. That was one of the things we were using as a symbol when we started to get the book together. So they decided to write a pamphlet together and Bill and Bob would write stories about how they had recovered. In ’38, they both had three years sobriety and at that time six months was a hell of a lot of sobriety, so those two chapters were written and those same chapters are in the book today with practically no change.”

Jim recalls in his memoir that Bill drew on the inspiration from four books as he began to write the Big Book. Bill consulted William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Emmet Fox’s *Sermon on the Mount*, Dick Peabody’s *Common Sense of Drinking*, and Lewis Browne’s *This Believing World*. About the latter, Jim writes, “it clearly shows that the major failures . . . in the past have been due to one of three things: Too much organization, too much politics, and too much money and power.”

Jim writes that the finished chapters were brought to that Tuesday night meeting and the group would make suggestions — Jim arguing against religious terminology and Fitz and others arguing for a more dogmatic approach. Bill averaged about a chapter a week. The manuscript was completed in October 1938. Jim points out that at this time there were only four sober men in New York, along with Dr. Bob in Akron.

There was some concern about what to name the book. They found that “100 Men” didn’t work because women had

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started coming into the Fellowship. “This Way Out,” “Exit,” and “The End of the Road” were all suggested before the name “Alcoholics Anonymous” was decided upon in November 1938. At the suggestion of Dr. Howard, the Chief Psychiatrist for the State of New Jersey, Bill then removed all the “must” statements from the book, instead using the word “suggest.”

Jim adds his own contribution: “Another thing changed in this last rewriting was qualifying the word God with the phrase ‘as we understood Him.’” The book, incorporating all of the suggestions from the Akron and New York groups, was finished in December 1938, when Jim was six months sober.

In his Big Book story, Jimmy is very clear about when both his alcoholism and his aversion to church began — at the age of thirteen at a Protestant boarding school in Virginia. He writes, “I swore I would never join or go to any church except for weddings and funerals.” His childhood friend Fitz went to the same school, and when the debates occurred about the writing of the Big Book, Fitz was the one advocating more religious terminology. Jimmy writes about his return to A.A. in June 1938, and the less than trusting attitude of his fellows: “I don’t think the boys were completely convinced of my personality change, for they fought shy of including my story in the book, so my only contribution to their literary efforts was my firm conviction, being still a theological rebel, that the word God should be qualified with the phrase ‘as we understood him’ — for that was the only way I could accept spirituality.” His story appeared in the second edition of the Big Book.

Jim had a far more gradual spiritual experience than his predecessors in A.A., but that in no way affected the dy-

namic fervor he had for A.A. service. Jim went on to start the first A.A. group in Philadelphia in 1940, and later that year in Baltimore. He was also involved in getting the Jack Alexander article published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941 before settling in San Diego with his wife, Rosa.

Jim weighed about 135 pounds, a small man with red hair and a gravelly voice who was constantly smoking a pipe in those smoky meetings. He died on September 8, 1974, at the Veterans Administration Hospital in San Diego.

In the Grapevine article that was written when Jim was sober for 30 years, he says, “I do feel sure my experience was not in vain, for ‘God’ was broadened to cover all types and creeds: ‘God as we understood Him.’ For the new agnostic or atheist just coming in, I will try to give very briefly my milestones in recovery: The first power I found greater than myself was John Barleycorn. The A.A. Fellowship became my higher power for the first two years. Gradually, I came to believe that God and Good were synonymous and were to be found in all of us. And I found that by meditating and trying to tune in on my better Self for guidance and answers, I became more comfortable and steady.”

In that same Sacramento talk, he expressed one misgiving. “I can’t express to you how much you hear these old folks talk about the good old barefoot A.A. It’s the most ridiculous thing. In the old days we would go with pills in one pocket, a bottle in the other, take them to hospitals, wash their diapers, baby sit them. And what did we do? Not a damn bit of good. We did nothing to help the man stand on his own two feet. We know now that the drunk is the only one that can do it. All we can do is give him balance as he goes along. Give him this Fellowship.”

Preservation Basics: Protect Your Historic Scrapbooks

Scrapbooks provide a unique record of individuals’, families’, or organizations’ memories for generations. They have been a common tool for keeping photographs, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, documents, drawings, postcards, and other diverse items. Due to varied contents, scrapbooks can be a challenge to preserve. Most scrapbooks often have very acidic pages that deteriorate rapidly and may become stained and embrittled with time. Unfortunately, the compulsion to save one’s memorabilia is often carried out with methods and materials that are both detrimental and contrary to the collector’s initial intention of long-term preservation.

Some Basic Storage and Preservation Tips

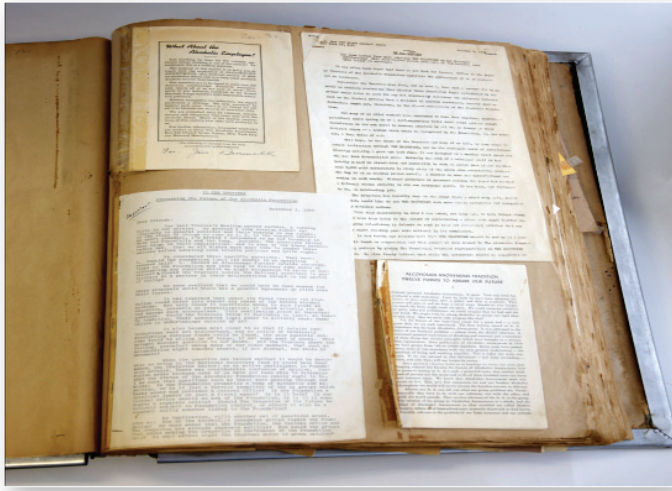
In some ways, we all act as archivists or collectors in our private or personal lives. We collect memorabilia and save these for our future generations. Jimmy B.’s scrapbook includes his personal memorabilia from the early days of our Fellowship, and was given to G.S.O.’s A.A. Archives over fifteen years ago. It is a treasure for us. Unfortunately Jimmy, like so many other novice “archivists,” used adhesive tape, glue, and staples to bind the documents to the scrapbook. The acids and lignin

chemicals in the adhesives and paper facilitated the decay of the book. The damage caused from acid migration is also visibly evident. Acid migration from the pages on one side of the book stain their facing pages.

Because Jimmy’s scrapbook is so large and heavy and the spine is breaking away from the pages, extra care is mandatory when handling it. Most of the documents are adhered strongly to the paper, which makes it a challenge to remove with a spatula. Conversely, some documents are unfastened because the adhesive dried out, leaving a yellow residue on the paper. Archivists should never attempt to remove documents that are strongly adhered to the pages.



Jim B.’s scrapbook, now in A.A.’s G.S.O. Archives, contains his personal memorabilia from A.A.’s early days.



This page in Jimmy's scrapbook shows the effects of using cellophane tape to adhere the documents. Over time the adhesive dries out and leaves a yellow residue on the documents.

Complicated restoration and conservation tactics should only be attempted by a professional. As an option, use document repair tapes that are both acid free and have an acrylic-based adhesive to tape the items that have become unloosened. When applying the tape, also keep in mind that the less tape used, the better. Use only the amount of tape that is needed to hold the item in place.

Another method of reattaching a document to its base page is to enclose the document in an acid free envelope or polyester sleeve and then attach that to the page.

Since our scrapbook is oversized it is best stored flat. If this is not an option for you, scrapbooks can also be stored with the spine down, as long as there is something holding the covers upright and closed. The scrapbook may be placed inside an acid free, lignin free, and PH neutral box to offer further protection.

Jimmy's scrapbook, like so many other scrapbooks, is already filled with enclosures that caused the spine to disband. In this case, interleaving with acid-free tissue may add strain to the already overstuffed volume. Interleaving only between the worst of the pages is one option.

Another option, though much consideration should be given first, would be to disbind the books and store each page in

an acid-free folder in an acid-free box. This option should only be considered if the scrapbook is severely overstuffed or extremely fragile. Disbinding a scrapbook and storing it in acid-free folders and boxes can prolong the life of the individual pages and the items that are attached to them. The downside is that there is a risk of destroying the provenance or the meaning of the original layout.

In most instances, leaving the scrapbook alone and storing it in an acid-free box will be the best solution. The box keeps the volume together and any loose contents from slipping out.

Handling

Because of the size of Jimmy's scrapbook it contains items that are coming loose from the base pages, and archivists should always be careful when picking it up. Keep it level while it is being carried to a table large enough to accommodate it. You can do more damage to the scrapbook from mishandling than you would if you left it in an attic or basement for a period of time. The volume should only be handled with clean hands or gloves — the natural oils from your fingers can cause permanent damage. If the pages are brittle, use a heavy piece of cardstock to help turn them.

Storage Environment

As with any other paper-based product, scrapbooks can be affected by varying changes in temperature and humidity. A poor storage environment, or one where the temperature and humidity fluctuates, can cause the binding, the paper, and all the various types of materials to swell and contract. Typically, attics are very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter; they are poor storage areas for scrapbooks. Basements are also poor storage areas for scrapbooks due to varying temperature and humidity and they sometimes tend to be damp and moldy. A suitable temperature range is 65–68 degrees Fahrenheit. A well-ventilated area can be quite helpful in hot, humid conditions, providing a cooling environment and inhibiting mold growth.

Scrapbooks offer descriptive, historic presentation of life in the past. If you are either compiling a scrapbook, or are a keeper of an historic one, we hope these basic guidelines provide you with tools and knowledge on preserving your treasured artifact.