

## Surviving Daughter of an A.A. Pioneer Sends Trove of A.A. Material to G.S.O. Archives

Bob V., who was among the earliest A.A. members, invited Bill W. and his wife, Lois, to move in with him and his wife, Mag, and their children in 1939. Bill and Lois, who had lost their home earlier that year, stayed for a number of months.

“The tradition of generosity and hospitality within the Fellowship was already well established in the New York area, as it had been in Akron. At Bog Hollow, in Monsey, New York, Bill and Lois stayed with Bob and Mag V. in a rambling old farmhouse. They had a huge room on the second floor of the ‘Siberian’ wing of the house. It was so cold, it was called Upper Siberia; the room below it, Lower Siberia.” (*Pass It On*, page 218)

Bob and Maggie’s daughter Barbara (Babs) was a teenager at the time and remembers that year and the many other occasions when Bill and Lois, as well as other early A.A.s, visited the family home.

Babs, who is now in her 80s and lives in Florida, has for all these years held on to A.A. memorabilia dating from the late 1930s to the 1960s. The collection contains materials collected by her mother and her older sister, who joined A.A. in the 1950s, according to Babs. Earlier this year she sent that memorabilia to the Archives at the General Service Office.

In a letter that accompanied the material, Babs writes: “I can still remember Bill playing Bach, Brahms, or Beethoven on his violin in front of our fireplace.”

She adds that “Lois was like a second mom to me,” and that in 1947, “both Lois and Bill attended my wedding.”

Also visiting the family home in Monsey, N.Y., in the 1940s were other A.A.s whose names are a part of the early history of the Fellowship, such as Hank P., who Bill refers to as a “one-time Standard Oil executive and the very first alcoholic ever to stay sober even a little while in the New York group.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, page 154). Hank P.’s son, says Babs, “was my first boyfriend.”

Bert T., a successful tailor with an upscale establishment on Fifth Avenue in New York City, was another visitor. His

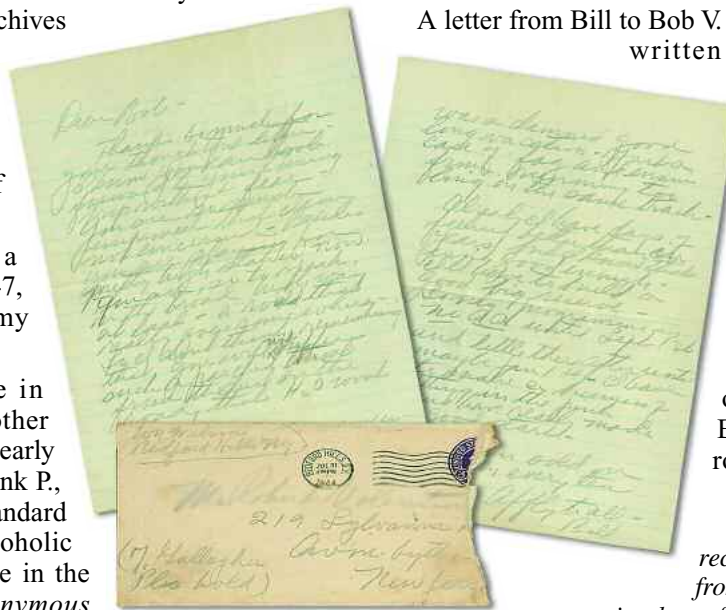
financial help to the Fellowship in 1939 was key. “Bert T. (of the Fifth Avenue tailoring establishment where early meetings were held) now transacted a piece of business that was characteristic of the spirit of the group.... Bert undertook the task of borrowing \$1,000 to keep A.A. afloat.” (*Pass It On*, page 224)

According to Amy Filiatreau, G.S.O. archivist, the material sent by Babs, some of which dates to the earliest years, “is a staggering collection. Even now, as we begin the process of cataloging and preserving these originals, we realize that we’ve only just begun to uncover the depth of this archival collection.”

Among the material are handwritten letters from Bill W.; books signed by him and several Big Book story authors; many original manuscripts of A.A. literature that had been sent out for comments and suggestions; very early A.A. pamphlets and flyers; programs from the early International Conventions; newspaper articles and clippings about A.A.; early Grapevines; dozens of photographs of A.A. gatherings, and letters from the earliest and most significant A.A. pioneers.

A letter from Bill to Bob V. dated June 2, 1942 and written on “The Alcoholic Foundation” letter-head reads in part: “Tell Babs we are both thrilled about her graduation and really desolated that we can’t be there.”

There is correspondence to and from the General Service Office on various subjects. Bob V. evidently had a role in what was called



*Among the material received at G.S.O. Archives from the daughter of Bob V. is a letter from Bill W. to her father.*

*The original envelope is postmarked July 31, 1944. Bill writes: “All I needed was a damned good long vacation—just a case of fag and ennui from running in place too long. Already I have days of feeling better than in years....”*



The program for the First International Conference of A.A. in 1950 has been signed by Jim B., a founding member of A.A., and Bill W.

“Headquarters” in the 1940s, but what that role was is not clear. Bill writes in that same letter of June 1942: “It is quite important that Florence endorse that stock certificate and return it as nearly all the shares are turned in and we want to dissolve Works Publishing to save taxes.”

Also among the material is a program from the First International Conference of A.A., which was held in Cleveland in July 1950. The program is signed by Bill W. and Jim B., who was one the first members of A.A. to get sober in New York and whose story “The Vicious Cycle” is in the Big Book. He was an A.A. pioneer in Philadelphia.

A few of the A.A. members who congregated around that farmhouse in Monsey started the first meeting for alcoholic inmates at nearby Rockland State Hospital, a psychiatric facility.

In a talk by Bill W. to an A.A. gathering in 1955, he says, referring to the year 1939: “In the fall of that year ... we moved down to Bob V.’s. Many of you remember him and Mag. We were close by the Rockland asylum. Bob and I and others went in there, and we started the first institutional group, and several wonderful characters were pried out of there.”

In G.S.O.’s archives is a letter to Frank K. by Bill W., in which he speaks about Bob V. The letter is dated January 17, 1964: “You can have no idea what his and Mag’s friendship meant to us in the very early days of A.A. They took us into their house the winter of 1939 when we had lost our own and were stony broke. To make things look more uncertain, the A.A. book venture had collapsed because the

Readers’ Digest had failed a promised piece about it and the work of A.A. We can never cease being grateful to them, and I’m certain that countless others of their friends can say the same.”

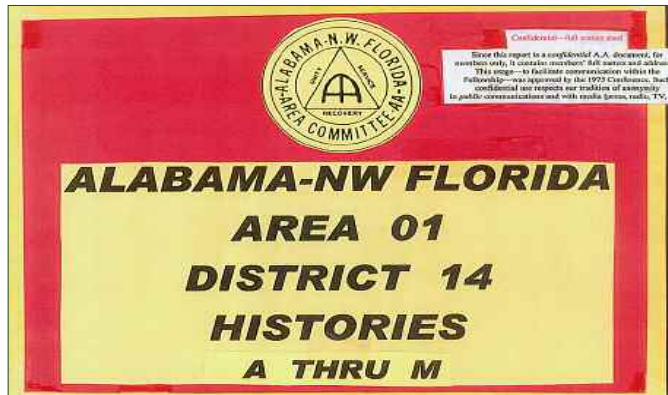
Babs writes in her recent letter to G.S.O.: “I think the last time I saw Bill was at my father’s funeral in 1969. I have very fond memories of those years.”



In a failed effort to revive the Old 24th Street Clubhouse in New York City, which closed in 1960, A.A. members put together this flier.

## Workshop Addresses How To Create a District Archives

By Mike B. and Jerri Lea S., Area 1, Alabama/NW Florida



This binder containing district histories in Alabama-NW Florida is the kind of archival compilation that can be created using district archives.

Setting up a district archives was the subject of an archives workshop in Alabama, with 30 A.A. members attending.

The archivist for Area 1 (Alabama-Northwest Florida) joined the archivist for District 14 (Fort Walton Beach in the Florida panhandle) to talk about what to collect and how to organize the material.

There were exhibits from the District 14 archives covering five large tables. The archivist used various items to demonstrate how to create exhibits that can be used to illuminate the history of a district.

The point of the workshop, which took place last November, was to offer practical advice on how to create an archives, and the reason for doing so. The presenters made the point that the archives of A.A. are the conscience of A.A., and that if we want to keep the message of A.A. alive, we need to preserve the records of the Fellowship.

They stressed that archives at different levels serve different functions. For example, the archives at the General Service Office documents the larger history of A.A., while the archives at the area level shows how A.A. came into, spread, and is maintained there. Likewise for districts.

The two archivists noted that having a mission statement is useful in deciding what to collect and what not to collect. For example, the mission statement of the Area One Archives is as follows: “It is the mission of the Area One Archives to collect, preserve, research, and display the records and artifacts of continuing value related to Area One.”

The two archivists talked about what may constitute the archives of a district. Among the significant records are group histories; minutes of district and/or Intergroup meetings; district committee meeting minutes; correspondence; flyers; oral histories, whether of oldtimers or others; photographs of different meeting places and groups (even photos of individual members, so long as anonymity is respected); autographed

Big Books and other literature; records that relate to district gatherings of any kind; and more, qualify as the types of records that obviously fall into the realm of a district archives.

In closing the meeting, the two speakers noted that it is easy to be overwhelmed by the task of gathering and keeping archival materials. What they suggested to beginning archivists is to work hard, while being realistic about goals. Create exhibits, even if very small, they said. If in doubt about whether to keep an item in the archives, keep it, they advised, since it is always possible to change your mind about it later.

The two archivists said that they are planning more workshops to address different archival concerns, and that they are always available to answer any questions about archival matters.

## Area Digitizing Its Archives To Solve a Problem

By Michael D. (chairman of the Area 81 Digital Archives Project Committee)

Area 81 in Canada has been finding it impossible to fill the position of archivist, but believes it has found the solution in digitization.

It was in the late 1970s that members began to build an area archives, with a traveling collection that is displayed annually at two area assemblies and two area committee meetings, in addition to occasional other events.

Area 81 consists of groups in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and northern Nova Scotia. There are 13 districts with a total of 190 groups spread over a fairly large geography.

The archivist needs adequate and suitable space to store the material, and must be able to move it from location to location during the year. The problem has been that the growth of the collection has made it extremely difficult to find members willing to commit to the task.

In the spring of 2006, the idea surfaced to digitize the collection. All original material would be kept and stored, but multiple copies would be purged. Only a small sample of original material would be moved around to events, and any other item in the collection could be called up for display on a notebook computer or—for larger groups—on a digital projector.

*This program for an A.A. maritime convention in Canada in 1948 is the sort of item that Area 81 is digitizing in order to make its traveling collection manageable, and to help preserve originals*



The project was approved by the fall 2006 assembly, a budget established, and fundraising started. As of this writing, A.A. members, groups, and districts have contributed 89% of the budget. All work is being done by A.A. volunteers. The scanning, while tedious, is expected to be completed and the digital archives fully operational on target—Spring Assembly 2008.

At our Spring Area Committee Meeting in March a bilingual (English and French) demo of the system with actual archives content was shown to members, and received with enthusiasm.

Some have told us that we are pioneers to tackle this; others have hinted that we may not appreciate the difference between leading edge and bleeding edge!

We would be happy to share our experiences with other areas considering the digital path for their archives collections.

*(For more information or to contact Area 81, go to its website at <http://www.area81aa.ca>.)*

## Look to the Traditions For Ways to Put Archives to Use

*(This article was contributed by an area archivist.)*

As an archivist, have you considered applying the Traditions to your district or area archives? They are a rich source of ideas about how to use the archives for the good of A.A. as a whole. Here are seven examples.

**Tradition One: Unity** Many of us have found differences in A.A. meetings when we travel, even though they all follow the principles of our Fellowship. The archives can prevent divisiveness from arising in A.A. by sharing local history at A.A. events. Sure, it is satisfying to bring that first edition of the Big Book, but a display of your district's or area's newsletters for the past 10 or 20 years can demonstrate how A.A. grew where you live—just like it did where other members come from.

**Tradition Two: Informed Group Conscience** There is a saying in service that just about the time you learn your job, you rotate out of it. Why not ask outgoing trusted servants for a brief list of things they learned? As an archivist you can gather this experience and pass it on to the newly elected officers. Often it is a fascinating record of what worked—and what didn't.

**Tradition Three: Membership** Anyone is an A.A. member who says they are. Today's members arrive in our Fellowship by paths that are often very different than our current long-timers. One way to build unity and watch how our Fellowship changes yet remains the same is to ask newcomers to write down their stories. OK, so they may have only been sober for one year or less, but what a year it has been for them! And what an eye-opener it can be for the long-timer, too!

**Tradition Four: Group Autonomy** One group in a nearby district to me looked to the Traditions for guidance

regarding what to do about people who identified themselves as addicts attending closed meetings. After a year of thoughtful study, the group decided to take no action. When a group has studied the Traditions to reach an informed group conscience, ask if the group made a record of its discussions and would be willing to contribute a summary to the archives. These problems come up over and over again. The archives can record what local groups have done and share their process to help other groups, perhaps with many new members, stay on the A.A. beam.

**Tradition Five: Primary Purpose** Carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers can be a difficult task, and a rigid approach may turn off a prospect. The archives are a source of wisdom to help enrich sponsorship. We often hear in meetings that the “Steps are in order for a reason,” but Bill W. himself said that “the individual is free to start the Steps at whatever point he can, or will” [page 191, *As Bill Sees It*]. Another thing one sometimes hears at meetings is, “everything you need to know is in the first 164 pages of the Big Book.” Hey, we are archivists! Do we really believe that *A.A. Comes of Age, As Bill Sees It, Pass It On*, and *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* ought to be ignored? Where else can we learn, for example, that Dr. Bob was “gloriously tattooed” with curious figures, including snakes? [Page 298, *Good Oldtimers*] Do you need to know this? Well, did you ever sponsor a tattooed (and very angry) biker? Enough said!

**Tradition Six: Problems of Money, Property and Prestige** An archives is intended to be a carefully structured holding of A.A. history assembled with restraint. Here is where the archivist, the archives committee chairperson and all the committee members ought to be very prudent in acquiring items for the archives. One donated first edition of the Big Book in a district or area archives helps all members relate to our Fellowship’s past. But a dozen copies, especially if purchased out of Seventh Tradition contributions? Yes, that sounds silly, but can you think of a better way to create problems of money, property and prestige than with an expensive collection of A.A. memorabilia?

**Tradition Seven: Accumulation Beyond a Prudent Reserve** It is likely that over time donations to an archives

from members in the local district or area will duplicate material. Inventory your contributions as carefully as you would count the contents of the Seventh Tradition basket. If the material relates to the historical focus of your archives, excellent! If not, write to other archives and ask if they would like these documents. If you just received the third copy of the first edition of the Big Book, perhaps another district or area archivist has expressed a desire for one. Bill W. engaged in voluminous correspondence. Could the archives at the General Service Office use his signed letter? It is difficult to avoid the very human urge to collect things, especially if they are unique. But we can’t keep it unless we give it away.

## Tap College Libraries For Old Printings of A.A. Literature

College and university libraries can be a source of A.A. material for your archives. First determine if a local school library stocks any A.A. literature. This can be done in person or over the Internet. Once you have a list of a library’s holdings, explain to a librarian that if they will give you the old books, you will replace them with new printings. You may also offer the library additional A.A. literature not in their holdings. Sometimes it takes a year or more to move through the process and have the old printings released to you, but it’s well worth the wait.

*Dave F., New Hampshire*

## National Archives Workshop Will Meet in Phoenix

The 11th Annual A.A. National Archives Workshop will take place September 6 through 9, in Phoenix, Arizona. The meeting, which is an opportunity for A.A. archivists from around the country and Canada to share information and learn from each other, usually attracts about 140 participants. This year’s theme is “Preserving Our Heritage to Pass It On.” (Visit [aanationalarchivesworkshop.com](http://aanationalarchivesworkshop.com) for more information.)

### REQUEST FOR SHARING:

## Tell Us About Your Non-English Archival Collections

Do you have archival collections in languages other than English? Do you have a bilingual archives collection, or collections exclusively in another language, such as French or Spanish? Do you serve visitors in your archives who speak languages other than English?

If you have a collection like this, we would love to know more about it and your work. Please send your written accounts to us by September 1, 2007. You can email them to [archives@aa.org](mailto:archives@aa.org), fax them to 212-870-3003, or send them by mail to: GSO Archives, Grand Central Station, P.O. Box 459, New York, NY 10163. Please call or write to us if you have any questions.