

Audio Digitization Project Aims to Preserve the Voices of A.A.

The digitization project at the G.S.O. Archives has resulted in a collection of more than 4,000 digitized sound recordings of A.A.'s co-founders, pioneers of A.A., historic local and International Conventions, regional conferences, and the annual General Service Conferences. The digitized recordings are all cataloged in a database system, making them easily accessible.

The Archives has accumulated a substantial collection of audio recordings over the years—either original recordings or reproductions of these originals made decades ago.

These recordings were disintegrating, and certain brands of tape that were favored decades ago turned out to be inherently unstable. Some types of audio tape are notorious for their poor sound quality and short lifespan. Even the best climate controls and storage conditions cannot stop their breakdown. For that reason, about nine years ago the Archives consulted an audio specialist to explore options to preserve the original sound recordings. The result was the digitization project.



This wire recording of early A.A. members dates from 1948. It is an example of the kinds of audio material at G.S.O. Archives that has been transferred to a digital format.

reflect only such bibliographic attributes such as title, subject, etc. The next step involved examining each cataloged record for data entry errors, ensuring the use of consistent terminology, and listening to each recording for specific content or items of interest. Listening to recordings takes a significant amount of time, but is important work.

With the Archives' limited resources, it may easily be years before audio cataloging is complete.

The Archives has only recently begun to listen to the collection of Bill's talks at various A.A. events. In the process of

doing so, we came across a narrative by Bill on the day he "lost his pants!" Bill told the story at the 1960 International Convention, and the crowd can be heard laughing in response. Here is the transcription:

"It was out on the town near my brother-in-law's place, I was supposed to show up for supper, (but) I got talking with the man at the garage.

"I forgot about supper, I forgot about Lois. It was kind of a bitter night. We needed more grog to get warm. And we kept warming ourselves and finally I, I realized that I had to start for my brother-in-law's for supper, several hours later. I started up the street. And suddenly I realized it was time to go to bed.

And uh, there was a field in the side hills, paralleling the street. And uh, I wandered over in there. And I laid down, and it was a wintry night. And I woke up. Gracious, I was cold.

"I got off it, up the hill to the main street, started down the main street, looked down... and my God, I had on my coat and vest, and my... But no pants!

"Right down the main street at Yonker's field!

"My brother-in-law and Lois met me at the door. They were saddened, and since I was minus my pants, the unspoken question was, 'Where have you been?'

"Do you know the very next morning, we found that field, and I was absolved at least, from one sin, when my shoes and my pants... shoes side by side and pants carefully folded there in the grass, as far as I'm told.

"Even then, without knowing it, I was condemned to obsession, to lunacy, and to death without knowing it."

Overview of the Cataloging Process

It is vital that these recordings be well cataloged with detailed documentation of their creation, content and current processing status. The Archives created a catalog template to facilitate the following functionalities for the end user:

- Searching recordings by title, presenter, keywords, date or item number
- Availability of recording, i.e. whether closed or open for access
- Physical description of original format
- Copyright status, if known

Cataloging is a daunting process. In general, there are two types of data cataloging: "catastrophic," in which the most minimum and most pertinent data is retained (title and date, for example); and "extreme," which is a full write-up of a recording (format specifics, keywords, content description, etc.). Extreme cataloging is time-consuming and expensive, and may not be necessary for most repositories.

Before attempting a cataloging project, it is best to determine the exact information needs; it is not worth exacting a huge amount of data if the end user will not: 1) use it, and 2) know what it all means.

The Archives initially cataloged the sound recordings to

In 1938, Rockefeller Associate Takes First-Hand Look at Akron A.A.

By Bill S.

(For the past year, Bill S. has been conducting research at the Archives for a book he is writing about the creation, editing and publication of the Big Book. In going through letters, notes, telegrams and official documents from 1937, 1938 and 1939, he happened upon a number of documents that shed light on little-known aspects of the history of A.A. This article is about two such documents.)

Frank Amos, an associate of John D. Rockefeller Jr., visited Akron, Ohio, in January 1938 to look into Alcoholics Anonymous on behalf of Rockefeller associates who had met with Bill W. and other A.A. members a month earlier. The Rockefeller group would be making recommendations regarding A.A. to John D. One very likely suggestion was to be for the funding of an A.A. hospital that would be run by Dr. Bob. But before doing so, the Rockefeller group wanted to learn more about this new society of recovering alcoholics.

Amos was going to be in Ohio on business and he was asked to visit Akron to investigate and verify what the Rockefeller people had been told about A.A. there. Amos spent “most of three days” there interviewing people, and he wrote a four-page report that he submitted to Rockefeller’s secretary, Willard Richardson.

Amos described the “technique used and the system followed” for staying sober that was “being carried out faithfully by the Akron group”—a system that he outlined in his report:

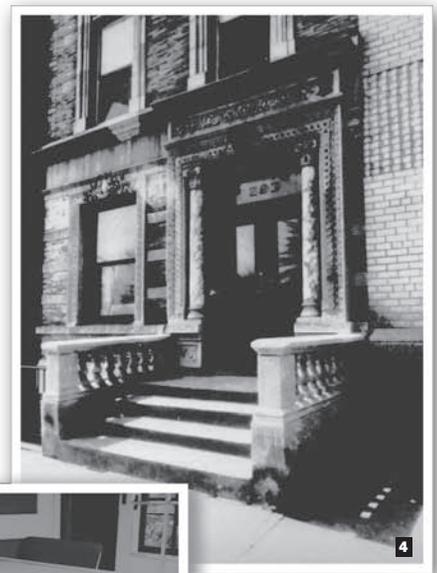
“1. An alcoholic must realize that he is an alcoholic, incur-

able from a medical viewpoint and that he must never again drink anything with alcohol in it; 2. He must surrender himself absolutely to God realizing that in himself there is no hope; 3. Not only must he want to stop drinking permanently, but he must remove from his life other sins such as hatred, adultery and others which frequently accompany alcoholism. Unless he will do this, absolutely, Smith and his associates refuse to work with him; 4. He must have devotions every morning—a ‘quiet time’ of prayer, and some reading from the Bible or other religious literature. Unless this is faithfully followed, there is grave danger of backsliding; 5. He must be willing to help other alcoholics get straightened out. This throws up a protective barrier and strengthens his own will power and convictions; 6. It is important, but not vital, that he meet frequently with other reformed alcoholics and form both a social and religious comradeship; 7. Important, but not vital, that he attend some religious service at least weekly.”

While several elements of what would later become the program of Alcoholics Anonymous are present here, there are some notable differences. Point number three might easily be related to the “searching and fearless moral inventory” found in the 4th Step, but it is striking how insistent Amos says Dr. Bob and the other Akron A.A.s were about the absolute necessity of correcting certain behaviors—and of their unwillingness to work with people who refused to consider such reform.

Number 4 is also much more emphatic about the amount of “quiet time” that must be devoted each morning to prayer

These photos are displayed at a nonprofit homeless shelter called the Healing Place of Wake County. Located in Raleigh, N.C., the Healing Place offers a non-medical detox and recovery program based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.



and meditation—something that is much less emphasized in most current A.A. practices. Amos got the distinct impression that if this wasn't done “faithfully,” that there was “grave danger of backsliding” into drinking.

And, just as the 11th Step gets more emphasis here, it is interesting to note that attendance at meetings and other connections with sober members of the group are considered to be “important, but not vital”—and as having the same value to sobriety as regular attendance at church.

The Rockefeller group was expressly Christian in its own approach and it was through a Christian lens that these men understood the A.A. program of recovery. No one sought to dissuade them.

Of course, when it came time to the question of funding for A.A., John D. decided this new group should be self-supporting, a conclusion with which Bill W. came to fully agree.

An Act of Surrender Was Custom in Early A.A.

Bill W. conducted many interviews in 1954 while preparing to write “Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age.” Most of these transcribed interviews were with early members of Akron A.A., and Bill usually asked them to describe what meetings were like during those days in Ohio.

Many of these early members claim that in 1937 an “act of surrender”—on in front of others and on your knees—was required before a person could be considered a member of A.A.

Here is one recounting of how that worked by a man who got sober in April 1937:

Bob [E.]: ...the last thing I did there at the hospital before I

left was to make a surrender, which I think was important.

Bill [W.]: Like the Oxford Group—on your knees?

Bob: Sharing completely—have to be done with another person. Pray and share out loud. The act of surrender.

Bill: You know, in the first draft of the Twelve Steps, it said that people were to be on their knees, but the other drunks made me take it out. That went back to this practice of surrender—you got on you knees and surrendered your life to the will of God. That was the process which you actually went through?

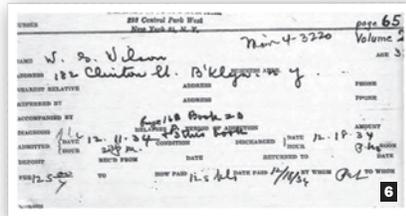
Bob: Oh yes. Of course, I've never forgotten that—it made a tremendous impression on me. I hear a lot, to this day, fellows talk about getting down on our knees to pray at night.

Bill: Oh yes, lots of people do it, to be sure, but this was a certain act of surrender?

Bob: Yes, this was very important at this time. There were no exceptions. You couldn't attend a meeting unless you had gone through that. You couldn't go to a meeting—you had to go through the program of surrender.

In more than one of these 1954 interviews, it is reported that this on-your-knees act of surrender was most frequently done in an upstairs room at Dr. Bob's house, just prior to the beginning of the meetings.

Controversies still rage in A.A. over “the God” part of the program. It is useful to remember, though, that in the foreword to the second edition of the Big Book, Bill W. dubbed the time before April 1939 as A.A.'s “flying blind period.” He predicted that time would inform and shape the Fellowship, as it has.



- 1.- Dr. William Silkworth
- 2.- Rev. Sam Shoemaker
- 3.- The kitchen table from the Clinton St. house.
- 4.- Towns Hospital
- 5.- Calvary House, where the Oxford Group met.
- 6.- Bill W.'s discharge slip from Towns Hospital in 1934
- 7.- Calvary Episcopal Church
- 8.- Bill W. and Lois' house on Clinton Street, Brooklyn

Photos Submitted by Chris B.

Questions to Ask When Writing Group Histories

The questions below were compiled by Archives in response to the many requests for guidance by A.A. members writing the history of their groups. Members undertaking to write such a history might also consider contacting both the G.S.O. Archives and their local Archives for information. For groups conducting an oral history, the G.S.O. Archives has prepared an Oral History Kit, which is available on the Archives portal of G.S.O.'s A.A. website at www.aa.org.

- Who were the founding members of the group?
- Where and when was the first meeting held? List chronologically where later meetings have been held. Include city, state, building, residence, church, clubhouse, etc.
- Did the group list with the General Service Office at the time the members first met?
- What is the group's name? Have there been any changes to the group's name over the years?
- What initiated the meeting? Was it the offshoot of a parent group? Was there a split due to disagreements? Did a few A.A.s simply decide to start a hometown group, etc.?
- How did the founding members let the community know that a new A.A. meeting was forming?
- How many members attended the group's first meeting?
- Describe member composition, for example, men only, women, young people, etc.
- How did the group experience growth over the years?
- Are group inventories conducted regularly and have they been helpful?
- Who were the early group officers? List, for example, GSR, Group Contact, Chair, Group Secretary, etc.
- Has the group used a steering committee?
- Have any group members participated in District, Area or other service to the Fellowship?
- How often were meetings held and has that changed over the years?
- What meeting formats have been used – closed, open, discussion, etc.?
- Describe the group's growing pains or controversies.
- How does the group celebrate group members' anniversaries of sobriety?
- How has the group celebrated the anniversary of its founding?
- Describe how the group has cooperated with professional agencies (by signing court cards, supporting a meeting in an institutional setting, taking regular phone duty at the Intergroup or Central Office, etc.).
- Has the group participated in special local or regional A.A. functions, such as conventions, conferences, round-ups, forums or workshops?

To our readers: the G.S.O. Archives would welcome a copy of your written or recorded group history.

Markings via E-mail



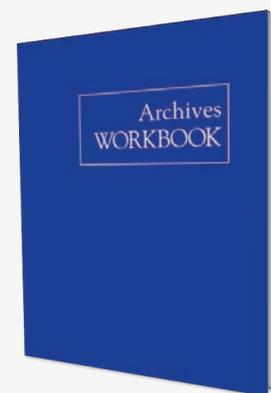
Have *Markings* delivered directly to your e-mail inbox by registering your e-mail on the A.A. Digital Subscription service at G.S.O.'s A.A. website, www.aa.org. Other A.A. newsletters are also being made available via e-mail, and you will be able to register to receive them too.

Big Response to Archives Offer of Giveaways

Many readers responded to the offer by the Archives of back issues of the AA Grapevine, *Box 4-5-9*, and General Service Conference Reports. Archives staff would like to thank readers for their hearty response and to let them know that all the material has now been spoken for.

With Renovation Postponed, Archives to Remain Open

The renovation of the G.S.O. Archives has been postponed, and the Archives will remain open to visitors. The planned reconstruction, which was reported in the previous issue of *Markings*, would have made the Archives unavailable to visitors for about three months. No new schedule has been set for construction.



The newly revised Archives Workbook, which includes format changes and additional copy aimed at raising awareness of copyright issues, is now available online in Spanish and French (along with English) on G.S.O.'s A.A. Website at www.aa.org.