

## Preserving A.A. History Found in Newspapers



*This scrapbook from the 1940s shows the ill effects of poor preservation, with glue stains, clippings fallen loose, and frayed edges. Also, lacking publication names and dates, these clippings are of only limited use.*

Newspapers feature prominently in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the early years of the Fellowship, newspaper stories about A.A. helped spread the word to those looking for a way out of alcoholism. These accounts of A.A. in newspapers are valuable resources that merit special attention by archivists.

Many of the rules governing the preservation of newspapers are the same as for preserving other paper materials. They should be stored in a cool, dry location above the floor and kept out of direct light as much as possible.

If nothing else, it is important to maintain a stable temperature and humidity, because fluctuations in heat and moisture damage paper and promote the growth of mold, mildew and other bacteria. Harmful pests can also be a problem.

Flat, acid-free document boxes are the best storage option, enabling archivists to stack newspapers in chronological order in a safe environment. Due to the often high acidity of newspaper, it may be necessary to separate individual editions from others with alkaline (anti-acidic) dividers. Although there are additional treatments to reduce acidity, they are often expensive and not necessary for most collections, assuming simple preservation rules are followed.

Arguably the best way to maintain newspapers is to transfer them into another format. The first possibility is to reformat the original documents to microfilm. Microfilming has existed for

over a century and is considered by many to be the best way to preserve a variety of materials due to its relative simplicity and durability. In terms of newspapers, however, it is important to determine if there are any legal matters, such as copyright or duplication policies, that would prevent the creation of microfilm. It is possible that an organization has already produced a microfilm version of your newspaper (including the publisher), which may restrict your attempts to do so.

If you are able to microfilm, and choose to employ an external vendor to produce the product, be sure that the vendor has a record of reliable service. It is also important to maintain an accurate index of the material to be microfilmed so the information can be accessed. If, however, you are able to microfilm the newspapers by yourself, it can be done exactly to your specifications. Finally, it is important to create at least two copies of the microfilm -- a master copy to be stored in a safe environment, and a user copy for reference and research purposes.

The second option for transfer is simply to photocopy the desired information onto acid-free, archivally safe paper. This can save a great amount of time, money, and effort compared with microfilming. Rarely is it necessary to save the entirety of a newspaper; it is more likely that specific articles or entries are valuable. This method permits archivists to save only what is necessary, and to customize their collections to fit their needs. A further advantage of photocopying is that it can almost always be done locally – most archives have access to both acid-free paper and a photocopier. It is necessary to establish guidelines for photocopying newspapers, as the shape, size, and length of articles can vary considerably. The most important rule is to ensure that all of the desired information is captured in your photocopy. Often, the date of the article and the name of the newspaper are not located on or around the article you want. It is possible to clip that information and include it with your article, or to simply hand-write it onto a blank space near the article before photocopying it.

The rules about how to fit large or awkward articles onto standard photocopier paper are less important, but it is wise to set rules and follow them. Establish a method for photocopying articles of varying forms, and stick to that method. Arrange the material chronologically, create a reliable inventory of the photocopies, and then store them in archivally safe folders and boxes.

Although scanning and digitizing newspapers is possible, it is not usually recommended. Their large size makes scanning

difficult and produces large files, which can rapidly deplete electronic storage space. Additionally, making these available online may cause copyright problems, particularly if the newspaper is from the last several decades. Large newspapers would also be difficult for external users to open.

Scanning individual articles, however, may be a simple way to both preserve and provide access to a newspaper collection. Due to the wide variety of scanning programs and devices, it is impossible to provide an exact guide here, but the basic rules that apply to photocopying apply also to scanning. Establish a standard method for scanning articles and maintain that system, and be sure to capture the entirety of the information you want, including the date and title of the newspaper. Also, be sure to create a routine scanning procedure and filing system so items can later be found. It is helpful to create a master scan in TIFF (.tif) format at around 600 dpi, and then user copies in GIFF (.gif) or JPEG (.jpeg) formats at around 200 to 300 dpi to provide you with good quality back-ups.

When A.A. was in its infancy, articles about this new phenomenon helped attract members. Decades later these early articles are a part of our history that we can hold onto by taking the right approaches to preservation.

*Note: This list is provided for reference only and does not imply endorsement or approval by the General Service Office Archives.*

### Other resources:

- 1) “Library of Congress Preservation” (<http://www.loc.gov/preserv/care/newspap.html>)

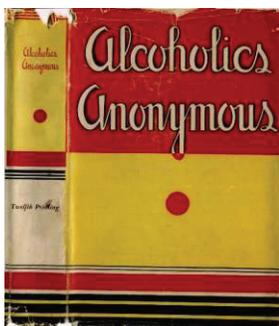
- 2) “How To Preserve Historical Newspapers: Saving The Obama Victory Paper and Other Important Documents” (<http://americanhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/howto-preserve-historical-newspapers>)
- 3) From “KU Libraries: Preserving Historic Newspapers” (<http://www.lib.ku.edu/preservation/Newspapers.shtml>)



*Photocopying newspaper clippings onto 8 1/2" by 11" acid-free sheets of paper is an effective and cost-efficient method of preservation. When these sheets include the newspaper's name and publication date, they can be organized for easy access.*

## Bill W. on How A.A.'s Big Book Came to Be Written

*To commemorate the 70th anniversary of the publication of the Big Book, G.S.O. Archives has pulled from its files a 1954 talk by Bill W. on the origins of the book, in which he touches on some lesser known aspects of the story.*



*A first edition and first printing of Alcoholics Anonymous, from 1939.*

One afternoon in the fall of 1937, Bill W. and Dr. Bob sat together taking stock of A.A. and, as Bill later said, realized that “this thing was going to succeed.”

But in a talk he gave to an A.A. convention in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1954, Bill also remembers saying to Bob that, “If this thing doesn’t move any faster than it has in the last three years, it may be another 10 years before it gets to the outskirts of Akron.”

The A.A. program at that point had gotten upwards of 40 drunks sober. As Bill says in that talk on how the Big Book came to be written, “there had been an immense amount of failure and a long time had been taken just to sober up the handful. How could this handful carry its mes-

sage to all those who still didn’t know?”

Bill had a number of ideas. He remembers saying to Dr. Bob at the time: “Maybe we could go to the old-timers in each group ... and say to them, ‘take a year off your job ... and go to Kentucky, Omaha, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles ... and give this thing a year and get a group started.’” Bill also considered creating a string of hospitals dedicated to problem drinkers.

Another idea was for a book describing the program. Bill and Dr. Bob brought these ideas in front of the A.A. members in Akron, “and we touched on the book” he says.

This led to the question of how this could be funded (as Bill says, “to find the money, somebody else’s money, of course”). With some reluctance, the group of about 18 A.A. members gave Bill the green light to return to New York to raise money. Speaking of the sales job he did at the meeting, Bill says, “exerting myself to the utmost, which was considerable in those days, we finally got a vote in that little meeting and it was a mighty close vote.”

Bill had no luck raising money, though. “I began to approach some people of means describing this tremendous thing that had happened ... (but) it didn’t seem so tremendous” to them.

Then the following spring, with little else offering hope, Bill started writing the Big Book. “One day probably in August 1938, I produced at a Foundation meeting, a couple of chapters of a proposed book...” He had three and a half years of sobriety.

Along the way another A.A. member, Henry P., came up with the idea of selling stock certificates in Works Publishing Company, which would produce the book. The plan was to sell the certificates for \$25 each to A.A. members. The first time they pitched the idea at a meeting, though, “the drunks all gave us this stony look that said, ‘what the hell ... you’re asking us to buy stock in a book that you haven’t written yet.’”

An editor at *Reader’s Digest* suggested the magazine would be interested in writing about the book once it was written. Though this turned out not to be the case, Bill used this promised publicity as a selling point for the stock certificates. “The *Reader’s Digest* is going to give us a free ad, boys,” he’d say, adding that the books “will move out by the carload. How can you miss?”

In the end, according to Bill, 49 members became shareholders. “Some people could buy as little as one. One guy bought 10 shares. We sold a few shares to nonalcoholics and my promoter friend (Henry P.) ... went out and kept collecting the money from the drunks so that little Ruthie Hock and I could keep working on the book.”

The editing process was another hurdle. “More chapters were done and we went into A.A. meetings in New York with these chapters in the rough.” The reaction was, Bill says, a “terrific whirlpool of arguments. The ‘good old A.A. Bible’ ... when I hear that it always makes me shudder, because the guys who put it together weren’t a damn bit biblical.”

In his talk in Texas, Bill remembers that the A.A. members of the time “fought, bled and died our way through one chapter after another. We sent them out to Akron and they were peddled around and there were terrific hassles about what should go in this book and what not. Meanwhile, we set drunks off to write their stories or we had newspaper people to write the stories for them to go in the back of the book.”

Speaking about what was to become Chapter 5, Bill says, “the idea came to me (that) we need a definite statement of concrete principles that these drunks can’t wiggle out of.... Moreover, if this book goes out to distant readers, they have got to have an absolutely explicit program by which to go.”

Bill set himself the task of breaking “this program up into small pieces so they can’t wiggle out. And when I got the pieces set down on that piece of yellow paper, I put numbers on them and was rather agreeably surprised when it came out to 12. ... Then I noticed that instead of leaving the God idea to last, I’d got it up front.”

The reaction from the other A.A. members was jarring. As Bill says, “pandemonium broke loose. ‘What do you mean by changing the program? ... this thing is overloaded with God... you’ve got these guys on their knees... stand them up!... Let’s take God out of it entirely.’”

But, as Bill says, “that argument caused the introduction of the phrase which has been a lifesaver to thousands; it was certainly none of my doing. I was on the pious side then, you see, still suffering from this big hot flash of mine. The idea of ‘God as you understand him’ came out of that perfectly ferocious argument.”

A few months later, in April 1939, the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published, with a run of 5,000.

The first disappointment was that the *Reader’s Digest* article fell through. The financial situation was in shambles. As Bill says, “we had drunks with 4,500 bucks in it, Charlie Towns hooked for 2,500 bucks and 2,500 bucks on the cuff with the printer. There was maybe \$500 left in the bank.”

Then one of the A.A. members used his connections to schedule an appearance on a national radio show to talk about the A.A. and its new book. Though the interview would be only three minutes long, Bill and others imagined it would pay big dividends. Figuring that the major market for the book was physicians, the A.A. members spent the last \$500 on a mailing announcing the radio spot and inviting mail-in orders for the new book.

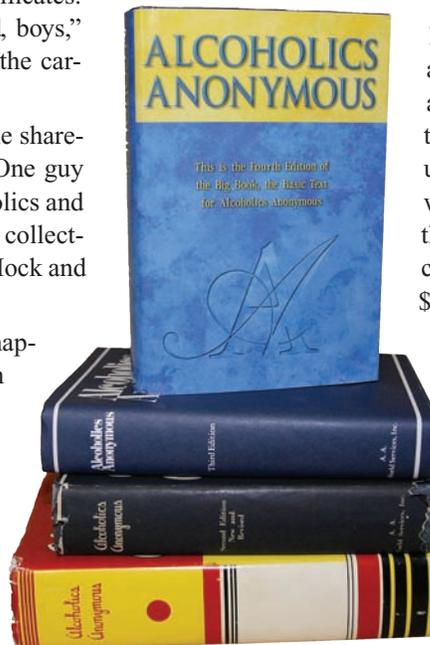
A few days after the radio show, Bill and others arrive at the Post Office. “We go to the clerk and he brings out 12 lousy postal cards, 10 of them completely illegible.”

At this stage, “We were absolutely and utterly stone broke,” says Bill. His and Lois’ home in Brooklyn was foreclosed. “We began to shop around from one magazine to another asking if they would give us some publicity. Nobody bit.”

Then in September *Liberty Magazine* printed an article about Alcoholics Anonymous. “Eight hundred inquiries came in as a result of that, we moved a few books and barely squeaked through the year 1939.”

In the rest of his address in Texas Bill talks about the Rockefeller dinner and his initial disappointment at John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s judgment that A.A. “is a work of goodwill. It needs little, if any, money.”

The few thousand dollars that came from Rockefeller and others at the dinner kept Bill and the A.A. office afloat, however. Publicity generated by the dinner also helped. Speaking of Rockefeller, Bill says, “He said to the whole world, ‘this is



*In 1973, sales of the Big Book reached one million. This year the 50th millionth copy of the Big Book is expected to be sold.*

good.’ The story went out on the wires all over the world. People ran into the bookstores to get the new book and we really began to get some book orders. An awful lot of inquiries came into the little office on Vesey Street.”

Then came the big break they were finally ready for: the *Saturday Evening Post* article by Jack Alexander, published March 1, 1941. Within a few weeks more than 6,000 letters flooded the office, along with hundreds of inquiries by telegram and telephone. At that point, A.A membership was under 2,000. Five years later, there were 30,000 members.

“Such is the story of the preparation of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*.... Of its subsequent effect, you all have some notion,” says Bill.

It is expected that the 50th millionth copy of the Big Book will be sold this year.

## Frequently Asked Questions About the Big Book

### Where did the Big Book get its nickname?

When *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published, the founding members wanted purchasers to be sure they were getting their money’s worth. So they instructed the printer to run the job on the thickest paper he had. “The original volume proved to be so bulky that it became known as the ‘Big Book,’” Bill W. said.

### Where did the custom of reading from Chapter 5 at the beginning of meetings get started?

A man by the name of Mort J. sobered up in 1939 solely from reading the Big Book. He moved to Los Angeles in 1940, and at his own expense rented a meeting room in the Cecil Hotel. He

“insisted on a reading from Chapter 5 of the A.A. book at the start of every session,” according to *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (page 93). The practice took root on the West Coast and spread from there.

### Who are the recipients of the milestone printing copies of the Big Book?

At the 50th Anniversary International Convention in Montreal in 1985, the five-millionth copy was presented to Ruth Hock, who typed draft after draft of the original manuscript. The one-millionth copy was presented to President Richard Nixon in April 1973; the two-millionth to Joseph Califano in June 1979; the ten-millionth to Nell Wing, Bill W.’s longtime (nonalcoholic) secretary and A.A.’s first archivist, in July 1990. The 15-millionth was given to Ellie Norris, widow of former trustee chairman John L. Norris, M.D., in 1996; and in the year 2000, the 20-millionth copy was presented to the AI-Anon Family Groups. The 25-millionth copy was presented to Jill Brown, warden of San Quentin Prison, in July 2005, at the A.A. International Convention in Toronto.

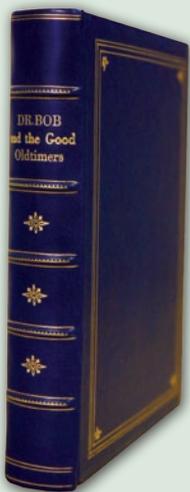
### How much has the price of the Big Book risen since 1939?

The original price of the Big Book was \$3.50; the hardcover Fourth Edition is now \$8.

### Who wrote the “To Wives” chapter?

Bill W. wrote that chapter. According to his wife, Lois, she wanted to write it but Bill “insisted” on doing it himself. “I was mad,” she said, adding, not “so much mad as hurt.” The reason he gave for wanting to write the chapter himself, said Lois, was that “he thought it should be in the same style as the rest of the book.” (*Pass It On*, page 200)

## Found at Flea Market:



## Advance Copy of *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*

I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous with a few years of sobriety. While visiting family in Texas last year, I took a side trip to a big flea market in Canton.

Browsing, I saw for sale a dark blue leather-bound book and was excited when I noticed the title: *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*. When I opened the book (carefully ...it didn’t look like it had ever been opened out flat, and I didn’t want to break the binding), I found a 1980 letter from Bob P., the former general manager of the General Service Office in New York, presenting an advance copy to the parents of the author. It is the only book of its kind! The vendor told me he had purchased the book in an estate sale. He sold it to me for \$10.

Once home, I contacted our Archives Committee in Rochester, N.Y., and arranged to bring the book to them. Our delegate then brought it to the Archives at G.S.O. New York. The book has come full circle and is back home!

By Natalie E., Webster, N.Y.