

# MARKINGS

YOUR ARCHIVES INTERCHANGE

VOL. XVII • No. 1 — 1994

c/o G.S.O. 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115

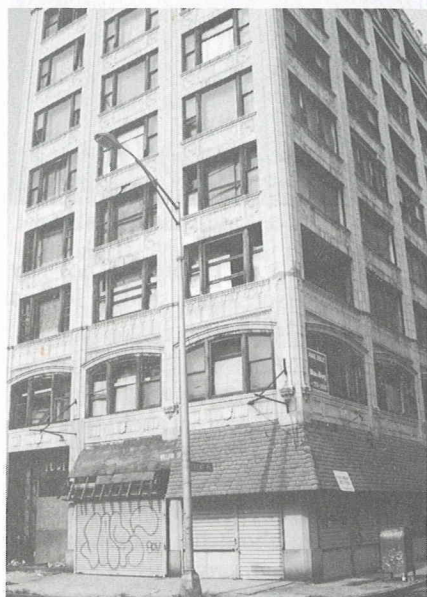
## Touring 17 Williams Street

*I recalled how the summer had been spent trying to repair the bankrupt affairs of the A.A. book, which money-wise had failed so dismally after its publication. We had a hard time keeping the sheriff out of our little cubicle of an office at 17 William Street, Newark, where most of the volume had been written.*

(A.A. Comes of Age, p.11)

The following is an interesting letter from Joe H., outline his odyssey back to that historic site where our Big Book was born:

"Thank you for putting me in touch with Merton M., who made it possible for me to visit the Calumet Building, 17 Williams Street, Newark, New



Calumet Building, 17 Williams Street.

Jersey, where most of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was written.

"This visit put to rest the misconception I had about my stumbling into Hank P.'s office and possibly selling Bill W. a newspaper. I can now say, with certainty, that the scene I depicted in my earlier letter to you was *not* room 601, where Merton said most of the

Big Book's chapters were written, or, for that matter, room 604, where Works Publishing Company moved after being evicted from 601. However, the trip to 17 Williams St. was memorable, filled with excitement and adventure for me, as well as for some members of my New Jersey family. Here is what happened.

"I called Merton to make final arrangements for our trip and we agreed to meet at his home in Summit on Sunday, September 26th. He asked me to bring another person to watch the car while the two of us were in the building.

"Mark, my nephew, a Toms River physician, agreed to try to make contact with local A.A.s, hopefully, to find one who would act as 'car guard' for us. Three of the A.A.s he contacted declined, wanting no part of the neighborhood. A fourth (not familiar with the area) agreed to go, but had to cancel when he learned he was to work that Sunday. I was getting ready to advise Merton of my failure in getting a 'local' to accompany us, when Gina, Mark's little sister from Summit, readily agreed to go with us. She works at an office in Newark and had even visited Halsey and Williams Streets a few days earlier. The trip was on. I then consented to my wife, Basia, who is also in the program, to accompany us, having earlier denied her offer as a guard because of her recent hip surgery. Gina's mother, Regi, also decided to join us.

"Merton instructed me to wear old clothes and to bring a flashlight, since the place was dark and dirty. When we arrived at his house, there waiting for us was a husky fellow, holding a two-foot long flashlight that resembled a policeman's billy club. He looked more the part of a night watchman than the lawyer that he is. By comparison I felt over-dressed, even though I was wearing the oldest clothes I could find.

"We took Interstate 78 to Newark, exiting on McCarter Highway; at the base of the exit ramp were a couple of

beggars, shaking styrofoam cups at motorists to encourage donations. Back in 1938, beggars were seen on the same spot, only then it was the shaking of tin cups or empty cans that were used to draw motorists' attention. On Broad Street, the main street in Newark, some major buildings were familiar—the Mosque Theater, and City Hall. On our left, a tall building looked like it might have been the Douglas Hotel on Hill Street. However, when we turned onto that street, we found ourselves looking at the Calumet, 17 Williams Street. The building, with all its windows boarded up and decorated with graffiti, did not look familiar at all. Neither did any of the other buildings or store fronts, so changed was that street. I had to look at the street sign, Williams Street and Treat Place, for a bit before I fully accepted what Merton was telling me—that this indeed was 17 Williams.

"Few people were on the street this Sunday afternoon, which is what Merton had hoped for when he planned this visit. With camera bag containing a camera with color film, another camera with black and white film, an audio tape recorder, extra camera batteries, and paper to map out the building and rooms, plus a trusty flashlight, we entered the building through an opening in the rear on Treat Place, where the boarding was already pried loose.

"We quickly lost the benefit of outside light, depending entirely upon our lanterns. Water dripped, through goodness knows how many stories, to settle in the mess we had to wade through. Merton seemed to know his way around, missing the larger puddles of stagnant water, all of which I managed to slosh through. Our nostrils were assailed by odors; the smell of urine suggested recent human habitation. We worked our way to the front of the building where we ascended a staircase. A slight breeze was felt in the upper floors, clearing the air somewhat. At each landing we passed the building's double elevator shaft, now left dangerously open. At the top of the staircase on the sixth floor, a left turn

had us facing room 601 (east) where Bill wrote most of the chapters to the Big Book. The glass in the door was intact, showing 601 clearly. However, the office was now divided down the middle, with a separate inner door to each suboffice.

"After traveling so far to be on this spot, I had to admit, with disappointment, that room 601 was not the room where the events took place that I remember. Room 601 is much larger (perhaps 22' x 22') and, though it faces fully east (Treat Place), it is located too far forward (toward Williams Street) to be the right office. After walking up six flights of stairs, I realized that it is more likely that my experience occurred in an office on a lower floor, perhaps the third or fourth. Nothing about room 601 or its location in the building looked familiar.

"Needless to say, this was not a pleasant building to be in. In it's almost total darkness, a light had to be played on the subject for the photographer to know where to point the camera. Also, one easily loses sense of direction in the total darkness. We walked half way down the hall to room 604. When walking into that office I was sure the window (the only one not boarded) faced south, rather than west, as it does, overlooking Halsey Street (one block west of Treat Place).

"There was comparative comfort in being in the natural light provided through the unboarded window of 604. We could now see each other instead of the apparitions created by the lantern light. Conversation became easier. We speculated: nothing inspiring about the view from these windows (601-604); those shelves in the corner closet (604) could not have stored many books; Hank's big desk may have been comfortable in 601 but would have crowded 604. We even took interest in markings on the wall, like a business stamp, '*Anthony La Russo, Watchmaker, 17 Williams St., Newark, N.J. 641-1331*', or hand-printed notes (probably made by Mr. La Russo), '*Omega/Jack's Watch/July 15, 1968*'. From the window of 604 could be seen empty lots for almost two blocks on Halsey Street, where, in the 1930s, stood multi-storied buildings with active businesses on the ground floor. I could not help thinking that if Bill were standing here he would not have recognized this landscape.

"Before vacating the building we

studied the front entrance from the inside, appreciating the beautiful marble veneer that once graced Calumet's entry way. As we were ready to leave, a well-groomed dog appeared. It looked us over, then trotted away. Now I got worried. The dog appeared too neat and clean to be a stray. Was his master near? The possibility of someone else being in the building gave me the creeps. We quickly followed the dog out of the building.

"I suddenly remembered the 'blown' safe and teller-like window that may have been part of a 'bookie' operation. We went back in and, after a few photos, we left the building for good.



Doorway to one of the offices.

Before entering the car, however, we returned to the entrance to pick up pieces of ornamental tile souvenirs that had broken off from the face of the entrance. We made one more stop. Holding a current copy of the *Newark Star Ledger*, I was photographed, as if hawking newspapers on 'my corner,' Halsey and Williams. I am sorry that circumstances did not permit us to spend more time in the building or to have more conversation with each other. I am grateful to have met Morton. He deserves a medal for the research he is doing toward writing the history of Alcoholics Anonymous in New Jersey, and a battle star for each time he escorted one of us through 17 Williams Street. One can't help but appreciate the giving of his valuable time for the sake of history to escort us through that mess.

"This experience will provide good

discussion material during Tradition Sessions, that Basia and I hold in our home annually. As a result of my 17 Williams experience, 'The Writing of the Big Book' was the topic of a new meeting in our area, at Union Park. A panel of five discussed the topic, then opened it to the groups for further discussion. The topic for the second meeting, was 'Women in A.A.' Next will be, 'The Oxford Group.'

"When we were moping around the entrance of 17 Williams picking up tile, a policeman was watching us from behind his unmarked car; so I have been told by the women. They also told of trepidations felt when waiting for us

while parked on the corner. They say that every person that passed by looked long and hard at them.

"It really pleases me that Merton is writing the New Jersey history of Alcoholics Anonymous to include the events of 9-11 Hill Street and 17-19 Williams Street, Newark. So little has been written about the actual writing of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. There are those who think that Bill appeared at Hank's office in Newark and 'voilà!' out came the manuscript. We find only about a half-dozen pages on the subject in *A.A. Come of Age*, *Bill W. (Thomsen)*, and *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, with a few more than that in *Pass It On*. I have been unable to find even the mention of Newark in *Not God* (Kurtz). Even then, these pages deal primarily with its title, finances and production process. We hear very little

about Fitz, Hank and others who may have also taken part in the book's authorship.

"Bill had spent nearly a year of walking hours in Newark, N.J., a daily commuter from his home in Brooklyn. His mode of travel would necessarily have been via the Central Railroad, ferry to Battery, and subway to Brooklyn, or via the Hudson Tubes from Newark's Pennsylvania Station to New York, then a subway to Brooklyn.

"Since there was nothing inspiring about the landscape seen from the window of 601-604, I believe Bill's best creative thinking would probably have occurred while commuting. He would be away from Ruth and Hank in Newark as well as Lois and his alcoholic friends in New York. Too bad Bill did not delve into this aspect of the book's writing more extensively.

"I wonder, was Bill tempted to drink during this period? On 'my corner,' 31 Williams, was a tavern, just a few doors away from the Calumet. His walk to Pennsylvania Station probably took him 15 to 20 minutes, past many opportunities for a drink. Down Treat Place, a few doors short of Brandford Place, he would pass another tavern. Taking a right on Brandford, he would pass a bar that catered to the sports enthusiasts and where progress of ongoing baseball games were announced from a radio located at the entrance. On Market Street, past Mulberry, was a saloon decorated to please the horse-race enthusiasts. Another bar drew the boxing crowd, with a boxing ring in the back room for training young pugilists. During warm weather the open doors of these drinking establishments exuded exotic barroom aromas to tempt the passerby. Having safely made it to the station, Bill would also have had to pass the cocktail lounge of the Pennsylvania Railroad Station after

buying his ticket for the Hudson Tubes to New York.

"Bill, while on this walk, would also have had the opportunity to help the still-suffering alcoholic. I wonder, did Bill avail himself of the occasions? I remember one second-floor flop house on Market Street that advertised beds for 25 cents. He also had to pass two store-front missions that fed and lectured to the down and out. The city blocks which he walked to reach the station were laced with alleys. Here Bill could find derelicts galore.

"*Alcoholics Anonymous* can be found, I am told in 141 countries and is printed in 27 languages. Certainly not competing with the Bible or Koran, but, without a doubt, *Alcoholics Anonymous* is the most far-reaching sociological document of the 20th century. I think I can even backtrack several centuries and still place *Alcoholics Anonymous* in the top dozen writings for its positive significance to mankind.

"I think we owe our future generations more detailed background information on the writing and the existing atmosphere during the writing of *Alcoholic Anonymous*. The fact that the stock market had not yet recuperated from the 'crash' of 1929; that the newspaper was the primary communication medium of the time (television was still experimental and car radios were not yet prevalent); that auto travel was, for the most part, slow and expensive.

"I believe future generations would enjoy knowing more about the human interest aspects of Bill's travels to and from work; e.g. experiencing the smell of roasted chestnuts on a wintry day, the whistle from the peanut vendor's cart, admiring the two-story sculpture housing the traffic light at the city's main intersection of Broad and Market, and the ever present beggars and dere-

licts he would see on side street, warming their hand over crude oil-drum fires during cold weather days. This is just a small measure of what Bill may have experienced on the New Jersey side of his commute. There is also the New York side.

"Other questions I have regarding the writing of the Big Book are: Have any first drafts survived? Are we in possession of any drafts that Bill sent to Dr. Bob for review? Are there any that show suggested changes by Dr. Bob? There is so much that needs looking into.

"The distance between 182 Clinton St., Brooklyn, and 17 Williams St., Newark, is 10 miles as the crow flies. However, that trip, for Bill would take from forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes, depending on time of day and schedules. Has anyone traveled that route since Bill's day? I think it's historically important that such a trip be made, documenting times and events, even though they are more than 50 years after the fact. At the very least, a video documentary of Bill's traveled route from 17 Williams St., Newark, to 182 Clinton St., Brooklyn, should be the group's main objective.

"By placing such emphasis on 'Bill's Walk,' I don't mean to suggest that we deify our co-founder. Far from it. From what I have read and heard about Bill, he had a few human traits that precluded any nominations for sainthood. The 'Walk,' from Williams to Clinton might give us some insight into how some of the brilliance of the Big Book came about. It's during relaxed times that our subconscious releases our most powerful thoughts. I am willing to bet that a great deal of Bill's inspiration was influenced by events and situations known only to him while traveling from 17 William St., Newark, N.J., to 182 Clinton St., Brooklyn, N.Y."

## Caribbean History

We received the following from Jean M. in the Caribbean.

"Bill T. has asked me to write you re your archive research into the old days. Since I have been around and about the Caribbean and in the program for many twenty-four hours, he thought perhaps I could give you some input into the early kickoffs on St.Thomas, Sint Maarten and here on the little island of Saba.

"St.Thomas was the lure for this alcoholic on the geographic change in 1957 —because likker was \$1 a bottle, and sunshine beaches and what goes with them were more conducive to my life style than Stateside asphalt towers on the Island of Manhattan. Of course, trouble met me head-on, and in 1958 I called upon an American, Mike M., living on St.Thomas, of whom I had heard. So began weekly meetings between Mike and myself, in each other's homes.

"About two month into the program, another gentleman joined the act, and we oochd along slowly, I having trouble separating religion from spirituality. Mike, bless his heart, talked 'God'... and the other guy spouted 'Cosmic Forces.' I, an agnostic (at that time), left them after seven months of unhappy sobriety.

"As we all know, our disease progresses, and I rapidly slid down the drain, albeit still holding a job in spite

of the 'Shaky Hand Vodka Sweat Syndrome,' believing that no one knew I was a problem drinker. Finally, two and a half years later, I hit the 'Big Bang Bottom' and crawled back to Mike, April 12, 1961. During my time away, Mike had managed to attract about eight members. We all met weekly in a little wooden hut en route to the airport, lent us by the local Boy Scouts.

"Subsequently the Scouts had a windfall, and were able to construct a more substantial meeting place in another part of Charlotte Amalie, but by this time the pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church invited us to use its newly erected recreation room, adjacent to the parish, and in the more accessible heart of town.

"After a year's sobriety, in 1962, I was privileged to visit Sint Maarten and was interested in relocating there. However, with only twelve months in the program, and no A.A. group on that island, I deemed it unwise to leave the safe haven of St. Thomas and its good Island A.A.

"Our little group burgeoned beautifully and when I finally did uproot in 1975 there were approximately four gatherings in action on St. Thomas, with total membership comfortably ensconced. There were meetings four to five times weekly in various areas in and out of town.

"Sint Maarten, however, was still without A.A. and after settling in I went to police, hospital, doctors and all who would listen, advising I was available to be of help to anyone who asked for it. Meantime, I registered with G.S.O. as a Loner.

"I was met with the resistance of a culture in which family problems are kept quiet. One evening, a little more than four years later, I happened to tune in to the local radio station. To my surprise, an announcer was advising, 'There will be an organizational meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in the office of Dr. H., Tuesday night at 8:00 p.m.' I was totally floored. It was I who was supposed to bring my inspired program to the enlightenment of afflicted Sint Maarteners! Needless to say, I was laughing at myself within minutes and, of course, went to that meeting with deep gratitude at the specified time, February 22, 1980. I learned that Dr. H., desperate with his alcoholic pa-

tients, had called on a close relative who was visiting and who had a goodly amount of time as an A.A. member, to help get something started. Twelve persons were seated about the office when I arrived. Six cowed men and six ferocious wives, with arms tucked across ample bosoms, glaring at their respective spouses.

"Weekly meetings were established at Dr. H's office, with membership dwindling over the next few months. By the time the doctor was transferred off the island, about a year later, they ceased altogether, with the exception of myself and Brison, an elderly Antillean gentleman who had caught the program and wished to continue.

"To the rescue came Father Heyliger, St. Martin of Tours' parish priest, who turned over the basement of the Philipsburg Roman Catholic Rectory, an old stone building, moldy and dank. Dear Brison and I seated ourselves on unsteady benches around a rickety wooden table for our weekly confab. But alas, Brison's transportation soon vanished and while he remained true to our principles, I who do not drive, was once more listed as a Loner with a pot of coffee as company for six or more months.

"One evening, while I tried to squash resentments that no one wanted what I had to offer, I emptied the coffeepot, put away the brochures and vowed to the priest's housekeeper that I was closing shop for good. 'If anyone comes by, you know where I live, right around the corner. Just phone me and I will come for whomever shows up.'

"Within about five minutes of my return to my apartment, there was a knock on the door - and so A.A. started off again. The newcomer to the island had a good A.A. background and was able to bring Brison back to join us. Together we slowly grew. We placed an ad in the daily newspaper which helped to swell the ranks to six. Visitors found us through the A.A. Directory and our little band survived.

"I'm not quite sure exactly when the rectory was torn down, but we were offered the backstage dressing room of the Sint Maarten Cultural Center, where now and again we'd be interrupted by youthful aspiring actors and actresses. But we all hung in there, and when the new rectory was completed

we were granted the use of the large and comfortable Fellowship Hall, where meetings are now scheduled Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 6:00 p.m. Always very well attended by regulars and visitors alike. Al-Anon flourishes, as does Narcotics Anonymous: The meetings are a far cry from the early struggle to get program recognition.

"In 1988 I moved to Saba, the little island 13 minutes by air from Sint Maarten, where once again I was met with family privacy resistance to any curb on the habits of locals. Here the population registers only 1,200, with a great number of closely related families, and gossip is rife so it is understandable that locals would be difficult to lure into A.A., as no one can admit to having a problem. I placed an ad in a local paper, registered again as a Loner, and let it be known to all and sundry that I chose to break my anonymity in the interest of attracting whomever felt the need to talk.

"It was not until 1992 that my phone rang in response to my ad, and a well known islander came to see me. He ultimately attracted two other men, and we used to get together in my garden gazebo Monday evenings for our A.A. discussion. However, it was not until an American couple, in 1993, both with several years of membership, moved to Saba, that things bubbled up. In the first place, the men now had another male with whom to identify, rather than an elderly lady with no experience in Stateside A.A. methods. And I, who had never had a sponsor throughout my many years in our great program, latched onto his wonderful wife.

"Our Saba meetings now convene Monday and Thursday in the Windwardside Community Center. We've grown from two to ten on an island where per capita consumption of Heineken beer is the highest in the world.

"And I have learned that where there are no meetings, those of us who want to quit the life of booze can handle one day at a time with ease. But it is them wot ain't convinced yet who slip away where meetings are scheduled, but bar-rooms beckon.

"Hoorey for A.A.! Wot say we all meet in San Diego? Yes?"