

Pioneer Members Joined Prison Inmates to Bring A.A. Behind the Walls

Inmates of correctional facilities and pioneer A.A. members recognized the potential of Alcoholics Anonymous to help problem drinkers behind the walls at an early date. In fact, there were A.A. meetings in jails and prison before some major towns had A.A. groups. In September 1940, only seven months after the first meeting in Philadelphia, members there visited the local correctional facility.

In responding to why A.A. meetings are desirable in a place where alcohol isn't readily available, an inmate A.A. member from the 1940s said: "We are sick and tired of battering our stubborn heads against prison walls and are trying to find the answers to the causes that brought us here.... A.A. in prison is like an oasis in the Sahara."

One of the first prison groups got started in 1942 in San Quentin State Prison in California with the support of its warden, Clinton T. Duffy, who Bill W. described as "enlightened and liberal," and someone who had "given much thought to the urgent and pressing problem of prison reform."

Warden Duffy, faced at the time with the challenge of helping inmates return to society with a chance of success, concluded that: "it was apparent to us that the alcoholic presented a problem of rehabilitation which the prison program was not meeting."

In his book published in 1950, "The San Quentin Story," Warden Duffy writes: "The Alcoholics Anonymous movement was in its infancy then, but I communicated with some of the organizers in San Francisco and they agreed to come to San Quentin. No other prison had ever tried A.A. within the walls, and there was some

official apprehension because we would have to bring in civilians to work closely with our men. Nevertheless, we took the chance, and we got our first twenty men by announcing the A.A. program and its purpose in the *San Quentin News*" (page 229).

Looking back, Duffy writes: "The A.A. movement has been in full swing for the past seven years, with an average membership of two hundred men, and on Sundays our men have worked with as many as 100 A.A. visitors." He calls the program "a spectacular success," and says that "A.A. men on parole have a consistently better record than other parolees who do not have such unselfish and devoted moral support from a civilian group."

In late 1943, Bill W. traveled to the prison and spoke before the inmates at their A.A. meeting, which later prompted this letter from an inmate who was there: "I want to take this opportunity to tell you how fortunate I was to have been present when you made your unforgettable visit to San Quentin, over a year ago. That was my first A.A. meeting — I haven't missed a meeting since.... I will be eligible for parole late in August of this year, and I am confident of my future in the knowledge gained in right thinking through following the 12 Steps."

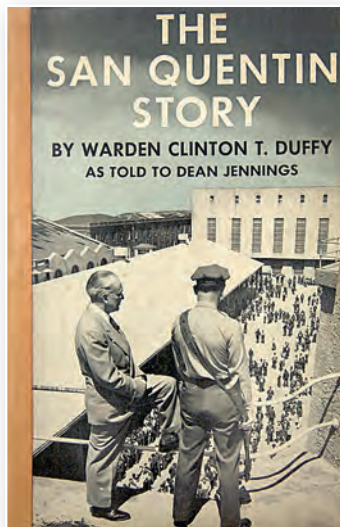
That letter is one of the very earliest written by an inmate to "Headquarters" in New York, but others followed, a number of them addressed to Bill W. As Bill writes in response to a letter to him in June 1946 from Charles K., an inmate and A.A. member in the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton: "On receipt of your affecting letter I read it through several times. It touched me deeply because I know that your situation, in common with all those at Trenton, is harder than the lot of the average alcoholic. Yet A.A. has well demonstrated that no trouble is too great, no tarnish is too deep, for the loving kindness of God to remove — if and when we are willing to do our part."



Bar-less magazine shown here in issues from 1951 and 1952 was published six times a year by A.A. member inmates at Indiana State Prison. The publication, which was 32 pages or longer, included recovery stories, news of prison A.A. groups, reprints from A.A. literature and the Grapevine, and letters. The issue of January-February 1952 (at right) is devoted to an account of the first ever A.A. prison groups conference, which was held at Indiana State Prison.

Folsom Prison Inmates Learn of A.A.

The success of A.A. in San Quentin inspired inmates in another California penitentiary, Folsom Prison. In June



One of the very earliest A.A. meetings in prison was formed at San Quentin State Prison in 1942 with the help of that facility's warden, Clinton Duffy, shown here on the cover of his book, published in 1950.

1943, inmates in that facility 25 miles northeast of Sacramento organized an A.A. group. According to an account by an inmate at the time: "One day one of our number ran across an article describing A.A. and the remarkable affects it had produced on the most unregenerate alcoholics. We read and reread that article.... And then we began to run across other articles on A.A. We absorbed enough of its philosophy from them to come to the conclusion that here was something real, something well worth trying.... A small group of us had become deeply interested in the movement. We had all been more or less agreed

that overindulgence in alcohol was primarily responsible for our being in prison....

"We decided we'd like to give A.A. a whirl. We didn't know just how to go about it... when we discovered via the *San Quentin News* ... that an A.A. group had just been formed in San Quentin. That settled it. If A.A. was practical in San Quentin it was practical in Folsom."

The inmates approached prison officials with their idea and were told that if enough men were interested it might be possible to work out a program similar to the one in operation at San Quentin. The authorities granted the inmates permission to contact the San Quentin group for information. Then, in a remarkable illustration of the respect the A.A. program had established among corrections authorities at the time, "an inmate member of the San Quentin group was transferred to Folsom to help us get our first group started."

Following that, a call went out to the local A.A. group. According to an account by a member of that group, the Sacramento Chapter: "In June of 1943, the Sacramento Chapter was informed that an A.A. group was being organized in Folsom and prison officials extended an invitation to our Chapter to participate in the work there." Five members of the group attended a meeting at the prison and spoke about Alcoholics Anonymous, and, "we found a receptive and appreciative audience."

To deal with the special circumstances of organizing an A.A. group in a correctional facility, the A.A.s inside and outside Folsom devised an orientation phase. According to an

A.A. member from Sacramento, "After that first meeting we consulted with the inmate A.A. committee and finally evolved a program consisting of an eight-week 'instruction period.'" Under this plan, interested inmates would attend meetings on successive Sundays to learn about the A.A. program. The Steps would be discussed and explained at each gathering, with outside members attending every other Sunday.

"There would be a review of the Twelve Steps on the seventh Sunday and a 'graduation' on the eighth Sunday, at which members were to be given a card attesting to their continuous attendance during the instruction period." Within a year, according to the report by the Sacramento A.A. member, 150 men "completed the instruction course." The writer adds: "Although a man has completed the so-called instruction course, he is given to understand that a man NEVER 'graduates' from A.A. and he is urged to attend all subsequent meetings. Some members of the Folsom group have established an enviable record for continuous attendance since the first class was inaugurated."

In a report of the trip that he and Lois took to the West Coast in 1943, which included visits to San Quentin and Folsom, Bill writes: "At San Francisco and Sacramento fresh wonders came into view — the work at San Quentin and Folsom prisons. I found 400 A.A.s within these prison walls. The spirit of these men was indescribable. ... The men attend on their own time, their recreation period. ... At Folsom, where supposedly hardened offenders are sent, I saw the identical drama re-enacted.... Nor can I leave the prisons without one more word of thanks for the beautiful and affecting testimonial scrolls presented me by the San Quentin and Folsom groups. ... Their words are from the heart."

Bill continued his involvement with A.A. in prison on his return from the West Coast, speaking in late 1943 at the Clinton Farms Reformatory for Girls in New Jersey. One result of this talk was that Bill was later invited to address a luncheon of superintendents of correctional facilities — and A.A. continued to spread among these lock-ups. By the end of 1945 there were A.A. groups confirmed in correctional facilities in Texas, Illinois, Virginia, Connecticut, New York, Washington State, New Jersey, Oregon, Michigan, Georgia, and Kansas.

In November 1952, the General Service Office drew up a list of six suggestions for the formation of A.A. prison groups, among them that the group have a "sponsor" from among prison officials, which in many cases is the "institutional parole officer," along with suggestions for the ways outside A.A.s can support an inside group.

A.A. Members in Prison Write to G.S.O.

Also in 1952, the G.S.O. compiled the messages from A.A. members in prisons around the country and published them in an *Exchange Bulletin*. The A.A. members on the inside share how their groups are run and how they are doing and what A.A. is doing for them, and to ask questions or assistance.

Among the comments contained in these early *Exchange*

Bulletins are: “we are proud of the privileges accorded us by the officials here, and guard them jealously. There has never been an incident in which the A.A. group has been involved, nor have we ever betrayed the confidence placed in us by the staff” (from the Seagoville Group in Seagoville, Texas). Another inmate writes: “most of us that are in A.A. now really never knew such a Fellowship existed.... If we had, I am sure that some of the parole violators that have been returned due to alcoholic conditions might still be out doing themselves and society some real good for once. We haven’t the temptations in here that we have outside and we all realize the fact, but our main goal is to plant the seed deep enough in here that it will remain when we are released” (from the I-R A.A. Group in Pendleton, Indiana).

As attested to again and again by prison officials, inmates attending A.A. meetings generally stayed out of trouble while incarcerated, and after release stood a much better chance of remaining free. It’s also evident that A.A. members on the inside took great pride in the good comportment of their fellow A.A.s in prison, and in their successes outside the facilities. A number of the letters in the *Exchange Bulletin* cite the low recidivist rate of A.A. members released on parole.

One boasts: “so far this year, 19 men have left the institution. Most of them are doing a fine job on the outside. Just three of them have come back. We think that is a pretty fine showing for our group” (from Walter C., West Concord, Massachusetts). Another says: “Since we organized our group back in 1949, we have lost via parole and discharge 61 members. Of that total, only three have been returned as parole violators. I venture to say that there isn’t a prison group in the

country that can match that record. I wish there was some way of checking it” (from Lee F. in Marquette, Michigan).

By 1957, the G.S.O. was receiving so many letters from A.A. members in correctional facilities that a staff member was devoted full-time to responding to them. In a letter he wrote that year, Bill W. says, “I have a great interest in the whole prison situation — and so does our office.... It is wonderful that we are approaching the 300 figure in groups in prisons.”

By 1962 the concept of “sponsorship via correspondence” was well-established between A.A. members on the inside and the outside. A warden in a Pennsylvania said at the time that: “through the program of sponsorship via correspondence there is a strengthening of the home community ties and a preparation for the time when the man will be released.”

A.A. Prison Group Conference in 1952

Indiana State Prison was the site of the First Regional Conference of A.A. Prison Groups at Michigan City, Indiana. Over 600 friends of A.A. from the outside joined 196 from the inside — coming from seven jails — for the event. The Governor of Indiana, Henry Schricker, delivered an address at the conference, thanking the A.A. members attending from outside groups and adding: “Great work is going on here in Indiana. I want to see an organization like [Alcoholics Anonymous] in every community in the state.... There are men in every community who need this wonderful A.A. fellowship.”

The warden Alfred Dowd said: “I predict that Alcoholics Anonymous, with the help of good outside leadership, will be the greatest weapon we have ever known to keep

In Memoriam:

40th Anniversary of Death of Bill W.

This past January 24th marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Bill W., A.A.’s co-founder. He was 75 years old when he passed away at the Miami Heart Institute in Miami Beach, Florida, as a result of pneumonia.

Dr. John L. Norris, chairman of the board of trustees of Alcoholics Anonymous, announcing Bill’s death to the Fellowship, writes: “It has been suggested that A.A. members throughout the world might want to participate in memorial services for Bill. Thus, Sunday, February 14 has been set aside so that we who feel so great a debt will have an opportunity not only to share our grief at Bill’s passing, but to express our gratitude for his having lived and to rededicate ourselves to completing the task he began 35 years ago.” Among the memorial services held worldwide on that date was the one at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

About 2,000 attended the service, and among those who offered tributes were Marty M., one of the first woman to get sober in A.A., who said, “he was my inspiration, and not mine alone.” In his tribute, Dr. Norris said: “We can never again say, as we have said so many times before, ‘Bill, what do you think?’ What his death means is that all of us will have to listen harder than ever to discern the group conscience.”

Hundreds of A.A. members and others at the time sent cards of condolences to the G.S.O., which are preserved in the Archives.

