

## As Early A.A.s Find Their Way, Enduring Recovery Program Emerges

Ebby T., a boyhood friend and drinking companion of Bill W., got sober in 1934 attending Oxford Group meetings. On several occasions that year Ebby visited Bill at his Brooklyn home to talk about that then-popular movement and how it was helping him.

Ebby's efforts, which were destined to have far-reaching and dramatic effects on his friend and untold others, did not seem to be helping Bill get sober.

As Bill writes in a chronology of early A.A. events that he compiled in 1954: "I got drunk on Armistice Day 1934 for the last time. The binge lasted exactly a month."

He landed for the third time in Towns Hospital, which specialized in treating alcoholics.

Bill writes: "Ebby appears at hospital probably on the morning of December 14. After he left I had the tremendous spiritual experience so often described. About ten

days following this attended Oxford Group meeting at Calvary House."

Bill attended Oxford Group meetings for the next couple of years, working with alcoholics he found in those meetings. From the start, though, there were tensions.

The Oxford Group formula for sobriety was: admit defeat, talk honestly about your feelings, make restitution, give of yourself, and pray. It also recommended meditation and belief in a God of the believer's understanding.

In the chronology, Bill writes: "[1935] opened with increasing coolness of Oxford Groups toward work with alcoholics. Drunks could not seem to accept the rigor of the Oxford Group's program. They'd stay sober only briefly and then flop."

In May, Bill made his fateful business trip to Akron, where, when the venture soured, he writes: "In danger of getting drunk."

## G.S.O.'s New Archivist

In February, Amy Filiatreau joined the G.S.O. in New York as Archivist.

"This is a wonderful position for me," says Amy. "Members of my family have been involved in A.A. since before I was born. This job feels like a natural fit." Referring to an A.A. group in her home town of Louisville, Kentucky, Amy says, "the Goldsmith Lane Group, which meets Wednesday nights, has been full of Filiatreaus since 1963. It's like a weekly family reunion."

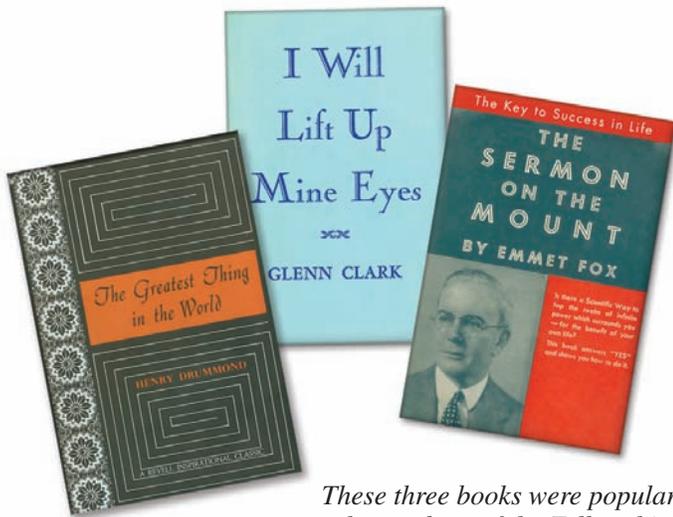
Before coming to G.S.O., Amy was director of archival services for The History Factory in Washington, D.C., where she managed the archival collections of more than 35 corporations, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and other institutions. She supervised a staff of 10 archivists and oversaw operations, including research, assessment, preservation, and digitization of diverse historical materials housed in a 35,000-square-foot storage facility.

Among her other positions, Amy worked as archivist for the Archives and History Center at SBC Communications Inc. (recently merged with AT&T), serving SBC's 13-state region, and more than 150,000 employees.

She is certified by the Academy of Certified Archivists, and received a B.A. in anthropology and archaeology from the University of Chicago and an M.L.I.S. from the University of Texas at Austin, with additional certification in Preservation Administration from the school's Preservation and Conservation Program.

"I have always loved the Fellowship of A.A. and the people drawn to what it offers," says Amy. "I'm thrilled to be here and I hope to serve the membership and friends of A.A. for many years to come."





*These three books were popular among early members of the Fellowship. The Sermon on the Mount was considered particularly valuable and is still read today by some in Alcoholics Anonymous.*

Through a series of circumstances based on his inspired belief that he could stay sober through talking to another alcoholic, Bill was led to a meeting with Bob. S., a doctor who was also a seemingly hopeless drinker. Bill describes what happened: “Probably third week of May 1935. Went to live at [Dr. Bob’s] house. Smithy stayed sober briefly and then got drunk at the Atlantic City Convention. Returned home from there about June 6, nursed him through hang-over to sobriety in time for a surgical operation.”

Referring to the date now cited as the day A.A. was founded, Bill writes: “During this bender he hit bottom never to drink again, dating from June 10, 1935.”

By the time Bill left Akron in September, the beginnings of the first A.A. group had taken hold there. Bill talked about that group in a speech in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1954: “I helped Smithy briefly with it, and he went on to found the first A.A. group in the world. And, as with all new groups, it was nearly all failure, but now and then somebody saw the light and there was progress.”

In the 1954 chronology, Bill writes: “On return to New York began to go to more Oxford Group meetings. First work at the Mission and the Towns Hospital very hard.”

Referring to his wife and their home in Brooklyn, Bill writes: “Lois and I began to take in drunks at Clinton Street....Not a single one of them made a recovery in our house but we learned a lot about drunks.”

Slow progress was being made, though: “By the close of ’35 a small meeting had developed at Clinton Street. A few seemed to be staying sober, that is, if they lived outside of our house.” Over the next couple of years the movement gained traction, and by the fall of 1937 about 40 had gotten sober.

## What Early A.A.s Were Reading

Before there was any A.A. literature, certain books were popular among early members of the program. The following is from a 1954 recording of a conversation between Bill and Dorothy, the wife of Clarence S., who is credited with founding the first A.A. meeting in Cleveland:

*Dorothy: The first thing that Bob did was get me Emmet Fox’s Sermon on the Mount.*

*Bill: That was very popular everywhere then.*

*Dorothy: That was required reading for everybody. As soon as men in the hospital, as soon as their eyes could begin to focus, they got that Sermon on the Mount. ... Then, Bill, do you remember the Upper Room? ... They impressed on us that we had to read that absolutely every morning.*

*Bill: Do you remember some of the other books that had early influences?...*

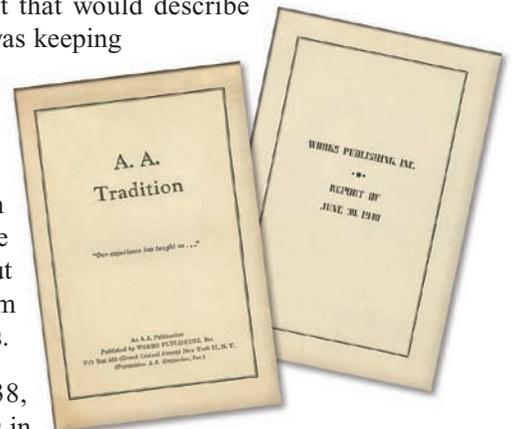
*Dorothy: Well, Drummond’s Greatest Thing in the World. Those were about the three.*

## Putting the Program in Print

After a couple of years of modest — but undeniable — success, the question was, as Bill later said: “How could this handful carry its message to all those who still did not know?” He told the story of the Big Book in the talk he gave in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1954. According to Bill’s account, he was back in Akron visiting Dr. Bob on an autumn afternoon in 1937. Reflecting on the program and the success it had had with “really fatal cases of alcoholism,” it hit the two men for the first time “that this thing was going to succeed.” They also realized, though, that they’d “have to get some kind of literature. Up to this moment, not a syllable of this program was in writing.”

Bill and Bob agreed on the idea for some kind of text that would describe the method that was keeping them and others sober. Back in New York, Bill received enthusiastic support from the group for the idea of a book, but no interest from potential investors.

In May of 1938, the A.A. members in New York formed



*Early A.A. pamphlets.*

the Alcoholic Foundation. All that summer “we solicited the rich,” Bill said in his Texas talk, though their efforts went nowhere. “So one day, I produced at a Foundation meeting a couple of chapters of a proposed book, in rough and in mimeograph. As a matter of fact, we’d been using chapters of this book to try to put the bite on the rich, and we still had it kicking around.”

One idea was to issue stock in a publishing company and an early pamphlet published by A.A. contained a proposal for doing that. An excerpt from that pamphlet, published in 1938 or 1939, reads: “When it is considered that there are an estimated million alcoholics in this country the obligation for wide spread of the work may be perceived. Education and instruction should be made available to every one touched by a drink situation. ... It is felt that these aims may be gained by the publishing of an anonymous volume based upon the past four years experience.”

Another pamphlet, a report from Works Publishing Inc. dated June 30, 1940, reads: “One of our older members, Mr. Wm. G. Wilson, was delegated to assemble material and write the text. After long discussion, it was decided that The Alcoholic Foundation ought to publish the volume if possible.”

In 1938, when Bill began work on the first draft of what is now the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he had been sober about three and a half years. Dr. Bob was sober a few months less than three years, and the other 100 early members who contributed in one way or another to the writing of the book had been sober for periods ranging from a couple of years to a couple of months.

This shaky, often fearful group of men and women somehow brought to publication, in April 1939, a blueprint for recovery from alcoholism that has been followed successfully for over 70 years.

## The Rockefeller Dinner

An event that raised A.A.’s profile and accorded it a new measure of respectability occurred on Feb. 8, 1940, when John D. Rockefeller Jr. gave a dinner for Alcoholics Anonymous in New York City. His son Nelson played host to a group of several hundred guests, most of them business associates of his father.

One of the speakers, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reverend at New York’s renowned Riverside Church, said: “And now comes a movement, an astonishingly apt and pertinent movement, where men who have been in the thick of this thing, who have faced the hopelessness of the situation, who have felt that they never could get well, have found resources of strength and have come out and there is not a

thing about alcoholics they do not know....

“I suspect that if it is wisely handled — and it seems to be in wise and prudent hands — there are doors of opportunity ahead of this project that may surpass our capacities to imagine.”

This dinner received widespread and favorable press coverage, including in *Time magazine*, which reported in its issue of Feb. 19, 1940: “No cocktails were served, for several of Mr. Rockefeller’s guests were members of ‘Alcoholics Anonymous,’ a widespread, publicity-shy group of one-time guzzlers who have cured themselves.”

The event that landed A.A. in the consciousness of the country’s population, though, was the appearance of Jack Alexander’s article “Alcoholics Anonymous,” the lead piece in the March 1, 1941, *Saturday Evening Post*. The impact was immediate, with some A.A. groups doubling in size scarcely a week after the article was published. In the article’s wake, A.A. groups began to form beyond New York and Ohio, spreading north to Toronto and Windsor in Canada and west all the way to Honolulu. By 1944, the Fellowship was well established, with an estimated 10,000 members.

It was becoming clear that this growing, diverse movement would need more formal guidelines to better establish the principles and priorities that made A.A. effective.

## The Twelve Traditions

In the pamphlet, “A.A. Tradition,” published in 1947, Bill W. writes: “Nobody invented A.A. It grew. Trial and error has produced a rich experience. Little by little we have been adopting the lessons of that experience, first as policy and then as tradition.

“That process still goes on and we hope it never stops. Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that!”

In a letter to an A.A. member named Dewey, dated April 14, 1958, Bill explained the process: “Like Topsy, the tradition idea sort of grew. In the early days, the office was beset



*John D. Rockefeller Jr., an early friend of A.A., hosted a dinner for the society.*

by group problems, jillions of them. So many letters had to be answered by a limited staff that we were forced to codify the answers. A form letter, to be accompanied by a note, was, I think, the original idea. So in 1945, I drew the draft which boiled down into the old ‘long form’ twelve Traditions. As I worked at these, I could see that they might have implications, great implications in effect, for the whole of our society. So, on the spot, I named them traditions to accelerate this effect.

“At first, practically nobody approved the Traditions. As time went on, they became valuable in solving group problems. By the time of the Cleveland International Convention in 1950, the common consent was so large that we asked the Convention — a good cross-section of A.A. — to approve them, which it did.”

## A Magazine for A.A.

In the spring of 1944, six New York A.A. members (four women, two men) had an idea to start a newsletter for New York City A.A.s. Collecting articles, borrowing money to pay for paper and printing, and working out of their apartments, the editors brought out the first issue of the Grapevine in June 1944.

Writing about the magazine in the “A.A. Tradition” pamphlet from 1947, Bill says: “Our newest development, The A.A. Grapevine, is one of the finest of A.A. volunteer undertakings. Its 6,000 subscribers (1946) are to be found in every state of the Union and many foreign lands.”

The magazine’s most prolific contributor was Bill W., who often spoke of it as a “mirror of the Fellowship” and a “forum for debate.” He put into his Grapevine articles his thoughts on vital A.A. issues. The Traditions were first published in the magazine’s April 1946 issue.

And so, only a decade after its founding on June 10, 1935, the small society of sober alcoholics had laid the foundation for a program of recovery that has endured into the 21st Century and attracted over two million members in more than 180 countries. ■

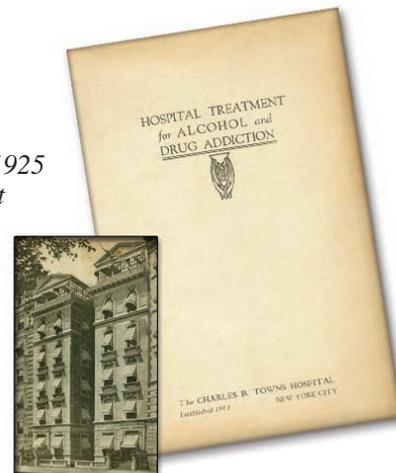
## We Welcome Hearing from You

Your G.S.O. Archives welcomes material of historical interest regarding Alcoholics Anonymous, for publication in *Markings*. Over the years, A.A. members have sent the archives area histories, anecdotes, and personal memorabilia. Please continue to share your experiences, successes, and historical accounts with us, so that we may pass them on to other readers.

## Towns Hospital Booklet Donated to Archives

In 1992, Jim M., who has been sober in A.A. since June 1973, was at the home of an old country doctor who had recently passed away and whose family was preparing for an estate sale.

*This booklet from 1925 describes treatment procedures at Charles B. Towns Hospital, famous in A.A. as the facility where Bill W. had his white light experience.*



“They were bringing down piles of *Liberty Magazines* from the attic and I went through them hoping to find the article about A.A. in the 1939 issue (‘Alcoholics and God,’ by Morris Markey, issue of September 30),” says Jim.

“The doctor’s son asked me if I had found what I was looking for. I told him I hadn’t and then he pointed me to the Towns Hospital booklet.”

What Jim picked up that day was a publication from the Charles B. Towns Hospital in New York City, which specialized in treatments for alcoholism and drug addiction. The booklet, which is 29 pages long and dated September 1925, contains information about the hospital’s medical procedures, facilities, and treatments that would have been of interest to prospective clients.

Bill W., A.A.’s co-founder, underwent three stays at Towns Hospital. During the last one, in December 1934, he had the life-transforming spiritual experience he describes in the Big Book.

Jim, who lives in North Carolina, recently donated that booklet to the G.S.O. Archives.

“After working as a railroad engineer for 32 years, I had a stroke and retired in 1998. I know I could have another stroke and I didn’t want this pamphlet to wind up in the garbage. When I saw the reproduction of the old magazine ad for Towns Hospital in *Markings* (September-October 2005 issue), I decided to send the booklet to the Archives at G.S.O., where it can be put to some use.”