

*“History,” wrote Thomas Carlyle, “is the
essence of innumerable biographies.”*

*Perhaps nothing better sums up
A.A. history than the millions of personal
stories of recovery that come together
as a priceless legacy in*

THE A.A. ARCHIVES

Why does an anonymous program need archives?

Carl Sandburg explained “why” very well when he wrote, “Whenever a society or a civilization perishes, there is always one factor present: they forgot where they came from.”

A.A. co-founder Bill W. was aware of the confidentiality difficulties that could face A.A.’s archives collections. Nonetheless, he perceived the need for preserving A.A.’s past, and had the vision to see that historical accuracy and anonymity were not incompatible. Noting in a letter dated 1957 that A.A.’s past was “still veiled in the deep fog,” he expressed a desire to preserve the Fellowship’s original documents and artifacts. “We are trying,” he wrote, “to build up extensive records that will be of value to future historians.... It is highly important that the factual material be placed in our files in such a way that there can be no substantial distortion.”

Only through the systematic maintenance of our written, permanent historical record can we prevent distortion and remember where we came from.

What are A.A. archives?

An A.A. archive consists of any historical collection at the level of the group, district, area, intergroup/central office, region, or General Service Office. In July 1973, the General Service Board formed the trustees’ Archives Committee. Its mission was “to give the Fellowship a sense of its own past and the opportunity to study it, to keep the record straight so that myth does not predominate over fact.” In 1975, G.S.O. Archives formally opened its doors.

As Nell Wing (nonalcoholic), G.S.O.’s first archivist, put it, “The knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm of the oldtimers gave us the momentum. With Bill and his A.A. co-founder Dr. Bob (who died in November 1950) both gone, it was an idea whose time had come.”

Meanwhile, by the late 1970s, archival efforts were evident in almost every state from California to Florida and the provinces of Canada. There were fledgling archives overseas in England, Ireland and South Africa, with other countries soon to follow. Today, almost every area, and many districts and intergroups, have permanent archival collections open to the Fellowship.

A.A. archives collections vary, but generally they consist of all kinds of written and audiovisual material deemed to be historically valuable: administrative reports and minutes, personal correspondence, newsletters, books, photographs and sound

recordings, and more. These days, more and more of these records are being produced electronically, so an archives collection may contain digital photos, PDF files, archived websites, and more on digital media. These records must be maintained as well.

Not all records can or should be maintained permanently. In fact, only about 5-10 percent of records created by an organization should find their way to the archives. It is critical to develop a system for knowing what to keep and what to throw away. Many A.A. archives struggle with this concept of selecting what to preserve. The G.S.O. Archives may be able to share some experience to assist in developing a prudent collection policy.

How are local archives paid for?

The techniques for preserving and storing documents, photos and memorabilia are complicated — but the methods of paying for them are not. The operational budget for archival supplies, electronic equipment and a computer, shelving and furniture, travel for the archivist, and other needs is generally part of the overall budget of the area/district/intergroup. This way, the archives are seen as an integral part of Twelfth Step service.

How do local archives grow?

Judging from the interest shown in various archives exhibits at assemblies, conventions and round-ups, it is clear that we A.A.s are fascinated with our past and open to contributing what we can to it. Many oldtimers have archival materials that they may wish to donate to the archives, especially if they can trust that their documents will be cared for and preserved permanently for the Fellowship.

To heighten members' awareness that they may have valuable A.A. artifacts right under their noses, some archives furnish bookplates and/or bookmarks saying, "Don't throw me away, I belong to A.A." These are especially handy for identifying books and other souvenirs that members wish to keep during their lifetimes, then bequeath to the Fellowship.

An area archivist has said, "We've found that communication — through workshops, area newsletters and person-to-person contact — is the number one key to success." By creating attractive displays of the archives and taking these to local events, giving presentations about our archives and history, writing articles for newsletters, and gathering local history, the archivist and the archives committee

can highlight the purposes of archives and create more interest in the collections.

For most A.A. archivists, preserving A.A.'s past is a labor of love. Searching for "old" archives collections is important, but it is just as critical to collect what is being produced today, as these will be tomorrow's archives. There are many items of interest that you will find as you develop your collection. However, before accepting materials, you must first assess them to make sure they really belong in your repository. This review process is called *appraisal*. The term *appraisal* in this context does not refer to placing monetary value on records. Rather, archivists assess materials for enduring value (historic, intrinsic, administrative, legal) and their relationships with other records in the repository. Archivists should never profit from the records under their care and should avoid commenting on the possible financial value of items in the collection. It is suggested that the archivist collect current minutes and reports, group records, newsletters, pamphlets, books, and other significant documents in a systematic way, working with other trusted servants to ensure that these materials are consistently funneled to the archives.

Many an archive has gotten its start in an A.A. member's bedroom or basement, then eventually moved to a home of its own — ideally, a rented space where the archives are centralized, secure, temperature-controlled, and open to visitors.

Who takes care of the archives?

When a need for an archive has been identified, discussed, and approved, then it may be decided to create an archives committee and/or archivist position, responsible to the area/district/intergroup committee.

Archives committees usually include A.A. members who are knowledgeable about A.A.'s history and the service structure, as well as those who simply want to help. The archives committee establishes budgets, policies and procedures, and has final responsibility for the management of the archives, through its group conscience.

The archivist is responsible for preserving and organizing the collection, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of all A.A. members, and providing information and access to the collection. The archivist generally does not rotate frequently (and in some cases it is a nonrotating position), so he or she will have the necessary time to become familiar with the collection.

For more information about these roles, see the G.S.O. Archives Workbook and Archives Guidelines.

How can you help?

There are many ways to participate in this rewarding aspect of A.A. service:

- Ask oldtimers to tape their stories — the G.S.O. Archives can help you get started with this by sending you an Oral Histories Kit, with suggestions for how to conduct a successful taped interview.
- Create a history of your home group, through research and interviews, to learn how, when and why your group got started — then share this history with your area and district.
- Volunteer your time to sort through archival material and help organize files. Almost every archive has a backlog of material to be sorted and inventoried. While this can be tedious labor, there is nothing more important in archives work. Without meaningful organization and an inventory, the archives are basically unusable.
- Help with visitors and help with the archives display at local events.

How can G.S.O. assist local archives?

G.S.O. Archives staff is committed to assisting those who are beginning to set up their own archives. We provide an Archives Workbook, which goes into much greater detail about the breadth of archives work. There is also a service piece, the Archives A.A. Guidelines. G.S.O. Archives also has a series of papers on archival preservation. All of these are available on G.S.O.'s A.A. website, www.aa.org. You can contact the G.S.O. Archives any time to receive a packet of information, either by mail or email.

G.S.O. Archives staff has also developed a traveling exhibit that can be borrowed by local archives and set up with ease at meetings, assemblies and other events.

Some historical photos that trace the beginnings and growth of A.A. are available from the G.S.O. Archives. In addition, a CD of sound recordings, a prepublication manuscript of the First Edition Big Book, and several other historical items are available.

Finally, G.S.O. Archives staff is always happy to receive questions about archival issues and A.A.'s history. Local archivists are encouraged to share their experience with G.S.O.

How is the Anonymity Tradition observed?

Seeking to safeguard A.A.'s Anonymity Tradition, the trustees' Archives Committee determined, in 1975, that "any A.A. member may view the originals

of any material that has been previously printed or published,” and, with approval, may conduct research using unpublished material such as correspondence.

Researchers working in the G.S.O. Archives are asked to adhere strictly to the Anonymity Tradition — among other things, to list only the first names and last initials of all A.A. members, living or deceased.

Further, the trustees’ Archives Committee has recommended that there be no photocopying/scanning of correspondence or other unpublished material, both to maintain the physical integrity of archival documents and to assure anonymity protection. A.A. archivists are ever vigilant when it comes to anonymity, which places principles before personalities and protects both the individual A.A. and the Fellowship as a whole against exploitation from within and without.

How do A.A. archives help carry the message of recovery?

Through archives we are able to express A.A.’s *collective* experience, strength, and hope, gained through its rich heritage, and renew our own sense of purpose.

As one A.A. member said, “When I saw the archives display at the area assembly, I had no idea what it was all about. But after looking at the materials, I had a new feeling of ‘what we used to be like.’ I realized that I could help by donating some time at the archives office, and later I taped two oldtimers who told me a lot about the early days in our area. It has made me read some of the other A.A. books I had missed and has given me a real sense of ‘carrying the message.’”

As we sort out fact from fiction, we ensure that our program of recovery will continue undiluted and true. The collective experience of the past reminds us of how little hope there once was for the suffering alcoholic — of how far we’ve come, thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous.

For more information:

Contact the G.S.O. Archives at 212-870-3400, by email at archives@aa.org, or write to the address below.

This service piece is available, free of charge, from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Website: www.aa.org.

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