

Big Book Celebrates 50th Birthday As A.A.'s Most Effective 'Sponsor'

When the first copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous* rolled off the presses in April 1939, no one foresaw that it would become one of the top nonfiction bestsellers of all time. We know that more than eight million copies have been distributed or sold in the intervening 50 years; what we cannot reckon is the number of suffering alcoholics who have found sobriety as the result of its scope and spiritual power.

Back in 1939, after heated discussion, the list price was set at \$3.50, high for those days and only ten cents less than it is today. To compensate, A.A. co-founder Bill W. and his friends chose the thickest paper they could find. "The original volume proved to be so bulky that it became known as the 'Big Book,'" Bill later recalled. "Of course, the idea was to convince the alcoholic purchaser that he was indeed getting his money's worth!"

Bill's nonalcoholic secretary, the late Ruth Hock, would remember differently. The thinking as she understood it "was that everybody who read this book, to start, was going to be shaky and nervous, and they didn't want fine print or fine pages. They thought an alcoholic would handle thick pages better."

Bill began work on the Big Book in spring 1938 with no preconceived outline. Ruth, who typed the manuscript, remembered that he would arrive at the office of the Alcoholic Foundation (now the General Service Office of A.A. World Services, Inc.) with yellow scratch sheets of notes for each chapter. These, she said, "were the result of long thought, after hours of discussion pro and con with everyone who might be interested."

Bill would stand behind Ruth and dictate the material as she typed. The work went slowly, she later explained, because Bill would drop it any time a visitor came into the office wanting to talk.

Meanwhile, the obstacles were great. While Bill received "nothing but the warmest support" from Akron members, he got what he called "a real mauling" from the New Yorkers. Possibly, the Akron people were strongly attuned to Bill's spiritual ideas, while many of

the New York contingent were agnostic, skeptical, or both. Moreover, the Akronites had confidence in co-founder Dr. Bob, whose stature in the community was enormous; his support of the proposed book virtually guaranteed that the Akron membership would stand behind it.

After much discussion and prodding from Bill, group conscience prevailed in both the cities where A.A. began, and the way seemed clear except for one very sticky wicket: lack of funds.

Few of the recovering alcoholics had money to invest but shares were eventually sold, many on the installment plan, in the hastily formed Works Publishing, Inc. (now A.A. World Services, Inc.)—so dubbed, Bill has written, "because the forthcoming volume would be only the first of many such 'works.'" There are some oldtimers who say the company was named for a favorite slogan of the membership, "It works!" Others claim that it was named for the Akronites' favorite quotation from the New Testament (James I, 4): "Faith without works is dead."



The birthday cake, celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Big Book, had replicas of the dust jackets of the First Edition and the present one. The cake was served at the A.A. General Service Conference, April 1989.

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The Big Book was launched on a shoestring but published it was. Importantly, it provided the name for a small self-help movement that until then had been known only as the Alcoholic Foundation, with but 100 members. Today Alcoholics Anonymous has an estimated 1,800,000 members in 134 countries. Additionally, its program of recovery serves as a model for Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous and other self-help programs.

The Big Book itself has opened the way to a life of comfortable sobriety for thousands of suffering alcoholics who otherwise might not have found help. It has offered convincing evidence to relatives and friends that compulsive drinkers can recover; and has furnished revealing insights to physicians, psychologists, the clergy and other professionals who work with alcoholics.

The first edition of the Big Book was divided into two main sections. The first half set forth, in words of hope and inspiration, the principles that were keeping A.A.s sober. Then came the recovery stories, provided by early members in both Akron and New York. The only section not written by an A.A. member was the introductory statement written anonymously by a New York physician who subsequently was identified as Dr. William D. Silkworth, one of A.A.'s first medical friends.

Perhaps the most widely quoted section of the Big Book is the first paragraph of the fifth chapter, entitled "How It Works," which begins: "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. . . ." In the same chapter, Bill also expanded the word-of-mouth program's six suggested steps to recovery into the Twelve Steps as we know them now. His reasoning was that "maybe our six chunks of truth should be broken up into smaller pieces. Thus we could better get the distant reader over the barrel, and at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation." He wrote the Steps in bed, his wife, Lois, later observed, not because he was sick but because he felt it was "the best place to think."

Flushed with success, Bill read the Steps to two A.A. friends, one barely three months sober. Their immediate criticisms that "there's too much God stuff" and "it's

too stiff" led to considerable changes. For example: Bill's first draft of Step Seven stated, "Humbly, on our knees, asked Him to remove our shortcomings—holding nothing back." In the published text, it was softened to, "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings."

When Bill began drafting the Big Book, he was less than four years sober, which seems a miracle. But he did not do it alone. *Alcoholics Anonymous* is truly a multiple miracle, for each chapter that Bill wrote was "edited" by the Akron and New York A.A.s—all of them sober less time than Bill. It was a cooperative effort, reflecting the experience of the young Fellowship as a whole.

The reviews that greeted publication of the anonymously authored Big Book were mixed. The *New York Times* reviewer hailed it as an "extraordinary book," noting that its general thesis "is more soundly based psychologically than any other treatment of the subject I have ever come upon." However, the *Journal of Nervous Mental Disorders* called it "a rambling sort of camp-meeting confession of experiences . . . of various alcoholics who have provisionally recovered, chiefly under the influence of the 'big-brothers-get-together' spirit. Of the inner meaning of alcoholism there is hardly a word." And the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* saw it as "a curious combination of organizing propaganda and religious exhortation . . . in no sense a scientific book."

Initially, sales lagged, and the fledgling movement found itself saddled with nearly 5,000 unsold books and large incidental debts. Loans from sympathetic nonalcoholic friends barely kept the new publishing enterprise afloat. Then, in March 1941, after Jack Alexander's article on A.A. in the *Saturday Evening Post*, sales zoomed and a second printing was ordered that same month.

It took 35 years to sell one million copies of the Big Book; now A.A. distributes a million every year in the English language edition alone. At last tally, the Big Book had been published in fifteen other languages: Afrikaans, Dutch, Finnish, Flemish, French, German, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian and Swedish. Polish and Czechoslovakian translations are in the works.

In 1986, a softcover edition was published. This unabridged version is smaller in size than the hardcover copy, lighter in weight and, at \$3.20, less expensive.

To newcomers, the language of the Big Book may seem very much of its time, sometimes stilted, flowery, even severe. But the power of its words has been proved, and the first 11 chapters remain almost exactly as they were when completed in 1939. Over the years, the group conscience of A.A., acting through the General Service Conference, has approved additions and deletions among the stories of personal recovery, to reflect changing patterns in the membership. But it has resisted

streamlining the writing style or making other suggested "improvements."

During a presentation he gave at the General Service Conference in April, Norm A., a director of the A.A. Grapevine, described a meeting of the subcommittee appointed by the trustees' Literature Committee to figure out "how to commemorate the 50th anniversary of our beloved Big Book." The members were envisioning commemorative printings, fancy dust jackets, bookmarks and other mementos, Norm says, when "suddenly one person declared, 'We're trying to create souvenir-icons—just what we want to avoid. Let's celebrate the message, not the book!'"

A point that goes to the heart of the matter. Yet without the book, there might not be a message to pass on today. So happy birthday, Big Book. We are grateful for you *and* for your life-giving message.

Big Book Workshops

As part of the commemoration of the Big Book's 50th anniversary, the Conference Literature Committee encourages Big Book Workshops at regional, area, district and group gatherings. The purpose of the workshops is twofold: to focus the Fellowship's attention on the Big Book in this significant year, and also to provide A.A. members with the opportunity to consider the need for a fourth edition and/or publishing it in various formats, *i.e.*: pocket-size version, gift edition, binding of first 164 pages plus Dr. Bob's story, etc.

Big Book Workshop Questions were prepared by the trustees' Literature Committee and reviewed by the Conference Literature Committee. If you would like a copy please contact your General Service delegate or write to *Box 4-5-9*. And please be sure to let your delegate know the results of your Big Book Workshop.

John B. Rotates Out In the Spirit of Service

On July 1, John B. turned over his responsibilities as president of A.A. World Services, Inc. to Wayne P., of Rogers, Arkansas, who had succeeded John as general manager of the General Service Office just three months earlier.

The changing of the guard in these key A.A. areas has been effected more swiftly than in the past. John succeeded Bob P. as G.S.O.'s general manager in August 1984 but did not replace him as president of A.A.W.S.

until March of the following year. And although Bob P. before him had succeeded the late Bob H. in January 1975, it wasn't until three years later that he became president of A.A.W.S.

Explains John: "It is particularly gratifying to give these responsibilities to Wayne. He is a seasoned G.S.O. service hand, with long experience on both the A.A.W.S. and General Service Boards. The transition has been easy. As for me, it has been an enormous privilege to serve the Fellowship in this way. However, rotation is one of the most treasured of our A.A. Traditions, and now is the time for me to observe it."

Wayne attributes the smooth transfer of managerial functions to John's guidance and administrative skills—and to the quality of his sobriety. "John has been good for the General Service Office," Wayne says. "He is an extremely able, totally dedicated A.A. member. It's a privilege to follow him." Importantly, Wayne adds, "John knows how to take hold and when to let go. That's what the spirit of service is all about."

During John's years at the A.A. helm, Wayne notes, "he introduced sound business practices without disturbing the spiritual integrity of the Fellowship. He also helped to facilitate exchange visits with the Soviet Union that already have brought A.A.'s message of sobriety within the grasp of some alcoholics there."

Retirement from G.S.O. signals several beginnings for John. A consultant on technology and business management, he plans to return to that work both in his Schenectady, New York home and aboard a 38-foot Chris-Craft power boat which he and his wife, Mary, recently acquired. But one thing won't change. Whether on land or on sea, he will continue to carry the A.A. message as he has for almost 23 years, and to go on saying "yes" when called to serve.

Please Post the 1990 Convention 'Teaser' on Your Group Bulletin Board

What is a "teaser"? It is a flyer to stimulate interest—in this case, a preview of the big celebration of A.A.'s 55th Anniversary, to take place in Seattle, Washington, July 5-8, 1990. If you are not sure about attending, perhaps the complete run down of the program will help you decide. The long accordion-folded gray flyer gives all the major events and topics for the weekend of worldwide A.A. sharing.

A "teaser" is enclosed with each single copy of this issue of *Box 4-5-9*, and one with each bulk subscription. If you would like more to distribute to A.A.s in your area please write: Convention Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

G.S.O. Open House Will Not be Held in 1989

Although the "official" fall Open House Day will not be held this year, the door at your A.A. General Service Office is always open. You may visit us at 468 Park Avenue South, between 31st and 32nd, Monday through Friday, 9 to 5.

Each year over 1,000 A.A. visitors from around the world tour the G.S.O. and Grapevine offices, visit the A.A. Archives and attend the 11:00 a.m. Friday A.A. meeting. Also, if any A.A.s from any area would like to plan a special bus excursion to visit G.S.O. they just need to let the staff know in advance.

We hope to see you, at *your* office. The welcome mat is always out and the coffeepot is always on.

Register Now for the 1989 Central Office Seminar

Central office/intergroup managers, steering committee chairpersons and others will meet at the Airport Marriott, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, for the Fourth A.A.W.S./Intergroup Seminar, November 3-5, 1989.

The seminar will feature workshops and presentations, all designed to widen communication and share experience, strength and hope regarding literature and other matters. Space limitations dictate that the seminar be limited to *one* representative from each office.

To register please write to: Central Office/Intergroup Seminar Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Closing date for hotel reservations is October 3, 1989.

The A.A. Program Is Spiritual, Not Religious

From time to time, letters come into the General Service Office asking for clarification of the statement in our Preamble that A.A. is not allied with any sect or denomination. If this is so, they ask, "Why does the word 'God' appear frequently in our Steps and Traditions? . . . Why do so many meetings close with the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer?"

Co-founder Bill W. often and clearly said that it would be unwise for A.A. to have an allegiance to any one religious sect. The Fellowship's usefulness is worldwide, he believed, and contains spiritual princi-

ples that members of any and every religion can accept.

In *A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill tells the story of a Buddhist monk who, after looking over the Twelve Steps, said, "These are fine! But since we Buddhists don't understand God as you do, it might be more acceptable to insert the word 'good' for 'God.'" Bill had no objection: "To some," he observed, "such a substitution might seem like a watering down of A.A.'s message. But we must remember that the Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them as they stand is not a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made A.A. available for membership to thousands who never would have tried at all had we insisted on applying the Steps exactly as written."

Responding to a member who questioned the practice of closing meetings with the Lord's Prayer, Bill wrote in 1959, "This prayer is of such widespread use and recognition that the argument of its Christian origin seems a little far-fetched." He noted that in the Fellowship's early days, "there was no A.A. literature; in fact, we didn't even have a name." Thus, the early groups leaned heavily on Bible reading for inspiration and guidance. Meetings probably closed with the Lord's Prayer because, Bill concluded, "it did not put speakers to the task, embarrassing to many, of composing prayers of their own." Today the custom persists in the U.S. and Canada, but only with the sanction of the individual group conscience. The same is true of the Serenity Prayer.

Occasionally, A.A.s write G.S.O. to ask for guidelines concerning formation of specialized groups for Christians. G.S.O.'s reply: "It is perfectly alright for A.A.s who are also Christians to meet with one another if they choose. However, our Preamble states that A.A. is not allied with any sect or denomination, neither endorses nor opposes any causes, so it would be misleading to consider such a gathering an A.A. group. No specialized meeting qualifies as an A.A. group unless it conforms to these six points defined by the group conscience of the Fellowship in the U.S. and Canada:

"(1) All members are alcoholics, and all alcoholics are eligible for membership; (2) As a group, they are fully self-supporting; (3) A group's primary purpose is to help alcoholics recover through the Twelve Steps; (4) As a group, they have no outside affiliation; (5) As a group, they have no opinion on outside issues; and (6) As a group, their public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion, and they maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, television, radio and film."

Yet another A.A. member took a dim view of "hymn singing" at A.A. roundups and other functions "in view of the fact that probably more than half the A.A.s of the world are not Christian. I really have tried to 'Let Go and Let God,' but my Higher Power (God) keeps urging me to try harder to reach those who would make

our Fellowship appear exclusive." The G.S.O. respondent suggested that the writer share her feelings with the service workers who comprise the steering committees of most A.A. conventions, roundups and other events. In every such instance, it was noted, the group conscience of the steering committee prevails. A.A. itself is strictly nondenominational.

Bill W. himself never expressed A.A.'s position more simply than when he said, "We are only operating a spiritual kindergarten in which people are enabled to get over drinking and find the grace to go on living to better effect. Each man's theology has to be his own quest, his own affair." On another occasion he stated succinctly, "How far the alcoholic shall work out his dependence on God is none of A.A.'s business. Whether it is in a church or not in a church, whether it is in that church or this church, is none of A.A.'s business."

Dr. John Chappel Brings Working Knowledge of A.A. To Class-A Trusteeship

"A.A. is the most powerful and effective influence on alcoholics that I know. However, physicians treating the illness of alcoholism need to know more about it. Medical school students generally spend a couple of hours' class time in community medicine, go to the required A.A. meeting, and emerge as doctors capable of administering immediate detox treatment but not the attendant medical care."

So observes John Nelson Chappel, M.D., of Reno, Nevada, who in April was elected to the General Service Board as a Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee. To his positions as medical director of the Chemical Dependency Program at Reno's Truckee Meadows Hospital; Professor of Psychiatry, the University of Nevada School of Medicine; and consultant to Nevada's Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, he brings a familiarity with A.A. that is evidenced by his frequent references to the Twelve Steps and how they work.

Dr. Chappel's early years provided no hint of his later concerns with medicine and the treatment of chemical dependency. The son of a minister, he was born in Grande Prairie, North Alberta, and raised "all over Canada." He enrolled in Ontario Veterinary College but changed course abruptly after two years. "A classmate close to me attempted suicide after flunking finals," Dr. Chappel relates. "He knew more about veterinary medicine than I did, yet he failed. I was deeply moved and decided to take a year off. I never returned."

Instead, he earned his B.A. and M.D. degrees from



John Nelson Chappel,
M.D.

the University of Alberta and went on to complete a residency in psychiatry at Billings Hospital, the University of Chicago, in 1968. He became board-certified in psychiatry in 1971 and was elected a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association in 1977.

During his residency, Dr. Chappel was "recruited" by his teacher and mentor Jerome Jaffe, M.D., into service at the Board of Health's Mental Health Center in Woodlawn (Illinois), an inner-city ghetto notorious for its alcohol and drug-related problems. "I knew nothing at the time about chemical dependency," he says, "but I learned fast. There was just one A.A. group in the area. As a career teacher, I saw firsthand the power of the program to heal and rehabilitate alcoholics who had been viewed as 'hopeless.' The experience changed the direction of my life's work."

Before assuming his posts in Reno, Dr. Chappel served variously as director of the Medical-Psychiatric Department and chief of Psychiatric Staff at the Illinois Drug Abuse Program; consultant, the Hines (Illinois) V.A. Hospital Drug Abuse Program; and consulting psychiatrist to both Woodlawn Mental Health Center and Cook County Hospital's Mental Health Unit.

As a trustee, Dr. Chappel looks forward to working with the Cooperation With the Professional Community Committee. "Since the 1950s," he says, "reports in the medical and popular literature have given A.A. a halo effect. The medical community knows that the program is a 'good thing' but often hasn't the foggiest idea of what it involves. A.A. has come a long way in informing doctors and other professionals but there is still much to be done."

The author of numerous articles and monographs, Dr. Chappel has written extensively on substance abuse and its treatment. In 1987, he also coauthored an article on "The Effect of a Course on Students' Attitudes Toward Substance Abuse and Its Treatment" for the *Journal of Medical Education*.

