

MARKINGS

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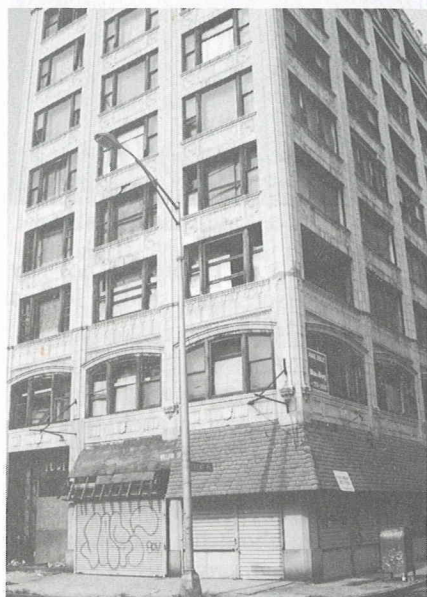
Touring 17 Williams Street

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

