

CONVICTS

Take the Cure

By George Dolan

It isn't easy for a guy to go on a bender while he's in prison. Inmates figure all their weekends behind bars are lost - but not because they've fallen off the wagon.

Still, in Huntsville, Texas, an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter flourishes in "The Walls" - prisoners' tag for the main unit of the Texas prison system.

"There's no problem here of a man going out on a drunk," admits the sponsor, Howard L Sublett, "But liquor is the reason they're here. They were slaves to the bottle."

The A.A. members behind prison walls are trying to condition themselves mentally for a return bout with the free world when - and, in some cases, if - they leave.

Sublett, the chapter's sponsor is the 28-year-old assistant director of the prison system's Bureau of Classification. A thin, dark, intense young man, he donates his time and is one of the few non-alcoholics in the world able to take part regularly in an A.A. movement. He's as wrapped up in the program as are the alcoholics. His only "pay" comes from results.

A 35-year-old Dallas ex-convict paid him a bonus early this

year. The former prisoner, who joined the chapter in "The Walls" while serving a ten-year robbery term, rejoined his wife and two children when he was released.

"You'll never know how happy I am," he wrote Sublett. "I'm working every day in a machine shop. And every night I drop on my knees and thank God I was able to find myself through Alcoholics Anonymous."

He was a member of the original group organized in June, 1948, at the penitentiary. Inmates themselves formed the chapter; and they run it, too.

Members meet every Sunday afternoon and are often joined by A.A.'s from the free world.

The bond between "inside" and "outside" members of the A.A. movement is strong. "When an Alcoholics Anonymous member leaves prison," says Sublett, "he invariably is met by free members. They take him into their homes, lend him money and help him find a job. This follow-up work is half the battle."

The "inside" members have no secrets from one another. At their Sunday meetings they rehash their

lives and the influence alcohol has lent.

The spiritual therapy has helped the chapter secretary, a 28-year-old former Air Force man from Detroit, sentenced to life imprisonment in 1950 for rape, decided that "I've got something to live for now. Alcoholics Anonymous has given me faith, hope, and a chance to face the world - if the day comes."

"I had been under the influence of liquor for ten years," he continues. "I was drunk at the time of the crime. I was wearing a uniform, trying to be a big shot."

Another member, 44, who is serving a twenty-year sentence for robbery, says he's been an alcoholic since he was twelve. "I was born and raised in Arkansas, where a lot of booze was made. My older brother and their friends drank. I began drinking to be part of them."

He was in "The Walls" for three years before he became an A.A. member. "It changed my attitude. For a period I thought I had been mistreated. I didn't feel like I'd got any justice. Now that 's water under the bridge. I have two kids. The height of my ambition is to try and show them I mean to

do right by them. I have a son I worry about. His mother is an alcoholic. I feel like it's my fault she is..."

Another member, a 53-year old San Antonio mechanic who has served five years on a two-to sixty-year murder rap, says he's been "a drinking man" for thirty-five years. "I was blacked out when the crime was committed."

Two years before the slaying, he recalls, "One of my employees talked to me five minutes about Alcoholics Anonymous."

A year later, his wife showed him some A.A. literature. "I never did read it," he says sorrowfully. "I can see now if I was out there I would have gone farther than the man did with me, to help a man find this program. I've learned a wonderful lesson. But it took a terrible thing to bring me here to it."

Prison officials, delighted with the results of the A.A. chapter, plan to take the lead in extending it into every penitentiary unit.

"Alcoholics Anonymous is their insurance not to come back here," says Sublett.