

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

*More youths, blacks, women, homosexuals,
Hispanics and alcoholics addicted to other
drugs now join A.A.*

Adapted from "Getting Better: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous,"
by Nan Robertson, to be published by William Morrow in April.

By Nan Robertson

Only Bill Wilson could have imagined A.A. as it is today, because only Bill, among the old-timers of Alcoholics Anonymous, had such grandiose, improbable dreams. In the summer of 1935, there were only two A.A. members - Wilson, a failed Wall Street stockbroker, and Dr. Bob Smith, a practicing surgeon - sitting in the Smith kitchen in Akron, Ohio, through half the night, chain-smoking and gulping coffee and trying to figure out how they could sober up other drunks like themselves. The society they had founded attracted only 100 members over the next four years; it would not even have a name until 1939. Now there are more than a million and a half of us around the world - members of the most successful, imitated, yet often misunderstood self-help movement of the 20th century.

About half of all A.A.'s are in the United States, the rest are scattered among 114 other countries. Many additional millions have passed through the movement and been made whole by its program, but A.A. periodically counts only those who are regularly attending meetings.

For those in the know, there are clues to A.A.'s presence everywhere : the sign on a jeep's hood in a Mexican town that says

the "Grupo Bill Wilson" will meet that night; a West Virginia bumper sticker advising "Keep it Simple." The Serenity Prayer, attributed to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and recited at the end of A.A. meetings, appears framed on the wall in a South African living room or embroidered on a pillow in a chic Madison Avenue shop.

A.A.'s meet in Pagopago, American Samoa, on Wednesday nights, in McMurdo Sound, Antarctica, on Saturdays, and in Lilongwe, Malawi, on Mondays and Friday. They find one another just to sit and chat between meetings in a doughnut shop and coffee shop on the main street of Peterborough, N.H., a town of 5,200 that has four A.A. groups. One of them is called Our Town in honor of Thornton Wilder, who took Peterborough as the model for his nostalgic play about American small-town life. The belfry of a Roman Catholic Church near Covent Garden in London and a bank's board room in Marin County, Calif., are reserved for A.A. meetings once each week. Some groups meet on ships, at sea or port. To these exotic settings must be added the thousands of prosaic basements and halls in churches, community centers and hospitals where most A.A.'s inch their way back to a life of quality.

In the last decade or so, large numbers of Americans, mainly entertainers, have gone public to say they are recovered alcoholics. Almost all said their motivation, and their hope, was, by their example, to inspire still-drinking alcoholics to recover. But the great mass of membership everywhere is composed of more or less ordinary people. They are neither movie stars nor skid row bums; the great drama of their lives has not been played out in the spotlight or in squalid flophouses. These alcoholics have suffered., increasingly isolated, in bars, in their own bedrooms, or in the living rooms of friends who have become estranged by their drunken behavior. Their recovery has been worked out in private.

Over the last 50 years, the substance of A.A. - its core literature, its program of recovery and its ways of looking at life - has changed very little. But in terms of the numbers and diversity of its members, A.A. today would be unrecognizable to its pioneers. In the early years, A.A. members were almost exclusively male, white, middle-class, middle-aged and of Western extraction. They were men who had fallen very far, often from the top of their business and professions.

The A.A. of 1988 is huge, increasingly international, multiethnic, multiracial, cutting across social classes, less rigidly religious than it was in the beginning, more accepting of gay people, and of women, who now form one-third of the total North American membership and about half of the A.A. membership in big cities. Increasingly, many turn to A.A. for help in earlier stages of their disease.

A much more abrupt and spectacular trend is that young people have streamed into A.A. in the last 10 years, most of them

addicted to other drugs as well as to alcohol. Dr. LeClair Bissell, the founding director of the Smithers alcoholism center, in Manhattan, expresses the consensus of the alcoholism research and treatment world when she says: "There are almost no 'pure' alcoholics among young people anymore. They are hooked on booze and other drugs, or only other drugs."

It is common now at A.A. meetings to hear a young speaker say, "My name is Joe, and I'm a drug addict and an alcoholic."

The dually addicted anger some A.A. members. One with 20 years of sobriety says: "This fellowship was formed to help suffering alcoholics, and alcoholics only. That's why it has been so successful - we don't monkey around with other problems."

In a few communities, A.A. members have formed groups billed for those "over 30." The message is clear: No druggies wanted. This development infuriates John T. Schwarzlose, executive director of the Betty Ford Center for substance abusers in Rancho Mirage, Calif.: "A.A. is the epitome of tolerance, flexibility and inclusiveness, but some drug addicts have told me about being turned away from A.A. meetings in the Midwest and South when they say they were just addicted to drugs, Now I tell them to say they are both alcoholics and drug abusers." In the big cities and at A.A. headquarters, attitudes toward the dually addicted are much more welcoming.

For a long time, Alcoholics Anonymous was believed to be a purely North American phenomenon. It was thought that its themes of self-help and voluntarism would not transfer to more relaxed cultures. A.A.'s Ecuador-born coordinator for Hispanic groups voiced the early point of view among his Latin

friends: "A.A. is O.K. for gringos, but not for us. In Latin America...if a man doesn't drink, he's not a macho." To his surprise, A.A. began to boom among Hispanics in the 1970's. Mexico's membership of 250,000 is now second only to that of the United States. Brazil, with 78,000 members, and Guatemala, with 43,000, are next-highest in Latin America.

Until recently, A.A. had been unable to gain a toe-hold in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. The movement had been regarded there as possibly threatening, because of its precepts of anonymity and confidentiality, its religious overtones and the fact that it operates outside any government control. Then last summer, the Soviet Union sent to the United States four doctors specializing in addiction. They visited Alcoholism-treatment centers, the Summer School of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University and numerous A.A. meetings. When they returned home, they took back quantities of A.A. pamphlets translated for them into Russian. Still, the only Eastern European nation to embrace A.A. has been Poland. Its Government finally recognized what is called the "psychotherapeutic" value of A.A.

In the United States, those long familiar with A.A. meetings notice that there seem to be disproportionately high numbers from certain ethnic groups. "Alcoholism goes with certain cultures, such as Celtic or the Scandinavian, that approve of drinking, or at least are ambivalent about it," says Dr. Bissell. "But in some environments or religions, people don't drink on principle. These abstinent cultures in the United States include Baptists, some other Southern Protestant sects and Mormons."

For a long time, there was a widely held belief that Jews did

not become alcoholics. The work of JACS - Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others - is helping to dispel that myth. Jews are present in large numbers, JACS says, at A.A. meetings in many large cities where there is a significant Jewish population. But rarely do A.A. meetings take place in synagogues or Jewish community centers.

Sheldon B., an alcoholism counselor in New York, told of how a few years ago he approached his own rabbi with the idea of opening their temple to an A.A. group. He thought that Jewish members in any A.A. group might be more comfortable about accepting help in a synagogue setting than in a church. The rabbi informed him that there was no need: "There are no Jewish alcoholics." When Sheldon B. said, "But I am an alcoholic," the rabbi thought for a moment and then replied, "are you sure you know who your real father was?"

Although there are black A.A. groups and mixed racial groups in large Northern cities, the number of blacks in A.A. does not appear to reflect the race's proportion in the nation - 29 million, or 12 percent of the population.

"There is a great stigma in being black and being drunk, even recovered, a black Philadelphia teacher declared at a meeting devoted to the subject. "I made the mistake of telling my principal that I had a problem. I checked myself into a treatment center. She used a hatchet on me."

As a black Milwaukee social worker explained: "The black community is afraid that if blacks admit their alcoholics, it will reinforce the white stereotype that they are shiftless...The black community likes to think that oppression causes their alcoholism...Other oppressed minorities use the same argument. "Who wouldn't drink?" they say.

"Our lives are so goddamned awful...Oblivion is the only way out of our pain."

Homosexuals are coming into A.A., and in sophisticated communities are welcomed. Some recovered alcoholics have formed all-gay groups, just as there are special groups for women, doctors, agnostics, lawyers, airline pilots and others.

"Growing up in Alabama, I was taught to hate myself," one gay member told an A.A. meeting. "I was a nigger sissy. In A.A., I learned that God loves us all. My business in A.A. is to stay sober and help you if you want it."

A.A. surveys do not inquire whether members attend religious services or if they believe in God. There are no questions about ethnic or racial origins, sexual preference or whether alcoholism runs in the family. But a family predisposition to alcoholism is reflected strikingly within A.A. Often, speakers at meetings begin: "My name is Mary, and I am an alcoholic...and my father [or mother] was an alcoholic."

Longtime A.A. members believe that it is hopeless to drag another into sobriety if the alcoholic is determined not to be helped or refuses to believe he is ill. Even so, the courts in some states are sending thousands of offenders to A.A. meetings instead of to jail. But the A.A. program sometimes catches on even with unwilling alcoholics.

There are many things outsiders believe A.A. to be that it is not. It is not a temperance organization or Prohibition society. A.A. does not want to save the world from gin. Nobody invites you to join A.A. You are a member if you say you are, or if you walk into an A.A. meeting with the thought that you have a drinking problem and you want to stop. There

are no papers to sign, no pledges to take, no obligations to speak up, no arms twisted. The attitude of members toward those outside who drink moderately is, "I wish I could drink as you do, but I can't."

A.A. is not a religious cult. Some members are agnostics or atheists. Many choose to believe that their "higher power" is their A.A. group. Most members prefer to call A.A.'s program "spiritual." Yet God is mentioned directly or indirectly in five of the Twelve Steps, which A.A. uses to help heal individuals, and this sometimes repels outsiders who might otherwise be attracted. (Boiled down to six instantly understandable principles, the Twelve Step program might read: We admitted we are licked and cannot get well on our own. We get honest with ourselves. We talk it out with somebody else. We try to make amends to people we have harmed. We pray to whatever greater Power we think there is. We try to give of ourselves for our own sake and without stint to other alcoholics with no thought of reward.)

A.A. does not work for everybody. But then, nothing does. About 60 per cent of those coming to A.A. for the first time remain in A.A. after going to meetings and assiduously "working the program" for months or even years. Usually, they stay sober for good. But about 40 percent drop out. These statistics refute a widely held notion that A.A. is always successful or an "instant fix." Even so, its success rate is phenomenally high.

Freudian analysis and religious faith, for example, may be two great ways to heal the human spirit, but they do not work on their own for alcoholics. The vast majority of doctors, psychologists and members of the clergy who are familiar with A.A. as well as

almost all experts in alcoholism, make A.A. their No.1 choice for a long-term program of recovery. A.A. precepts are built into the programs of every respected intensive alcoholism treatment center in the country, including those of Hazelden in Minnesota, Smithers in New York and the Betty Ford Center. John Schwarzlose of the Betty Ford Center expresses a typical opinion "Patients ask how important it is that they go to A.A. after they're through here. I say, 'I can give you a guarantee. When you leave here, if you don't go to A.A., you won't make it.'"

A.A. has no ties with political parties, foundations, charities or causes, nor does it sponsor research into alcoholism.

And unlike most tax-exempt organizations, A.A., whose current annual budget is \$11.5 million, does no fund raising. Nor does A.A. accept money from outsiders. The funds supporting headquarters services come mainly from A.A.'s huge publishing empire, which distributes authorized literature to members.

Each group is self-supporting, passing a basket at every meeting to help pay for coffee, snacks, literature and rent for the meeting space. Those present often give a dollar. Others may just drop a coin in the basket. Some cannot give anything.

No member may donate more than \$1,000 a year to A.A. Nor may a member bequeath more than \$1,000, or leave property to A.A., which has never owned any real estate.

"The reason we discourage gifts and bequests," says Dennis Manders, a nonalcoholic who served for 35 years as the controller at A.A. headquarters, "is that we don't ever want some person dropping a million bucks in the A.A. hopper and saying, 'Now, I'm going to call the tune.'"

About half of the groups

contribute nothing at all for headquarters services. Many members feel that carrying the expenses of their "home group" is enough. This kind of autonomy and decentralization typifies Alcoholics Anonymous.

The average A.A. member, according to surveys, attends four meetings a week. After about five years of regular attendance, some A.A.'s go to fewer and fewer meetings. They may stop altogether when they feel they are able to function comfortably without alcohol. However, some speakers at meetings are full of cautionary tales about how they drifted away from A.A. and drank again, sometimes disastrously and for long periods of time, before returning to the fold.

The movement works in quiet and simple ways. Members usually give of themselves without reservation; exchange telephone numbers with newcomers; come to help at any hour when a fellow member is in crisis; are free with tips on how to avoid that first drink. Most people in A.A. are flexible, tolerant of eccentrics, suspicious of "rules" and "musts." The lack of ritual can be a surprise to beginners. So is the absence of confrontation, finger-pointing, blame-laying, angry debate and chronic whining.

The essence of A.A. can only be guessed at in big, showy gatherings, such as its international conventions every five years. It is in the intimacy of the neighbourhood meetings that the truth, the flavour and the inkling of the reasons for A.A.'s success can be grasped. The members may meet in groups as small as 2 or 3, or as large as 200, but the usual attendance is somewhere between a dozen and 40 people. In New York City, the most active single A.A. spot anywhere, there is a choice of 1,826 listed meetings

held by 724 groups every week.

As A.A. grew and diversified, the stigma of alcoholism gradually faded. There were many stages along A.A.'s road to respectability, beginning in the 1940's, that gradually transformed the public's perception of the society of recovered drunks from a butt of disbelief and even ridicule to that of an accepted and admired organization. None was more significant than the action taken by the American Medical Association. In 1956, the A.M.A.'s trustees and its House of Delegates declared that alcoholism was a disease, thereby validating a central belief of A.A., from its co-founders on, that it is a sickness, not a sin.

Now the Supreme Court of the United States is debating the legality of the issue. Last Dec. 7, the court heard a challenge by two Vietnam War Veterans against the Veterans Administration for excluding "primary alcoholism" (in which drinking itself is the root disorder) from the list of illnesses and disabilities that allow veterans more time to claim education benefits. Extensions can be granted to veterans hindered by physical or mental problems "not the result of their own willful misconduct." The justices are expected to hand down an opinion before the Court's term ends in June.

The structure of A.A. is a little harder to grasp than the disease theory of alcoholism. It is close to the truth to say that A.A. consists of a million Indians and no chiefs. And that it is less an organization than an organism that keeps splitting amoebalike, into ever more groups. If a member doesn't like how things are run in his group, he can start another one with people he finds more compatible. This has given rise to

an A.A. saying: "All you need to start a new group is two drunks, a coffee pot and some resentment."

There is a structure in Alcoholics Anonymous, but it would set any conventional notion of how to run a business on its head. Basically, the local groups are boss, and the board of trustees and the staff at the General Service Office are supposed to carry out their orders. The board of trustees is made up of 14 A.A. members and 7 nonalcoholics.

Although alcoholics hold all the top administrative jobs, they never handle money. A.A.'s financial operation is run by nonalcoholics. The reason is that Bill Wilson and the early A.A.'s were afraid that if anybody running A.A. felloff the wagon, that would be bad enough, but if he were handling finances as well, the results could be disastrous. The philosophy has endured.

The manner in which A.A. directs its collective affairs and sets policy can be seen most clearly - or in all its democratic confusion - at its yearly General Service Conference, the closest approximation to a governing body of A.A. About 135 people attend, including 91 delegates elected at regional A.A. assemblies in the United States and Canada. Also on hand are the trustees of the board and representatives of the headquarters staff.

The day-to-day business of Alcoholics Anonymous has been carried on since 1970 in a brick building at 468 Park Avenue South, in midtown Manhattan. Whatever policies are decided at the conference are carried out by the headquarters staff. Their jobs are divided into specialties such as literature, treatment centers, prisons, public information and cooperation with professionals - doctors, counselors, social workers and teachers, for example - in the

alcoholism field. And just in case somebody should become overly fond of a specialty, all the top staff members, except the general manager and the Hispanic coordinator, regularly rotate jobs every two years. The same frequent rotation occurs at every level in A.A. Officers in local groups usually step down every six months.

The seven nonalcoholic trustees, who are often experts in some profession, such as medicine, law, banking or social work, serve a special need. Joan K. Jackson, a sociologist with long experience among alcoholics, explains: "We can use our full names in public. We are not perceived by outsiders as having any vested interest. Privately within A.A., our greatest function is as gadflies and questioners."

What makes A.A. headquarters run is the A.A. World Service publishing empire. It now brings in \$8.8 million annually or 76 per cent of A.A.'s yearly corporate revenues. It is the cause of some trepidation among those who have taken what amounts to a vow of poverty. Each year, A.A. distributes 7 million copies of more than 40 pamphlets (mostly gratis for members), and almost a million and a half copies of 6 books and two booklets. Seven million copies of the Big Book (A.A.'s central text, published in 1939, whose formal title is "Alcoholics Anonymous") have been sold. Last year alone, about a million Big Books were purchased, virtually all of them at A.A. meetings, alcoholic rehabilitation centers or through mail orders.

At the time of his death, early in 1971, Bill Wilson was earning about \$65,000 a year in royalties from the Big Book and three other books he wrote for A.A. Last year, his widow, Lois, received \$912,000 in royalties. Under the terms of the agreement

Bill concluded with A.A. headquarters in 1963, she was allocated 13.5 per cent of Wilson's royalties. Another 1.5 percent went to his last mistress, who died a few years after Bill.

There has been almost no negative publicity about Alcoholics Anonymous over the five decades of its history. Extensive research turns up only a handful of critical views in the press. Writing in *The Nation* in 1964, Jerome Ellison charged that A.A.'s conservative top councils had lost touch with the ever more diverse rank-and-file. The same year, Arthur H. Cain, a New York psychologist, in a book and articles for various magazines, called A.A. a "cult" that enslaved its members to self-righteous sobriety. Bill Wilson's reaction was typical of the man's tolerance. The co-founder trying to calm the ensuing fuss at headquarters, said: "In all the years, this is the first thoroughgoing criticism our fellowship ever had. So the practicing of absorbing stuff like that in good humour should be of value." It was the first public criticism, and it proved to be one of the last.

Privately within A.A., there has been a growing dissatisfaction with headquarters. Some members say staff members are becoming frozen in bureaucracy and are overly sensitive to pressure from the most rigid and narrow-minded members, particularly old-timers, who regard the Big Book and other authorized literature almost as Holy Writ.

"If anything is going to destroy A.A.," says Dr. John Norris, a nonalcoholic physician, friend of Bill Wilson's and for many years chairman of A.A.'s board of trustees, "It will be what I call the 'tradition lawyers.' They find it easier to live with black and white than they do with gray. These 'bleeding deacons' - these

fundamentalists are afraid of and | fight any change."

Source: The New York Times Magazine, February 21, 1988.