

It's Fun to Be Sober

For many seamen, the sea is an escape. It was for Joe. The ruddy-faced, squarely built, 27-year-old Irishman would come into port, get drunk, maybe get jailed, and then look around for a ship. The first few days on board were pretty rugged. But after he had fought off his drunk, he was safe from another - until the next port.

About a year ago, Joe sobered up permanently. "on account of being a drunk, I fell out with the union," he explained. "My privileges were taken away from me." At the same time he learned from a Public Health Service doctor that alcoholism is a disease and that "drunks aren't just bad boys." The doctor recommended Alcoholics Anonymous, the group of chronic drinkers who have learned how to keep sober by helping others to do the same.

The idea made sense. But Joe didn't like to rub elbows with bankers, lawyers, teachers, and other toffs in the original A.A.

membership. On the hunch that it takes a seaman to understand a seaman he collected "a handful of drunks" and formed his own club - Alcoholics Anonymous Seamen's Group. Last week, in their new clubhouse on West 24th Street in New York, the reformed seamen held a New Year's open house for 150 members. Refreshments: hot dogs, coffee, cokes, and cake.

As secretary of the group Joe has given up the sea to remain on duty at the clubhouse. "guys hear about it and walk in," he said. "Some don't know what it's all about. They think they can take a couple of pills - and bingo! - they're cured. Not everybody wants to cure himself."

Joe also goes down to hospitals and shipyards to talk to "tough cases." "I tell my own experiences. If a guy gripes about the War Shipping Administration, I ask him: "How are you going to be in a position to tell off the WSA if you're a drunk."