# Alcoholics Anonymous Celebrates Its 50th Year

*by Baz Edmeades*

*Fifty years ago this summer two men managed to cast off the chains of their alcohol addiction. The fellowship they founded has saved the lives of millions.*

*Within a year of Jack Alexander's report on Alcoholics Anonymous in The Saturday Evening Post, AA's ranks leaped from 2,000 to 8,000 and continued to climb. The Post is still hearing from grateful relatives of alcoholics. We received this letter in 1982: "Your magazine did the ultimate service for my father.... Physically a wreck, having d.t.'s, he would not have lived long.... I took him to the nearest chapter meeting... and he swore he would never drink again."*

The March 1, 1941, *Saturday Evening Post* (adorned with an appealing Norman Rockwell cover and costing five cents) is a historic issue. It contains a Jack Alexander story that turned Alcoholics Anonymous, an obscure self-help organization, into an American institution.

AA's growth has not leveled off in the intervening years. The fellowship now has more than one million members, and its message of spiritual renewal is felt world-wide.

This July in Montreal, Canada, some 50,000 people from around the world will meet to celebrate AA's 50th birthday. They will gather without hoopla or hype, for AA has a firm policy against promotion. The meeting, nonetheless, will be one of celebration, an expression of "sheer joy" by recovered alcoholics and their families. Among the honored guests will be the surviving relatives of two strong-willed men without whom Alcoholics Anonymous would never have been founded. This is their incredible story:

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 after a New York stockbroker, William Griffith Wilson, met a fellow alcoholic, Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, in Akron, Ohio. The fellowship is reckoned to have started on June 10 of that year, the day that Dr. Smith took his last drink, a beer accompanied by a tranquilizer. Dr. Smith needed to steady his nerves--he was about to perform an operation.

The whole story starts a few years earlier. A pebble from the Alps had started the avalanche of recovery that was to become Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1931 the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung was treating an American named Rowland H. for a drinking problem. No sooner had therapy ended, however, than Rowland lapsed back into drunkenness. Refusing to take him back as a patient, Jung told Rowland bluntly that further psychiatric measure were pointless. His only hope of recovery, said Jung, lay in a "vital" spiritual experience.

Returning to the United States, Rowland found spirituality--and sobriety--with the Oxford Group, an evangelistic organization founded by a Lutheran minister, Dr. Frank Buchman. Rowland shared Jung's message, and his own experience, with other problem drinkers whom he met through the group.

As a result of Rowland's efforts, at least one member, Ebby T., was able to stop drinking for a time. Near the end of 1934, Ebby, then about six months sober, went to Brooklyn to see his old friend Bill Wilson, who had fallen upon hard times.

Bill, a tall, good-looking man, had been one of the first, and best, security analysts on the New York Stock Exchange. He had conceived the notion that investors would do well to take a closer look at the businesses whose stocks they were buying. He and his wife, Lois, had quit their jobs and taken to the road to do just that.

His breakthrough was to discover the great investment potential of the General Electric Company at the advent of radio. Other coups

followed and brought Bill prestige and success. The crash of 1929 hurt Bill, but he made no less than two financial recoveries in the early '30s. Alcohol (in the heart of the Prohibition!) finally reduced him to poverty. A friend remembered how things were during this period:

"Nearly half a century has passed, but I can still see Bill coming into Ye Olde Illegal Bar on a freezing afternoon with a slow stride--he never hurried--and looking over with lofty dignity at the stack of bottles back of the bar, containing those rare imported beverages straight of the line from Hoboken. One time at Whitehall subway station, not far from Busto's [a speak-easy] he took a tumble down the steps. The old brown hat stayed on; but, wrapped up in that long overcoat, he looked like a collapsed sailboat on the subway platform. I recall how his face lit up when he fished out of the heap of clothes an unbroken bottle of gin," he reminisced.

At the time of Ebby's visit, Bill was becoming violent and increasingly abusive; his doctor suspected brain damage. For Bill, self-hate was the daily companion to the terror that he and Lois felt. Ebby, on the other hand, looked and felt good. Rather hesitantly, he explained how he had stopped drinking. He didn't really expect to get through, but as Bill was to confess later, "In no waking moment could I get that man or his message out of my head."

Bill continued, however, to drink. A month later, he was back in Charles B. Towns hospital, an alcoholic rehabilitation center, for the fourth time. Ebby paid him another visit there. Bill asked him to repeat the "neat little formula" that had enabled him to stop drinking; Ebby did so "in perfectly good humor." The process involved admitting that you were beaten, getting honest with yourself, talking it our with somebody else, making restitution to the people you had harmed and praying to your own conception of a God.

Bill was, to say the least, uncomfortable with the idea of a higher power, but he was in the grip of a terrible depression--his pride could no longer hold out against the danger and disgrace drinking had brought upon him. Suddenly he found himself prepared to do "anything, anything at all." Without faith or hope he cried, "If there be a God, let Him show Himself!"

**Then came an event that would change everything.** "Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up in an ecstasy that there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man."

In later years Bill was to downplay this event. With cheerful iconoclasm, he would refer to it as his "hot flash" experience. He insisted that his real battle with ignorance and arrogance lay ahead. But he never took another drink.

Ever the skeptical Yankee, Bill suspected initially that his "hot flash" might have been nothing more than a hallucination associated with the d.t.'s. He discussed this fear with the hospital's chief of staff, Dr. William D. Silkworth. Silkworth, a neurologist, had already introduced Bill to the idea, unorthodox at the time, that alcoholism was a disease rather than a moral weakness. Now he affirmed that Bill had undergone "some great psychic occurrence" and advised him to hold on to it.

Life began anew for the Wilsons. They attended Oxford Group meetings and lived off the small wages Lois was earning as a salesclerk in a Brooklyn department store. Bill yearned to become the family's breadwinner once again, but he had always been the slave of his own enthusiasm. Caught up in something, he would give it all his considerable energies.

Now Bill was consumed by the idea of a movement of recovered alcoholics who would help their still-suffering fellows. He was convinced the message from Dr. Silkworth and from Ebby T. could work for other alcoholics, too. Ebby's message had been particularly effective. Ebby knew the hopelessness and blindness of alcoholism from the inside; surely his empathy had enabled him to get through to

Bill when nobody else--not even Lois--could. The first six months of Bill's sobriety were spent in enthusiastic but fruitless attempts to help other alcoholics. Bill's approach was almost exclusively spiritual. Finally, Dr. Silkworth, who was permitting him to speak to patients at Towns, suggested bluntly that he "stop preaching at drunks" and concentrate on the medical facts instead. If an alcoholic could be told *by another alcoholic* that he had a serious illness, that might do the trick....

Bill did not put this advice into practice immediately. A business opportunity intervened. He went to Akron to take part in a proxy voting battle for the control of the National Rubber Machinery Company. The prize would be a position as an officer in the company and a new career. He was, after all, only 39, and great things still seemed possible. For a while, the proxy solicitations went well, and victory appeared to be in Bill's grasp. Abruptly, however, the tide turned in favor of the opposition. Bill's past offered them an excellent weapon they did not hesitate to use. The battle was lost. Bill's associates returned to New York and left him alone in Akron to salvage the situation.

It was Friday afternoon, and Bill faced a weekend alone in a strange city. Lonely, and resentful over his defeat, he paced up and down in the lobby of his hotel. At one end of his beat was a bar, where the familiar buzz of a drinking crowd offered comfort and conversation. Bill was gripped by fear. He thought of his work with other alcoholics during the past six months. Unsuccessful as it had been from *their* point of view, the work had certainly kept *him* sober. Now he needed another alcoholic as much as that person needed him.

He called an Episcopal clergyman listed on the church directory displayed in the lobby and explained his situation as frankly as he could. One call led to another, and by Sunday he found himself in the home of a young woman member of the Oxford Group. She wanted him to speak to her friend, Dr. Robert Smith, who had recently confessed to being a drinker. Dr. Smith arrived at five that afternoon with his wife and teen-age son in tow. Hung over, he explained he could only stay 15 minutes. He stayed six hours.

Bob Smith's drinking has been a serious problem since he had been at medical school. The suffering involved in maintaining a facade through the subsequent years had been considerable. Fifty-five years old, he had by all accounts been an excellent doctor. Now, however, his career was in ruin, and his financial position desperate.

At the invitation of Bob's wife, Anne, Bill stayed with the Smiths for the rest of his time in Akron. A month later, Bob took his last drink. Only weeks later Bob and Bill carried the message to another man, Bill D., a lawyer who had had to be tied to his hospital bed after he had blackened the eyes of two nurses. Bill D. found permanent sobriety.

Through Bob and Bill's efforts the self-help society began to grow. Bill was the pioneer, the promoter and the organizer, but Bob was unsurpassed at working personally with alcoholics. In the next few years, he would treat thousands without charge--in addition to rebuilding his career as a surgeon. "It is difficult," wrote a priest who worked with Bob, "to speak of Dr. Smith without going into eulogistic superlatives. While he lived, he laughed them off, and now, though [he is] dead, I feel he still laughs them off." A classmate from medical school recalls a day near the end of Bob's life in 1950. "One of the outstanding incidents of my life is the Sunday we spent with him at his home in Akron. It was something like people coming to Lourdes--people he'd never seen or heard of. One was a dean of a large college in Ohio. Two people who stand out in my memory were a lawyer and his wife. They had driven all the way from Detroit to tell him what he'd done for them through AA."

Two years after their first meeting, Bill and Bob could count at least 40 sober alcoholics, some of them "very grim, last-gasp cases that had been sober a couple of years." They realized the chain reaction they had started could spread throughout the world. "What a tremendous realization that was!" Bill wrote.

"At last we were sure. There would be no more flying totally blind."

While Bob continued to build the fellowship in Akron, Bill began writing a book (*Alcoholic Anonymous*; AA members call it "The Big Book") about its methods and philosophy. Until then AA's message had been transmitted exclusively face-to-face. For a while, it seemed that the potent magic of that message had been lost in print--the book simply didn't sell. Local newspapers and word-of-mouth continued, however, to spread the news of hope for alcoholics, and before long a steady trickle of orders began coming in.

**Then Jack Alexander began working on an article about AA for *The Saturday Evening Post*.** Initially prepared to debunk the fellowship, Alexander, after an exhaustive investigation, became an enthusiastic believer. No sooner had his article appeared in the March 1, 1941, *Post* than the group's small office in New York was swamped with orders for the book and letters asking for assistance. Somehow, the staff (a young woman, Ruth Hock) and volunteers (everybody else) managed to send a personal reply to each inquiry. Throughout North America (and indeed, the world) the Big Book took the place of the personal "sponsorship" that had brought sobriety to pre-1941 members.

AA almost burst upon the world too soon. At the time of the *Post* explosion, it had just begun to develop its unique "corporate poverty" policy--without which it could not have attained its present power and importance.

Money had been a problem for Bill and Bob from the start. Both had spent their early years of sobriety in straitened circumstances. When AA was three years old, Bill was offered "an office, a decent drawing account and a very healthy slice of the profits" of Towns hospital in exchange for "moving his work" into that institution. Initially he was delighted, but other members of the New York group persuaded him to refuse. (Today, many AA members work as paid alcoholism counselors--but in the fellowship's formative years salaries might have been too heavy a strain on AA's all-important tradition of free and voluntary assistance.) Shortly after deciding to keep his AA work non-professional, Bill lost his home. For the next two years he and Lois lived with friends and moved more than 50 times before they could afford their own home.

Renouncing personal gain, Bill, however, clung to the idea that AA itself should be liberally funded. He believed that AA should build a chain of hospitals and mount a public education campaign. With these aims in mind, he and his associates approached John D. Rockefeller, Jr., for financial assistance. Rockefeller dispatched an investigator to Akron. The report he received made him a life-long supporter of the group--and a firm believer that money would spoil it. In 1940, he gave a dinner for AA and invited the leading members of New York's financial community. At this dinner, he asked his son Nelson to announce that he (John D.) was donating only $1,000 and to explain that AA required little more in the way of financial assistance. The other guests followed suit--one banker sent a check for $10!

Likewise, some members of the fellowship now began questioning whether they really wanted a well-funded organization with a powerful executive. AA had, after all, been founded on the power and enthusiasm of the individual. While the group debated this issue, the steady growth of the first years was suddenly overtaken by waves of new members in the wake of the *Post* article. AA began to realize it enjoyed a fabulous amount of good will. It did not need Rockefeller.

The issue of funding came to a head when one-well-wisher left AA a legacy of $10,000. After a lively discussion, the group made a unique decision. They would not accept it. "... [A]t the slightest intimation to the general public from our Trustees that we needed money, we could become immensely rich. Compared to this prospect the $10,000 was not much, but like the alcoholic's first drink, it would, if taken, inevitably set up a disastrous

chain reaction. Where would that land us? Whoever pays the piper calls the tune, and if the AA foundation obtained money from outside sources, its Trustees might be tempted to run things without reference to the wishes of AA as a whole. Every alcoholic feeling relieved of responsibility would shrug and say, 'Oh the foundation is wealthy! Why should I bother?' The pressure of that fat treasury would surely tempt the Board to do good with such funds, and so divert AA from its primary purpose." As the result of this decision, AA neither solicits nor accepts any outside contributions. Only members may contribute, and even they are asked not to donate more than $500 per year.

So Bill had avoided becoming the president of yet another wealthy New York charitable foundation and became, instead, "the greatest social architect of the century," in Aldous Huxley's words. He died in relative obscurity in 1971. In the last part of his life, he avoided fame as assiduously as he had sought it earlier; he refused publicity and awards--a *Time* cover portrait, an honorary doctorate from Yale.

Bill in particular was no stranger to the lure of fame and wealth, but he had come to believe that seeking personal gain--including prestige--from the connection with AA would be short-sighted. This belief lies at the heart of AA's all-important 12th tradition, which reads, "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

Appropriately enough, the Akron meeting of Bill Wilson and Bob Smith had its origins in the consulting rooms of Carl Jung, that great believer in synchronicity--"significant" coincidences. Today, 50 years after that meeting, more than one million people have found sobriety in AA. That any single one of them is staying sober is in itself so unlikely, one must conclude that the lives of each one of those men and women have been the product of synchronicity, or what some might call a miracle.

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Source: *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 1985, pp. 70-72, 102, 104