

Behavior: Anonymous Ally

The more money he made in the 1920s bull market, the more Wall Street Analyst William Griffith Wilson hit the bottle. "Men of genius," he assured his worried wife, "conceive their best projects when drunk." He was right, though hardly in the sense he meant. When Wilson died last week at 75, he left one of the finest projects that a drunk has ever conceived. He was the famous "Bill W.," who sobered up and in 1935 co-founded Alcoholics Anonymous.

A gawky Vermonter, Wilson grew up with a crushing sense of inferiority. Alcoholism ran in his family; he was physically weak and a target for bullies. By sheer persistence, he became captain of his school baseball team, played the violin well, and led the school orchestra. But his feelings of inadequacy remained until as a World War I artillery officer, he gulped his first drink.

Inspirational Teachings. As Wilson used to relate, "Down went that strange barrier that had always stood between me and the people around me. Here was the missing link." After the 1929 crash, Wilson tried to forget his losses with numbing doses of bathtub gin and bootleg whisky. His wife went to work to support him, and, as Wilson recalled, his mental disintegration "proceeded rapidly and implacably." Injured after an Armistice Day bender in 1934, he tried to heed the inspirational teachings of the First Century Christian Fellowship (precursor of Moral Re-Armament), but soon went on a three-day drunk that left him shattered.

At a Manhattan hospital, Wilson grimly prayed for help. "Suddenly," he related, "the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe." After leaving the hospital, Wilson tried to help other drunks achieve similar religious experiences, but found that he also needed medical facts to crack their tough egos. In 1935 he got the help he needed when he met "Dr. Bob," Akron Surgeon Robert H.

Smith, a fellow Vermonter who had vainly tried to control his own compulsive drinking. Together they founded Alcoholics Anonymous.

For a time, Wilson had grandiose visions: "Chains of A.A. hospitals and tons of free literature for suffering alkies." But when he sought millions from John D. Rockefeller Jr., the philanthropist astutely replied: "I think money will spoil this." As a result, A.A. was financed by its own members. In dealing with each other or the public, they use only their first names and initials. "Identification leads to power drives," Wilson explained. "The thought of power is one reason we were drunks in the first place."

A.A. shunned moralizing in favor of viewing alcoholism as an emotional crutch combined with a physical allergy to liquor. Thus, A.A.'s methods leaned more heavily on psychology than physiology. Recognizing that alcoholics must not merely control their consumption but curb it entirely, A.A. members listened to each other's stories and helped one another resist the temptation to drink. But they never forgot that the major effort to abstain must be made by the drinker himself. "The only requirement for A.A. membership," according to an organization tradition, "is a sincere desire to stop drinking."

Wilson was A.A.'s most active member. Even after his retirement in 1962 he remained in touch, addressing the organization's banquet each fall and, despite illness, struggling from a wheelchair to speak to its convention in Miami last July. He took immense pride in his accomplishment, and with good reason. A.A. now has 475,000 members in 16,000 groups in the U.S. as well as 90 foreign countries. A.A. strategy has been copied by organizations like Synanon and others working on group therapy for all kinds of troubled people, including ex-convicts. It obviously works. Today 60% of A.A. members get on the wagon and stay on it.