

Passionately Anonymous

The 15,000 men and women who thronged California's Long Beach Memorial Stadium last week differed from most conventioners in one major respect, there was no danger that any of them would get together in a hotel room to kill a bottle. For this was Alcoholics Anonymous, mustering its recovered, sworn-off drinkers, their relatives and well-wishers to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Uncrowned but undisputed head of A.A. is Bill W., a tall Vermonter in his early 60s who drank himself out of a lucrative career as a high-risk stock operator. "In 1934," he recalls, "My doctor told my wife that if I didn't stop I'd have to be locked up because I'd either go mad or die." Bill W. didn't stop until he drank himself into a hospital and realized that he must stop or die. He had to find another drunk in the same predicament so that by helping each other they would ensure their own survival. In Akron, in June of 1935, he found his friend, Dr. Bob (who died of cancer in 1950). Together they founded A.A. and laid out the basis for its famous twelve tenets.

Neither Chase nor Chastise.

Last week, in his unofficial presidential address, Co-Founder Bill W. noted that the organization today counts 300,000 members in more than 8,000 groups in about 80 countries. Yet A.A. did not congratulate itself for any wholesale success. "In the U.S. alone there are still at least 5,000,000 active alcoholics, and

perhaps 25 million worldwide. It is an awesome number that A.A. would be glad to help, said Bill W. We are not going to chase them, chastise them or campaign for them. All we can hope is that they will come to us for help when help is what they want."

A.A.'s wait-and-accept philosophy is the key to its success to date. About 50% of those who enroll themselves stop drinking as against 5% reported by physicians with any pre-A.A. treatment. Of the drop-outs about half return to the fold. This is not to say that 50% to 75% of all alcoholics will respond to A.A., many of the toughest cases simply never enroll.

The Thought of Power. The passion for public anonymity is readily understandable at the individual level. Every alcoholic needs pals on whom he can lean for help, and whom he can help to bolster his own ego. At the organizational level the anonymity is more complex. Bill W., a forceful speaker with a cutting wit explains: "Identification leads to power drives. The thought of power is one reason we were drunks in the first place. A.A. takes no denominational, political or economic stands. It stays out of controversy. We do not claim that anonymity is a virtue. Rather it is a protection." In proof of his own passion for anonymity, Bill W. has refused an honorary doctorate from Yale. "A degree for what?" he asks. "For being the world's leading drunk?"