

Saved from Skid Row

Medicine Column

The reformed drunkards numbered only 100 or so after four years of often-discouraging efforts when, in 1939, they decided to publish a guide to giving up alcohol. The collaborators' first choice for a title was *The Way Out*. But a check at the Library of Congress showed twelve previous works thus named; the authors shied at the 13th, settled instead for their second choice, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. It has sold 300,000 copies.

Last week the 5,000 A.A. members gathered in St. Louis had two items to celebrate: 1) their 20th anniversary, which marks their growth to a massive fellowship of 150,000 reformed alcoholics organized into 6,000 chapters in more than 50 countries, and 2) publication of a new and enlarged (575 pages) edition of "the big book," as they fondly call *Alcoholics Anonymous* (Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing Co.; \$4.50).

News from a Broker. Bill W., former Wall Street broker and surviving co-founder of A.A., argued that it was time for a permanent guiding body within the organization to take over from the elder statesmen, and the delegates agreed by ratifying a charter with a 15-member board of trustees. He also noted a switch in emphasis: now that its fame is widespread, A.A. gets more and more alcoholics (about half of its new members) who have not yet sunk out of social respectability into Skid Row obscurity, who have had little or no experience with delirium, hospitals and jails. In consequence, A.A. is

approaching closer to preventive medicine. Such cases make up one of the most encouraging sections of the new edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. A prime example:

A neurosurgeon named Earl in a Western state had always been fortune's darling; class president from high school through medical school and a professional success, he had never lost family or income because of alcohol. ("I made more money the last year of my drinking than I ever made before in my whole life.") He knew that something had to give when he found that the drinks he craved made him miserable even before they made him drunk. His wife read him an A.A. pamphlet. For the moment it had no effect. But a few evenings later, as he was opening his second fifth, the thought struck him: "This is the last one!"

Help from a Butcher. The break came easy for Dr. Earl, but continued abstinence came hard. Although he was a graduate of 5 1/2 years in psychoanalysis, he had to call on the local butcher, a pillar of A.A., for guidance when the going got rough. The butcher brought the doctor down to earth, interested him in A.A.'s program of mutual support. Dr. Earl has not had a drink for three years.

In writing his own case history, the doctor speculates whether A.A.'s curative power should be called "benevolent interpersonal relations" or group psychotherapy. Then, like so many other successful A.A. members, he gives his own answer: "To me it is God."