

The AKRON CONNECTION & the Birth of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

It was early Spring 1935 and Bill Wilson was about four months sober. He'd begun frequenting "friendly" Wall Street firms when the glimmer of an opportunity presented itself. Bill learned of a proxy fight for control of the National Rubber Machinery Company in Akron, Ohio. He made a quick study of the company, convinced some Wall Street investors of the soundness of his plan, then in April went out to Ohio to persuade disgruntled share-owners to support his group's bid for control.

Were he to succeed, he would rebuild his shattered career and be set for life financially (with a starting salary of over \$200,000 in today's dollars) when he became the company's new Chief Operating Officer— as was promised by his partners.

After a few weeks of meeting with various groups of shareholders, Bill began to feel the rising excitement of prospective victory. By early May, he was confident enough to return to New York, gather his investors and descend en-masse to Akron for the final vote.

However, in his absence, several "splinter groups" of shareholders pooled their resources with some share-holding managers. Upon the return of Bill and partners for that final vote, these "splinter-groups" succeeded in putting together 60% of the votes, meaning failure for the Wall Streeters and absolute disaster for Bill Wilson.

Bill's associates immediately departed for New York, leaving him alone in Akron to make a last effort to salvage the venture. They left on a Friday, leaving Bill facing a solitary weekend in a strange (and now unfriendly) town. He had too much time on his hands and a great deal of bitterness in his heart: fate had suddenly turned against him. He was filled with self-pity, resentment and now loneliness. Saturday afternoon found him pacing the *Mayflower Hotel* lobby in an extremely agitated state – with less than ten dollars to his name.

And so began the personal crisis that was to set in motion a series of life-changing events for Bill. There was a bar at one end of the lobby where he could strike up an acquaintance. He would only have a ginger-ale, he thought. But the "wheels were turning" in his head, as he began to think, "*perhaps he could handle, say three drinks – no more!*" Suddenly Bill had the panicky feeling that he was on thin ice – *fear gripped him*. In New York he stayed sober through working with other drunks at Towns and elsewhere. That work had been his protection. It was this thought that lead him to turn in the direction of the church directory at the opposite end of the hotel lobby.

Bill looked over the names listed, and quite at random, picked out that of a Rev. Walter F. Tunks. Some say he picked him because it was a funny sounding name, which he liked – or perhaps because he was Episcopalian like many Oxford Groupers back in New York. Whatever the reason, he unwittingly picked the strongest Oxford Grouper among all of Akron's clergymen.

He told Rev. Tunks he was "*a drunk from New York*" who could only stay sober if he could get in touch with a drunk to talk to. Rev. Tunks never hesitated or paused

to think about this odd request – And despite not personally knowing any drunks, he never stopped to question the wisdom of giving a total stranger the names of ten people who might direct him to a drunk.

Bill called nine of the ten without success. But one man, the tenth and last on the list, Norman Sheppard, knew a woman, a fellow Oxford Grouper named Henrietta Seiberling, who'd been trying desperately without success to help a friend who recently declared to the group that he was a hopeless alcoholic. This friend, Dr. Robert Smith had privately confided to her that the Oxford approach was not helping him because "*I just don't understand this alcoholism thing – nobody does.*"

This was the situation on Saturday May 11, 1935 when Henrietta Seiberling received a telephone call from an absolute stranger.

"My name is Bill Wilson, I'm a rum-hound from the Oxford Group in New York looking for a drunk to talk to in order to stay sober myself," she recalled him saying.

This was manna from heaven she thought to herself. Henrietta had relied heavily on God's guidance in her life, and that phone call was the help she and other Group members had been praying for to help their friend. "*You come right out here,*" was her response to Bill.

When he arrived, she called the Smiths only to be told by Anne Smith that her husband had brought her a potted plant for Mother's Day (the next day), and "*now he's laying potted under the kitchen table.*" So the meeting between the two men was arranged for the next afternoon at Henrietta's residence.

Dr. Bob told Anne that "*15 minutes of this stuff would be tops. I didn't want to talk to this mug, or anybody else, and we'd really have to make it snappy. Now these were the facts*" he recalled, "*we got there at five o'clock and it was 11:15 when we left*" taking Bill Wilson with them.

Bill remembered Dr. Silkworth's suggestion that he first get the prospect's attention through identification. To "*get them to understand what was wrong with them by seeing themselves in your story,*" he advised. So Bill began telling Dr. Bob of his experiences with alcohol: the hopes, the promises, and the failure of both. When it came to Dr. Silkworth's diagnosis of alcoholism as a physical allergy which explains the uncontrollable craving that follows the first drink, and the obsession of the mind which precedes the first drink, he "*really laid it on.*"

When they walked out of the room where they'd been sitting for about six hours, Dr. Bob said Bill was "*the first living human I had ever talked to who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience. In other words, he talked my language.*" He didn't preach and offered no "you musts" so Dr. Bob opened his heart for the first time in his life, and told Bill his personal story.

As we know, Bill stayed on with the Smiths (for three months) and on the day of Dr. Bob's last drink, June 10, 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous was officially born (see "*Historical Accuracy Footnote*" below). The two men then set out to pass the message onto others, as they realized that they "*must keep spiritually active*". In other words, they could only keep what they'd found by giving it away.

Historical Accuracy Footnote:**

In his story Dr. Bob briefly describes his three-day binge at an AMA convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Upon his return to Akron, Bill helped him through a three-day sobering up period to get ready for a scheduled surgery. Dr. Bob had his last drink on the day of the surgery and gives the date as June 10, 1935. AA also marks this date as the beginning of the AA Fellowship.

*"AA Comes of Age" (p. 147) "Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers" (p. 72) and "Pass It On" (p. 147) all erroneously state that the AMA Convention began the first week of June 1935. The AMA archives has long ago confirmed that the convention began on June 10, 1935. Allowing for three-plus days of binging and blacking out followed by three days of sobering up, Dr. Bob's sober date appears to actually be June **17**, **not** June **10**.*

*However, Sally Corbett (Executive Director of Stepping Stones) apparently has uncovered some evidence of a "pre-convention" for rectal/colon surgeons that took place several days **before** the actual larger AMA Convention. So, it seems the June 10th "anniversary" date might be accurate after-all if Dr. Bob was put on a train to return to Akron **after that pre-convention** – but **before** the actual AMA Convention.**

SOURCES:

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age by Bill Wilson (pgs.65-73)

Not God : A History of Alcoholics Anonymous by Ernest Kurtz (pgs. 26-33)

Bill W. My First Forty Years : An Autobiography with Robert Thompson (pgs. 211-217)

Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers (pgs. 60-75)

Pass It On Bill Wilson and the A.A. Message (pgs. 133-138)

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous (various pages)

*Conversations with Michael Fitzpatrick (A.A. Historian & Author)

**http://www.prestongroup.org/aa_docs/big_book_facts_and_myths.pdf