

The Early History of Alcoholics Anonymous In Northern New Jersey

By: John B.

“The spark that was to flare into the first A.A. group was struck at Akron, Ohio in June 1935, during a talk between a New York stockbroker and an Akron physician.” (AABB 2nd Edition, p. xv)

“A second small group promptly took shape at New York...”
(AABB 2nd Edition, p. xvii)

In August of 1935 Bill Wilson left Akron and returned to New York. Not long after, Bill found his first New York prospect at Town’s Hospital. Most A.A. historians date it in September when Bill first began working with Henry P. Henry (Hank) had been an executive with the Standard Oil Co. and was fired for his drinking. Hank was to become Bill’s first New York “sponsee” and was from Teaneck, New Jersey. A.A. in New Jersey can trace its roots to this event.

In the fall of 1935, a little band of recovering drunks had formed and began attending “Oxford Group” meetings in Brooklyn held in Bill & Lois’s house at 182 Clinton Street. These meetings included Bill and his wife Lois, Hank and his wife Kathleen, and Fitz M. Hank (The Unbeliever), and Fitz (Our Southern Friend) had their stories included in the first edition of the Big Book. “Pass It On” indicates that there were other attendees at these Tuesday night meetings including Ebby T. who had moved in with the Wilson’s, Shep C., Freddie B (The Chemistry Professor) Brooke B. (from Calvary House) and Alec (the Finn) who had also moved in with the Wilson’s. In later years, Jerseyites Bill R. and his wife Kathleen from Hackettstown, Herb D. and his wife Margaret from South Orange and Ernest M. (Mac) from Westwood would also attend the Tuesday night meetings.

1936 appears to be a year of “hanging on.” There was only one new member added in the New York contingent, Myron W (Hindsight). The “drunk squad” continued to meet on Tuesday nights in Brooklyn and attend Oxford Group meetings.

Moving forward to 1937, on February 13th the “Alcoholic Squadron” of the New York Oxford Group held a meeting in New Jersey at Hank P.’s Teaneck home. It was the first time the group of drunks met here in New Jersey to conduct an “alcoholic style” Oxford Group meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce Bill R. (A Business Man’s Recovery) of Hackettstown to the fledgling fellowship.

In 1937, New Jersey added additional members to its ranks. Douglas D. from Plainfield joined in early 37. In March of 1937 Florence R. joined the growing band of recovering drunks and was the first woman to achieve any sobriety time. Florence hailed from Westfield, New Jersey. Florence's story also appeared in the first edition of the "big book" (A Feminine Victory). In July of 1937, Paul K. of Roselle achieved sobriety.

Hank had opened a business office in Newark New Jersey located at 9-11 Hill Street, room 705. Hank later moved the office to the 6th floor of 17 William Street. The office was "the headquarters for a rapidly failing business," according to Bill.

The "rapidly failing business" was Honor Dealers, which Hank had conceived, according to one source, as a way of getting back at Standard Oil, which had fired him. His plan was to provide selected gasoline stations with the opportunity to buy gasoline, oil, and automobile parts on a cooperative basis. Hank hired a secretary, Ruth Hock and Bill Wilson was a salesman for the company. Ruth remembered very little gasoline business being conducted there. A lot of people dropped in to discuss their drinking problems, and on more than one occasion she observed Bill and Hank kneeling in prayer by the side of Hank's desk with one of these visitors, an Oxford Group custom when seeking God's guidance. It was here in the offices of Honor Dealers that the book Alcoholics Anonymous was to be written.

March of 1938 marked the beginning of the writing of the Big Book at Hank's office. Bill W wrote, edited and rewrote manuscripts at home on legal pads then dictated chapters to Ruth Hock (nicknamed "Dutch" - short for "Duchess" who was then the Honor Dealers Secretary). In the spring of 1938 Bill wrote to Dr Bob that he had dictated two chapters of the proposed book (There Is a Solution and Bill's Story). He also suggested at that time the name of "Alcoholics Anonymous" for the book as well as the idea of establishing a foundation using the same name.

Although Bill was the primary author of the book, Hank is credited with writing Chapter 10, To Employers. Without Hank and his hard driving, raising money, promoting and keeping Bill on task, the book may never have been written.

In January of 1939 the first draft of the Big Book was complete. Four hundred multilith copies were produced and distributed to the shareholders of Works Publishing and interested parties for review. One of those to review the book was reportedly the "Chief Psychiatrist of NJ" "Dr. Howard" from Montclair, New Jersey who suggested softening the tone of the book to make it appear more suggestive.

In April of 1939 the Big Book was published with the name "Alcoholics Anonymous"

On April 25, 1939 New Jersey member Morgan R. of Glen Ridge (former advertising man, asylum patient and friend of Gabriel Heatter) appeared on Heatter's 9:00 PM radio program "We the People." He told his story and made a pitch for the newly published Big Book. Morgan had been sequestered at the downtown Athletic Club for a number of days to ensure his sobriety remained intact for the program.

On April 26, 1939 Bill and Lois were evicted from their home at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn. They moved in with Hank and Kathleen who were now living in Montclair, New Jersey. A few days later Bill and Lois left to stay at the Bungalow owned by Horace C. (a New York member) in Green Pond, New Jersey. Green Pond was in the remote wilderness and Lois loved it. Her diary entries from that time, many of which are in Lois Remembers, are the longest and happiest of that first 5 year period.

On May 14, 1939, a Sunday afternoon, the very first meeting of what was to become the New Jersey Group of Alcoholics Anonymous took place in the home of Hank and Kathleen in Montclair. Meetings that had been formerly held in Brooklyn were held in New Jersey for the next 5 or 6 weeks. The meetings began at 4:00 PM and went most of the night. They rotated speakers for the first portion according to Jimmy B. who was living at Hank and Kathleen's home as well at that time. These were dinner meetings with Herb D. paying for a "big spread". The wives always attended these meetings along with their spouse's. At the May 14th, meeting they voted in the Bill and Lois Home replacement fund and each pledged different amounts of which none of them paid more than a few months. They wrote up a document with this information which is in the GSO archives. (Bill and Lois were doing an errand when they voted this Home Replacement Fund in, they arrived shortly thereafter and Lois wrote in her diary that they were thrilled.) Marty M. was still a Blythewood Sanitarium patient and took the train from Connecticut to this historic event in New Jersey.

In the early summer of 1939 there was a falling out between Bill and Hank. In late June Hank and Kathleen would split up. Hank moved to East Orange and by mid June, the New Jersey Group of Alcoholics Anonymous began meeting at the South Orange home of Herb D. At this time, the group was beginning to grow and had about 15 members.

By early September, Hank had returned to drinking. Bill's first sponsee, the great promoter of the Big Book and the founder of A.A. in New Jersey would never again enjoy long term sobriety.

At the end of the summer of 1939, Bill and Lois moved in with Bob and Mag V. Their farmhouse was located in Bog Hollow near Monsey, NY. Bob was a member of the New Jersey Group with six months sobriety at the time.

On October 22, 1939 the first public meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in New Jersey was held at the South Orange Community Center. A newcomer with just five months of sobriety, Gordon M., along with Herb D. had arranged the public meeting space to accommodate the growing New Jersey Group who now had between twenty-five and thirty members attending its meetings. This meeting was held on Sunday evening at 5:30 PM and marked the start of regular Sunday night meetings held at the Community Center. It was this group, then known as the New Jersey Group, that would become the “mother group” for all of New Jersey. Later this group would be known as the South Orange Sunday Night Group which still meets today.

On January 1, 1940 the group produced a membership roster that is housed in the GSO archives. The survey was conducted in preparation for the Rockefeller Dinner. The member list shows forty-one names, but indicates seven are no longer group members. Of the active members, there are several pioneers of A.A. and five people with between one and three years of continuous sobriety. Another nineteen members have between three months and one year and six are working on ninety days.

The group claims an overall success rate of 73% with 46% getting and staying sober on the first try. These numbers were consistent with the fellowship’s report to the Rockefellers and the press. A.A. would continue to use the 50-25-25% figures quoted in the foreword to the second edition of the Big Book for many years to come. The membership of the New Jersey Group at that time represented more than twenty-three towns including, South Orange, East Orange, Orange, West Orange, Bogota, Jersey City, Caldwell, Newark, Montclair, Upper Montclair, Irvington, Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Westwood, Millburn, Verona, Plainfield, Ridgewood, Hoboken, Hackettstown, Roselle and two upstate New York towns.

Two of the newcomers with less than one year, Gordon M. and Helen P. would become active in group’s affairs and later appeared in one of the photographs in the Jack Alexander article of the Saturday Evening Post, March 1, 1941. Both would hold trusted servant positions in the early years of the group. Lois’s diary, indicates that she and Bill attended the South Orange meeting on February 18, 1940 and then spent the night at Gordon M.’s East Orange home.

As the membership in New Jersey grew many changes occurred. The New Jersey Group actually became a legal business entity with its incorporation in 1941.

It was then legally know as A.A of New Jersey, Inc. This is of course prior to the traditions being written and the incorporation of the NJ Group was done to allow it to conduct real estate transactions, purchase property, sign leases and contracts, etc. Activities somewhat incompatible with today's A.A. traditions

In 1941, the New Jersey Group began to give birth to its children. The second group in New Jersey was the Morristown Group started by Dr. Malcolm T. Morristown was followed by groups in Camden, Englewood and Fairlawn. The South Orange group also began holding a Tuesday Luncheon meeting at the Howard Johnson's in East Orange.

The New Jersey Group held an anniversary dinner on March 14, 1942 at the Hotel Suburban, 141 South Harrison Street in East Orange, NJ. The featured speaker was none other than Bill Wilson and the cost was \$2.50.

By 1943, there were growing groups in Newark, Bloomfield, West Orange and Montclair; and in 1944 the Newark/Roseville group in association with dozens of A.A. members from local groups formed a corporation called the Alanon Association and purchased a building owned by the Roseville Athletic Association (Roseville A.A.) There was no need to change the name on the building! This is the Alanon Club that we have today on 7th Avenue in Newark.

Growing A.A. in New Jersey led to the formation of New Jersey Intergroup which had its first offices at the Alanon Club. The Intergroup Committee of A.A. of New Jersey, Inc became official at a meeting held in May 1945 when the Articles of Association were adopted by the delegates representing sixteen A.A. groups in New Jersey. The first Intergroup office was some space set aside on the 2nd floor of the club. It was a small office provided rent free by the club. The only furnishings were a small desk, a few chairs and a telephone. The secretary of Intergroup became a full time employee receiving \$35.00 per week. Keeping with the tradition that groups should be self-supporting, Intergroup requested a monthly contribution of \$.50 per member per month. Even though many groups numbered over thirty members, Intergroup received only \$5 – \$10 monthly from the groups.

Intergroup originally held meetings twice a month then switched to a monthly meeting being held on the first Monday of each month. New Groups in New Jersey would be asked to join and participate in the monthly meeting. Intergroup was responsible for booking the speaker commitments for the various institutions such as Lyons, Greystone and the Essex County Penal Institute. Intergroup published a booklet listing the different meetings available in New Jersey. The meeting book today still looks very much like the original except of course in the number of meetings.

In April of 1948, the Intergroup office was moved to bigger quarters at 944 Broad Street in Newark. Future moves of the office included Clinton Street and Maplewood, New Jersey.

In October of 1948, a pamphlet entitled “Facts about Intergroup” was written by NJ Intergroup which described the formation of an Intergroup Committee and sold for \$.10. The draft for this pamphlet was sent to the Alcoholic Foundation and the response was favorable that this type of system within A.A. was workable. The pamphlet was circulated by the Alcoholic Foundation to different parts of the world and served as a guide for the formation of other Central Offices and Intergroups.

In June of 1953, the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was published. Bill described the work: “This small volume is strictly a textbook which explains AA’s 24 basic principles and their application, in detail and with great care.” Betty L. and New Jersey member Tom P. helped Bill in its writing. Jack Alexander also helped with editing.

On September 14, 1957, New Jersey held its first State Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous at Seton Hall University in South Orange. The program was a one day event lasting from 12 Noon until 8:45 PM. The featured speaker at the final meeting was New Jersey’s Tom P., who edited and helped write the Twelve and Twelve for Bill W.

God willing, more will be revealed!

The following sources are gratefully acknowledged:

1. A Narrative Timeline of AA History 2007 – Arthur S.
2. Alcoholics Anonymous 2nd Edition - AAWS
3. Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age - AAWS
4. Pass It On - AAWS
5. Not God – Ernest Kurtz
6. Nancy Olsen
7. Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers - AAWS
8. Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions – AAWS
9. History of the Big Book – Don B.
10. Lois Remembers – Al Anon
11. Various Postings on AA History Lovers Group – Yahoo
12. Various writings of Bill W. AA Grapevine.
13. NNJ Area 44/Intergroup Archives

Fall - 2008