

# Henry (Hank) P.

(1895 – 1954)

## *“The Unbeliever”*

Hank P. was born March 13, 1895 in Marion, Iowa. He is considered to be A.A. #2 in the New York contingent of “Alcoholics Anonymous” and was Bill’s first “sponsee”. Henry (Hank) was from Teaneck, New Jersey and could be considered to be the fifth\* member of A.A. New Jersey A.A can trace its roots to Hank.

Hank had once been the Assistant General Sales Manager for Standard Oil of New Jersey and had been fired for his drinking. Bill found him in September of 1935 in the Town’s Hospital and offered him the solution that had worked for him, Doctor Bob and Bill D. Hank, who had been treated numerous times previously at Town’s and was an avowed atheist, reluctantly accepted the “spiritual” solution. His story, “The Unbeliever” was published in the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the big book Alcoholics Anonymous.

Hank is first mentioned in “The Doctor's Opinion” on page xxix of the Big Book. Doctor Silkworth describes his case in detail:

*“He has lost everything worthwhile in life and was only living, one might say, to drink. He frankly admitted and believed that for him there was no hope. Following the elimination of alcohol, there was found to be no permanent brain injury. He accepted the plan outlined in this book. One year later he called to see me, and I experienced a very strange sensation. I knew the man by name, and partly recognized his features, but there all resemblance ended. From a trembling, despairing, nervous wreck, had emerged a man brimming over with self-reliance and contentment. I talked with him for some time, but was notable to bring myself to feel that I had known him before. To me he was a stranger, and so he left me. A long time has passed with no return to alcohol.”*

Hank is again mentioned in the chapter “A Vision for You” on page 163 as the “... A.A. member living in a large community.” This refers to Hank’s home on N. Fullerton Street in Upper Montclair where he was living in 1939 when the big book was first published.

Hank has been described as a red haired, tall, broad-shouldered former athlete with a salesman's drive and enthusiasm. Hank was a hard driving promoter who was once described as “having an idea a minute.” He and his wife Kathleen had two sons, Henry and Robert (Hank, Jr., and Bob.)

Hank and his wife Kathleen began attending the meetings on Tuesday nights that Bill and Lois held at their Brooklyn home at 182 Clinton Street. These meetings which began in the fall of 1935 would continue until April of 1939. Hank also attended Oxford Group meetings with Bill and another New York recruit named John Fitzhugh M.

One A.A. story has Hank in early recovery one night with, Bill and Fitz driving down Park Avenue in Hank’s convertible. Hank suddenly stood straight up, grasping the steering wheel in both hands, with the wind beating against him, yelling, “God! God almighty, booze was never this good.”

Hank had an office at 9-11 Hill Street in Newark, which later moved to 17 William Street. The office was “the headquarters for a rapidly failing business,” according to Bill. The business was Honor Dealers, which Hank had conceived, according to one source, as a way of getting back at Standard Oil; the company that had fired him for his drinking. His business plan was to provide selected gasoline stations with the opportunity to buy gasoline, oil, and automobile parts on a cooperative basis. Bill W. was hired to be a salesman for the company and was later joined by Jimmy B.; another pioneer of A.A. Ruth Hock was hired as the secretary of Honor Dealers and would later become the A.A. Foundation’s first national secretary. 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.

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

March of 1938 marked the beginning of the writing of the Big Book at Hank’s office. The project needed funding so Hank wrote up a prospectus for “The 100 Men Corporation.” They offered 600 shares for sale at \$25 par value. Hank went down to a stationary store, bought blank stock certificates, typed in his full name, followed by the title “President.” The name of the publishing company was “Works Publishing Co.,” but the corporation was not registered until several years later. Hank and Bill were each to keep 200 shares for their work on the book, the balance of the 200 shares would be sold for \$25 per share. This would raise the \$5,000 needed to publish the book

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.

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 Upper 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.

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 at that time.

In the early summer of 1939 there was a falling out between Bill and Hank. Hank wanted to leave his wife and marry Ruth Hock, the secretary from Honor Dealers. She refused his proposal and Hank felt that Bill had interfered. In late June Hank and Kathleen would split up. Hank moved to East Orange and the Sunday meetings moved to South Orange.

In 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. Hank would nurse resentment against Bill for the rest of his life and cause great division within the A.A. ranks in the months to come.

In March of 1940 Bill and Ruth moved the office of the Alcoholic Foundation to Vesey Street in Manhattan. Not long after, Hank showed up dirty, drunk and in a bad way. He complained that the furniture in the office was still his and Bill offered him \$200 for the furniture provided he signed over his 200 shares of Works Publishing Co. to the Alcoholic Foundation. Hank, in desperation, complied.

Hank did have periods of sobriety over the next 14 years despite lengthy episodes of drinking. At one point he married the sister of Clarence S.'s wife, Dorothy, and had Clarence working for him as a salesman for a company called Henry Giffen, Fine Porcelains.

Hank's third marriage was to a Houston oil heiress. She reportedly was the love of his life. She died leaving Hank an inheritance which he later used to remarry Kathleen and purchase a chicken farm in Pennington, New Jersey.

The chicken coup caught fire and was destroyed in January 1954. The story was reported in the Pennington Post, which also carried Hank's obituary on the very same day.

Hank died January 18, 1954, at Mercer Hospital in Pennington, New Jersey. Lois Wilson said his death was due to drinking. Others claimed it was pills. Some thought it was both. His obituary says only that he died after a lengthy illness.

Despite Hank's difficulties, A.A. owes Henry P. its thanks and gratitude. Without Hank, the Big Book and A.A.'s early history might be remarkably different from what we have today. A.A. in New Jersey and its history are the direct result of Hank P's involvement in A.A. during its "flying blind" period.

The Big Book Study Group  
of  
South Orange, New Jersey

\* Hank being the "fifth" member; in Hank's 1<sup>st</sup> edition story he says:

"Told him it sounded like self hypnotism to me and he said what of it . . . didn't care if it was yogi-ism, self-hypnotism, or anything else . . . four of them were well."

"Four of them were well" refers to Bill, Dr. Bob, Bill D. and Ernie G.

The following sources are gratefully acknowledged:

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A Narrative Timeline of AA History 2007 – Arthur S.  
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Not God – E. Kurtz