



# BOX 4-5-9

NEWS AND NOTES FROM THE GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE OF A. A.

Vol. 16 No. 2

Memorial Issue, January 1971

## TO OUR BILL, IN LOVING MEMORY

Bill W. died at 11:30, Sunday, January 24, 1971, at the Miami Heart Institute, Miami Beach, Fla., after a long illness. He had been treated for emphysema since 1968. At death he was 75 years old.

After a private funeral service, burial will be in E. Dorset, Vt., where he was born on November 26, 1895. These arrangements followed Bill's wishes.

A.A. groups around the world will hold memorial meetings February 14, 1971, honoring Bill's work as co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, author of basic A.A. books, and chief architect and articulator of the Fellowship's principles.

### Last Public Appearance

Bill's last public appearance was at the Spiritual Meeting, July 5, 1970, in Convention Hall, Miami Beach, which closed the 35th Anniversary International Convention—the fifth in A.A. history.

He had gone to Florida anticipating a full speaking schedule, but virus pneumonia necessitated a short hospitalization, and physicians allowed him only the one token convention appearance.

That Sunday morning, the tall, slender and somewhat weary white-haired man was wearing a bright orange-colored jacket as a salute to the A.A.'s of his host state.

As he pulled himself to his feet, a throng of 11,000 men, women,



BILL'S BIRTHPLACE — E. Dorset, Vt.

and children jumped to their feet applauding and cheering. Many wept.

Many 24 hours had passed since Bill had gulped from a bottle of gin on the steps of Towns Hospital, New York.

That proved to be his last drink, on Dec. 11, 1934. It followed shortly after Ebby T., an old drink-

ing buddy, had visited Bill in the house on Clinton Street in Brooklyn, New York, where Bill lived, unemployable, seemingly a hopeless drunkard supported by his wife, Lois.

Ebby had stopped drinking after affiliating himself with the Oxford Groups, a religious movement then very popular.

In Towns Hospital, Bill had the transforming spiritual experience which relieved him of a desire to drink, and prompted him to try to persuade other drunkards to give up drinking.

His efforts seemed to meet with no success until May, 1935, when he found himself about to take a drink in the Mayflower Hotel, in Akron, Ohio after a business disappointment.

Suddenly he realized that his futile efforts in New York to sober

(to p. 2)

### TO HONOR BILL'S MEMORY

Lois, Bill's widow, wishes to convey her gratitude to the thousands of friends—and even strangers—who sent her messages of sympathy and comfort. Personal acknowledgement of each will be physically impossible.

Both Bill and Lois had requested no flowers. They suggested that A.A. members may wish, instead, to make contributions to a special

*in memoriam* fund to be administered by the General Service Board of A.A. for some special A.A. purpose.

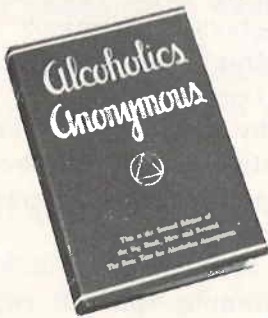
Only contributions from A.A. members can be accepted, of course, because of the A.A. Tradition of self-support. Checks should be mailed to "Memorial Fund, P.O. Box 459, New York, New York 10017."



# THE THREE LEGACIES OF A.A.

(from p. 1)

up other drunkards had at least resulted in his own sobriety for nearly five months. So instead of going into the bar, Bill began a series of telephone calls to find a fellow alcoholic whom he could *try* to help—believing now that whether the other listened to him or not, *trying* to help another person would, it seemed, prevent *him* from taking that drink. It was now, for the first time, a matter of his own survival.



As a result, in the gatehouse of the Seiberling estate in Akron, Bill met Robert H. ("Dr. Bob") S., a surgeon who was also an alcoholic.

This meeting of the two who became known as the co-founders of A.A., represents, in a way, the first session of the very first A.A. "group." It was the start of Dr. Bob's recovery.

He resumed his medical practice, specializing in the hospital treatment of alcoholics.

With Dr. Bob's encouragement, Bill devoted nearly all his time thereafter to A.A. which grew steadily into 16,000 groups in 90 countries, with an estimated total membership of over 475,000.



By 1937, the co-founders realized that about 40 once-hopeless drunks were staying sober in two tiny, nameless bands in Ohio and New York. They then persuaded those first members that a written record of their experience should be made, so it could be used by other alcoholics—in other places, and at other times.

The result was the book, "Alcoholics Anonymous," first published in 1939. The movement itself soon became known by the name of the book. Bill wrote the first 11 chapters, including the famous Twelve Steps suggested as a program of recovery. He later described *Recovery* as the *First Legacy* of A.A.'s earliest members to the rest of us.

In the next few years, A.A. ideas and procedures—in addition to those in the 12 Steps—were being developed.

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## ANONYMITY

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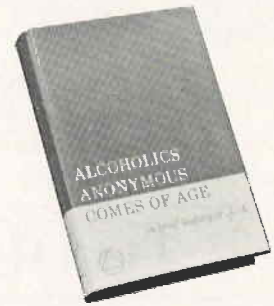
Upon his death, Bill's full name was revealed by A.A.'s General Service Board to public news media for the first time.

This may have been one of the best kept secrets of modern times—particularly remarkable in this celebrity-conscious, publicity-seeking age of famous personalities.

Informed opinion had long recognized that Bill's anonymity probably could not be maintained in public news accounts of his death. So the Board arranged this particular exception to the Tradition: Bill and Lois concurred.

The Board furnished the news media with accurate obituary information and photos. This action might actually emphasize the importance of A.A.'s traditional anonymity.

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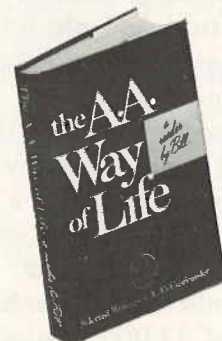
So in 1945, he wrote for the A.A. Grapevine "Twelve Points to Assure A.A.'s Future." These became the Twelve Traditions.

They were accepted by the Fellowship at its first International Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1950, the year of Dr. Bob's death.

Bill described them as the Legacy of *Unity*—the *Second Legacy* from A.A.'s founders to its future members. He enlarged on them in "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions," his second book, published in 1952.

Ownership of the movement's books and operation of its principal information office (G.S.O.) in New York, had been entrusted in 1939 to a non-commercial corporate board. Among trustee members of the Board (all unpaid), distinguished nonalcoholic business and professional men outnumbered A.A. members. But the Board had few ties of any sort to the A.A. groups and membership.

To remedy this, Bill proposed that a General Service Conference composed of delegates elected by



U.S. and Canadian A.A. groups, meet annually as a bridge between the membership and the Board.

At the Fellowship's second International Convention (St. Louis, 1955) the Conference was accepted by the Fellowship as the permanent successor to Bill, Dr. Bob, and A.A.'s other oldtimers. It is the means by which the General Service Board of A.A. holds itself accountable to the entire membership.

In "A.A. Comes of Age," published in 1957, Bill described this event in a brief history of A.A.'s first 21 years.

In 1966, the Conference changed the ratio of alcoholics to nonalcoholics on the G.S. Board, providing for a Board of 14 A.A. and seven nonalcoholic trustees.

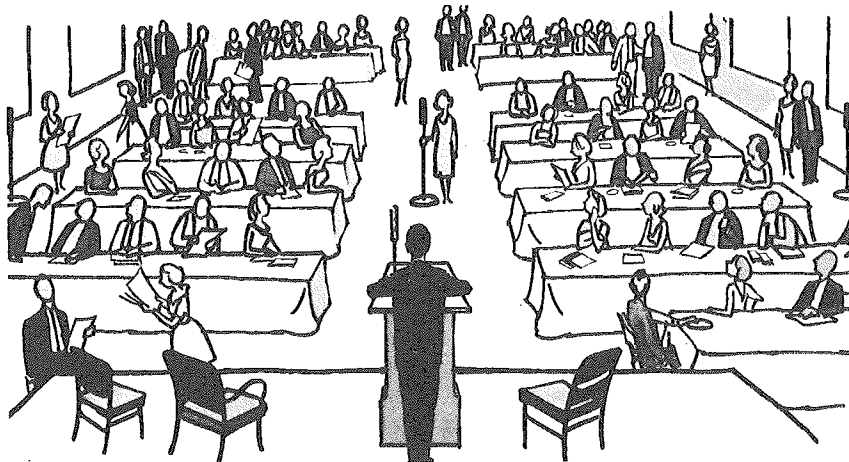
### Third Legacy

To Bill this signified the Fellowship's complete acceptance from its founding members of the *Third Legacy*—the responsibility for *Service* to alcoholics, as well as for its own future.

In "As Bill Sees It," (The A.A. Way of Life), Bill's last book (1967), he returned to the inspirational and spiritual concerns which since 1934 had formed the basis of his own personal life. It summarizes in a daily-reader format much of the help he freely gave to other alcoholics in thousands of visits and a vast correspondence.

Thousands of A.A.'s probably remember Bill best as speaker at International Conventions held every five years since the Cleveland meetings in 1950—in 1955, in St. Louis, Mo.; in 1960, in Long Beach, California; in 1965, at Toronto, Ont., and in 1970, at Miami Beach, Florida.

He held thousands spellbound as he repeated the stories of A.A.'s beginnings.



*A meeting of the G.S. Conference*

Maybe he told it best at his own 35th A.A. anniversary dinner. The 1969 event climaxed A.A.'s first *World Service Meeting*.

Twenty-seven delegates from 15 countries were among the 3,500 guests who heard Bill say that A.A. really began in the office of Dr. Carl Jung, a founder of psychoanalysis and modern psychiatry—in Zurich, Switzerland, during treatment in the early 1930's of an American alcoholic named Roland. The latter in turn would share his experience with Ebby T., the former drinking crony of Bill's who in his turn carried his recovery message to Bill in Brooklyn in 1934.

### Declined Public Honors

In accordance with the Traditions, Bill declined public honors for his A.A. work. These included an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, a movie of his life story, and

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### MEMORIAL GRAPEVINE

The March issue of The A.A. Grapevine, to which Bill was a frequent contributor, will be a special memorial to him.

Many pictures will accompany a biographical section.

a cover picture story by *Time* magazine.

Bill never completely lost the Vermont twang from his speech. It added to the wry stories he liked to tell on himself.

During his last months he told one visitor to *Stepping Stones*, his home in Bedford Hills, N.Y., about returning to Wall Street business activities in the 1960's.

After his semi-retirement in 1962 from active A.A. leadership, one day at an airport he ran into an old business acquaintance from his Wall Street days of the 1920's. With delight and surprise, they recognized each other.

The old friend exclaimed, "Bill, where have you been?"

Bill said he found himself slightly miffed. "I thought everyone," he said, "knew I was the No. 1 drunk of A.A.!"

So he decided to let the man know he was a founder of it. He asked, "Have you ever heard of Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"Oh sure," said the old friend. "I'm glad you finally joined A.A. Now since you're sober, would you like to work with me again?"

"And after I wiped the egg off my face," Bill said, "I did!"

In a way, he pointed out, it brought his life full circle. He had urged other A.A.'s not to devote

full time to A.A., but to keep it as an avocation while returning to their regular professions.

He had not done so himself, however, until the accidental meeting with his old Wall Street friend.

Bill lectured at the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies, was one of the directors of the National Council on Alcoholism, addressed the American Psychiatric Association and other medical groups, and contributed to several non-A.A. books on the illness. In 1968 he attended the International Congress on Alcohol and Alcoholism in Washington, D.C., and in 1969 he testified there before a Senate subcommittee studying the problem of alcoholism.

### Booster of Al-Anon

Bill was one of the earliest and most ardent boosters of the Al-Anon Family Groups, calling them "one of the greatest things that has happened since A.A. began."

In all of these activities he was careful to honor the A.A. Tradition of anonymity in mass media. He never allowed a full face photo or his last name to be publicly broadcast or printed.

He became interested in the 1960's, in the American Schizo-

phrenia Association, and he helped this young voluntary health movement—very dear to his heart—gain some recognition. He was careful to point out that this labor involved him as an interested private citizen, not as a representative of A.A.

### Never Received Salary

Bill was never paid a salary for his A.A. work. A complete account of all his A.A. financial transactions is kept on file at G.S.O. for the membership to see.

It shows Bill was paid only the usual author's royalties for his writing. The royalties revert to the Board upon the decease of Bill's heirs.

The A.A. approach to alcoholism, as Bill summarized it in the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, is generally credited now with sparking a worldwide revolution in understanding and treatment of one of mankind's oldest problems.

But Bill himself continually deprecated any grandiose claims for A.A. "We've only scratched the surface," he declared again and again, pointing out that A.A. has probably touched the lives of only one of the world's estimated 20 million alcoholics.

## BILL'S BOOKS, TAPES & FILMS

### Books

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (IN 9 LANGUAGES)  
TWELVE STEPS & TWELVE TRADITIONS  
A.A. COMES OF AGE  
AS BILL SEES IT (A.A. WAY OF LIFE)

### Films

"Bill's Own Story"  
"Bill Discusses the 12 Traditions"

### Tapes

"The First Recovery Story"  
"How We Learned to Serve"

Leery of the dangers of egotism and pride, Bill repeated often that at the heart of recovery was faceless 12th Step service to other drunks, unrewarded except by the server's own sobriety. It begins with communication at depth in what Bill called "the language of the heart"—a phrase which alcoholics everywhere seemed to understand and cherish.

### A Spiritual Movement

Bill worked tirelessly to make A.A. a spiritual movement which would be above and beyond individual personalities and one which would survive its founders.

Such a time has now come for the entire movement, and it leaves us here at G.S.O. with a depressing sense of personal loss.

But as he so often said, "in A.A. our work is more important than our persons." "Newcomers to A.A. must be greeted and helped long after we go."

So, Bill would probably ask for no more fitting memorial tribute than the outstretched hand of help offered to the next drunk who stumbles into any A.A. meeting room tonight.

So long for now, Bill. Welcome, newcomer.



▲ "Stepping Stones," Bill and Lois' home in Bedford Hills, N.Y. since 1941, where they have entertained many A.A. and Al-Anon friends.

▲ Bill's studio, where he answered his mail, wrote many Grapevine articles and much of the writing for his A.A. books.



# MANY PAY LAST RESPECTS

*These are only a tiny fraction of the many wonderful tributes to Bill that have been received at G.S.O.*

Letter to the N.Y. Times,  
January 29, 1971

"As a physician involved for many years in treating alcoholic persons in a major city hospital, and now in administering the nation's major alcoholism program, I feel profound sadness at the loss of this man I never knew. Not only do the many recovered alcoholics helped by Alcoholics Anonymous mourn Bill W.'s passing, and give thanks that he lived, but we in the helping professions share in these feelings and express gratitude for his singular achievement in pointing the way to accepting the alcoholic as a person worthy and capable of being helped. The Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship was the first to say, and to show, that the alcoholic's life was not a lost cause. For many years while medicine, psychiatry and the social and helping agencies lagged behind in recognizing alcoholism as a treatable condition, Alcoholics Anonymous began to build its record of successful self-help recovery for many individuals."

*Morris E. Chafetz, M.D.  
Division of Alcohol  
Abuse and Alcoholism*

"I remember Bill as he stood on the platform of the International Conference in Toronto in 1965 — the Maple Leaf Garden was filled with thirty thousand applauding, delegates and families — and humbly bowed his head. What was on his mind at that moment? Certainly his thoughts were not for himself, and perhaps not even for the

alcoholics who had been saved by A.A. My guess is that he was thinking of the millions of drunks who still need help, for he often talked of them. There was never a trace of self-satisfaction in Bill, or a feeling that he had done enough. Nor can we feel differently. This, I think, is our legacy from him."

*Vincent P. Dole, M.D.  
Nonalcoholic trustee to the  
General Service Board*

"...how wise you were all those years ago . . . we all had glimpses and flashes, but yours was the instinctive wisdom — the 'touch' — the communication between two loving hearts, the gift of sensitivity and the grace of imperfection

which enabled us all to 'relate'. You were the first to point it out, when we all wanted to put you on a pedestal — 'our Lord never selected perfect men to carry His message,' " you said.

*From a member*

*"The Good Word," a taped message from the St. Francis Monastery:*

"That Bill W.'s death was awarded space allowed to only the greatest of national and international celebrities indicates that his life, work and influence was anything but unknown or insignificant. . . The fact that he helped to restore hope, usefulness and literally life to over 475,000 human beings already in the decay immediately proximate to death, ranks him as one of the greatest healers of all time."

## BILL BEFORE A.A.

Born in East Dorset, Vermont, November 26, 1895, Bill was the only son of Emily and Gilman Barrows Wilson. He was educated first in a two-room schoolhouse at East Dorset and later at Rutland, Vermont; Burr and Burton Seminary; and Arlington High School, Arlington, Mass.

In 1914, he began an electrical engineering course at Norwich University, Vermont, which was interrupted when he entered Officers' Training School at Plattsburg, N.Y., in May, 1917. Like thousands of other World War I doughboys, Bill had his first drinking experiences during military service.

He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in Artillery and served in France with the 66th Coast Artillery Corps.

He was married to Lois Burnham of Brooklyn, N.Y., on January 24, 1918, in the Church of the New

Jerusalem (Swedenborgian), Brooklyn.

In 1921, Bill became a criminal investigator for the U.S. Fidelity and Guaranty Company in New York, and began his Wall Street career, which flourished until 1931.

Few knew when his drinking was getting out of control, nor did he recognize it, himself. These were the Roaring Twenties of bathtub gin, home brew and speakeasies in every block.

His drinking, however, became a serious problem. He lost an excellent job, saw the mortgage on his Brooklyn Heights home foreclosed, and became only a hanger-on of the stock brokerage business. Lois took a job to support them.

On Armistice Day, 1934, he began his last drinking bout which terminated December 11, when Bill was admitted to Towns Hospital for the last time.

## Bill W. of Alcoholics Anonymous Dies

by John Stevens

William Griffith Wilson died late Sunday night and, with the announcement of his death, was revealed to have been the Bill W. who was a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. His age was 75.

At his bedside was his wife, Lois, who had remained loyal during his years as a "falling down" drunk and who later had worked at his side to aid other alcoholics. She is a founder of Al-Anon and Alateen groups, which deal with the fears and insecurity suffered by spouses and children of problem drinkers.

As Bill W., Mr. Wilson shared what he termed his "experience, strength and hope" in hundreds of talks and writings, but in turn—mindful that he himself was "just another guy named Bill who can't handle booze"—heeded the counsel of fellow alcoholics, and declined a salary for his work in behalf of the fellowship. He supported himself, and later his wife, on royalties from A.A. books.

Mr. Wilson gave permission to break his A.A. anonymity upon his death in a signed statement in 1966. The role of Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith as the other founder of the worldwide fellowship was disclosed publicly when the Akron, Ohio, surgeon died of cancer in 1950 after 15 years of uninterrupted sobriety.

In fathering the doctrine that members should not reveal their A.A. affiliation at the public level, Bill W. had explained that "anonymity isn't just something to save us from alcoholic shame and stigma; its deeper purpose is to keep those fool egos of ours from running hog wild after money and fame at A.A.'s expense."

### Sense of Inferiority

Mr. Wilson shunned oratory and euphemisms and impressed listeners with the simplicity and frankness of his A.A. "story":

In his native East Dorset, Vt., where he was born Nov. 26, 1895, and where he attended a two-room elementary school, he recalled, "I was tall and gawky and I felt pretty bad about it because the smaller kids could push me around. I remember being very depressed for a year or more, then I de-

veloped a fierce resolve to win—to be a No. 1 man."

"In the Roaring Twenties," he remembered, "I was drinking to dream great dreams of greater power." His wife became increasingly concerned, but he assured her that "men of genius conceive their best projects when drunk."

### Oxford Group Help

Late in 1934, he was visited by an old barroom companion, Ebby T., who disclosed that he had attained freedom from a drinking compulsion with help from the First Century Christian Fellowship (now Moral Re-Armament), a movement founded in England by the late Dr. Frank N. D. Buchman, and often called the Oxford Group.

Bill W. staggered a month later into Towns Hospital, an upper Manhattan institution for the treatment of alcoholism and drug addictions. Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, his friend, put him to bed.

Mr. Wilson recalled then what Ebby T. had told him: "You admit you are licked; you get honest with yourself. . . you pray to whatever God you think there is, even as an experiment." Bill W. found himself crying out:

"If there is a God, let Him show Himself. I am ready to do anything, anything!"

"Suddenly," he related, "the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed. . . that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man."

Recovering slowly, and fired with enthusiasm, Mr. Wilson envisioned a chain reaction among drunks, one carrying the message of recovery to the next. Emphasizing at first his spiritual regeneration, and working closely with Oxford Groupers, he struggled for months to "sober up the world," but got almost nowhere.

"Look, Bill," Dr. Silkworth cautioned, "you are preaching at those alksies. You are talking about the Oxford

precepts of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Give them the medical business, and give it to 'em hard, about the obsession that condemns them to drink. That—coming from one alcoholic to another — may crack those tough egos deep down."

Mr. Wilson thereafter concentrated on the basic philosophy that alcoholism is a physical allergy coupled with a mental obsession—an incurable though arrestable illness of body, mind and spirit. Much later, the disease concept of alcoholism was accepted by a committee of the American Medical Association and by the World Health Organization.

Still dry six months after emerging from the hospital, Mr. Wilson went to Akron to participate in a stock proxy fight. He lost, and was about to lose another bout as he paced outside a bar in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel. Panicky, he groped for inner strength and remembered that he had thus far stayed sober by trying to help other alcoholics.

Through Oxford Group channels that night, he gained an introduction to Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, a surgeon and fellow Vermonter who had vainly sought medical cures and religious help for his compulsive drinking.

Bill W. discussed with the doctor his former drinking pattern and his eventual release from compulsion.

"Bill was the first living human with whom I had ever talked who intelligently discussed my problem from actual experience," Dr. Bob, as he became known, said later. "He talked my language."

The new friends agreed to share with each other and with fellow alcoholics their experience, strength and hope. The society of Alcoholics Anonymous was born on June 10, 1935—the day on which Dr. Bob downed his last drink and embraced the new program.

Mr. Wilson called Dr. Smith "the rock on which the A.A. is founded. Under his sponsorship, assisted briefly by myself, the first A.A. group in the world was born in Akron in June, 1935."

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