

Ruth Hocks recollections

Bill Wilson's
secretary

[The following is typewritten, transcribed from an [original document](#)]

November 10, 1955

Dear Bill:

As I wrote to you last week it is difficult for me to get a long period of uninterrupted time together to put down my recollections of those old A.A. days – but I have about two hours – so here goes.

Let me say first that I do not guarantee the accuracy of any dates I may use until I have the opportunity to check one thing against the other which I am willing to do if it ever proves necessary – neither do I insist that my memory is absolutely accurate – it will be easier if I can just sort of meander along for present purposes.

As I remember it you had been sober just a little over a year when I first met you. I think I went to work for Honor Dealers in about January of 1936. The job I applied for was as Secretary to sort of a distributorship for a group of service stations – naturally I had no idea what a surprise fate had in store for me and what a change it would make in my personal life, in my relations to and my opinions of my fellow man.

I walked into the Honor Dealers office in Newark, N. J. on Williams Street one Monday morning – was

interviewed by Hank – and started to work immediately that morning. My immediate impression of Hank was that he had a vibrant personality – that he was capable of strong likes and dislikes – that he seemed to be possessed of inexhaustible energy – and that he liked to make quick decisions.

You arrived shortly thereafter, Bill, bringing with you an aura of quiet warm friendliness – of slow deliberate decisions – and at least I thought at the time, not much interest really in the service station business.

By the end of that [first day](#) I was a very confused female for, if I remember correctly, that first afternoon you had a visitor in your office and I think it was Paul K. Anyway, the connecting door was left wide open and instead of business phrases what I heard was fragments of a discussion about drunken misery, a miserable wife, and what I thought was a very queer conclusion indeed – that being a drunk was a disease. I remember distinctly feeling that you were all rather hard hearted because at some points there was roaring laughter about various drunken incidents. Fortunately I liked you both immediately – I am not too easily frightened – and you were paying \$3.00 more per week than I had been getting – so I was willing to give it a try.

You will remember with me, I know, that in those days and for several years to come, we talked about "drunks" and not "alcoholic" – and therefore I use those terms here.

The activity of Honor Dealers, as I remember it, was never of paramount importance it seemed to me after I began to know most of you original men, that it was only a means to an end – that end being to help a bunch of nameless drunks. Having come from a thrifty German family I know what I thought if you two would spend as much energy and thought and enthusiasm on Honor Dealers as you did on drunks you might get somewhere. That would be hard to prove either way and actually I've never known whether [the original](#) premise of Honor Dealers was sound.

Anyway I soon stopped caring whether Honor Dealers was successful or not and became more and more interested in each new face that came along with the alcoholic problem and caring very much whether they made

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the grade or not. All of you made me feel as though I was a very worthwhile person in my own right and very important to you which in turn made me want to always give my best to all of you. To me that is part of the secret of the success of A.A. – the generous giving of oneself to the needs of the other.

Well – [the activities](#) of Honor Dealers slowly but surely declined and there was more and more correspondence with drunks and more of them showing up in the office. In those days it was part of the procedure, if the prospect was willing to go along, to kneel and pray together – all of you who happened

to be there. To me, drunkenness and [prayer](#) were both very private activities and I sure did consider all of you a very revolutionary lot – but such likable and interesting revolutionaries!

Hank put a good bit of thought and effort into Honor Dealers but whether his ideas had real merit or whether there was not enough prolonged effort or whether it was just a poor time for that kind of an idea. I was not capable of judging them nor am I now. I only know that within about a year finances were precarious enough to move us into a tiny office in the same building and even then I was front man to explain to the superintendent why the [rent](#) wasn't paid on time and the telephone bill, etc. Payday was an indefinite affair indeed.

I am somewhat confused about the timing of the move into the small Newark office because now that I think about it I remember that the book work was done in the large office.

Anyway, early in my association with you, Bill, you began to dictate letters to Doc S. (Dr. Bob). You never liked to dictate to a shorthand notebook – you always dictated directly as I typed. In the amazing way these things often happen, since word of what you fellows were doing in New York and by that time Doc S. in Akron was simply spread vocally from mouth to mouth, inquiries began to float in from amazing distances and some of these you asked me to answer in my own fashion. That is, to refer them to the closest "educated drunk." "Educated" of course in the

sense that they knew something of this new possibility of an answer to alcoholism.

Somewhere during those first months I also first met Doc S. (Dr. Bob) who gave everyone a feeling of great serenity – peace with himself and God – and an abounding wish to share what he had found with others. Somewhere along in there John Henry Fitzhugh M. also appeared (offhand I have no idea of the dates) with his warm sense of humor and the all abiding wish to give to other drunks what he too had found. This you all had in common to an exciting and unbelievable degree.

During that first year at least I don't think I ever attended a meeting, but through your dictation, Bill, through all I heard at the office and through the letters I was answering myself in your behalf I began to absorb an understanding of what it was all about and what you were trying to do and I became aware that the possibilities of writing a book were being discussed. Many of you thought it was an absolute necessity because even then the original idea was often distorted in the hundreds of word of mouth discussions. Its original basic simplicity was often completely confused beyond comprehension and besides it was becoming more and more impossible to fully expound the idea satisfactorily in [letter](#) after letter to various inquirers. Also, especially to the advertising type of man, the spread of the idea was going much too slowly and would become a sensation overnight if only put out in book

form!!

So far as I know there was never any doubt that you were the one to write it, Bill, and I know that you spent endless hours discussing its

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general form with everyone who would [listen](#) or offer an idea – especially with Doc S., Fitz and Hank. As soon as you began to feel you had at least a majority agreement you began to arrive at the office with those yellow scratch pads [sheets](#) I came to know so well. All you generally had on those yellow sheets were a few notes to guide you on a whole chapter! My understanding was that those notes were the result of long thought on your part after hours of discussion pro and con with everyone who might be interested. That is the way I remember first seeing an outline of the twelve steps.

As I look at it today the basic idea of each chapter of the book and the twelve steps is still essentially today what you scribbled on the original yellow sheets. Of course there were thousands of small changes and rewrites — constant cutting or adding or editing but there are only two major changes made that I remember, both fought out in the office when you and Hank and Fitz and I were present.

The first had to do with how much God was going to be included in the book itself and the 12 steps. Fitz was for going all the way with God, you were in the middle, Hank was for very little and I trying to reflect

the reaction of the nonalcoholic was for very little too. The result of this was the phrase "God as you understand Him," which I don't think ever had much of a negative reaction anywhere. We were unanimous that day and you got a green light everywhere you showed that typewritten copy including Doc S. and the Akron contingent where a copy of everything was sent for O.K. or criticism.

The only other major change I remember during the actual writing of the book was that originally it was directly written to the prospective alcoholic, that is — "You were wrong —

— "You must — "You should" and after a big hassle, this was changed to read — "We were wrong — "We must — "We should — etc." This was quite a job because by this time this major revision was decided on most of the book had been finished in its first draft at least and each chapter as well as the 12 steps had been slanted toward "you" instead of "we" to begin with.

At this time I had still attended very few meetings but I know that the office confabs and final decisions were only made after the aforementioned hours of discussion with all who cared to take part in them with you so that the majority opinion of all who attended meetings at that time was reflected in the final decisions.

During all this time, of course, there was plenty of discussion about a name for the book and there were

probably hundreds of suggestions about a name for the book and there were probably hundreds of suggestions. However, I remember very few – "One Hundred Men" – "The Empty Glass" – "The Dry Way" – "The Dry Life" – "Dry Frontiers" – "The Way Out" – This last was by far the most popular. Alcoholics Anonymous had been suggested and was used a lot among ourselves as a very amusing description of the group itself but I don't believe it was seriously considered as a name for the book. More later on this.

By the time the book was mimeographed mostly for distribution in an effort to raise money to carry on and get the book published. There was constant discussion about detail changes with seemingly little hope for unanimous agreement so it was finally decided to offer the book to Tom Uzzell for final editing. It had been agreed, for one thing, that the book, as written, was too long but nobody could agree on where and how to cut it. At that point it was still nameless because Fitz had reported that the selected name of "The Way Out" was over patented. I remember that during an appointment with Tom Uzzell, we discussed the

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various name possibilities and he [handwritten insert: Tom Uzzell] immediately – very firmly and very enthusiastically – stated that "Alcoholics Anonymous " was a dead wringer both from the sales point of view because it was "catchy" and because it really did describe the group to perfection. The more this name

was studied from this point of view the more everybody agreed and so it was decided. Uzzell cut the book by at least a third as I remember it and in my opinion did a wonderful job on sharpening up the context without losing anything at all of what you were trying to say, Bill, and the way you said it. I really cannot remember who originally thought up the name "Alcoholics Anonymous". [insert of handwritten reference to a handwritten footnote: See w??? * //]

The financing of the book is quite difficult for me to remember, that is, what happened when. Originally, of course, the work was done on Honor Dealers time. In other words what salaries were paid came from Honor Dealer transactions, and the paper, the pencils, the office, the typewriter, the phone, etc., belonged to Honor Dealers. Let me make it clear that the members of Honor Dealers were never cheated in any way they were always promptly served – it's only that what might have been a worthwhile idea for a group of service stations just didn't pan out.

When the income from Honor Dealers finally dwindled away completely – finances were a real problem. At this point there was universal agreement (except in Cleveland) that the book was a necessity and that what you had done on it up to that time was extremely satisfactory both in concept and execution. So the only problem was how to get enough money to finish it and get it published. You went to one of the large book publishers about an advance — and as I remember it you were offered one thousand dollars

with a rather minute royalty on each book published. Hank (I think) then came up with the idea of selling stock to finance the writing of the book and to publish it. Thus – Works Publishing Co. was born – and the book stock idea set up and forms printed. There was great optimism about the ease with which this stock could be sold by you and Hank and Wally von Arx who was active in this phase of the situation. That dream was not to be fulfilled because for the most part selling a share of Works Publishing Co. stock for \$25.00 per was like pulling teeth. Enough stock was sold in the original enthusiastic reaction of a few to keep us going on an extremely minimum basis for a while and then sales came to a complete halt and there we were back where we started.

The paradox of this is the fact that if enough stock had been sold and the book carried through to a conclusion on this basis, the stockholders would have had a fine return indeed for their original investment. However all things happen for the best and this kind of private profit would probably have been a perpetual thorn in the A.A. side.

You then decided to approach Mr. Rockefeller and were able to do so through various contacts you had built up through the years. This resulted in the Rockefeller dinner which in turn resulted in a minimum pledge which finally resulted in the book being carried to a conclusion and finally published by the Cornwall Press. Unfortunately I am not very good at getting across the spirit of fun, the real enjoyment of life, the cheerful

acceptance of temporary defeat, the will to keep trying, the eternal effort to keep everybody satisfied, which made these years so very worth while and so soul satisfying. In this paragraph I am describing particularly my own reactions, but I know that you will agree and so would everyone else who had any share in it. Even the altercations and disagreements of which there were many were carried on with a basic will to reach a compromise at least – therefore a compromise was always possible and always reached amicably.

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Naturally, when the book was finally rolling off the press the feeling was that our trouble were over which turned out to be far from the case. It was agreed that the book needed to be advertised and a date was finagled for a member of A.A. on "We The People." Morgan R. agreed to appear anonymously and did a good job with his three minutes while we all listened breathlessly on the radio. As I remember it his talk was slanted at doctors and to back him up we had mailed out thousands of postal cards to a selected list of doctors to reach them in time to get them to listen to the broadcast and to tell them how to get a copy of the book. We had an assembly line all ready to pack and mail the books when the orders came rolling in – and then we waited. I don't think more than four cards were returned at all and the only one that made an impression on me was the first one that came in – an order for six books – C.O.D. There was great

jubilant that morning – naturally we thought we were in. We simmered down to as close to gloom as I ever remember we got in the next few days over the few replies and were really practically squashed flat when the package of six books was returned marked "no such address." I'm afraid none of us appreciated for a while the humor of whoever that joker was.

By this time we were at the Vesey Street office and that address was a compromise too. Since I lived in New Jersey I didn't want to work in New York at all – on the other hand you had always wanted to have the office near Grand Central Station – so we settled on Vesey St. For quite a while, about a year at least, there were just the two of us handling correspondence, packing books, and whatever there was to be done and all the while the financial struggle to keep the thing going at all continued. The Liberty Magazine article was published and for the first time we began to find a stirred up interest in the form of [letters]. Each letter was answered individually and although the book was mentioned we tried to get across the fact that it was not necessary to purchase the book and in each case the individual was referred to whatever group or individual A.A. closest to him or her since at that time I imagine there were no more than 500 A.A. members, if that, scattered from coast to coast and the great majority of those in the Middle West and East it was often difficult to get any closer to the individual than several hundred miles. However, we did the best we could and we soon fortunately

began to be able to count several traveling salesmen among our A.A. members. Outstanding among these was "Greenberg" who often made side trips of several hundred miles to try to contact people who had written to our New York A.A. office for help.

When the Saturday Evening Post article hit the stands we really began to be flooded with mail and meanwhile the book sales had been steadily increasing from two or three a week until I think they hit an average of about 25 a week and we began to be able to meet office expenses. We had to hire an assistant who turned out to be Lorraine who was promptly christened "sweety pie" by you, Bill, and I don't think she was ever called anything else by anyone connected with A.A. I would like to say that "sweety pie" was always cheerful and loyal and understanding beyond her years and was a real asset to those early days of the A.A. office at Vesey St.

To me some of the things that stand out most were letters individuals who were too far distant to contact any A.A. group or member but who kept writing back to us and with the help of the book were able to reach sobriety by themselves, and even to start their own groups.

To keep us humble and laughing, were developments like the southern group started via mail through (was his last name Henry?). Anyway,

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he wrote us a glowing report about his group and its

amazing recoveries of members in his group. One of our travelling members stopped in for a visit and his letter to us was an eye opener indeed. It seemed that particular group was based on the theory that all alcoholic beverages were very bad for the alcoholic - except beer. This idea was carried out so thoroughly that beer was served at their A.A. meetings with copious readings of the A.A. book. Oh well - the beer itself soon cured that misconception.

One of the biggest things you ever did for the solid growth of A.A. in my opinion, Bill, was to set up a policy of noninterference in the development of individual groups. You set up a policy of suggestion not direction with which I agreed all the way and which I always followed. An individual or a group can resent and argue an order or direction but how much can you resent a suggestion which carries the intimation that possibly they might come up with a better answer if they work it out for themselves. In other words if a group wrote us a description of a problem in their midst and asked for an answer, we would usually describe what another group had done under similar circumstances or suggest possibilities and put the problem squarely back in their laps. In other words each individual is responsible for his own sobriety — so is each group.

We learned early too, not to make predictions about who would or would not stay sober. The most impossible looking cases so often made the grade to confound us with the miracle while our most promising

so often fell by the wayside. Do you remember the two young hopefuls we practically made bets on. I think they were Mac and Shepherd. They contacted us about the same time and were specially interesting because they were younger than most at that time. As I remember it Shepherd was a high betting favorite while "poor Mac was hopeless." To our surprise Shepherd at that time had trouble almost immediately while Mac seemed to make steady progress in sobriety. Of course the whole situation blew up in our faces when one day Mr. Chipman promised to visit us at Vesey Street so that you could show him what wonderful progress A.A. was making in every way and to top off the performance you invited Mac to appear to prove that even very young men could achieve sobriety. The stage was all set and you met Mr. Chipman for lunch. Meanwhile, Mac appeared at the office completely polluted for the first time in about six months. Unfortunately he was so far gone that he collapsed in a coma in the big chair in your private office. I couldn't budge him so all I could think of to do was shut the door and try to head you off. When you appeared with Mr. Chipman, though you were talking a blue streak complete with gestures and I couldn't get a word in edgewise , so you swept open the door to your office to reveal Mac in all his drunken glory. After the proverbial moment of stunned silence you broke into roars of laughter, and a minute later, bless his heart, Mr. Chipman joined you. Then I relaxed too and all three of us laughed until we literally wept. When Mac snapped out of this particular binge some days

later he enjoyed it too.

This ability to laugh at yourselves to accept the puncturing of your own self importance is one of the basic steps in A.A. I believe — of course it makes every individual more livable and lovable whether alcoholic or not. What little I have been able to absorb made life much simpler for me, I know.

I'm going to quit right here, Bill - if it isn't the kind of thing you want - tear it up. If there is anything I can or should add or subtract, let me know.

Always the best to you Bill --- Devotedly

Ruth