

GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE ARCHIVES

Self-Guided Tour

Welcome to the G.S.O. Archives! This self-guided tour will allow you to learn about the history of the A.A. Fellowship as you walk through our exhibit space. Please note that this self-guided tour refers only to the framed photographs posted on the walls throughout the exhibit space and in the library. The titles of each section in this document correspond to the plaques on each wall. There are other exhibits in glass cases and cabinets to explore as well. Please feel free to ask any of the employees of the Archives if you have any questions. With that, let's get started!

Wall 1: The Early Lives of Bill and Lois

On this wall, you will see photographs of Bill W. and his wife, Lois, long before A.A. began. Bill W. is pictured by himself in both his military uniform and wedding suit, and Lois is by herself in her wedding dress and in the garden at the Burnham house on Clinton Street in Brooklyn, their home at the time. The façade of the house in Brooklyn is also pictured, where Lois and Bill lived during the worst period of his alcoholism and the first few years of his sobriety. Finally, there is a photo of Bill and Lois in a motorcycle taken in the mid-1920s. During this time they traveled the country, with Bill investigating companies and reporting his findings to his Wall Street associates. During this time, Bill's drinking worsened.



Bill W. in his wedding suit and Army uniform in 1918



Lois W. in her wedding dress in 1918

Wall 2: Spiritus Contra Spiritum

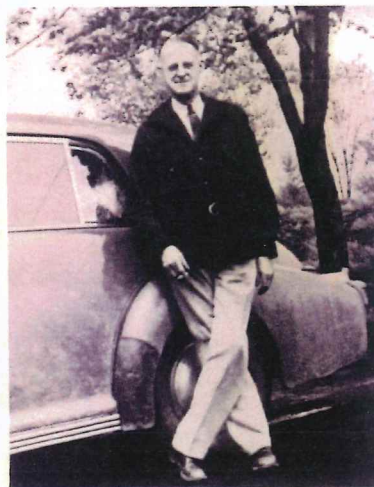
Here you can see how the message of recovery from alcoholism started and was transmitted to Bill. Dr. Carl Jung, a well know Swiss psychologist, had an alcoholic patient named Rowland H. in the early 1930s. After exhausting medical options, Dr. Jung told Roland that his only hope of recovery was a transformative experience. Rowland went on to join the Oxford Group, an Evangelical Christian group, and achieved sobriety. He carried this message to Ebby T., who is pictured standing next to Bill W. Ebby visited Bill in late 1934 and carried the message of recovery he received through the Oxford Group. At this time, Bill also met Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopal clergyman who was affiliated with the Oxford Group, and visited both the Calvary House, a mission of the Oxford Group, and Calvary Church, headed by Shoemaker. Finally, Bill W. went to Towns Hospital, a place where alcoholics went to get “dry,” for the fourth time in a year. Dr. Silkworth, who treated Bill W. during these visits, is pictured. Ebby visited Bill in the hospital, bringing him once again the message of recovery. In December of 1934, Bill W. had a spiritual experience in Towns Hospital and never drank alcohol again. Dr. Silkworth helped convince Bill W. that this was not a hallucination, but a genuine transformative event. Bill joined the Oxford Group and decided that he could help other alcoholics recover. Many years later, Bill W. would write to Dr. Jung to explain Jung’s contribution to A.A., and the doctor replied to Bill W. with the letter you see on the wall.



Bill W. and Ebby T.

Wall 3: The Early Lives of Dr. Bob and Anne

The other co-founder, Dr. Bob, was at the same time experiencing what became known as his “nightmare.” On the wall, you can see a picture of Dr. Bob in his youth as a student, where he developed his taste for alcohol. He would later marry Anne, and the two of them would move to Akron, Ohio, into the house pictured. Over time, his drinking worsened, even after both Bob and Anne became members of the Oxford Group to help alleviate it. One of Dr. Bob’s delights in life was automobiles, and you can see him in two separate images with a car.



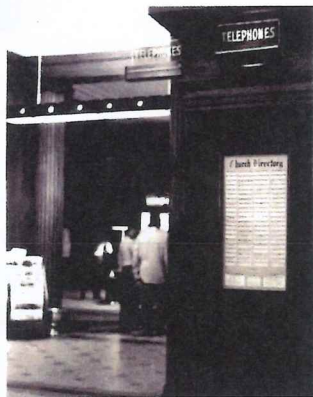
Dr. Bob leaning against his car



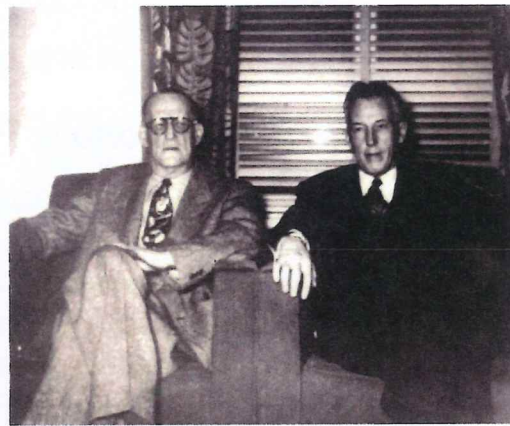
Anne S.

Wall 4: They Meet in Akron

Bill W., sober about six months, found himself on a business trip to Akron, Ohio. The venture fell through, and Bill was left alone in the Mayflower Hotel. Fearing that he would seek a drink, and knowing that working with another alcoholic could keep him sober, Bill used the telephone directory to call a minister in the area. He happened to call Reverend Walter Tunks, also of the Oxford Group, who provided Bill with names and numbers of people to call. Ultimately, this led to Bill W. contacting a woman named Henrietta Sieberling, an Oxford Group member who was herself hoping to find help for Dr. Bob. She organized a meeting of the two men at the Sieberling Gatehouse, and Bill and Bob first met on May 12, 1935. They talked for many hours. Dr. Bob would drink again on a trip to an American Medical Association meeting, but after returning home to Akron, he had his last drink on June 10, 1935. This date is considered by many to be the founding day of Alcoholics Anonymous.



Telephone Directory in the Mayflower Hotel



Dr. Bob and Bill W.

Wall 5: Ear-

ly A.A.

in Ohio

Bill W. and Dr. Bob started working with other alcoholics soon after Dr. Bob's last drink. The first person to successfully join them, Bill D., was visited in City Hospital, where Dr. Bob occasionally worked as a surgeon. Dr. Bob would also visit alcoholics at St. Thomas Hospital, also in Akron, with the help of Sister Mary Ignatia, who worked there. Together, they helped thousands of alcoholics and their families until Dr. Bob's death in 1950. Early meetings were held at Dr. Bob's house, and when the number of attendees grew too large, they moved to King School, where meetings are still held today. The unnamed Fellowship, which later became A.A., was still closely linked to the Oxford Group, and some members of that group were supportive of the "alcoholic squad." Alcoholics were welcome at the house of T. Henry and Clarace Williams for years after A.A. broke off from the Oxford Group. Later, in 1939, members of A.A. in Ohio had printed in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, a local newspaper, a series of articles about Alcoholics Anonymous. This brought a huge number of alcoholics to the Fellowship, and made it clear that the A.A. program could work on a large scale.



Sister Ignatia with patient



St. Thomas Hospital

Wall 6: Early A.A. in New York

After helping to bring sobriety to a number of people in the Akron area, Bill W. returned to New York City and helped a few alcoholics to stop drinking. At this time, Bill and Lois welcomed alcoholics into their house, providing comfort and care to those who needed it. Although many of these did not improve, the few that did would ultimately help A.A. in New York grow and strengthen. The A.A. members in New York formed the 24th Street Club House in 1940, known as the first A.A. clubhouse in the world. It served as a meeting area, an early intergroup, and even as a home for Bill and Lois when they had no house. It was here on a cold winter night in 1940 that Bill was visited by Father Edward Dowling. This Jesuit priest became close personal friends with Bill W. and provided him with spiritual advice for years to come.



24th Street Club House Interior

Wall 7: The Alcoholic Foundation

In 1937, during a visit to Akron, Bill W. and Dr. Bob realized that they had about 40 stable members between the Ohio and New York areas. With the fragile support of the members, they decided to seek financial assistance from the wealthy so they could build hospitals and hire "missionaries" for A.A., as well as write a book. Bill W. was unsuccessful in this effort, and in late 1937 he sought advice from his brother-in-law, Dr. Leonard V. Strong. In a stroke of luck, Leonard was able to contact Willard S. Richardson, a man associated with the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. After a series of meetings and a visit to Akron by Frank Amos, another Rockefeller associate, John D. Rockefeller decided to provide \$5,000 to the fledgling group. This money supported Dr. Bob and Bill W. when they were in a desperate financial state, and helped them start working on the book project. Moreover, Amos and Richardson helped form the Alcoholic Foundation, a trust which would later become the General Service Board. This gave the group some stability and leadership. Please note the letter from John D. Rockefeller to Bill W. from 1946 on the wall, which shows the gratitude Mr. Rockefeller felt in helping A.A. Also pictured here is Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was the pastor of Riverside Church during this time. He would write a positive review for the Big Book, lending both it and the A.A. Fellowship the approval of Protestant clergy.



John D. Rockefeller



Harry Emerson Fosdick

Wall 8: The Book Takes Form

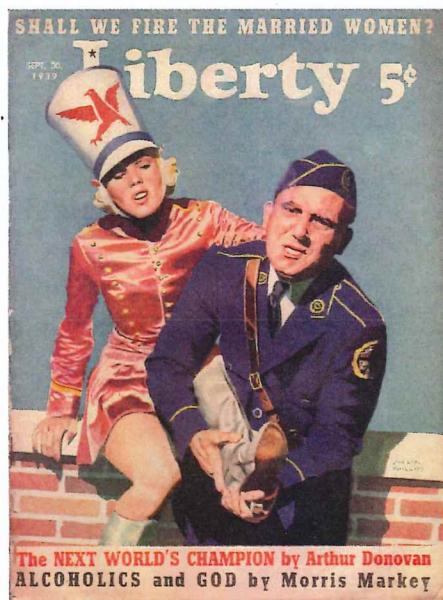
Using the funds provided by Rockefeller, Bill W. and other New York area members established the first service office in Newark, New Jersey, and hired Ruth Hock as a secretary. She was an enormous help, typing the manuscript of *Alcoholics Anonymous* dictated by Bill W. and corresponding with thousands of alcoholics around the continent. Meanwhile, Bill W. and another early member and his business partner, Hank P., purchased stock certificates and created Works Publishing, Inc. This would later become Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., the publishing arm of A.A. Selling this stock to members and friends of A.A., they raised enough money to write and produce the Big Book, which was released in April of 1939.



Ruth Hock

Wall 9: Articles that put A.A. on the Map

At first, the Big Book sold poorly, and many thought the young Fellowship was headed towards collapse. In September of 1939, the magazine *Liberty* published an article titled "Alcoholics and God," which described A.A. and brought a few hundred members aboard. Then, in 1941, a famed writer for the *Saturday Evening Post* named Jack Alexander wrote the article "Alcoholics Anonymous: Freed Slaves of Drink, Now They Free Others." Although he was initially skeptical of A.A., Jack Alexander would come to praise the Fellowship, and later served as a Trustee on the General Service Board. His article publicized the movement across the nation and brought in thousands of new members. Now established, A.A. would continue to grow and flourish for decades.



Cover of *Liberty* Magazine
September 30, 1939



Cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*
March 1, 1941

Wall 10: Stepping Stones

After two years of “living around” and not owning their own house, Bill and Lois purchased a unique home in Bedford Hills in 1941. Situated just north of New York City, it provided the couple with a degree of privacy they hadn’t enjoyed in years. Eventually, they would call the dwelling Stepping Stones. They enjoyed its gardens and lands, and added touches of their own over the years. One addition was “Wits End,” a small studio built by Bill W. where he would do much of his writing. Stepping Stones is now a historic home and a National Historic Landmark, and can still be toured.



Bill and Lois W. in the garden at Stepping Stones



Bill W. on the roof at Stepping Stones

Wall 11: At the Office

After the 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* article by Jack Alexander, A.A. grew by leaps and bounds. The office in New York, called at the time “A.A. Headquarters,” needed to grow as well, and moved to larger and better accommodations. Between 1944 and 1992, the G.S.O. was located near Grand Central Station, which allowed Bill W. an easy commute from Stepping Stones. He would visit frequently in the early years and had his own office, complete with the couch now located here.



Bill W. at the G.S.O.
141 East 44th Street

Background on Bill W. and Dr. Bob, A.A.'s Cofounders

Bill W. was born in East Dorset, Vermont on November 26, 1895. He married Lois Burnham in 1918. After serving in World War I, Bill and Lois moved into the Burnham home in Brooklyn, New York. He became a stock speculator and was quite successful for many years, traveling around the country.

Bill's alcoholism and the Great Depression brought hard times, however. Eventually his drinking led to his hospitalization in New York's Towns Hospital several times, on the edge of death. But Bill found that he was able to refrain from drinking when he started trying to help other alcoholics. He then met and worked with Dr. Bob to found Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935.

Lois was always very involved with Bill's A.A. work, and she later helped to found Al-Anon, a Fellowship that helps the families and friends of alcoholics.

Bill died January 24, 1971 and Lois passed away on October 6, 1988.

Dr. Bob S. was born in St. Johnsbury, Vermont on August 8, 1879. He attended Dartmouth College, attended medical school at the University of Michigan, and finished his medical education at Rush Medical College in Chicago. Dr. Bob then moved to Akron, Ohio, and started work at the Akron City Hospital. He married Anne Ripley in 1915. Soon, Bob's medical practice began to fail due to his intense compulsion to drink.

Dr. Bob met Bill W. in 1935 and together, they stayed sober through helping others. Together they eventually founded the program that would be called Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr. Bob worked tirelessly in Akron to bring alcoholics into A.A. and help them find peace in sobriety.

Anne was a steadfast supporter, who opened her heart and home to alcoholics and their families for years.

Dr. Bob died November 16, 1950. Anne had preceded him in death June 1, 1949.

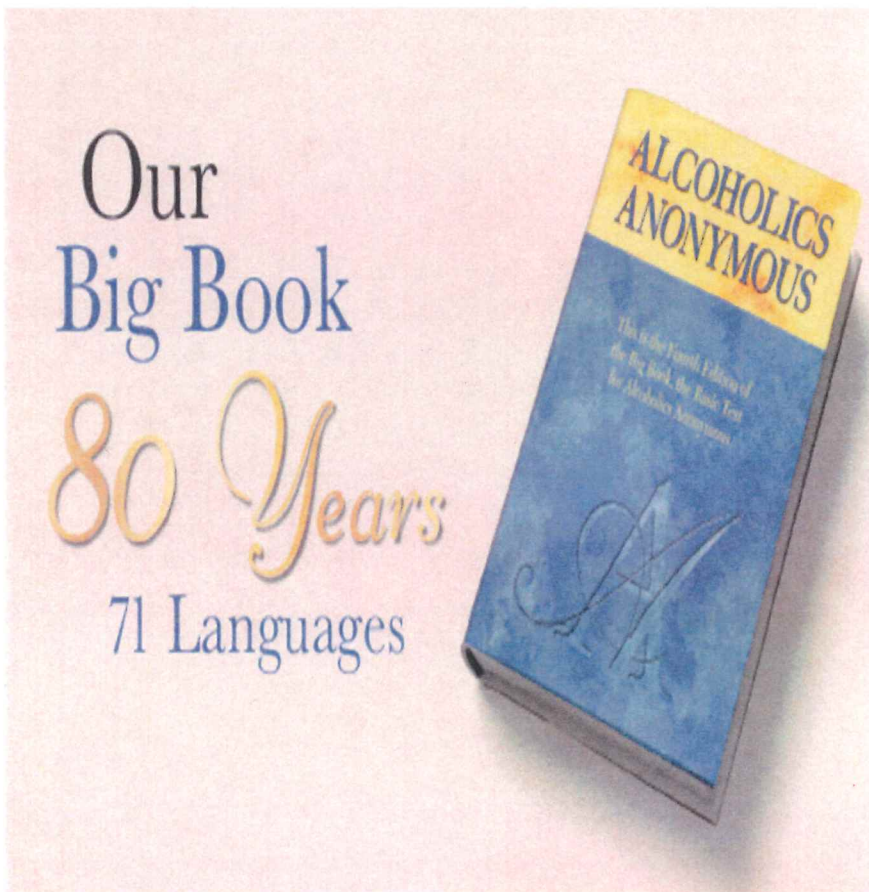
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