

[Article 11]

A Day with the Akron A.A. Pioneers

By Dick B.

After eleven years of personal research, and through generous sharing by those such as Dr. Bob's kids, the Seiberling children, and T. Henry's daughter, coupled with diligent writings of historians and archivists who have really delved into the guts of early A.A. in "Akron Number One" (as Bill Wilson called it), we can piece together a picture of the earliest A.A. days. And enjoy "a day with the Akron A.A. pioneers." Virtually!

Most of our information sources have never seen the light of day as far as the average AA is concerned--Anne Smith's Journal, Dr. Bob's Library, the transcripts of Akron oldtimers lodged in GSO archives in New York, the papers of people like Clarence Snyder and Bob E., and even the four AA of Akron pamphlets that have been on sale for a number of years in Akron and Cleveland. A number of us have had the opportunity to interview some of the survivors of our earliest days, or their immediate friends or families. And the results enable a picture, albeit reconstructed by this author, of what a single day in the period of 1935 to 1938 was really like.

Early Morning Quiet Time at Dr. Bob's Home

Let's start with Quiet Time at the home of Dr. Bob and Anne Smith. Dr. Bob's daughter told me that the "guys" who came over often said they were coming to Anne's place for "spiritual pabulum." Let's also start with some documented descriptions of Anne's early Quiet Time, as well as those conducted by other pioneers individually and in groups:

He [an alcoholic] must have devotions every morning—a "quiet time" of prayer and some reading from the Bible and other religious literature. Unless this is faithfully followed, there is grave danger of backsliding (From the report of Rockefeller's investigator Frank Amos, published in *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 131).

The A.A. members of that time did not consider meetings necessary to maintain sobriety. They were simply "desirable." Morning devotion and "quiet time," however, were musts (*DR. BOB, supra*, p. 136).

Daily Quiet Time. This cannot be emphasized too much. Not a day should be missed. The early morning hours are best. It may be that more than one quiet time will be needed during the day. Whenever need arises one should stop and pray and listen. The method of holding quiet time varies some with each individual. All include prayer and Bible reading and study and patient listening to God (Quoted from Anne Smith's Journal: Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal, 1933-1939*, 3rd ed., p. 61; see also Dick B., *Good Morning! Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and Early A.A.*, 2d ed, pp. 6-9).

At that time [when "Dad and Mom and Bill were working out the program"] I [Dr. Bob's

daughter Sue] was getting involved with the quiet times they had in the morning. The guys would come, and Mom would have quiet time with them. There was a cookie salesman and he'd bring the stale cookies over, and we'd take up a collection for three pounds of coffee for 29 cents. They'd have their quiet time, which is a holdover from the Oxford Group, where they read the Bible, prayed and listened, and got guidance. Then they'd have coffee and cookies. This was early in the morning, when the sky was starting to get light. Sometimes they'd get us out of bed to do this (Bob Smith and Sue Smith Windows, *Children of the Healer*, pp. 43-44; Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal*, *supra*, p. 54).

Sue also remembered the quiet time in the mornings—how they sat around reading the Bible. Later, they also used *The Upper Room*, a Methodist publication that provided a daily inspirational message, interdenominational in its approach. “Then somebody said a prayer,” she recalled. “After that, we were supposed to say one to ourselves. Then we'd be quiet. Finally, everybody would share what they got or didn't get. This lasted for at least a half hour and sometimes went as long as an hour” (*DR. BOB*, *supra*, pp. 71-72; Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 204-08).

[John R., Akron pioneer, remembered] Before one of these meetings [at DR. Bob's home in the morning], Anne used to pull out a little book [her journal] and quote from it. We would discuss it. Then we would see what Anne would suggest from it for our discussion (Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of A.A.*, *supra*, p. 110; *Anne Smith's Journal*, *supra*, p. 56)

Here's a segment from Anne's journal. Picture some reading from the Bible. Then a prayer. Then a Quiet Time, sharing what was received. Then Anne's reading the following from her journal and inviting discussion of the remarks:

Confession. Don't be shocked at any confession. It is hypocritical for you yourself have at least thought of doing something similar. A man may share many problems, but not his deepest one. You must share deeply with him, UNDER GUIDANCE; you may be guided to share your deepest sin, and this will clear the way for him to share his. The time will come when he will begin to tell you things about himself that he doesn't tell to others. Why are people so afraid to face their deepest problems? Because they think there is no answer. When they learn there is one, they will believe it can work out for them, and they will be really honest about themselves. When we fail to share, people think their sin is unique, but sharing lifts a tremendous load. It is absolutely necessary to face people with the moral test [absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love]. Fundamentally, sin is independence toward God, living without God. Seeing one's self as God sees one, brings hatred out of sin (From GSO copy, page 4).

What Next?

I'm not sure we can state *precisely* what happened in the course of a pioneer day, but we do know certain facts for sure.

For one thing: Teams of AAs (many called themselves the “alcoholic squad of the

Oxford Group”) visited newcomers who had been hospitalized at the Akron City Hospital. They told their stories. They told the newcomer that Dr. Bob had the answer to their problems. Sometimes they even gobbled up the food the hospitalized “pigeon” was unable to stomach. Dr. Bob also visited the patient each day. By his own account: “I used to go to the hospital and stand there and talk. I talked many a time to a chap in the bed for five or six hours.” On the final day, Dr. Bob would make sure the newcomer believed in God and then would have him get out of bed, get down on his knees, and “make surrender.” That meant accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (*The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 12; Dick B., *That Amazing Grace*, pp. 25-27).

Daily meetings: [Dr.] Bob said, “We used to have daily meetings at a friend’s house [the home of T. Henry Williams in Akron]. All this happened at a time when everybody was broke, awfully broke. It was probably much easier for us to be successful when broke than it would have been if we’d had a checking account apiece. We were, every one of us, so painfully broke. . . I think now that it was providentially arranged. Until 1940, or maybe early 1941, we held the Akron meetings at the residence of that good friend, who allowed us to bang up the plaster and the doorjamb, carting chairs upstairs and downstairs. Then we outgrew that (*The Co-Founders, supra*, pp. 13-14). Since many lived at the Smith home itself as well as at several other A.A. homes, and since none was prospering, historian Ernest Kurtz opined that, in hindsight, most of their waking lives was a continuous A.A. meeting (Kurtz, *Not-God*, p. 56). Focused as he was on his own *not-God* thesis and his inadequate Oxford Group understanding, Kurtz missed the more insightful observations as to the nature of these meetings by Dr. Bob, early AAs, and other observers at that day. Thus Dr. Bob considered every meeting a “Christian Fellowship.” (*DR. BOB, supra*, p. 118; Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of A.A., supra*, pp. 219-220). The Oxford Group itself was “A First Century Christian Fellowship” (Dick B., *The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous*). AAs themselves perceived a Christian fellowship emphasis where Bible study, prayer, use of Christian devotionals, and reading of Christian literature were stressed, along with breaking bread together (See Acts 1:13-14; 2:41-47; 4:32-37; 10:34-48; 12:26-49). For Sam Shoemaker had often written of the importance of Christian fellowship, quoting in many cases from the Book of Acts (See Dick B., *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker and A.A.*, pp. 59-60). Early AAs such as Bob E. were speaking of living “Christian fellowship” (See Kurtz, *Not-God*, p. 55). And outside observers commented on the similarity between Akron’s old-fashioned prayer fellowship and First Century Christianity (See *DR. BOB, supra*, pp. 129, 131, 135-36; *Pass It On*, p. 184; Thomsen, *Bill W.*, p. 282)

Other Daily Happenings

Input from Anne and Henrietta: In addition to the quiet times, hospital visits, and frequent meetings, the roles of Anne Smith and Henrietta Seiberling were of major importance. Anne was legendary in her work with new people. She acted as counselor, nurse, evangelist, and teacher; and the pioneers had great confidence in her love and advice. She often shared important Bible passages with them. She used the phone much to keep in touch with those who were not actually present at the Smith home. Henrietta Seiberling paid daily visits to the Smith home, kept in touch by phone, and shared many important Bible and Oxford Group ideas with the early people and their families.

Individual reading and study: Individuals did a great deal of reading on their own. *The Upper Room* was a major guide. And daily Bible study, prayer and Quiet Time were important aspects of their spiritual growth and understanding. The number of Christian books in wide circulation and use is quite astounding compared to the situation in A.A. today (See Dick B., *Dr. Bob and His Library* and *The Books Early AAs Read for Spiritual Growth*, 7th ed.).

Religious comradeship: There most assuredly was socialization, but that word has been used in misleading ways by recent commentators as a substitute for what A.A. Trustee-to-be Frank Amos more appropriately called religious comradeship. For it appears that fellowship and comradeship with believers was far more important in those earliest days than mere social activity. The pioneers and their families were deadly serious, and they took their reliance on our Creator very seriously and shared it in fellowship.

The “Regular” Meetings

The Unique Focus in Akron: Simplicity was the watch word. And prayer was the focus. If you do as I did, and examine the kind of meetings Dr. Bob attended as a youth in Christian Endeavor, you can see how much Akron A.A. resembled the Christian Endeavor program of Dr. Bob’s youth (See Dick B., *Dr. Bob and His Library*, Appendix 1, “Dr. Bob’s Biblical and Christian Background,” pp. 111-19). In an effort to stigmatize the Oxford Group’s very clear influence on A.A. and then to develop excuses for A.A.’s departure from the Oxford Group, commentators (including Bill Wilson himself) have ignored the startling difference between Akron A.A., New York A.A., and regular Oxford Group meetings of the 1930’s. In Akron, there was no Calvary Church where either Frank Buchman or Sam Shoemaker called the shots. There were no Calvary House meetings adjacent to Sam’s church. There was no Sam Shoemaker doing the mentoring. There were no “teams” or “houseparties” or even the kind of “sharing” that was so typical of the Oxford Group activity.

The “old fashioned prayer meeting”: A typical Akron meeting began with prayer—not the Serenity Prayer. It ended with the Lord’s Prayer. There was usually an open Bible present, with the meeting’s leader reading Scripture to the group. There were prayers. There were announcements about newcomers in the hospital. There often was reading from a devotional such as *The Upper Room*. There were brief group Quiet Times, but these were hardly peculiar to the Oxford Group. Quiet Time has been observed in one form or another from the earliest Bible days (See Dick B., *Good Morning!: Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and Early A.A.*). It was used in the world-wide Student Christian Movement, the YMCA, Christian Endeavor, and the teachings of F. B. Meyer—who influenced all the foregoing movements. It was observed in the Christian Endeavor meetings Dr. Bob attended as a youth and in the practices Sam Shoemaker advocated in his books, first calling the practice *Morning Watch*, and later, *Quiet Time*. It meant prayer, Bible study, quiet time for receiving God’s guidance, confession of Jesus Christ, and activities in support of the local church as well as focus on area fellowships. It did not mean “sharing” of experience, strength, and hope—as the Oxford Group generally so often did, and as New York meetings began to emphasize. Akron A.A. meetings did not have “drunkalogs.”

The Bible reading: Picture Dr. Bob’s tall, stern figure opening up the Bible and reading one of the following passages to the group—portions that Dr. Bob and the oldtimers considered

“absolutely essential”:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. . . (From Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:43-45).

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through to steal; But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness. No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (the sermon, Matthew 6:19-24).

Charity (agape love) suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil: Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:4-6).

Blessed *is* the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man; But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin, and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren (James 1:12-16).

No talk of drinking, meetings, psychobabble, relationships, or fatalism. Just reading what God has said on the important subjects of love, service to God, walking in the love of God, and resisting temptation. What a day that would have been!

The Surrenders “Upstairs”: You had to make surrender, whether at the hospital or at the regular meeting when people were taken upstairs to be prayed over by the “elders.” New York did not have surrenders patterned on the Book of James where there was acceptance of Christ on your knees, group prayer to have alcohol taken out of your life, and group prayer over the newcomer that he might live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Other emphasis: There is no evidence I have seen that New York meetings or Oxford Group meetings were pointed toward visiting the newcomer in the hospital in groups as the “alcoholic squad” did in Akron (though Bill W.’s earlier months certainly did involve visits to Towns Hospital, Calvary Mission, etc.). There is no evidence of Akron focus on “team” life-changing such as that in which Bill Wilson participated in New York in late 1935 when he was handling the business-men contacts in huge meetings for League of Nations President Hambro,

whom Frank Buchman had brought to the United States. See Dick B., *Turning Point: A History of the Spiritual Roots of Alcoholics Anonymous; New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.*

Fellowship socializing: There does not appear to be much evidence of fellowship socializing on the New York scene. Yet this was regular fare at the home of T. Henry Williams and others in Akron on Saturday nights. No evidence on the New York path, of the recreational activities observed not long after in Cleveland with bowling and baseball and huge servings of food and beverage.

The Product

In our 23,900 item historical collections now planted in part at The Wilson House Griffith Library and in part at the Maui Recovery Resource Center (with several more centers to go), we have countless lists and rosters of the early members of A.A.—the first 40, and then the first 220. Early AAs knew each other. They had the names and addresses and phone numbers of each other. Their pictures (the earliest pioneers) can still be seen at Dr. Bob’s Home and elsewhere. Their sobriety dates, their “relapse” dates in a few cases, and even their dates of demise were frequently recorded. And the bottom line was a 75% success record in Akron, and a 93% success rate in Cleveland—not disputed until these recent years. An astonishing and arresting record of victory for our Creator!

On the New York scene, not a single person got sober in Bill Wilson’s home between 1934 and 1939. Bill was not able to help anyone get sober in his first six months of sobriety before coming to Akron. And very very few established any sobriety on the East Coast immediately thereafter. Bill and Lois both humbly stated these facts many times. Bill readily pointed to the much greater success rate in Akron and to the spiritual emphasis there (which necessarily meant Bible, prayer, Quiet Time, and religious literature—as Frank Amos had reported). Finally, Bill made it clear that he felt it was the lack of spiritual emphasis that accounted for the difference.

The real program of recovery, to use Bill’s own words in A.A.’s Big Book, was founded on finding God, establishing a relationship with Him, developing a “design for living” that depended on His guidance and power, and following the precepts so earnestly sought and learned from the Bible, the early Christian literature, the Oxford Group life-changing ideas, Anne Smith’s Journal, and the teachings of Sam Shoemaker. This program was “under construction” every early “day in Akron.”

Do you believe, as Akron pioneers did, that a seemingly hopeless alcoholic who really tried could be cured of alcoholism by this program? I do. They were! See page 191 of the Third Edition of the Big Book for A.A.’s real golden text. See also Dick B., *The Golden Text of A.A.*

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