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## Rigorous Honesty: A Cultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous 1935-1960

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RIGOROUS HONESTY:

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS 1935-1960

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

KEVIN KAUFMANN

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2011

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Survey of Existing Literature	11
CHAPTER TWO: “AFTER MORE OF THAT ACCURSED POISON THAT HAS RUINED YOU?” THE INFLUENCE OF THE TEMPERENCE AND PROHIBITION MOVEMENTS ON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, 1840–1930	20
T. S. Arthur and the Changes in the Temperance Movement	22
Songs, Poems, and Images from the Temperance Movement	38
Temperance to Prohibition, 1880–1920	47
The Prohibition Era	54
CHAPTER THREE: “OUR STORIES DISCLOSE WHAT WE USED TO BE LIKE...”	61
Wilson and Smith in the Land of the Green Mountain Boys	63
“Attraction Rather Than Promotion”: Bringing in the “100”	70
“Experience, Strength and Hope”	83
“On the Tail of a Comet”: The Role of the Oxford Group	90
Conclusion	96
CHAPTER FOUR: “RARELY HAVE WE SEEN A PERSON FAIL”: EARLY STRATEGIES AND THE WRITING OF <i>ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS</i> , 1935–1940	98
Flying Blind: The Early Years of Alcoholics Anonymous	100
“The Big Book”: Writing <i>Alcoholics Anonymous</i>	110
Conclusion	123
CHAPTER FIVE: “WE CARRIED THIS MESSAGE TO ALCOHOLICS”: THE SPREAD OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, 1939–1942	125
“About the Town”: Advice Columnists and the City Desk	128
“The Sunday Papers”: Feature Articles and Jack Alexander	132
“Don’t Dismiss What Our Friends in Organized Religion Say”	141
“The Doctor’s Opinion”: The Medical Profession	148
Conclusion	155
CHAPTER SIX: “AA NEITHER ENDORSES NOR OPPOSES ANY CAUSES” EXCEPT IN TIMES OF WAR: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AND WORLD WAR II	158
“Our Common Welfare Should Come First”	161
“Staying Sober in the Most Desperate of Times”	171
“A Meeting By Mail”	179
“Now That the War is Over the Real Fight Begins”	183

Conclusion	186
CHAPTER SEVEN: “IT WAS OBVIOUSLY NECESSARY TO RAISE THE BOTTOM”: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN THE 1950s	189
“John Barleycorn Became Our Best Advocate”: Raising the Bottom	198
“‘What Situations Have Caused Me Anxiety?’ AA in the ‘Age of Anxiety’”	206
“Lady Souses”: AA and Women in the 1950s	217
Conclusion	225
CONCLUSION	228
BIBLIOGRAPHY	243
VITA	257

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

For the past fifty-five years, members of Alcoholics Anonymous have gathered in Akron, Ohio every June to celebrate the founding of their society. People from all over the world descend on this former industrial town to reflect on the history of the organization that they believe saved their lives from the disease of alcoholism. There are lectures to attend about the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous and testimonials or “leads” given by members throughout the weekend. Every hour bus tours leave the campus of the University of Akron, where the pilgrims reside for the weekend, and take them across the city visiting places significant to the story of AA and its founding. They travel to Co-founder Dr. Bob Smith’s house on Ardmore Avenue where they can see the first coffee pot used for an AA meeting and look at the rooms where the other Co-founder, Bill Wilson, lived with the Smiths while he was traveling on business. After the visitors have taken in all of the sites of the modest home, they can stop by the living room that has been converted into a gift shop and buy a piece of memorabilia.

Further along the bus route the tourists see the gatehouse on the Seiberling estate where Wilson and Smith first met, the Mayflower Hotel (now an assisted living center) where Wilson anxiously paced, debating between getting a drink or reaching out for help with his new found sobriety. As the tour winds back to campus the two hospitals in

which Dr. Smith worked can be seen as well as King School which housed quite possibly the first AA meeting, at least in the format that is common to members today.

On Saturday night all the attendees gather in the University's 15,000 seat arena, and participate in a sobriety count down; each person stands up when the emcee announces the amount of time he or she has been sober, until the final question of, "Is this anyone's first day of sobriety?" The person at his or her first meeting is greeted with a thunderous applause, given a copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and told that they are the most important person in the arena. After all of that, the final activity of the night is a keynote speaker, a member who has been sober for a considerable amount of time who gives an hour long lead, reflecting what his drinking was like, what happened and what his life is like now. It is a story rich with detail about how the program works and if applied in a similar fashion, provides a guide how others can achieve the same kind of success. After the speaker finishes the crowd joins hands and prays the Our Father, chanting at the end, "Keep Coming Back, It Works If You Work It, SOBER!"

As a coda to the giant meeting the night before, the attendees organize a procession to the cemetery where Dr. Smith and his wife, Anne, are laid to rest. Led by the members with motorcycles, the caravan contains all manner of vehicles: SUVs, old beaters, pick-up trucks, and luxury sedans. They bring flowers and tokens of appreciation to the gravesite, but the most poignant display is the members who leave their sobriety coins. Hundreds, if not thousands, of coins displaying the years of sobriety earned are laid on the headstone of Dr. Bob and Anne Smith. The amount of sober time

is staggering to contemplate and the effect that Alcoholics Anonymous had on the people gathered is palpable even to the most casual observer.

What is it about this program that draws people to the Midwest every summer? How did this program designed and founded by two “rock-ribbed Vermont Yankees,” spawn a worldwide phenomenon?<sup>1</sup> What accounts for this undeniable success? Why were the 1930s, the era of its founding, ripe for such an organization? Finally, what can AA tell us about the mid-twentieth century? How can Alcoholics Anonymous inform us, not only about its own past, but about the greater history of American culture? These are the questions this dissertation will answer.

A second major concern is, how? What about AA sets it apart from other attempts to reform the drinking habits of Americans? An oft-quoted story about a researcher who asks a member how AA works, got the response, “quite well!” This anecdote illustrates the difficulty scholars have had discovering how the group functions. What rituals, practices, and policies help AA maintain its clarity of message and success? The key answer to this is, in a sense, none. The loosely organized fellowship allows for each autonomous group to establish its own rituals and local traditions. What is confounding to the scholar is that people write about their personal experiences of sobriety as if they were the standard for everyone. This is not the case. While many members like to state that divine intervention is the reason for AA’s success, there is a humanistic element to its message. The one unifying element to all groups is the 12 steps, and to a lesser extent the 12 traditions, a set of suggestions designed to help local groups with their

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<sup>1</sup> *Pass it On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the AA Message Reached the World* (New York: AA World Services, 1984), 54.

organization. It is within the steps we see “How it Works” not only from a practical standpoint, that of personal recovery, but from a cultural one as well.

First, why and how does the program succeed? I argue that Alcoholics Anonymous survived and thrived, especially in its early years, because of the commonality of its message to its members. The first members had a great deal in common, demographically speaking, and these shared attributes helped sustain the program in its early stages. Of much more importance, however, is the message of AA and how it specifically addressed the cultural needs of the generation of its first members. Ann Douglas, in *Terrible Honesty*, off handedly remarks that AA is a return to an earlier cultural model, one dominated by the feminine and one that does not embrace the search for honesty, an honesty that the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald were trying to capture during the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Nothing could be farther from the truth. Alcoholics Anonymous makes honesty, “rigorous honesty,” a cornerstone of its program. While many authors write about AA as being a throwback to the Victorian Era, it is in fact, acutely modern. This honesty was, first, honesty with one’s self about the seriousness of one’s drinking problem. Second, it demanded that members be open to one another about their weaknesses and faults. In addition to this modern search for honesty, Alcoholics Anonymous embraced other aspects of modernism.

The early members of AA were convinced that they brought something new to the greater culture of America. It was a new way of imagining the drunkard, from pitiable lout of the Victorian era, to the modern alcoholic, a person afflicted with a disease.

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920’s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 474.

Closely related to the disease concept is another modernist aspect of AA. The spiritual/religious aspect of AA is crucial to understanding the workings of the program, but the respect for and alliance with science was crucial to the success of Wilson and Smith's work. This nod to the medical community allowed AA to appeal to both spiritual and rational individuals, and gives the program a firm grounding in the modern era.

Next, closely related to this public form of honesty, Alcoholics Anonymous embraced a Calvinist style of redemption for its members which also contributed to its success. Members were expected to make a list of their sins, confess them at least to one other person, and then publicly "upon our knees, humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings."<sup>3</sup> This process is reminiscent of the Oxford Group, but it is also closely related to the "sharing" tradition of many Protestant faiths. Some historians have commented on the puritanical nature of AA, but I offer a much more in-depth examination into the program. I will closely examine the texts of the fellowship, especially its primary work, *Alcoholics Anonymous* and the later principal work, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, to see how they fashioned a Christian neo-orthodoxy for the Twentieth century United States.

Finally, the main component to AA's success is how it breaks from past models of recovery. In contrast to previous attempts to aid alcoholics, AA did not issue a challenge to the United States on the issue of temperance. It did not, nor has it since, demanded a public oath from its members to stay sober. The great success of the organization came from its secrecy. Unlike the temperance movements of the previous century, movements both Wilson and Smith experienced, they did not ask for pledges nor

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<sup>3</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: AA World Services, 1939 [2003]), 59.

did they tell society what to do about drinking. AA focused on the individual and his own recovery within the confines of a supportive group. Also, AA's cofounders experienced the failure of prohibition, the greatest challenge to American drinking, and they did not want to be seen in the same light. Alcoholics Anonymous was a reaction to the failure of prohibition. Many of the first members experienced their worst drinking during a time when alcohol was illegal. The designers of the program knew that personal recovery from alcoholism could not be a matter of public policy, but a private affair within a secret organization; an organization which held personal anonymity as one of its highest principles.

It is within this concept of not taking a public stance on alcoholism, of not issuing a public challenge to society or its members, that we can see how AA reflects the culture of the 1930s. What resonated with the early members and later generations of adherents is that Alcoholics Anonymous did not criticize the status quo of Depression Era America, or later eras. It was not interested in engineering public policy like much of the New Deal. It was an anti-movement. It had no leaders, no recognized members, and in the beginning very little dogma. It was one of the strongest groups to emerge from the 1930s, largely because of its "soft sell" approach. The Eighteenth Amendment challenged the American way of life in a way that these self-described "rock ribbed Yankee conservatives" thought far too radical an assault on the United States Constitution. What made AA effective in the 1930's was that it allowed belief in the American dream to flourish by providing a personal model which then could be carried over into other aspects of member's lives. As a person got sober, his chances for success

became greater. The message was that the American system that many doubted was not broken, but the individual was.

By maintaining sobriety, members corrected the problems created by the Depression. People joined and dealt with their shame in private, unlike earlier temperance movements. They were not asked to go public with their sober success rather they were expected, later compelled through “traditions,” to remain anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous was successful in the so-called political decade, because it was so apolitical. The early members did not want to change the nation’s ideas about drinking, but they did want to change one another. It is here that we see an interesting shift, that being the strength of the collective being used to benefit the individual. The group was not being used within public culture to cure society’s ills, but it was an intimate approach toward each new member to change their lives individually.

In his essay “Culture and Commitment,” Warren Susman stated that the middle-class American was striving to find a “commitment or system of commitments that would enable him to continue, which would provide him with a mechanism to overcome his fears and his *profound sense of shame*<sup>4</sup>” (italics added). Susman further stated that the Thirties can be seen as the age of Jung, alluding to the power of symbols and belief in cultural archetypes as a way of coping with one’s life situation. Significantly, Wilson called Jung one of the founders of AA, based on Jung’s advice to a suffering alcoholic that he must undergo a spiritual conversion.<sup>5</sup> While Susman discussed culture and

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 198.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 203.

commitment on a grand scale, Alcoholics Anonymous provides an excellent case study of his ideas on a much more personal level. By examining the background of Wilson and Smith, and analyzing the program they created, in the context of other temperance efforts and approaches, we can see the nature of AA and the nature of the Thirties, especially in regards to the middle-class. The fellowship grew by leaps and bounds in the following decades, giving us, along with a look at the culture of the thirties, a window into American culture until the present day.

The starting point for investigating the program is the 1938 book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Unlike many social movements, AA and its membership are loath to change even a word of the original text. We have, as if in amber, the program as it was originally written. This “design for living,” demonstrates the vision of the cofounders not only for their new fellowship, but for the entire nation as well. This idyllic republican vision, represented in the meeting format and group structure which resembles town hall meetings, was based on the New England upbringing of Smith and Wilson. By examining the cultural underpinnings of AA, this dissertation investigates 1930s culture and its explorations of traditional aspects of society, such as the search for the “American Way of Life,” and its quest to affirm the social structure that appeared to be failing during the Depression.<sup>6</sup> AA’s longevity is proof that these elements of 1930s culture had a more lasting impact on the history of the United States than the more radical elements that have been examined more frequently by scholars such as the Popular Front and the Communist Party in general. AA’s success demonstrates that American culture is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 154.

responsive to its traditional past, and in times of crisis, turns toward what is familiar and comfortable.

Historians of AA do not discuss the impact of World War Two at very great length. Like so many groups of the era, AA had to deal with a wealth of changes literally overnight. A significant number of members were sent overseas and many others served in the armed services throughout the nation or moved for employment in war industries. With all of this dislocation, the program went from a few major metropolitan areas in the Midwest and Northeast to reach across the country and gain tow-holds in various countries around the globe. The lasting legacy of this time period was the founding of the society's monthly magazine, *The Grapevine*. This dissertation addresses this shortcoming of the historical record and thoroughly investigates the war years.

The history of AA offers a different look at postwar culture than what many recent historians have offered. Both Lizbeth Cohen and Elaine Tyler-May offer excellent insight in the changes from 1930s culture to the culture of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, though looking at different aspects of middle-class suburban culture, the authors describe how postwar culture breaks from the culture of the 1930s. It would not be until the 1960s that some of the radical impulses of the 1930s were revived. In contrast, the history of Alcoholics Anonymous demonstrates a continuation of 1930s culture. I believe that the strength of AA, what draws people to it, is the traditional American values that it upholds. As the United States took a more conservative turn in the years following

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<sup>7</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *Consumer Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1988.)

World War Two, the message of AA had an even greater appeal to people searching for a solution to their drinking problems. The message of AA, which does not challenge the status quo of society, found fertile ground in the 1950s. Much of the postwar era was about fitting in, which, in a sense, is what Alcoholics Anonymous embodied. The program rehabilitated the individual alcoholic, the person with a problem, and made him or her a respectable part of American society once again. Even more significant, one of the great tensions of AA was (and still is) between the individual and the group, the collective. If the 1930s was an era of commitment, thereby giving AA members something to belong to, to feel a part of something while restoring the individual to health, in the post-war era, AA gave its members a place not to feel alone. As the middle-class moved from the city to the suburb, AA did as well. In the isolation of suburban life, the lonely individual found comfort in the AA atmosphere. The ability of AA to address this need for belonging, but not in a political way, allowed people of the post war era to join a group, to be a part of something in an time when joining and being a part of a group was being called into question. The tension in AA between the individual and the group is fully explored in the postwar era.<sup>8</sup> It is no great mystery then, that in an era that was rather conservative, especially for the middle class, a conservative group from the 1930s thrived. As other organizations from the 1930s faltered and disappeared during the years after the war, AA continued to grow. AA maintained its primary message, but adjusted it to fit the changing times, most significantly in the

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<sup>8</sup> David Riseman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.)

kinder, gentler interpretation of the steps contained in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

Finally, the question may be asked, “Why stop at 1960?” There are a number of reasons for this cutoff date. First, Bill Wilson took a less active role in Alcoholics Anonymous after this time, making it a natural breaking point in the examination of the group. Second, moving past the 1950s brings the emergence of the youth and drug culture of the 1960s. The effect that these cultures had upon AA is significant, requiring a closer examination of its own. Finally, throughout the 1960s, Wilson and his fellow early members were either dying or declining in influence. How AA dealt with that change in leadership is a very interesting story, but beyond the scope of what this dissertation is trying to accomplish.

#### *Survey of Existing Literature*

The history of Alcoholics Anonymous is the subject of many books, but few of them are of much use to scholars. The one work that is useful is also the best to date, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* by Ernest Kurtz, published in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Kurtz discusses the groundbreaking methods of the AA program and fellowship, using the concept of “Not God” and “not-God.” By not being the center, the infinite, not being God, an alcoholic is able to begin recovery. The second side of Kurtz’s definition is that the alcoholic, after coming to the realization that he or she is not the center of the universe, is a limited human being, therefore in need of other people, especially other alcoholics. This relationship of alcoholics needing one another, becoming agents of

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Educational Materials, 1979 [1991].)

sobriety for the still suffering alcoholic while acting to maintain their own sobriety, is a generic representation of limitation that Kurtz labels “not-god.”<sup>10</sup> Kurtz does an admirable job of placing Alcoholics Anonymous into the history of ideas and within the religious history of the United States, but fails to discuss the culture of the 1930s. Kurtz does not take into account any of the more recent publications about the 1930s and its culture, failing to engage Warren Susman, Michael Denning, Richard Pells, among others.<sup>11</sup>

Since there are very few useful histories of Alcoholics Anonymous, the next reliable source for studying the program comes from biographies. The “official” biographies of the cofounders, *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, and *Pass It On*, both offer very light, yet useful information about Robert Smith and Bill Wilson, respectively.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the biographies, however, focus on Wilson. Robert Thomsen wrote the first biography of Bill Wilson *Bill W*, in 1975, four years after Wilson’s death. Thomsen’s volume presents one of the major problems with many of the publications written about Wilson and Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson employed

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 6. Admittedly, why Kurtz chose to title his two concepts so similarly is quite confusing. He speaks of the hyphen in the second title being symbolic of connectedness for the alcoholic. All the same, a different turn of phrase would help the reader immensely.

<sup>11</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael Denning, *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Year*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973.)

<sup>12</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers, A biography with recollections of early AA in the Midwest* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1980.)

Thomsen for about fifteen years prior to his death. While the unlimited access to Wilson gave the biography an intimate look at AA's cofounder, it also painted an overly positive picture.<sup>13</sup> Many other authors suffer from the same bias as Thomsen, that of being too close to the subject.<sup>14</sup> The great pitfall that all of these authors share is that they try to describe for the general audience what the "typical" AA environment is. Unfortunately, in an organization as loosely organized as AA, there is no such thing as typical.

The best insights into the life of Bill Wilson have arrived in this century. The first, published in 2000 by Matthew St. Raphael (a pseudonym) is entitled *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of AA's Co-Founder*.<sup>15</sup> Raphael attempts to discover the "real" Bill Wilson, the private citizen who was not the famed Bill W., cofounder of AA. Raphael attempted to paint Bill Wilson as a non-religious, modern philosopher who only uses religion as a first step. In reading other accounts of Wilson's life, however, it is apparent that Wilson had a deep appreciation for and curiosity about religion during his entire life. Like Raphael, Susan Cheever, in *My Name is Bill*, tried to take out some of the more religious aspects of Bill Wilson's character and of Alcoholics Anonymous, at points comparing him to a modern day Thoreau, and like Raphael, her ideas appear to be

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Thomsen, *Bill W.* (New York, Harper's and Row, 1975.)

<sup>14</sup> Bill W.: *My First Forty Years* (Central City, MN: Hazelden Information and Educational Services, 2000); Nell Wing, *Grateful to Have Been There: My 42 Years with Bill and Lois and the Evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Park Ridge, IL, Parkside Publishing Corp, 1992); Nan Robertson, *Getting Better: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1988); John Sutherland, *AA to LA (Last Drink to LA)* (London: Short Books, 2001.)

<sup>15</sup> Matthew J. Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of AA's Co-founder* (Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 2000.)

more wishful thinking than actual fact. Better than any other biographer, however, Cheever provides an interesting look at the “Vermont Spirit” that had a great impact upon Wilson’s life.<sup>16</sup>

Alcoholics Anonymous and Bill Wilson are the subject of many works, ranging from the very good (Kurtz, Cheever) to the very bad (Hartigan), but none of these do an adequate job of placing AA within the historical context of the 1930s. That is one of the tasks accomplished by this dissertation, a two-way discussion in effect. First, why did AA come into being within this decade? Second, what did this program tell us about the 1930’s, especially the middle class? What does it add to the historiographical discussion?

What is also important to include in this survey is material on temperance and prohibition. This dissertation investigates how AA was influenced by the temperance and prohibition movements that preceded its founding in 1935. Although the temperance movement has a history almost as long as the United States itself, the main focus of this dissertation is on the movement after the Civil War through national prohibition.

As background for the earlier temperance movement, the best works act as complements for one another. W.J. Rorabaugh’s *Alcoholic Republic* and Ian Tyrell’s *Sobering Up* focus primarily on the antebellum period.<sup>17</sup> Rorabaugh investigated the importance of alcohol to the early republic, not just as a beverage choice, but also as a means of currency. As industrialization began during the Jacksonian Era, the importance

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name is Bill. Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004.)

<sup>17</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Ian Tyrell, *Sobering Up: from Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979.)

of alcohol as an economic staple faded and an increase in involvement in temperance causes resulted. Tyrell examined the growth of the temperance movement from 1800-1860, establishing the time period as the most important era for the movement. He, like Rorbaugh, saw the shift in the economy as the key factor in the rise of temperance concerns. A monograph that predates both Tyrell and Rorbaugh and examined the temperance movement especially in the post bellum era through prohibition is Joseph Gusfield's *Symbolic Crusade*.<sup>18</sup> Gusfield argued that after the Civil War, the temperance movement changed from an effort to change the nation's drinking habits through moral suasion into a movement dedicated to moral and legal coercion. Gusfield contended that the middle class of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt threatened by the "more urban, more secular, more Catholic, and more ethnic" America and needed to bolster their flagging higher status. In effect, Gusfield stated that the temperance movement was more of a symbolic cause, an attempt to demonstrate the supposed superiority of the native and often nativist, middle class.

The temptation from the above narratives is to see the temperance movement as a sustained movement from the early republic until the twentieth century, but Jack Blocker's, *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform*, makes a strong case for the various periods of the movement having their own unique origins.<sup>19</sup> He did not try to make them appear unrelated, but demonstrated convincingly that the temperance movement occurred, and still occurs, in cycles. As each generation realized an alcohol

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: status politics and the American temperance movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973 [1986].)

<sup>19</sup> Jack Blocker, *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.)

(and later drug) problem in society, it began by trying to persuade society into proper living, only realizing later that it must coerce, like previous movements, society into proper behavior. Blocker acts as an excellent bridge from studies of temperance to studies of prohibition. Many of the sources on prohibition reflect the historian's penchant for finding origins. Both Richard Hamm's *Shaping the Eighteenth Amendment* and Ann Marie Szymanski's *Pathways to Prohibition*, examined the era of greatest concern to this dissertation, that being the late nineteenth century through national prohibition.<sup>20</sup> Both authors focused on the change within the temperance movement from an "all or nothing" approach to a more gradualist "local" approach to achieve the ultimate goal of national prohibition, highlighting the advent of the Anti-Saloon League as the turning point of the movement.

The histories of the Prohibition Era can be classified in two ways. The first category is popular history. Edward Behr's *Prohibition: 13 Years That Changed America* and John Kobler's *Ardent Spirits* are examples of this set.<sup>21</sup> Both books offer interesting narratives about Prohibition, but offer little in the way of cultural analysis. The second category focuses on the legal history of the Eighteenth Amendment, and specifically its repeal in 1933. Norman Clark's *The Dry Years* and David Kyvig's *Repealing National Prohibition* are typical examples of this second grouping. There is not much scholarly work on the cultural impact of prohibition, specifically. There is a

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Hamm, *Shaping the Eighteenth Amendment Temperance Reform, Legal Culture, and the Polity, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ann-Marie Szymanski, *Pathways to Prohibition: Radicals, Moderates, and Social Movement Outcomes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.)

<sup>21</sup> Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years that Changed America* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996); John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits: The Rise and Fall Prohibition* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1973.)

great deal of study on the culture of the 1920's, but much of it only makes passing reference to the impact of prohibition. Prohibition is an accepted fact of the era, and authors do not engage in its consequences to a great extent. Inquiries like Kathleen Drowne's *Spirits of Defiance*, however, are filling that void.<sup>22</sup> In *Spirits*, Drowne examines the influence of national prohibition on American Literature. A narrowly focused piece, *Spirits* does open the door to the possibilities of other studies examining the specific role prohibition had on American culture. Michael Lerner's work, *Dry Manhattan*, is the most recent work on prohibition and provides a great deal of insight and perspective that was lacking from the accounts written earlier in the century.<sup>23</sup> Lerner spent less time on the more well known aspects of the era and focused on the class divisions, cultural differences and political failings of the legislation.

In all of the works mentioned above, the question of where the drunkard (later the alcoholic) fits goes unanswered. The focus is on drinking by all members of society, not just those who overindulge. More specifically, historians of Alcoholics Anonymous ignore the impact that these earlier movements had on Alcoholics Anonymous. Some historians of AA have looked at the influence of the Washingtonian Movement on the fellowship, but no one has examined how temperance and prohibition impacted the founding of AA. How earlier perceptions of the drunkard affected member's self image is a question that this dissertation explores. Also, what effect temperance and prohibition had on the shape that the program took is examined. Finally, how Alcoholics

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<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Drowne, *Spirits of Defiance: National Prohibition and Jazz Age Literature, 1920-1933* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005.)

<sup>23</sup> Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Class, Culture, and Politics in Prohibition-Era New York City, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.)

Anonymous was a continuation and, more importantly, a break with earlier conceptions of drunkards and their rehabilitation is of paramount concern of this project.

In order to best investigate the history of Alcoholics Anonymous a chronological approach will be utilized in the following chapters. Chapter two explores the history of temperance in the United States, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century until its final defeat at the end of prohibition. Particular attention is paid to the popular image of the drunkard during this time, especially presented by the middle-class dominated temperance movement. It is important to look at this period when discussing AA because the influence of the temperance movement was quite significant during this era, and undoubtedly affected the early members of the program. Also, very few, if any, works currently examine the influence of the earlier movements on the society and it is a void that needs to be filled. Chapter three takes an in-depth look at the cultural backgrounds of Smith and Wilson as well as their first recruits. The common ties between these men were key to the new society having any chance of surviving outside one of its greatest influences, the Oxford Group. Chapters four and five examine the growth of AA and what methods, especially the writing of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, were employed to spread their message across the nation. Chapter six details how the group met the challenge of World War Two and how, like so much of society, the war radically changed the organization, making it a truly global organization. Finally, Chapter seven looks at how the group altered its message to stay current and remain relevant in the post-war culture of abundance. As important, however, chapter seven also examines how AA remained true to its initial message, its connection to traditional values that had been its key to

success during the Depression. It is this ability to change with cultural trends, yet connect to deep-seated American ideas that is the most important theme of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “AFTER MORE OF THE ACCURSED POISON THAT HAS RUINED YOU?” THE INFLUENCE OF THE TEMPERANCE AND PROHIBITION MOVEMENTS ON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, 1840-1930

On October 28, 1928, Bill Wilson had had enough. He swore to his wife, Lois, that he was through with drinking. To prove his seriousness, Wilson wrote the following pledge in the family Bible: “To my beloved wife that has endured so much, let this stand as evidence of my pledge to you that I have finished with drink forever.<sup>1</sup>” Unfortunately for Wilson and his wife, he did not live up to his solemn oath. It was another seven years before he got sober. This scene from autumn 1928 is significant for two reasons. First, it shows Wilson’s history, prior to 1935, of unsuccessful attempts to curb his drinking. Second, this scene would have been familiar to many members of the earlier temperance and prohibition movements. The swearing of an oath, the signing of a family Bible, and the promise to a long suffering spouse all bear a striking similarity to the pledges and religious overtones of earlier movements.

This chapter is concerned with how the temperance movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century affected the design of Alcoholics Anonymous. By examining such movements we see how they influenced AA and the perception of the drunkard for all of society. The literary and pictorial sources of the temperance

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<sup>1</sup>*Pass it On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the AA Message Reached the World.* (New York: AA World Services, 1984), 81.

movement give us insight into how AA changed that image, and how it used similar themes to maintain a connection with the past, giving new AA members in the 1930s and 1940s a familiar cultural form to embrace and make the pursuit of sobriety easier to undertake.

In order to understand the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, the cultural influences that acted upon its founders need to be discussed. Both Wilson and Smith came of age when the push for national prohibition was at its zenith. It is important to see how this massive social movement influenced what became the largest attempt at a total abstinence society in the world. The political and social history of the movement is covered elsewhere. This chapter is not a history of the temperance movement or prohibition, but a look at the image of alcohol and those who drank it, produced it and sold it.

The drive to eradicate alcohol also demonstrated the cultural shift that occurred from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth, from “island communities” to a national state, or as John Higham described the era as “congenial to the new search for order.”<sup>2</sup> This was a shift from a culture focused on the individual and local concerns to a national culture that included all parts of the nation and different parts of society. Many of the efforts to curb the nation’s drinking habits started as local and state concerns, such as the Massachusetts Temperance Society. Some rose to national prominence, like the Washingtonians, and quickly faded out. It was not until the Progressives and groups like

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); John Higham, “From Boundlessness to Consolidation: the Transformation of American Culture.” In *Hanging Together: Unity and Diversity in American Culture* (New Haven, CT: 2001), 161; Also from Higham see, “Integrating America: The Problem of Assimilation at the Turn of the Century.” Also in *Hanging Together*.

the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League that a national organizational effort developed. To understand this cultural shift and its effect on Alcoholics Anonymous the image of the drunkard and the change of focus by the temperance movement over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century needs to be examined.

*T.S. Arthur and the Changes in the Temperance Movement*

There were scores of temperance speeches, but to reach a wider audience temperance advocates used a variety of other methods to share their message about drink and drinkers. W.J. Rorabaugh briefly discussed the use of propaganda by early temperance organizations (prior to 1860) demonstrating the impression these materials made on society and its legacy to later temperance crusades. While Rorabaugh examined songs, poems and stories, he did not discuss the most popular method of disseminating the temperance message, the temperance novels.<sup>3</sup> Not only do they give a fascinating window into the mind of temperance workers and how they viewed drunkards, they also offer the best demonstration of how the movement changed during the century. Shifts within the philosophy of the movement reflected shifts within American culture. The temperance crusade began largely concerned with the plight of the individual drunkard and how to protect other individuals in society from a similar fate. By the end of the century the temperance workers were much more concerned with how alcohol and drunkenness affected the entire country, not only the physical well-being of its citizens, but on the moral health of the nation as a whole as well. A number of temperance novels

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<sup>3</sup> W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (Oxford [New York] Oxford University Press, 1979), 196-200.

taken from the time period (1840-1890) demonstrate this shift, but few temperance authors experienced the changes and wrote during the entire period as did T. S. Arthur, author of the best selling temperance novel of all time.

A devoted teetotaler until his death in 1885, T. S. Arthur was a key voice in the temperance movement throughout the nineteenth century. Much of his early life came to populate the stories he later wrote. He was born in upstate New York in 1809, where he was regaled with stories from his mother about his grandfather who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War.<sup>4</sup> Like so many people during the century, Arthur's family moved to an urban center for better economic prospects. He became intimately aware of the local household artisan economy in Baltimore by first watching his father, a miller, and later by serving as a tailor's apprentice. Trade work was not in Arthur's future however, and he began to write short stories for literary magazines and newspapers, through which he became acquainted with Edgar Allan Poe. Even his earliest writings were dominated by the social and moral issues of the day. His first major work was a collection of articles about the Washingtonians, a Baltimore temperance society that began in 1842 and quickly declined after 1845. A member of the group discussed how previous temperance workers ridiculed and denounced drunkards who wandered into their meetings and were often turned away.<sup>5</sup> This rebuff by temperance reformers led to the founding of the Washingtonians. It was a working-class abstinence society that relied on the idea that no

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<sup>4</sup> T.S. Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, And What I Saw There* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964 [1854]), Introduction by Donald A. Koch, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *The Foundation Progress and Principles of the Washington Temperance Society of Baltimore*. By a Member of the Society. (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1842), 39.

one understood the drunkard like another drunk. Their goal was to change their fellows from “loathsome beast to brother.”<sup>6</sup> This egalitarian approach was also a reaction to the more religious elements within various temperance societies.<sup>7</sup> As the movement grew, other temperance organizations saw the Washingtonians as allies, and invited them to speak on a number of occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Arthur’s *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1843) does not offer much in the way of history for the popular temperance movement. It does mention that it was a society based on the principle of former drunkards helping their fellows overcome drunkenness and Arthur described the meetings, but his description does not match what other commentators observed. The Washingtonian gatherings were raucous affairs that to outsiders appeared just like a tavern or saloon without the alcohol.<sup>9</sup> Instead of raucous, spirited affairs, Arthur recounts quite somber meetings that end with the president of the group imploring new arrivals to sign an abstinence pledge. Arthur’s attempt to tone down the class differences between the actual Washingtonians and his vision of them is similar to the societal split observed by Elliott Gorn in his work, *The Manly Art* in which he observed the professional class taking a harsh view of the working class and their

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>7</sup>John J Rumbarger, *Profits Power, and Prohibition: Alcohol Reform and the Industrializing of America, 1800-1930* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 28.

<sup>8</sup>Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers: 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997 [1978]), 133.

<sup>9</sup>Ian Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 177-178.

amusements, boxing in particular.<sup>10</sup> Arthur admired the Washingtonians and their goals, but he wanted his audience to respond to their message and he needed them to more closely resemble the higher classes of society.

The book is considered a temperance novel, but it is really a collection of six individual cautionary tales regarding the evils of alcohol and drunkenness. Five of the six chapters revolve around the descent of one man into chronic drunkenness. Unlike the real Washingtonians who were largely tradesmen and predominantly working class, Arthur's characters are from the middle and professional class. A tavern keeper and a mechanic are also chronicled, but the others are a merchant, a physician, a lawyer and a grocer. All are very well off when their drinking begins and not surprisingly all are destitute by the end of their respective tales when they find redemption by signing the Washingtonians pledge. The decline of the middle class was one of the key concerns of most nineteenth century reform movements and temperance was no exception. The view that most temperance advocates held is best summed up by this observation from Mary Ryan in her work about the creation of the middle class, "intemperance, on the one hand, was conceived of as the classic precipitant of downward mobility; abstinence, on the other, was the highway to wealth."<sup>11</sup> Their view of those who drank too much was that they were already lost and to spend too much time with them was a waste. They had little faith that a drunkard would remain sober.

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<sup>10</sup> Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 135.

The counterpart to each male drunkard is the person most harmed by his drinking. In all of the stories that person is a woman, specifically a daughter, a wife or mother (widowed for good effect). In the last chapter, “The Moderate Drinker,” it is the drunkard’s entire family that suffers from his drunkenness. All of these relationships demonstrated familiar characters to anyone reading temperance works. In all of these cases, the women of the family suffered the most at the hands of the irresponsible drunkard. The women are described as “frail,” “slender,” “like a child.”<sup>12</sup> Adding to the melodrama the women are also regarded as “guardian angels”, “saints” and “martyrs.”<sup>13</sup> This language firmly establishes the image of the weak woman suffering at the hands of the drunkard, who was described as lowly and a failure.<sup>14</sup> Arthur told his audience that to drink was to destroy the women whom one cared for most deeply. Not only was one’s place in society in jeopardy but one’s family as well, reflecting another concern of reformers of the era, the sanctity of the family as the cradle of the middle class.

These two themes carried on well into the twentieth century, but what makes *The Washingtonians* a significant reflection of the temperance movement was its lack of concern for the rest of society. There was little mention of the price the drunkard costs the rest of society or the burden he was placing on his community. Drunkenness in the 1840s was an individual affair, according to Arthur. His appeal was precisely aimed at those who drink by forcefully demonstrating the effects of alcohol on the drinker (loss of status) and the effect on the drinker’s family. They were surely to be pitied, but Arthur

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<sup>12</sup> T.S. Arthur, *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (Boston: Harvard U Press, 1842), 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

made no mention of aiding the suffering family or of the greater society aiding the hopeless drunkard. What's more, Arthur did not advocate for any laws governing the use or sale of alcohol. This stance was in keeping with the earlier generations of the temperance movement. Most groups from this time supported the tactic of "moral suasion" which Arthur sees within the Washingtonian meetings. The narrator of all of these stories represented the moral, caring community that took pity on drunkards and their families, but offered little else. This focus changed with the Civil War and the issues surrounding it, a change reflected in Arthur's philosophy presented in his next major and most influential work.

*Ten Nights in a Bar Room and What I Saw There (1854)* is often called the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of the temperance movement."<sup>15</sup> The book achieved huge literary success, going through multiple editions and thousands of copies sold, and eventually became a play that continued production throughout prohibition. Similar to *Uncle Tom*, *Ten Nights* was an overly sentimental work of reform literature, befitting the period. The story recounted the ten-year history of the Sickle and Sheaf, a barroom and inn in the fictional town of Cedarville. Arthur offered vivid images of those that sell alcohol, those that allowed it to thrive, and those that imbibed. Further, he recounted the effects of alcohol on the town and its inhabitants. To put it bluntly, there were no redeeming qualities to the Sickle and Sheaf, the owner of the bar, or the town of Cedarville as long as it allowed alcohol within its limits. Like *The Washingtonians* the novel had a number of characters battling alcohol addiction, but *Ten Nights* demonstrated a change in the thinking of the temperance movement. The focus shifted from strict attention to the

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur. *Ten Nights*, vii.

individual drunkard. In *Ten Nights* Arthur was much more concerned with the local community, reflecting a broadening of the goals of the temperance movement as a whole. While still not a national movement, the temperance movement in the period before the Civil War, similar to the country as a whole, was moving in more national direction.

The novel closely followed those who frequented the bar. Each character presented an aspect of what the temperance movement feared most from alcohol and its surrounding culture of drink. The narrator was a man of high moral character who witnessed the damages brought on by alcohol, but did nothing about the problems of Cedarville. This attitude was a reflection of two major strands of political thought of the time period. Arthur wrote the novel during the era of local-option laws, a period when the temperance movement advocated that each county or town should decide whether or not to become dry. Second, the story takes place before the Civil War and the supremacy of the Federal government was still an open issue. The local option was the main means to tackle municipal and county issues, similar to the segmented system detailed by Robin Einhorn in *Property Rules*.<sup>16</sup> While the push for statewide prohibition, or Maine Laws as the statutes were called, occurred at this time in many states, Arthur did not approve of their use.<sup>17</sup> The narrator's refusal to take action in a community not his own was in complete accord with the political and social thinking of the time. While he commented on and discussed with various characters the problems of taverns, their difficulties with

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<sup>16</sup> Robin Einhorn, *Property Rules* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Anne-Marie Szymanski, *Pathways to Prohibition: Radicals, Moderates, and Social Movement Outcomes* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 75.

drink and the moral flaw of having a tavern in ones community, he always stopped short of telling them what to do as individuals or as a community.

The main character, Sam Slade represented the damage done by alcohol on those who sold it. According to temperance workers, the tavern trade was not honest work. Slade agreed; “I got tired of hard work, and determined to lead an easier life.”<sup>18</sup> Even more, the person who deals in alcohol was not just lazy, but greedy. Again in Slade’s own words, “Every man desires to make as much money as possible, and with the least labour.”<sup>19</sup> It was because of this greed and laziness that Slade destroyed his former employee, Joe Morgan. Morgan was once Slade’s assistant, a journeyman miller, but because of the sale of Slade’s mill and construction of the bar, Morgan fell to the temptations of alcohol. Not only was alcohol destroying Morgan, but the betrayal of his master on two counts also brought him to ruin.<sup>20</sup> The moral for the working class was clear, rely on self-control or face certain peril.

The characters of Slade and Morgan, specifically their past relationship of master and employee, highlighted the great fear of many reformers during this era. The breakdown of the traditional household economy caused great anxiety not only for those who were actively involved in it, but for those who saw it as a key to the social order, a social order that they dominated. As the traditional economy broke down, reformers of all stripes looked for issues that they felt led to the ruin of society. The abuse of alcohol was seen as one of the greatest contributors to this trend.

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur, *Ten Nights*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

The danger of drink that Arthur emphasized the most was the harm that it did to the next generation. The children in *Ten Nights* came to horrible ends; Slade's children died or went insane, Morgan's daughter died, and Wily the son of a town father, Judge Hammond, was killed in a barroom brawl.<sup>21</sup> These misfortunes show that even the slightest use of alcohol was a great danger. The destruction of youth by the saloon culture, as symbolized by the death of Morgan's daughter, showed that just having a saloon in the community was harmful to young people. If children imbibed, they were beyond redemption. Wily Hammond in particular represented the fall from middle-class respectability that was the greatest fear of mid-century reform movements. By spending his leisure time drinking, gambling and consorting with the wrong crowd, Wily fell from his place in society and was presented here as a warning to similar young men. The other young man, Slade's son, further depicted the decline of society overall. Since his father was no longer in a "respectable" trade, which he could teach to his son and hand it over to him eventually, the only possibility for him was tragedy. This concern for the younger generation was also a key to temperance reform that Mary Ryan observed when she noted that not only were the reformers interested in social change, but in maintaining a good reputation for their offspring.<sup>22</sup> Arthur used the ruinous stories of the younger generation of Cedarville as a message to his audience that if they do not take up the cause, their children could be next.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 141.

Because of the corrupting influence of the saloon on voters, men like Judge Lyman, a corrupt Democratic politician, gained office by securing votes through drinks. Timothy Gilfoyle describes how reformers tried to expose the ties between government and prostitution and a similar concern was in the temperance movement.<sup>23</sup> The corrupting influence of the saloon, like that of the brothel needed to be checked for the safety of society. It should be noted, however, that Arthur does not make this a national issue, demonstrating again the localized “island” mentality prevalent before the Civil War. It was up to the townspeople to save their community, their homes and to “restore the old order of things.”<sup>24</sup> This old order was disappearing in a number of ways at the century’s midpoint and for many, like Arthur and other temperance crusaders, drinking was a key contributor to the decline. In order to keep the society in which they held a prominent place, they had to defeat the threats that they saw aligned against them.

The patrons of the Sickle and Sheaf gave readers of *Ten Nights* a very precise picture of those who drink and saloon culture. Beyond just drinking, the customers engaged in a whole host of unsavory activities (at least in the eyes of reformers) namely gambling and politics. The first characterization of customers was unseemly, especially the character Harvey Green. Upon meeting him, the narrator immediately saw that, “unscrupulous selfishness was written all over his sinister countenance; and I wondered that it did not strike every one, as it did me, with instant repulsion.”<sup>25</sup> Later Green is

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1992), 186.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur, *Ten Nights*, 231.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

compared to the devil and the narrator literally sees the word “TEMPTER written upon his face.”<sup>26</sup> These descriptions all reinforced the idea that to drink alcohol, and in Green’s case, to gamble as well, was to be in league with the devil. Lowell Edmunds makes a similar observation about temperance culture in his history of the martini, *The Silver Bullet*, that to drink was to be “willfully evil; a diabolical expression”.<sup>27</sup> Further, anyone partaking in such activities was not just a danger to themselves, but to all of society, especially the young. In Green’s case, his influence not only led to the ruin of young Wily Hammond, but to the financial ruin of his father, Judge Hammond, as well as to the unsalvageable drunkenness of Judge Lyman and his untimely death. This melodramatic descent into ruin was also seen in the concern about prostitution as outlined in Gilfoyle’s *City of Eros*. Just as the prostitute was a symbol of downward mobility and loss of status, the drunkard was as well.<sup>28</sup>

The other major image of those within the saloon was that of excessive sensuality, that they were base men unworthy of the love of a good and noble woman. Over the course of a year, for example, the bar owner’s son became “rounder, and had a gross, sensual expression, especially around the mouth.”<sup>29</sup> Further, among the other patrons there was, “scarcely one of them whose face did not show marks of sensuality,” the latter

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>27</sup> Lowell Edmunds, *The Silver Bullet: The Martini in American Civilization* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 96.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur, *Ten Nights*, 43.

quote, an allusion to syphilis that left pockmarks upon those afflicted.<sup>30</sup> According to Arthur, even a citizen of good standing could not resist the dehumanizing effects of alcohol. Five years after the opening of the Sickle and Sheaf, Judge Lyman appeared “twice his former size; and all bright expression gone...The swollen lips and cheeks gave to his countenance a look of all-predominating sensuality. True manliness had bowed itself in debasing submission to the bestial.”<sup>31</sup> All of these descriptions enforced the notion that to drink was to demean one’s self to the lowest possible aspects of humanity and it was degrading to manhood itself. Drinking made one less of a man, one who did not fulfilling one’s true purpose for society. It caused men to lose the virtue of self-control and restraint which were keys to success according to the mores of the period. Consuming alcohol also encouraged dangerous sexual behavior such as solicitation, and caused people to become grossly unattractive. There were no women patrons to speak of, except the wife of Slade, who ultimately went insane because of the breakdown of her family. The Victorian ideal of self-denial was completely lost turning those that drank into oversexed animals. To drink was to revert to a kind of barbarism that a true man would not allow to happen to himself.

T.S. Arthur never matched the success of *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, but he continued to write temperance novels. One of his later works, *Women to the Rescue*, detailed how the temperance movement changed its views, becoming more concerned with alcohol as a national concern. This national, broader focus is consistent with other social movements in the Post Civil War era. Arthur wrote *Women to the Rescue* in 1874

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 126.

at the height of one of the most dramatic moments of the nineteenth century temperance movement, the Woman's Crusade. This populist uprising, which led to the formation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU), occurred from 1874 until 1876 in locations across the country, but centered mostly in Ohio and the Midwest.<sup>32</sup> The comet-like movement concentrated in small towns where the townswomen banded together to remove saloons by marching, meetings and mass prayer. Arthur's novel chronicled a fictional crusade in the town of Delphi that drew inspiration from and followed the pattern of the real crusades.<sup>33</sup>

As the two novels demonstrate, the role of women changed considerably over the intervening twenty years. In *Ten Nights* and *The Washingtonians* the female characters were passive victims of alcohol and those that drink. In *Women to the Rescue*, the women, while still suffering from the drinking of their sons and husbands, took direct action against the saloons. In effect, as Donald Meyer argued in *Sex and Power*, women were in the process of expanding their role of moral guardian outward into society.<sup>34</sup> An example of the change in the role of women is in the characterization of the saloon-keeper's wife. In *Ten Nights*, Slade's wife began as an unwilling partner in the tavern business, showing a nervous disposition toward her husband's new venture.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the novel, as mentioned, she was driven insane by the behavior of her husband and her

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<sup>32</sup> Jack S. Blocker Jr., "Give to the Wind Thy Fear" *The Women's Temperance Crusade, 1873-1874* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985); Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981.)

<sup>33</sup> TS Arthur. *Women to the Rescue* (Philadelphia: JM Stoddart and Co., 1874.)

<sup>34</sup> Donald Meyer, *Sex and power: The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden, and Italy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.)

<sup>35</sup> Arthur, *Ten Nights*, 17.

son, Frank. The saloonkeeper's wife in *Women* was quite different. She was a willing participant in the saloon business, becoming more and more unattractive as the novel progressed. She took on a Lady Macbeth persona, spurring her husband to foreclose on his former employer's house, the grandest in town, and takes up residence there. Further, where the wife in *Ten Nights* was pitied, the wife in *Women* was despised, described as, "coarse, ignorant, vulgar" and not welcome in the better circles of society.<sup>36</sup> This characterization of her as supporter of the saloon, illustrated a shift in the perception of women from 1854 to 1874. It represents a feminization of the temperance movement and of the growing role of women in society.<sup>37</sup> Arthur was an advocate of women's activism so long as it remained within the proscribed roles of women in society. Women can agitate for change by praying and marching, but not by any other means.

The changes in the image of the saloonkeeper also shed light on the changing attitude of the temperance movement. In *Ten Nights* Sam Slade was, by all accounts, a native born American. No mention was made of his ethnicity, and there are no other saloons in Cedarville besides the Sickle and Sheaf. In *Women to the Rescue*, however, Arthur specified that there are thirty saloons in Delphi, the majority owned by foreigners.<sup>38</sup> The main saloonkeeper's ethnicity was not explicitly mentioned, but his name, Jimmy Hanlan, easily reads as Irish. This nativist fear was new for Arthur. In *Women to the Rescue*, he set the scene of Delphi as one overrun by the immigrant

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<sup>36</sup> Arthur, *Women*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Douglass, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977.)

<sup>38</sup> Arthur, *Women*, 19.

element. The town was “being held hostage” by the saloonkeepers who were rigging elections.<sup>39</sup> What is more, the people who suffered the most from drinking were the best citizens of Delphi.

Arthur commented on the disruption of the social order in *Women to the Rescue*, much as he did in *Ten Nights*. The great fear now evident was not simply the changes brought upon society from the shift from the household to the market economy, but the place of the immigrant in society. Jimmy Hanlan was a usurper, according to Arthur. He began by working for Luke Sterling and later owned a saloon, Hanlan House. He slowly took over Sterling’s place in society, by encouraging Sterling’s drinking habit. He stopped showing any deference to Sterling, his former employer. The person he once called “mister” or “your honor” was now referred to by his first name, if that.<sup>40</sup> This was the final evidence according to Arthur that Hanlan was an “evil beast.”<sup>41</sup> Hanlan rose above his place and this was a great danger to the town of Delphi, and by extension the rest of the country. Not only did he displace his former master Sterling, but he was instrumental in his downfall. Finally, and most egregious to Arthur, he no longer showed the proper respect to Sterling. This was the society that Arthur feared most, where the foreign-born lower-class took over, reducing the middle class to broken second-class citizens.

According to Arthur, alcohol was the main weapon in the reordering of society.

This idea was consistent with the motivations of the Progressive movement which was

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 75.

just beginning. As Richard Hofstadter noted, “Progressivism, in short, was to a very considerable extent led by men who suffered from the events of their time into through shrinkage in their means but through the changed pattern in the distribution of deference and power.”<sup>42</sup> Similar to Gilfoyle’s assessment about the danger of prostitution leading to “the emergence of an independent, popular culture, cut off from and uncontrolled by those religious and educational institutions previously responsible for disseminating culture,” Arthur was also concerned with this issue.<sup>43</sup> Drinking and the influence of the saloon needed to be checked to maintain the proper order of society that the relationship between Hanlan and Sterling represented. Further the anti-immigrant aspect of this relationship continued throughout the temperance and prohibition period until the eventual repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933.

By 1874, Arthur’s attitude toward political coercion changed as well. Instead of taking more of a localized approach to the question of alcohol, Arthur advocated prohibition. He was even willing to violate the Constitution to achieve this goal. By refusing saloonkeepers the right to operate their businesses and suspending the freedom of town residents for their own good, Arthur believed that he was violating the constitutional rights of the populace. His inspiration for this was one of the most enduring heroes of the late nineteenth century temperance movement, Abraham Lincoln. Arthur did not quote the temperance speeches of Lincoln, but invoked Lincoln’s Civil

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform. From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955.), 135.

<sup>43</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 190.

War politics namely violating the Constitution in order to preserve the Union.<sup>44</sup> Arthur saw the need for a stronger stance against drink in much the same way. The battle against alcohol was a battle for the Union, just as imperative as the battle against the Confederacy.

This attachment of a political cause to a moral one was a key shift in the attitude of the temperance movement. By comparing the movement to the greatest event of the generation, Arthur made the temperance cause the duty of all those who supported the Union. According to Arthur, abstinence was a patriotic decision. Now the battle was not against a rebellion of states, but to preserve a cultural and societal order that many felt was disappearing between the corrupting influences of the foreign born lower classes and the dominant elite. The progressive movement in general used this same strategy for a number of issues. Making a moral and societal issue into not only a political issue, but a measure of one's patriotism gave the progressive causes, including temperance, an evangelical zeal that inspired the middle class into action throughout the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

*Songs, Poems and Images from the Temperance Movement*

Temperance novels were the most popular means to advance the message of the movement and its image of the drunkard, but other methods were also used. One such method was songs used by temperance societies as a way to convert drunkards to their cause. Unlike the novels, the songs were directed toward the drunkard. For example, "Sign To-Night" (to be sung earnestly), repeated the title three times before each verse and then told the drunkard of the relief he would feel when he signed a pledge to stop

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<sup>44</sup> Arthur, *Women*, 140.

drinking. The second verse repeated many of the same themes as other temperance works except that it asks the drunkard specifically if he saw the “work of sorrow, a million homes are desolate, o wait not for the morrow.”<sup>45</sup> In the song, “Sign the Pledge” (to be sung spirited), the singers pled with the drunkard to “seize the rope we throw” and “now leave your evil ways we pray! And sign! Sign! Today!”<sup>46</sup> In both the temperance workers believed strongly that a solemn pledge of sobriety was enough to keep a drunkard sober. They believed that by taking an oath, the drunkard could cast off “Satan’s chains.”<sup>47</sup> This illustrated that many within the temperance movement believed drunkards were not only morally weak, but evil as well. By singing to the drunkard about all of the pain caused by alcohol and drinking, they attempted to pressure him with feelings of guilt. Those within the temperance movement felt morally superior to those that drank and some took pity on them.

The song, “Poor Child of the Drunkard” (to be sung tenderly), illustrated this last point, and reinforced other aspects of drunkenness and the harm caused by drinking. The first verse was about the abandoned child of the drunkard. The next two verses were about the women he hurt the most, his wife and mother. Both are deceased, broken hearted by his drinking. The final verse was a mirror of first, except that it was about the drunkard himself. He was described as thoughtless and fallen. Like the child, he asked,

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<sup>45</sup> WF Sherwin, JN Sterns, *Bugle Notes for the Temperance Army: A Collection of Songs, Quartettes and Glees* (New York: National Temperance Society and Publication House, 1871), 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

“where canst I go?”<sup>48</sup> The answer for child and drunkard were the same: come dwell with those in the temperance movement.

The image of the drunkard presented in this last song was quite patronizing. The drunkard was seen as a child. He was treated as someone not fully capable of making his own decisions and a person who society pitied. Also it echoed other temperance themes of the drunken man being a weak and irresponsible person. Not only has he abandoned his wife and child, but his drunkenness also caused his mother untold heartache. It is implicit that it was because of his drinking that both wife and mother, the two great icons of Victorian womanhood, met an early grave. The imagery of the “fallen” man paints the drunkard as a sinner who needed redemption. As Mary Ryan noted from literary sources in her study of Oneida County, drunken husbands were “disgraceful, stupid, and a trouble.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, the song illustrated that the temperance crusaders viewed themselves as morally superior, making those who used alcohol morally deficient. The only place that the drunkard was accepted was within the temperance movement. Not only did he have to stop drinking as the song’s final line explains, but the only place of comfort was to “dwell” with the temperance worker, becoming a part of the temperance movement itself. These songs of the “temperance army” also stand as an example of the cultural shift which occurred during the late nineteenth century. John Higham noted that music during this time was undergoing a change from a “nostalgic style to a muscular spirit”

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>49</sup> Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 195.

reflecting the dawn of the Progressive Era.<sup>50</sup> These songs occupied a middle ground.

The melodies were not the spirited tunes of rag time, but the lyrics, intended for an army no less, shared the muscular ideal that came into vogue during the time period.

Another method of transmitting the temperance message was songs and rhymes for children. Much like the children's poems and elementary school reading primers used by Ryan to examine the changes in the middle class family over the course of the nineteenth century, these sources depict the image of the drunkard imprinted on young minds at the end of that century.<sup>51</sup> In 1886 Emma Smith published a volume, *Jets of Truth*, intended "for young minds unlearned, using rhymes for truth."<sup>52</sup> Within these poems, the image of drink as evil was prevalent, for example referring to drink as a "demon monster."<sup>53</sup> While this was the most overarching theme in all of the materials examined, other motifs emerged, giving a more rounded picture of how temperance crusaders saw alcohol and those who used it. They gave insight into the motivations of the temperance movement and who they felt was most at risk from alcohol consumption.

A common image in Smith's rhymes was the forsaken wife and child. In the verse "Voneja," a dying mother spoke to her dying child about their "untrue" father and husband. His vow of temperance was false and it left his family alone to die in the

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<sup>50</sup> John Higham, "America in Person" in *Hanging Together*, 179-180.

<sup>51</sup> Ryan. *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 31-32.

<sup>52</sup> Emma Pow Smith, *Jets of Truth: A book devoted to the Truth, Temperance and Reform In the Interests of Humanity and for God, Home, and Native Land* (San Francisco: Brunt and Fisher Printer and Publications, 1886), preface.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

cold.<sup>54</sup> In a similar poem, “Twice Bereft,” a husband again abandoned his wife to rum, only finding relief from his guilt in death. As the husband died, he promised his wife “in heaven, there is no rum to mar our wedded bliss.”<sup>55</sup> Both of these works, and many like them, portrayed drinking and more importantly the drinker as the destroyer of the family. Not only did the husband’s drinking caused strife, such as broken vows and abandonment, but it caused the death of at least one, if not more, members of the family. It is also important to note that in almost every familial scene from temperance literature, the husband was the drinker, making the popular image of the drunkard a man. The virtuous yet frail wife was in keeping with the nineteenth century image of true womanhood. This image of the effects of alcohol supported the idea that women were too weak to help their husbands or families. Much like the characters from T. S. Arthur’s novels a drunkard was a burden to his wife and family and only a sober man can truly support a family.<sup>56</sup>

This image of the weak woman in need of a strong man went a step further in the work, “The Curse of Rum.” Written in 1886, when drunkenness was one of the major issues across the nation and the temperance movement was well on its way to becoming a national movement, the poem presented the United States as a young woman whose bosom was pressed by a thorn: “it is piercing the tenderest cords of love, and maddening

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 17-20.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” in Michael Gordon ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978) 313-333.

her youthful brain, that thorn is rum.”<sup>57</sup> In another century she “will sink in death, America will be past healing.”<sup>58</sup> The final lines of the rhyme exhorted the male listeners to “come like men and for temperance stand till death.”<sup>59</sup> Only the sober man was capable of saving the young nation, and if he died in the effort, so be it. This image presented the notion that drink and by extension drinkers were not only destroying their own families, they were destroying the nation as well. The use of the young maiden as a representation of America was wide spread as John Higham notes in his discussion of national symbols.<sup>60</sup> By using Columbia (as Higham named her) Smith demonstrated a national awareness within the temperance movement that grew until prohibition.

A double meaning also appeared in the phrase “maddening her youthful brain.” Drinking corrupted the youth of America as well. This is particularly interesting when considering Smith’s target audience of “young minds.” By making America a young woman, these young minds equated themselves with the nation. The young were the hope of the nation as well as being at risk, like the young maiden America. Many leaders of the final push toward prohibition were children in 1886, listening to verses such as this from Emma Smith. They took the message to heart, and when looking at materials from prohibition-era sources, the same sentiment of saving the nation from disaster is present.

The poem, “You Ask Me Why,” solidified the link between the earlier temperance movement and prohibition. In the verse, the narrator was asked why she

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<sup>57</sup> Pow Smith, *Jets of Truth*, 52.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Higham, *Hanging Together*, 45.

argued for prohibition. Her answer was because she saw “an army marching into drunkard’s graves, they are falling dear mother’s son’s, one by one.”<sup>61</sup> The only way to stop this tragedy was for a new army dedicated to prohibition to rise up. This image of an army of drunkards carried over into the prohibition period. The drunkard army’s objective was to keep the United States an intemperate nation, without strong men to protect and provide for her. Those working for prohibition took this idea even further by using the progressive language of the time and calling its foe, the “liquor interests.” The prohibitionists presented liquor producers as a united coalition against prohibition, against the better interests of the nation and the common man. Conversely, the “new army for prohibition” took shape in the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). Not only did they unite many temperance organizations under one banner, but they had, if you will, Special Forces, like the Lincoln Legion.<sup>62</sup> To complete the crusader imagery, the ASL also published a list of “martyrs to the cause of temperance.”<sup>63</sup> Like Smith’s call for a “new army for prohibition,” the later prohibition forces viewed their foe as an equally strong army that they must defeat. This martial language presents a gendered image to the forces opposing alcohol. The late nineteenth century obsession with manliness by the middle and upper classes was a major theme in this poem. As Higham and Elliott Gorn noted, the 1890’s were a time when “the strenuous life,” soldiers, cowboys and athletes

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Jets of Truth*, 109.

<sup>62</sup> Ernest H. Cherrington, editor, *Anti-Saloon League Yearbook, 1910-1911, 1914* (Westerville, OH: Anti-Saloon League of America, 1910-11, 1914), 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

were idolized for their masculine strength.<sup>64</sup> By projecting an image of an army locked in a pitched battle, this poem, and many like it formed part of a much larger cultural current.

As important as the written sources were in establishing a universal image of the drunkard and illustrating the large shift in the American cultural landscape, the story is woefully incomplete without a discussion of the powerful illustrations that accompanied many works discussing the temperance issue. As Higham noted in his essay “America in Person” the use of symbol and illustration has a profound effect on how a nation is perceived, both by its own people and the world at large.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the image held of drunkards was influenced by the images produced by temperance advocates and their allies. In the text, *Grappling with the Monster*, a twelve-panel illustration graphically depicted the relationship of alcohol to Satan and the effects that it has on a weak man. Alcohol was a servant of the Devil, sent to Earth to harvest souls for his master. After finding an unsuspecting victim, alcohol along with gambling led the once virtuous man to a life of crime, and ultimately to his untimely death by execution. Alcohol then returned to Satan, receiving “his congratulations.”<sup>66</sup> This story is striking because of the literal link between the devil and drink. By consuming alcohol one became an agent of the Devil, even to the point of committing murder. In the pictures, alcohol (pictured as a

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<sup>64</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 187.

<sup>65</sup> Higham, *Hanging Together*, 23-55; See also: Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>66</sup> TS Arthur, *Grappling with the Monster: or the Curse and the Cure of Strong Drink* (Philadelphia: Cottage Library Publishing House, 1877), 125-130.

bottle) and gambling (pictured as a very sinister five of hearts) prod their victim into criminal action.

The link between drinking and gambling was an important part of the presentation, reflecting the attitude of the reform community. Like drinking, gambling was viewed as a moral failing, not only harming the gambler but the rest of society as well. Like drinking, gambling was responsible for the loss and misuse of money, often leaving the person in much worse straights. Both vices went against the cultural standards of self-denial, thrift and the pursuit of success. Drinking came under greater and greater attack during the late nineteenth century as did gambling. Gambling was also associated with downward mobility by progressive reformers. Finally, it was widely regarded that both activities led to antisocial behavior, especially violent behavior which was tearing at the fabric of the nation that reformers were so desperate to preserve.

At the end of the nineteenth Century, the family lay at the epicenter of middle class values.<sup>67</sup> The effect the drunkard had on his family was, as in rhymes and songs, a common subject in visual images. A poignant example entitled “Christmas Morning in the Drunkard’s Home,” presented a tragic scene. The children, dressed in torn nightgowns, gazed forlornly at their empty Christmas stockings. In the background, their mother was in bed, with a bandage around her head evidence of an injury sustained at the hand of her drunken husband. The final cruelty of the scene was a bottle of whiskey sitting on a table instead of any gifts for the children.<sup>68</sup> The drunkard was conspicuously

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<sup>67</sup>Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 239.

absent from this illustration many images of him appear as the irresponsible parent. The drunkard was unable, and with the bottle prominently shown in the picture, unwilling to provide for his family. He took care of his needs but left the family without any gifts and, more importantly, when viewing the entire desolate scene, he did not provide anything for some time. The characterization of the drunkard as abusive was also apparent in this illustration. The wife was on the bed, bandaged and unconscious, the victim of an attack of some kind. This perpetuated the idea of the drunkard as violent, especially toward women. The final message of this scene is presented by what was not there. By not including the drunkard in this scene, it depicted the drunkard as abandoning his family. Not only was the drunkard a bad provider, but he was an absentee father as well. This image, from 1909, demonstrated that the imagery of the drunkard and the temperance movement was active until the beginning of national prohibition in 1920. It also provides an excellent bridge to images of the drunkard during the period leading up to the passage of the eighteenth amendment.

*Temperance and Prohibition, 1880-1920*

Temperance organizations like the WCTU did not stop in the twentieth century, but as the Progressive movement gained momentum, we see a substantial change in the efforts of those involved in temperance, the push for national prohibition. The people most responsible for the final effort to dry up the nation were as John Higham described, “a native-born middle class, feeling squeezed between an oligarchy above and a restive lower class beneath, rallied to the broad political movement that called itself

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<sup>68</sup> Elton Raymond Shaw, *The Curse of Drink or Stories of Hell's Commerce* (Grand Rapids, MI: Shaw Publishing Company, 1909) from the History of Alcohol Image Database, [http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/alcohol\\_history](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/alcohol_history).

progressive.”<sup>69</sup> The mantle of Progressive covers a wide variety of reform efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the temperance movement fits comfortably within this generalization. Like many of the other reforms, the temperance movement took on a much more national perspective. It was no longer a local concern nor was it strictly focused on aiding the individual drunkard. As the middle class felt more and more “squeezed,” it saw its reforming impulses not only saving their tenuous status but also saving the entire nation.

The Anti-Saloon League (ASL) offers the best example of the move from a strict focus on the individual to an organized national concern. The League, founded in 1893, became the strongest voice in the push for national prohibition. It had a broad appeal, touching the middle class base of the temperance movement and gaining a great deal of its funding from the nation’s leading families, such as the Rockefellers.<sup>70</sup> The ASL tapped into the one issue that united all temperance organizations, the destructive nature of the saloon. Those that identified themselves as progressives believed that the destruction of the saloon would lead to the “Americanization” of the working class.<sup>71</sup> The move to a more national concern is seen in the organizational structure of the group itself. The league started in Oberlin, Ohio as the Ohio Anti-Saloon League, but soon worked to coordinate other state level organizations under one umbrella. Nothing

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<sup>69</sup>Higham, *Hanging Together*, 204.

<sup>70</sup>Rumbarger, *Profits, Power and Prohibition*, 159.

<sup>71</sup>James H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 119.

illustrates this broader focus more than the decision to lobby in Washington on behalf of national prohibition.

Much of the material presented by the ASL would have been familiar to the temperance worker of the nineteenth century, including the strong representation of clergy within their ranks.<sup>72</sup> Like other advocates of temperance reform, the League draped their message in patriotic tones, relating abstinence to freedom and the realization of the true spirit of American democracy.<sup>73</sup> The ASL produced posters and pamphlets in order to help spread the message of prohibition, much like the earlier temperance movements. One example, entitled “Goliath’s pride,” presented the standard image of alcohol being responsible for death. In this image, the drunkard was depicted as a lazy, uncaring slob. He sat upon his cask of liquor, on top of the bones of his fellow drinkers, and was motioning to the ASL/David hero that he did not care for prohibition and that he was oblivious to the carnage he caused. Another image from the ASL that was a carry over from other temperance societies was “His New Mount.” In this scene, Uncle Sam was pictured riding across the world on a camel. Not only did Uncle Sam choose to become “bone dry,” but from his and his camel’s expression, he was quite happy about it.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>73</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> *American Issue*, 1/4/19; 1/25/19, [http://www.wpl.lib.oh.us/AntiSaloon/printed\\_material/cartoons.html](http://www.wpl.lib.oh.us/AntiSaloon/printed_material/cartoons.html).

As Robert Hamm and Joe Blocker argue, however, the ASL wanted to appear more modern than their Victorian predecessors.<sup>75</sup> The ASL was a strong example of Robert Wiebe's idea of the "bureaucratization" and organization of society.<sup>76</sup> The League was highly organized and efficient in its approach to Prohibition. The ASL Yearbook, published between 1908 and 1933, was the chief publication demonstrating this approach. The yearbook illustrated the progress prohibition made each year. A large portion of each year's book was devoted to maps showing which regions of the country had gone dry, which had established tighter liquor-trafficking laws and so on. In the 1910 Yearbook, a detailed timeline of the temperance movement, from 1642 to 1910 gave the ASL historical legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> The yearbook also contains many graphs and figures, lending support from science. One of the more dire statistics cited in the yearbook was that, by 2165, "the United States will become universally defective, insane, idiotic, or other defectives caused by alcohol."<sup>78</sup> Not only did this reflect the Progressive obsession with mental health, it also expressed the Progressive sense of urgency. This statistic reinforced the image of the drunkard as not only unpatriotic (allowing the nation to be defective) but also a person of questionable intelligence. The question surrounding this statistic was if continued drinking will irreparably injure the entire nation what harm is drink doing to the drunkard? In line with the character of the Progressives, a more

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<sup>75</sup> Richard F. Hamm, *Shaping the Eighteenth Amendment: Temperance Reform, Legal Culture, and the Polity, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Jack S. Blocker, ed. *Alcohol, Reform and Society: The Liquor Issue in Social Context* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979.)

<sup>76</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.)

<sup>77</sup> *Anti-Saloon League Yearbook, 1910-1911, 1914*, 5-26.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

scientific approach emerged to discuss the problems of alcohol. James Timberlake observed in his study of the influence of the Progressive Movement on national Prohibition, “reformers realized this (scientific approach more appealing) and in their propaganda concentrated almost exclusively on the worldly rather than the religious aspects of the liquor questions.”<sup>79</sup>

The emotional appeal did not fade but the turn of the century brought a new approach. An excellent example of this was in the work of Joseph Crooker and his study of alcohol, *Shall I Drink?* published in 1914. Crooker stated he was going to take a scientific look at alcohol and dispel what he called the “drink superstition.”<sup>80</sup> Not only did he equate the use of drink as a superstitious enterprise, he called it barbaric.<sup>81</sup> Throughout his work, he used facts and figures to illustrate the harm that alcohol inflicted upon the population. For example, “one half of all fallen women owe their shame directly or indirectly to drink” and “the use of alcohol makes the bed for tuberculosis.”<sup>82</sup> To support this latter claim, he used a bar graph representing the difference in TB cases among those who are abstinent, those who drink moderately, and heavy drinkers. Heavy drinkers, of course had the most cases of the disease. He used other illustrations to demonstrate that intemperate families had a higher incidence of birth defects. This picture was powerful because of the overwhelming difference between temperate and intemperate families. The temperate families had “normal” children 82% of the time;

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<sup>79</sup> Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph Crooker, *Shall I Drink?* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1914), 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 37.

intemperate ones had “normal” children only 17.5% of the time.<sup>83</sup> The most stunning illustration that Crooker used was the difference between infant mortality rate between non-drinking mothers and drinking mothers. Instead of simply quoting numbers, Crooker included a photograph illustrating the two groups. In the intemperate group, over half of the children were dressed in black representing those who died before age two.<sup>84</sup> From this image, alcohol was not just the killer of misguided drunkards, but of their children. Not only was Crooker maintaining a well-established image of alcohol, he engaged in one of the most fundamental causes of the Progressive movement, that of child welfare. On a more implicit note, Crooker’s discussion of drunkenness and its causal relationship to birth defects, infant mortality and later behavioral problems could easily be used in the many eugenic arguments made by Progressive reformers as well.

Apart from Crooker’s representations of the effects of alcohol and its image as a lethal agent, his language presented a detailed image of the drunkard. As mentioned above, to drink was to fall back on superstition and barbarism, echoing themes presented by T.S. Arthur. The Progressive movement was about modernism, rejecting barbarism, and helping (sometimes forcing) those who still held on to such notions. The Progressive reformer was dedicated to helping the individual who was risking the fate of the nation. The Progressive mindset as Hofstadter discussed, “received quite earnestly the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 96.

exhortations that charged him with personal responsibility for all kinds of social ills. It was his business to do something about them.”<sup>85</sup>

The image of the weak-willed drunkard was a major component of Crooker’s argument against alcohol. Not only were women who drink in danger of becoming fallen, but because of liquor advertising, which he labeled “profanity,” many who “would never drink” fell prey to the vice of alcohol.<sup>86</sup> The mere suggestion of alcohol was enough to cause a weaker person to drink. Next, drink and the drinker were dangerous to the next generation. According to Crooker’s findings, children of those who drink were much more likely to die, but also become criminals, or as Crooker stated “drunkenness leads to degenerate off-spring.”<sup>87</sup> Therefore the person who drank was not only a danger to himself and to the current society, but the parent who drank was responsible for the next generation of criminals and deviants. Finally, Crooker believed even moderate drinking led to drunkenness.<sup>88</sup> This idea was held by many within the temperance and prohibition movements there was no such thing as responsible drinking eventually the light drinker became the drunkard. For Crooker, to “retreat from abstinence” was cowardly and went against what a responsible man should do for himself, his family and his country.<sup>89</sup> Not only was this an excellent example of the personal responsibility that

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<sup>85</sup> Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 211.

<sup>86</sup> Crooker, *Shall I Drink*, 127.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

Hofstadter discussed, but it was also an insight into how the Progressives imagined manhood as strong, self-denying, and above all sober.

### *The Prohibition Era*

The passage of the Eighteenth amendment signaled a great victory for those who advocated temperance. Many scholars have demonstrated that prohibition was not a sudden change, but rather the culmination of almost a century of agitation and political activity. The Progressive impulse and the concern for the well being of the nation were key to the passage of the amendment. The initial push toward prohibition occurred during World War I. When the federal government restricted the amount of alcohol produced in the United States, it insured that enough grain was used to support American troops abroad. The prohibition of alcohol became a patriotic cause to eliminate whiskey was to help the fight in Europe. When the war ended, the social benefit of eliminating drink was vital to the passage of the Volstead Act. The promise of a safer society was part of the reasoning to secure the act's passage, but the aftermath of the war was also vital. The anti-German and later anti-immigrant hysteria that took over the United States during and after the war made prohibition plausible to many who had not supported the measure prior to the war.

The prohibition era was an exciting time in American history, evoking images of gangsters and flappers. According to the letter of the law, it was the most restricted era of drink culture in the United States, and yet the 1920s are remembered as "roaring," and "The Jazz Age," a decade long party. It was dominated by the debate over alcohol use, who was using it, and where. Much of the history of the era, however, is largely written

for a popular audience. As Michael Lerner stated in *Dry Manhattan*, “Prohibition itself... has been the topic of far less historical analysis. While Americans have delighted in retelling tales of Prohibition and the excesses of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties, the history of Prohibition has been relegated largely to folklore and anecdote.”<sup>90</sup> The neglect of the era makes the investigation of the image of the drunkard and finding the views on drink culture during the 1920s a challenge. By examining the works of Lerner and others that concern themselves with the dry years, a decidedly two-sided image of drinking and the drunkard emerge. One side highlights the modern acceptance of drinking the other is interested in the temperance movement and Victorian culture that led to the Eighteenth Amendment. It is important to investigate drinking and the place of those that imbibed too much if we are to understand the immediate era that affected the design of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The shift in the culture of the United States during the 1920s is really an examination of the change in the middle class. Paula Fass documented much of this in her study of college life in the 1920s, *The Damned and the Beautiful*. Until Prohibition, the middle class, especially women, were seen as the great allies of the temperance cause. During the dry decade, however, this former ally changed sides when it came to alcohol. Nightclubs and speakeasies became “cosmopolitan.”<sup>91</sup> To drink, especially for women, meant sophistication and as Fass detailed, drinking was a form of rebellion and a symbolic gesture, like smoking and dancing, establishing a modern sensibility to the

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Class, Culture, and Politics in Prohibition-Era New York City, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.)

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

United States.<sup>92</sup> While this change in society can be traced back before Prohibition, the height of this shift occurred in the 1920s, especially in urban areas.<sup>93</sup> Magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* represented the ideal of this new milieu and the ownership of alcohol and bar-related materials became the mark of the truly sophisticated.<sup>94</sup> What is more as Kathleen Drowne argued in *Spirits of Defiance*, the acceptance of alcohol was reflected in the fictional characters of the time period as well. Nick, Gatsby, and especially Babbit all reflected an embrace of drinking by the middle-class.<sup>95</sup> George Babbit perhaps best illustrated this new ideology when Sinclair Lewis described him thus: “Babbit was virtuous. He advocated, though did not practice the prohibition of alcohol...[prohibition] is a mighty fine thing for the poor zob that hasn’t got any will power, but for fellows like himself and his close friends, Prohibition is an infringement on personal liberty.”<sup>96</sup> This best characterized why the middle-class changed its behavior in such a drastic way, at least in the eyes of those who favored prohibition. While temperance seemed like a good idea for “everyone else,” the middle-class often did not see themselves included in this mix. Further, as prohibition became law, the culmination of a decades long campaigning, the willingness to experiment and

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<sup>92</sup> Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19, 310-311.

<sup>93</sup> Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1925* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 191. Also see Edmunds. *Silver Bullet*, and his discussion of how the martini is urban upper class not rural or lower class.

<sup>94</sup> Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 198, 213.

<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Drowne, *Spirits of Defiance: National Prohibition and Jazz Age Literature, 1920-1933* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press.)

<sup>96</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Babbit*, quoted in *Spirits of Defiance*, 88.

embrace a different culture reached its height as well. At the moment of triumph for the ASL and the anti-drinking forces the middle class became disillusioned with the dry argument and was willing to try something new. The Eighteenth Amendment was a hold over from a different world. The First World War destroyed the faith in the future and the surety that right living was essential to the American nation held by the Progressives. The experience of world war, what it did at home and what was seen abroad led to doubts about the merits of Western Civilization in general and America in particular. The quaint reform about the perils of drinking paled in comparison to the carnage witnessed in war and the social upheaval that occurred immediately after the war in the United States. Faced with this new reality, staying away from alcohol was the least of Americans concerns. This lack of belief, of being lost, made the choice to drink much more acceptable. Rorabaugh also explained that people drink more in times of high anxiety and great social change.<sup>97</sup> He was discussing the massive changes within the United States between 1820 and 1860 but the period after World War One fits the same criteria. 1920 and beyond was a culture far removed from the one of even a decade earlier.

Perhaps no image personifies this new experimentation as much as that of women, especially the flapper. The perception of “flapper Jane” was young, urban, and single. As one observer noted, however, “the young girl may have invented the flapper, but it was her mother that kept in going.”<sup>98</sup> The role of women in the temperance and prohibition movement cannot be understated. The shock then that the most stalwart

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<sup>97</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 125.

<sup>98</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1958) Quoted in Drowne, *Spirits of Defiance*, 84.

supporter of the movement, the middle-class woman, had become a drinker illustrates this change in society. What is more, and especially germane to this discussion is that the middle-class woman, the mother, the wife, the daughter who had been the innocent in need of protection from the evils of alcohol and drinking, became the great symbol of the new freedom of the age.<sup>99</sup> The loss of women to the cause of temperance is best illustrated by the group, Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR.)<sup>100</sup> Competing with the WCTU for members, this new group demonstrated that women were equally committed to repeal as they once had been to prohibition. Finally, groups like the WONPR reinforce the idea that it was not only young women who engaged in drinking and the social reorganization that was occurring, but also the older generation: The "New Woman" generation who learned to organize from the WCTU and suffrage groups were part of the sea change as well.

The image and place of women demonstrate a dramatic shift in the perception of alcohol and those who drank it, in some cases public drunkenness becoming its own mark of distinction.<sup>101</sup> The older images, however, of the evils of drunkenness and drinking were still powerful ones within American society and culture. First, one of the main arguments in favor of repeal was, ironically, the increase in alcoholism.<sup>102</sup> It was argued that the lure of the nightclub and speakeasy had made a generation of alcoholics. If, the argument continued, the risqué nature of the nightlife was muted by becoming legal

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<sup>99</sup> Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 248.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

<sup>101</sup> Drowne, *Spirits of Defiance*, 75.

<sup>102</sup> Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 396.

again, a decrease in problem drinking would result. What is even more revealing about the older image of drunkenness and the drunkard can be found in much of the fiction during the time period. Much has been discussed about the writers of the era and the birth of modernism in their work. It is interesting to note how many of the “modern” characters met horrific ends, especially women, much like the characters of T.S. Arthur of a generation before. In almost every case, the flapper character in the works of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and others comes to a terrible end, such as dying destitute, forced into prostitution, or being murdered.<sup>103</sup> The message could not be clearer; to drink and partake in the new culture was to take a great risk, usually with tragic results.

This dual image of modernity on one hand and the older Victorian sensibility on the other had great influence upon the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous and the program they create in 1935. Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, the founders of AA, took their first drinks in scenes familiar to many of the same generation: Wilson the night before he shipped off to France and Smith while attending Dartmouth.<sup>104</sup> Before an examination into Alcoholics Anonymous can occur, an investigation of how these men and the first members of AA were influenced by this culture is in order. Alcoholics Anonymous was a unique program, but it was also a product of its culture. The impact of the culture that the first members were apart of and engaged in is an important first step toward understanding the forces that created the program and how this affected later decisions

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<sup>103</sup> Drowne, *Spirits of Defiance*, 46-47.

<sup>104</sup> *Pass It On*, 56; *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers: A Biography, with Recollections of early AA in the Midwest* (New York: AA World Services, 1980), 22.

made by its leaders. What they were doing and who they were is the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “OUR STORIES DISCLOSE WHAT WE USED TO BE LIKE...”

In May 1935, Bill Wilson had six months of continuous sobriety. He was in a strange city, Akron, Ohio, on business and he wanted a drink desperately. Instead he decided to put into practice his theory that talking to another alcoholic would stop him from taking that next drink. After many useless calls, Wilson finally got in touch with Henrietta Seiberling, a friend of Dr. Bob Smith, a notoriously hard-drinking proctologist in the area and tried to set up a meeting. Dr. Smith’s alcoholism was well known, a common joke being that if you went to see Dr. Smith you were really betting your ass.<sup>1</sup> He started drinking as an undergraduate at Dartmouth, where he and his friends became known as “the Dartmouth Animals” in Hanover, New Hampshire.<sup>2</sup> After a brief career in business, Smith went to the University of Michigan to pursue his medical degree, but his drinking was so severe in Ann Arbor that he was asked to leave in 1907. Smith was admitted to Rush University in Chicago, still dogged by drinking, but managed to graduate in 1910 and he secured employment in Akron. Smith’s drinking continued during this time, which he later referred to as a nightmare.<sup>3</sup> His jitters were so severe that

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<sup>1</sup> Nan Robertson, *Getting Betting in Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1988), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers: A Biography, with Recollections of Early AA in the Midwest* (New York: AA World Services Inc, 1980), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: AA World Services, Inc., 2003 [1939]), “Dr. Bob’s Nightmare,” 171-181.

he took sedatives to calm his nerves before surgery. A waitress at a diner he frequented asked what was wrong with him and her manager's reply was, "perpetual hangover."<sup>4</sup>

By the time Wilson came calling to Akron in 1935, Smith was in an almost constant state of drunkenness. Unfortunately for Wilson when he called that May afternoon Smith was too drunk to meet. The next evening, Mother's Day, a clearly guilty Smith promised his wife Anne that he would see Wilson but for no more than fifteen minutes. When the two men finally got together, Bill Wilson looked at the haggard and drawn Smith and said, "You look like you could use a drink." After dinner, the two men were left alone in the study of Henrietta Seiberling's house.

The meeting, meant to last fifteen minutes, lasted six hours. No one but Bill Wilson and Bob Smith know exactly what happened that evening, but Smith remarked later that for the first time someone else understood what he was going through and what it meant to be an alcoholic. As Smith said, "He spoke my language." Many take this common language to be that of alcoholics sharing their experiences. There is, however, much more to this common tongue of Dr. Smith and Bill Wilson. They both grew up in Vermont both reared on stories of the Civil War and unflinching respect and admiration for Abraham Lincoln. Both attended private schools in Vermont which catered to the New England elite; both attended college in an era when only the most prosperous were able to do so; both associated with the better classes of society their entire lives, each enjoying an upper middle class lifestyle, one as a surgeon the other as a stockbroker. Both also lived during the halcyon days of the 1920's, experienced the crushing blow of the Great Depression, and shared the ravages of daily drinking, which nearly wrecked

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<sup>4</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 34.

their lives. Further, both received assistance with their alcoholism from the Oxford Group, a religious movement led by Frank Buchman that tried to live by first century Christian principles.

Their common language had a great deal to do with alcoholism, but it was more than pure coincidence that these two men talked for an entire evening. In fact, many of the experiences shared by Wilson and Smith were also shared by the first generation of members of Alcoholics Anonymous. These common experiences, including drinking, formed a core of knowledge that designed the heart of the program. This chapter examines the background experiences of Smith and Wilson, and of other early members as well through their first-hand recollections and accounts of the early days of Alcoholics Anonymous. By investigating these early stories a better understanding of what allowed Alcoholics Anonymous to succeed even from its earliest days.

*Wilson and Smith in the Land of the Green Mountain Boys*

Vermont residents have always viewed themselves as a different type of New Englander. As Yvonne Daley noted in her study on Vermont writers, “Vermont is a state of mind – a place that breeds rugged individuals, quirky politicians, hard workers, stubborn idealists, unconventional economists, and gifted artists.”<sup>5</sup> This view held true at the turn of the century as the people of Vermont just began to experience modernity. Telephones and electric lights were mysterious inventions, barely making their way into the rural landscape of the Green Mountains. Railroads, let alone cars, were rare. Horses were the main mode of travel, sharing the road with automobiles until the 1920s. As

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<sup>5</sup>Yvonne Daley, *Vermont Writers: A State of Mind* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), ix.

Allen Freeman Davis illustrated in *Postcards from Vermont*, residents of the state took great pride in this pastoral image, in their traditions and their history.<sup>6</sup> This love of a shared history provides the first connection between Wilson and Smith that goes beyond alcoholism.

All Vermont boys raised in the late nineteenth century heard tales of two monumental events in their history. The first was the Revolutionary War. Towns across the state held festivals each year commemorating the landing of the pilgrims, the establishment of the republic, and the heroics of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. The story of Ethan Allen was especially poignant for Wilson because Allen came from Dorset, the same area of Vermont as did Wilson. The other major event that impacted Wilson and Smith was the Civil War. St. Johnsbury, Smith's hometown, celebrated Vermont's role in the war each year with one of the largest celebrations in the state. Wilson's grandfather, the man who raised him, served in the Vermont regiment that repelled Pickett's Charge at the battle of Gettysburg. Wilson, who accompanied his grandfather to the fiftieth reunion of the battle, especially felt the influence of the war and its veterans. In the many biographies of Wilson this trip with his grandfather was a particularly poignant event of his early years. He felt a great sense of awe toward the veterans and was dogged for much of his life by a feeling of uselessness that he did not measure up to the example of this generation of soldiers.<sup>7</sup> As Joe Dubbert observed in his work about manhood in the early part of the twentieth century, "The Sons of Civil

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<sup>6</sup> Allen Freeman Davis, *Postcards from Vermont: A Social History, 1905-1945* (Hanover, RI: University Press of New England, 2002.)

<sup>7</sup> Francis Hartigan, *Bill W.* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2000), 25.

War veterans were thirsting for their own adventure and action in order to validate their own claims of masculine fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup>

Another key aspect of Wilson and Smith’s shared experiences was their common involvement in outdoor living, an interest that occurred around the turn of the century. No state was more taken by this fad than Vermont. Both Smith and Wilson engaged in outdoor activities throughout their childhood and teen years. Wilson traveled throughout the Dorset region hunting and fishing, and Smith went to Canada for three weeks with friends on an extended hunting trip.<sup>9</sup> This involvement in the outdoors illustrates that Smith and Wilson, and their families, were engaged in the cultural currents of the time. The trend that this outdoor involvement reflected most was a concern about manhood in America, especially with regards to young boys and adolescents. Many historians have analyzed the “strenuous life.”<sup>10</sup> The focus on the New England middle-class by Anthony Rotundo is especially informative. He detailed the changing landscape of masculinity that both Wilson and Smith were exposed to and taking part in as they matured. Much of the childhood and early adolescence of both men was shaped by this drive to get back to the natural essence of men, to embrace the primitive.<sup>11</sup> Teddy Roosevelt, the childhood hero of Smith and Wilson, came to Vermont as well, further inspiring the outdoor

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<sup>8</sup> Joe Dubbert, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1979), 175.

<sup>9</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. (New York: Basic Books, 1993.)

<sup>11</sup> Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 227-228.

movement and by extension Smith and Wilson. This emphasis on outdoor activity was a key component of both Smith and Wilson for their entire lives.

From this New England background other aspects of Wilson and Smith's adult personalities emerge. Each took on an archetype that came to prominence during their adolescent years. This idea of regional manifestations of identity has been discussed more prominently concerning southern manhood, but it is a useful tool to examine New England identity in a similar fashion.<sup>12</sup> First, Bill Wilson emerged as the "Yankee genius." Wilson was very involved in the "jack-knife" industry when he was young, especially encouraged by his grandfather to build an authentic boomerang.<sup>13</sup> This "Yankee ingenuity" was a source of pride for Wilson his entire life. When he and his wife Lois finally bought their own home, Wilson invented a variety of devices throughout the house to turn on the heat, warm the water and the like. This innovative thinking served Wilson well, especially when he became one of the first stock analysts on Wall Street. It also led to his first brush with fame when he was featured in a *New York Times* article discussing a test given by Thomas Edison to prospective employees. Bill Wilson was one of the few applicants to be offered a position with Edison, but for reasons known only to Wilson he opted against taking it.<sup>14</sup>

Smith took on another persona from the era, that of the "country doctor." Though an accomplished surgeon, many observers of Smith commented on how he presented

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<sup>12</sup>Craig Thompson Friend, *Southern Masculinity: Perspective on manhood in the South since Reconstruction* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009.)

<sup>13</sup> *Pass it On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the AA Message Reached the World* (New York: AA World Services, 1984), 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name is Bill. Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 91.

himself as an uncomplicated, simple man. But as a doctor, Smith was regarded as a very kind, approachable teacher, especially after one got past the outward Yankee reserve. Many who worked with Dr. Smith remember him fondly, commenting on his calm, comfortable demeanor.<sup>15</sup> One nurse in particular stated, “He kept it simple before AA, and the nurses who scrubbed for him loved him for it,” enhancing the fatherly presence that Dr. Smith carried among his co-workers and subordinates.<sup>16</sup>

These combined aspects of Wilson and Smith’s characters, the shared experiences, the outdoor activity and the assumption of cultural avatars enhanced their images as authentic “Yankees.” As genuine Yankees, Bob Smith and Bill Wilson tapped into another cultural current of the Depression, a rediscovery of New England, especially the “real” New England of back-country Vermont and Maine.<sup>17</sup> In the 1930s Robert Frost, Norman Rockwell, and *Yankee Magazine*, all emerged to give New England, especially its rural north country, a surge in popularity across the nation, especially among the middle class. Some observers commented that it was from this region that the rest of America would learn how to cope with the economic calamity that was gripping the country.<sup>18</sup> According to one author, writing for *Yankee Magazine* during the

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<sup>15</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Also “Keep it Simple” is one of many slogans from AA that Bob Smith is credited with starting.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 263.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Depression, Yankee self-reliance and determination were a much better cure for the nation than the New Deal.<sup>19</sup>

During the Depression throughout America, including New England, there was a major drive to find the true or real American culture. The regional and folk movements of the time represented a turn inward by the country to find a solution to the present crisis.<sup>20</sup> The quest for a traditional solution to current problems led many during the time to investigate and embrace New England. Having two Yankees like Bob Smith and Bill Wilson present the AA program to their fellow members of the middle-class, gave Alcoholics Anonymous an immediate air of authenticity. Smith and Wilson both played up their New England backgrounds. Smith was proud of his New England accent, even correcting the Midwestern pronunciation of his friends and colleagues in Akron.<sup>21</sup> Along with his knack for inventing contraptions around his house, Wilson was always eager to share stories of his Vermont upbringing during his many testimonials around the country promoting AA.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the “authentic” Yankee personalities, Smith and Wilson were connected to New England history and the very fabric of American society. Smith was Ivy League- educated, and his wife was a Wellesley girl. He also graduated St. Johnsberry Academy, which counted many elite political and business leaders among its alumni, including Calvin Coolidge. The Smiths fit very well into the high society of the tire capital of the world, Akron, Ohio. As the automobile emerged in the twentieth

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>20</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 164.

<sup>21</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Pass It On*, 267.

century so too did Akron. Names like Goodyear and Seiberling took their place among the other industrial giants of the early part of the century and the Smiths were in this Akron social scene as well.

Although a descendant of the Mayflower, for his part, Wilson downplayed his lineage and associations, though he cultivated elite friends throughout his life. He also may have been a distant relative of Woodrow Wilson.<sup>23</sup> He attended a prominent prep school, Burr and Burton Academy, where he met his best friend, the scion of a prominent Albany family, Ebby Thatcher. Despite this background and the wealth of his grandfather, Wilson portrayed himself as rural hick who came to the big city. It was through Lois, however, that the Wilsons were deeply embedded in the history and elite society of the United States. Lois Wilson was a member of the Daughters of the Revolution and her father was a prominent physician in New York. Some of Lois's closest friends were the descendants of Abraham Lincoln, and she often summered with them in Manchester, Vermont (where she and Bill met). The Wilsons also stayed with other members of high society when they were in Washington, D. C. while traveling up and down the east coast.<sup>24</sup> These associations added to Bill Wilson's feeling of being an outsider, of being inferior to many of his contemporaries, especially in the social circle kept by the Burnhams, Lois Wilson's family.<sup>25</sup>

Given these many similarities and shared traits, Smith and Wilson were able to connect with each other in more ways than just their shared alcoholism. In turn, being

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<sup>23</sup> Cheever, *My Name is Bill*, 33; *Pass It On*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Diary of Lois Wilson, Stepping Stones Archives, New Bedford, NY, 12/22/1925.

<sup>25</sup> Cheever, *My Name is Bill*, 65-66.

descendants and associates of New England's mythological past, gave Smith and Wilson a built-in authenticity to the new members of Alcoholics Anonymous. As real Yankees from the usable past of the pilgrims, revolutionaries, and Civil War heroes, the cofounders formed a special bond that gave them an instant credibility among the first generation of members, sometimes referred to as the "100."<sup>26</sup>

*"Attraction Rather Than Promotion": Bringing in the "100"*

Wilson and Smith embodied two key areas of commonality that encompassed all the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Nearly every early member, Wilson and Smith included, started their drinking while in Europe fighting World War I or while attending college before or during the 1920s. Freshly commissioned from Norwich Military Academy, Bill Wilson started drinking shortly before he shipped out.<sup>27</sup> While stationed in France, he spent much of his time sampling fine wines.<sup>28</sup> Many of the other early members shared the experience of drinking their way through the war. World War I was not the first, nor is it the last war that demonstrates this connection between drinking as a soldier and problems with alcoholism later in life. The life of a soldier is treated as outside the concerns of society, allowing behavior, such as over drinking, to thrive. When the soldier returns to civilian life, the expectation is a return to societal norms. Unfortunately for many returning veterans, from World War One until the present day, that transition is a difficult one, one that AA eventually aided.

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<sup>26</sup> This reference comes from the title of AA's main text, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of how 100 men and woman have recovered from alcoholism*. On many AA related websites and printed materials the "100" or "first 100" are spoken of in a certain reverence.

<sup>27</sup> *Pass It On*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

The war was a shared event within the lives of the early membership and illustrates how their lives, in addition to being addicted to alcohol, intertwined. In reading their stories, there is a sense of regret, much similar to the attitudes of writers of their generation who witnessed the war and became disillusioned with the world around them. While it may be an overstatement to say the early members blamed Europe for their drinking, all those that participated in the war pointed to this moment as the beginning or the increase of their drinking. As members of the Lost Generation these eventual members drank, in part, to forget their experience, or like Bill Wilson, because he felt ashamed that his service was in rear areas and not on the front lines. As the negotiations in Versailles dragged on, the returning veterans believed that what they had fought for was pointless. Many believed that the machinations of the European powers destroyed any hope of the future and left them searching for meaning from such a horrible experience. In short, the best way to defeat the drunkenness and decay of the Old World was to embrace the institutions and traditions that had originally set America as the new, pious example for the world. In a very real sense, in order to gain some meaning in their lives, a strong commitment to America as an ideal is what Alcoholics Anonymous provided.

It is ironic that the other key experience of the membership was that they began drinking during their college years. Though Wilson attended Norwich Military College, he viewed college men with a certain disdain because he did not graduate. He remarked that one of the people who first came to help him as a mission from the Oxford Group appeared to be a “pantywaist, who probably got drunk once at a Junior League

cotillion.”<sup>29</sup> This bias, however, subsided by the time he met Dr. Smith. Bob Smith jumped into drinking with both feet when he attended Dartmouth College. He was a member of a drinking fraternity and took great pride in his ability to chug large quantities of beer and not be hung over the next day.<sup>30</sup> His excessive drinking continued when he went to the University of Michigan for medical school. In fact, he so overdid his alcoholic binges that university authorities ultimately asked him to leave and finish his education elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> This pattern of drinking was common among many of the early members’ stories. During this period, the men who attended college were leading a life of privilege. Higher education was not attainable by the majority of Americans until after World War II, so these men were from the upper middle-class and elite families of the Midwest and East Coast. Attending college is quite a different experience than fighting in a war, so it may appear odd that this branch of early AA members adhered to the same principles for recovery from alcoholism.

At their core, however, the same motives are at work. As the war members embraced a stricter theology and republican values in response to the excesses of the Old World, the collegiate members embraced these same institutions in response to the excesses of privilege. Like the veterans, the college alumni felt a need for redemption from a tradition steeped in American mythology. They were reconciling their sin of abusing the advantages given to them by American society. In order to reclaim their

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<sup>29</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City MN: Hazelden Educational Materials, 1979 [1991]), 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

inheritance, these members had to come back to the traditions manifested in AA that first made their families successful.

Significantly, the founders and early members of AA did not see a turn toward the temperance movement as the remedy to their problem. Overwhelmingly, the early members had a dim view of their predecessors in the fight against alcohol. When examining the stories of the early members the last thing that they wanted was preaching. As one member stated, “[It] sounds like the Salvation Army. [I] told him that and he {the AA member} said he was not going around singing on any street corners.”<sup>32</sup> As we see by the member’s response, he wanted to make it clear that this was not like other organizations dedicated to helping drunkards. Bill Wilson had to tone down his religious rhetoric as well. Dr. William Silkworth, the physician who presided over Wilson’s hospital stays in the early 1930s, told Wilson, “Look Bill, you’re having nothing but failure because you are preaching at these alcoholics. So give them the medical business, and give it to them hard.”<sup>33</sup> When it came to dealing with the press, early AA members across the country pointed out that they were not a temperance organization: “Those fellows are not reformers. There is nothing holier-than-thou about them.”<sup>34</sup> Also in the first accounts of AA, many of the stories highlight that the meetings were “just as gay as any other party held that evening despite the fact that there is nothing alcoholic to

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<sup>32</sup> *Experience, Strength and Hope: Stories from the first three editions of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2003), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Wilson, *AA Comes of Age* (New York: AA World Services Inc., 1957), 68.

<sup>34</sup> “There is Hope,” *The Hackettstown Courier-Post*, 1/19/1939.

drink.”<sup>35</sup> In the features and editorials written about the early program the authors always pointed out that this was not some temperance group. “Don’t make the mistake of picturing these people as psalm-singing blue noses, smug reformers, starry-eyed with missionary zeal,” declared one such article. “They are notably cheerful, hearty people, ready with laughter, completely candid about themselves.”<sup>36</sup> The articles and editorials emphasized that AA was a program founded by drunks for drunks. The editors like to stress this point with tantalizing headlines such as “John D. Rockefeller Dines Toss-Pots,”<sup>37</sup> and “Ex-Drunks Help ‘Beat the Booze.’”<sup>38</sup> The early members of AA and the generation of journalists covering the new organization held the temperance movement in similar low regard. Alcoholics Anonymous tapped into a societal feeling that the old means of helping drunkards was ineffective and that something new was needed, and in the case of the new Alcoholics Anonymous program, welcomed.

The early membership of AA wanted to distance itself from the temperance movement for three reasons. First, as Dr. Silkworth said, drunks did not like being preached at. Many of the early members, Smith included, testified to an inherent dislike of organized religion, in most cases since childhood. As Smith noted in his personal story, “I swore that when old enough, I would never darken the doors of a church again.”<sup>39</sup> The early members of AA heard about the evils of drinking throughout their

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<sup>35</sup> Elrick B. Davis, “Alcoholics Anonymous Makes Its Stand Here,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 10/21/1939.

<sup>36</sup> Howard Vincent O’Brien, “All things Considered,” *Chicago Daily News*, 4/30/1940.

<sup>37</sup> *Pass It On*, 234.

<sup>38</sup> “Ex-Drunks Help ‘Beat the Booze,’” *Pittsburgh Telegraph*, 1/6/1941.

<sup>39</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 172.

childhood and adolescence, yet this message did not have any effect on their adult behavior. By the 1930s, the ideas of the temperance crowd were outdated. These men were part of a world that was in the process of becoming modern, one that embraced science and reason. The religious movements of their youth did not have the substance this new world required for legitimacy.

The second reason was the temperance movement's strong association with women. In discussing the cultural shifts in America, Ann Douglas presented a picture of the changes in American culture that Alcoholics Anonymous exemplified. In her first work, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Douglas discussed how American novelists and cultural opinion makers began to change in the nineteenth century and by the turn of the century the focus of American culture was decidedly feminine. As the ministers and the women they preached to defined American culture, the effect was seen throughout society. In her next book, *Terrible Honesty*, she discussed how the modernist movement of the post World War I era was a reaction to this feminization of American culture; she sees the era as an attempt to re-introduce the masculine back into the culture.<sup>40</sup> While Douglas saw the stock market crash as the end of this movement, the emergence of AA proves otherwise. AA was a movement dedicated to the reaffirmation of the masculine in American society. Wilson, Smith and the other early members did not want to be associated with the earlier temperance movement because they wanted to be seen as a modern movement: one that embraced science and, much like the authors Douglas

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<sup>40</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.)

examined, one that embraced an older theology that was lost during their childhoods.

These men wanted to return to a society that insisted upon toughness, a toughness dare I say honesty, needed to attain true sobriety. Or as one member wrote about the program, “To the new man I would also like to say that this program is not for sissies for, in my humble opinion, it takes a man to make the grade.”<sup>41</sup> This commitment to toughness, to not being a sissy, is reminiscent of early twentieth century thinking on masculinity. As Joe Dubbert noted about the generation of post Civil War men, they were reared on stories of personal success and the example of their fathers and grandfathers.<sup>42</sup>

The third reason the early membership wanted to distance itself from the earlier temperance movement was its association with the failure of Prohibition. Prohibition was “the great promise,” and for many of the early members Prohibition was the great disappointment of their lives. Many of their stories reveal disdain for the Prohibition Era, not simply because it failed as a social experiment, but because it failed them personally. Numerous early members felt that national Prohibition would save them from their drinking problem. As Bob Smith remarked, “With the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment I felt quite safe. I knew everyone would buy a few bottles, or cases, of liquor as their exchequers permitted, and that it would soon be gone.”<sup>43</sup> Instead, he soon discovered how easy it was for the medical profession to get an almost unlimited supply of alcohol, for “medicinal purposes.” Dr. Smith took to using the Akron phone book to write bogus prescriptions to maintain his habit. As if this were not enough, he also made

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<sup>41</sup> *Experience Strength and Hope*, 326.

<sup>42</sup> Dubbert, *A Man's Place*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 175.

regular contact with a bootlegger. The other future members of AA also demonstrated the failure of Prohibition by using countless methods to circumvent the Volstead Act. Many of them made their own “hooch”. Others, like Bill Wilson lived a Fitzgerald-like existence in going to various speakeasies and night clubs to evade the law.<sup>44</sup> In telling their stories, the first members of AA felt that their ability to get booze proved that the law was a joke. This was a sentiment shared by the general population.<sup>45</sup> If they could so easily flout the law, there must be a problem in the approach to dealing with alcohol and the inherent problems it presented to society. And they knew that, not only were they breaking the law, but their excessive drinking was damaging to themselves and their families. As one member stated, “to drink was to break the nation’s law, which I would never do, yet did anyway.”<sup>46</sup> This person, called the “European Drinker”, displayed devotion to the United States and its laws, but when it came to Prohibition, that respect became secondary to having that next drink.

Prohibition made these middle-class men into something they never thought they would become, lawbreakers. While they took responsibility for their own drinking, it is evident that they felt quite strongly that national Prohibition was a mistake. Another interesting outlook on Prohibition, and the realization that violating the Constitution was only one aspect of the damage of their drinking, came from a member who entitled his story “The Seven Month Slip.” He stated, “Oh yes, I outsmarted our national laws but I

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<sup>44</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 30; *Experience, Strength and Hope*, 240; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Class, Culture, and Politics in Prohibition-Era New York City, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.)

<sup>46</sup> *Experience, Strength and Hope*, 249-250.

was not quite successful in evading the old moral law.”<sup>47</sup> This illustrated that national law was insufficient for his personal needs. A deeper, more personal solution was needed to help the problem drinker. Ultimately, neither the moral approach of the temperance movement nor the legal thrust of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment proved effective enough to solve the problem of drunkenness. In short, society had failed to solve the problems of the individual drinker who proved invulnerable to both moral and legal strictures. A new system, one that embraced the individual yet used the group, one that stressed personal responsibility, yet the importance of helping others as well, was needed to help drunkards to achieve sobriety.

It is not surprising that much of the early press associated with Alcoholics Anonymous also stressed that it was not an organization devoted to the prohibition of alcohol. Similar to their aversion to being associated with the overly moralistic temperance crowd, the early members did not want to be thrown in with those advocating a return to Prohibition. While it is largely forgotten now, national Prohibition was still a controversial topic in the 1930s. As Alcoholics Anonymous spread across the country, each news story introducing the program stressed that AA had no quarrel with alcohol, those who made it, or those that could drink it without losing control. “There will be no anti-drinking anti-liquor, prohibition campaigns,” declared a news story from 1941, “there will be no public demonstrations.”<sup>48</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous wanted everyone to know that it did not care whether the greater population drank, or the state of the nation’s alcohol policy. They were not out to reform the world, members announced at every

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>48</sup> “Alcoholics Anonymous,” *San Antonio Light*, 6/30/1941.

turn, just themselves. Bill Wilson made this point quite often when writing from the Alcoholic Foundation offices in New York or when he gave interviews. It was, in part, from the prohibition question that Alcoholics Anonymous took one of its strongest principles, avoiding public controversy by not taking a stance on any outside issues. This stance aided the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous in every era of its development.

In addition to setting themselves apart from the early temperance movement, Alcoholics Anonymous also used a hero of temperance organizations, Abraham Lincoln, to enhance their program and image. AA meetings are replicas of the small town meetings that Wilson and Smith experienced in Vermont. The meetings echo the great republican tradition that was preserved by Lincoln in the Civil War. During the Depression, those who did not see Franklin Roosevelt as a hero embraced Lincoln as the forgotten hero whose example could restore the United States to its proper republican roots. The cult of Lincoln, like the reemergence of New England, was a profound middle-class cultural theme during the Depression. Many biographies, paintings, and essays about the great emancipator appeared at the time and the Wilsons appeared to participate in this rediscovery of Lincoln. Not only were they family friends of the Lincolns (Lois anyway), but in their Bedford Hills home, Stepping Stones, they displayed a bust of their hero in the living room.<sup>49</sup> Later, as AA established itself, Wilson became interested in the history of temperance, exploring the links between the Washingtonians and Alcoholics Anonymous. Among his findings, published in the *Grapevine*, the official magazine of AA, was a series of three speeches given by Lincoln on the issue of

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<sup>49</sup> Stepping Stones is preserved as the Wilson's furnished and decorated it during their lifetimes.

temperance. Wilson wrote of his respect and admiration for Lincoln and went on to discuss where AA improved upon the experience of the Washingtonians and the beliefs of Lincoln.<sup>50</sup>

Wilson's admiration for Lincoln was consistent with his overall political outlook, which also reflected the views of the first cohort of AA members. Wilson was a life-long Republican who favored the Grand Old Party in all elections. In some of his last drunken ruminations he wrote (rather unintelligible) letters to Franklin Roosevelt voicing his opposition to government interference in the economy.<sup>51</sup> Also according to his personal secretary, Nell Wing, a liberal Democrat and ardent New Dealer, he often engaged in debates with her about politics.<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that Wilson was not a social conservative, but more a fiscal one who favored small government, which is seen in the overall design of Alcoholics Anonymous and its decided lack of structure. Also, writing to a friend before the 1964 election, he declared that he could not bring himself to vote for Barry Goldwater, based on Goldwater's social policies.<sup>53</sup>

This admiration of Lincoln led to comparisons between the former and Wilson. An early AA member from the Los Angeles area wrote a rousing speech comparing Wilson to Lincoln, which he used throughout California to raise awareness (and funds). "He was an emancipator," wrote this member, "who, when the final count is taken, will

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<sup>50</sup> "Washington, Lincoln and Temperance in their times," *A Grapevine Milestone Report* (AA World Service Archives. New York) 6, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Cheever, *My Name is Bill*, 110.

<sup>52</sup> Nell Wing, *Grateful to have been There: My 42 Years with Bill and Lois and the evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Park Ridge, IL, Parkside Publishing Corp, 1992), 49.

<sup>53</sup> Bill W. to Spencer Willingale 9/2/1964, AA Archives.

have set free as many slaves from the yoke of John Barleycorn as did our much beloved and great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln free from the sting lash of Simon Legree.”<sup>54</sup>

By making Wilson the equal of Lincoln, freeing drunks from alcoholic slavery, the speaker not only pulled one of the heroes of the temperance and prohibition movements into the ranks of AA, but he also latched on to a cultural symbol that many of the early membership embraced as a reinforcement of their values in opposition to the values of the New Deal. While some have commented on the similarities between the New Deal and AA, much more of AA’s philosophy is seen in the writings of Herbert Hoover, especially in the early years of the program.<sup>55</sup>

Another common experience uniting the early membership was the economic boom of the 1920s. Almost every early member of AA was successful during the “Roaring” decade. As one of the first stock analysts and a lively member of the Manhattan social scene, Wilson almost walked directly out of a Fitzgerald short story. One of the first female members (a rarity in early AA) described herself as, “Scott Fitzgerald’s little lost debutante, abused, misunderstood, and running wild.”<sup>56</sup> While not in the glamorous setting of Manhattan, those who coalesced in Akron after Wilson and Smith first met, also experienced the boom of the 1920s, largely because of the rise of the automobile and the part Akron’s rubber industry played in that explosion. A number of AA pioneers from the Akron area were able to turn their craftsmen and technical

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to Bill W. from Harry Billings, 4/24/1941, AA Archives.

<sup>55</sup> P. Ferraioli, “Alcoholics Anonymous and Liberalism: Ideological, Religious and Political Considerations” (Ph. D. Diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1996.)

<sup>56</sup> *Experience, Strength and Hope*, 349.

backgrounds into successful businesses.<sup>57</sup> While many blamed their drinking for their business failures, along with the economic disaster of 1929, one also gets the sense that they felt that their success and lifestyle during the 1920s were not achieved by honest means nor that their behavior was fully moral or ethical. As the identification with the Fitzgerald character shows, these people lived deeply mired in guilt during the 1920s. Not only were they breaking the law by drinking but somehow all of this new wealth was not quite legitimate either. Wilson described his life during the 1920s this way:

For the next few years fortune threw money and applause my way. I had arrived. My judgment and ideas were followed by many to the tune of paper millions. The great boom of the late twenties was seething and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part of my life. There was loud talk in the jazz places uptown. Everyone spent in thousands and chattered in millions. Scoffers could scoff and be damned. I made a host of fair-weather friends.<sup>58</sup>

While this is a picture of success, one gets the impression that it was fleeting, especially the reference to “fair-weather friends.” Wilson displayed guilt over his Wall Street success. He did not see it as honest work. This illustrates his rural background and values as well. Similar to Fitzgerald, Wilson was troubled that his success did not come from labor, but from a system of speculation that he viewed as flawed. As he and other members drank and made fortunes, breaking the law and turning their backs on their childhood values, the Depression became a personal reckoning for them, as well as the nation. For Wilson, the collapse of the economy brought on the worst of his drinking. He recounts that from 1930 until 1935, he barely drew a sober breath. During this period there were numerous visits to hospitals, all vain efforts to help him get sober. The final

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 101, 248.

<sup>58</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3.

blow to Wilson was that he was not welcome on Wall Street and his wife had to become the principal breadwinner.<sup>59</sup> When AA was created it not only reacted to the experience of the Depression but the 1920s as well. Both eras, that of excess and destruction, were discarded. As Wilson, Smith, and the other early members crafted Alcoholics Anonymous, they returned to the principles of an era that they barely experienced, yet yearned for. They created a society based on personal responsibility, community, and one grounded in faith. The extravagant individual of the twenties was not welcome, and unlike the Depression, which loomed like a reaper in the minds of the generation, the reckoning led to redemption.

*“Experience, Strength and Hope”*

In his autobiography Wilson underscored his view that farm labor was a wholesome living in contrast to the Wall Street speculation with which he had made his fortune and then lost his way. He commented to his wife during their east coast stock-analysis mission in 1925 that farm laborers were, “the real workers of the country... honest, kindly people.”<sup>60</sup> Wilson commented that some farm work he did on the same trip was the “last honest manual labor on my part for many a day.”<sup>61</sup> As his drinking got worse, Lois Wilson tried to get Bill as far from New York as possible. When they were in the country, he did not drink, most of the time anyway. This experience of using the

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<sup>59</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Lois Wilson Personal Diary, 8/13/1925, Stepping Stones Archives.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

country as a healing excursion was common throughout AA's early history.<sup>62</sup> Bob Smith returned to Vermont a number of times in an effort to sober up; other members went back to their parents' farms in an effort to do the same. Early on in AA, a farm was established in Connecticut, under the auspices of a nun, as a place for drying out particularly difficult cases.<sup>63</sup>

This urban to rural experience is informative in a number of ways. A significant number of the members were part of the great population shift that occurred at the opening of the twentieth century, again giving us a broader picture of who the first people in AA really were. Next, it demonstrated the middle-class bias toward the city. In many of the testimonials the authors discussed running off to the city from the farm and falling prey to its excitement and temptations. This plot device, to borrow a phrase from literary circles, helped to establish a link between members and readers from outside the program, potential members especially, because it harkened back to temperance novels and testimonials that were from the generation before. Of course, unlike the people from the temperance era literature, this "country cure" would always fail, sooner or later. While the home in the country may have had a temporary restorative power, it was never enough to keep an individual sober for very long. Another modern aspect of the program that came about from this experience was that AA began and thrived in urban areas. As it spread across the United States, the largest cities of the country were the focal point of AA in the region. Soon after the 1935 founding of AA in Akron, for example, the largest

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<sup>62</sup> And the argument can be made even today. Just a quick scan of the location of many of the top treatment centers demonstrates that the bias of the country over the city in curing drunkenness is still prevalent.

<sup>63</sup> Unidentified news clipping from 3/29/1940, in *Alcoholics Anonymous 1939-1942 Scrapbook*. The Archives of the General Service Board of AA New York, 1985.

group of sober alcoholics in Ohio was in Cleveland, Akron's larger neighbor to the north. Like other aspects of the temperance movement, AA used similar language and style to establish a link with the older tradition, but then offered a new, modern alternative, ultimately distancing itself from the past and presenting an alternative program for the recovery of the alcoholic.

This participation in the "rural-versus-city" dynamic was only one of the ways in which early AA members identified with one another and their shared middle-class background. Most came from prosperous backgrounds and were successful in their chosen professions until alcohol cut them down. It was not just the loss of a job, however, that bound these men together. More than losing a position, what truly brought them together was the loss of middle-class status. Many of the stories mark as the low point of their experience the taking of a blue-collar job. "The Seven Month Slipper" stated that he was "assigned the hardest job in the factory."<sup>64</sup> The most galling of these experiences was when a former owner was forced to take a lesser position in the company he once owned. This happened on at least two occasions, and as one might expect, never ended well for the alcoholic.<sup>65</sup> The fall from grace is significant for two reasons. First, when the alcoholic was forced to take a lesser job, the episode was a punishment, not simply a fact of his worsening economic situation. The blow to his pride and manly self-esteem was evident as he related this story to the reader. Second, it is a message similar to temperance literature that feared for the soul and status of the middle class. These alcoholics affirmed the belief that liquor was the great leveler of society.

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<sup>64</sup> *Experience Strength and Hope*, 49.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Later, Alcoholics Anonymous would branch out its definition of “hitting bottom,” but for many of the first 100, the fall from white collar life to blue collar status represented a catastrophic decline.

Just as the fall from grace, embodied by the change of jobs from white to blue collar, was a common thread with the early members, so too were other experiences that leveled the pride of the first members. The place of the wives in this experience was a key component. Bill Wilson’s experience was common among the early members. As drinking became more and more of a problem and he became unemployable by 1933, Lois Wilson was forced to take a job at a department store. Wilson and others spoke of this chain of events as filled with shame and humiliation. He compounded his shame by stealing from his wife’s purse in order to pay off some drink tabs and, of course, to procure more liquor.<sup>66</sup> While no other members shared this much detail in their stories, the situation of having one’s wife as the primary breadwinner was common. Many of these men felt useless, resentful, and depressed about their current situation. Not only did they fail in their careers, but many of them had to rely on their wives for financial support as well. It was a blow to their manhood that they could not duck, even as they continued to drink to forget their troubles. As many alcoholics will attest, drinking to forget only led to more morbid reflection, and more drinking.

The other examples from the wives in the story of the 100 are intertwined. In both, they are assaults on the masculine sensibilities of the members. A common theme in all of the stories is the shame men felt when their wives saw them in their drunken state. Many members also felt the same way about their mothers seeing them in such a

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<sup>66</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 6.

condition, and they often tried to hide their drinking from both wife and mother. One member stated that it was because of the misery of his mother that he eventually got sober.<sup>67</sup> The shame of the two most revered feminine archetypes of the early Twentieth Century seeing them as drunkards was strongly associated with the testimonials and images of the temperance movement. In a similar vein, the wives were caregivers to their ailing husbands, assuming the roles of wife and mother. While this led to great appreciation years later, it also was one reason why members felt they needed to sober up, to “become a man.” This dual role of wife and mother led to resentment on the part of many members. Many of the early stories in *Alcoholics Anonymous* related how they were inspected upon entering the house and the lengths they went to hide their bottles throughout the houses.<sup>68</sup> The impression from these episodes is that the alcoholic felt he was treated like a misbehaving child and he resented the implication. Of course, all of this resentment and shame did not lead to a change of behavior. Other steps were needed in order for that life change to occur.

Even here the role of the wife proved key. Most of the early stories mention how it was the wife who first inquired about getting help for her husband, first by looking into medical solutions and later by contacting Alcoholics Anonymous. This again is reminiscent of the temperance stories. Often it was the prominent woman in the drunkard’s life that first tried to solve the drunkard’s problem. Going to church, joining a temperance society, engaging in a crusade, and even going into the bars and taverns to retrieve their husbands were avenues attempted by the heroines of the temperance

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<sup>67</sup> *Experience, Strength and Hope*, 140.

<sup>68</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 176.

movement. In a similar vein, the early membership relates how their wives got in touch with AA and invited the sober alcoholics to help their suffering husbands. This was, in fact, part of the early strategy of AA to gain new members. “If there is any indication that he wants to stop,” noted the authors of the Big Book, “have a good talk with the person most interested in him — usually his wife.”<sup>69</sup> Not only was this a practical step, seeing how a practicing alcoholic was more defiant, but it had other, more symbolic uses as well. As Wilson often summarized the AA program, the first part of the process was (and still is) a leveling of pride, or deflation of the ego.<sup>70</sup> By first engaging the wife about a potential member, the sober alcoholics announced to the drunk that he was not capable of being approached, he was not man enough.

The approach to the wife was for many members the final straw in breaking their pride. After they had been reduced from the middle-class, after they had to be supported by their wives financially, after alcohol had ravaged them so completely that their wives had in effect become their nurse and mother, they could not even direct themselves to their own recovery. They needed the help of a woman. They were lessened as men as a result, and had proved incapable on their own of achieving the middle-class dream of individual success. It was into this situation that the sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous presented himself. It was his task to restore the alcoholic to his rightful place as head of the family and head of the household. This was the goal, along with living without alcohol, of the first AA members: to restore themselves, and in order to continue that restoration, help restore their fellow drunkards. It was on this individual

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 59.

basis, each individual helping another to form a community of like-minded fellows that was the solution that they embraced; it was consistent with the Depression theme of the community helping the individual succeed. It was similar to the solution that was being directed to the problems of society at the time, but without governmental assistance or political ramifications. AA, while offering a solution to drunkards, was engaging in a solution for all of society.

The men that made up these first members of Alcoholics Anonymous acutely felt the pressures of the Depression. The reversal in traditional gender roles only emphasized the shame and guilt of not supporting their families. After living through the failure of prohibition, these men viewed themselves, their peers and their country in decline. The social movements that they witnessed in their youth and young adulthoods looked to be incredibly ineffective against the overwhelming power of the Depression, which only increased their drinking and feelings of hopelessness. Instead of looking to a governmental or societal solution to their drinking problem, and their loss of middle-class status, Smith and Wilson along with other early members of AA chose a more personal and traditional method of aiding those in need. Alcoholics Anonymous was an example of a stronger element of society reaching out to help the weak, like the government largess of the New Deal, or of the earlier ethos of the Progressive movement. It was a collection of like minded weak individuals coming together to help others with a similar problem. It was the power of the group helping the individual to achieve sobriety and, especially important during the Depression, regain the individual's place in middle-class society.

*“On the Tail of a Comet”: The Role of the Oxford Group*

This chapter is about the common experiences of Wilson, Smith and the early membership. To make the picture complete, one needs to understand the role of the Oxford Group (later Moral Re-Armament) in the story of Alcoholics Anonymous. In Dr. Smith’s final address, he detailed that the program largely came about "as a result of our study of the Good Book," specifically the Sermon on the Mount, Chapter Thirteen of First Corinthians, and the Book of James.<sup>71</sup> However, what directed Alcoholics Anonymous to these passages was the Oxford Group, which began in 1919 under the direction of Frank Buchman. Much like the hospital experience of Bill Wilson in 1934, though not concerned with alcoholism, Frank Buchman had a similar spiritual revelation in 1908. This experience led him to found a world wide society dedicated to a change of heart for all of humanity:

I had entered the little church with a divided will, nursing pride, selfishness, ill will. The woman's simple talk personalized the Cross for me that day...it produced in me a vibrant feeling, as though a strong current of life had suddenly been poured into me...<sup>72</sup>

This experience convinced Buchman "that such an experience, if multiplied was the answer to the world's ills."<sup>73</sup> He began structuring a group that would lead the world to such a change on a person-to-person basis.

It was this idea of change that made the group dedicated to the principles of first century Christianity.<sup>74</sup> The world had lost touch with the basic teachings of Jesus Christ,

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<sup>71</sup>Dr. Bob's Last Major Talk, 1950, Cleveland OH. Lansing AA Archives, Lansing, MI.

<sup>72</sup>R. H. Murray, *Group Movements Throughout the Ages* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 306.

<sup>73</sup>Willard Hunter, *AA's Roots in the Oxford Group* (August 1988), 2. Lansing AA Archives.

and a return to the common fellowship of the early Christians was needed to cause the change in the world's attitude that Frank Buchman desired. Just as early Christianity was simple, so was Buchman's program for a spiritual experience. The five "C's" were the basic tenants of the group: Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Continuance.<sup>75</sup> Along with the five "C's" there were four absolutes that helped to govern the group: love, honesty, purity and unselfishness.

The absolutes are rather self-explanatory, but the five "C's" need some elaboration. Confidence was establishing a rapport with a group member and coming into the group. Confession was the process by which the new member tells of their sins, either in public or private. Conviction was the mental process by which a person becomes fully aware of their sins. Conversion was the point where a person was willing to let go of their sins and commit fully to the group. Finally, Continuance was the process of going out and finding other sinners and bring them to the life change that they had just experienced, therefore starting the whole process over.<sup>76</sup> Other integral parts of the Oxford program were the ideas of "house parties" and "quiet time." The house parties were gatherings where members of the group could share their experiences with one another and hear confessions of other group members. Quiet time was a time specifically designed to facilitate meditation or for listening for God's message.<sup>77</sup>

Both Bill Wilson and Bob Smith went to the Oxford Group looking for a solution to their drinking problems. It was from his association with the Oxford Group that Wilson found Dr. Smith who was part of the group in Akron. The meetings of the group

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<sup>74</sup> Walter Clark, *The Oxford Group* (New York: Bookman Press, 1951), 27.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

provided a safe, comfortable place for Smith, Wilson and others because they were gatherings not only of like-minded people, but also of people of a similar class. The goal of the Oxfords was to recruit the best of society, the leaders of society, and bring the rest of the world along.<sup>78</sup> This also was the manner in which Wilson and Smith were brought into their respective groups in New York and Akron. Smith was brought to the group by Henrietta Seiberling, estranged wife of Frank Seiberling, the rubber magnate. She lived on the Firestone estate in the gatehouse to keep the children close to their father. Incidentally, Seiberling was exposed to the group by a great push by Buchman and his group to gain entry into Akron by promising to sober up through his methods one of the members of the Seiberling family. As it turned out, his methods ultimately were unsuccessful. From this meeting, Seiberling actively worked on helping Dr. Smith, along with other Oxford members, especially the Williams family who frequently hosted “house parties.” While much is made of Wilson going to the 21<sup>st</sup> Street mission of the Calvary Episcopal Church, as if to signify that he was truly down and out, his introduction to the Oxford Group was more in line with the normal method of recruiting new members. His boarding school friend, Ebby Thatcher went on a recruitment mission to save him. Thatcher was a member of a very influential Albany family, and had been sober for about six months prior to his meeting with Wilson.<sup>79</sup> Thatcher himself was introduced to the Oxford Group by another prominent Yankee offspring, Rowland Hazard. So, while the legend of Wilson plays up the “man of the people” image, he was someone that the Oxford Group wanted in their fold in order to convert the world to their

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<sup>78</sup> Hartigan, *Bill W.*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> The story of the meeting between Thatcher and Wilson is told and retold in AA related literature. The best versions are Wilson’s recollection of the event in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 8-13, and the authorized biography of Wilson, *Pass It On*, 111-112, 115-116.

brand of first Century Christianity. Like Smith, he was seen as someone Buchman would have called “maximum.”

Wilson and Smith did not have a structure for their new program, especially where and when to meet, what to do at meetings and how to organize an effective agenda. Their early solution was to bring their new recruits to Oxford meetings, especially the meetings held at the Williams’ household in Akron. This meeting and the Williamses themselves though not alcoholics were an active part of early AA in Akron. When Alcoholics Anonymous officially left the Oxford Group in 1937, leaving the Williams family was one of the more difficult growing pains of the new society. There was a genuine affection between the alcoholics, dubbed “the alcoholic squadron” of the Oxford Group, and the Williamses. In some of the reminiscences, T. Henry and Clarace Williams come across as parental figures to the early AA members. There is a bit of a cloud as to whether Smith and Wilson were recruiting for their own new, as yet unnamed group, or were they recruiting for the Oxfords. The answer lies somewhere in the middle. The first person contacted by the team of Smith and Wilson, forever remembered as “AA #3,” was a prominent lawyer and former politician in Akron. He certainly fit the bill as a person the Oxford Group took an interest in. Also the Wilsons, with Lois Wilson’s diary as a guide, demonstrated that they were active in that group. Lois wrote of her “convictions” on numerous occasions and, while her commentary is brief, she does note many of the activities she and Bill participated in with the Oxfords.<sup>80</sup> It is no surprise that Lois Wilson might have felt more comfortable in the Oxford Group. While Bill Wilson was not from as meager a background as he liked to portray, Lois was from a more exclusive circle. Sitting in house parties with the Hazards and Thatchers was second nature for her.

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<sup>80</sup> Lois Wilson Diary, 3/13/1937, Stepping Stones Archives.

It is evident that a key to the success of early AA had a great deal to do with this middle to upper class religious society. By bringing the new members to these meetings, they were presenting them to their peers as someone to be redeemed. It was an action of social confession, bringing the former/fallen member of society back into the fold. Especially at an Oxford gathering, not only was it a collection of likeminded, economically similar people, there was a very good chance that someone of a greater social standing, a celebrity, leader of the community, or business leader was likely to be in attendance. This drunkard's coming out, as it were, gave the new society a key part of their program, and also lessons for the future that they did not immediately foresee. It allowed the new member to feel welcome; until very recently they had been scorned and shunned.

Wilson, however, did have difficulty with the Oxford Group when he brought less than desirable people:

The Oxford Group self-consciously aimed to convert the world, and had chosen to achieve this by seeking out and converting the socially prominent who would allow their prominence to help them "carry the message" to other potential leaders. The only thing which Bill Wilson and his coterie showed any interest, however was seeking out hopeless alcoholics, prominent or not.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, Wilson and his new companions, Fitz M. and Hank P., did not carry the message of Jesus Christ, which the other Oxfords insisted upon as part of becoming like first century Christians. Instead, they simply talked about sobriety and how to attain it. As the still nameless group of alcoholics grew, they also felt that an exclusive gathering of drunks on Tuesday nights was far more beneficial than the regular Oxford Group

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<sup>81</sup>Kurtz, *Not God*, 44.

meetings. A split soon occurred. It was 1937 when the main body of Oxfords made their feelings clear, "Alcoholics just weren't worth the trouble...Bill Wilson should abandon his efforts with drunks . . . (this was) the divergent work of a secret, ashamed sub-group."<sup>82</sup>

It was with this that the little band of alcoholics realized that they did not need the Oxfords to remain sober, but rather they needed each other. After the main body made its feeling clear, the alcoholics split entirely.

In Akron, the story was the same but the process took a little longer. Dr. Smith and his group, Bill D. and Bob E., were quite comfortable in the Oxford Group. This may have been because Smith had a closer relationship with the Oxfords as well as the perception that he was the more spiritually minded of the two founders. Soon, however the same objections arose from the rest of the group members. A new recovering alcoholic from Cleveland, Clarence S., was gathering Catholic members who were not allowed to attend the Protestant Oxford Group meetings. Lastly growth in Cleveland and Akron was faster than in New York, and all of the alcoholics attended the Oxford meeting that Smith did. They soon began to dominate the group which made the other group members uneasy.<sup>83</sup> With the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939, the Akron and Cleveland members decided they had sufficient strength to break away from the Oxford Group.

Alcoholics Anonymous was indebted to the Oxford Group but the split between the two was inevitable. In many regards, it had more to do with the Oxfords and their overall mission of trying to convert the world, namely through high profile members, to

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 80.

an idealized form of Christianity. The early members of AA were already becoming leery of public attention and they also weren't eager to put their recent alcoholism on display. Also, the new group of alcoholics wasn't terribly interested in finding high-profile members, middle-class status notwithstanding, but they were already more concerned with helping their fellow drunks. Lastly, the very high standards of the Oxford Group, of being "maximum" and "absolute" struck many members as unrealistic. After experiencing the "absolute" solution to drinking that prohibition tried to be, less ambitious goals were more to the liking of the men who founded Alcoholics Anonymous.

### *Conclusion*

The Oxford Group provided the final piece to the mosaic of the early AA membership. It was here the early members met and felt comfortable among their peers, discussing matters of spirituality, good works, and maintaining their sobriety. Much more was at work than a group dedicated to reviving first-century Christianity. These men, and a few women, who made up the "first 100" shared a life experience that shaped who they were and what they believed, not just about themselves, but about their nation and society. They took their cue from two Vermont Yankees, who were the first to connect on this new basis. The New England connection was especially significant during the Depression. It was during this time that a revival of interest in the region specifically, and in the history of the United States in general, was occurring. The people who had experienced the horrors of World War I, the excesses of the 1920s, and the depths of the 1930s, wanted to find their way back to a simpler time, a time that they had been raised to revere, a time when their forefathers built up the nation.

Not only were these greater themes of experience at work in the coalescing of Alcoholics Anonymous, but more personal themes were at work as well. The overwhelming majority of the new membership came to their drinking in a similar manner, almost all belonged to the upwardly mobile middle class, and the expectations of that class had a great deal to do with their failure and fall into alcoholism. When the Depression stunted that mobility and for the first time in their lives actually sent them spiraling down the feelings of shame and uselessness became acute as many within the middle-class blamed themselves for their own failures and the nations. Finally, the reversal in gender roles that occurred in many of these households had a great deal to do with how they experienced their alcoholism and what they did to recover from it. Perhaps the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, best sums up the importance of the shared background of the “100”: “The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us, but that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined.”<sup>84</sup> The horrors of alcoholism brought Wilson, Smith, and the rest of AA together, but their shared cultural background kept them together and helped them forge their greatest unifying force, the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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<sup>84</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 17.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “RARELY HAVE WE SEEN A PERSON FAIL”: EARLY STRATEGIES AND THE WRITING OF *ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS*, 1935-1940

According to AA legend, Bill Wilson struggled writing the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1938 especially the chapter “How It Works” which introduced the now famous twelve steps to recovery program. As he related in the official history of AA, *AA Comes of Age*:

I was in this anything but spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through...I could not get my mind on the job, much less put my heart into it...Finally, I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know... When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant.<sup>1</sup>

The twelve steps are the corner stone of Alcoholics Anonymous. They form the basic path of recovery, demanding that the new members admit powerlessness over alcohol, that they are insane and that their lives are currently unmanageable. After this admission of complete defeat, the steps guide alcoholics to sober living. Starting with the third step, which requires those following the program to turn their will and life over to God, the steps continued through a rugged process of self-examination, contrition, penance and service. Steps four through twelve incorporate a higher power, fellow alcoholics and the world at large. It is through this program that individuals regain their place in society.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of AA* (New York: AA World Services, 1957), 160, 161.

Many who wrote on the history of Alcoholics Anonymous discussed the inspirational character of the steps and their first writing but it is important to discuss how Alcoholics Anonymous functioned before the steps were codified. Specifically, an investigation of how it started, gathered its membership and grew is required to understand Alcoholics Anonymous and its place in American culture. This chapter will investigate that early process. How did Wilson and Smith gain new members? What tactics and rituals did they use? What resonated in these early years with the first generation of AA members? Finally, what insight does this provide about the culture of the 1930s? The initial effort to gain new members provides the answer to these questions.

Just as there is no denying the place of the twelve steps, there is no denying the impact of the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known as the “Big Book,” in 1939. What had been a slow-growing society of former drunkards grew by leaps and bounds after the publication of the group’s basic text. In the “Big Book,” Bill Wilson not only outlined the steps needed to attain sobriety, he offered a vision of how society needed to change, specifically to help the drunken man who not only experienced the ravages of alcoholism, but the ravages of the Depression as well. Wilson pointed the way to restoring sobriety to the new membership, but he also wanted to restore their sense of manhood. The volume *Alcoholics Anonymous* attempted to achieve both tasks by making sobriety and manhood synonymous. This aspect of the book is examined in section two of this chapter.

*Flying Blind: The Early Years of Alcoholics Anonymous*

Bill Wilson often referred to the early period of Alcoholics Anonymous as their “flying blind period.”<sup>2</sup> Reviewing that era, the description is apt. They were successful with some of their earliest recruits and these successes provided a blueprint for later methods. The first person with whom Smith and Wilson succeeded (AA #3) was Bill D., an Akron lawyer and former politician who had fallen on hard times because of his drinking. The duo found Bill D. through Smith’s connections at Akron City Hospital. He asked the ward nurse if there was anyone who was a “real down and outer.” The nurse responded, “Yes, in fact, he punched two nurses and is now in restraints.”<sup>3</sup> Bill D. was taken out of the receiving ward and placed in a private room at the request of Smith and Wilson. Before going to see him, Smith and Wilson approached his wife to get some idea about his drinking. At first this did not sit well with Bill D., two strangers talking to his wife about his problem, but he was less annoyed when he found out they were both alcoholics. After a few more visits and his release from the hospital, he was taken to Oxford Group meetings and spent a great deal of time with the pair, even joining them on other recruitment missions. Unlike the first meeting between Smith and Wilson, we have a better idea of what was said to Bill D. in his first encounter with AA.<sup>4</sup> He was told

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<sup>2</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, (New York: AA World Services, 4ed 2003 [1939]) Preface to the 2ed., xvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Old timers: A Biography and* (New York: AA World Services, 1980), 82. cf. *Not-God*, 37-39. Quite humorous tidbit: the nurse asked Dr. Smith why he was interested in an alcoholic case (Smith was a proctologist) and he told her he had found a cure for alcoholism. The nurse then said, “Well, I hope you have tried it on yourself.”

<sup>4</sup> NB. At this point, Smith and Wilson did not have a name for what they were doing, but for simplicity’s sake, I will refer to their efforts as AA.

about the medical aspects of alcoholism, especially the theory that it was a disease and that the only way to be cured was through a higher power. After initially balking at this method of recovery, Bill D. accepted what Wilson and Smith offered and became the third member.

The organization abandoned a number of elements from this first approach, like the dietary requirements of tomatoes and sauerkraut, but this method became the template for future approaches to potential members, later called “twelfth step calls.” The importance of the medical aspects of Wilson and Smith’s approach are apparent. The prospect was moved to a private room. This mirrored Wilson’s experience at Towns Hospital in New York and also allowed for a greater concentration on the prospect. It also stressed the theory that alcoholism was a disease that required special treatment.<sup>5</sup> Alcoholics needed closer attention than what was given in a common ward. These hospital stays lasted about a week and gave the alcoholic a reasonable time to dry out. For the most part, the hospital stays were non-negotiable. If a new prospect was not bad enough or did not want to go the hospital, he was not ready for Wilson and Smith’s method. After the hospital stay, the new member was brought into the Oxford Group and instilled with their practices right away. Both Wilson and Smith felt this part of the process was vital because the Oxford Group provided so much to their personal recovery. Finally, another key element we see in the case of Bill D. was an immediate push into carrying the message to the next prospect. Bill D. was only days out of the hospital when Wilson and Smith took him to see the next member, Ernie G.

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Gifford, *Alcoholism*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010.)

One aspect of the early sobering up process that Bill D. and Ernie G. did not take part in was living with Dr. Smith and Wilson. This strategy was common in the early years, though the case of Eddie R. exemplified why it was abandoned. Eddie shimmied down Smith's drainpipe to get a drink, abused his wife in Smith's home and even chased Anne Smith around the house with a butcher knife.<sup>6</sup> Even so, the practice of allowing new participants to live with established members became a common practice in these early years. Bill and Lois Wilson allowed new members to reside with them in Brooklyn after Wilson returned from his failed business trip to Akron. As was the case with Eddie, many boarders abused the privilege. For example, the Wilsons came home to find one of the men chasing another with a two-by-four throughout the house.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, one prospective member killed himself by putting his head in the oven when the Wilsons went away for a weekend.<sup>8</sup> Despite these episodes of failure, both Smith in Akron and Wilson in New York managed to succeed with some of their prospects. A hospital stay, the Oxford Group, reaching out to yet even more prospects, and a stay (if needed) in either Smith or Wilson's home became the standard practice for the first few members of the new society.

With each new addition, however, new wrinkles in the system appeared. As Ernest Kurtz discussed in his history of AA, *Not-God*, a split developed between New

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<sup>6</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> *AA Comes of Age*, 73.

<sup>8</sup> *Pass It On*, 164.

York and Akron.<sup>9</sup> Wilson and his recruits were much more focused on fellowship and expansion of their ideas into a full-fledged, perhaps even profitable, society. Smith took a decidedly more conservative approach. He developed a much stronger bond with the Oxford Group than Wilson. For lack of a better word, Smith also used more ritual than Wilson did. Smith insisted on a formal surrender by the new man. This occurred after the current members and non-alcoholic Oxford members believed the prospect was serious about getting sober. Smith took the new member upstairs, away from the rest of the group and asked him to kneel and surrender to the will of God.<sup>10</sup> This could be quite the harrowing experience for the still jittery alcoholic. As one witness reported, the new man often came down the stairs “white as a sheet.”<sup>11</sup> There is no record of Wilson engaging in such a formal process of surrender. Wilson was too busy with his two biggest successes, Hank P. and Fitz M., gathering new recruits and trying to discover innovative ways to promote their new program. In spite of Wilson’s aggressive drive to spread the new society, however, it was Smith’s more religious approach that was winning over more adherents. Moreover, the Akron branch of the program had more members remain sober for the rest of their lives, while the New York group encountered more slips.

During the earliest days of Alcoholics Anonymous many of its features were borrowed straight from the practices of the Oxford Group. Bill D. recalled sitting with

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. (Center City MN: Hazelden Press, 1991 [1979]), 232.

<sup>10</sup> *Doctor Bob*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Bill Wilson and Anne Smith as they discussed their quiet time. Quiet time was a key component of the Oxford program that each member was encouraged to practice in the morning. A period of prayer and reflection is a practice that is still practiced within AA today, embodied in the eleventh step.<sup>12</sup> While the new group was still well within the boundaries of Oxford meetings, separate gatherings based on the Oxford model were developed exclusively for the alcoholic members. These new meetings were hardly distinguishable from other Oxford gatherings except for the emphasis on alcoholism. Even so, non-alcoholics were welcome. Like the Oxfords, these new groups were family affairs. Spouses, almost exclusively wives at this juncture, came along and shared in the activities. Smith's children recall attending the gatherings too. As Robert "Smitty" Smith Jr. recalled, "there began to be more and more people gathering around the kitchen table with their talks and little meetings in the morning."<sup>13</sup> These sessions were not referred to as group therapy at the time, but in more recent studies, the AA approach to groups settings is recognized as a pioneering method in psychotherapy.<sup>14</sup>

The meeting structure also reveals the gender divisions within AA. Henrietta D., wife of Bill D., remembered that Anne Smith called her each morning to ask if she had prayed and had her quiet time.<sup>15</sup> Many of the early Akron members had similar memories of Anne Smith acting as the matriarch of the new group. They recalled

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<sup>12</sup> AA's 11<sup>th</sup> step: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will and the power to carry it out.

<sup>13</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Philip J Flores, *Group Psychotherapy with Addicted Populations: An Integration of Twelve Step and Psychodynamic Theory*. (New York: Haworth Press, 2007 [1997].)

<sup>15</sup> *Dr. Bob*, 86.

stopping by the Smith home at all hours for conversation and guidance. Rarely do people recall her giving any direct advice, but instead she offered rather more general spiritual suggestions. Anne Smith is credited with giving Alcoholics Anonymous one of its central credos from the Book of James, "Faith without works is dead."<sup>16</sup> By taking on the identity of matriarch, she was quite familiar to the early members of AA in this perspective. She was the religious mother giving general guidance to her newfound charges. This traditional image was only one of the identities that the spouses of early AAs assumed. Lois Wilson, best exemplified the other, that of caregiver. In the early years of AA in New York Lois Wilson was, in essence, the housewife to all of the new recruits that Bill Wilson brought home. She cooked, cleaned, and nursed many of the new boarders, all the while being employed by a New York department store.

Apart from the gender roles reinforced by the early meeting structure provides insight into 1930s culture from these early meetings, especially the need to belong to group and to feel of use that many commentators on thirties culture has been discussed. In this respect the meetings acted like many of the more diverse organizations of the era, such as the Communist Party. They collected like-minded people with the purpose of trying to solve a common problem, in AA's case, alcoholism. These get-togethers gave the early membership something else to focus on beside the current state of the nation and their own personal economic problems. This aspect of the program can be overstated, however. As Patricia M. Ferraioli stated in her dissertation, because the early

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<sup>16</sup> James 2:26.

members were unemployed, they were able to engage in much more AA work.<sup>17</sup> This may be the case for some early participants but it is important to remember that many of the first members offered as a sign of their success a reaffirmation of their middle-class status. Story after story of the first members concludes with how they became employed once again. They were back to their proper place in the social order. In short, economic success was the equal of sober success. So, even though they were engaging in a great deal of Alcoholics Anonymous related activity, Ferraioli went too far stating that their lack of employment was the cause of this sober zeal. By regaining employment, the early membership offered living proof that the program worked. Also by having a job and being involved in the fellowship the need to be a part of something was being met on another level. Alcoholics Anonymous got the new member sober, gave him a greater sense of self-confidence, and thus helped make him employable once again as *a part* of the workforce.

All of this was achieved without resorting to methods at odds with an older vision of American society. AA reaffirmed American values that were especially appealing to middle-class Protestants who took their economic failure as a sign of their shame and unworthiness. Instead of trying to reform society as a whole, like the New Deal, and the Progressives and the temperance movements before it, Alcoholics Anonymous focused on the great symbol of America that was under attack in the 1930s, the individual. The collective was not the greatest beneficiary of a new group, the individual alcoholic was. As Wilson stressed as early as his first trip to visit Dr. Smith, he was calling on him, not

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia M. Ferraioli, "Alcoholics Anonymous and Liberalism: Ideological, Religious and Political Considerations," (PhD Diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1996), 146.

just to be a Good Samaritan, though that was in complete keeping with his underlying Christian values, but he was there to help himself, to protect his sobriety. Conversely, Smith and later members, with varying degrees of eagerness, wanted to hear how one could stay sober. As a hook for the new prospect, Wilson and the first generation told the new recruit that by listening to their stories, the new man helped them stay sober. The message of self-preservation allowed the prospect to immediately feel as though they were doing something good. A personal benefit was gained, but a great societal benefit was achieved.

By listening to a recovering alcoholic the prospect was given two great boosts: news that recovery was possible and a feeling that, at least at that moment, they were of use to someone else. However, this embrace of individualism was not a return to the ethos of the 1920s. The first generation of Alcoholics Anonymous was disillusioned with the “roaring” decade just as much as they were with era of the Great Depression. Wilson, Smith and the others reached back to their childhoods and embraced the model of the Christian gentleman, doing good works not only because it helped society, but the individual as well. Wilson fleshed out this idea when he wrote that individuals were, “spearheads of God’s ever advancing creation...”<sup>18</sup> Wilson and the early members of AA saw each person as an agent of a higher power, a being with a purpose for the betterment of society and in the bargain themselves. This was not a vision of the individual found in the 1920s, or later in Ayn Rand for that matter, but from a value set that many felt was lost.

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<sup>18</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 49.

The above quote leads us to another aspect of AA and how it reflects the culture of the 1930s. Not only did AA embrace the traditional value of the individual being supported by society, but it also embraced an older theology that had been missing from the American landscape for some time. As Ernest Kurtz discusses in his work on AA, Wilson and Smith came together one year after what many theologians refer to as *annus mirabilis*, “the miraculous year.”<sup>19</sup> Kurtz points out that during this time, a neo-orthodox movement arose in the United States within many Protestant faiths. As part of this wave of new religious thinking, Alcoholics Anonymous got in touch with an even greater trend by tracing its theological roots back to ancient sources that Kurtz labels as a deist theology. As he stated, AA acted “as a bridge between ancient religious insight and modern psychological age...”<sup>20</sup> It is not necessary to look back to ancient theological principles to see where Alcoholics Anonymous gained its inspiration. Instead of going back to first century Christianity, which undoubtedly was a part of the Oxford message, a more definitive label for the values of Alcoholics Anonymous is Neo-Calvinism. The structure of AA, during and after its involvement with the Oxford Group, was an embrace of the values of an earlier time in American history. The success of the organization and its lasting appeal stems, at least in part, to these theological tenets.<sup>21</sup> Lincoln Konkle, in his work on Thornton Wilder, also discussed how this cultural trend was especially cogent in the 1930s. Konkle posits that the appeal of Wilder’s work, especially his

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<sup>19</sup> Kurtz, *Not-God*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine M. Piderman, et al., “Spirituality in Alcoholics during Treatment.” *The American Journal on Addictions*, No. 16: 2007, 232.

classic work from 1938, *Our Town*, rested on its “continuity with seventeenth and eighteenth century New England Puritan beliefs,” specifically Calvinist beliefs.<sup>22</sup> While Alcoholics Anonymous made sin acceptable, more importantly it made redemption possible to a group of people once thought unredeemable. By extension, if one of the lowest members of society, the alcoholic, was redeemed, then the message of hope would also resonate throughout the nation. This hope and belief in the future is a central belief in the American ethos. It is a cornerstone of the American Dream that lay under a huge cloud of doubt throughout the Great Depression. While the idea that the New Deal was a radical message of hope to those suffering, Alcoholics Anonymous is better understood as a remembrance of what Susman calls an older set of traditional values.<sup>23</sup> David Kennedy also describes the New Deal, as less of a radical plan to save the United States, but rather a pragmatic solution to the crisis at hand.<sup>24</sup> AA took a similar pragmatic approach to alcoholism and offered hope to alcoholics by embracing these traditional values and making them accessible to their members, but the focus lay strongly on the individual and his redemption.

Membership grew during this early period. It was slow but by 1938 Smith and Wilson determined that between the Akron and New York area groups there were around sixty members who were maintaining sobriety by following their method. This

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<sup>22</sup> Lincoln Konkle, *Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition*. (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 176.

<sup>24</sup> David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (New York: Knopf Publishers, 1999.)

realization made both men cry with joy at their success and also it gave them the courage to think in larger terms about how to further expand the membership.<sup>25</sup> After some discussion, they decided that their best course was to write a book detailing their approach to sobriety.

*“The Big Book”: Writing Alcoholics Anonymous*

*Alcoholics Anonymous* was written in roughly a year and a half, predominately by Bill Wilson. His main editorial partners were Hank P. and Ruth Hock, the new secretary for the publishing firm, Works Publishing Inc., which was established specifically to print and distribute the new book. The membership in Akron and New York also had a fair amount of input. Wilson wrote long hand and dictated the pages to Hock, and each new chapter was passed out to the group. In turn they commented, in the case of Akron by mail as well as in person and in the case of New York exclusively in person at the Wilson home with meetings taking place every week. This may explain why, as Wilson remembered, the Akron group “was receptive to whatever I wrote,” but New York gave him “a real mauling.”<sup>26</sup> This collective editorial approach is only one of the ways in which *Alcoholics Anonymous* reflects the 1930s. The content of the book also offers insight into AA’s role in the culture of the period. The Big Book is a cultural artifact that has not been examined sufficiently in regards to what it tells us about the conservative strains of the 1930s. Alcoholics Anonymous was not a large group during this period however its creation was covered by the press (and viewed by the population) as a

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<sup>25</sup> *Pass It On*, 178; cf. *Not-God*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Pass It On*, 196.

significant cultural event. While it embraced a number of modernist traits to establish its credibility for a contemporary audience, at its core the book reflected the traditional values of the program that Smith and Wilson started in 1935. It is a reflection of Wilson's, and to a lesser extent the entire membership's, worldview, especially concerning alcoholics.

What strikes the observer first is the cover of the first edition of the Big Book, as it was familiarly called. Unlike other materials regarding drinking and temperance, which had a stolid and somber appearance, the first cover of *Alcoholics Anonymous* appears as a piece of modern art.<sup>27</sup> Its use of bold colors, including the bright red interior cover, signified that this group of drunkards was not ashamed of its condition. To the contrary, the original cover, later called the "circus cover", begs for a closer inspection. By rejecting the first proposed cover with a comic book style illustration, the original members of AA moved away from the older temperance tradition. This rejection can be seen throughout the book. From the first edition until the most recent 2003 edition, no illustrations exist in the pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. This omission and the modern cover establish a break with past temperance and prohibition materials. The simplicity of the book's design allowed the book to appear less preachy and the absence of illustrations gave the book the appearance of a more serious endeavor. By doing away with the drawing of the distraught wife, the demons circling the drunkard and the denizen of skid row, the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* presented a text that did not immediately reach for an emotional appeal, but rather took on the appearance of a more scholarly work.

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<sup>27</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, cover art first ed., 1939.

It is, however, rash to judge a book strictly by its cover. Further investigation of *Alcoholics Anonymous* provides clues to the influence of American culture on the book. First, and in many ways the most profound was the change in the name of the drunkard to *alcoholic*. By using a relatively new term, AA distanced itself from its temperance predecessors. Terms such as drunkard carried a decidedly negative connotation, thanks in no small part to the image of the drunkard cultivated in temperance and prohibition circles. Other terms tried to have a more medical nuance but fell short. Designations such as inebriate and dipsomaniac also had negative connotations, especially highlighting the idea of mental illness.<sup>28</sup> The problem may be in the person's mind, but alcoholism encompasses a far-reaching disease, more than just a mental disorder. The greatest tribute to the effect that the term alcoholic has had is in the use of its suffix to describe other societal problems. Terms like *workaholic*, *shopaholic*, and *rageaholic* all stem from alcoholic, demonstrating the power of the disease concept.<sup>29</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous did not originate the idea of alcoholism as a disease, Dr. Benjamin Rush was the first in 1803, but AA was the most significant organization in publicizing the theory.<sup>30</sup>

The chapter "More About Alcoholism" moves away from the physical characteristics of alcoholism and into its mental aspects. Here Bill Wilson explained the

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<sup>28</sup> Ernest Kurtz. "Alcoholics Anonymous and the Disease Concept of Alcoholism." *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 20: 2002, 5-39.

<sup>29</sup> It is remarkable how ubiquitous alcoholic and its successor words really are. When typing this chapter, workaholic is in the MS Word dictionary.

<sup>30</sup> The disease nature of alcoholism is still debated, see for example: Griffin Edwards. *Alcohol: The World's Favorite Drug*. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002).

difference between the alcoholic mind and its normal counterpart. In this chapter Wilson set out how the alcoholic differed from the ordinary, temperate drinker, giving readers a different image of the drunkard than found in earlier temperance movements. Wilson pointed out that the alcoholic was a person of character.<sup>31</sup> Borrowing heavily from his own story, Wilson stressed the alcoholic wanted to change, that he wanted to stop being a burden to his family and society. To the nonalcoholic, this idea gave the image of an earnest person, who is working against a problem that is difficult to solve. This image of the person willing to quit but unable to do so provided an identifiable experience to the alcoholic reader and since it was the most recurring theme of the Big Book, it held out hope.<sup>32</sup>

The second major change in the image of the drunkard from “More About Alcoholism” was how Wilson created the mysterious aspect of the disease. He wrote, “This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it — this utter inability to leave it alone, [alcohol] no matter how great the necessity or the wish.”<sup>33</sup> Wilson told brief stories about some of his fellow members and how they came upon their first drink after a period of sobriety. In the illustrations, the notion crossed the alcoholic’s mind that taking a drink under certain circumstances was safe. In each case though, the narrator observed that they were fooling themselves. The lack of rational thought concerning the first drink is echoed in the chapter, “There is a Solution.” “If you ask him why he started on that last

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<sup>31</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Robert F. Zakrzewski, Mark A. Hector. “The Lived Experiences of Alcohol Addiction: Men of Alcoholics Anonymous.” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 25:61–77, 75, (2004.)

<sup>33</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 34.

bender, the chances are he will offer you any one of a hundred alibis...But in their heart of hearts they really don't know why they do it."<sup>34</sup> The drunkard/alcoholic was no longer a weak willed person, or a person of questionable moral fiber, or a person easily influenced by the liquor trade. He was a person with a mysterious inability to refuse the first drink. He did not know why he drank, he just did. To illustrate the seriousness of an alcoholic's desire to quit, and how older methods failed, Wilson made a short list of common methods drunkards used: "Drinking beer only, limiting the number of drinks...swearing off forever (with and without solemn oath), more physical exercise, reading inspirational books, going to health farms and sanitariums...we could increase the list ad infinitum."<sup>35</sup> This list of the methods advocated by temperance reformers appears weak and ineffective when presented by someone who has tried them all and failed. The new alcoholic was no longer the pitiable man who could reform if only he were sincere in his desire to stop. Wilson presented a picture of the earnest alcoholic, who wished to stop, but was unable because of some indefinable urge to drink, that could not be overcome by his own paltry methods. Hence he was still a man of character under the influence of a disease with mysterious powers.

Along with the theological aspects of the big book and the use of modern science as a support for the program, *Alcoholics Anonymous* is replete with aspects of traditional American values that give a picture of Protestant middle class beliefs during the Depression. A stress upon the individual was apparent throughout the text. From the opening chapter, "Bill's Story" until the final chapter, "A Vision for You," the purpose of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 31.

the book was to identify alcoholism as an individual problem, not a societal one.<sup>36</sup> As Rita Barnard discussed in her examination of Thirties mass culture, “we should not assume that the economic crisis entailed a similar collapse of the nation’s favorite mythologies.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout, Wilson urged the reader to stop looking at society and the problems that may or may not be there and focus on himself. Sam Girgus also highlighted that during this period a “Hollywood Renaissance” occurred, especially in the works of Capra, Ford, and Kazan among others.<sup>38</sup> Like Bill Wilson, all of these directors, according to Girgus, recall a fundamental set of American values that connected with audiences at a particularly difficult time in the nation’s history. *Alcoholics Anonymous* tapped into those same values to reach a more specific audience. All three directors along with Wilson embraced the traditions of American democracy, community, and neighborliness as a counter to the rugged individualism of the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> They emphasized moral or communal individualism.

This idea of individual responsibility was not new to Wilson and *Alcoholics Anonymous*. During the 1930s many self-improvement books emerged, all putting the focus on the individual and away from the problems of society, none more famous than

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<sup>36</sup> “A Vision for You” is the final chapter of the section of *Alcoholics Anonymous* that hasn’t been changed since 1939. The rest of the book is personal testimonials that have changed with each edition.

<sup>37</sup> Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Sam Girgus, *Hollywood Renaissance: The Cinema of Democracy in the Era of Ford, Capra and Kazan*. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.)

<sup>39</sup> Warren Susman, “Culture Heroes, Ford Barton and Ruth.” In *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 122-149.

Carnegie's *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, published in 1936.<sup>40</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* fell right into line with the self-improvement philosophy, namely that the fundamental structure of the United States was not flawed, but rather the individual was. These individuals not only were at fault but needed to realize their proper place through a process of ego deflation.<sup>41</sup> Susman observed that self-help literature carried the message that "failure is personal, not social, and success can be achieved by some adjustment, not in the social order, but in the individual personality."<sup>42</sup> Even though Wilson, unlike Carnegie, advocated joining a group to improve oneself, Alcoholics Anonymous unlike many of the groups organizing during the period, did not hold at its core a restructuring of American society. AA and its early members had too much at stake in the present system, and the goal was not to change that structure, but rather to change individual behavior to operate successfully within that system once again. Moreover, as Wilson stated in the Big Book, "If anyone who is showing inability to control his drinking can do the right-about-face and drink like a gentleman, our hats are off to him. Heaven knows, we have tried hard enough and long enough to drink like other people!"<sup>43</sup> AA was not out to alter anyone else's behavior except that of the alcoholic. The membership went to great lengths to make sure that people knew they did not have a problem with people who drank alcohol. They did not want to change the drinking habits of the nation, but rather

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<sup>40</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Make Friends and Influence People*. (New York: Norton, 1936.)

<sup>41</sup> Duane F. Reinert, "Surrender and Narcissism: Assessing Change over Alcohol Treatment." *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 17: 3, 1-12, (1999).

<sup>42</sup> Susman, 165.

<sup>43</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 31.

maintain a link to an older vision of America, one that didn't interfere with individual freedom, but was more reflective of the middle-class values that many in society still believed in.<sup>44</sup>

The chapter, "To the Wives" established a subordinate place for the alcoholic's wife. Wilson wanted it to appear as if it were written by one of the wives of the membership, and Lois Wilson thought she would write it.<sup>45</sup> However, Bill Wilson wrote it himself, arguing that it needed to be compatible with the rest of the book. Wilson achieved his goal, but we also get his idealized vision of a wife. Wilson started out with familiar images of the drunkard's wife, a long-suffering woman who was forced to put up with a great deal of hardship. She was, as Wilson described, "the wife who trembles in fear of the next debauch."<sup>46</sup> Wilson gave a list of the various ways that wives dealt with their alcoholic spouses, "We have been unselfish, and self-sacrificing... We have prayed, we have begged, we have been patient... We have been hysterical. We have been terror-stricken... We have sought sympathy..."<sup>47</sup> This list conjured up older images of the wife of the drunkard who was treated poorly, was abandoned, or worse died as a result of her husband's drinking. Wilson, however, did not portray the alcoholic as abusive. Instead, he tried to keep the new image of the alcoholic as positive as possible. He tried to evoke

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<sup>44</sup> Gary Dean Best, *The Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 2; See also Lawrence Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression" in *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.)

<sup>45</sup> *Lois Remembers: Memoirs of the co-founder of Al-Anon and wife of the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous*. (Virginia Beach VA: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1979) 111.

<sup>46</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

the image of a man facing his challenges and becoming the better for it, much like the heroes of “hard-boiled” detective novels. Megan Abbott discussed the complexities and need for reconstitution of the masculine during the Depression in her work on hardboiled fiction *The Streets Were Mine*.<sup>48</sup> Like these characters that fought the decadent rich, Wilson tried to reaffirm the manhood of the decadent middle class, many of which were his readers.

In order to regain the better part of the husband, Wilson gave a number of suggestions to the wife to help her husband recover from alcoholism. First, a wife should not condemn her husband’s drinking or behavior. Instead he should be treated as if he had pneumonia. Next, a wife “should never be angry,” followed by encouragement to be patient and good-tempered. Third, a wife must avoid at all costs the appearance of being a “nag or killjoy.” The quickest way to incur those titles was by telling the husband what to do about his drinking. Fourth, she must be “on guard not to embarrass or harm” the husband’s reputation.<sup>49</sup> This list presented what Wilson thought was important to recovery; it gave the alcoholic a great deal of leeway with his behavior. The AA wife was in direct opposition to the suffering wife of the drunkard of the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Instead of evoking pity for the wife, Wilson solicited understanding for the husband. Wilson did not paint the picture of the wife being forced to an early grave, or being

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<sup>48</sup> Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 108, 111, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Lori Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America*. (Durham NC: UNC Press Books, 2002), 170.

abused, or of having a barren house at Christmas. Rather, he removed the image of the suffering wife, and replaced her with a much more compliant one. Instead of harping (or being a killjoy) on the damage the alcoholic does in the home, Wilson insisted that the wife be agreeable or her husband would not succeed in AA. Wilson did not demand that women stop working like others did during the Depression, but he clearly proscribes for them a subordinate role.<sup>51</sup> Wilson even went so far as to suggest that the wives of alcoholics should live by the same principles outlined in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the previous image of the suffering wife who prayed for her husband, this new conception called for the wife to help with her husband's "spiritual activities."<sup>53</sup> Wilson stated that the wives of alcoholics have a "picture of the ideal man, the sort of chap we would like our husbands to be."<sup>54</sup> In "To the Wives," Wilson gave his vision of what the ideal wife should be: compliant, non-threatening, non-judgmental and supportive.<sup>55</sup> The alcoholic who with the aid of an understanding wife recovered replaced the image of the drunkard who victimized his spouse.

Patience and understanding were also the watchwords for the children of the alcoholic. In "The Family Afterwards" Wilson expanded some of his ideas. In an attempt to relieve the alcoholic from all of the blame for the family's situation, he stated

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<sup>51</sup> Hapke, Laura, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995.)

<sup>52</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 119.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> *Love on the Rocks*, 173.

that the entire family was ill.<sup>56</sup> Now, instead of the alcoholic causing all of the woes, the rest of the family was included. Wilson conceded that the drinker was mostly to blame, but unlike previous views of the alcoholic, he was not to be pitied, nor was he described as suffering. With sobriety, the good father re-emerged and the sick family not just the alcoholic would find itself on the road to recovery. Wilson then alerted the family that dad would follow one of two paths, one that either stressed financial stability or the other that brought spiritual stability. In both cases, the family had to allow the alcoholic the freedom to pursue whichever path he chose. In the case of the financial drive, the family was to be patient and not expect much of the father as an earner. The lowered expectations allowed the alcoholic to fail and not deal with the pressures of his family.<sup>57</sup> This message was especially significant to a generation of men who had experienced the Depression. If the father partook in the more spiritual track of early recovery, the family “should let him have his head.”<sup>58</sup> Especially in this area, Wilson expected the family to allow the drunkard to have as much freedom as possible, intimating that if dad did not keep up with this part of the program, he would surely drink again.<sup>59</sup> The specter of relapse became part of the family’s responsibility to help him maintain his sobriety.

This was the rightful place of the alcoholic father, at the head of the house and the place of the subordinate, nurturing and compliant wife and family was the overall theme of these familial chapters in the Big Book. The previous images of the alcoholic family

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<sup>56</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 122.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

had shown little faith that father could recover and return to the family structure. In Wilson's new vision the recovered alcoholic was returned to his place of prominence with the support of a helpful, non-judgmental family. The return to prominence, or at the very least a recovery of the proper place of the father, of manhood more broadly, was an important theme of the 1930s. As discussed by Jeffery Hornstein in his work *A Nation of Realtors*, the real estate profession, which followed the arc of American history in the Twentieth Century, was very influential in making home ownership a key component of national recovery.<sup>60</sup> Also as Jeffery Suzik discussed in his article about the CCC, "Building Better Men" Americans wanted to make sure that manliness was still being emphasized, despite the stress of widespread unemployment.<sup>61</sup> Wilson painted a picture of the alcoholic husband that, instead of the unfeeling, inconsiderate drunkard of generations past was quite a good fellow.<sup>62</sup> Roderick McGillis also explored this image of masculinity in his study of B Westerns.<sup>63</sup> Much like these caricature cowboys, Wilson made sobriety, self-denial, and humility the cornerstones of the reformed alcoholic.

The value of hard work was another constant theme throughout *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Successfully working the twelve steps required a great deal of effort on the part of the new member. Borrowing from his and other member's backgrounds in

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<sup>60</sup> Jeffery Hornstein, *A Nation of Realtors: A Cultural History of the Twentieth-Century American Middle Class*. (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005) 118.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffery Ryan Suzik, "Building Better Men: The CCC Boy and the Changing Social Ideal of Manliness." *Men and Masculinities*, 2: (152-179), 156, (1999.)

<sup>62</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 107.

<sup>63</sup> Roderick McGillis, *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western*. (Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009.)

business, Wilson often described the process a person must go through as if it were a business model. The fourth step, “make a fearless moral inventory” was compared to a small business owner who needed to take stock in order to perform better.<sup>64</sup> As the book concluded, instead of an image of ease and freedom, Wilson invited the reader to “trudge the road of happy destiny.”<sup>65</sup> Wilson was telling the membership, that even if sobriety was achieved, remaining so would be a difficult struggle. Relating this notion to the state of affairs of the Depression era is obvious. Just as the alcoholic needed to work hard to attain his sobriety, and by extension regain his standing within the community, a great deal of hard work was needed for the United States to get out of its current difficulties. Susman also commented on this emphasis on hard work and fitting in when he discussed another self-help book, Henry C. Link’s *Return to Religion*.<sup>66</sup> It was important not only to get back to work, but to stay busy as well. AA achieved both of these aims. It helped to make members employable once again, but through their twelfth step activities, they stayed busy even if unemployed.

After Wilson finished writing the manuscript and received feedback from the two groups, the only thing left to do was decide on the title. The first, and most popular choice, was *The Way Out*. Another choice that was rejected immediately was *The Bill W. Movement*. The final choice, *Alcoholics Anonymous* was chosen because after investigating possible titles, there were nine other books recently published as *The Way*

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<sup>64</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 64.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 165.

*Out*, or variants thereof; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, zero.<sup>67</sup> Much of the membership did not like the title, but it proved to be a stroke of genius. Not only did the title give the group its name, but it was also different enough to encourage more investigation than other books concerned with the rehabilitation of alcoholics. *Alcoholics Anonymous* was the most effective recruiting tool that the society ever had.

### *Conclusion*

There is little question that the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was a culmination of four years of trial and error in the process of helping drunks get sobriety. It codified the philosophies and methods of the fledging group and provided a template for new and later members to follow when reaching out to fellow alcoholics. More than that, however, *Alcoholics Anonymous* provided insight into the thinking of the middle-class during the depression and how men dealt with the shame and confusion they were feeling at the time. “The Big Book” also provided Wilson’s vision for what society, especially the family, should look like. It was an idealized version of traditional gender roles, where women were clearly subordinate and children were seen, but definitely not heard.

The entire movement that became known as AA after the publication of the text was a prime example of a conservative reaction to the forces of the depression. Those in the middle class once believed they had the power to transform society, but the sobering reality of World War I, the failure of prohibition and the teetering of the American ethos from the depression ended that faith for many. Alcoholics Anonymous took root during an era that was, to paraphrase Warren Susman, concerned with finding a commitment to something to provide direction and meaning. In the case of AA it came in the form of

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<sup>67</sup> *Pass It On*, 203.

weak, broken individuals joining together, the collective working for the betterment of the individual. It appealed to the need to feel useful when so many felt useless, but it didn't depend on the government or society to provide the assistance. It was an attempt to rekindle an America that many in the middle-class felt had been lost. This organized attempt to reconnect with older, traditional American values made Alcoholics Anonymous a popular media story even if its numbers weren't as significant as other groups during the time. The media and professional allies that AA gained during these early years is the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “WE CARRIED THIS MESSAGE TO ALCOHOLICS”:

#### THE SPREAD OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, 1939-1942

The publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous* brought high hopes to the young organization. Wilson and others were sure that requests for information were imminent and they would be overwhelmed by new members. Many of the histories and biographies of Wilson paint this period as one of false hope and overeager expectations. One anecdote often shared is about a time after a Wilson radio appearance to promote both the book and organization. As Wilson related, “By a great effort of self-restraint we kept away [from AA’s PO Box] for three whole days. The mail clerk handed us exactly twelve cards. Some ribbed us unmercifully.”<sup>1</sup> Overall, the new book received favorable reviews. Most of the positive reviews came from religious publications, but a fair number came from the general press. Overwhelmingly the reviews recommended the program to anyone with an alcohol problem and pointed out that this was a new approach to redeem the drunkard rather than the stereotypical temperance approach and that it, “may have considerable influence when read by alcoholic patients.”<sup>2</sup> A number of the reviews highlighted the fact that it was a serious book, not “quack literature.”<sup>3</sup> *The New*

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Wilson, *AA Comes of Age*. (New York: AA World Services Inc., 1957), 68, 175-176.

<sup>2</sup> “Book Review of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 221(15) (October, 1939.)

<sup>3</sup> Westchester Feature Syndicate; *Christian Herald*; *Washington Post* 11/13/1939.

*York Times* gave a guarded recommendation for the book, commenting on its potential usefulness to drunkards and that the book was, “more soundly based psychologically” than other volumes concerning alcoholism, but still called it, “strange.”<sup>4</sup> However, not all of the reviews were favorable. The *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* held the exact opposite opinion of the favorable accounts: “this big, big book i.e. big in words, is a rambling sort of camp meeting confession... Billy Sunday and similar orators had their successes but we think the methods of Forel and Bleuler infinitely superior.”<sup>5</sup> The *Journal of the American Medical Association* said it was reminiscent of Dale Carnegie and it, “has no scientific merit or interest.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the few negative responses, *Alcoholics Anonymous* was, at least critically, a success. This success and press coverage eventually led to a significant increase in membership. If the numbers from various accounts are to be believed, the membership of Alcoholics Anonymous rose from roughly one hundred when the book was written to over a thousand by 1940. The growth in membership tells a different story than what is commonly believed. This spike in membership reveals that AA had a large appeal across the country. The Big Book codified the workings of the program, but it also transmitted the values and cultural message of Bill Wilson. The demanding program, the stress on the individual and his place within a group, and the emphasis on hard work resonated not only with potential members, but with the general public as well. According to the

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<sup>4</sup> Percy Hutchinson, “Alcoholic Experience” *New York Times*, 6/25/1939.

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 6/40. N.B. Auguste-Henri Florel and Eugem Bleuler were two prominent psychiatrists from Europe who did some work with alcoholics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>6</sup>“Book Review of *Alcoholics Anonymous*,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 113 (16), (October 1939.)

popular history, it was not until Jack Alexander published his account of Alcoholic Anonymous in 1941 that membership took off. An examination of press accounts during this time paint a more nuanced picture. Newspaper articles and columns from across the country show that Alcoholics Anonymous experienced steady growth in a distinct method. While the Alexander piece was highly influential, the role of the local press throughout the country aided and promoted the growth of AA across the United States. From city to city, newspapers carried the news that Alcoholics Anonymous had arrived. Headlines like “There is Hope,” “Alcoholics Anonymous Makes its Stand Here,” and “Unusual Program at Exchange Club,” among others, announced to each new locale that AA was ready for business.<sup>7</sup> The press gave a snapshot of the values and beliefs most cherished by the population at the time. The moral message that resonated with the middle class was a slight deviation from the Protestant ethic subscribed to by temperance and prohibition supporters. Alcoholics Anonymous resurrected individual reform as opposed to societal reform as its main focus when dealing with drunkenness. The new program also mirrored the vision of Herbert Hoover and the Republican Party and their solution to the Depression, that of groups of successful citizens being responsible for their less successful neighbors, in this case within the strict scope of dealing with alcoholism. The one entity that was most responsible for linking these traditional values to AA was the press, especially the advice columnists who offered up traditional solutions to the most pressing problems of the era, including alcoholism.

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<sup>7</sup> “There is Hope,” *The Hackettstown Courier-Post* 1/19/1939; Elrick B. Davis “Alcoholics Anonymous Makes Its Stand Here,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*; 10/21/1939; “Unusual Program At Exchange Club,” *Little Rock Gazette*, 7/1/1940.

*“About the Town”: Advice Columnists and the City Desk*

With the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the days of being a word-of-mouth society were over. Along with the favorable reviews of the book, many advice columnists referred letter writers to AA. Beginning with the nationally syndicated Beatrice Fairfax in 1940, many other national and local advice experts advocated Alcoholics Anonymous. Fairfax asked readers this question “is your husband, fiancé, or father on too intimate terms with John Barleycorn?” She then proceeded to readily accept the disease theory of alcoholism and gave her own take on who it affected and when:

This disease, for disease it is, so often gets a decent citizen in middle life. These years, when disillusionment sets in, and a man realizes he is not going to accomplish all those fine things he dreamed of in early youth, and the fear of losing his job and having no old-age security gnaws and drives him to forgetfulness at any cost.<sup>8</sup>

Fairfax’s vision of an alcoholic was that of a middle class man facing a midlife crisis.

Along with similar columnists, Fairfax received numerous letters from “distraught wives” and concerned siblings.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional values of AA were quite accessible to such a middle class institution as the advice column. These women columnists always stressed the preservation of the home and the maintenance of the family. AA, with its membership dominated by middle-class professionals, was the ideal place to refer the distraught wife deeply concerned about her husband’s drinking. The people writing to, and reading,

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<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Fairfax, “Alcoholics Anonymous an Unusual Cure,” *LA Herald Express*, 3/25/1940.

<sup>9</sup> Beatrice Fairfax, “Alcoholics Anonymous Article Stirs Inquires,” *LA Herald Express*, 6/26/1940; Ruth Alden, “Unhappiness Results from Elder’s Drinking,” *Detroit Free Press*, 4/4/1940; Nancy Brown, “Experience,” *Detroit Free Press*, 11/11/1940.

these columns were at ease with the membership of AA and readily identified with them. By no means were any of these advice columnists advocating a radical solution to any problem their readers might have. They relied on the current value system of American culture, that of a belief in family and that society's problems were best solved through individual, voluntary effort.

Other columnists also recommended Alcoholics Anonymous to their readers. Many of the 'about the town' style columns, for example, featured items about Alcoholics Anonymous arriving in town and also about the kind of work the organization did in the community. The columns with names like "In the News" and "All Things Considered" gave the program a great deal of free advertising, often at the suggestion of a member looking to start a new chapter in the local community.<sup>10</sup> These columns featured descriptions of the get-togethers, emphasizing that Alcoholics Anonymous was like any other middle class social group, without the booze. The meetings presented often took place in a member's home, adding a strong identification with a better off segment of society. From these columns, and many other articles, a clear picture of how AA spread emerges. First a member moved from one of the established centers, or person who sobered up in Akron, for example, returned home and needed to set up a new chapter. He called ministers and doctors looking for new prospects, the press was used to

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<sup>10</sup> Alma Whitaker, "Let's Talk it Over," *LA Times*, 11/24/1939; Howard Vincent O'Brien, "All Things Considered," *Chicago Daily News*, 4/30/1940; Cedric Adams, "In This Corner," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, 3/1/1941.

inform the public at large that Alcoholics Anonymous had “set up shop” in their area.<sup>11</sup> There were follow-up articles centering on the growth of the program in the area, and the arrival of Bob Smith or Bill Wilson was treated as news and made the visit by the cofounder feel like a membership drive.

In addition to these single articles, often a reporter wrote a series of pieces over the course of week or month, giving an even more in depth picture of the organization’s activities.<sup>12</sup> All of the series, or exposes, followed the same format. They chronicled the descent of a respectable man into alcoholism, thereby demonstrating the weakness of the middle class man, the misery of his life and how he found help in AA. Next was an “inside look” at the meetings and the reporter observed the importance of helping the next person that came through the door. There was a lot of stress put upon the idea that the alcoholic must want help, otherwise it was pointless to try. The press also emphasized the availability of Alcoholics Anonymous members to the new man. Many of the accounts mentioned that the sober man would go anywhere at any hour to help the next member.

The biggest news event associated with Alcoholics Anonymous in its early years was the story of Rollie Hemsley.<sup>13</sup> Hemsley was a catcher for the Cleveland Indians who

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<sup>11</sup> “Anonymous Speaker Tells club how to Curb Drunkenness.” *Arkansas Gazette*. 7/2/40; “Alcoholics Anonymous, Fraternity That Streamlined the Waterwagon, Has Formed a Group in STL.” *STL Star-Times*, 12/26/40; Charles Hogan, “Alcoholics Anonymous Chapter is Active Here.” *Kansas City Star*, 6/14/41.

<sup>12</sup> Ted LeBerthon, *Los Angeles Times*. 3/3/42, 8/4/42, 9/11/42; Nan Hamilton. “Ex-alcoholics All; 150 meet — and its water or nothing.” 12/1/40, “Weekly Meetings help ex-alcoholics to shun barrooms” 12/3/40, “It Works for them, will for others, say former alcoholics.” 12/4/40. *Chicago Sun-Times*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Not-God*, 85-88.

was known throughout baseball as a hopeless drunk.<sup>14</sup> He had had discipline problems with various teams before landing a position with the Indians in 1938. His play improved over the course of the season and in 1940, after he caught Bob Feller's much publicized no-hitter, Hemsley announced that he had achieved sobriety with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. The news made national headlines and gave AA exposure on an unprecedented scale. Many sports writers gave glowing accounts of the transformation of Hemsley and were fascinated that AA had had such a positive effect. One critic, however, was very leery of Alcoholics Anonymous, and did not want to appear as an advocate for the group, "I'm a reporter, not a one man auxiliary of the WCTU and this is an account of facts, not a monograph upon the virtues of total abstinence."<sup>15</sup> Hemsley pointed out that the group was not interested in sobering up the world, just those that had trouble drinking. "You fellows for example he explained are just social drinkers who can handle the stuff. This organization is interested only in those who can't."<sup>16</sup>

The other key lesson from the Hemsley episode was not readily apparent in 1940. At first the maintenance of anonymity was an unspoken rule, but not a formal requirement. After Hemsley went public with his sobriety and how he achieved it, the question of how useful anonymity was came to the fore in the organization. The person most troubled by this break of anonymity was Bill Wilson. As Hemsley gained more and more attention, in effect becoming the face of AA to the nation, Wilson began speaking

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<sup>14</sup> For more about Hemsley's behavior and career prior to AA, see, Charles C. Alexander, *Rogers Hornsby: A Biography*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995) especially chapters ten and eleven.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Cunningham, "An Orchid To Rollie Hemsley." *Chicago Press*, 6/3/41.

<sup>16</sup> Ed Mcauley, "Embarrassed by Mysteries of Life. Finds Hemsley Objective to Hemsley Case." *Cleveland News* 4/18/40

out publicly about the program, allowing his name and photograph to appear in the press. Wilson was competitive by nature, and liked to be “the number one man.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that ordering a Coke became known as a “Hemsley Highball” must have gotten to Wilson and his large ego.<sup>18</sup> While Hemsley’s break with anonymity was startling to the membership, it was Wilson’s that caused greater concern. The groups, especially in New York, were instrumental in causing the first major policy directive of AA. They demanded that all members adhere to the policy of total anonymity when interacting with the press, radio and film.

Anonymity as a guiding principle also illustrated a value that was in keeping with the overall mission of AA, selflessness in the service of others. Being sober was quite an accomplishment for members, but the ideal that a successful person should help others without credit was the essence of anonymity. It was a forced humility which was needed to balance the hubris of the 1920s and restore the moral order that many felt disappeared during the jazz decade and was the best alternative to heal the current state of the nation.

*“The Sunday Papers” : Feature Articles and Jack Alexander*

It is no wonder that beyond the series of articles in local newspapers and the national story of a prominent athlete that Alcoholics Anonymous was also a very popular subject for syndicated and Sunday features. These larger pieces followed a similar format to the more general articles, but used more personal perspectives to tell the story of Alcoholics Anonymous. The in-depth coverage started with the presentation of an

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Wilson, *My First 40 Years* (Central City, MN: Hazelden Information and Educational Services, 2000), 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> “Hemsley Highball for Non-Rollicker.” *Chicago Press*, 4/18/1940.

alcoholic in his cups. Common themes from most of the writing about drunkards are evident in all of these stories: the loss of job, loss of family, and the loss of standing in the community were keys to the tales. The author always presented a physical description that bordered on stereotype. The articles discussed the person's dress, unshaven face and lack weight. The healthy and well-kept looking members of AA contrasted with the image of the drunkard in a before and after format familiar to readers. From there the articles featured the new person's first meeting. Similar to other articles, the authors went to great lengths to portray the meeting as a happy affair. With more space to fill, the features about AA provide a more detailed picture of these meetings, at least the public face that AA wanted to show. Many of these articles described how the house meetings included activities such as bridge, dancing, or "just chewing the rag."<sup>19</sup> These articles also focus more centrally on the role of the family. One writer commented that the wives "have generally become neurotic and need help almost as much as their husbands."<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on the family reflects much of what Wilson envisioned in the chapter, "The Family Afterward."<sup>21</sup>

The other major contribution of the feature article was the photos. These photos show us the image of the alcoholic as imagined by the popular press but also how Alcoholics Anonymous wanted the world to see its members. The most striking of these images was from a piece in Columbus, Ohio that has on one page the standard drunk

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<sup>19</sup> Logan Long, "The Strangely Moving Story of a band of Tolerant People who Call Themselves 'AA' and Daily Save American Lives and American Homes." *Rocky Mountain News Sunday Magazine*. NO DATE, Courtesy of AA General Service Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Jay Nelson Tuck, "Challenge Accepted." *NY World Telegram*. 10/15/41.

<sup>21</sup> See previous chapter.

picture, a disheveled man, bleary eyed and alone. Opposite this photo is another picture of the same man, cleaned up and sitting in an easy chair surrounded by his wife and children.<sup>22</sup> Wilson could not have posed it more perfectly himself. The message is clear: AA not only restored the drunkard to health, it also restored the traditional family with the father at the head and the wife and children subordinate to him. Other photos were used as action photos, showing AA members (usually Bill Wilson) going to the bed of a potential member and engaging him in the AA method of sobering up.<sup>23</sup> These photos had two significant meanings: first, they depicted the direness of the alcoholic condition. When discussing any illness, if a hospital stay is required, it becomes a much more serious problem than recovering at home. These hospital scenes effectively portrayed alcoholism as a serious illness as opposed to a moral failing. The second benefit of this image was that it presented AA in a favorable light.

These men, who appeared well kept and successful, were reaching out to help someone else. This visual portrayal of altruism made Alcoholics Anonymous appear as a sympathetic entity. Members went to hospitals to save those that needed their help; they were angels of mercy. Unlike other temperance workers, however, they were not only trying to save the alcoholic in the bed, but rather they aimed to save themselves as well. This picture of humble kindness resonated within the greater culture as well. These men demonstrated what was best about American values. They were the living embodiment

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<sup>22</sup> *Columbus Sunday Dispatch*, 3/22/1942.

<sup>23</sup> William Neal, "Alcoholics Anonymous" *Atlanta Journal*, 3/26/1942.

of the Protestant ethic of the more successful in society helping those less fortunate, but clearly there were rewards for the giver of philanthropy.

The other photos that commonly appeared alongside these articles were the “anonymous” photos. In these pictures, AA members either were pictured with their backs to the camera or wearing masks.<sup>24</sup> These pictures highlighted the lengths AA’s went to in order to remain anonymous. It demonstrated to the potential member that their secret was safe, and it also allowed current members to feel safe regarding their standing in their respective communities. Most importantly, these photos represented a similar cultural value as the “action” photos. They demonstrated humility on the part of Alcoholics Anonymous members that to other readers were curious images for drunkards. Instead of being the bar room braggart or skid row bum, here were self-proclaimed drunks working to help others, and asking for no credit.

No discussion of the role the press played in the expansion of Alcoholics Anonymous is complete without a discussion of the Jack Alexander article in the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1941.<sup>25</sup> As Wilson later commented, the Alexander piece, “placed such a compelling picture of AA before the general public that alcoholics in need really deluged us.”<sup>26</sup> Alexander was initially skeptical of the new movement, but as his story demonstrates, he was quickly won over by the alcoholic organization. Like many essays written about AA, Alexander’s described the founding of the society and covered

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Alexander, “Alcoholics Anonymous.” *Saturday Evening Post*, 3/1941, reprinted by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, New York.

<sup>26</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xviii.

a “12<sup>th</sup> step call” in a hospital. Alexander made the members of AA especially recognizable to his readership. He paid lip service to the working men that he saw in the meetings, but it was clear that his focus was on the middle and upper class members of the community. He paid particular attention to the professions and alma maters of the members. Alexander even mentioned that Smith’s wife was a Wellesley graduate and that Wilson’s wife hailed from a prominent Brooklyn family.<sup>27</sup> The article was a strong statement regarding the perceived moral weakness of the middle class that had allowed the country to fall into such a desperate condition. Overall, short of attending meetings and reading the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Alexander provided the best description of the program up until that time.

There is no denying that the article had a profound effect on the membership numbers of AA. AA was growing before its publication. Anywhere between two and five thousand people identified themselves as members of Alcoholics Anonymous. After Alexander’s piece membership exploded. There are a number of reasons this article had such a huge effect on the growth of AA. First, *The Saturday Evening Post* was the largest national publication to write about AA. While many of the syndicated Sunday features were widely distributed, none had the exposure of an article in the *Post*. Second, the article was absolutely glowing in its praise of Alcoholics Anonymous. After its publication, AA sent copies of the article to people requesting further information about the group. This praise was the result of Alexander being completely charmed by AA and Bill Wilson. At the time, Alexander had the reputation of being a hard-nosed journalist,

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander, “Alcoholics Anonymous,” 22.

making his name exposing a number of frauds and scandals.<sup>28</sup> He was intent on getting to the bottom of Alcoholics Anonymous, and wound up writing one of its most effective public relations pieces. After writing the article, Alexander served on the Alcoholics Anonymous Board of Trustees as a non-alcoholic member. Finally, perhaps most importantly, the reason the *Saturday Evening Post* article gave membership such a boost was because of its place in American society. With its Norman Rockwell covers and conservative editorial content, *The Saturday Evening Post* was “the” publication of the middle-class. Perhaps no other magazine, with the possible exception of *Reader’s Digest*, had as long a reach into traditional middle-class homes as the *Post*. In turn, it was from this audience that AA gained most of its membership. The effect on membership was profound. Wilson wrote in 1955 that membership jumped from 2,000 in early 1941 to 8,000 by the end of the year.<sup>29</sup> The message of AA was working quite well with professional men, and those who read Alexander’s piece were a part of that same class. AA received legitimacy by being presented in the most middle-class publication of the time. The responses to the article poured into the New York offices because the values that AA promoted were the same values that the readers of the *Post* held. AA not only presented a solution to a loved one’s drinking problem, it also offered a group identity that was in line with their morals. It allowed people to identify with a group that was not a challenge to the status quo, and yet provided a group that satisfied the need to belong, so prevalent in the era.

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<sup>28</sup> *Pass It On*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, preface to the second edition, ix.

Unlike newspapers, radio played only a limited role in the spread of the AA message to a greater audience. Bill Wilson and the New York area group made a number of attempts to get on radio. These endeavors either didn't pan out or meet the expectations of Wilson and the other members. One particular program, "We the People," was expected to generate a great deal of interest, but it resulted in only a tepid response.<sup>30</sup> The member who appeared on the program was newly sober and it was later revealed that the major concern on the part of Wilson was whether or not he would get drunk before the program.<sup>31</sup> Another program that Bill Wilson appeared on in Jacksonville, Florida was poorly received.<sup>32</sup> Even though radio was arguably the most powerful medium of the era, the AA message did not carry over to the airwaves. It would seem that radio is a more personal form of communication than print, the ability of the news writers to describe Alcoholics Anonymous added to the success of the newspaper stories and magazine articles.

The lack of enthusiasm for the radio programs aside, AA used all of this exposure to their benefit and at times even courted it. With each new story Bill Wilson inflated the number of members to advertise the group's success. In meetings that Wilson visited across the country he shared the news that AA had expanded to various new communities. This news was a boost of confidence to the membership. It demonstrated that not only could they recover from alcoholism but they were also part of a spreading

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Alcoholics Anonymous Will Appeal to Other Brethren Through Program Over WJHP." *Jacksonville Journal*, 9/12/1941.

movement. It reinforced the idea that they were part of something worthwhile, something useful. Along with the articles written about AA as it entered new communities, Wilson and the New York offices courted the involvement of the press. There are a number of press releases and personal notes from Wilson telling reporter friends of some special event that involved AA. Alcoholics Anonymous also used the occupations of its members to help publicize the program. The aforementioned radio exposure was the result of a new member who worked at the station. Though the program kept its membership anonymous, it did not want to be anonymous to the world as a whole. In the early years of AA, publicity was a key function of the group.

The many exposés and syndicated articles introduced readers to a person of some standing in the community, usually a businessman who had fallen on hard times because of the economy and who turned to alcohol to alleviate his problems. Of course, this did not work and he hit bottom. Anyone who had lived through the stock market crash and its devastating aftermath could identify with this basic story. While not everyone used alcohol to escape the problems of the era, all certainly could relate to this notion of falling from grace. For the rest of a community, it acted much the same way. If a person brought so low could raise himself up again, then there was hope for the community at large. The ‘insider look’ into the meetings took a “clandestine” activity and made it wholesome. So many groups were meeting in the 1930s with agendas that were alien to many middle class Americans. AA presented a group doing good for the community, and while they preferred to remain anonymous, they wanted to assure everyone that what they were doing was for the greater good.

The image of service rendered without expectation of reward is a powerful example of American traditions. Ultimately it represents the antithesis of two of the greater cultural currents experienced by the United States at this time. First, it claims the individual as AA's own, but not to be praised like the exultation of successful heroes in the 1920's, rather as nameless, faceless persons willing to do what is right without concern for their personal reward. Second it is a response to the predominant culture of the 1930s in that the organization was not a governing body nor did it claim to be one. The viewers of these images are introduced to a collection of individuals who are acting on their own for the benefit of all, much like the populist movements of an earlier generation. AA was in a very real sense what Herbert Hoover envisioned as the primary way out of the Depression: private individuals acting for the betterment of the community with little to no government assistance.

The stress on the need of an alcoholic for help was a key aspect of AA's appeal during the 1930s. Instead of asking the townsfolk to help the drunkard, the individual must first come forward. There was no compulsion or request made by the government to get involved with reforming the drunk. The problem drinker saw this as the first step to accepting responsibility in his life; the greater community saw traditional values at work. The person helping himself, received help. There was no need for the community, government or state to interfere. AA sent the message to the world that the values of a prior America still worked. More important, these values worked on a group of people that many thought beyond help. If these values could restore the lowest society had to offer, then there was hope that the rest of society could recover as well. Ironically, it was

this older societal model that placed so much emphasis on the economy that failed and resulted in the problem drinking of the future membership of AA. Yet the founders of AA never took the failings of this model to task and certainly they did not look to alternatives, unlike many organizations of the 1930s. While AA made it a point to let the greater world know they accepted people from all professions and classes, they never discussed, let alone explored using the labor organization methods of the working class to deal with the challenges of the depression. Nor, it must be admitted, did the organization go out of its way to recruit members of the working class who were so hard-hit by the economic catastrophe.

*“Don’t Dismiss What Our Friends in Organized Religion Say”*

The press was the most important factor in the growth and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous during its early period. The hundreds of news articles were overwhelmingly positive and swayed public opinion strongly in favor of the fledgling program. The press was not alone, however, in its adulation of the new organization. Another key ally in the spread of Alcoholics Anonymous was organized religion. From its beginnings within the Oxford Group to the writing of the “Big Book” and afterwards, AA benefited greatly from the interest expressed by various religious denominations and societies. This was not only because of the results AA had with drunkards, but also because of Alcoholics Anonymous’ carefully crafted message that made the group palatable across all Christian lines. This acceptance by so many denominations made joining the group easy for the new members and gave them confidence that they were in a morally approved organization.

A previous chapter discussed the role of the Oxford Group, but the importance of the split bears repeating.<sup>33</sup> Wilson and the New York group knew they were moving away from the Oxfords. Wilson and the others also knew that if they wanted to be of maximum benefit to drunks, then they needed to be free of affiliation with any one religious organization or denomination. Especially key to this thinking were the concerns of Catholic members and the identification of the Oxford Group with Protestantism. The same concern was a key reason for the split of the Akron group, not only from the Oxfords, but of the Cleveland members deciding that they needed to form their own group as well.

Though all chapters of AA moved away from the Oxford Group, one of the key individuals of the Oxford movement, Reverend Sam Shoemaker, was an important person in the development and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous. First, it was at his church, Calvary Episcopal, that Wilson first encountered the Oxford Group. Wilson was allowed within the mission at the church to test his methods of recruitment and aid to alcoholics. As AA grew and split off from the Oxford Group, Shoemaker still provided major support for the program. After a protracted misunderstanding between Wilson and Shoemaker, the pastor remained a friend of the program as it grew. Shoemaker was also important because he was one of the most influential and well-known clergymen in the United States during this time. He had national prominence and because his name was associated with the program, he helped Alcoholics Anonymous achieve greater visibility and greater respectability.

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<sup>33</sup> See chapter 3.

When they disassociated from the Oxford Group, AA became a more acceptable and welcome organization to Roman Catholics.<sup>34</sup> Many of the members commuting from Cleveland to Akron were relieved when the association with the Oxfords ended because, quite simply, they no longer felt compelled to commute to Akron for the weekly meetings. The approval of the Church hierarchy was also a concern of Wilson's. He had an early manuscript of *Alcoholics Anonymous* delivered to the Archdiocese of New York to make sure that it did not offend any of the tenets of the Church. The church proposed only one minor edit and Wilson readily agreed to the change.<sup>35</sup> This episode demonstrates that not only were Wilson and the other early members concerned with being available to as many people as possible, but the added concern about the opinion of the Catholic Church shows that AA was aware of where its membership was located. As Alcoholics Anonymous spread across the country, it always sprouted in major metropolitan areas first. While all religions were present in urban areas, none was more associated with the city than Catholicism. By courting favor with the church, AA fostered its growth in many of the nation's big cities. This proved another way in which Alcoholics Anonymous diverged from the earlier temperance and prohibition movements. Notoriously anti-Catholic, most famously in their treatment of Al Smith in the 1928 election, the temperance and prohibition advocates were strictly associated with Protestantism, and they made no overtures to Catholics. They viewed themselves as the rural, sober opposition to urban, drunken, and polyglot society. By

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<sup>34</sup> *Pass it On*, 173.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

including Catholics within their coalition AA further disassociated itself from the old temperance guard and established itself as a new alternative to the old societal question of drunkenness.

A key development in the connection between Alcoholics Anonymous and the Church was the friendship of Bill Wilson and the Jesuit priest Bill Dowling. In 1941, Dowling sought out Wilson to discuss the twelve steps and their connection to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and the two men quickly became friends. Wilson soon relied on the priest for spiritual guidance.<sup>36</sup> This close relationship further enhanced the Catholic-AA bond. Father Dowling was a constant presence in Wilson's life, one that he never hid. Dowling was even on stage with Wilson at the twenty-year anniversary of AA, when Wilson declared Alcoholics Anonymous had come of age.<sup>37</sup> Though Wilson never joined the Catholic Church, he did strongly consider it, even beginning catechism with Fulton Sheen, a famed Monsignor of New York. In the end, Wilson did not want to appear to be endorsing any particular religion and he had fundamental issues with the Church and its structure.<sup>38</sup>

Another key religious figure that endorsed Alcoholics Anonymous early on was Dr. Dilworth Lupton, a Unitarian minister prominent in the Cleveland area. After observing the group, he expressed amazement at the success of Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>39</sup> Lupton admitted his previous failures with problem drinkers, especially with Clarence S.

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<sup>36</sup> *AA Comes of Age*, 253-254.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Pass It On*, 281.

<sup>39</sup> "Watches Religion Save Alcoholics." *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 11/27/1939.

the first AA member in Cleveland. Lupton had been a supporter of prohibition so this was an admission of the failure of eighteenth amendment and earlier temperance methods.<sup>40</sup> As late as 1929 he advocated for stronger enforcement of the Volstead Act, arguing that, “prohibition should have a longer, fairer chance.”<sup>41</sup> Lupton praised the work of Alcoholics Anonymous and referred to the members as “he-men” who operated with “no sensationalism, no fanaticism, no aggressive evangelicalism. They have no desire to make the country dry.”<sup>42</sup> This message was important for several reasons. Like Shoemaker, another major religious figure endorsed the program. Next, by stating that the program was populated by “he-men,” he cast off the image of the society helping the drunks as a feminine one; to be sober was to be masculine. Finally, echoing many other press reports, Lupton stressed that AA was not out to reform society, just alcoholics. Coming from a minister who had been a strong advocate for national prohibition, this was an especially salient point.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Baptist minister who was the pastor of the inter-denominational Riverside Church in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York, was another key minister who accepted AA. His endorsement was especially significant because he was perhaps the most well-known religious figure and somewhat of a national representative of Protestantism in general. Speaking at a dinner hosted by John D. Rockefeller in 1941 to help publicize Alcoholics Anonymous, he remarked,

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<sup>40</sup> Dilworth Lupton. *The Prohibition Dilemma* (Cleveland, OH: First Unitarian Church, 1929.)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> “Watches Religion Save Alcoholics.” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 11/27/1939.

“There are doors of opportunity ahead of this project that may surpass our capacities to imagine.”<sup>43</sup> The appearance of so famous a minister (who had also been on the cover of *Time* magazine), widely reported by the press, gave AA a great boost. Fosdick presents a great example of the appeal that AA generated throughout its early years. A major voice of liberal Christianity, Fosdick’s endorsement of the program carried with it a broad acceptance by mainstream Protestantism. Fosdick’s close association with the Rockefellers also gave AA a measure of prestige within American society.

Another aspect of AA’s appeal to organized religion was its emphasis on personal responsibility. The individual, the sinner, must help himself in order to be redeemed, and then help the next person to achieve a similar transformation. While the group was there to support and aid in this process, ultimately it was up to the individual to accomplish the task. It was this fundamental truth that made the appeal of AA so strong. It recalled a set of values that many felt were challenged by the 1920s and needed to be restored in the 1930s in order to save the nation from the maelstrom of depression. Organized religions across a broad Christian spectrum saw this within AA. They recognized, despite their differences that, in the words of Ernest Kurtz, Alcoholics Anonymous “rendered the spiritual acceptable in modern times is no small achievement.”<sup>44</sup> Even more important, however, was that AA brought sin back to American culture.<sup>45</sup> While Warren Susman decried this development in his writings about American culture, especially the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, it is perhaps AA’s greatest achievement. By bringing back sin, and

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<sup>43</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 572.

<sup>44</sup> *Not-God*, 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

therefore making the U.S. a society of sinners, it allowed society to redeem itself. Most importantly, AA did not accuse society of any wrongdoing, only the individual. It was not society's fault that the drunkard was in his straits as the temperance movement argued. Instead the emphasis was upon the individual, not society, and the individual can be fixed, one person at a time without blaming the rest of the community. Furthermore, and much to Alcoholics Anonymous' credit, while they focus on the weakness of the professional/middle-class of American society, they never leveled accusations at the working class or immigrants, again in contrast to the earlier temperance movements.

This ability to appeal to a liberal Christian like Henry Emerson Fosdick on the one hand and the Catholic Church on the other demonstrated the ability of Wilson as a writer. *Alcoholics Anonymous* presented a rigorous program to achieve self-improvement, but it did not challenge any of the key areas of beliefs of any major religion. It presented its belief system as a universal method for achieving faith. It often referred readers to seek out further spiritual help from religious persons with such statements as "Suggestions about these may be obtained from one's priest, minister or rabbi. Be quick to see where religious people are right. Make use of what they offer."<sup>46</sup> Though Alcoholics Anonymous never formally stated that their members should return to church, with advice like this the subtext was clear. The personal stories were much more explicit. Many of the early members remarked that they returned to the faiths that they had once abandoned. The return to church therefore became another visible sign that the member was recovered. Like reuniting a marriage and gaining employment, the return to church was a benchmark of sobriety. By encouraging members to return to church and

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<sup>46</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 87.

having a broad theological appeal, it was easy to see why AA received such a ringing endorsement by such a variety of faiths.

*“The Doctor’s Opinion”: The Medical Profession*

The official reclassification of alcoholism as a disease by the American Medical Association did not occur until 1956, but the inroads to effect this change occurred early on in the history of AA. The association with medical professionals gave Alcoholics Anonymous an immediate air of legitimacy. While ties to the psychiatric community took longer to develop, the first mental health professionals who advocated for AA were present very early on as well. The link between AA and medicine was established from the very first stirrings of the program. Bill Wilson had his “vision” of a worldwide movement in an upscale Manhattan hospital under the care of Dr. William Silkworth.<sup>47</sup> Silkworth was a major contributor to the rise of AA. He informed Wilson about his theory that alcoholism was an allergy. This gave Wilson one of the key tenets of his approach to curing alcoholism. Wilson was convinced that alcoholism was a threefold disease. It afflicted the sufferer mentally, physically, and spiritually.<sup>48</sup>

Unfathomable today, a key to the development of Wilson’s approach with alcoholics was Silkworth’s willingness to let him work with patients at Towns Hospital. Immediately after Wilson’s last stay in the hospital, Silkworth allowed him to share his experience with other patients, and try to convince them that they too could find a cure for their disease. Silkworth continued medical treatment for alcoholics but he saw no

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<sup>47</sup> *Pass It On*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Kurtz has a long discussion of the philosophical aspects of the disease concept and disease as metaphor, see *Not-God*, 199-204.

harm, and possibly great benefit, to Wilson's efforts. Solidifying this relationship between Silkworth and AA was his official endorsement of the program in the preface of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. "The Doctor's Opinion," written by Dr. Silkworth, detailed his ideas that alcoholics suffer from an allergy which "never occurs in the average temperate drinker."<sup>49</sup> Dr. Silkworth endorsed Alcoholics Anonymous as the only effective means that he had seen to help the chronic alcoholic.<sup>50</sup> By enlisting the endorsement of Dr. Silkworth, Alcoholics Anonymous followed the path previously trod by progressive era reformers, using science as a support for their argument. The key difference, however, was that Silkworth focused not on the harm that alcohol or alcoholics inflicted upon society, but rather he concentrated on the condition of the alcoholics themselves.<sup>51</sup> Further, his preface did not discuss (at least in great detail) the ravages, or potential fatal effects, of alcohol use, especially for the temperate drinker. Finally, by describing alcoholism as disease, Silkworth helped remove much of the guilt associated with the condition. The previous image of the drunkard was of someone who was deep in remorse, beyond hope, pitiful, and broken beyond repair. Regret still remained in the AA age, but by having a disease, instead of a weakness, the drunkard, now alcoholic, took some relief in the idea that there was more to his present state than simply a moral deficiency.

Another physician who embraced Wilson and his method was, of course, Dr. Robert Smith, his first success. When Smith and Wilson began approaching potential

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<sup>49</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xxiii-xxx; xxvi.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx.

<sup>51</sup> Also see Kurtz's discussion of this in *Not-God*, 34, 59.

members as a team, Smith's medical background was a key in swaying the opinion of the bleary-eyed prospect. Smith's role, however, was more than just a spokesman. Smith used his influence at Akron City Hospital to direct the care of alcoholics in the hospital. He changed the reasons for admission for a number of men (alcoholism was not considered a reason for admittance to the hospital proper, just for the common ward) and provided private rooms for them where he approached them about entering Alcoholics Anonymous. These practices eventually came under scrutiny at Akron City Hospital, leading Dr. Smith to take on a new position at St. Thomas Hospital, where he oversaw a ward dedicated to the care of alcoholics. With the help of Sister Ignatia, a Carmelite nun on staff at St. Thomas, Smith helped thousands of alcoholics in the Akron-Canton region. At St. Thomas the treatment was entirely Alcoholic Anonymous based, quite possibly the first such ward in the nation to do so. It set a precedent that is still being followed today, namely the twelve steps being the main method of treating alcoholism.<sup>52</sup>

Two other medical professionals who helped the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous were Dr. George Preston and Dr. Floyd Faust, from Baltimore and Columbus, respectively. In both cases they were localized versions of Dr. Silkworth, and helped to promote AA in their communities. In Baltimore, the news article discussing the work of AA mentioned that the group and Dr. Preston had a working agreement with one another focused on helping alcoholics.<sup>53</sup> Part of the approach that Preston used was the emphasis on the importance of a job to middle-class values as seen in his praise of

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that this approach is coming under more and more criticism in the last ten years.

<sup>53</sup> Harrison Johnston, "John Barleycorn's Victims Seek Strength in Unity" *Baltimore Sun*, 2/16/1941.

“getting them back to work is one of the first, and most important, things the group attempts to do.”<sup>54</sup> This echoes the sentiment of Wilson’s emphasis in *Alcoholics Anonymous* on the value of working and the chapter, “To the Employers.” In Columbus, Dr. Faust saw a need for the treatment of alcoholics, and unaided by help from AA chapters in other cities, Faust started the Alcoholics Anonymous program in the Columbus area.<sup>55</sup> Both cases represent how, early on, the acceptance of AA occurred within the medical community. While it was still years away until the AMA changed its definition of alcoholism, by the time it did, the change was largely symbolic. Practicing physicians across the country were already treating alcoholism as a disease and were using the methods of Alcoholics Anonymous to treat it.

The final social institution that was instrumental in the acceptance and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous was the psychiatric community. This community took a little longer than other professions to endorse the AA approach to alcoholism, but eventually it did. Soon after the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA was the focus of a number of psychiatric studies. Like the medical doctors, therapists saw the possible benefit of the AA approach and began to recommend it to their patients. The most influential of these psychiatrists was Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, who practiced in New Haven, Connecticut. Dr. Tiebout received an early version of the Big Book and immediately found it useful. He recommended its use to one of his patients who proved to be one of the most important members of Alcoholics Anonymous, Miss Marty Mann. Mann led the way in popularizing the idea that alcoholism was a disease. It was through Mann that Tiebout

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Dr. Floyd Faust, “Alcoholics Anonymous Spur Drive” *Columbus Dispatch*, 11/29/1941.

met Bill Wilson and became his therapist for a number of years. In a sense this relationship, that of Wilson and Tiebout, also increased the acceptance of psychiatric theory and practice within AA as well. In the beginning of the program, Dr. Smith was concerned that their approach might get all “Freuded up.”<sup>56</sup> As Wilson cultivated his relationship with Dr. Tiebout, however, the prejudice toward the mental health profession subsided somewhat within the ranks of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Other key individuals in the acceptance of AA within the mental health community were Dr. Milton Maxwell and E.M. Jellinek, a biostatistician and physiologist at Yale.<sup>57</sup> Both conducted early research on the usefulness of AA and also included members of Alcoholics Anonymous in their activities. Maxwell was largely concerned with the effect of the group dynamic in the recovery of the alcoholic (Maxwell was a sociologist) while Jellinek explored the causes of alcoholism and found in AA a number of people willing to share their stories in order to aid his research. As Jellinek continued to research alcoholism, he began an institute at Yale University to further his investigations. For many years, Bill Wilson was an active participant in the institute, often presenting his theories on alcoholism during special summer sessions. While it was a number of years before the entire psychiatric profession accepted the AA approach as a treatment for alcoholism, it was because of the work of private practitioners, like Tiebout, and researchers, like Maxwell and Jellinek, that Alcoholics Anonymous became the dominant method of treatment in the United States.

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<sup>56</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, 338.

<sup>57</sup> *Pass It On*, 325.

Wilson's involvement in the Yale Institute was only one of many activities that he engaged in while trying to foster the relationship between the medical and psychiatric communities and Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson also gave numerous presentations to state and national boards about alcoholism and AA. He presented his theories to the Connecticut Board of Mental Hygiene and the New York Board of Health. As AA grew, Wilson was asked to speak at many other conferences and hearings about alcoholism and public health. Looking at the presentations that are available, it is apparent that Wilson was very careful not to offend anyone in the profession he was addressing. He never introduced himself as an expert in any field, but rather he styled himself as more of a well informed layman. His experience with alcoholics was key in his approach to these gatherings. He was also very wary of presenting too much of the religious side of the program when he was before these boards. A great example of this approach was how Wilson discussed the disease concept of alcoholism, "We have never called alcoholism a disease because, technically speaking, it is not a disease entity. Therefore we did not wish to get in wrong with the medical profession."<sup>58</sup> As Wilson presented more frequently to these various bodies, AA's acceptance within each area grew until ultimately Alcoholics Anonymous ultimately became the standard method of treatment of alcoholism from a medical and psychological standpoint in 1956.

Wilson was keen on establishing a firm link between Alcoholics Anonymous and psychiatric history. He always credited William James with giving him the initial impetus to start the program. As many others have noted, this not only wove him into the

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<sup>58</sup> Bill Wilson quoted from presentation to National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism, 1943. quote used from Kurtz, *Not-God*, 22.

fabric of intellectual history, but also established the program as part of the intellectual tradition of the father of American psychiatry.<sup>59</sup> Another person Wilson always recognized as a “founder” of AA was Dr. Carl Jung. In crediting Jung with some of the founding principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, an interesting symmetry of disciplines occurred. Jung believed that a spiritual experience was the key to the overall mental health of many of his patients. Wilson, and many AA members, felt that they had achieved such an experience. In 1961, Wilson wrote to Jung, expressing his thanks for his ideas and his indirect influence on the development of AA.<sup>60</sup> Jung replied and offered an implicit approval of the program especially when he wrote:

The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is that it happens to you in reality, and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism...Alcohol in Latin is *spiritus*, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*.<sup>61</sup>

This acceptance by one of the most influential psychiatrists of the twentieth century is best seen as the coda of the public acceptance of Alcoholics Anonymous. By 1961, AA was firmly established within American culture, yet with Jung’s inclusion, all of the allies that propelled AA to national prominence were legitimated. The earliest influence, according to Wilson, was officially in line with the AA way of thinking.

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<sup>59</sup> Kurtz discusses James’ impact at much greater length, see *Not-God*, 23-25.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson felt this link was established by an early forerunner to AA, Rowland Hazard. Hazard was under the care of Dr. Jung for a year, and tried to remain sober, ultimately achieving success with the Oxford Group. He then contacted his friend Ebby Thatcher to help him recover, who then approached Bill Wilson. A very tenuous chain to say the least, but Wilson always thought it significant.

<sup>61</sup> *Pass it On*, 384.

*Conclusion*

The exposure from the *Saturday Evening Post* was extraordinary, but Alcoholics Anonymous had been steadily growing before March 1941. The approval and acceptance of the press, religious, medical and psychiatric communities paved the way for AA to become an American institution. It grew in the segment of the population that it had the most in common with, namely the middle class. With the support of the *Saturday Evening Post* and advice columnists from across the country, AA's traditional values and beliefs were related to an eager audience, an audience looking for a way to restore themselves and their nation. It was this lack of radicalism, this lack of challenge to the status quo that made Alcoholics Anonymous such an immediate success. As the idea of the American Way of Life took shape, AA presented a method to achieve that way of life for those that firmly believed in the traditions of the United States but had fallen farther than many of their non-alcoholic counterparts.<sup>62</sup> In essence, the message of hope for the alcoholic was carried to the entire country. By illustrating the success of AA in so many feature articles across the nation the image of the alcoholic sobering up and rejoining society was a very powerful one to the nation still suffering from the Depression. The pictures of these reformed men carried with them the message that if the lowest members of society were able to recover, then it was possible for everyone to recover. What is more, they did it the old-fashioned American way. They lifted themselves, individually and as a group, by their bootstraps to rescue themselves from a horrific condition. The reader response that many of the writers mentioned in subsequent articles comes as no surprise. The readers of the columns and features were responding not only for a

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<sup>62</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 154.

troubled relative, but also to the message that there was a solution, not only to drunkenness, but also to the problems of the day. Like other cultural institutions from the era, AA was an inspiration to alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike.

In tandem with this wide acceptance and praise from the general population, other key areas of society were instrumental in the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous. The religious, medical and psychiatric communities all played a significant role in the establishment of AA as a national presence. In the case of the religious community, by being accepted by such a wide array of faiths (Christian anyway) AA was a symbol of unity that many were drawn to during the era. If Alcoholics Anonymous could bring liberal Christians, like Henry Emerson Fosdick, and the Catholic Church together, there was hope for the rest of the nation. AA's belief system also harkened back to an earlier time that many believed was missing. AA brought back sin, and more importantly a way to overcome it.

As the religious acceptance established AA as a moral force that reinvigorated the nation, the medical and psychiatric acceptance established that Alcoholics Anonymous was also a modern entity. It was not simply a religious approach, but a scientific one as well. Just like the religious community, however, these two professions eagerly accepted AA because AA did not challenge their place in society. Alcoholics Anonymous never claimed expertise and welcomed the partnerships of those in the medical and psychiatric professions.

All of this publicity did, as Wilson declared, "open the flood gates." What was once a society centered in two cities had grown, by 1941, to countless communities. As

each new chapter sprang up, many of the same problems occurred. Who was and was not a member? Can women belong? How should money be handled? These and countless other questions were asked of Bill Wilson and the central office of AA, located in New York. Wilson and others tried to answer all of the questions consistently, but the problems of AA becoming a national organization were only beginning. A letter from the Los Angeles Central Office to a back sliding member demonstrates that Alcoholics Anonymous chapters across the nation were struggling with how to cope with this surge of interest and membership, "Dear Mrs. Livoni, your attendance at group meetings was no longer desired until certain explanations and plans for the future were made to the satisfaction of this committee."<sup>63</sup> This letter was dated December 6, 1941. One day later, the concerns of LA Central, Alcoholics Anonymous, indeed the nation itself, were radically altered. The war immediately became the paramount issue for everyone in the United States. Issues such as who was and was not a member became a distant second to the issue of how Alcoholics Anonymous was going to deal with the war.

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<sup>63</sup> Letter from LA Central Committee to Mrs. Irma Livoni, 12/6/1941, Akron Central Area Archives Akron, OH.

## CHAPTER SIX

“AA NEITHER ENDORSES NOR OPPOSES ANY CAUSES”

EXCEPT IN TIMES OF WAR:

### ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AND WORLD WAR II

Lying on the beach at Dunkirk, an early member of AA had a revelation. His time in Alcoholics Anonymous prior to the war, he realized, was the best time of his life. He had a host of friends, a community to belong to, a purpose in his life, and for the first time, genuine happiness. All of that changed when he went overseas to help the British Army fend off the Germans in 1940. He lost contact with the group, stopped reading the organization’s inspirational literature, and when the boredom became too much, or fear set in, he took up drinking once again. Lying wounded on the beach, with bombs exploding and fires raging, he realized sobriety was the best thing that had ever happened to him and he vowed to get back on track if he made it through the horrors of war. He survived the Miracle of Dunkirk, and wrote a letter detailing his experience and sharing his resolution with friends in the organization.<sup>1</sup> Meetings across the nation shared the letter as an example of how AA worked in even the most harrowing of circumstances and reminded members not involved in the war they had little reason to complain. His letter

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from SGT. GR Jackson to “Bob” 8/17/41. *Alcoholics Anonymous 1939-1942 Scrapbook*. The Archives of the General Service Board of AA New York, 1985.

was also the first of what became hundreds of missives from GIs around the world telling the folks back home what the war was like, if they slipped, or how they were managing to stay “on the beam.”

More than providing soldiers for the armed services, Alcoholics Anonymous was eager to be part of the war effort in any way, going against its earlier stance of not taking sides on any public issue. To be fair, the principle of non-involvement was not official policy until the adoption of “The Traditions” in 1955. It was a guiding principle, however, even in the earliest days of the fellowship. Dr. Robert Smith and Bill Wilson were conscious of their public image and worked hard not to be associated with any political party or social movement, especially any advocating prohibition. The membership went to great lengths to keep its focus on their main goal, achieving sobriety for themselves and other alcoholics. Although it proved temporary, World War II saw a dramatic shift in this policy. Alcoholics Anonymous eagerly helped in the war effort and most importantly, demonstrated that the alcoholic, now reformed, was a useful, if not a vital, part of the nation in its struggle against fascism.<sup>2</sup>

AA’s involvement in the war effort manifested itself in a number of ways. First the fellowship wanted to help the army with its drunkenness problem. Wilson even tried to reenlist in the army and broached the idea of setting up a special office, with him at its head, to coordinate sobriety activities in the armed forces. Next, members in the armed

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<sup>2</sup> A number of works also demonstrate this unity and willingness across American society see for example, Michael CC Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Allan M Winkler, *Home Front USA: America during World War II* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986); Kenneth Paul O’Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons, editors. *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.)

forces reached out where they were stationed and started their own groups with the aid of hospitals and chaplains. The central office helped the morale of the alcoholic soldiers, especially through the work of Bobbie Burger, the office manager during the war, by keeping in regular contact with GIs literally across the globe, providing news from home, offering words of encouragement, and helping establish contact with fellow members around the world. An offshoot of this activity was the creation of the first specific gathering within the organization, the Seaman's Group, based in New York but dedicated to the particular needs of those who served at sea whether in the Navy, Merchant Marine, or other maritime endeavors. Finally *The Grapevine*, a magazine whose mission was to communicate news about home to the membership abroad was created.

A final concern of Alcoholics Anonymous was the returning soldier. Wilson believed that alcoholism awaited many of the returning GIs, just as had happened for his generation. Wilson wanted to prevent what he experienced after World War I. Before the war was over, Wilson was barnstorming the nation telling groups that they “needed to be prepared for a bumper crop of drunks” when the war was over.<sup>3</sup> All of this activity during the war provides great insight into the organization and the culture of the United States. The group and its members were one of the unusual organizations that give us a view of both the home and battlefield. The concept of unity, so important to the American war effort, is seen on both fronts through AA, and this concept of unity had an enduring legacy on the group following the war. The notion of unity and having one voice for the alcoholic society began in the pages of *The Grapevine* and carried on well

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<sup>3</sup> Gwen Morgan, “Alcoholics Anonymous, 700 Former Tap-Happy Citizens, Lay Plans for Post War Work.” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 6/13/1943.

after the war was over. World War II affected the growth, message, and presentation of AA that is still seen today.

*“Our Common Welfare Should Come First”*

When World War II began it barely registered in Lois Wilson’s diary. Her only remark was “9/1/39 -- the world is at war again. I can’t believe it.”<sup>4</sup> When the United States entered the conflict two years later, there was not a mention. Bill Wilson, however, saw the war as an opportunity for alcoholics, and himself, to be of great service to the United States and its efforts to win the war. Though he was in his forties, Wilson tried to enlist in the Army. He made a number of appeals to the armed services, but ultimately they turned him down. His reasons for wanting to reenlist were two fold. First, he genuinely wanted to help his nation in its time of need and second, he wanted to prove his valor. Since his service in World War I, according to a number of his biographers, Wilson felt considerable guilt at being part of a rear artillery battery, far from the front lines. His record, he believed, paled in comparison to that of his grandfather’s who was part of the Union force that repelled Picket’s charge at Gettysburg. A new war offered Wilson another opportunity to live up to his ancestor’s great achievements. Further, among the early members of AA, many were veterans of World War I who had seen considerably more action than Wilson. By rejoining the Army, he would be able to compete, in a sense, with his contemporaries’ past service.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Wilson’s Diary, 9/1/1939, Stepping Stones, New Bedford, NY.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name is Bill: Bill Wilson His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous*. (Washington Square Press: New York.), 73; *Pass It On: Bill Wilson and the AA Message*. (AA World Services: New York), 52-54.

The army's major reason for considering Wilson unfit was his alcoholism. Even so, he continued his efforts to be part of the Army in some capacity. His next attempt was to establish an office within the Army, with himself as the head of the department, helping soldiers battling alcoholism. From his own military experience, as well as the experience of his fellow veterans, he knew the challenges faced by the troops who were having trouble with alcohol. At no point did Wilson advocate a return to prohibition. While World War I was an avenue to total prohibition in the United States, Alcoholics Anonymous never took up the cause during World War II. In keeping with the organization's primary focus, Wilson wanted to help individual soldiers become sober, thereby making a greater contribution to the Army overall: help the individual and society benefits. Unfortunately, Wilson wrote to his friend Bill Jones, that the Army wasn't interested in having him join their ranks in any capacity a second time.<sup>6</sup>

Though Wilson did not get to fulfill his goal of becoming part of the Army, another member did. Roy Yeargan was instrumental in starting AA in the Houston area in 1940 and joined the Army with the expressed goal of "sobering up the Army."<sup>7</sup> Initially rejected, he was finally inducted in 1942. Reflecting back on his experiences in 1960, Yeargan felt that his efforts failed while he was in the service. He could not recall anyone that he had sobered up during his stint in the Army. His letters to the New York

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Wilson to Bill Jones, 6/9/1942, AA General Service Office Archives; Also William O'Neill offers interesting context of the problems faced by the US government and its initial mobilization for war in *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II*. (New York: The Free Press, 1993) especially chapter 7, "The People are Willing" 129-152.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Yeargan Self Recorded Oral History, ca. 1960. Tape 1 AA General Service Office Archives, New York.

office however were much more optimistic. Yeargan established strong working relationships throughout the Army, especially at the bases where he was stationed. His efforts helped the armed services begin to confront a problem that they previously refused to acknowledge. While Yeargan saw his efforts as futile, by the Vietnam War a generation later, Alcoholics Anonymous was firmly established throughout the U.S. military. Further, while the soldiers who Yeargan tried to help did not sober up in the Army, there is no way of telling how many of those soldiers found help when they returned after the war. It is likely that at least some of the returning veterans received their first exposure to the program from Yeargan's work.

More important than his actual activity on army bases was Yeargan's establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous groups in the communities surrounding bases, especially in Florida. Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater all consider Yeargan the founder of their local chapters. He would not have accomplished this if not for his time in the Army. While recording his oral history, Yeargan did not think much of what he did during the war years, but he is just one example of a member turned soldier who took Alcoholics Anonymous across the country and the world.

Another example of AA's growth as a result of the efforts of those in the service and associated with the war effort is its beginnings in Honolulu, Hawaii. According to a report written by the Oahu Central Committee, it was commonly believed that Alcoholics Anonymous got its start after Pearl Harbor was attacked and members serving in the Navy were stationed there. They discovered, and letters to the Central Office confirm, that a ship builder, Euell G., working for the Navy was also instrumental in starting AA

in Honolulu. Euell G. wrote to the Central office in 1943 asking for assistance in starting a chapter on the island territory and that group's growth pattern was similar to that of others across the country. It offered insight into the importance of mail from the Central Office, especially as it directed them to groups around the world.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the work of Roy Yeargan in Florida, the start of Alcoholics Anonymous in Hawaii demonstrated the effect of the war on the growth of the organization. While the beginnings of the Honolulu group are not linked to a single soldier as in Yeargan's case, the concentration of activity around Pearl Harbor showed that not only soldiers but those involved in the industrial effort of the war also played a significant role in spreading AA around the world.

Soldiers like Roy Yeargan were also important to the public and self-image of Alcoholics Anonymous. Much was made of the number of members who were in the military (even if the number was exaggerated), and countless news articles from the time highlighted the amount of man-hours the group saved by helping the workforce avoid the bottle.<sup>9</sup> All of this was a concerted effort to demonstrate that AA and its members were patriotic citizens. Shortly after the United States entered the war, various newspapers reported that Alcoholics Anonymous pledged its support for the duration of the war.<sup>10</sup> As part of this support, a pledge was distributed to groups to be read before meetings, it read:

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<sup>8</sup> AA *Grapevine*, July 1944. AA Grapevine Digital Archive, <http://www.aagrapevine.org/da/>

<sup>9</sup> Probably the most accurate number comes from *The Grapevine*, 300. *Grapevine*, June 1944.

<sup>10</sup> "Alcoholics Anonymous Are Pledged for the Duration." *Grand Rapids Press*, 6/12/1942.

I will keep myself fit physically, mentally, spiritually to be ready for any crisis and to discipline myself for strength.  
 I will go about my business with a clear eye a cool head and a stout heart, neither scared by wild rumors nor deluded by false security.  
 I will do my particular job — in office, store, mill or farm — better than it was ever done before, dedicating my skill to my country's service.  
 I will take an active interest in government — in town, school, district, county, state and nation — and make it my business to understand public affairs, laws and policies.  
 I will help build my town as a wholesome, balanced community, because if all the communities are sound, America will be sound.  
 I will vote in every election, appreciating the right of the ballot now denied in many lands.  
 I will support billions for defense but not one cent for waste.  
 I will work for unity among all our people and oppose efforts to create hatred based on race, creed, or color.  
 I will encourage our boys and girls to revere and respect our American traditions.  
 I will keep faith with myself, my country, and my God.<sup>11</sup>

This pledge is an extraordinary look at the mind-set of members during the war. Like so many Americans, they focused on being loyal and patriotic. The best way to demonstrate this nationalistic faith was by working hard, very much in line with the values that Alcoholics Anonymous espoused during its earlier years. Not only was a member to “work better than ever before” but also they pledged to be in top physical, mental and spiritual condition. The sober alcoholic was to be the ideal citizen during wartime, a far cry from how the “membership” acted during the previous war. In a great departure from AA literature prior to and after the war, members were directed to take an active interest in politics and community affairs. This demonstrates a strong admiration and respect for the United States and its institutions of government, but it also implicitly shows us a

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<sup>11</sup> “An AA’s Pledge for National Defense and Self Preservation”, *AA Scrapbook, 1939-1942*, AA General Service Archives, New York, 1985.

certain amount of distrust of the federal government. By taking part in every election, members were expected to act as watchdogs on the actions of those in charge. This is especially seen in the line of the pledge dedicated to defense, but strongly opposed to any kind of waste.

The middle-class cast a wary eye on the policies of the New Deal and how they went about paying for the war. The pledge was a value statement revering the right to vote, the profession of faith, and the keeping of proper traditions for the future of America. While all of these “value” based statements are in keeping with the patriotic fervor of the United States during the war, they also represent a reaffirmation of the values upon which Alcoholics Anonymous was based. All of these statements were rejections of the previous life of the alcoholic. They also raised the United States as the standard for a proper government and society. They also echoed the rejection of Europe seen in the first AA membership and by American culture as a whole. This was a pledge to the wholesomeness of America, to support the country during wartime and to demonstrate to the world that the values of the United States were better than those of a decadent Europe. By embracing such an ideology, sober alcoholics showed the world and most importantly themselves, that they were sterling examples of the American ethos that would ultimately triumph in the current war.

The importance of winning the war to AA members is apparent in another aspect of this pledge. Unlike the “Big Book,” which was very careful to use the phrasing of “should” or “might” when making suggestions about how to achieve sobriety, this pledge goes against the policy of being “suggestive” only. All of the statements are declarative,

“I will.” While the steps were meant to be suggestive only, patriotism was not. This is not much of a surprise. Not only was Alcoholics Anonymous full of veterans and civic leaders, but before Bill Wilson got sober, he made a remark to his wife about what his higher power was. “There is a great power,” he told her, and “that power is America.”<sup>12</sup> Wilson’s faith changed after he got sober, but his love of country never left him. During his life he took great interest in the activities of the nation, often commenting to friends about the policies of the President (though, when sober he did not write letters to the President as he did to President Roosevelt when still drinking).<sup>13</sup> The reverence for America that was a key part of Wilson’s background growing up in Vermont re-emerged in AA’s drive to be part of the war effort.

Much of what this pledge portrayed and all of the news reports about the great things Alcoholics Anonymous did to help the war effort also helped create of a favorable public image of the alcoholic and the organization itself. Instead of being seen as lazy, helpless or useless, sober alcoholics wanted to demonstrate that they were just as patriotic, or more so than their non-alcoholic counterparts. Just as they portrayed their meetings as gay affairs without the booze and often stressed how the membership regained their status in middle-class society as well as in their careers, the stress on what members were doing was a strong part of how AA presented itself during the war. They

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<sup>12</sup> *Bill Wilson, My First Forty Years*. (Central City, MN: Hazelden Information and Educational Services, 2000), 144.

<sup>13</sup> letter from Bill W. to Ed B. 10/17/1964, commenting on upcoming election; Nell Wing, *Glad to Have Been There: My 42 Years with Bill and Lois and the evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Park Ridge, IL, Parkside Publishing Corp, 1992), 49.

wanted to be seen as exemplary, to be seen as the opposite of how alcoholics were traditionally viewed.

The opposing view was still prevalent in society, as Elizabeth Hughes, a columnist for the *Boston Globe*, made clear in her editorial. “We can’t put men apt to collapse at the first sound of a rifle in our combat zones,” she declared.<sup>14</sup> AA was keen on proving those who shared Hughes view wrong. Within the pages of *The Grapevine*, AA’s magazine started during the war, much was made of the amount of man-hours being saved for war production. Citing an article from the *Richmond Independent* reporting that AA saved “600,000 man-hours in one year,” *The Grapevine* wanted its readers to feel proud of the work they were doing at home.<sup>15</sup> The magazine stressed that by these efforts in industry they were saving soldiers’ lives and winning the war. *The Grapevine* published a letter from a non-alcoholic who admired what AA had done for industrial production during the war, praising them as “the most potent force yet found to help industry protect its investment in individuals.”<sup>16</sup>

This kind of sentiment bolstered Alcoholics Anonymous efforts to present the reformed drunk as an ideal citizen. Not only were individual members working and fighting in the war, but their efforts with others was the “most potent force” in combating the drunkenness of others working for the war effort. Newspapers also highlighted the role of the group in war industries. A feature from New Haven explored the multiple

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Hughes. “What I Think.” *Boston Globe*, 7/2/1942.

<sup>15</sup> *Grapevine*, August 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Clemens Mortenson “Letters to the Grapevine” *Grapevine*, April 1945.

ways it worked to boost production through the contribution of its members who were “one hundred percent employed, scores are in executive posts of great responsibility in the war effort and private enterprise,” but also because Alcoholics Anonymous was called upon to help industry from across the nation.<sup>17</sup> This was all part of a national campaign by “all its 230 groups... to contribute to the upturn in the nation’s war production graph” by dealing with “the Saturday night drinkers,” as Bill Wilson referred to the largest part of the absentee problem.<sup>18</sup> Similar to Wilson’s belief that alcoholics were not the only problem with drunken absenteeism, another editorial from *The Ship Worker* connected the use of alcohol in society squarely with defeat. “We refer to Alcoholism. The downfall of France can be laid upon his feet,” exclaimed the editorial. “With the exception of Norway, all of the other subjugated nations have linked arms with him and have paid for the companionship.”<sup>19</sup> The message was clear: to drink to excess was to allow defeat.

Another example of pitching into the war effort was the idea of sacrifice, not only by soldiers going off to war, but also by those having to ration their consumption and alter their mode of living.<sup>20</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous was no different in this attitude and used it to further the image of alcoholics doing their part. Much was made of the

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<sup>17</sup> Howard H. Smith, “Alcoholics Anonymous Cuts Absenteeism” *New Haven Register*, New Haven, CT. 4/7/1943.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Alcoholism and Absenteeism” *The Ship Worker*. 4/1943.

<sup>20</sup> An excellent look at the impact of and reaction to rationing during World War Two is Paul D Casdorff, *Let the Good Times Roll: Life at Home in America During WWII*. (New York: Paragon House, 1989) and Doris Weatherford *American Women and World War II*. (New York: Facts On File, 1990).

organization publishing its basic text in a smaller format to conserve paper for the war effort. Not only did the dimensions of the Big Book shrink, but also it was printed on a different grade of paper to support the conservation of materials. Although AA embraced the idea of sacrifice, it is interesting to note that they felt they should be exempt from gas rationing during the war. Both Bill Wilson and Robert Smith testified before various governmental bodies arguing that driving was vital to their work with drunks and to the overall health of their members. Their logic was that the more people that were sober, the more productive the entire workforce. Wilson carried on this push for a gas exemption by writing to the Assistant Surgeon General, Lawrence Kohl, hoping he could convince other governmental agencies of the medical importance of AA's work. Ultimately, they were granted an exemption in a letter from the director of the rationing board in which he stated, "we recognize the important social significance of the work done by the Alcoholics Anonymous and feel that the mileage driven by its members for the purposes of the necessary meetings of the organization comes wholly outside of the pleasure driving ban."<sup>21</sup> This illustrates how far Alcoholics Anonymous had come in less than ten years. They were recognized by an important part of the government as a key to fighting the alcoholism problem in the United States, and by extension, an important part of the war effort.

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Luther J. Reid, Head, Rationing Section, Office of Price Administration to James Crane, Chicago Sun Bureau, Washington DC. AA General Service Archives, New York.

*“Staying Sober in the Most Desperate of Times”*

In a letter dated April 5 1943, Bobbie Burger, the secretary of the Alcoholic Foundation in New York, wrote Jim E., a soldier in the Pacific Theatre, “We don’t know where you are exactly,” she said, “but we heard that it was pretty hot, and we’re not talking about the weather! Take care Jim and know that everyone here is thinking and praying for you.”<sup>22</sup> This small note encapsulates the role that Alcoholics Anonymous played in the lives of its many overseas members. Bill Wilson kept his focus on trying to be of service to the war effort at home so the task of corresponding to soldiers fell upon Bobbie Burger. Burger was a member of the New York group who joined AA around 1940 and became the secretary for the Alcoholic Foundation in 1941. Much of her job consisted of writing letters to potential members interested in starting their own chapters, sending out literature to established and new groups, and trying to answer questions about the organization’s policies to the groups scattered across the country.<sup>23</sup> Burger had no idea that her job would soon consist of being a global correspondent.

Almost overnight, Burger wrote to soldiers, helping them cope with the isolation, stress and boredom of military life, while at the same linking their efforts abroad with the home-front. She shared personal details from her life to give the soldiers a taste of home. She took a personal interest in the lives of her pen pals, asking about girlfriends or wives, details about the sober group they were a part of back home and other aspects of their civilian past. Most important, she sent any and all AA literature that she could to

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Bobbie Burger to Jim E. AA General Service Archives, New York, 4/5/43.

<sup>23</sup> This activity became even more pronounced when Bill Wilson traveled and when he experienced one of the deepest depressions of his life in the middle part of the decade.

soldiers. Some of this effort was aimed at helping them establish a recovering community wherever they were, but these activities also served as a vital link with the Alcoholics Anonymous message, which the group hoped, would keep the members grounded. Burger provided encouragement to the members abroad, advising them to stay sober, telling the person how proud all of AA was of their efforts, and she provided a sympathetic ear willing to listen to bad news, especially news of a slip back to drinking.

This was Burger's greatest contribution to the recovering soldier. She was never judgmental or accusatory in her replies to those who fell off the wagon and she was sympathetic and welcoming to the man who had lost his way. The soldiers expressed gratitude for this understanding tone. Those who did not get drunk often told Burger how much they appreciated her efforts and the tone of their correspondence implies how important these letters, from someone they had never met, were to their time in the service. It was always an occasion when one of Burgers "boys" came through New York. The soldier met all of the staff at the Alcoholic Foundation and often went to lunch with Burger, and if possible, Bill Wilson. To the member of AA serving in the military, this was quite special treatment. Not only did they get to meet Burger, but also an hour or two with the co-founder was something extraordinary.

The content of these letters to and from Bobbie Burger demonstrate what was important to the soldiers during the war, the need to stay connected to life in the States, especially to a sympathetic woman who understood their problems. She may not have been Betty Grable, but she did function as an important link between male servicemen abroad and the world of domesticity at home. The details and discussions may appear

ordinary or even boring, but when viewed in the context of the war, they illuminate what was driving the servicemen: doing their duty and returning to a normal life. Part of that normal life for AA members included returning to their respective groups. As one soldier wrote to Burger after a slip lasting a number of months, “I look back now at my time in the New York group as the best time of my life. I had a host of friends, was doing good work and felt good. I let old habits get the best of me and almost blew it.”<sup>24</sup> AA was central to the lives of those overseas and any contact with that part of their life was paramount, not only to their sobriety but to their sanity as well.

Along with Bobbie Burger, many of the women working in the central office had similar correspondence during the war. This function is telling. The emotional support offered by these women demonstrates an important aspect of women in the war effort that is not always discussed.<sup>25</sup> While supporting Alcoholics Anonymous members also included being a spiritual and sober contact, these letters show how important news from home was to all soldiers. It kept them going during the extreme stress of combat and the deadly boredom of camp life. The role of these women in AA cannot be stressed enough. Burger alone kept in regular contact with at least five soldiers along with her other duties in the office. Every letter was not a lengthy account of life since the last missive, but

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Ed C. to Bobbie Burger. Date Unknown. AA General Service Archives, New York.

<sup>25</sup> Also regarding the role of support provided by women during the war see: Doris Weatherford *American Women and World War II* (New York: Facts On File, 1990) 265-284 and Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Elaine Tyler May, “Rosie the Riverter Gets Married” and Susan E. Hirsch “No Victory at the Workplace: Women and Minorities at Pullman during World War II.” in Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, editors, *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.)

they all took time to write and Burger and the others realized how important the communication was.

The relationship that developed between the office staff and the soldiers is multifaceted. It falls along the traditional gender relationship of men going off to war and women staying home and supporting their efforts. Women workers from the World War Two era felt they were aiding the soldiers.<sup>26</sup> There was not much correspondence between men in the office and soldiers in the field. Government officials sought to make the war about saving democracy and freedom, and the soldiers believed in that message. From these letters, however, even more than letters to their wives and girlfriends, we get the sense that these men were fighting for these women and for all women. They were fighting to protect America as they saw it.<sup>27</sup> It was symbolic reminder of what these men were fighting for, their vision of the “American Way of Life.”

Along with this traditional view of the relationship between soldiers abroad and women at home, a second, less examined role emerges from this particular body of documents. Bobbie Burger and the other office staffers were performing vital work for the war effort through their dedicated correspondence. While the image of Rosie the Riveter dominates most discussions of women’s work in defense industries during the

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<sup>26</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); Nancy Baker-Wise and Christy Wise, *Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.)

<sup>27</sup> Robert B Westbrook, ““I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James”: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec., 1990), 587-614; Lewis A. Erenberg, “Swing Goes to War: Glenn Miller and the Popular Music of World War II,” in *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 181-210.

war, these women were also part of that change in a more subtle way. The office workers exemplified the role of women during the war described by Maureen Honey in her work, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, “a complicated mixture of strength and dependence, competence and vulnerability, egalitarianism and conservatism.”<sup>28</sup> They were the face of Alcoholics Anonymous. They took care of the day-to-day operations of the office and managed to keep the spirits up of members away from home. These women were not building bombers but they did expand their role in society just the same. In a time when few women were members of Alcoholics Anonymous, these women were entrusted with the important and vital task of “carrying the message” to alcoholics literally everywhere in the world. What had been almost exclusively the task of men prior to the war was now a primary function of the women in the New York office.

Looking at the literature surrounding the role of women during World War II, the staff of Alcoholics Anonymous strikes an interesting middle ground. In many ways they illustrate Karen Anderson’s argument that the war was important for women, but not the watershed moment that others, especially William Chafe, declared that it was. The greatest strides for women during and especially after the war were in employment opportunities that were largely considered women’s roles before the war. Unlike Leila Rupp, who sees no significant change for American women, the small sample that AA

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<sup>28</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 7.

provides demonstrates the war years being important toward the changing view of women in American society.<sup>29</sup>

One of the key functions of the central office during the war was putting fellow soldiers in touch with one another. Many of the letters from the office staff mentioned another person they could write to in order to get more support during their tours of duty. These letters have been lost to time, but in the many updates to the central office, the correspondents told of writing and/or meeting their fellow AA.<sup>30</sup> It was through this type of communication that Roy Yeargan established contact across the nation with various new members and helped to establish groups in the Tampa Bay region of Florida. These contacts also allowed the traveling member to establish personal contact wherever they were stationed.

This soldier-to-soldier contact illustrates, yet again, the importance of Alcoholics Anonymous to the lives of these men and the power AA had in their lives. As a sailor recounted to *The Grapevine* in July of 1944:

In addition to Johnny, I had a reunion with the master of a Liberty ship which came in here a short while ago— he was a member of the ‘Frisco group. Both of us agreed that without the group, neither would be here. Such reunions as these do wonders for people who have been more or less completely cut off, and living in a world apart.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations and the Status of Women During World War Two* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Leila J. Rupp, ‘War is not Healthy for Children and other Living Things: Reflections on the Impact of Total War on Women’ In James Titus, *The Home Front and War in the Twentieth Century: The American Experience in Comparative Perspective: Proceedings of the Tenth Military History Symposium, 20-22 October 1982* Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy, 1984.

<sup>30</sup> *Grapevine*, June 1944.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1944.

These men wrote and visited with people they did not know, yet they reached out to one another for their sobriety. This relationship impacted the growth of AA during the war in a number of ways. As the case of Roy Yeargan demonstrates, a person who was more itinerant than a permanent resident could still carry the message and establish new groups. During his time in Florida, Yeargan became known as a “member at large” for various groups because of his travels throughout the region. Ultimately the idea of being part of a single group, i.e. the Akron Group or the New York group, became secondary to the understanding and identity of the AA member. While never made to feel unwelcome by other groups, a visiting member often identified with his home group. During the war and afterward, this local identification was less important. The war made Alcoholics Anonymous less of a local institution and more of a national (and later an international) one.

This shift from a local to national identification mirrored the change in identity throughout the nation as well. Much has been said about American soldiers being aware of their place in the world as the world’s first superpower.<sup>32</sup> More than this, though, the army of the United States created a national identity for these men. Instead of just being from a certain region or city of the US, they were aware of being part of a much larger entity. AA and the experience of its membership is a microcosm of this increasing sense of national identity. As alcoholics were shipped around the globe, desperate for contact

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<sup>32</sup> Warren Susman, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America” in Lary May, editor. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 19-37.

with another sober person, they emerged as a more unified whole than they were prior to the war. No other group reflects this universal aspect better than the first “specialized” group in Alcoholics Anonymous’ history, the Seaman’s Group.

The Seaman’s group was founded in June 1944 with a very loose home base in an old clubhouse in New York.<sup>33</sup> Its purpose, in addition to its primary goal of AA, keeping and helping others achieve sobriety, was to address the unique problems of the alcoholic at sea. The hopes of the group are best described by the editors of *The Grapevine* who said of the Seaman’s group, “While formerly Drink was the only international language known to seamen when they got off of their ships, an ever increasing number are learning the constructive language of the AA Seamen.”<sup>34</sup> A number of members established groups in various ports of call, and with the aid of the War Shipping Board, set up meetings in various rest centers.<sup>35</sup> The main method of making contact with fellow members was through letters between sailors. This correspondence demonstrated the effectiveness of the AA message without the benefit of a highly organized group or even an established location. Further it showed that members saw themselves as part of a greater whole something that could not have been possible without the experience of war. In many ways, the advent of the Seaman’s group was the manifestation of the power of the written shared experience. The longest running legacy of that experience was not the Seaman’s Group, but *The Grapevine*.

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<sup>33</sup> *Grapevine*, January 1945.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

“A Meeting By Mail”

*The Grapevine*, first published in 1944, was a way to better facilitate communications between the goings on stateside and the soldiers abroad.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, the magazine also served as a forum for the soldiers to share their experience with those at home. As the editors stated in the fourth issue of the magazine, “One of the strongest motives behind the starting of *The Grapevine* – in fact the main thing that pushed the editors from the talking to the acting stage—was the need so often expressed in the letters from AAs in the service for more AA news.”<sup>37</sup> To fulfill this mission, every soldier received a free subscription to *The Grapevine*. The magazine’s content was geared toward the soldiers in that it was a digest of what was going on nationally for the organization, what new groups were forming, what the central office was doing, as well as personal reflections on sobriety from members. *The Grapevine* also told the folks back home what the soldiers were doing. The first issue included a story about the experience of a soldier during D-Day. It gives a detailed account of his actions on that historic day, but more pertinent to AA members was how his sobriety helped him through such a trying time. For the remainder of the war the magazine featured correspondence from the battlefield in every issue. All of these vignettes were similar in recounting the difficulties of war and sharing how they endured using the principles of Alcoholics

Anonymous.

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<sup>36</sup> The official name of the magazine is *AA Grapevine*, but for simplicity’s sake I will just refer to it as *The Grapevine*. The reason for the cumbersome title is that in the 1940’s the FBI published an internal newsletter called *The Grapevine*. Not wanting to face any legal troubles or trouble with the FBI, the name was quickly changed.

<sup>37</sup> *Grapevine*, September 1944.

The magazine was very inspirational reading, especially to the member at home. If the man at war practiced the program, then there was no reason why someone at home could not do the same, which was the subtext of all of these stories. As one soldier wrote:

When you see men who have been through the real hell of war, and you hear from them what it's like (you can't know unless you've been there), or you see them laugh with tears in their eyes as they tell you how their comrades were killed all around them, you wonder how you could have ever taken yourself so damned seriously. I'm very well in every way, and living only for the day, we can all take up where we left off.<sup>38</sup>

Much like the correspondence with the general office, *The Grapevine* letters boosted morale, not only for the fight at hand, but for the fight against alcohol as well.

As a soldier related from an island in the Pacific:

We used to have our choice of two beers or two cokes every other night, but now they're out of cokes so I'm drinking warm water. I know just what two beers would do to me — even out here — and I don't care to experiment. This is all I'm allowed to write. It is lonesome here and I'd sure enjoy hearing from some of the boys.<sup>39</sup>

Like letters, the magazine gave the GIs a much-needed connection to home and more specifically to AA. They might know the person writing a column or be a member of a group that was featured, or just need to read about people staying sober one day at a time. As a member from the New York area wrote, “How often these days I think of the fine

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<sup>38</sup> *Grapevine*, April 1945.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, July 1945.

times I had in AA and the wonderful people I have met. So Flushing has a separate group now that is wonderful!”<sup>40</sup>

What began as little more than a newsletter quickly became a national magazine with a circulation of over five thousand. This aspect of the magazine is its most important legacy. Before *The Grapevine*, AA did not have a national voice. Bill Wilson, and to a lesser extent, Robert Smith, acted as national spokesmen but a complete diffusion of their thoughts on current issues facing AA groups was not available. Before the magazine, problems such as membership requirements, what to do with large financial gifts and others were dealt with on a case by case basis. With *The Grapevine*, the AA Central Office developed, mostly through the writing of Bill Wilson, a standard for all Alcoholics Anonymous groups across the country. As Bill X. wrote from Northern Ireland, “The house organ idea, with the chit-chat, lore and some party line thinking, establishes a newer sense of unity which projects the group therapy phase a step further. It’s terrific.”<sup>41</sup>

Along with providing news from home and acting as a conduit for the distribution of national policy, *The Grapevine* provided practical advice to both soldiers and civilians. For example, one occasional column entitled “The Pleasures of Reading,” offered reviews and suggestions of books that AA members might enjoy or find useful in their efforts to stay sober.<sup>42</sup> Not only did the magazine offer reading suggestions but a semi-

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, June, 1944.

<sup>41</sup> *Grapevine*, September, 1944.

<sup>42</sup> *Grapevine*, December 1944; *Grapevine* June 1945.

regular feature, “Time on Your Hands?”, listed suggestions for things to do around the New York area that did not involve drinking. Events and programming from the New York public schools, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Columbia University were recommended as activities to combat boredom at home.<sup>43</sup> *The Grapevine*, through the letters of men overseas, also dealt with the extraordinary circumstance of staying sober in the service. One soldier, Y.G., wrote from the South Pacific, detailing the three main factors that kept him sober during his time in the army.<sup>44</sup> Because direct contact with fellow AA’s was difficult to impossible, much of the advice from soldiers centered on keeping one’s thinking in check. As one soldier discussed, “By reading and re-reading the book and holding regular thought sessions with myself, I have been able to compensate in part for the lack of association and group therapy. Feel very confident but not cocky.”<sup>45</sup> Another member shared, “The crux is not where you are or what you’re doing, but your thinking. To be sure, an AA is more in danger the farther he is from other AA’s but separation is not necessarily disastrous, nor proximity a guarantee of safety.”<sup>46</sup> In both of these letters, and many others like them, the focus on keeping in line with AA’s message was paramount. By sharing these ideas, it gave fellow soldiers and people at home a method to stay sober when contact with others was not possible.

*The Grapevine* also followed Wilson’s activities. Often the magazine announced his travel plans, giving groups around the country (and later around the world) an

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., June 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., August 1944.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., October 1944.

opportunity to get ready for his visit. This monthly update made Wilson the more prominent of the co-founders. The news of Wilson also gave everyone a common experience within all of AA, a center that was lacking prior to *The Grapevine*. Born out of need to provide more to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous serving in the military, *The Grapevine* for the next thirty years served as a forum for Wilson to disseminate his ideas about the current state of AA, address the greatest questions facing the fellowship as he saw them, and provide a national identity to all of the groups by reporting on his life and various activities.

*“Now That the War is Over the Real Fight Begins”*

The war was the main focus of *The Grapevine* and Wilson was also preoccupied with the conflict. He publicized the amount of man-hours AA saved and the number of servicemen the organization provided. His other major concern, however, was the returning soldier. He was convinced because of his and other members' experience from World War I that there would be “a bumper crop” of alcoholics in the United States following the war.<sup>47</sup> On a number of occasions, he stated this concern publicly and announced that AA was getting ready to address the problem when the time came. What exactly those plans were was a little sketchy, but being ready for the next wave of troubled veterans made for good public relations copy, something Wilson never passed up. It was certain that the members of AA did not want a return to national prohibition. “The man who started the group said that prohibition after the last war accelerated

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<sup>47</sup> Gwen Morgan, “Alcoholics Anonymous, 700 Former Tap-Happy Citizens, Lay Plans for Post War Work.” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 6/13/1943.

drinking and this would cause many former alcoholics to fight against any similar move now.”<sup>48</sup>

*The Grapevine* also expressed concern for the returning soldier. Before the end of the war, the magazine ran a long letter detailing the problems of reentry written by a recently returned soldier from the European theatre. The two largest adjustments facing the author were the lack of life and death experiences and overconfidence in his ability to stay sober. As the soldier explains, “When for instance in New York he hears the weekly Saturday noon air raid sirens...he remembers they are only practice and may wish momentarily that they were the real thing.”<sup>49</sup> The overconfidence he warned against was the result of surviving the war allowed the vet to “let up” on his AA activities.<sup>50</sup> As a former Marine wrote, “So, now that World War II is over, let’s not relax. We have a real war to fight, one that will never end but that will pay rich dividends and give us happiness, contentment and love as long as we successfully fight it.”<sup>51</sup> The imagery of continuing the fight against liquor was a common theme to much of the advice given to the returning soldier. There were also some concrete methods discussed in *The Grapevine*, namely the idea of an “Induction and Processing Center” for new alcoholics who were also veterans.<sup>52</sup> The focus on former members of the service illustrated that

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<sup>48</sup> Former Toppers Plan to Aid New Crop After War.” *Alcoholics Anonymous Scrapbook, 1939-1942*, AA General Service Archives, New York, 1985.

<sup>49</sup> *Grapevine*, March 1945.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1945.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1946.

AA was concerned with its future and with the future of American society. Alcoholics Anonymous wanted not only to continue the success it started in 1935, but it wanted to prevent a possible return to the lifestyle of the 1920s and be a safe haven to the returning man, a haven that the original members did not have in 1919. As one person described upon his return to the States:

Present-day conditions are putting a pressure on the civilian population which has caused day to day existence to be speeded up in a manner reminiscent of the 'terrific twenties.' During my 17 days on leave, friends have brought me into contact with three people who have gone beyond the 'safety line' of normal drinking. So the group is needed more than ever before, in all areas of the country.<sup>53</sup>

A series of articles in *The Grapevine* written by an anonymous World War One veteran Abbot T. recounted his experiences in the war and the difficulty that he had upon returning home. It was his hope that by sharing his story he could help men returning from the current war and avoid similar troubles.<sup>54</sup> In his letters, Abbot T. recalled the experience of fighting and offered detailed instruction on how to stay sober after the fighting stopped. Wilson, Abbot T. and the editors of *The Grapevine's* concerns were genuine and reinforced the values that Alcoholics Anonymous held so strongly in its earliest years. First, they were strictly concerned with the veteran who had a drinking problem and did not want to intrude on the drinking habits of other people. This implied that none of them wanted a return to prohibition which was what they were greeted with when they finished their time in the service. Second, the new appeal to national unity in AA as a result of the war appears in both Wilson's and Abbot T.'s writing. Both asked

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1945.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, May 1945; January 1946.

the fellowship to help the returning soldier and since so many of the members were veterans themselves, this message had a strong resonance. Not only were they identifying on the basis of shared experience of alcoholism, but also with taking part in a foreign war as well. Many of the people waiting to help this “bumper crop” were ready to help the new man feel more at ease with the transition to home life.

### *Conclusion*

World War II was a shock to the system of the United States and no organization was immune to it. Alcoholics Anonymous experienced all aspects of the war; men who fought, men and women who worked in the factories, and men and women who tried to share their experience, strength and hope in the most trying of circumstances. For AA it was vitally important to demonstrate that sober alcoholics were as loyal and patriotic as the next American, perhaps even more so.

Through this commitment to the nation the concept of unity gained a new importance. As members were flung across the globe, an identity as an AA member grew from one more associated with one’s local group to a greater identification with a national movement. The first “specialized” group of AA, the Seaman’s Group, is perhaps the most profound example of this shift in the concept of what it meant to be a member, but it was the publication of *The Grapevine* that stamped AA as a national organization. Now news from New York was the same for everyone, not individual letters to individual groups reflecting on different aspects of policy in a piecemeal fashion. The magazine also gave Wilson a nationwide format to share his ideas that he put to great use after the war.

Finally, but no less important, was Alcoholics Anonymous' concern for those doing the fighting. Not only was AA loyal by working without waste and volunteering for the service, but those that stayed home acted as emotional and spiritual support for those overseas. The contributions of Bobbie Burger and the rest of the central office to the morale of the sober alcoholics were significant. Not only does it demonstrate what these specific troops were going through and what they needed, but more generally it gives us insight into everyone who went through the experience of war. The need for news from home, no matter how seemingly insignificant, the need for a connection to the outside world, was an important key to the sobriety and sanity of AA's soldiers, but the same can be said for all soldiers. Reading the correspondence between the office women and the men in the field gives a glimpse of how they dealt with the ravages of war. This correspondence also sheds some insight on what these soldiers were looking forward to when they returned to the United States. They wanted women like Bobbie Burger, they wanted nurturing women who would support them as they reintegrated into American society. In many ways these letters foreshadowed the conservative shift that would define the cultural movement from the end of the war through the 1950s.

AA was not just concerned for the soldiers in the field, but the situation of the returning veteran as well. The concept of unity became an important part of the ethos of Alcoholics Anonymous. By focusing on the shared experience of fighting overseas, early members were able to identify with the new man who was just returning from war. This concern for the alcoholic soldier reinforced the values that first made AA popular in the late 1930s. They were not out to change the nation, just those that wanted to recover

from alcoholism. In a distinct contrast from the experience of World War I, AA made sure that they were available across the nation to help those that were looking to quit drinking.

With the end of the war in 1945, everyone was ready to get back to a normal life. Just like the rest of the nation, Alcoholics Anonymous experienced the transition to peace time, but in their case from a distinctly middle-class point of view. As the men returned home to build careers and establish families, many of the concerns that had plagued early members in the 1930s were no longer present in post war America. Could a program devised during the depths of the Depression change to meet the new needs of a still expanding membership? Or, like so many institutions of the Depression decade would it fail to change with the times and become a forgotten program of a decade that many were trying to forget by the 1950s? How that message changed without disrupting the core values of the organization is the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### “IT WAS OBVIOUSLY NECESSARY WE HAD TO RAISE THE BOTTOM”: ALCOLHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN THE 1950S.

The year was 1955. By any measure, Alcoholics Anonymous was a success. The group, like many organizations of the 1930s, survived the war, expanded throughout the country and transformed during an unprecedented membership boom. Twenty years earlier Bill Wilson was an out-of-town and out-of-luck stockbroker desperate to find another drunk in Akron, Ohio to help him maintain his tenuous sobriety of six months. Twenty years later, Bill Wilson, now age sixty, looked out upon an audience of over 10,000 alcoholics who had followed the program he, Dr. Smith, and a small host of others began and spread in the summer of 1935. No longer was AA a small, out-rider organization, but it was firmly entrenched as a part of a middle-class view of society.

Now, the scene was no longer Akron, but St. Louis, for the second annual general service conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. In contrast to the beginning days of the society, Wilson was all but alone. Many of the first members of Alcoholics Anonymous like Dr. Smith had passed away, or like Hank Parkhurst, who got drunk shortly after the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous* and fell off the wagon and were out of the organization. It was at this moment and this place that Wilson wanted to make a statement about the future of Alcoholics Anonymous. He chose this convention as the

place where he, the co-founder of AA and its most prominent voice, announced his retirement from the day-to-day activities of directing the fellowship. In dramatic fashion, he appeared as the final speaker of the weekend and he not only recapped the weekend's festivities but gave a rousing summary of the previous twenty years. Wilson mentioned the first meetings in Akron and the grand dreams he had of sobering up every drunk in the world. He also spoke of various missteps and wrong turns that ultimately provided wisdom for the betterment of the organization. Then he spoke of how Alcoholics Anonymous had reached maturity. No longer did the group need him, one of its parents, telling the organization what to do or not to do. In effect he said, the fellowship had "come of age."<sup>1</sup> With a bold proclamation, Wilson relinquished all responsibility at organizational headquarters and turned over all of his authority to the newly permanent General Service Board, and then he walked off the stage to thunderous applause.

This 1955 meeting certainly was a dramatic scene, perhaps overwrought in Wilson's imagination with significance and meaning. Even though he relinquished his authority, Wilson was still the voice and "face" of Alcoholics Anonymous. He still visited the central office in New York on a regular basis; still wrote for the official magazine, *The Grapevine*, almost every month; still toured the country, and the world for that matter, to spread the message of Alcoholics Anonymous around the globe. The central question then becomes, why, in 1955 was it so important for AA to assume its

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Wilson, *AA Comes of Age*, (New York: AA World Services, 1957), 47-48; text of speech given, 223-234.

own leadership, or as Wilson characterized it, “maturity?”<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the reasons Wilson gave in St. Louis and in articles of *The Grapevine* were accurate. He and Dr. Smith were mortal, and would one day be gone; it was high time members took total responsibility for their own organization and by extension their own recoveries; finally, he wanted more time to be himself, write more, travel more and retreat more to his home, Stepping Stones.

Also it was an opportune time for Wilson to leave the organization. By 1955 Alcoholics Anonymous was thriving, buoyed by the rising conservatism that occurred in the United States after the war. Though a small organization before the war its traditional message did not find its most accepting audience until the war and its aftermath. The post-war era, with its rejection of radicalism and diversity was fertile ground for an organization that encouraged traditional, Protestant, middle-class values of community and individual responsibility. In short, AA was thriving and Bill Wilson was able to leave it without much worry, if any, for its future.

If however, we look at the cultural landscape of the United States during the 1950s, we can see other forces at work insisting that Alcoholics Anonymous present itself as a mature organization. For many cultural historians and contemporaries of the postwar period of American history, the years following World War II were the time when America stepped onto the world stage as the leader of the free world. In short the United States had matured after the war, emerging out of Europe’s shadow to become an adult. As Ernest Kurtz commented, AA is uniquely American, and so, is it any wonder then that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xiii.

when the United States became self aware and mature that Alcoholics Anonymous wanted to follow suit?<sup>3</sup> Beyond the question of maturity and what that designation symbolized, the cultural shift within the United States after the war was perhaps one of the greatest shifts in the American history. The cultural forces unleashed by the Second World War shaped the United States in ways unforeseeable before the conflict. As the greater society tried to deal with these changes, Alcoholics Anonymous, as a microcosm of that society, also navigated its way through these changes as well.

The publications of AA during this time period, especially Bill Wilson's much more in-depth study and his meditations on the twelve steps, demonstrate how the group altered its message, yet remained true to its most fundamental foundations. The bottom was raised to accommodate the next generation of alcoholics but the core beliefs that sustained AA through depression and war now carried it through abundance and anxiety. Looking at this dichotomy, that of affluence and anxiety, how did Alcoholics Anonymous cope with the palpable anxiety throughout American culture in the 1950s? If one were to take a Cook's Tour through the 1950s, the expression of fear, not just about the Soviet Union (though that is where much of this fear manifested itself) but throughout society would be inescapable. There was the fear of the power of women, there was the fear of juvenile delinquency, the fear of non-white races, and most significant to the middle classes, the fear of not being accepted by one's peers. All of this contributed to the perception that Americans were somehow unhappy with themselves, despite the nation's material success. Alcoholics Anonymous confronted these worries by emphasizing a part

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<sup>3</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. (Center City MN: Hazelden, 1979 [1991]), 164.

of its message that was not publicized in its earlier years. The concept of serenity as the main tenet of sobriety firmly took hold in the post war period. As this concept gained greater traction, AA went beyond being a program for sobriety and became a “way of life.” (The title of Bill Wilson’s final never completed work, *The AA Way of Life*, published posthumously as *As Bill Sees It*.)<sup>4</sup>

In one of the last essays written by Warren Susman, he posited the notion that after the United States won the Second World War, Americans should have been able to enjoy their new found abundance; instead they experienced an age of anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Many authors in the subsequent twenty years have examined this idea from a myriad of perspectives. While many, such as Richard Fried’s *The Russians are Coming!* and Stephen J. Whitfield’s *The Culture of the Cold War*, trace this anxiety to a more political manifestation, namely the global conflict with the Soviet Union, other historians and social scientists examined it from an introspective view, especially dealing with the notion of conformity and the fear of the other and the importance of both of these concepts to the contemporary culture of the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> The works of Martin Halliwell and Andrew Dunar both detailed these trends and presented a window to those who made up

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Wilson, *As Bill Sees It* (New York: AA World Services, 1972.)

<sup>5</sup> Warren Susman, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representation in Postwar America” in., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* Lary May ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 19-37.

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.)

suburbia in the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Taking both prongs of Susman's perspective, those of abundance and anxiety, Alcoholics Anonymous faced both of those issues simultaneously. The most pressing question confronting AA and the country in the 1950s was "What to do with success?" It was not quite conceived in those terms by Wilson and AA members, but rather was discussed in terms more specific to alcoholics.

Two concepts emerged after the war that either were not present in the early years of the fellowship or had altered meanings after the war. The first was the notion of "raising the bottom" to define when one became an alcoholic, or in other words "high bottom drunks." However expressed, it is fundamental to understanding Alcoholics Anonymous in the years following World War II. The problem facing this organization, founded during the worst economic crisis in American history, with its roots grounded in the notion of redeeming one's self materially as proof of sobriety, now had to redefine itself in quite possibly the most affluent time in US history.<sup>8</sup> How AA altered its message, how it came to accept "high bottom drunks," is one of the key themes of this chapter.

Another theme throughout much of the literature about the 1950s, especially in more recent works, was the state of the American male. It is here that the concept of maturity, so important to Bill Wilson and AA meets the anxieties of the decade head on. In many of the works on the 1950's man, the discussion of "momism" assumes a very prominent place. Social critics such as Philip Wylie worried that men raised by

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Andrew J. Dunar, *America in the Fifties* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006.)

<sup>8</sup> William L O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1986.)

overbearing mothers had a negative effect on contemporary society.<sup>9</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous never took the tack of blaming mothers for the plight of the modern day alcoholic. This call for maturity, however, is nothing less than a call to take personal responsibility, to act like a grown man. The place of men in society is also seen in the other themes of the decade. How men related to women, dealt with isolation from their neighbors and responded to the anxiety of global politics were all issues that surrounded masculinity during the era.

Other themes emerge when examining the historical works on the culture of the 1950s. The best example is the place of women in society after World War Two. The most influential book on the subject of the past twenty years, *Homeward Bound* by Elaine Tyler May detailed the role of women in American society and how American culture reacted to the new roles women engaged in during and after the war.<sup>10</sup> May took the Cold War notion of “containment” and turned it inward on American society, using it to explain the common views of women and what their proper place should be. In short, women’s power and freedom needed to be contained by the greater society. They needed to be put in their proper place, specifically the home and away from the places of men. This desire to contain women stemmed from the fear that American society had undergone radical changes during the war, especially their greater independence and presence in the workforce. This concern was coupled with the fear of the Soviet Union,

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<sup>9</sup> K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), 129-133.

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988.)

and how the American domestic arena could best aid the United States in its drive for global dominance over Communism. Alcoholics Anonymous dealt with similar issues and much like the rest of society, AA tried to contain women, most notably in the foundation of Al-Anon. This dissertation is not concerned overtly with the history of Al-Anon, but it does tell a part of the story of the culture of Alcoholic Anonymous and it gives a clearer picture of the society during this decade.

May's work is still one of the most cited when discussing the culture of the 1950s especially when dealing with the topic of women. She is not, however, without her detractors. A collection of essays edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, detailed other, often overlooked, women from the decade and provides an interesting counterpoint to May's argument. *Not June Cleaver* went to great lengths to dispel the notion of a monolithic status for women of the 1950s. Every essay presented different populations of women who did not belong to the white, suburban, middle class that was the focus of May's work. The women who May examined were more similar to those who came into contact with Alcoholics Anonymous, especially as wives of AA members. However, the women presented by *June Cleaver* are also evident in Alcoholics Anonymous, specifically when dealing with the rise of female membership in AA itself. While AA was doing its part to promote the separation or "containment" agenda of the cold war decade, the actual membership numbers tell a slightly different story. After the war, women's membership within AA rose sharply, not leveling off until the 1970s. So, while there was a definite push toward moving women, especially the wives of alcoholics, out of meetings, as seen with the rise of Al-Anon, there were in fact more

women joining AA than ever before. Like the work force and other sectors of society, the emergence of women was one of the key cultural phenomena of the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Jessica Weiss strikes a middle ground between Meyerowitz and May, focusing on the middle-class women of May's study but detailing how they were agents of change in their family and society as well.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1950s a number of the allies that helped AA in its formative years also experienced a boom in popularity, namely psychology and organized religion. Many have commented that the "Age of Freud" occurred earlier in US history, but no other decade saw such a dramatic rise in people seeking professional psychiatric help as the 1950s. This greater use and acceptance of psychology can also be seen in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill Wilson in particular (perhaps because he was a patient, off and on, during the post war period) highlighted the uses of psychiatric professionals in dealing with sobriety. The 1950s also saw an increase in church membership, making the leap to Alcoholics Anonymous, with its prevalent religious overtones a much more digestible program for those who came into its doors during the decade.<sup>13</sup> Always

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<sup>11</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, editor, *Not June Cleaver* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.); Destroying the "myth" of the 1950s became a bit of a cottage industry. Other books with the expressed intent on setting the record straight include: Joel Foreman, *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007); Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages, Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982); Haynes Johnson, *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.)

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Weiss, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.)

<sup>13</sup> Andrew S. Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.)

careful not to endorse any specific religion, AA still took advantage of the rise in religious participation to help grow its own membership.

*“John Barleycorn Became Our Best Advocate”: Raising the Bottom*

The 1950s were one of the most prosperous times in American history. It was also a vastly different world than the one in which Alcoholics Anonymous first emerged as a viable organization. The economic pressures that confronted the founding members had largely vanished from the nation, making many, especially Bill Wilson reconsider what made someone an alcoholic. This reconsideration is best summed up by a term coined by the editors of *Grapevine*, “high bottom.”<sup>14</sup> In the first edition of the “Big Book” there is little mention of what, or more metaphysically where, the bottom exists for an alcoholic. The distinction between low and high did not come about until the postwar period. Until then it was always assumed that the new member was pretty much down and out, fallen below the standard middle-class social position and its accordant set of social values that were critical to AA’s view of what an alcoholic was. As postwar society emerged wealthier than was previously thought possible, the old definition of where a habitual drinker needed to be in order to qualify for the Alcoholics Anonymous program began to change. It was evident to the membership that many people, especially men, were still drinking too much and believed that they had a problem with alcohol. Though they still had a house, a car, and a job, it was apparent to the troubled drinker that something was wrong. More than ever before the ethos that Alcoholics Anonymous aided the flawed individual instead of questioning American society found fertile ground

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<sup>14</sup> AA *Grapevine*, November 1944. AA Digital Archive: <https://www.aagrapevine.org/da/>

in the newest wave of members. The problem, however, confronted by AA struck at the core of the twelve step program, especially the principle of ego deflation, the first major component of the steps. Two questions needed to be answered, the first regarding the new man, the other regarding the organization itself. First, could a man who still had everything (relatively speaking) be convinced that his ego needed deflating? Second, could the older membership, the key component in relating the message of AA to the next generation, be convinced that this new, relatively affluent individual really needed AA? As a corollary for the older members, had the new initiates suffered enough to be ready for what Alcoholics Anonymous had to offer?

Bill Wilson was the leading voice in both discussions. The latter question ultimately proved to be more vexing than the first. While acceptance of the new high bottomed drunks occurred, even today there is a certain amount of prejudice aimed at those deemed too smart, too rich and especially too young. In the immediate years following the Second World War, Wilson had to define sobriety about more than just quitting drinking and getting one's job back. In order to make the high-bottomed drunk acceptable to the older members, he needed to find a common ground between the two generations. Even though their experiences were divergent when it came to economic factors, there were other factors that moved to the forefront of the AA message in order to bridge the gap. Wilson largely pulled from his own experience, still the alpha experience of AA, and explained how he came to terms with the new blood in Alcoholics Anonymous and what the place of the older generation was in light of the new cultural reality.

The first place that we encounter the raised bottom is in *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (12 and 12). In Step One we get Wilson's thoughts on the changes taking place in American culture. Similar to the beginning of the Big Book, Wilson talks about the ravages of alcoholism and the cost that it often has for those who become habitual drunkards. The difference, however, comes from his observation that many people coming into Alcoholics Anonymous at present were not in the same situation he was twenty years prior. As Wilson stated:

Alcoholics who still had their health, their families, their jobs, and even two cars in the garage, began to recognize their alcoholism. As this trend grew, they were joined by young people who were scarcely more than potential alcoholics. They were spared that last ten or fifteen years of literal hell the rest of us had gone through. Since Step One requires an admission that our lives have become unmanageable, how could people such as these take this step?<sup>15</sup>

This was of course, a rhetorical question and Wilson answered in the affirmative by giving his fellow old-timers a prism through which to view this new wave of alcoholics. Speaking as everyman, Wilson says "By going back in our own drinking histories, we could show that years before we realized it we were out of control, that our drinking was no mere habit, that it was indeed the beginning of a fatal progression."<sup>16</sup>

It is here that Wilson introduced the idea of raising the bottom directly. As he explained, "It was obviously necessary to raise the bottom the rest of us had hit to the point where it would hit them."<sup>17</sup> Wilson made it clear what exactly that entailed. It was

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<sup>15</sup> Bill Wilson, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. (New York: AA World Services Inc., 1952), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

not merely a change in the attitude toward what a new member had lost, but had much more to do with the emotional and mental state of the new man. In the postwar years, a man did not experience the same defeat, yet he was defeated nonetheless. While common experience was always at the core of the AA method, now that experience had to come from other factors besides the material possession one accumulated or one's place within society.<sup>18</sup> The rise of the concept of sin in 1950s popular religious thought made the underlying philosophical ideas of the program timely. The three theologians discussed in Andrew Finstuen's work, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants*, points out that Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich all appeared on the cover of *Time*.<sup>19</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, with its strong moral message, yet not part on any single denomination, was easily received by new members who were already, if only tangentially, familiar with the concepts of the organization. In addition to the advantage of being well established during a burst of popular religion, the ethos of the Cold War, especially for civil defense and preparedness made the culture of AA appealing to new members as well. As Guy Oakley states in *The Imaginary War*, "the civil defense ethos appealed to small town values, self-help, mutual assistance, and community spirit."<sup>20</sup> This appeal reflected many of the same attributes of Alcoholics Anonymous that made both old and new members feel comfortable and secure in a time of growing anxiety. Now, however, these values

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<sup>18</sup> Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes, *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in Fifties America* (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Press, 2000.)

<sup>19</sup> Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

placed AA at the center of an American culture that gloried in an imaginary sense of national self-definition.

The chapter in the “Twelve and Twelve” detailing Tradition Three also confronted the changing landscape of American culture. The tradition stated, “The only requirement of AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.”<sup>21</sup> Wilson discussed how this tradition came about and why it was (and still is) all encompassing. Mostly told through the example of two men who came to Alcoholics Anonymous seeking help, one with “an addiction other than alcohol” and the other a “strident atheist,” Wilson also discussed limits on who can or cannot become a member.<sup>22</sup> He briefly described how many of the earliest groups of Alcoholic Anonymous had membership rules (like the one in Los Angeles that is mentioned at the end of chapter 3) and that if all were enforced, no one could be a member.<sup>23</sup> Seeing how so much had changed by the 1950s, part of those membership qualifications that seemed so important in the early years of AA, needed to be abolished. The barriers to entry which were based on past experience were no longer acceptable to those people coming into AA during this time. By being so open a consensus was reached within AA regarding its membership. Even though there were differences of opinion, ultimately these minor differences did not hinder the overall scope of the program and like many institutions of the time a certain conformity took hold.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Gerd Hurm and Ann Marie Fallon, *Rebels Without a Cause?: Renegotiating the American 1950s* (Bern: P. Lang Publishers, 2007.)

The formal establishment of openness, very much the ideal for Alcoholics Anonymous, still was not quite the reality that Wilson and other members wished it to be. AA faced issues of race and what being a truly open society meant. Alcoholics Anonymous was overwhelming white, middle class and male starting with its two founders in Wilson and Smith and the men that they first encountered from 1935 through the war. Looking through the various biographies of Bill Wilson and the single biography of Dr. Smith, we see that Wilson, Smith, and their fellow old-timers were products of their age. In *Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers*, and the official biography of Wilson, *Pass It On*, there is some discussion of racial matters but neither offered real analysis of the racial situations or tensions that were present concerning the episode presented. In Cleveland when an African-American woman was determined to sober up and become a member, Oscar W. responded to her situation. Unfortunately, when he took her to the Lake Shore Group (the first meeting house in Cleveland) the rest of the group refused her entry. Instead, Oscar and the woman (who remains unidentified) started a separate group in a black section of the city.<sup>25</sup> This strategy was in keeping with the social conditions and solutions to racial problems of the time and reflected as Gary Donaldson discussed in his work on the postwar period, *Abundance and Anxiety*, that racial issues were another cause of anxiety throughout society.<sup>26</sup> Like other social institutions, from insurance and newspapers to sport teams, the first members of AA set

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<sup>25</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers: A Biography with Recollections of Early AA in the Midwest* (New York: AA World Services, 1980), 247.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Donaldson, *Abundance and Anxiety: America, 1945-1960* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997.)

up a mirror group for African-Americans<sup>27</sup>. The situation was similar in New York, where Wilson tried in 1940 to racially integrate group meetings.<sup>28</sup> Wilson wrestled with the issue. In a very thorough letter (like much of Wilson's writings) he discussed integration with a member who was upset with the racial climate in general and discrimination present at meetings in the city in particular. It is apparent that Wilson was conflicted with what exactly to do in the situation:

Along with you, I feel very deeply about this race business. Save this one question, I suppose AA is the most democratic society in the world. All men should have an equal opportunity to recover from alcoholism – that is the shining ideal.

But, unhappily, my own experience suggests that it may not be achieved in our lifetimes. In all the South and in most of the North whites refuse to mingle with blacks socially. That is a stark fact which we have to face. Nor can they be coerced or persuaded to do so, even alcoholics! I know, because I once tried here in New York and got so much slapped down that I realized that no amount of insistence would do any good. It would be bound to do harm to the white alcoholics, the number of blacks is very small indeed. Suppose that some of us tried to force the situation in the South. The prejudice is so great that 50 white men might stay away from AA in order that we save one colored. That's the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. It falls grievously short of our ideal – but practically speaking what can be done about it? I don't know – I'm still looking hard for the answer.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, Wilson felt that he was caught in the middle. It also shows that this was not an easy issue for him to confront. He believed it was his mission to sober up as many

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<sup>27</sup> K. Kaufmann, "The Pittsburgh Crawfords as a Means of Self-Help in Inner-City Pittsburgh, 1930-1938." (MA Thesis, Michigan State University, 1995.)

<sup>28</sup> Francis Hartigan, *Bill W.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 181; *Pass It On.* (New York: AA World Services, 1984), 317.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Wilson to Joseph D., 10/23/1943 AA General Service Office Archives. cf. *Pass It On*, 317.

alcoholics as possible and to turn away or hinder even one person's chance at recovery was difficult for him. He was, however, a pragmatist and believed, perhaps foolishly, that serving more people by discriminating against the minority was, in the current society, a necessary evil.

As the abundance of the 1950s altered Alcoholics Anonymous and those whom they admitted to membership, another group that swelled the ranks of Alcoholics Anonymous from the 1950s until the present (and some argue that they have always been a part of AA) is that of drug addicts. We can see this wider open policy being instituted by none other than Bill Wilson in his 1945 essay entitled "Those 'Goof Balls.'"<sup>30</sup> In the article, Wilson discussed drug use for the first time in any AA literature. In some of the original stories of the Big Book there is mention of some sedative use and other pills, but nothing as explicit as the "Goof Ball" article. The problem that Wilson addressed is whether or not a person who is addicted to both alcohol and drugs qualifies for the AA program.<sup>31</sup> Wilson argued that they are if they say so. In part this controversy was one of the reasons why the Third Tradition came into existence. Wilson continued to address this issue on an occasional basis. In another *Grapevine* article, "Problems Other Than Alcohol," Wilson was more detailed in his thoughts about who was and was not a member and he branched out from pills and other prescription drugs and specifically

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<sup>30</sup> Bill Wilson, "Those Goof Balls," in *Language of the Heart, Bill W.'s Grapevine Writings* (New York: AA World Services Inc., 1989), 103-105.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this debate still occurs in AA meetings today. People still question if "dual-addicted" folks should be allowed in a closed AA meeting.

mentioned heroin use.<sup>32</sup> While he was quick to protect AA's singleness of purpose, namely helping the alcoholic who still suffers, he was quite clear that being a drug addict was not enough to bar someone from membership in Alcoholics Anonymous.

*"What Situations Have Caused Me Anxiety?" AA in the "Age of Anxiety"*

One of the main reasons that people take drugs, even today, is for relief from stress and anxiety. Susman termed the 1950s the Age of Anxiety a time of great material wealth, yet Americans did not enjoy the riches of the era. At first glance, that anxiety is often tied to the omnipresent Cold War during the 1950s, but looking deeper into the era, there were many other components to the culture that led to increasing anxiety in the American population, especially among men. The most common current of distress was the worry of being different, of not fitting in with one's neighbors. In order to combat this feeling of unease, Alcoholics Anonymous changed its message. As seen in the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous, sobriety was very much tied to a material set of values. Having a job and retaining middle-class status were the hallmarks of what sobriety meant to the first generation of members. In the post war period, these worries were far less significant, but anxieties abounded nonetheless. Instead of focusing on the material aspects of achieving sobriety, sobriety became a state of mind, best compared to serenity. Ernest Kurtz discusses this shift as well in his history of AA, *Not God*, but Kurtz did not discuss how this change of attitude arose in response to the culture of the 1950s.<sup>33</sup> Though there are many contemporary works that deride this need for

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<sup>32</sup> "Problems Other Than Alcohol," *Language of the Heart*, 222-225.

<sup>33</sup> Kurtz, *Not-God*, 164-165.

acceptance and the damage such attitudes played on the American character, the overwhelming desire of the middle class was for conformity if for no other reason than to have a “normal” life after depression and war.

As many authors have posited, the message of television and film was that to be different was both bad and dangerous. It comes as no surprise that during this decade, the membership of organized religion rose dramatically. Feeding off of this same impulse, Alcoholics Anonymous experienced growth as well. No one wanted to be considered an alcoholic, to be considered diseased, to be considered troubled. The new attitude of the post war period toward drinking, that it was a sign of maturity, made it even more of a stigma not to hold one’s liquor. Instead, AA offered the same things as religion: a way of life, a direction for living (serenity) and a group to join. Being a part of this group had two major benefits. First, the alcoholic felt a part of something again as he took part in the social aspects as well as the spiritual ones of the program. Second, Alcoholics Anonymous reintegrated its members into the greater society. Though they were now usually employed and doing well from a status perspective, the new members of the 1950s were still isolated from their peer-group because of their uncontrollable drinking. By joining Alcoholics Anonymous, the new member went from being a drunk, unable to hold his liquor, to being a person with a disease. Also as he grew within the fellowship, he became more spiritual. Whether or not he got involved in organized religion was not important. He was focused on a higher plane which was something that many in the 1950s valued. It was a direct response to the “godless” communists and it reaffirmed the

strength of the United States for many of its citizens. AA's spiritual message gave its members a way to participate in that trend.

At its core, the experience of the members of the 1950s and those of the 1930s were quite similar. Though the events surrounding the program were strikingly different, what the alcoholic gained from membership was ultimately the same. We see in both eras a need to be a part of something, to join, to be reaffirmed in the American experience. In both eras, those who joined AA were largely middle-class men suffering from a loss of status. In the 1930s, it took on the very real consequence of losing one's job, income and therefore membership in the social strata to which one was accustomed. Though Susman did not make the connection explicit, the conservative impulse that he saw in action among the middle-class in the 1930s was the same in 1950s, but now the actions and values of such people and such organizations defined the era more. People, especially the middle class, needed community. In the thirties it was the need to feel useful, to feel as though what one was doing mattered. In the fifties it was the need to belong, to be assured that the status achieved in the post war boom was justified. It was also a need to demonstrate that one was not an outsider, that one did not pose a "danger" to American society itself. This is why the groups that saw their numbers swell in the 1930s could not possibly experience the same growth in the 1950s. One of the largest groups from the thirties, the Communist Party was virtually destroyed by the political and social climate of the fifties. Because of the fear of communism, the participation of the government within the economy was seen as veering far too close to that dangerous shore. Yet, while these radical impulses declined, those more conservative institutions

which seemed quite a small phenomenon now grew into cultural pre-eminence. Finally, the economy itself was thriving. The idea of wholesale change in the American economy, a move away from capitalism, seemed ridiculous. AA and its conservative underpinnings were very much in line with the cultural thinking of the 1950s. Even more than in the 1930s, the idea of society being at fault was ludicrous in the 1950s. The individual, if given the proper help from his peers, wife and family, eventually would fit in as a sober, responsible member of the unflawed society.

There was still anxiety, however. Susman noted that in the 1930s, a time of high stress, people were compelled to reaffirm their American values. He finds great significance that it was during this decade the concept of the “American Way” was first developed. If the American Way was being invented during the 1930s, it reached its ultimate definition in the 1950s, but no longer did it include visions of social democracy and criticism of capitalism as its central tenets. The American Dream, once in doubt for many Americans, was a reality at the mid-century mark. Now, the stress was not if the dream could be achieved, but rather could it be maintained? For many Americans this led to yet another occasion to grasp at the core values they thought made up the American Way.

Along with the need to belong and to conform, another major anxiety of the fifties was the place of the American man. Many have examined the cultural discussion surrounding the American male in the 1950s and how this concern was dealt with in

popular literature, television and film.<sup>34</sup> As with almost every “crisis of manhood” that we see in the United States, the people most commonly blamed were, of course, women. Particular to the 1950s, a new phenomena was introduced, “momism.” A number of social commentators wrote about the evils of momism in the 1950s, most notably Philip Wylie and David Levy<sup>35</sup> The root of softness in American men lay at the feet of overbearing, overprotective mothers. Modern man was too attached to his mother and her opinion of him. The condition led to all sorts of sociological and psychological problems. The men suffering from momism were terribly immature, open to similar women as their spouses (another type of woman to be avoided) and could possibly be a homosexual, the great scourge of the optimal man. As far as the rest of society was concerned, momism and the men it created led to a weak nation that did not stand a chance against the evils of communism, not to mention any number of domestic and international threats to the nation’s security.

The literature of Alcoholics Anonymous did not directly mention momism, though the mothering of an alcoholic by his spouse was considered a bad method of dealing with the disease. Also, as previously discussed, the wife of the alcoholic needed to be supportive but not oppressive or critical. The “shrew wife” was not tolerated. What we do see is a great concern with maturity and this as a goal of not only the alcoholic, but

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<sup>34</sup> See for example, K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. (New York: Routledge, 2005); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. (New York: Free Press, 1996); Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: resistance and the crisis of Masculinity*. (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997.)

<sup>35</sup> Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*. (New York: Rinehart, 1955 [1943]), David Levy. *Maternal Overprotection*. (New York: Columbia University Press; 1950.)

for all of AA as well. Kurtz details Wilson's quest to have AA perceived as a "mature" organization throughout the second half of *Not-God*. Looking at Wilson's writing on the subject, not only is it a point of pride and independence as Kurtz suggests, but it is also in keeping with the fifties cultural landscape. Wilson and others wanted to be taken seriously as an organization dedicated to helping alcoholics, but this need to be mature also speaks to the anxiety of the age as well, especially regarding the place of men. In the 1950s, social drinking took on a much more acceptable place in American society. It was an activity that "mature" adults took part in. Not being able to control one's behavior after drinking was immature. Alcoholics Anonymous needed to present sobriety as a mature lifestyle as well, without being seen as killjoys or reformers. Part of the solution to this problem was in keeping with the tack from the 1930s, basically focusing on the individual alcoholic with the problem and not the rest of society. The importance of maturity is central to Wilson's 1956 work, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. In a number of the essays, he comments on how the twelve steps led to responsible, moral, and spiritual behavior. In short, the steps led to sobriety and by implication maturity. For example, Wilson starts his essay about the Sixth Step with the line, "This is the step that separates the men from the boys."<sup>36</sup> The discussion centered on the action taken in the step, namely becoming entirely ready to have one's defects of character removed, and to truly engage and accomplish this task was more difficult than it appeared. The implication, however, that this was the step that moves one beyond a certain basic, immature state to a more advanced, mature level was clear, a maturity that was a key to

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<sup>36</sup> *Twelve steps and twelve Traditions*, 63.

being part of the “vital center” so important to the society of the 1950s. It was a reasoned, self-controlled step it was centered on making a sober decision. It was the step that led to manhood in an orderly, conforming way: “Any person capable of enough willingness and honesty to try repeatedly Step six on all his faults – *without any reservations whatever* (emphasis Wilson’s) – has indeed come a long way spiritually, and is therefore **entitled to be called a man** (emphasis mine) who is sincerely trying to grow in the image and likeness of his own creator.”<sup>37</sup>

Discussing Step Seven, Wilson pointed out that to truly be an adult, one must be, as the step instructed, humble. This attitude especially personified the idea of a mature, fully masculine man in 1950s culture. Even a cursory examination of male figures in the media of the period demonstrated their humility as a strikingly similar trait among them all. For example, Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, or Alan Ladd in *Shane*, portrayed quiet, strong, humble men who are able to cope with even the most dire of situations. The president of the decade, Dwight Eisenhower, was a retiring war hero. Wilson further described being humble as the proper attitude for personal growth and spiritual development. The depictions of alcoholics in film during the post war era were sympathetic especially in two of the best know films about Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Lost Weekend* and *Days of Wine and Roses*. The films, released in 1945 and 1962 respectively, feature an alcoholic as their main character and offered “real” portrayals of alcoholism. Norman Denzin also used these two films to define his “classic” period of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

the alcoholic film in his study, *Hollywood Shot By Shot*.<sup>38</sup> The differences in the films demonstrated how ubiquitous the organization's message had become and how the image of the alcoholic changed as well. In *The Lost Weekend*, the audience saw the horrors of the disease, but it only implied that the lead character will stay sober for good. On the other hand, and tellingly after the period when Bill Wilson altered the message of Alcoholics Anonymous, the main character of *Days of Wine and Roses* gained sobriety, became a family man and even resisted the temptation of a bender. To varying degrees, other films from the era, about forty films in all, reflected similar portraits of alcoholism and its possible recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>39</sup>

It is on the spiritual discussion that AA updated its message. As Wilson wrote about Step Twelve in the *12 and 12*, it was no longer just about helping the new alcoholic and keeping sober, but about approaching serenity and understanding, what Wilson called "a divine paradox."<sup>40</sup> He describes the Alcoholics Anonymous experience and the effect living by the steps will have. We get a picture of a contented man, who looked very similar to the idealized man of the 1950s. Material success went without saying and the AA man was a pillar of his community, a good husband with a supportive and loving wife and family, and he was of a spiritual mindset that made all of this possible. If one did not live up to the vision, or was "off the beam," Wilson gave advice on how to get

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<sup>38</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Hollywood Shot by Shot: Alcoholism in American Cinema*. (NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Room, "Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1945-1962: The Party Ends for the 'Wet Generations.'" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1989, 368-383.

<sup>40</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 109.

back on track and also offered encouragement to those that were having difficulties with modern life.<sup>41</sup> All of which portrayed the alcoholic as a mature, well-adjusted member of society, who was an accepted member of the community. In short, the mature individual sobered up and adapted to society instead of trying to change the society that was causing him to drink. Though Wilson never explicitly said so, there was a hint of condescension in his description of the alcoholic in comparison to the rest of the world. In effect, Wilson made the alcoholic more developed than their unaffected counterparts. If truly working the Alcoholics Anonymous program, AA members operated at a more mature level than those not so spiritually inclined.

After the Twelfth Step, the discussion of the book moved to the Twelve Traditions. These essays were much shorter than the step discussions and for the most part were the same essays that appeared in *The Grapevine* leading up to the 1955 General Service Conference in St. Louis. There are some differences worth noting, however. The tone of the essays was much more relaxed as compared to *The Grapevine* selections that were geared toward convincing AA member that the Traditions were a good idea. By the time the *12 and 12* was published, the traditions were well on their way to wide acceptance within the program. The change in tone also reflected Wilson's idea about maturity. Wilson discussed in Tradition Two the place of older members of AA and put them into two distinct categories, "bleeding deacons" and "elder statesman."<sup>42</sup> These two character types illustrated where a true AA member strove to be and the place where the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 113-115.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 135.

spiritually lacking member was. When comparing the behavior of the two types, it was obvious which one deals best with the issue of maturity--the elder statesman. This image was a poignant one; the older member who followed the program, who was mature, and exhibited a calm, wise leadership style. He was a sage rather than a senator. Wilson obviously saw himself in this role. The calm, cool, collected ideal was what every man, sober or otherwise strived for, regardless of AA membership.

In opposition to the ideal was the “bleeding deacon.” He was a bit of a braggart, overly sensitive to the criticism of others and unwilling to accept change, as the name implies they came off as overly righteous martyrs. They are best compared to the suffering mother or wife who used sentimentality to dominate the men in their lives. The bleeding deacon did the same thing except with his Alcoholics Anonymous home group. To borrow a more modern interpretation of this style of leadership, he took the group hostage. In keeping with the 1950s ideal, this emotionalism was a severe handicap. It was possible for the deacon to become a mature, trusted member; in fact it was important for him to do so. If he did not he ran the risk of becoming drunk once again.

Another key to maturity as a group was being financially responsible. This was quite a change in AA considering its early history. At the beginning of AA, Wilson, Smith and many in the early New York group were fixated on getting money from wealthy benefactors, namely the Rockefellers.<sup>43</sup> Alcohol Anonymous managed to secure a limited amount from the Rockefeller Foundation, but overall their attempts at fund raising were futile. In discussing Tradition Seven in the *12 and 12* Wilson described a

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<sup>43</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 14-15.

number of episodes that led the organization to eschew wealth.<sup>44</sup> Put into a greater context, however, the rejection of charity, in a sense becoming independent, was a sign of the symbolic maturity that Wilson discussed, and also a symbol of being an adult, of being a grown man. When the program started during the Depression, the need for wealth was a main concern, not just for the nascent organization, but for much of the membership. In the postwar period, the question of wealth was no longer of such great concern. If the members survived without a benefactor, then the organization itself should as well.

It is interesting to note that Wilson referred to the early periods in similar words. The earliest period, when the need for money seemed the most pressing concern, was referred to as childhood. The period of growth during the 1940s was that of adolescence. The post war period, where the need for money had become less of a concern, was the period of maturity. Wilson had an almost a condescending attitude when discussing the place of money in the society of Alcoholics Anonymous in comparison to the rest of society. Though the rest of society thought drinking was a sign of maturity and was out hustling for more money, more prestige, and more society, AA society was more moral, more centered; in short AA was morally superior to the rest of society and its wealth centered ways.

A final aspect of maturity and manhood not explicitly mentioned by Alcoholics Anonymous and Wilson, but fodder for the later biographers of Bill Wilson was the often tumultuous relationship he had with his mother. At best portrayed as distant, at worst

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<sup>44</sup> Tradition Seven: Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions, lest problems of wealth and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

portrayed as an overbearing, overcritical harpy, Bill Wilson's mother holds a prominent place in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. None of his biographers drew the correlation between Wilson's need to have AA recognized as mature and Wilson's own personal need to separate himself from his mother's influence. If the great fear of the postwar period was of "momism" running rampant in the United States leading to a generation of weak men, then Wilson needed to make sure his issues with his mother were also put to rest. When Wilson made his great declaration that AA had grown up and hence he could leave the stage in democratic fashion, it is worth noting that Wilson's mother was in attendance as well.<sup>45</sup> He was walking away from Alcoholics Anonymous as a parent and demonstrating what they, the membership needed to do, by walking away from his mother.

*"Lady Souses": AA and Women in the 1950s*

The history of women in Alcoholics Anonymous is a checkered one, to say the very least. As argued earlier, women took part in the founding of AA from day one. It was a woman, Henrietta Seiberling, who put Bill Wilson and Dr. Smith into contact for the first time. The wives of the early alcoholics, especially Anne Smith and Lois Wilson, were anchors for the first fledgling groups in Akron and New York. Anne Smith, for instance, served as a surrogate mother to many of the members and their spouses and Lois Wilson acted very much like a spouse or housewife to the boarders that she and Bill Wilson took in while the former were trying to recover from alcoholism. In the early gatherings, all of the wives participated, making the meetings family affairs in every

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name is Bill*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 213.

sense of the word. As the world engaged in war, the women of the office staff of Alcoholics Anonymous functioned as the life-blood of communication with members-turned soldiers and helped them keep a strong hold on their new found sobriety. These wartime contributions, while conforming to traditional gender roles of the time period, served as examples of women entering the work force in large numbers, as was the case throughout society. Much of the “carrying of the message” done overseas during World War Two was conducted by these office workers. While not put on posters like “Rosie the Riveter,” they played a vital part in the dissemination of information and support to members of AA’s who traveled abroad in service of their country.

As more and more women entered the work force to become a greater force in society, Alcoholics Anonymous turned its attention toward them and their problems. What to do with female alcoholics became a genuine concern of many local AA chapters, inspiring news stories with headlines such as “Now Alcoholics Anonymous Tackles the Lady Souse Problem,” and “More Women Joining Group to Cure Selves of Drinking.”<sup>46</sup> This reflected the cultural place of women in wartime as seen in the works Elaine Tyler May and Lizabeth Cohen, respectively.<sup>47</sup> May detailed how women during the depression and war were part of the workforce, waiting to marry and taking on roles that had largely been the purview of men. Similarly, Cohen discussed how the power of the

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<sup>46</sup> Chas. Neville, “Now Alcoholics Anonymous Tackles the Lady Souse Problem” *San Diego Union*, 11/7/1943; Josephine Hoben, “More Women Joining Group to Cure Selves of Drinking” *White Plains NY: Reporter Dispatch*, 11/18/1943.

<sup>47</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. (New York: Basic, 1988.); Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumer Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004.)

consumer, largely seen as the function of women during the same time period, had a great impact on the nation's buying habits and manufacturing habits as well. Both cases are reflected in the role of women in AA, and similar to the arguments in both works, the shift in the role of women during the postwar period, especially the 1950s, was an attempt to recapture an ideal of womanhood that never existed. It should be noted that Alcoholics Anonymous never refused membership to any woman who believed she was an alcoholic at any point in its history. In fact female membership in AA rose steadily from its founding in 1935 until the period in question, to the point where the membership numbers listed women members at fifteen percent of the total.<sup>48</sup> What is much more telling, especially considering the cultural landscape of the decade, was the place that wives held in the post war period. Nothing speaks to that change more than the creation of Al-Anon by Lois Wilson in 1951.

As mentioned in chapter 4, Bill Wilson offered his vision of the perfect wife in the chapter from the Big Book, "To the Wives."<sup>49</sup> In much of the literature about the place of women in the 1950s, there was a definite ideal held up in the popular media, especially that which catered to the middle class. This idealized woman was subordinate to her husband, not in the work place and remained in and took care of the home. In a sense, American culture caught up to Wilson's vision from 1938. In line with this idealized cultural trend was the founding of Al-Anon, by Lois Wilson in 1951. Unlike

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<sup>48</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, preface to the Second Edition. Women number about 30% of the most recent membership data collected by the *Grapevine*, November 2008.

<sup>49</sup> See chapter 4.

the earlier version of AA meetings, which brought entire families together, Al-Anon featured a separate space for the spouses of alcoholics, who were overwhelmingly women. When Al-Anon started, the male AA's did not know what to make of it. There was concern that the new "wives" group was conspiring against their husbands. In an oft-told story, an AA member pretended to sleep outside of an Al-Anon meeting in order to eavesdrop and report back to the group what had transpired.<sup>50</sup> The men were not only concerned that their wives were telling family secrets, but they were also afraid that the women were becoming too independent, less reliant on the traditional head of household.

The husbands of Alcoholics Anonymous did not need to be concerned. The full name of the organization, Al-Anon Family Groups, gives great insight into the approach of the group toward the relationship between AA and Al-Anon. Like the cultural message of the 1950s, the focus of women, especially middle-class wives like those associated with AA, was to be squarely fixed on the home. "Family groups" was a phrase loaded with meaning, especially when presented through the lens of 1950s America. It was the purpose of these groups, by practicing the twelve steps in their own lives (as recommended by Wilson twenty years earlier) to be supportive, dutiful spouses to their sober (and sometimes not) alcoholic husbands, much as pictured in the "bread winner ethos" discussed by Barbara Ehrenreich in *Hearts of Men*.<sup>51</sup> Like many creations

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<sup>50</sup> Lois Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 164.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1984.)

of 1950s culture Al-Anon reflected a concern with domestic relationships and incorporating family into that dynamic.<sup>52</sup>

Very rarely, even up until the present did Al-Anon advocate divorce or separation. The literature of Al-Anon called for reconciliation, reflection on one's own flaws, and forgiveness of the errant spouse. Throughout, Al-Anon literature put the onus strictly on the shortcomings of the spouse, not the alcoholic. For example, the literature stressed that it was important for the wife to take care of herself, and often reminded her that she had an important role in protecting the family from the drunken alcoholic. While her husband sobered up, she had to be the lynchpin of the entire family. The alcoholic could not be expected to immediately join in family activities and responsibilities. Just as Wilson described in 1938, Al-Anon codified the idea of the supportive, uncritical spouse. This process started before Al-anon became its own incorporated group. Writing in 1944, Lois Wilson wrote in the *Grapevine* about her experiences with Bill. She detailed the overwhelming frustration and futility of trying to sober up an alcoholic. However, she aimed her frustration much more at the disease of alcoholism than at the drunken sufferer who needed the support of an understanding and supportive spouse. The theme of the article focused on her realization that she had many faults as well, including anger and jealousy toward her husband. In order to have a healthy relationship, Lois Wilson

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<sup>52</sup> Beatriz Colomina, Annmarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim, *Cold War Hotheouses: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.)

explained that she had to accept her faults and her husband's. She may not have had alcoholism, but she was suffering from the disease through her spouse.<sup>53</sup>

Other women had similar advice to give AA wives. In numerous articles to the *Grapevine* with titles like "A Wife Learns How to Really Help," and "Wives can Well Follow AA's Example," spouses of alcoholics were urged to follow the twelve steps and to remain a non-critical yet stable partner. In the "Wife Learns to Help" article the author discussed the futility of separations from her husband and that to be "truly helpful" she needed to stay with and help him stay on the road to recovery. Certainly, no one advised the long-suffering wife to jump ship, get a divorce, and find a life of her own. A supportive spouse seemed the major role for women to play.<sup>54</sup>

The main group under the Alcoholics Anonymous umbrella that dealt directly with children, Ala-teen was not created until the late 1960s. There were some instances in *The Grapevine*, and later in the *Al-Anon Forum*, that discussed the role of children in the alcoholic family. In a reflective piece written by a college aged woman, she recalled growing up with an alcoholic parent and how the relationship between her parents and with her father shaped her life. Like the role of a wife, the strongest advice to children was to adopt the twelve steps. Children were, however, given a greater amount of leeway. The emphasis wasn't so much about remaining a part of the family, though that was often implied, but the lack of guilt children shared with their parents. The child was

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<sup>53</sup> Lois Wilson, "Bill's Wife Remembers When He and She and the First AA's Were Very Young." *Grapvine*, December 1944.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth B. "Wives Can Well Follow AA's Example." *Grapevine*, 8/1947; Gertrude S. "A Wife Learns How Best to Really Help." *Grapevine*, December 1947.

neither the alcoholic nor the enabler and did not have to meet the same expectations as the supportive wife.

Similarly, it was not until the postwar period that we see alcoholism referred to as the “family disease.” When surveying the history of alcohol reform the effect that drunkenness has on the family is a key component of the discussion. The behavior of the alcoholic must be changed in order to protect the family. To a limited extent, Alcoholics Anonymous continued with this argument, but with an interesting twist to the logic. Not only was it a disease that affects the whole family, but rather it is the family’s disease. Al-Anon took it on as its purpose to aid the entire family with their own individual illnesses. Regardless of whether or not the alcoholic in the family got sober, the goal of Al-Anon was to get those around the alcoholic “sober” in a spiritual sense, in a word healthy. Like much of the media of the time, Al-Anon preached an identical message. Going a step further, not only did the alcoholic’s family respond to the cultural pressures of the age in conventional ways, but because the disease concept was placed more squarely on the family than in the past, the alcoholic family had to heal as well as live as model citizens.

The message of Al-Anon was conveyed through its monthly magazine, *The Forum*. First published in 1953, like *The Grapevine* the magazine offered reflections, advice and inspiration to the members of the organization. All of this material stayed on message regarding the place of the family with regards to the alcoholic and their recovery. In 1954, Margret D. took over as editor of *The Forum* and through her writings the overall tone of the magazine was readily seen. Between 1954 and 1960 Margret D.’s

primarily focused on three main aspects of being a good family member: maintaining hope, overcoming fear about life, and tolerance for the alcoholic.<sup>55</sup> The idea of tolerance was most in line with the ideas of the supportive spouse presented in *Alcoholics Anonymous* writings and in many ways went beyond simple acceptance of the alcoholic's behavior and misgivings. In a 1954 editorial, Margret D. wrote about confronting a husband about his drinking and surmised:

We did more harm than good, although we thought we were helping, we really added to a burden which was already crushing him. We probably even prolonged the excessive drinking, because that was his way of fighting back, just as a child who has been put in the wrong will fight against correction.<sup>56</sup>

Not only did this approach lessen the burden of guilt for the alcoholic, but it also laid some of the blame for the drinking, especially continuing to drink, at the feet of the concerned wife. Rather than worry about his drinking or her own life, the magazine recommended that she should tolerate her husband's behavior and focus on her own actions. Margret D. also implicitly suggested that a wife be grateful for what she has when she writes, "So, the next time your mate irritates you thoroughly, pause, consider, do a little comparison-shopping."<sup>57</sup> Clearly being married to an alcoholic is not as bad as many alternatives, especially not being married at all, which in the world of *Al-Anon* seemed a fate worse than death. Throughout Margret D.'s tenure at *The Forum* (which ended in 1970) she never advocated divorce or separation and during the period being

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret D., *Forum Favorites. Vol. 1* (New York: Al - Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1982.)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

examined, there is no mention of divorce as a viable solution to marital difficulties in the magazine. Clearly, part of the cure to the “family disease” was keeping the family together in an age of familial togetherness.

### *Conclusion*

The decade and a half following the Second World War gave rise to some of the greatest social and cultural changes in the United States during the twentieth century. Alcoholics Anonymous and its members experienced those changes like every other person and organization in the nation. Like many of its cultural counterparts and early contemporaries during the Depression era, AA was able to change its message yet remain true to its core, traditional values and continue to build its membership and influence, both from a cultural standpoint and also within the medical and psychiatric community. The key to this change and that which enabled AA to continue to grow was the idea of raising the bottom of what it meant to be an alcoholic. Coupled with this, Alcoholics Anonymous shifted its focus squarely on defining what was meant by the term sobriety. No longer was it just staying away from alcohol, but it became a state of mind, a design for living. AA also opened its doors wider than it had in the past considering not only where a person was on the socio-economic scale, but whether a person believed they were an alcoholic or not.

Alcoholics Anonymous also responded to the anxieties of the age, especially the major worries of the middle class, namely the fear of being outside a secure community and the concern that men might go off the deep-end. In both cases, AA responded by offering many of the same responses given to the problems of the Depression, but in a

different light. During this time, AA groups became not only more open to members with different problems, but groups sprang up in locations that were not in the urban environments of earlier times. In regard to the latest “crisis of manhood” during the 1950s, Alcoholics Anonymous responded by demonstrating that to be sober and part of AA was a grown-up, mature thing for a man to do. Further, Wilson dedicated much of the decade proving that AA as an organization was mature as well. All of this discussion of maturity gives us the image of AA members and Alcoholics Anonymous as grown men, not immature, and not dependent on their parents, especially their mothers. Maturity as sobriety also put AA in sharp contrast with the new middle-class attitudes toward drink itself. Taking a drink or two had become a sign of a sophisticated, mature adult in the 1950s. Alcoholics Anonymous did not directly confront this notion, but played up the idea that AA members were paragons of maturity as well, because not only had they realized that they had a serious disease, and as a result lived without drinking, but they were also trying to live a better, more useful *sober* life in general.

Alcoholics Anonymous was never, nor is it now, concerned much with current events. The great exception to this was World War II when AA was very much involved with the war effort, much like any number of public organizations of the time. As the postwar period progressed, more comments within AA literature appeared, especially by Wilson, discussing the precarious state of the world in a rather general way. Even though these references were vague at best, they represented a significant shift. Wilson’s worldview in particular and AA’s more generally, had changed. The pressures and anxieties of the Cold War made AA’s founder more cautious about the state of the world

and it made the pursuit of serenity much more personal than it had been before. Like many other aspects of life in the 1950s, the focus of AA turned inward. For the greater society, it was a focus on the home, the community, and the family. AA members took part in this cultural shift, while moving AA in the same inward direction, making AA a more self-focused organization than it had been in its early days.

## CONCLUSION

*Our hope is that when this chip of a book is launched on the world tide of alcoholism, defeated drinkers will seize upon it, to follow its suggestions.*

The above quotation is from the chapter called a “Vision for You” the final chapter of the main text of “The Big Book.”<sup>1</sup> It encapsulated the feelings of the original members of Alcoholics Anonymous and their wish that the program they started would reach untold numbers of alcoholics and they would make an impact in the fight against alcoholism. My vision isn’t nearly as grandiose but I do hope that this chip of a dissertation offers something to scholars on multiple fronts: first and foremost to the community of scholars that focuses on the history and impact of Alcoholics Anonymous. In this dissertation I have tried to fill in some of the gaps within the history of AA and its place in American society. Most importantly, the link between earlier temperance movements and the prohibition movement is a part of AA history that needed exploration. By placing Alcoholics Anonymous in the context of these earlier movements, it is apparent that the program is part of a long tradition of reform within the United States. Ernest Kurtz did an admirable job in his history of AA, *Not God*, placing the society in the historic stream of intellectual history in the United States and Jack

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<sup>1</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: AA World Services, 4ed. 2003 [1939]), 152.

Blocker noted that AA was part of a historic pattern regarding alcohol reform in his work *Cycles of Reform*.<sup>2</sup> Looking beyond these works, however, this dissertation demonstrates that Alcoholics Anonymous owed a great deal to the earlier movements which provided them with a language and cultural model to build upon to hone their own message for a new audience. Also the older movements provided examples of organizations not to emulate, older images of the drunkard that AA successfully changed, making alcoholism a disease rather than a moral failing.

There are many works on Alcoholics Anonymous but very few take the time to place it in its proper historical context. As Ernest Kurtz proposed AA was both inside and outside of history. I firmly believe and have argued throughout these pages that Alcoholics Anonymous was (and still is) decidedly part of its time and like so many institutions throughout the course of history influenced by those events. The cultural landscape of the 1930s through the 1950s shaped Alcoholics Anonymous, and it provides an interesting view of the middle class of that era. While the numbers were small in the beginning as Americans sought stability and normalcy after World War II the message of Alcoholics Anonymous struck a profound chord within society and it became a stalwart of American culture for the rest of the century.

This is not the first work to try and discuss Alcoholics Anonymous, nor I doubt will it be the last. There is, for lack of a better word, a built-in market for works on AA, namely the current membership. The history of the organization is very important to

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Educational Materials, 1979 [1991]); Jack Blocker, *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.)

many of the sober alcoholics within the meeting rooms. Every major metropolitan area has an archive dedicated to the local history of the fellowship in their town and many small towns follow suit. Volunteers staff these archives and they enjoy AA history especially as it pertains to their locality. Similarly at every AA event, from large national gatherings like Founders Day or the International General Service Conference held every four years to smaller regional gatherings like the Chicago Open, a booth or larger display of national and local artifacts is present. Many times it is a letter from Bill Wilson or a collection of articles pertaining to the local chapter or pictures of AA members from various eras.

Like these archives, every AA club and recovery house has a bookshelf filled with books focusing on AA history. Unfortunately, many of the works on Alcoholics Anonymous don't look beyond the details of events surrounding the fellowship, especially the life of Bill Wilson. The official biographies of the co-founders are for sale as well as copies of the "Big Book" and "Twelve and Twelve." None of the more revealing books about Wilson's life are for sale, such as Cheever's biography.<sup>3</sup> Thankfully, AA clubs don't sell the multiple self-published works on the history of the organization. Most of these focus on a narrow interpretation of the Twelve Steps and seem eager to engage in a phantom debate about the supposed dangerous direction the group is taking. AA members seem genuinely interested in the legend of the AA, but not necessarily in how AA was affected by cultural trends of American history or what Alcoholics Anonymous can tell us about the United States and the changes that occurred

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name is Bill. Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004.)

during AA's existence. In short, most members of the fellowship are more interested in seeing the first coffee pot used in a meeting than what those meetings tell us about the greater society of the era.

The experiences through the prohibition era, along with the experiences of the First World War and the 1920s, had a profound effect on the first members of Alcoholics Anonymous, not the least on the two founders of the program, Bill Wilson and Robert Smith. Among the first members almost all experienced either the horrors of war or the privilege of higher education at the turn of the twentieth century (sometimes both). All of these men experienced the failure that was national prohibition. These combined experiences, especially when viewed through the prism of middle-class society gave Alcoholics Anonymous a distinct shape in its early years. Ultimately, AA was a reaction to these events as much as it was a reaction to the temperance movement. Generally speaking the middle class of the era were disillusioned with American society after World War One and many experienced feelings of guilt and shame considering the excess of the 1920s and the blatant law breaking with regards to prohibition. These feelings of were only compounded with the onset of the depression which many of the middle class viewed as a retribution for the less than pious lifestyle they engaged in before the crash. In order to address their own alcoholism, the early members of AA decided to embrace an older vision of American society, a vision from their Victorian youth, that idealized thrift, hard work and of course, sobriety. In doing so they seized upon an idea that was not in vogue during the depression era, that of the individual. It

was the individual's responsibility to confront his alcoholism, not to confront society about what might possibly have caused that alcoholism.

This dissertation is first and foremost concerned with the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, but my aim has always been to also engage, if only on a limited basis, the greater historiography of the United States in the twentieth century. Using AA as my starting point I hope that I have shed some light on a group that isn't often the focus of historians of the depression, namely the middle-class. That isn't to say that the entire segment of the population has been ignored, but the conservative and traditional aspects that I have discussed in the previous chapters are not the cultural trends normally associated with the 1930s. It is true that AA did not hold the same place in American culture as it would later in the century, but even though a small group the ideas and methods that AA used were appealing to many, as evidenced by the large amount of special interest features and advice columns that brought the program's message to the public. This large amount of press coverage highlights one of the strongest themes of this dissertation, that American culture, especially in times of crisis, reaches out for what is familiar, what is traditional. I have tried throughout this dissertation to avoid the terms conservative and liberal for two main reasons. First, these two terms are so incredibly charged in modern discourse that they have become insults for the opposing sides. They are automatically received as political terms that I feel are too limited, and leads to my second reason for avoiding this dichotomy. That reason is that Alcoholics Anonymous isn't a political organization. Thus I have favored the term traditional versus conservative. The idea of trying to find the American way of life goes beyond simple

distinctions and while the early membership (and much of the later membership as well) were from a relatively high class, it would be a mistake to say that their motives for starting the organization were politically motivated.

As Warren Susman argued on numerous occasions, the 1930s were less radical than is often argued, especially when one considers the collective mood of the middle class.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Alcoholics Anonymous was not at its peak in the 1930s when it began but it still sheds a great deal of light on the culture of the decade. For a group whose membership was barely over a thousand by decades end AA's footprint in society was already being seen by the reaction of the press, the medical community and the religious community. Like the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, these fields were dominated by people (mostly men) who were from the middle class and shared many of the same core beliefs. Even before the publication of the book that gave the fellowship its name in 1939, there were literally hundreds of newspaper articles from across the nation touting the benefit and success of Alcoholics Anonymous. Along with testimonials and sermons from physicians and preachers alike, AA had strong allies in spreading its message almost from its very inception. It was not the largest organization of the time, far from it, but it had the philosophical underpinnings that made it easy for the nation, especially the middle class, to embrace.

The depression may have given the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous the impetus to start their society, but it was World War Two that moved it from a largely localized phenomenon to a national one. Like so many segments of society at the time,

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.)

AA was radically altered almost overnight. Through its members that became soldiers and those that moved across the United States as part of the war industries, the message, and more importantly the membership, of Alcoholics Anonymous spread literally across the globe. It was also touted as a great benefit to society by not only providing fighting men but by the number of man hours saved by its efforts to sober up the work force. In order to provide information and inspiration to those far from home and to provide the stateside membership with a consistent voice of the organization and its activities, Alcoholics Anonymous created *The Grapevine*, the official magazine of the fellowship. Finally, mirroring the rest of society Alcoholics Anonymous saw a change in the role of women with the organization. As men were either being called off to war, overseeing efforts to prepare for the returning soldier or moving across the country, the burden of corresponding with members abroad and reaching out to new members fell upon the women who worked in the central office of AA. These women may not have picked up a rivet gun, but they picked up a role that had been dominated by men before the war. They were the first contact for many newcomers during the war and they were the only sober contact for many who were fighting from Europe to Asia. When these men returned to the States, they were looking for stability, they were looking for quiet and prosperity; some might even say they were looking for serenity.

Alcoholics Anonymous, unlike so many groups begun in the 1930s was prepared to offer a vision of that serenity to the returning soldier and the rest of American society as well. No longer confronted with the hardships of economic uncertainty and downward mobility, the fellowship of AA changed its course to match the mood of the nation, while

maintaining its traditional conservative views. The individual was still the major player in the message of AA, that it was the individual that needed to be changed in order to fit into society, to become more mature, more responsible and more rational. For the alcoholic to achieve those ends sobriety was a necessity. Again, the pressures of society were not called into question by the group, but if the individual changed to meet the expectations of society then the elusive reward of serenity could be achieved. To ensure this future, the role of women in AA was again altered. Like the rest of society that like Elaine Tyler May described as focused on containment, Alcoholics Anonymous sought to contain women as well.<sup>5</sup> The advent of Al-Anon was an explicit attempt to separate women and the families of alcoholics into their own group whose focus was entirely on providing support for and nurturing the alcoholic. Al-Anon was decidedly not a group that questioned the importance of marriage or the subordinate role of women in society.

In 2007 the play *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* closed a five-month run on Broadway to great critical and financial success.<sup>6</sup> Not only was it a hit with the press, but members of Alcoholics Anonymous readily approved of the show as well. Many sober groups around the Northeast chartered special buses to go see the play. The production was rather simple, consisting of the two title characters and two supporting ones, Henrietta Seiberling and Anne Smith, respectively. The focus of the play recounts the first meeting between Bill Wilson and Robert Smith. It was pure conjecture by the playwright,

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<sup>5</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988.)

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Adam Newman, "Anonymous Is Prominent in Audience of This Play" *New York Times*, 4/3/2007.

Stephen Bergman, as to what actually happened but the performance connected with audiences throughout its run, thanks in large part to what the general manager of the production called “its humanness.”<sup>7</sup> This has always been one of the hallmarks of AA, the ability of one alcoholic to communicate with another on a level that is not attainable by people who have not experienced the ravages of alcoholism.

It is hoped that the previous chapters brought to light the fact that there is much more to a successful program than intimate communication. Alcoholics Anonymous survived and flourished for almost eighty years because it balanced on a fine line between respecting the past and adapting to present cultural circumstances. The organization remained true to its founding principles, especially those that touch on inherent American values such as personal responsibility, respect for the individual and voluntary inclusion in a community. The alcoholic society also maintained the same stance on alcoholism that it had at its founding, specifically that American society and the values that it promotes was not responsible for a person’s alcoholism, but rather the blame rested with the individual. If he can become sober, he can find fulfillment in an American social structure. The middle-class values that were predominant at the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous are still a strong force in the organization of today.

As constant as Alcoholics Anonymous remains to its core values from the Depression era, the organization needed to change in order to remain relevant to American society if it was to have any chance of surviving throughout the twentieth century. Shortly after its founding, the organization had to cope with the radical changes

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

that World War Two brought to American society. Similar to the expanded role of the United States across the globe during and after World War II, Alcoholics Anonymous expanded to become a national and even global organization.

Numbers and geographical reach were not the only ways that the United States grew in the war years. The economic boom of the war had an enormous impact on the country and on Alcoholics Anonymous as well. The organization may not have acquired great wealth, but many of its members achieved a level of affluence unheard of in earlier periods of the group's history. Could its message still be effective in an age of abundance? The economic hardships of the Depression were no longer a visible sign of being down on one's luck. Instead, many new members came into the meeting rooms with more wealth than many of the first members could have dreamed of when they were finishing their drinking careers. In order to meet this new challenge Bill Wilson wrote a new book, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which raised the bottom of alcoholism for a whole new generation of troubled drinkers. The traditional values that the group adhered to remained in place, but this shift in policy had much larger ramifications for the organization as a whole. By raising the bottom, the new standards of alcoholism established by the group led to a more inclusive precedent that permitted other types of addicts—especially drug addicts-- to gain a measure of social acceptance.

Women had always been accepted as alcoholics, but during the post war era, responding to societal pressures, Alcoholics Anonymous confined wives of alcoholics to a much more limited role in the group than they had been during its early years. Al-Anon Family groups became a separate organization meant to help spouses of alcoholics, but

they proscribed a secondary and subordinate place for women around the fellowship. According to the AA program, women had to support and nurture their alcoholic husbands, and make sure that a supportive family structure was available to them. Rather than viewing the relationships between alcoholic husbands and their nurturing wives as aberrant or symbiotic, Alcoholics Anonymous offered women no new outlets for their anger and frustration. Certainly, the organization did not advocate that women sever the marital cord with their irresponsible men and, as feminist groups advocated in the 1970s, find fulfillment on their own. Even though Wilson described the period of the fifties as the era when AA had come of age, it had not moved particularly far in maturity as far women were concerned.

The greatest change that the fellowship faced during its history was the death of Bill Wilson in 1971. Even prior to his passing as a result of emphysema (a complication of being a life long smoker) Wilson's activities in the group had slowed considerably throughout the 1960s. During that decade not only were women becoming members in greater numbers, but other minorities were beginning to have significant representation in the group as well. Along with the gay and lesbian communities, all of these groups wanted more representation in the community and largely because of their presence *Alcoholics Anonymous* underwent a substantial revision in 1976. These historically underrepresented and often excluded groups created their own exclusive meetings that caused a minor tremor within the organization. In response to these new developments, many of the older generations felt that the spirit of inclusiveness and singleness of purpose was in danger of being lost. Today, many specialized groups exist, ironically

including men's groups. Another population that has increased especially during the last twenty years of Alcoholics Anonymous has been the steady rise of younger people entering the group.<sup>8</sup> Like other distinct populations, young peoples' meetings became common in the 1980s. Finally, drug use was accepted as appropriate for Alcoholics Anonymous during the 1950s, but it was not until the sixties that it became wide spread throughout the organization and prompted the creation of Narcotics Anonymous in 1962.

Especially after the 1950s, Alcoholics Anonymous expanded its outreach to the rest of the world. Immediately following the war, Bill and Lois Wilson made numerous trips abroad to see how the fellowship was faring around the world. While the first fruits of success were in Europe, it was always a point of pride for Wilson that program he created also took root throughout Asia, reinterpreting the Twelve Steps for a non-Christian audience. In the years to follow the Big Book has been translated into over twenty languages and meetings are held in foreign languages throughout the United States. Whether it is a street corner in Chicago or in the coastal regions of Oaxaca, Mexico, the familiar triangle within a circle emblem of AA is a universal welcome to all who seek the comfort and safety of a sober place.

The 1970s saw a major change in how AA introduced itself to and envisioned its role in American society. This shift remains a contested issue both in the law courts and within the fellowship. Starting in 1975 the policy of being court ordered to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings became common practice throughout the country. The

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<sup>8</sup> People under the age of 30 comprise almost 20% of the current membership. They host statewide conventions across the United States and an International conference every year, The International Conference of Young People in AA.

older method of finding new recruits, the classic twelfth step call, was no longer the major means by which people were brought into the meeting rooms. Instead, new members often were ordered by the judicial system to enroll in AA, and they had to provide proof of attendance to a set number of meetings, primarily the signatures of meeting chairmen attesting to their presence. For an organization devoted to staying out of controversy, the issue of compulsory meeting attendance created debate both inside and outside of the organization. Many members believed that signing one's name to an attendance sheet, no matter how worthwhile the cause was a slippery slope leading to the publication and record of members of this secret and supposedly "anonymous" organization. Others believed, following the founding principles of the group, that a person needed to make his own decision whether to enter AA and not be coerced into the program. Many of those sentenced by the courts have challenged mandatory attendance on legal grounds.

The main argument of these cases stems from the religious overtones of meetings and a possible conflict with the First Amendment. The General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous has not made any official statement on this issue as it tries to remain above the fray. The silence of the New York office when it comes to compulsory meetings is consistent with its voice, or lack thereof, on other issues regarding alcohol consumption and drug use. They have consistently refused to make any comment regarding such issues as the raising of the drinking age nationwide to twenty-one or the ongoing debate about the legalization of marijuana. As sin taxes continue to increase on alcohol, Alcoholics Anonymous officially maintained its silence.

Warren Susman is a strong presence throughout this dissertation and perhaps it is best to conclude looking back at his work. In his most famous essay, “History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past,” he discussed, using the Puritans as his example, how each generation interpreted history for its own devices.<sup>9</sup> What was largely forgotten by one generation was sought out by the next and used to give meaning to their world and their actions. Alcoholics Anonymous functions in much the same way. The organization maintains a strong connection to its past especially, to borrow another phrase from Susman, its creation mythology. As its creation mythology, AA has long enshrined the moment when two alcoholics got together to discuss their mutual and destructive drinking problems. It is much more than that, of course. The story is filled with familiar characters steeped in American values. As part of the story, what stands out is the theme that Wilson and Smith were striking out in a new direction with regards to alcoholism, and as such were incredible underdogs who had little chance of success. They were also two men from the middle class, the group of Americans that most people identified with or aspired to. Wilson and Smith also created a program that encouraged hard work, self-denial and community service, which many Americans considered the best of American values. It was this from this usable past that Alcoholics Anonymous continued to find a connection with the present day alcoholic.

Ultimately, alcoholics are lonely, broken and isolated people. They feel that no one understands what they are going through or that anyone has a solution to their

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<sup>9</sup> Warren Susman, “History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past.” found in *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 5-34.

problems. Alcoholics Anonymous fills a void by providing an anchor for those who feel adrift. It does this by staying committed to its past yet altering its message as the era necessitates it. As AA enters its eighth decade it remains a vivid mirror of American culture by remaining committed to the values that it embraced in 1935.

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## VITA

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