

# **The History of the AA History Lovers**

**Glenn F. Chesnut**

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## **A plea to AA archivists and historians**

William L. White contacted me in August 2013 and asked me to put together this little history. He wrote me, “it is important to get this history recorded. None of us are getting any younger and we need to get our own recollections on paper, audio or video” before it is too late. He told me that he is hoping that my doing this might inspire other AA historians and archivists to get their own recollections recorded. “I’ll bet most Archives Committees have documented local AA history but have not recorded the history of their own committees.” I would like to add my own urging to his. If you have been deeply involved in setting up an AA archives or writing about AA history, please take the time to write up a memoir describing your activities—it can be quite brief if you desire—so it can be passed on to the next generation.

## **Respecting the anonymity principle**

One of the thorny problems with writing this little history of the AA History Lovers was the issue of anonymity. For more about how I attempted to handle this, see the extended note at the end of this article.

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## **The leading international web group for the study of Alcoholics Anonymous history and archives**

The AA History Lovers web group as of this point in time (summer 2013) has over 2,600 members from all over the earth including the United States, Canada, the U.K., Ireland, Mexico, Belgium, the Scandinavian countries, Australia, and India, to name just a few of the far flung lands where we have members. But the actual number of people who are affected by the web group is far higher. There are

many who read the group's postings on a regular basis without having signed up on the membership list, since anyone who has a computer and access to the internet can read all the messages. Enrolling on the membership list is only necessary for posting messages. And many of the group's readers forward some of the postings on to their friends, or reprint their contents in local AA newsletters, or put up copies on their own websites.

At least 90% of the people who have authored the best books on AA history are members of the AA History Lovers, as are at least 90% of the top archivists, rare book specialists and other historical researchers in the field. In addition, over the years, the Archivists at the Alcoholics Anonymous GSO in New York City have also regularly been a member of the AA History Lovers, although because of their position, they have usually refrained from public comments on the postings.

So the AAHistoryLovers has gained a reputation as the most dependable single source of historical information about AA. If you want to find out what the real experts say — the most knowledgeable and competent scholars and researchers in the field — the AA History Lovers will give you the best-documented and most up-to-date information known. And it will also usually be one of the first places to publish information about newly discovered documents and facts, along with notices of the most recent publications on AA history.

And there is another very important feature about the messages posted on the AAHistoryLovers website. As the twentieth century came to its close, it began to be realized that we were coming to the end of the line, in terms of people who knew the original founders of AA at first hand. In fact, the AAHL was started in part as a last-ditch effort to glean as much information as possible from these people while we could still sit at their feet and listen to them talk, and ask questions. The next generation will be forced to rely solely on documents and audio recordings.

But the web group attempts to maintain a high level of objectivity. The official description of the group at the top of the home page says:

This group is intended for all those interested in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is not limited to members of AA, and is not an AA group.

That is very important: it is not an AA group. We have contributors to the group who are neither alcoholics nor AA members, like the Yale-trained scholar Professor Trysh Travis, from the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and Ron Roizen, who received his doctorate in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, both of them notable scholars in the field.

Although the AA History Lovers avoids posting what is simply blind and tendentious AA-bashing material, it is perfectly acceptable to post messages criticizing the AA General Service Office or AA World Services, and to question even widely held AA beliefs. On "hot button" questions like whether Bill Wilson's vision of light in Towns Hospital was simply a result of belladonna intoxication, and whether Hank Parkhurst actually wrote the chapter "To Employers" in the AA Big Book, to give two fairly recent examples, the group posts messages from all sides of the debate.

On the other hand, the majority of the AA History Lovers members are AA members, many of them with 20, 30, 40, 50 or more years of experience in the program. Their own lives were saved by the twelve step program, and they have seen thousands of other men and women whose lives were saved by the program. So the fundamental assumption in the messages which are posted is that we can quarrel about even the most basic principles, but that we cannot deny that the program does in fact work if it is worked properly.

**One of the world's largest archives  
of AA historical material**

The collected messages of the AAHistoryLovers forms one of the largest single bodies of good AA historical material gathered in one place, a work of love carried out by a number of the world's best AA historians. For the sake of future generations, all the messages from the group's first eleven years have now been put into computer files which can be either downloaded or read online:

<http://hindsfoot.org/aahl.html>

Or those who are interested can go directly to the AA History Lovers website itself, where all the messages can be easily accessed:

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/AAHistoryLovers/>

The Message Board there also has a little box at the top where one can search for all the messages containing any particular word or phrase, which is extremely useful for carrying out research.

### **How I met Ernest Kurtz and Nancy Moyer Olson**

The web group was founded as the AA History Buffs in March 2000 by Nancy Moyer Olson, who acted as the group's first moderator. A sort of unofficial governing committee gradually grew up during the next few years, with Nancy, Ernest Kurtz, and myself at its core. Fiona Dodd, Bill White, and Arthur S. also played important leadership roles. When Nancy died in 2005, I eventually ended up as the principal moderator, that is, the one who handles and posts incoming messages most of the time, a role I am still playing some eight years after her death.

My own involvement with AA history and archives dated back to the 1990's, that is, to slightly before the founding of the AA History Buffs. At first I was only interested in the history of AA in the local area where I live — the portion of northern Indiana and

southwestern Michigan, with a population of about a million, which centers on South Bend, Indiana.

But let me tell the story now, for those who are interested, of how I moved out of the field of purely local AA history, and first came in contact with AA historians and archivists who were active at the larger national and international level.

In the early autumn of 1997, I walked through the doors of the second National Archives Workshop in Akron, Ohio, and was immediately greeted enthusiastically by Gail L., the organizer. The first workshop had been put on by her the year before, and although relatively few attended that year, it worked so well that people all across the U.S. and Canada, and even abroad, started begging her to put on another one.

People who were interested in Alcoholics Anonymous all over the globe were starting to come to the realization that something quite remarkable had begun, without anyone having been fully conscious up to that point of what was going on. I like to call it the Archival Movement, for lack of a better term (or perhaps the AA History Movement or AA Heritage Movement). Vast numbers of people, from ordinary AA members to academic scholars, were beginning to realize that the historical materials describing the early years of the movement were going to have to be gathered and preserved, or they would be lost forever, and were committing themselves individually to doing whatever they could to carry out some part of the task.

Archival repositories were beginning to be created at all sorts of levels. The parent collection was perhaps the one at the central New York AA headquarters, where Nell Wing began working at the idea of an archives after Bill Wilson's death in 1971. But when Ernest Kurtz was doing his research in the New York files during the later 1970's, he still had to rely totally on Nell Wing's memory of where all the key letters and documents were stored. An archives had been created at Hazelden in Center City, Minnesota, which eventually came under Bill Pittman's supervision, but it was difficult if not impossible for other people to gain access to those materials.

It was only during the 1990's that the Archival Movement really began to gather momentum. What has become one of the most important archives, the Chester H. Kirk Collection on Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous, had only been established in 1995, at Brown University in Rhode Island, with Charlie Bishop's collection as its base. And elsewhere during the 1990's, all across the United States and abroad, archives were being established in rooms or small buildings maintained by AA Areas and in local intergroup headquarters. Although a few things had been said publicly during that period in favor of creating archives and preserving AA history at a few AA conferences and in a few scattered AA publications, I think it would be fair to say that no one single person or body had really been coordinating all of this activity in any organized fashion.

It had for the most part just seemed to arise rather spontaneously in hundreds of minds during those years, all over the U.S. and elsewhere. The twelve-step program is above all a movement based on story and history (two English words which both came from the ancient Greek word *historia*, which meant to ask or inquire into what actually happened). History (in the way I am talking about it here, although this is certainly not the only historiographical theory around) is then regarded as the interweaving of individual human stories. In this understanding of history, it is the individual stories which are all-important: "Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now." It is in the reciting of them that we find ourselves contacting the spiritual power which can transform our lives. One can investigate early AA spiritual concepts and ideas, philosophy, sociological structures, and psychological theories, and analyze all of these at great length. But telling the stories — and listening to them — is far more important and basic, because this is the way the message is really passed on, and the context in which the deepest spiritual insights are revealed.

Those first two Akron workshops in 1996 and 1997 were not the place where this urge to preserve the past began, but just the place where large numbers of those involved in the Archival Movement began to realize how many they were in number, and — I also

believe — where they began to realize more deeply what an important thing they were doing.

Nell Wing had taken Gail L. to visit Lois Wilson at Stepping Stones, and as they were leaving, Gail (who was overcome by the great honor of getting to meet Lois and talk with her) told Nell that she would do anything Nell wanted in order to thank her. Nell's response was simply to ask Gail to go back to Akron and start an AA archives there too.

And Gail did in fact throw herself into AA archival and preservation work from that point on. When Dr. Bob's house came up for sale, she played a major role in the Akron group which arranged to buy the house — at one point in 1984 signing her own name onto a document which would have committed her to paying for the house herself if it came to that — so it could be turned into a permanent memorial for the place where AA began.

Gail greeted me enthusiastically the minute I walked through the door, grabbed a copy of a history I had written of how AA got started in South Bend, Indiana — I was holding it in one hand as I walked in — and put it on a display table for everyone who came to the workshop to look at. This was the first printing of what later became *The Factory Owner & the Convict* and *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*.

One of the major figures in AA archives, Charlie Bishop, Jr., came up to me at one point and offered to trade me a copy of the lengthy bibliography of AA publications which he and Bill Pittman put together, in exchange for a copy of *The Factory Owner & the Convict*. Thanks to Gail, Charlie had been involved with the National Archives workshops from the beginning: in her preparation for the first workshop, she had fought for, and got permission, to have him put up two display tables of rare AA archival materials right at the place where people came in and registered.

Later on, I got to stand and chat with that wonderful and extremely kind AA historian Mel Barger (from Toledo, Ohio) in the dining room of Dr. Bob's house. In the years that followed, I became

friends with both Mel and Charlie, both of whom I admire enormously.

Most importantly of all, I introduced myself to Ernest Kurtz, the author of the major history of the AA movement, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (1979), who had given a talk at the workshop. Ernie (with his characteristic generosity) immediately invited me to have dinner with him. This was the beginning of the close relationship which he and I have had, one which was soon going to lead me directly into my involvement with the AA History Lovers project.

Kurtz was the outstanding thinker of the AA tradition's second generation, the one who played a constant leadership role in pushing the movement towards the highest professional standards of history writing and supplied some of its most influential interpretive concepts. His ideas are vitally important for anyone who wishes to understand AA history during the twenty-five years or so following Bill Wilson's death in 1971.

Charlie Bishop, Jr., told me that his own memory was that Ernie Kurtz's book had been one of the prime catalysts for the rise of the Archival Movement. People would read Ernie's book, he said, and then say to themselves, "we could collect all our local materials, and tell our group's story here where we live too."

Over dinner with Ernie Kurtz that night in 1997 (and over the course of the years that followed), I discovered that he and I spoke a common language, even though he came from a Polish Catholic background and I came from an Irish and English Protestant background. He was brought up in Rochester, on the coast of Lake Ontario in western New York state, where during the 1950's, he went to St. Andrew's Preparatory Seminary and St. Bernard's Major Seminary and got a solid basic theological education. I had in parallel fashion gone to Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, in 1961-1964. Ernie had studied at Harvard University during the late 1960's and early 1970's, including two years as a teaching fellow at Harvard Divinity School. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in the History of

American Civilization in 1978. In parallel fashion, I had studied theology and history at Oxford University in England from 1965 to 1968, and received my doctoral degree from there in 1971.

We both came from a world of existential philosophy (more Jean-Paul Sartre in Ernie's case, and in my case, more Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir). Theologically, our minds had both been influenced deeply by Neo-Orthodox thought (in Ernie's case by Barthianism and the Niebuhr's, particularly Richard R. Niebuhr, who was one of his teachers at Harvard, and in my case more by Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann).

So in glancing at the title of Ernie's major work, *Not-God*, I immediately understood the powerful resonance of that proclamation with the central message of the revolutionary Neo-Orthodox theology which had so transformed western Christian thought earlier in the twentieth century. "Not God," Kurtz said, meant that alcoholics could not recover as long as they were all-dominated by pride and ego, and trying to act as their own gods — that was the central proclamation of the AA Big Book. But as I well knew, this was also the same message which the Swiss theologian Karl Barth had preached in 1919 in his famous commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans (Der Römerbrief)*, the work which appeared right after the First World War and started the Neo-Orthodox movement. The real God was "wholly other" (*ganz Anders*) from nature, society, material possessions, worldly power, or intellectual theories, which meant that none of us could know God until we let his grace and word explode in our own world like a World War I bombshell, knocking all our previous presuppositions to the ground.

Reinhold Niebuhr (of Serenity Prayer fame) had been the most important American-born representative of twentieth-century Neo-Orthodox theology. He taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 1928 to 1960, where his fame was such that Bill Wilson undoubtedly knew about him, at least at secondhand. Ernie Kurtz had been taught at Harvard Divinity School by Reinhold Niebuhr's nephew Richard R. Niebuhr. At Southern Methodist University, I had received my own graduate theological training

from teachers who had studied both with Karl Barth in Switzerland and with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary.

So I understood exactly what Ernie meant by the title of his famous book, and agreed with it totally.

Ernie and I had also gone to graduate school at a period when scholars were gaining a new respect for the importance of storytelling and narrative in spiritual literature. Collections were beginning to appear of the stories of the Hasidic rabbis and Zen Buddhist masters, and studies were also starting to be made of narrativity in the biblical text.

But above all, Ernie and I had both been trained as professional historians, and for that reason we had identical standards for what had to be done to produce good AA histories. We were both reading from the same page in that regard, and always — through all the years that followed — found ourselves in automatic agreement about the way the history of the twelve step movement had to be researched and written up, if it was to be intellectually credible.

My own involvement in AA history moved to a new level when, in 2001, I discovered a way to use the newly-invented print-on-demand presses to publish books on AA history. It was a kind of press which could take a CD (compact disk) with a digitized book manuscript on it, and in just a few minutes print and bind one copy or twenty copies — however few or however many you wanted — in a cost effective way. This eliminated most of the enormous cash outlay which was normally required to set the type for a book and carry out the first printing. The typical university press or other scholarly press of that time would have to invest around \$10,000 and print around 1,200 copies of a scholarly book and then hope that all of these would sell, so the publishers could get their initial investment back. This made them reluctant to invest in publishing most works on AA history.

To see whether the new print-on-demand system would work, I set up the Hindsfoot Foundation there in 2001 and published a book which I had written, called *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program: For Believers & Non-believers*.

At that point, people who wrote books on AA history were beginning to have more and more difficulty getting them published by the Hazelden Foundation in Center City, Minnesota, which had become the major place to publish books on that topic. There were almost no other publishers willing to do books on that subject, with only a few exceptions — Charlie Bishop, Jr., for example, was publishing some things through his local printers in West Virginia — but all in all, when Hazelden started disengaging more and more from publishing new books on AA history, it was leaving a big unfilled gap.

So not long afterwards, Ernest Kurtz put Nancy Moyer Olson in contact with me, and asked me if I would considered publishing the book Nancy had written on her role in passing the Hughes Act through the U.S. Senate: *With a Lot of Help from Our Friends: The Politics of Alcoholism*. Nancy had not even been able to get Hazelden to answer her phone calls or e-mails, let alone look at her manuscript. Nancy's book, which was beautifully done, finally came out in March 2003.

It was during this period that the AA History Lovers was begun. It started as a web group called the AA History Buffs on March 21, 2000. Message 414 from Ernest Kurtz was dated November 22 of that year, so he clearly joined the web group almost at the very beginning. The first messages from Glenn Chesnut, nos. 959-961, did not appear until March 3, 2002, so he did not become involved until a bit later.

Then an unforeseen accident occurred. Nancy Olson, who was in her seventies, knew very little about computers. She decided to switch from her AOL e-mail account to a different e-mail provider, and closed out her old e-mail address without leaving herself any way (after that point) to go into some important parts of the management section of the AA History Buffs website. In particular, it was now impossible for her to insert her new e-mail address as the official primary contact, so there was no way she could correct her mistake. She was permanently locked out of some of the major controlling functions of the website that she herself had set up.

Finally she started a new web group, called the AA History Lovers, and began transferring the most important AA History Buffs postings to that new site on March 30, 2002. In Message 1049 on the Buffs site, dated May 28, 2002, Nancy explained the basic problem:

Dear friends at AA History Buffs:

AA History Buffs now has close to 550 members scattered around the world. Thanks to so many of you who have been willing to share history, I am gaining each day in knowledge of AA history. But I have gained NOTHING in terms of knowledge of how to operate a computer.

We now have a problem because of my lack of technical knowledge. I tried a few months ago to change from AOL to another server. In trying to change the my ownership and moderator status to the new server, I accidentally lost the ownership, although I can still moderate, i.e., approve posts, but I can no longer add members, remove members who are disruptive, etc.

After trying for months to solve the problem, I finally started a new group called AA History Lovers. To subscribe write to: AAHistoryLovers-subscribe@egroups.com . . . .

Gradually I will transfer all the significant posts from the Buffs to list new list. If any of you would like to assist in this effort, please contact me. I would appreciate any help you can give me.

The AA History Buffs will remain available in the meantime.

Nancy Olson  
Moderator

Fiona Dodd in County Mayo, Ireland, began helping Nancy transfer the old messages. And Fiona has been pitching in to moderate the site whenever necessary ever since that time.

**Nancy Moyer Olson**  
**(September 18, 1929 - March 25, 2005)**

Nancy had an AA sponsor in Kingston, Pennsylvania (the place where she was living when I first met her) but she eventually asked me to be her spiritual director. So as I played this role over the next few years, she told her life story to me too, and in great detail.

She was born as Nancy Moyer on September 18, 1929, in Kingston, a town of around 7,000 in northeastern Pennsylvania right across the Susquehanna river from Wilkes-Barre. (Olson was a last name which she picked up in a brief marriage later on.) The town's life centered around the mining of anthracite coal, "black diamonds."

Her father was an alcoholic, and as a little girl, she loved him when he was sober, but was scared to death of him when he was drunk, because he yelled and was angry, and acted in ways that made no sense, although he never attacked her physically in any way. When he and her mother had a falling out and separated temporarily, Nancy (who was nine) had an almost total breakdown and had to be sent to her grandparents to live for a while. Her family considered themselves Lutherans, but Nancy had become skeptical and hostile to any kind of religion by the end of her childhood, and particularly the kind of Protestantism she had been brought up in. When she made her peace with religion much later on in her life, she ended up becoming a Roman Catholic instead.

In school in Kingston, some of her classmates thought that she was "snobbish," but the reality was that she felt frightened and inadequate, she said, and was afraid of close relationships. When she graduated from the town's high school, she left, seeking adventure and far off places, and vowing never to come back. She enlisted in the U.S. Army as a WAC, and served in military intelligence, part of this during the initial stages of the Korean conflict (a war which began in the summer of 1950). At some point after she left home, her father developed emphysema and had to go to a VA hospital. He fell into despair and committed suicide by jumping from a hospital window on an upper floor. This left a deep grief in Nancy from which she never completely recovered.

She married a soldier in a brief relationship which brought her to Chicago in 1951. Twenty-one years old, she became personal secretary to Mortimer Adler, who created the Chicago Great Books series, and continued working for him until about 1955. They became good friends, and Nancy received from Adler what was in effect a superb graduate level education in philosophy and the history of ideas.

In Chicago, between 1943 and 1952, Mortimer Adler had joined with University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins to publish a set of fifty-four volumes called the Great Books of the Western World. Adler was a professor at the University of Chicago and Chairman of the Board of Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Chicago great books series included the writings of a whole list of major authors and thinkers, including Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Copernicus, Galileo, Sir Isaac Newton, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Descartes, Spinoza, Milton, John Locke, David Hume, *Gulliver's Travels*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Darwin, Karl Marx, Dostoevsky, William James, and Sigmund Freud.

Nancy and Adler both considered themselves as atheists at first, but Thomas Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God were included in the Great Books series, and other classical theological writings, which she and Adler debated about between themselves. This eventually had its effect. In later years, both she and Adler ended up as believers: Nancy became a Roman Catholic and Adler became an Episcopalian (Anglican).

After the Chicago period, Nancy went to California and became an actress at the Pasadena Playhouse, performing under her maiden name, as Nancy Moyer. (There was already a famous movie actress named Nancy Olson). She remembered working with the young Dustin Hoffman, long before he became a movie star. With Nancy's blonde good looks — she was a breathtakingly beautiful young woman — her agent attempted to get her into the movies as “the

new Grace Kelley,” but this was not to be. Many more young women attempt to become movie stars than are actually successful.

Nancy then spent a while traveling the Caribbean with a British banker. Her drinking was beginning to cause problems by the end of this period in her life.

In 1965, when she was around thirty-six, she came into the AA program. Working to help alcoholics was going to become the great theme of the rest of her life.

Nancy was back in Chicago in August of 1968, serving as a volunteer for the Democratic National Committee at the Democratic National Convention. There she met, for the first time, Senator Harold Hughes from Iowa, like herself a recovered alcoholic and devoted AA member. She went to Washington D.C. to work for Senator Hughes, first as a volunteer. Then in 1969, he appointed her to the staff of the newly created Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics and she served as an aide on Hughes’ staff until he left the Senate in 1975.

Working with the senator, with Mrs. Marty Mann (with whom she became close friends), and with a number of other national figures who were recovered alcoholics and AA members, Nancy helped get the 1970 Hughes Act passed through the U.S. Congress (President Nixon was finally cajoled into signing it into law in a document dated on New Year’s Eve, 1970), and then helped shepherd it through the following years, when Congress had to vote on financing it and appointing people to run some of the programs it set up. The Hughes Act, which created the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), was going to totally change the way alcoholics were treated under United States law, in ways which still benefit alcoholics in this country today. It especially helped to enable the growth of the modern alcoholism and drug addiction treatment center. It and the Prohibition legislation of 1919 stand as the two most important pieces of alcoholism legislation in the twentieth-century United States, and unlike Prohibition, what Nancy helped pass actually worked (and is still working today).

When Senator Harold Hughes decided not to run for a second term in the Senate, Nancy was re-appointed in 1975 to the staff of the Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics by Senator Harrison A. Williams of New Jersey, and thus was involved in drafting the 1976 and 1979 amendments to the Hughes Act. During this period she also had primary staff responsibility for congressional oversight of the activities of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president, and many new senators and representatives were swept into office on his coat tails. This, coupled with congressmen who simply wished to retire, or were forced out of office for other reasons, left Nancy (in her estimation) without enough support in congress to continue her work effectively. In addition, many of the most powerful lobbyists and political activists for the alcohol industry and its various organizations (representing all the various American companies and corporations which produced wine, beer, or hard liquor) had now decided to try to drive her out, after she was forced by political circumstances to support a law requiring warning labels on bottles of alcoholic beverages. Even if she could have withstood their unrelenting attacks, it would have taken years to build up an effective political base again. She was 51, and she was tired and discouraged with politics by that time.

She decided to become a nun, and entered a monastery of the Visitation of Holy Mary to devote herself to prayer and meditation. But she had developed severe problems with her legs, in what may have been an attack of multiple sclerosis, and soon found herself unable to cope with the physical demands of life in the monastery. There were jobs that had to be done which required standing for long periods of time. She was given the task at one point, for example, of scrubbing, every morning, the floor of a cloister which was used as a nesting place every night by numerous pigeons. Convents and monasteries have special ways of developing humility among novices!

Nancy was hobbling along painfully and slowly on crutches when she visited a shrine in Europe famous for its healing miracles. As she was leaving, a priest told her calmly, pointing to her crutches, “You won’t need those any more.” She set them down, and to her surprise, was able to walk once again without crutches. Her legs remained weak however, and for the rest of her life, if forced to stand for too long, her legs would simply collapse under her.

It was clear that continuing to live in the monastery was going to be beyond her physical capacity, so in 1982 she returned to secular life in Washington where she worked as a very successful legislative analyst and lobbyist until her retirement in 1995.

Although Nancy had sworn that she would never go back home, she had very little money saved for her retirement, and so at the age of sixty-five she reluctantly returned to Kingston, Pennsylvania, the little town where she had been born and brought up. Within a few months she got bored and frustrated with nothing to do, so she responded immediately in 1996 when Senator Harold Hughes, shortly before his death, asked her to write a book telling the story of what they and their friends had done to try to help the plight of alcoholics in the United States. She quickly put together a large amount of material, part of it still only very loosely organized at that stage, and began looking for a publisher over the next several years.

She was still trying to find a publisher when, in March of 2000, she decided (just out of her own personal interest in the subject) to start the small web group called the AAHistoryBuffs. To her surprise, people all over the world began joining the group, and it soon turned into one of the best and most dependable sites on the internet for obtaining good knowledge about AA history. There are now over 2,600 members from all around the globe.

In March of 2002, she and I finally were put in contact with one another by Ernie Kurtz, and I began doing the final organization and revision of the marvelous book which will endure as one of the other great monuments to her life and her devotion to helping her fellow alcoholics. It came out in the Spring of 2003: *With a Lot of Help from Our Friends: The Politics of Alcoholism*. The United States

Surgeon General's Office, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, the Smithers Foundation, and other major groups immediately began hailing it as the best and most useful work they had ever encountered for understanding current U.S. national policies on alcoholism and how they had been developed.

Sadly, Nancy's plans for further research and writing were halted within a month or two of the time the book came out, by a series of small, silent heart attacks, which left her heart gravely weakened, and made it hard to concentrate on difficult tasks. She developed congestive heart failure, and her mind became more and more confused. Realizing that she did not have that much longer to live, she moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, to be closer to her family. She broke her hip, and due to her weakened heart, there was nothing the doctors could do to repair it. They put her in bed and made her as comfortable as they could. She died on March 25, 2005.

**The Golden Apples of the Sun:  
Nancy Olson describes going to her first  
AA meeting in November 1965**

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1965, as was my custom, I opened my breakfast beer and then turned on the TV to watch the Today Show. The program was devoting its entire two hours to the subject of alcoholism. A member of Alcoholics Anonymous spoke, with his back to the camera, and Dr. Stanley Gitlow, a doctor who specialized in alcoholism, also spoke. I recognized myself in their descriptions of an alcoholic. I don't remember who the others were.

I was 36 years old. I had done a number of things: I had been a WAC in military intelligence, I had been secretary to Mortimer Adler who created the University of Chicago Great Books series, I had traveled around the Caribbean with a British banker, and I had gone out to California to be a movie actress. I did get into the Pasadena playhouse and got some roles, and obtained an agent who backed me and tried to bill

me as the new Grace Kelly, but the big Hollywood producers never tumbled to my charms.

I had known for some time that I was an alcoholic, but I thought it was my secondary problem. I believed that I was insane, and that was why I drank too much and thus had become an alcoholic. (God knows I had been doing a lot of insane things.)

At lunch time I invited a friend to join me for lunch at a coffee shop. (The first time I had lunch in a coffee shop in years.) I told my friend that I had decided I was drinking too much and was going to stop. “But April,” I said, “I am not sure that I can.”

When we returned to the office I phoned AA and told them I would come to the Intergroup office after work. But by 3 p.m. I needed a drink so I went to the room where we kept the alcoholic beverages and opened a beer. I drank about half and poured the rest down the sink. Then I made an excuse and left the office and took a cab to the AA Intergroup office.

I walked back and forth outside, peeking in the window where I saw several men standing around. Finally I screwed up my courage and entered. But I immediately started to cry and ran out again. A man followed me out and persuaded me to come back. “There are two lovely women in the back room who will be happy to talk to you.” I did indeed meet two lovely women: Lila, sober about 25 years; and Ginny, sober about 15 years. They arranged for me to go to my first meeting that night with Lila.

But while I was talking with them I couldn't stop crying. A man entered the room and kept slicing an apple and urging me to eat it. I found it very difficult to eat the apple while sobbing, but not wanting to offend him, I choked it down.

About three months later that man showed up at a meeting I was attending. “How are you? I've often wondered about you and how you were doing.”

“I'm doing fine,” I replied. “I haven't had a drink since you fed me that apple. It must have been a magic apple.”

I then told him I was making my first talk the next week. “I will be there,” he said.

He came to the meeting where I was telling my story for the first time, and he had a small gift for me. It was a key chain with a small gold apple on it. He suggested I carry it with me at all times and it would remind me of how I felt the day he fed me the apple, and I would not need to take another drink.

So the golden apple became my good luck charm. I always wear one, and in the two pictures of me in the book I wrote about my work on alcoholism legislation later on in Washington, D.C. — the one with Senator Hughes and the one with Senator Williams — you will notice that there is a golden apple pinned to my dress.

**Nancy Olson, Ernest Kurtz, and  
Glenn Chesnut devise the guidelines  
for the AA History Lovers**

During the crucial period of the AA History Lovers' formation, Nancy Olson, Ernie Kurtz and I were in continual contact by phone and e-mail, discussing how to handle each new issue which arose. Ernie and I were professional historians, trained at Harvard and Oxford Universities respectively, and although Nancy had no formal graduate education, she had been trained by one of the world's most famous scholars in the history of ideas at the University of Chicago, another great world-class university. If Nancy had had the proper letters to put after her name — "Ph.D." or "D.Phil." or something of the sort — she could have earned tenure, on the strength of her book on the Hughes Act, at almost any university in the United States.

So we all three were agreed that, even though the vast majority of the people who had joined the AA History Lovers web group were not trained historians, they could learn how to do what was in fact near-professional-quality research. They could learn how to provide the sources of their information, including (when relevant) author, title, and page number, even if the way they wrote it down did not strictly follow the Chicago Style Guide in the placement of the colons, commas, and periods.

What was at stake here was **THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFIABILITY**. History-writing soon falls into mere legend mongering and the ignorant passing on of malicious rumors and gossip when no means are provided for the readers to check the original sources and see if the historian's claims can be verified. The rise of modern scientific historiography dates back to the work of the historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), who was dismayed when he looked at the histories of the Protestant Reformation which were currently being written, as he attempted to work out the story as it had actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Whether Protestant or Catholic, all they did for the most part was to repeat unfounded legends about their own side, and unbelievable malicious nonsense about the other side. Von Ranke insisted that **THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFIABILITY** meant that good historians had to go back to the original documents of the Reformation period, including government archives and files of personal correspondence and any other written evidence that could be found from the period itself, so they could make use of genuinely firsthand accounts of what had taken place. Likewise, attempting to write any kind of objective and scientific AA history was pointless until we devised our own version of the principle of verifiability.

After Nancy died, I went back through all the e-mails which the three of us had exchanged, and prepared a summary of all of our major conclusions, which I sent on to Ernie. He made only three or four slight verbal changes, and I then kept a copy of this for reference from that point on. Some of these guidelines emphasized the principle of verifiability, while others attempted to keep the group from degenerating into idle chatter and endless opinionated arguments, or emphasized the importance of politeness and respect towards others. Some were simply designed to make membership in the web group more enjoyable and to try to keep things from becoming boring through too much repetition of the same things. Some of the more important ones were:

1. We are not an AA group: the list is open to anyone interested in AA history whether AA members or not.

2. We are not a chat room: please do not use the list to comment on other people's posts. Comment on the post *only* if your message has additional history on the subject.
3. Personal opinions are to be avoided: no personal opinions, or posts based just on rumor or vague memory of what someone told you will be posted. To the extent possible please list the sources for any information you send.
4. Messages that repeat history already on the list will not be posted: please use the search box to make sure the information is not already on the list. Also please search the list before posting a question which may already have been answered.
5. To look at all the old postings which have appeared, go to:  
<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/AAHistoryLovers/messages>
6. Subject lines: please identify the subject in any post that you send. Those that say "A question" are not helpful.
7. The moderator will decide which of these messages need to be posted for the entire group to read.
9. Not every message sent in will be posted. Part of what makes the group so enjoyable is that the moderator uses some selectivity before posting anything.
10. When more than one person gives what is essentially the same answer to a question, the moderator will either post the first or the clearest answer, or will sometimes combine several answers into a single posting.
11. The moderator will usually attempt to give some sort of answer to everyone who sends in a question to be posted. But instead of posting it, the moderator may choose to answer the

person's question privately in an e-mail message to that person alone, or may refer the person to a previous posting which already answers that question, or may forward the person's question to someone who is an expert in that area.

12. Part of the purpose of the group is to keep everyone aware and up-to-date on current developments in the field. So the group can and must announce when relevant new publications on AA history appear, even if these are produced by a non-AA or commercial publisher, but it should usually be no more than a simple statement (sent out to the group one time only) that the work has appeared, its basic contents, and how it may be ordered, and certainly should avoid any appearance of blatant self-promotion or "spamming" type advertising.

13. Also the group may announce the date, place, and topic of a conference or workshop dealing with AA history or archives, and give information about how to register, but again one time only, and no big advertising spread, just a simple announcement.

14. Likewise, the group can discuss different editions and printings of AA works, but should not become involved in supplying current market prices of rare editions. The group is concerned with AA history and is not a forum for rare book collectors.

15. "We are not a chat room" also means that this is not a forum for debating current hot topics such as whether it is a violation of the U.S. Constitution for courts to require people to attend AA meetings, or whether the AA delegates to New York ought to vote to do such and such at next year's session. There are AA chat groups which exist for debating this sort of issue. The AAHistoryLovers however is a group which is concerned solely with historical questions.

16. Also, absolutely no attacks on other members of the group which cast personal aspersions on the other member, or attempt to continually “hound” some other member of the group over some issue. Disagreements over facts or interpretations should be stated politely and calmly, and if the two members still fail to agree after an interchange of opinions, it should be left at that. Disputes should not be run into the ground, with repeated messages and counter-messages going over the same ground over and over again.

17. People who consistently attempt to violate either of the two above guidelines, in a way which becomes harassing, should be warned that they may be removed from the group and their membership in it cancelled. This has only had to be done once, but one other member had to be warned at one point that he would be barred from the group if he continued doing what he was doing.

18. Our presupposition is that everyone in the group will already have read the basic sources on AA history, so we assume that everyone will already have copies of standard books like the following, and will already have looked to see if these books give them the answer to their question. We usually can't give answers that are any better or more complete than the ones found in these great works, or at the least, the material found in these works has to be the starting point for good historical inquiry:

AA Big Book

*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*

*Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How  
the AA Message Reached the World*

*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*

*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*

Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of  
Alcoholics Anonymous*

We encountered one issue on which the membership would never be able to agree, the matter of posthumous anonymity. Tempers still

begin to flare when this question is raised. We finally decided that those who, like Nancy Olson, Ernie Kurtz, and myself, wished to use the old traditional AA rules, could continue to do so. But those who wished to give first name and last initial only, even for AA members who were long dead, would be allowed to follow that practice in the messages they posted. So the guidelines stated:

19. There is no posthumous anonymity.\* After an AA member is dead, full names can be given (and usually should be given at least once, for the sake of later historical researchers). Likewise, references can be made to photographs of deceased AA members which are online.

20. For people who are still living, if they have themselves admitted publicly that they are alcoholics (or recovered or recovering alcoholics), one may state this in print along with their full names, and one may refer to photographs showing their faces. If any mention is made however that these people are AA members, then as long as they are still living, postings which refer to their AA membership may not give their full names, or refer to photographs showing their faces.

\*Members who wish to follow the new posthumous anonymity rule which some delegates to the New York General Service Conference have passed, can follow that rule (if they choose) in the messages which they post on the AAHistoryLovers. Two of our best historical researchers — Arthur S. and Jared L. — follow the principle of posthumous anonymity very strictly in the messages which they post in the AAHL.

But the overwhelming majority of the top published AA historians still follow the old rule — no mandatory anonymity for AA members once they are dead — and insist that this is the only feasible way to write decent history and do proper historical research. We need to be able to obtain information about historical AA figures from non-AA sources whenever necessary: obituaries, city directories and old telephone books, census records, gravesite records, genealogical tables,

and so on. It is also a gross violation of **THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFIABILITY** to publish historical accounts of AA which non-members cannot understand because only those few AA members who have the secret lists containing the last names can figure out which “John B. from Toledo” is which. It is a sneaky way of being dishonest with the general public.

It is also a total misunderstanding of the principle of anonymity to argue as though alcoholism conveyed such a terrible stigma that we had no “right” to mention that people were alcoholics, even after their deaths, for fear that perhaps one or two of their relatives might possibly feel “stigmatized” by this revelation. The AA movement completely rejects any notion that alcoholism should be regarded as a stigma. And in the *Twelve & Twelve*, it is clear that the anonymity principle was principally designed make it more difficult for AA members to turn into *promoters* (as Bill Wilson termed them) during their lifetimes, trying to get their names and photos in newspapers and magazines, and present themselves as definitive spokespeople for the whole AA movement. Once you are dead, you cannot any longer go around trying to promote yourself in that fashion! Dead bones moldering in a graveyard have no ego.

Furthermore, those AA historians who rejected any notion of mandatory posthumous anonymity for all AA members also defended themselves by pointing out that the old traditional AA interpretations of the steps and traditions are as important as the actual wording of the steps and traditions.

People who wanted to play nit-picking word games could argue that Steps Three and Eleven, which referred to “God *as we understood Him*,” used the word “God,” so that logically speaking, no one would be allowed to be an AA member unless that person was willing to use the actual word “God.” Although people could reinterpret what that word meant, phrases like Higher Power and so on would be completely banned. But in fact we know, from accounts of the debate in which this wording was originally chosen, that it was deliberately intended to include even atheists and total

skeptics. So that is the way we in fact interpret those two steps in all the twelve step groups.

This is the traditional English Common Law principle of appealing to historical precedence, which (in the case of the anonymity rule) needs to also be coupled with the principle, dating back to the American Revolution, requiring a supermajority to change a handful of the most basic operational rules.

As the supermajority principle is stated in AA, it would require a three-quarters vote of all the registered AA groups in the world who responded in writing in order to force everyone to follow a principle of posthumous anonymity. The delegates to the New York General Service Conference were never given the power to condemn and forbid anyone from ever continuing to follow AA practices which were known to be reasonably common, say, in the 1940's and 1950's. Not on their own, on the basis of only a simple majority vote.

But feelings still run high on both sides of this debate, so the AA History Lovers has stuck to the principle that each side has to be allowed to post its own messages in the form that they think best: with or without last names.

***Historians vs. antiquarians:*** These guidelines were drawn up in an attempt (in part) to keep the AA History Lovers in line with professional historiographical standards. But I should note parenthetically at this point, that the real division in the membership of the AA History Lovers was not between professional historians and amateur historians.

It was rather more like the division we find among people who are interested in the history of the American Civil War, which might better be described as a division between *historians* and *antiquarians*. There are some people (most of them professional historians who teach nineteenth-century American history at universities) who write books about matters such as the internal politics of the Lincoln administration, the influence on Civil War era society, economics, and military philosophy of the rise of the modern railroad system, and studies of the social interactions among

the upper echelons of southern society as they were portrayed in Mary Boykin Chesnut's *Diary from Dixie*. But those who teach the Civil War period at an American university find that a certain number of their students are not interested in that sort of issue at all, but are instead fascinated by collections of Civil War memorabilia, exploring major historic battlefields at first hand, and mastering all the details needed to carry out historical reenactments and create living history museums: the positioning of the buttons on a colonel's uniform, how the weapons were loaded and fired, the kind of tents and canteens the soldiers used, and so on.

To this day, the members of the AA History Lovers who are of an antiquarian mindset, and are interested in knowing such things as the exact location of Henrietta Seiberling's grave, the precise kind of coffee pot that was used in the kitchen of Dr. Bob's house (AAHL Message 5305 informs us that the coffee pot which currently sits on the stove is a Wear-ever 3008, but that the original was a Wear-ever 5063), and who enjoy endless arguments about the precise meaning of the em-dash in the middle of the First Step (why did Bill Wilson use an em-dash instead of a semi-colon?), will sometimes write angry e-mails to the moderator when a message is posted which seems to them to get too much into sociological or psychological theory, or other things of that sort. And I have to write them back and explain that our membership is very diverse, and that every message posted is not going to be of interest to every member of the group. The simplest way to deal with this, I suggest, is for them just not to read the messages that do not interest them personally.

But it certainly does not require a graduate degree in history to contribute useful answers to the majority of the questions discussed on the AA History Lovers. So if the question, for example, is who was the "Dr. Howard" who provided such useful comments on the mimeographed copy of the AA Big Book, anyone who can look through historical records can help in the attempt to identify the person.

And in my observation, most of the real problems created by lack of formal scholarly training on the part of some members, have not

come about because of a lack of professional historiographical knowledge, but because of their having insufficient training in fields like psychology and literature. There are often apt to be too many members — who really know nothing accurate about the topic — trying to answer questions, for example, about what psychologists and psychiatrists were doing during the 1930's (what their diagnostic terms meant, and particularly what the medications were that they were most apt to prescribe). Likewise, people who have read almost no good English and American literature from the 1930's and earlier, get hopelessly bogged down over questions such as why the word "reason" is capitalized in the sentence on page 53 of the Big Book (where it talks about people walking "over the Bridge of Reason toward the desired shore of faith").

But the overwhelming majority of the members of the AA History Lovers are intelligent men and women, many of whom have a good deal of professional competence in fields like engineering, computer science, psychological counseling, business, and military matters (from service in the army, navy, or air force), and nearly all of whom have a good deal of ordinary common sense. Once someone points out that good history writing requires giving the sources of your information, and that secondhand information ("an old timer told me" or "a famous California conference speaker claims") can be very undependable, everyone quickly realizes the wisdom of these guidelines.

### **Other people involved in the AA History Lovers**

When Nancy founded the AAHistoryLovers, it rapidly grew to include most of the people who had written the really good books about AA, plus some other extremely knowledgeable experts on AA history. The group was put together to share information about current research and new discoveries that had been made. It was also a place where experts in one area could ask questions of experts in other areas, to help them in their research.

It continues to this day as in many ways the single most accurate source of dependable information about AA history to be found anywhere in the current world. Any mistakes are rapidly corrected by one or more of the top AA historians around the globe.

**William L. White** is the author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* (1998), the classic history of treatment and recovery programs, covering the entire course of American history since its beginning. I first met him at the 6th National Archives Workshop in 2001, where I was on the planning committee, and he was the keynote speaker. After hearing him in person, I was so glad we had chosen him as our main speaker — it was the most fascinating and eye-opening talk on the general history of recovery in America I had ever heard. This was the workshop held in Clarksville, Indiana, just across the Ohio river from Louisville, Kentucky. Bill, who is very close to Ernie Kurtz, played a valuable role as one of the stabilizing figures in the AA History Lovers during the last two or three years of Nancy Olson's life. His book made it clear that a really good and thorough history of AA would have to supply material about the context in which the new AA movement had developed. Nothing historical comes into existence out of a complete vacuum, and in AA's case, there was a long history in the United States of trying various methods for dealing with both alcoholism and drug addiction. Some of these had a strong influence on early AA principles and methods — and also on struggles and controversies in which AA became involved later on, as we can see from Nancy Olson's book *With a Lot of Help from Our Friends*. Parts of Bill White's book and parts of Nancy Olson's book could be read quite profitably in conjunction with one another.

And there have been (and still are) many different kinds of mutual aid groups in addition to A.A., as Bill White's work makes clear. The book to read in conjunction with his work on this topic is the one written by Ernie Kurtz's wife, Linda Farris Kurtz, *Self Help and Support Groups: A Handbook for Practitioners*, which became a standard work for teaching graduate courses on that subject to counselors and social workers. She was Professor in the School of

Social Work at Eastern Michigan University when that book came out, which was in 1997, the year that I first met her husband.

**Arthur S. (Arlington, Texas)**, was a mainstay of the group since its beginning and also served as the moderator for a while, immediately after Nancy's death. He is the author of *A Narrative Timeline of AA History*, available on the internet, which is the most thorough, detailed, and dependable list we possess of the dates at which the major events of AA history occurred, based on an incredible amount of extensive research. He was also one of the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Recovery Outcome Rates: Contemporary Myth and Misinterpretation*, by Arthur S. (Arlington, Texas), Tom E. (Wappingers Falls, New York), and Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana), the work which put to rest the claim which had been spreading over the internet, even in the writings of a few highly trained alcoholism researchers, asserting that AA's own data "proved" that AA was only 5% or less effective in getting alcoholics to stop drinking.

**Jared L.** was active in the web group from the beginning, and if Arthur S. is our expert on matters like AA dates and the decisions of the General Service Conferences, Jared is our expert on things that could be gleaned from census lists, genealogical lists, and his own childhood memories of train lines and bus routes. He can still remember the occasions when, during his childhood, Bill W. visited his family home, and even played the violin there. Jared is that unique combination of someone who is an established scholar with a doctorate and numerous publications to his credit, but also someone who was actually there back in the earliest days of East Coast AA.

**Fiona Dodd (County Mayo, Ireland)** played a major role in transferring the old AA History Buffs files to the new AA History Lovers files, and also served as moderator on numerous occasions over the years, the most recent time being two months in the summer of 2013. She was the one who discovered the correct date and place of Sister Ignatia's birth in Ireland (and published some beautiful photos of the ruins of the family cottage). She has also most recently published a book called *The Authors: Short Biographies of the Men*

*and Women Who Wrote about their Recovery from Alcoholism in the Pioneering Days of the Twelve Step Program*, which assembles all the additional knowledge we have about the people who wrote the stories at the back of the first three editions of the Big Book.

The head AA Archivists at the New York GSO have frequently belonged to the group, including *Judit Santon* and *Amy Filiatreau*. Also two of the top American rare book dealers who have the expertise to handle rare AA books: *Charlie Bishop Jr.*, The Bishop of Books, and *William Schaberg*, of Athena Rare Books.

**90% of the AA historians who have  
published the top books belong to the group,  
including for example:**

**MEL BARGER** in Toledo, Ohio, principal author of the standard conference biography of Bill Wilson: *Pass It On* (1984). Also the author of a number of other books on AA history, including *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle* (1991), *Ebby The Man Who sponsored Bill W.* (1998), and *Three Recovery Classics* (2004). In 1900, he also came out with a twelve-CD audiobook which is billed on the internet as Mel Barger and George T., *The History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. He is also the author of Mel Barger, *Focused for the Future: Toledo a Contemporary Portrait* (1991), and Mel Barger, *Large Slow Target*, Volume 4 of *A History of the Landing Ship Tanks (LST) and the Men Who Sailed Them* (1999) — Mel served on an LST in landings under enemy fire in the Pacific during the Second World War.

**TRYSH TRAVIS**, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (2009).

**SALLY BROWN AND DAVID R. BROWN**, *A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous* (2001).

**MITCHELL K.**, *How It Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder and the Early Days of Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland, Ohio* (1999).

**WILLIAM G. BORCHERT**, *When Love Is Not Enough: The Lois Wilson Story*.

**JACKIE B.** (San Francisco, California), author of the Grapevine play at the 2010 San Antonio AA International, *In Our Own Words: Pioneers of Alcoholics Anonymous*, as well as *Our Experience Has Taught Us: A Sensational History of our Twelve Traditions*, to be performed at the 2015 AA International in Atlanta.

**JOAN ZIEGER**, *Women Pioneers in 12 Step Recovery*.

**AUDREY BORDEN**, *History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous*.

**TOM WHITE**, *Bill W: A Different Kind of Hero*.

**LESLIE B. COLE**, *Rogers Burnham: The Original Man Behind Bill W*.

### **Other major contributors**

But it is probably a mistake to focus too much on that short list of published scholars and historians. It would be much better to think of the group as a quite large assembly of very competent and dedicated researchers who discovered that the website could provide them a way to share their research findings with one another. I hate even to give a list of the names here, because there are so many, and because I am afraid I am leaving key people out.

But people like Barefoot Bill L. — and Jim B., who contributed the “Let’s Ask Bill” series in messages 19-62 — were deeply involved from the beginning and played a vital role in the web group’s investigations and postings. A lot of the research projects

were actually group efforts, such as the little biographies of the authors of the stories in the first edition of the Big Book, with one person writing up the results but many people contributing the information.

Going through the names of the people posting messages during the first two years (2000-2002), a number of other names also appear frequently: Charles K., Doug B., Rick T., Robert S. (Richmond, Indiana), Hank G. (remcuster), tcumming, Alex H., Lee C. (Santa Maria, California), and Art B. (Past Al-Anon Delegate from San Jose, California).

### **The transition at Nancy's death in 2005**

The most troubled time in the history of the group came when Nancy Olson's health began to fail at the end of her life. Her heart, crippled by several silent heart attacks, was pumping so poorly that not enough blood was getting to her brain, and her mental confusion kept on getting worse and worse. In terms of just observing her behavior, it was indistinguishable from what happens with people who have Alzheimer's. By the end, Nancy would do things like go through ten or fifteen messages submitted for posting, glance at each one for four or five seconds, and then delete it permanently. I discovered this by checking the computer system's log of actions carried out, which gave both the time and nature of the action taken, and which computer user had carried out the action. But when I asked Nancy why she had done it, she could not even remember having done it.

At that point, a few members of the group decided that they wanted to use this as an opportunity to change the nature and focus of the group. These were sometimes quite worthwhile ideas — one highly regarded AA historian, for example, wanted to turn the AA History Lovers into something which (or so it seemed to me) would be more like *Points: The Blog of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society*. This is an excellent web group, more oriented toward academic scholars in sociology, psychology, and alcoholism

research, and made up of a much larger percentage of members who are not themselves recovering alcoholics and addicts. But it would be something very different from what Nancy Olson had created over the previous five years, and it seemed to me that Nancy's way of doing things had produced something invaluable and absolutely necessary for writing good AA history.

Those who love to write about theories and high intellectual questions and do complex statistical analyses — for there are professional historians who view their craft in this way — sometimes refer patronizingly to Nancy's style as “anecdotal history.” But history is in fact “the oldest profession,” no matter what you might have heard said jokingly about prostitution holding that title. There were in fact no prostitutes really until there were cities. But thousands of years before that, when our ancestors still lived in caves, all the members of the tribe would sit around the campfire at night and listen with fascination as the professional story teller would begin narrating and singing the stories of the beloved ancestors. If the tribal story teller did a good enough job, one of the skilled hunters might give him a nice juicy piece of the deer or antelope he had just shot. So if the story teller was good, he could make a living just by doing that. No more need to spend hours sitting huddled in a clump of bushes, getting bitten by mosquitoes while waiting for an unwary deer to wander by within bowshot.

In my thirty-five years as a college professor, I was regularly regarded as one of the best teachers at whatever institution I was teaching at. One of the reasons why, was because I endeavored never to forget that no one was going to toss me an antelope steak unless I could tell the kinds of stories that people really wanted to hear: the ones that make us laugh or make us cry, that expose the real human condition, that make us suddenly see important truths about ourselves, and that inspire us to do our best, and comfort us when times are bad and situations seem desperate.

But at any rate, after a number of weeks in which the internal workings of the AA History Lovers was in major chaos, I took up the moderator's position myself, on what was intended to be only a

temporary basis, and with the goal only of keeping the group running the way Nancy had done it so successfully for the previous five years.

And the group continued to grow in size. It had over 500 members at the time in 2002 when the AA History Buffs was turned into the AA History Lovers. Now in 2013, we have over 2,600 members.

### **Controversial topics**

Some topics are far more controversial than others. Any question about Clarence Snyder can fairly easily slip over into members posting angry attacks on one another. He is no different after death than he was during his life, an apparently inherently controversial figure! A debate over the timing and nature of James Houck's involvement in both AA and the Oxford Group caused a greater explosion of anger than any other topic that came up during the period when I was the moderator. Tempers also flare whenever anyone begins talking about the fights over the two German translations or the two Spanish translations of the Big Book.

One of the most important tasks of the moderator is to help calm people down when debates start getting too heated. The web group would tear itself apart otherwise.

### **The moderator's role**

In fact, any web group of this sort has to have a moderator, because not everything sent in ought to be posted. For starters, the members of the group would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of messages if everything was posted.

Some messages ask questions which have already been answered in previous messages, in which case, instead of posting the question, the moderator needs to just write back and give the person links to the already posted messages which answer that question, or instructions on how to look up the answers.

Others ask questions which are already answered adequately in books like *Pass It On* and *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, in which case, instead of posting the question, the moderator writes back and tells the questioner where to find the answer.

In some cases, I finally developed written responses to a number of standard questions, which I would put in my answer back to the questioner. I had a list of the names of all of the people and places (the ones which we know) which are referred to in the first 164 pages of the Big Book. I sent this to large numbers of people, instead of posting their question. Was the person with the “worse stigmatized addiction” the same as the “blonde transvestite”? I had a detailed answer already written out (the answer was no, one of these people appeared in Akron 1937 and the other was a completely different person in New York in 1945) which I could paste and copy in my reply. Likewise with questions about Wombley’s Clapboard Factory, and so on.

Sometimes the moderator would have to write back and ask for the message writer’s sources of information before it could be posted, or for clarifying details.

Sometimes (although not very often) it was necessary to explain to someone that a particular message could not be posted, because it was too commercialized. There are still two different angry denunciations of me and/or the AA History Lovers posted on the internet because of this. In one case, the person wanted to post a commercial ad for a special book sale (which he openly admits), and in the other case, the real reason the person got it in for me was because I refused to post a message from him linking to a site where he explained how he would come and be your AA sponsor if you would just pay his transportation and expenses while he was there sponsoring you. Talk about violating the Twelve Traditions and the whole spirit of AA at the most basic possible level!

People sometimes got angry at another member of the group, and would keep on sending in messages attacking the other person and the position that he or she was taking. Past a certain point, it was necessary for the moderator to say that we couldn’t post any more

messages for now on that topic, because it had turned into an endless repetition of the same arguments back and forth, over and over again. At that point, the person who was already angry would then sometimes become furiously angry at the moderator as well!

And then we had the people who were trolls, or were just plain crazy. In any sort of public web group like this, you will inevitably attract a few people who are quickly diagnosable as paranoid schizophrenics or something of the sort. You cannot post their ravings, and you cannot connect with them at any kind of rational level to explain why their messages are inappropriate.

On rare occasions, the unbalanced ones show symptoms of being dangerously insane. One good woman historian in the group was extremely alarmed at one point — and I believe properly so — when a noticeably crazy man who had just joined the group started writing her e-mails and explaining how he and she were obviously soul mates, and so on. She gave copies of his e-mails to the safety and security people at the place where she worked, and they immediately advised her that the man was dangerous, and that she should take whatever steps were necessary to stay completely out of his way. The man in question later on threatened violence to me, and the nature of his threat and the context made me glad that we lived several hundred miles distant from one another.

Trolls are people who are not psychotic, but who love to join web groups and deliberately stir up arguments and controversies which eventually end up tearing the group apart and totally destroying it. Anybody who sets up any kind of web group or internet discussion group has to have someone appointed as moderator who has the power to keep trolls out of the group. There are over 2,600 people in the AA History Lovers, and not all of them by any means are alcoholics and addicts, but my guess is that at least a couple of thousand of them are, and a few of them are classic trolls. Part of the problem is, not having done a proper fourth step, they usually do not realize that they are simply acting as trolls. When told that such-and-such a message really cannot be posted, they immediately fall into outraged self-pity and accuse the moderator and the group of

practicing censorship, denying freedom of speech, and not wanting to know “the real truth.”

The place where the moderator will be forced to realize the problem created by this troll — if the moderator is still sitting in innocence — is when other members of the group finally start e-mailing and saying words to the effect that if this stupid controversy continues, I am quitting my membership in the group. And they will quit. This is the way web groups disintegrate and fail — everybody else quits except for a handful of trolls, and they certainly cannot stand one another, so they finally drop out too.

And in fact, in my own years as moderator, I always paid careful attention to whatever the principal mainstays of the web group were telling me and advising me. There are twenty or thirty extremely wise and knowledgeable people in the group, who have very good judgment. If one of them sent me an e-mail criticizing or questioning something I had posted, I immediately took it dead seriously. At least 99% of the time, I would modify or discontinue what I was doing to comply with that criticism. But when tempers really started flaring over some particular issue, it was sometimes necessary to respond even to one of these folks with a phrase like: “With apologies, but let’s let so-and-so have his say. Don’t read it if it offends you too much. But we had to post it. We have to allow a variety of topics for people with different interests.”

So controversies and arguments sometimes arise within the group. But in spite of all this, the moderator’s job is mostly quite enjoyable. You learn a lot about AA history, you find yourself challenged to think in useful and productive ways, and you end up becoming friends with a lot of really wonderful people. I have friends literally all over the world, which is something for which I am extraordinarily grateful.

**Important discoveries which were made or  
referred to in the AA History Lovers**

There have been a number of important discoveries which were made in the course of discussions within the AA History Lovers. And one can usually count on some mention being made in an AAHL message when an important discovery is made outside the group.

To give one example, it was discussions within the group which brought about the discovery that Dr. Bob's last drink could not in fact have been on June 10, 1935 but had to have been about a week later, most probably on June 17, 1935.

The earliest discussions I remember seeing about the authorship of the quotation on page 568 of the Big Book appeared in the AAHL (this was the question as to whether it was actually Herbert Spencer who said those words). The article by Michael StGeorge which solved the problem originally appeared elsewhere but was talked about in detail in the AAHL (it was William Paley, not Herbert Spencer, who originally said those words, or pretty close to those very words).

The discovery that Rowland Hazard went to Carl Jung for psychoanalysis in 1926, not 1931, was independently made by two scholars, one an AAHL member and the other one not. But again, regular readers of the AAHL were apprised of these scholars' works as soon as they appeared.

Although it was just a brief note, AAHL Message 6026 announced triumphantly that "Dr. Howard has been found!" It was not a pseudonym as some AA historians had speculated. The man who made such useful comments on the multilith copy of the Big Book was an Adlerian psychiatrist in Montclair, New Jersey, named James Wainwright Howard, who is referred to in numerous documents from that period which come from outside of AA

And we could give numerous other examples. Also, when important new books or articles come out, there are usually notices posted on the AAHL.

The important thing to note is that people attempting to write a new history of Alcoholics Anonymous would be advised to make a careful study of the past AA History Lovers messages. It will help

keep them from making any number of mistakes and make sure their knowledge is up to date. It is one of the most dependable sources of completely accurate information about AA History to be found anywhere in the world.

### **Writing a new AA history: the importance of the AA History Lovers material**

And in that regard, the question has been asked, do we need to write a new book on AA history, and if so, what kind of book should it be, and who should write it?

There are different ways of asking this question. Ernie Kurtz, for example, has often lamented that his 1979 book, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, remains the primary scholarly text on the history of AA and has publically called for new historical studies on AA, perhaps in the form of a revised and corrected version of *Not-God*.

Others, thinking in less scholarly terms perhaps, have talked about the need for a second volume to take the story of AA in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, and carry it from 1955 down to the present. That would be a book that would look very different from a continuation of *Not-God*. Or perhaps the story of AA from 1955 to the present should look more like *Pass It On* or *Dr. Bob & the Good Oldtimers*. That would also be a very different kind of book.

But regardless of which of these very different models one is considering, I think it is very clear that the materials collected in the AA History Lovers would of necessity have to serve as one of the primary sources of information. It has changed the way we look even at the period from 1934 to 1955, in addition to all the material it has given us about the years following 1955.

A well-known AA figure named Robert G. “Bob” Pearson (Feb. 19, 1917 - Jan. 1, 2008) wrote a long, detailed history of AA down to 1985. The project finally died c. 1993, after it was submitted to

the Trustees' Literature Committee, which rejected it. But copies of it have circulated privately among AA historians.

Bob Pearson joined AA in 1961, and eventually came to the New York General Service Office, where he worked for over twelve years. He was a director and trustee of the General Service Board for six years and the New York office's general manager for a decade. When he finally retired in 1986, the G.S.O. asked him to write a history, which gave more detail on the early period, and also continued the story down to AA's Fiftieth Anniversary in 1985.

(I would like to point out parenthetically that a good deal of this information about Bob comes from his obituary, which was published at the beginning of 2008 and gave not only his full name, including last name, but also a good deal of detail about his involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous. He and his family rejected any notion of mandatory posthumous anonymity, as totally contrary to the early AA tradition as it was actually practiced.)

Why was Bob Pearson's history rejected? What was wrong with it? The materials that raised the most objections at the time were the accounts of how the first AA groups were founded in various parts of the U.S. and Canada. By 1993, the rise of the Archival Movement had begun to produce good local AA history projects all over the U.S. and Canada, and as local AA historians began carrying out careful investigations in the old documents, and listening to tape recordings from the early period, and talking to the surviving old timers, it became clear that the material which Bob Pearson had assembled from the New York AA Archives was often quite wrong.

In Indiana for example, Bob's account of how AA got started in Evansville and Indianapolis in 1940 is basically accurate, but my own research showed that his story of how AA came to northern Indiana in 1943 is hopelessly garbled. Bob had unwisely chosen to rely on the research of a man named Dean L. Barnett, who tried to write a history of AA in Indiana in 1955, and sent a copy to the New York AA Archives, in which he completely confused what he had been told by the AA people in northern Indiana. And similar kinds of problems came up with Bob Pearson's account of how AA got

started in Washington, D.C. (Nancy Olson told me that Bob had made the mistake of believing one very opinionated and egotistical old timer in Washington), and in many other places.

The AA History Lovers has made a beginning at posting accurate accounts of how the first AA groups were founded at a number of major locations. And local AA websites are starting to appear online in which good local histories are posted. To give some examples, Al W. has done good work on early Baltimore AA, and the Detroit AA intergroup has some good basic material up on how AA was started in their city. Don B., a Past Delegate from Chicago, has posted an excellent account of how AA began in Chicago on the Hindsfoot Foundation site.

We are not quite there yet — there are still states and provinces where we know almost nothing about the early days of AA — but we are getting closer to being able to write an accurate history of how AA spread across the U.S. and Canada. And we also have accurate accounts now of how AA was established in many major areas abroad, including England, Ireland, and Australia, and we're beginning to get more information on how AA was established in certain other areas, such as Mexico and India.

But there are other kinds of problems with Bob Pearson's history. The story of Clarence Snyder in Cleveland, for example, got only 600 words in that entire enormous book, with most of that short account in the form of a negative put-down of Clarence, in spite of the fact that there was a period during which he was one of the major AA figures in the United States, and a period during which the AA Orthodox Movement was a force to be contended with on the national level. Mitchell K. has done the necessary research work here, in *How It Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder and the Early Days of Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland, Ohio*, but nobody in the New York AA headquarters who has talked about writing national AA history seems to have been willing to take advantage of Mitchell's treasure house of early AA lore.

As another example, Merton M. was at one point turning up fascinating material on early AA in New Jersey, which started

changing our whole basic view of early AA in parts of the East Coast. He seems to have dropped out of the scene at this point, but my understanding is that copies of what he wrote are still around.

Any future history of AA from 1955 to 2000, if it is to be a respectable and competent history, will have to take into account both Mitchell K.'s work and Merton M.'s work. Otherwise, whatever is written will be just a joke. We cannot confine ourselves to only writing about people who remained popular with the folks who controlled the central AA headquarters in New York, nor can we refuse to mention people and events and facts in AA history which embarrassed the New York AA office.

And I have even more serious issues with Bob Pearson's history. The four most published AA authors are Bill Wilson, Richmond Walker, Ralph Pfau, and Ed Webster. But the so-called histories of AA in the United States which we have seen so far, are written for the most part as though there were only one AA author who ever wrote about the program or had any influence on the way AA people thought and worked their programs.

So even though the manuscript of Bob Pearson's history of AA is 600 pages long, it never gives any mention at all of Father Ralph Pfau or the Golden Books. Just from the standpoint of institutional history, there was one period in which Bill Wilson regarded Father Ralph as being as serious a threat to his own plans for AA as Clarence Snyder had ever been. Bob's history mentions Ed Webster's name once, but never says anything about him writing *The Little Red Book*, which Dr. Bob helped write, and which Dr. Bob clearly regarded as one of the best books on AA ever written. Richmond Walker's name is also never mentioned at all, and Bob's one reference to *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* — the second most important book in early AA history — writes it off condescendingly as too "religious."

Books on AA history like Bob Pearson's mention the Oxford Group, because Bill W. had the Rev. Sam Shoemaker speak at the AA International Convention in St. Louis in 1955, but totally fail to mention that by 1939, no purely Oxford Group literature was still

being read in AA groups. (They were instead using and being strongly influenced by works like the Southern Methodist meditational book called *The Upper Room* which, with its mixture of old Anglo-Catholic piety and modern Protestant liberal rejection of born-again revivalism, represented a totally different kind of spirituality from what we see in the Oxford Group.) Histories of Bob Pearson's sort also fail to mention all the AA groups across the U.S. and Canada (including the Akron group and the groups in northern Indiana right next door to them) which were reading New Thought authors like Emmet Fox and James Allen. In South Bend, Indiana, in 1949, according to the AA *Grapevine*, the AA groups were even reading one of Fox's books where he taught the doctrine of reincarnation! Real AA in the 1940's — the period of its most rapid spread — was totally different from most of the common presentations of its history which are now in print.

Although — let us grant — Bill Swegan's book *The Psychology of Alcoholism* had not come out yet when Bob Pearson was writing his history, there is no serious study in Pearson's book of the atheistic, anti-religious, pro-psychological wing of early AA. And yet Pearson could have written at least a chapter on Jimmy Burwell and what he really taught, as opposed to the way Bill Wilson tended to distort his life story to make it appear more religiously oriented than it really was. And the minute AA historians start seriously digging in that area, my bet is that we are going to find a good deal more material about early non-religious and purely psychological interpretations of AA than some present day historians might expect. What about the way, for example, that so many of the Roman Catholics who were influential in AA, from Father Ralph Pfau to Father Ed Dowling, tried to work out syntheses between AA and the totally secular and non-theistic cognitive behavioral psychology of psychiatrist Dr. Abraham Low (1891–1954), a Polish Jew who came to Chicago and founded the self-help group called Recovery Inc.?

When people try to write about history, they are always tempted to talk about the people they like and admire and agree with, and ignore all the other people who played major roles in the story. But a

good historian cannot do this. It totally distorts what really happened. We cannot take people like Jimmy Burwell (who was one of the AA founding figures in both Philadelphia and Baltimore) and Bill Swegan (who obtained a completely authenticated 50% recovery rate in the program he set up in San Antonio, Texas in the 1950's), along with all the people who attended both AA and Recovery Inc., and write them off disparagingly as people who “worshipped light bulbs and door knobs.” That’s a cheap shot, and not worthy of a real historian. Nobody in that wing of AA ever talked about worshipping light bulbs and door knobs — accusing them of that is the kind of rhetoric you use if you are running for political office in an uneducated area filled with ignorant poor people, who know no better and can be led down the garden path by any kind of politician’s lie if you just repeat it enough times!

**Real history has to be more than  
just institutional history**

One of the reasons why Bob Pearson left so much important material out of his history, was because he was writing mostly institutional history. And in the nineteenth century and earlier, that was one common genre of history writing, although that did not make it good history, even back then.

There was a time for example when histories of the Roman Catholic Church used to be written that way, as almost completely institutional history. At their worst, this kind of institutional Catholic history would give long lists of medieval popes, who would be praised if they made outlandish claims of papal power, including the ability to depose kings and emperors, and otherwise meddle in secular politics. It was assumed in these histories that the pope and a small handful of bureaucrats in Rome, wearing scarlet and purple robes, had the authority to decide what everyone else in the Catholic world was allowed to think and believe. Long lists were made of forbidden ideas which a good Catholic should never think, even in the privacy of his or her mind, and books which a good Catholic

should never read. All of this was done out of love of course, as they explained in their histories, to keep people from going astray and holding incorrect ideas — love which regretfully compelled them to a task in which they took no pleasure (or so they claimed), that of dragging the people who disobeyed them into their torture chambers and burning numerous men and women at the stake.

Now Bob Pearson certainly did not take it that far — although there is one faction within AA at this point which does seem to be committed to trying to exercise thought control over everybody else in AA and determine what they are and are not allowed to read by cruel law suits and completely destroying them financially if they disobey — but he did spend a large amount of his time talking about the development of the AA bureaucracy and the movement's governing machinery.

And there is a great irony here. Bob Pearson, in his heart, knew much better than that. At the 1986 General Service Conference, Bob gave what the 1986 Final Report called “a powerful and inspiring closing talk” titled “Our Greatest Danger: Rigidity.” He said:

If you were to ask me what is the greatest danger facing AA today, I would have to answer the growing rigidity—the increasing demand for absolute answers to nit-picking questions; pressure for G.S.O. to ‘enforce’ our Traditions, screening alcoholics at closed meetings, prohibiting non-Conference approved literature, i.e., ‘banning books,’ laying more and more rules on groups and members. And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting farther and farther away from our co-founders. Bill, in particular, must be spinning in his grave, for he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met. One of his favorite sayings was “Every group has the right to be wrong.”

Bob said it, and said it beautifully, but then was so mesmerized by his years of working for the General Service Office, that he failed to practice in his historical writing what he knew in his heart was a better way of understanding the AA movement.

## **A multivolume history**

I think that part of the problem is that too many AA historians are still thinking too small. They have not yet fully grasped what a sweeping and earthshaking movement the twelve-step program has turned into. There is no way one can adequately tell the tale of something this big and epochal in a single volume.

I believe that we could better use as a model such famous works as *The Cambridge Ancient History*, where the first edition (1924-1939) was twelve volumes long. And *The Cambridge Medieval History* (1911) was eight volumes in length.

Since no one historian could know *all* about *all* of ancient history (which covers around 3,500 years from the invention of writing to the fall of the western Roman empire), and since no one historian could know *all* about *all* of medieval European history (which covers well over a thousand years) individual scholars were assigned to write anywhere from one to several chapters in each volume, dealing with a part of history in which they were in fact experts.

In the case of a multivolume AA history, some of the divisions might be topical rather than chronological, of course. They could include such subjects as:

Women in early AA

Important Roman Catholic figures in AA history, including Fr. Ed Dowling S.J., Sister Ignatia, Fr. Ralph Pfau, Fr. Joseph Martin (of Chalk Talk fame), Fr. John C. Ford S.J., Dr. Austin Ripley M.D. (founder of Guest House), and (in his role as a Catholic thinker) Dr. Ernest Kurtz

The influence of various psychological theories on AA, including William James's ideas on the psychology of religious experience, Jungian thought, other neo-Freudian systems (Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Erik Erikson, etc. and their influence on AA via figures like E. M. Jellinek, William

E. Swegan, and Kenneth G. Merrill), Abraham Low's early cognitive behavioral method, the use of suggestion and auto-suggestion (a cognitive behavioral technique borrowed by AA author Richmond Walker from the Emmanuel Movement in Boston where he lived), and so on

Black people in AA

The development of AA prison groups

The growth of Spanish-language AA groups in the United States

Attempts to reach out more effectively to Native Americans in AA

The influence of various kinds of Transcendentalism on early AA spirituality, including the New England Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, etc. via AA's New England roots), Richard Maurice Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, and New Thought authors like Emmet Fox and James Allen

Atheism and skepticism in AA, from Jimmy Burwell at the beginning to modern authors like Annette R. Smith, Ph.D., the California sociologist who wrote *The Social World of Alcoholics Anonymous: How It Works* (2007) and explained how identification with a social group (all by itself, without having to bring any kind of God into the equation) can produce radically changed values and behavior

The development of AA club houses as ways of skirting around the prohibition against AA groups owning property

The use of self-publishing and AA-oriented publishers to print AA-related material (and the advantages and disadvantages of having to publish books in this fashion)

### **AA at the turning point**

AA is at a major turning point right now. In the 1980's, we saw the rise of a new legalistic and authoritarian mentality in some AA circles. These people wanted to turn AA into a cult, with hundreds of mechanical rules about how AA meetings had to be run, and the precise words one had to use for dozens of rote phrases. They wanted to turn the meeting of the Delegates in New York into a censorship body which would tell all the AA members in the world what books they could and could not read in their meetings.

Then in the 1990's, we saw what was going to turn into a counter-force, I believe: the rise of the Archival Movement, which realized deep in its soul that the true heart of AA lay not in lists of hundreds of mechanical rules, but in the continually new insights we could gain by immersing ourselves in the living experience of the AA old timers who created *our historic heritage*. Preserving and passing on our historic heritage, and doing our best to make it come alive again, is our best defense against the authoritarian straitjacket of the legalists. This is because the AA movement in its youth represented the best of the spirit of the Enlightenment — the triumph of creativity and freedom of belief and the spirit of individual autonomy over the old dead forces of legalism and authoritarianism and obscurantism. As we immerse ourselves in the world of early AA, and allow ourselves to truly be liberated by their bold spirits, we find ourselves in like manner gradually gaining the courage to be free.

On June 17, 2006, Ernie Kurtz sent me an e-mail in which he said:

I believe that the variety of AA meetings and approaches is one of the fellowship's great glories and a large aspect of its success .... If I had another book in me, it would be on *The Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience*, with ... a profound bow to William James.

What did William James teach us? That there is no one way of saving people's souls which will work for everybody, because people have different personalities and are caught in different kinds of life situations. A true study of our AA *historic heritage* shows us likewise that there is a wide variety of different ways of setting up AA meetings and teaching the program.

We also, as I referred to before, need to stop drawing up ever longer and longer lists of hundreds of mechanical rules and conference decisions, and instead go back to the old principle of English Common Law, which says that the broad outlines of historical legal precedent are far more important than the precise wording of recent legislation and legal definitions. If we do that, we will be able to keep AA flexible and adaptive. Because early AA was above all flexible and adaptive and creative, and it did not tie men's and women's hands with narrow and restrictive regulations.

*The Varieties of Early AA Experience* would be an excellent title to give to a serious modern book on the history of AA. But however we title it, it must tell the stories of the good old timers. As Ernie Kurtz also said in that e-mail:

I have learned over the years that AA seems to work by stories, and its own story is one of the greatest, and I continually marvel and am grateful that AA's Higher Power ... chose me to help tell its story.

We who are archivists and historians are the guardians of AA's Historic Heritage. We must continue the work of telling the stories — the concrete human stories — which are the earthen vessels from which the treasures of the divine grace are poured out for all those who thirst for healing and redemption.

### **The impact of AA on twentieth century American culture**

At least in the field of U.S. history, the AA movement has had an enormous impact on the twentieth century. American historians are

only slowly starting to acknowledge that fact. But if I might draw a parallel, almost any American historian would tell you right away that the evangelical movement and frontier revivalism so permeated American ideas and culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, that there is no way of talking about American culture during those two centuries without discussing some of its effects. And there are many historians of ideas who argue that even today, it is impossible to fully understand many American attitudes, held even among those who do not think of themselves as religious at all, without studying that earlier world of revival sermons and faith-based emotional conversion experiences.

My position is that I think it has now become obvious that the twelve step movement has played a similar shaping role on the twentieth century. That is, the twelve step movement and the spread of its small group meetings has been to the twentieth century what the evangelical movement and frontier revivalism was to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One of the most insightful works on this subject has been Professor Trysh Travis's book, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (2009). At least in the United States, to understand parts of today's world you have to understand all the references to twelve-step language and all the assumptions about the necessity of making amends and so on.

It would be interesting to see studies made to see if the twelve-step movement has had a similar impact on other English-speaking countries, including Canada, the U.K., Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. And what about countries like Mexico, where AA has been developing a larger and larger presence? And the Scandinavian countries, and the French-speaking and German-speaking parts of Europe? And even further abroad, what about countries like Russia and India? I do not know what the results would be if studies of that sort were made. Part of the problem is that frontier revivals are noisy and public, while AA groups are deliberately quiet, anonymous, and creep into a new area as discreetly as possible. Nobody fully realizes

how many of them there are, even after they find themselves unconsciously using twelve-step technical terms themselves and making twelve-step assumptions about the proper path to healing addictions and achieving a higher spiritual state.

Why did the twelve-step program start having such a powerful influence? It provided ways of talking about spirituality in the twentieth-century world — a new world of thought built on new kinds of psychological explanations and discoveries like quantum physics and the uncertainty principle — which enabled people to simply bypass most of the problems that were tearing the traditional religions apart.

And AA principles do not require us to defend stories about the Red Sea parting or people walking on water. They do not require us to hem and haw about exactly when the universe was created and when dinosaurs walked the earth. This in itself makes the whole business of talking about spirituality so much easier!

Instead, AA spirituality asks us to put everything to the proof by trying it for ourselves. Can practicing prayer and meditation improve my life? I am asked to simply try some particular way of doing this — whatever method seems most congenial to me — and then see what happens. Can doing a thorough fourth step free my mind from a good deal of fear and resentment? Again I am asked simply to try it and see what happens. What kind of concept of a higher power works best? People who come into the program are asked to try some concept that makes sense to them, and then if it does not work very well, change it and adjust it until they find what does work best for them. Everything is to be put to the pragmatic test in their own lives. No one can argue with success when they have experienced it firsthand.

Bob Pearson, at the 1986 General Service Conference where he talked about rigidity as our gravest danger, said at the end of his talk:

At the 1970 International Convention in Miami, I was in the audience on that Sunday morning when Bill made his brief last public appearance. He was too ill to take his scheduled part in any other convention event, but now, unannounced, on

Sunday morning, he was wheeled up from the back of the stage in a wheelchair, attached with tubes to an oxygen tank. Wearing a ridiculous bright-orange, host committee blazer, he heaved his angular body to his feet and grasped the podium — and all pandemonium broke loose. I thought the thunderous applause and cheering would never stop, tears streaming down every cheek. Finally, in a firm voice, like his old self, Bill spoke a few gracious sentences about the huge crowd, the outpouring of love, and the many overseas members there, ending (as I remember) with these words: “As I look over this crowd, I know that Alcoholics Anonymous will live a thousand years — if it is God's will.”

I think that in a prophetic moment, Bill Wilson glimpsed the onward march of the centuries and realized that the fundamental teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous were going to become one of the greatest gifts given to the human race, and that they were going to continue to help people in countless ways for many centuries to come.

So to sum it all up, I think that AA is far more important than most of us have even dared to believe. And this is the point in time when we have to do all that we can to preserve as much early AA history as we can, because the last of the men and women who knew the original AA people are dying. No subsequent generation will have the opportunity which we have been given to have a few knowledgeable people still around who can look at our historical writings and warn us when we go astray, and say, “No, that’s not it, I was there when it was going on, and that’s not what it was like at all.”

It’s a big task which God has given us. But we in AA history and archives are trying our best to carry out the very special job which our generation has been assigned. I pray only that we may put our whole hearts into it, and that if God be willing, he may use our work as a vehicle to spread his saving grace to the world through many years to come.

**An extended note: how the principle of  
anonymity has been applied in this account**

One of the thorny problems with writing the history of the AA History Lovers was the issue of anonymity. With respect to well-known AA figures who are now dead, I followed the same practice which Nancy Olson, Ernie Kurtz, and I worked out for the AA History Lovers. I talk about this in much more detail about halfway through this article, when discussing AA History Lovers guidelines nos. 19 and 20. But to explain it briefly, I follow the old time AA rule, which in practice meant that once an AA member was dead, it was all right to give that person's full name when writing about that individual's AA activities, and to display photographs of that person's face. So in the material which follows, I had no hesitation in giving the full names of long dead early AA members like Hank Parkhurst, Jimmy Burwell, Mrs. Marty Mann, Clarence Snyder, Richmond Walker, Father Ralph Pfau, Ed Webster, Father Joseph Martin, Father John C. Ford, Austin Ripley, Senator Harold Hughes, Kenneth G. Merrill, and Dean L. Barnett. This is the practice still followed today by the overwhelming majority of the people who write the major books on AA history.

I gave the full names for three AA figures who have died only recently: Bob Pearson because his newspaper obituary spoke freely and in detail about his AA activities, Bill Swegan because I promised him before his death that I would re-issue his book with his full name on it after he had died (Bill, who got sober in 1948, felt very strongly that the old AA practice ought to be maintained), and Nancy Olson because I knew that this was the way she too interpreted AA principles (and also because she gives her full name on the cover of the book she wrote).

In the case of AA historians and scholars who have written major books and articles in which they gave their full names, I have also given their full names. It would be silly to do otherwise—if you know the title of the book or article they wrote, you can go to the internet and find their last names instantly. This would include people like Ernest Kurtz, William L. White, Fiona Dodd, Bill Pittman, Charlie Bishop, Jr., Sally Brown, David R. Brown,

William G. Borchert, Joan Zieger, Audrey Borden, Tom White, Leslie B. Cole, and Michael StGeorge. Are these people AA members? They never proclaim themselves as such anywhere in print, and frankly, with some of them, I do not know myself. It does not matter. The overwhelming majority of people who have written about alcoholism and its treatment are not AA members, and in my own reading, it seems to me that the majority even of people who have written books about the history and interpretation of Alcoholics Anonymous itself are not AA members. I know that Dr. Trysh Travis and Dr. Annette R. Smith (both of whom I refer to in this article) are not AA members.

In the case of people who have consistently avoided using their last names in the books or plays or other research works which they have published, I have respected their wishes and their principles, for example Mitchell K., Arthur S., Jared L., Jackie B., Don B., and Merton M.

Mel Barger gives his last initial only on the title page of some of his books, but he gives his full name in some of the other books he has written, and regularly gives his last name in public contexts such as his internet sites. The question of what to do here required a judgment call, but I decided it was necessary to give his full name in this article as well, so that people could more easily check out all that he has written and all that we know about him as one of the most prominent second generation authors writing about AA history. Also I know that Mel strongly disagrees with that extreme wing of the AA movement which wishes to remove all last names from books published on AA history.

In the case of Gail L. in Akron, I have left her last name out of this account, because I know that she prefers to keep a low profile and attempts to live a life of humility at all times, in keeping with the true spirit of the anonymity principle: as Bill Wilson explained in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, the rule was devised for the principal purpose of trimming the wings of would-be AA “promoters,” as he refers to them in the chapters on Traditions 4, 11, and 12. And in fact, I apologize to Gail for writing about her at all, but she is just too important to the story of the rise of the Archival Movement in the 1990’s. A leader of her wisdom and

modesty is entirely different from one of those ego-driven “promoters” whom Bill W. wished to discourage.

With a good many members of the AA History Lovers, I thought it best not to mention their full names: Barefoot Bill L., for example, along with Jim B. (who contributed the “Let’s Ask Bill” series), Charles K., Rick T., Robert S. (Richmond, Indiana), Hank G. (remcuster), tumming, Alex H., Lee C. (Santa Maria, California), and Art B. (Past Al-Anon Delegate from San Jose, California). In some cases, their full names appear in some of the messages posted on the AA History Lovers, but that website is kind of on the edge between public and private ground. Many members are fairly relaxed about giving their full names and personal data on that site. In theory, anyone with access to a computer could read the messages posted there. But in practice, how many people who are not in AA are ever doing to sit around reading about AA history on their computers? Nevertheless, for this article, I am taking the strict approach and not giving their full names.

The important thing is, I hope that my approach to anonymity does not offend anyone too much. There is too much of enormous importance being discussed in the preceding article, and I would be very saddened if anyone were to cast it aside because of a quarrel over that issue.

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