

Interview with Searcy W.



This is an interview with Searcy W. (Whaley) that was conducted for the October 1999 issue of the D.I.A.Log, the official newsletter of the Dallas Intergroup Association. Searcy passed away in 2003 with 57+ years of sobriety; he is greatly missed by all.

D.I.A. Log – Searcy, you’ve been sober longer than anybody we know of in Dallas AA, but at the time you got sober you weren’t living here. When did you actually move to Dallas?

Searcy W. – Well, the thing about that is, I came into Alcoholics Anonymous in Dallas, but at that time I had been transferred to Lubbock by the company I worked for. My drinking problems had become more serious, and toward the end in 1945 I heard about Alcoholics Anonymous from Bob S., who was an old drinking buddy of mine who lived in West Texas but had moved to Dallas. I ran into him in Odessa, and he told me about AA and what happened to him, and he sent me the Big Book. I didn’t read the Big Book very much, and I kept drinking until I lost my job in November 1945; then I stayed drunk until April 1946 when I finally did what Bob told me to: I came to Dallas, looking him up to find out what Alcoholics Anonymous was about. I had little knowledge of the actual workings of AA. They put me in a drying out place here in Dallas off Maple Street, which was the only place that a drunk could get in to sober up, and the third day there, they took me to a meeting in downtown Dallas. I finally got sober there on May 5, 1946. 912½ Main Street was the first group in Dallas, and there were about eight or nine people there sober in AA, and there were only about fourteen members at that time in all of the Dallas area.

D.I.A. Log – So your home was actually in Lubbock when you sobered up and then you moved back here?

Searcy W. – I was in Lubbock, yes.

D.I.A. Log – Okay, when did you actually move back to Dallas?

Searcy W. – I moved back here in 1949.

D.I.A. Log – Tell us more about the groups that were here when you moved back in 1949 and then how they developed through the ’50s.

Searcy W. – I came to all the meetings here even in the beginning: there was no group where I lived in West Texas; there wasn’t any group between Ft. Worth and Phoenix. So I had to come to meetings in Dallas, and I was a member of the Downtown Group. In September of 1946 we moved out and formed the Suburban Group at the corner of Dickason and Sale streets. I was a member of that group. The first groups were in this order: the Downtown Group at 912½ Main, the Suburban Group at Dickason and Sale, and then the Oak Cliff Group was formed about the same time. Out of the Suburban Group grew the Preston Group, the Belmont Group, the Belwood Group, and several like that. [Editor’s note: Other old-timers say that the Preston Group was a split-off from the Town North Group.] The Central Group and Town North and all of those groups grew out of the old Suburban Group: most of them did, anyway.

D.I.A. Log – That wasn’t the same Central Group that was around in Dallas in the ’80s, was it? That must have been a different group.

Searcy W. – No, no, that was before then, a different group.

D.I.A. Log – Right. So when did the White House Group actually get started?

Searcy W. – The White House Group started about fourteen years ago as a result of the demise of the Suburban Group which had closed its doors way back then, so the old members of Suburban Group came together at the White House where I had an office and we formed the White House Group. That was about fourteen years ago.

D.I.A. Log – So the White House Group really itself isn't that old but it's what was left of the old Suburban Group?

Searcy W. – Yeah, there were fourteen former members of Suburban Group that helped start the White House Group.

D.I.A. Log – That's really interesting. Now let's explore a bit more about the origins of Dallas AA. Our history records that a woman named Esther E. founded the first AA group in Dallas. Tell us what she was like.

Searcy W. – Well, Esther's story actually is written in detail; her story's in the Big Book. "The Southern Belle", you know. [Her story, found in the Third Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous, is actually titled "The Flower of the South" - Ed.] She was a good-looking lady and full of pep and knowledge about the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Of course she'd been through the ringer pretty well. She came to Dallas in 1943, and there were no groups in Dallas at that time. And there was no place, no hospital that would take an alcoholic for treatment. But you could take an alcoholic to Terrell state mental hospital. In that mental hospital was a guy named Vern G. Esther for 2 years went out there and worked there with him, and he would get out intermittently for awhile but he couldn't stay sober. She tried to give the program to him for a long while, but it failed. But then in 1945 they started the Downtown Group of Alcoholics Anonymous which was in cooperation with some early members of Alcoholics Anonymous in Ft. Worth. They had formed a little group in Ft. Worth, four or five people.

D.I.A. Log – Searcy, you have a wonderful story about you, Bill W. and the Twelve Traditions.

Searcy W. – From the time I came in 1946 through late '46 and '47 we tried to establish groups all over Texas, and everybody all over the state worked together to form these groups. And so what happened was that a lot of groups presented problems because in the Southwest we had clubs, and they called them AA clubs – which was not right. AA is not a club, officially. But we had clubs and that caused a need for money. So money and management and those things caused problems with Bill Wilson. Day and night he was being called about so-and-so trying to run this or that club. In 1948, 25 people agreed to meet in Lubbock; they came from all over the state of Texas. Bill Wilson had been visiting his mother in Phoenix, and I got him to come to Amarillo to meet me and then go on to Lubbock to speak and help us with forming these groups and tell us what we were doing wrong. Bill and Lois came in on a plane from Phoenix, and then we got on another plane and headed toward Lubbock. Then Bill reached in his coat pocket and pulled out some handwritten notes saying, "I want you to read these notes and see what you think about it." I read them over carefully and looked at him and said, "Well, Bill, we don't need this down here. We love each other. Oh, how we love each other." But it was the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, the thing that saved Alcoholics

Anonymous, but I didn't know it then. Very few people knew anything about these Traditions and why they were being formed, but later on of course in 1950 at the International Conference in Cleveland, Dr. Bob and Bill took me up to the room and schooled me in what we needed to do to get votes to pass the Twelve Traditions, to accept the Twelve Traditions as they were written. We were to vote on the Twelve Traditions with about 8,000-9,000 people. And at that meeting there was not a single dissenting vote.

D.I.A. Log – Can you clarify one thing for us? Bill showed you this draft of the traditions in 1948 when you were in West Texas but he had started publishing articles about his proposed Traditions two years before in the Grapevine. I'm betting not a lot of people who were members of AA down here were reading the Grapevine at that time.

Searcy W. – Very few. And very few people in the Southwest knew anything about the Traditions being formed, they didn't know anything about it. Not only in West Texas, but all over. At that convention in Cleveland where they voted to adopt the Twelve Traditions, not a lot of people knew about them, either. We voted for it for unity but we didn't know a hell of a lot about it, very little. It passed, thank God. You know, Bill worked on those traditions for four or five years previously and there may have been some things I had corresponded with him with about them, but I still didn't understand exactly why we needed them. That's how ignorant I was about it.

D.I.A. Log – Bill was incredibly farsighted, wasn't he? Tell us this: when you talked at our group a few years back you had some great reminiscences about Ebby T's sojourn in Dallas. Didn't Bill send him down here in desperation because he wasn't staying sober back East?

Searcy W. – Well, here's the story behind that. As you know, when Bill Wilson was near the end in 1934, Ebby came to see him and gave him an idea about "God as we understand Him." After AA got started Bill always said that Ebby was his sponsor. But six months after he gave Bill a clue on how to stay sober, Ebby went back out in the Bowery in New York City and had stayed drunk on and off for eighteen years. Then in early 1953 Bill Wilson came to Dallas. By then I was head of a clinic that took wet drunks. Bill and I had lunch, and after that lunch I asked Bill, "What would you rather see happen now that's never happened in AA before?" and without any hesitation he said, "I'd rather see Ebby have a chance to get sober." Bill said that it as if to say, "You sober Ebby up" – that's the way I took it. Bill didn't even know exactly where Ebby was, but a couple of mutual friends found him on the Bowery. They dried him out a bit but gave him a pint of whiskey to get on the plane with, and he flew to Dallas to sober up. Ebby was in bad shape physically, mentally, spiritually and every other way you could imagine after being drunk for the better part of eighteen years and sleeping on the streets. And he was very unruly. He cussed out Bill and Dr. Bob and me and everybody else. Ebby was still very resentful because he could have been one of the forefathers of AA. But finally, Ebby asked if he could go to a meeting with me, and we went over to the Suburban Club – he got sober and stayed that way. And he got to helping others; we got him a job and he did pretty good. He stayed 4 or 5 years before going back to New York. But his health was failing him and he fell off the wagon again. Of course Bill was in touch with him all the time, and he made arrangements for Ebby to go to a halfway house in upstate New York. The lady up there that ran it said she would gladly take care of him. He went up there in 1963 and in 1966, he died.

D.I.A. Log – Many of us have heard stories that Ebby didn't die sober, but then there are other ones that said he did die sober. Which is true?

Searcy W. – I happen to know that Ebby was sober 2½ years when he died.

D.I.A. Log – Thank you, it's good to get that straight.

Searcy W. – Most people say that Ebby died drunk, but he did not. He was sober 2½ years. My source on that was directly from Lois Wilson; she told me unequivocally that Ebby was sober 2½ years when he passed away.

D.I.A. Log – I appreciate you clearing that up for all of us. Only two more questions, Searcy. I'm sitting here looking at a medallion on your desk that has a Roman number L and three IIIs on it, and, frankly, that whole idea overwhelms me – you've been sober a very long time. Apart from your own sobering up, could you tell us the one most significant event of your whole AA experience? Most significant to you, that is.

Searcy W. – That would be difficult. I always thought after I came in that this was such a great thing. The program of Alcoholics Anonymous – it's such a design for living that I thought the whole world ought to know about it. So I questioned Bill Wilson about all these things that happened and why we're here and how we were here, and he wanted me to go to the Yale Summer School and study these things, alcoholism, you know? So I did that and luckily, Dr. Jellinek moved from Yale after I attended there in 1947 and came to teach a year at Ft. Worth. [Ed. note: Dr. E. M. Jellinek co-founded the Yale School of Alcohol Studies in 1943.] Then I met a man named Horace, and he and I worked for Dr. Jellinek and did educational work. We talked to schools, churches – anybody that would listen about the disease of alcoholism. We worked colleges, universities, schools, churches, all kinds of public talks. Dr. Jellinek also suggested we needed hospitals for an alcoholic to go into to sober up and go directly into AA. So he helped me establish the clinic in Lubbock, the clinic in Dallas where Ebby sobered up, and the ones in Houston and Carlsbad, New Mexico. And in those days everybody had a problem with drinking, but there were very few drunk addicts; we didn't have any. We had every once in awhile a barbiturate addict, but mostly straight alcoholics. But they sobered up in those places because there were AAs in there day and night taking them to meetings and sponsoring them, helping them through the steps, and they stayed sober. About 75% of them stayed sober, because they went into AA. Because they were taken to AA by an AA and worked with after that.

D.I.A. Log – As a final comment, Searcy, tell us how the Twelve Steps are working for you today, perhaps contrasted with the way they worked in your life fifty years ago when you were early in your sobriety.

Searcy W. – Well, there was a greater urgency at that time just to stay sober, that's for sure. But it's still true that anything that comes up in my life today is contingent on my daily relationship with a higher power. I can stay sober only on a daily basis – thank God we're taught to live one day at a time, and I've been doing that for 53 years, now!

D.I.A. Log – Searcy, this has been great, and we're so grateful for your spending your time with us. I know I can speak for all our readers in saying that we're looking forward to hearing about your celebrating a 54th birthday very soon.