

The "Saturday Evening Post" article Introduction

In March 1941, a feature article written by Jack Alexander entitled "Alcoholics Anonymous" appeared in the "Saturday Evening Post." This is how it came about.

Jim Burwell ("The Vicious Cycle" in the Big Book) had just moved to Philadelphia and was trying to get a local bookstore to carry the Big Book. The bookstore's manager was uninterested, but the conversation was overheard by a woman named Helen Hammer.

She spoke up and said she had sent the book to her alcoholic nephew in Los Angeles, who had sobered up instantly and had stayed that way for some three months. But the store manager remained unimpressed.

When Mrs. Hammer heard of Jim's attempt to start a group in Philadelphia, she introduced him to her husband, Dr. A. Weise Hammer.

Dr. Hammer was a friend of Judge Curtis Bok, the owner of the Saturday Evening Post. He persuaded Bok to do a story on A.A. Bok urged his editors to assign Jack Alexander, an experienced, even cynical reporter, to do a feature story.

Alexander was chosen because he had a reputation for being "hard nosed." He had just completed a major story exposing the New Jersey rackets and prided himself on his cynicism.

Alexander had many doubts about doing a story on a bunch of ex-drunks. In a story he wrote for the A.A. Grapevine in May 1945 ("Was My Leg Being Pulled?") he said: "All I knew of alcoholism at the time was that, like most other nonalcoholics, I had had my hand bitten (and my nose punched) on numerous occasions by alcoholic pals to whom I had extended a hand -- unwisely, it always seemed afterward. Anyway, I had an understandable skepticism about the whole business."

But he spent a week with Bill Wilson and other AA members in New York. "We gave him the most exhaustive briefing on Alcoholics Anonymous any writer has ever had," according to Bill. "First he met our Trustees and New York people, and then we towed him all over the country."

One of the people he interviewed in New York was Marty Mann, the first woman to achieve lasting sobriety in AA. (See "Women Suffer Too" in the Big Book.) She is called "Sara Martin" in the story, and she is disguised further by changing her time in London to time in Paris. But Sarah Martin is without doubt, Marty Mann. When the story came out Marty said "it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened, because we wanted publicity so badly. We wanted somebody to know about us."

Alexander felt the week was a success from one standpoint. "I knew I had the makings of a readable report," he wrote, "but, unfortunately, I didn't quite believe in it and told Bill so." But Bill convinced him that he should visit other cities to visit groups, and interview and get to know other members.

Bill, Dr. Bob and elders of the groups at Akron, New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Chicago spent uncounted hours with him. But when he reached his own home town of St. Louis, he met a number of his own friends who were now A.A. members, and the last remnants of skepticism vanished. "Once rollicking rumpots, they were now sober. It didn't seem possible, but there it was," he wrote.

When Alexander "could feel A.A. in the very marrow of his bones," he proceeded to write the story that rocked drunks and their families all over the world.

"Came then the deluge," Bill wrote. Six thousand frantic appeals from alcoholics and their families hit the New York office, PO Box 658. Bill and Ruth Hock, AA's first secretary, pawed at random through the mass of letters, laughing and crying by turns. But it was clear they couldn't handle the mail by themselves, and form letters wouldn't be enough. Each letter had to have an understanding personal reply.

Fortunately, they had anticipated this problem and Lois Wilson, in anticipation of the story bringing a strong response, had been organizing anyone who could type into squads, and scheduling those who could not type to answer the telephones in preparation for the expected deluge.

But even so, the response exceeded anyone's wildest expectations. Within days, meeting attendance doubled. Within weeks, newcomers were being sent out on Twelve Step calls to other alcoholics. Ruth Hock and Bobbie Berger, along with Lois and her volunteers, worked day and night for five or six weeks to answer all the mail.

The chain reaction Bill had envisioned when he was still a patient at Towns Hospital had become a fact, and nothing would stop it. A.A. was now established as an American institution.

Bill realized that he must, for the first time, ask the groups for assistance. It was determined that if each group gave \$1 a year per member, they would eventually have enough money to pay the New York office's expenses and rely no further upon outside charity or insufficient book sales. Most groups were happy to contribute to pay the expense of the New York office, and most continue to do so today.

Thus the tradition of self-support had a firm beginning.

The magazine's decision to do a feature story on A.A. would have been enough for editors all across the country to find A.A. newsworthy, but the story didn't stop with merely reporting on AA. It endorsed its effectiveness. It is hard for us today to

imagine the enormous excitement that this article generated among A.A. members. By 1950, AA membership was approaching a hundred thousand and there were thirty-five hundred groups worldwide.

In April of that year the Saturday Evening Post featured another article by Alexander entitled the "Drunkards Best Friend."

In 1953 Alexander became a member of the Alcoholic Foundation's board of trustees. He wrote articles for the A.A. Grapevine and helped Bill edit "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions." He was truly a great friend of Bill's and of A.A.

AA has World Services has reprinted the article regularly in pamphlet form, at first under its original title, and now as "The Jack Alexander Article."

"How well we love that Jack" wrote Bill in 1951. "We should all be grateful to Jack Alexander, one of AA's earliest friends from the press."

Sources:

"Bill W." by Robert Thomsen

"Bill W." by Francis Hartigan

"Pass It On."

"The Language of the Heart, Bill W.'s Grapevine Writings."

"Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers."

"Best of the Grapevine, Volume II."