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Then and Now

I HAVE TO admit that I miss those old days in AA when we all knew each other. In 1944, when I came in, there were only about a hundred members in the whole New York area. Marty, my sponsor, and a couple of other women took me to my first meeting at the old clubhouse at 334½ West 24th Street. We had one open meeting a week at the clubhouse, with a chairman and three speakers, and one closed meeting in another part of town, and that was it. To get to an extra one, some of us

used to have dinner at the Oyster Bar in Grand Central and then take a train out to a very small meeting in Forest Hills, Long Island.

Now, we have about a million members all over the world and round-the-clock meetings in New York. Of course, I'm delighted that AA has grown. I've done my infinitesimal best to help it grow. But Marty and I sometimes talk about the old days, and we get nostalgic.

We talk about old Tom, the caretaker at the 24th Street Club. Tom's

wife had once committed him to a state institution for life, but some AA men got him out. He was staying sober to spite his wife. He was bad-tempered and talkative, and he cussed, and he wouldn't let too many people into his kitchen. When a formal discharge from the state institution came through, Tom got drunk to celebrate. Ila P., one of our early members, took him to Towns Hospital in a cab. Tom's false teeth kept dropping, and Ila kept pushing them back. Tom sobered up after that and stayed on the program, still cussing with every other breath.

The old clubhouse had a long hallway and one downstairs room with an empty fireplace. The speakers stood in front of it. Over the mantel was a portrait of Bill W. that had a discernible halo. Bill and some of us made fun of it. The last people to get to the meeting had to sit in the hallway or on the stairs leading to the second floor. There was a big room upstairs, too, plus a bath and a small bedroom where Bill used to stay when he was in town.

The secretary's desk was upstairs, near a wall telephone where calls for help used to come in. It was the secretary's job to answer the phone and send people out on Twelfth Step calls. A bunch of men who were out of work sat upstairs and played cards all day. They were sober but practically useless. They almost never went out on a call. When I was secretary, I got tired of them. They made such a noise that you could

hardly hear anything on the phone. I made them move their everlasting card game downstairs. One huge, redheaded man got so mad at me that he went out and got drunk. He came back and leaned over the desk and told me what I could do with the club.

There was a character called Frances F. who used to come and sit right behind my desk and kibitz. She told the redheaded drunk what *he* could do. Beautiful! (And, alas, unprintable.) There was a rumor around AA that Frances had been a madam. She was big, tough, coarse, kindhearted, and killingly funny. Her hats, which she made herself, were covered with flowers, birds, and butterflies. When she made a forceful point, the birds flew and the flowers trembled.

People used to come in for help and sit at the secretary's desk and talk. A vague little blond waif was there one day, and Frances passed me a note: "Know good."

Later, I said, "Frances, that's spelled N-O."

"I don't care what it's spelled," she said. "It's still no good."

And that, unfortunately, was true. Of course, I helped some people, but I used to despair over the ones we couldn't seem to help. I used to drag intoxicated women to meetings and hand out AA literature to drunks in restaurants. It took me a while to understand that I couldn't sober up the world.

Tough old Frances, however, had

great success with people who got into the alcoholic ward at Bellevue Hospital or the Women's House of Detention, that old jail at Sixth and Greenwich Avenues. She would sit and give them lectures on alcoholism, her knees apart and yards of bloomers showing. She would hand out old clothes to the destitute and give them carfare to get to a meeting when they were released. Many wonderful old-timers owed their sobriety to Frances.

Tony, Frances' husband, was a slender little man who had occasional slips. They were always short, because she "slapped him sober."

A very different Frances, called Sister Frances, started High Watch Farm in Connecticut. (It was one of the first rest farms for alcoholics; after hospitalization, many still go there for a rehabilitation period, with intensive use of the AA program.) Sister Frances did not belong to any established religious order, but she had studied with a pupil of Mary Baker Eddy (founder of the Christian Science Church). She had three farms to begin with: one for children, one for adults, and one for older people, which was a sort of rest home. Everybody was to learn metaphysics, and baskets were hung outside the front doors to collect money. This didn't work very well.

A pigeon of Marty's knew Sister Frances and took Bill W. and Marty up to High Watch to see her. Bill started talking about AA. Of course, there was nobody to beat him at

that, unless it was Marty. When Sister Frances heard their story, she said, "I'm giving you this place." They explained that AA couldn't own any property, so a board was set up with some AA members on it, and AAs and new people started going up there.

Sister Frances' father was a former governor of Massachusetts. Her real name was Ethelred Folsom Helling, which I am sure she was glad to shed. She was small, eccentric, and highly intelligent, with a great sense of humor. She didn't believe in killing animals, so she wouldn't eat meat or wear fur or leather. She wore sneakers summer and winter. She and Marty became great friends. During that first summer, Marty was still out of work and had her own cottage up there, where she could stay whenever she liked. Marty's mother spent a year there and did all the cooking and baking. She was a soothing influence and a wonderful cook.

Back in New York, we always had a Christmas party at the old clubhouse, with a tree, entertainment by some of the members, and a nice big spread. Some of us had no place to go on Christmas. I once organized a Christmas Day party in the old Dutch Reform Church, when we moved there from the clubhouse in the 1940's. It was a huge barn of a place, with a stage, an auditorium, and a big kitchen. A lot of people said, "Nobody will come on Christmas Day."

And I said, "What do you bet?"

We sold fifty meat pies for fifty cents apiece, which was what they cost. We had salad, dessert, and gallons of coffee. A bunch of men, some of them off the Bowery, cleaned up for me. Some AA members put on a great stage show. Rudy P. from the Philharmonic played "Silent Night" on the French horn. Gradually, the auditorium filled up. Many AAs came after their family parties were over. It was a great success.

The first interracial group in the New York area started in the late 1940's. It was a slow process. There was a black group in Washington, D.C., which was then segregated. Its founder, Jim S. (whose story is in the Big Book), his wife Viola, and other members of the group used to come to New York on weekends to help us. They were simply wonderful. The black men and women in this area usually would show up at our downtown meetings, one at a time, and never come back. We tried to make one of the Greenwich Village meetings into an interracial group, and that didn't work.

Then, I heard about the Reverend Shelton Bishop, the rector of St. Philip's Church on West 134th Street. He was a great leader in Harlem. I talked to him, and he said we could have the basement area of the church and use the kitchen for our weekly meetings. A lot of people, including Bill, went up there to speak. But we'd get only one black

member, then two, then three, then one again. I once got so discouraged that I called Bill on the phone and burst into tears.

But Chase, my other sponsor, who worked up there, too, said, "Once this gets rolling, you won't be able to stop it."

He was right. The St. Nicholas Group, up there in St. Philip's, began to grow, and now there are many groups in Harlem.

Never be discouraged if your pigeons or would-be pigeons don't seem to make it. Sometimes, you'll see them years later at a meeting, and they'll come up and tell you that something you said to them long ago really helped to get them sober. Once, on Thanksgiving Day, I invited a brand-new woman to dinner with a couple of older members. I never heard from her again until years later. She sent word that she was sober in AA and living in Baltimore. She was so grateful for that long-ago dinner that she always invited some new person to her house on Thanksgiving.

Yes, I love the way AA has grown, but I'd like to go back magically through time and relive the old days. I'd like to visit with some old friends who are no longer here, like Pat C., who used to ship for Standard Oil, and who used to call me when he got to New York and say, "Put on the coffeepot. I'll be right up." I'd like to go to the old clubhouse again and have a talk with Bill again.

But the present has its rewards.

Some of my old friends are still here, and I have many new ones a generation younger — even two generations younger! I am a sober, reasonably happy great-grandmother. I love my family, and they love me. We do things together. I still go to meetings and try to work the program. I do a little Twelfth Step work when I can, though nowadays I'm

better at helping somebody who's sober and having problems.

I like to think about other people and not about myself. Controlled nostalgia is okay, but I don't want to be a compulsive reminiscer, an old-rocking-chair bore. I like living a day at a time. My nostalgia is laced with gratitude.

F. M., New Canaan, Conn.
