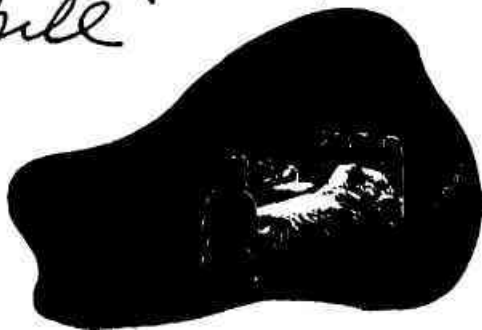


February 1954

Another Fragment of History By Bill



Because a tribute from all of Alcoholics Anonymous was due, Bill made a special trip to Cleveland to attend this particular meeting which he describes below. but he wishes us to say for him, with regret, that this does not mean he is once more available for general travel and speaking.

IT was December 13, 1953. The occasion was the first anniversary of the opening of Rosary Hall, the newly remodeled alcoholic ward at Cleveland's famed St. Vincent's Charity Hospital. It had been a great AA meeting. The small auditorium was crammed with alcoholics and their friends. So was the balcony. One thousand people now rose to their feet, clapping wildly.

The slight figure of a nun in a gray habit reluctantly approached the lectern's microphone. The uproar redoubled, then suddenly subsided as the little nun commenced to give her thanks. She was embarrassed, too. For had not the program she'd helped write for the occasion definitely stated that "The Sisters of Charity, and the members of Alcoholics Anonymous who have assisted, decline all individual credit." Sister Ignatia's attempted anonymity was busted wide open, for no one there wanted to let her get away with it this time. And anyway, she was just about as anonymous in that part of our AA world as baseball's Cleveland Indians. This was a tribute to her

which had been years in the making.

As I sat watching this scene, I vividly remembered Dr. Bob's struggles to start Akron's AA Group Number One and what this dear nun and her Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine had done to make that possible. I tried to envision all the vast consequences which have since flowed from their early effort. Seeking hospitalization for his new-found prospects, Dr. Bob, I recalled, had begged one Akron institution after another to take them in. Two hospitals had tried for a time but finally gave up in favor of folks with broken legs, ailing gall bladders, etc.—really sick people!

Then in desperation, the good Doctor bethought himself of Sister Ignatia, that shy but beaming nun who handled admissions at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron where he had occasionally operated. In an atmosphere of some secrecy he approached her with his proposal. In nothing flat, he got results. This rare pair immediately bootlegged a shaking alkie into a tiny two bed ward. Because the new customer kicked like a steer at this glaring lack of privacy for his delicate condition, Sister Ignatia moved him to the hospital's flower room. Here AA's co-founder Bob and Sister Ignatia ministered to this newcomer, who presently left his bed for the world outside, there to mend his ways and his broken life.

Through Sister Ignatia and Bob, God had wrought a divine conspiracy of medicine, religion and Alcoholics

Anonymous which was to bring sobriety within reach of more than 5,000 alcoholics who were to pass through the alcoholic ward of St. Thomas up to the time of Dr. Bob's death in 1950. But when that first customer was shaking it out in the flower room way back there in 1939, the Trustees of the hospital little guessed that St. Thomas had become the first religious institution ever to open its doors to AA.

Not long before Dr. Bob passed out of our sight and hearing, I was asked to inscribe a plaque which could always be seen on the wall of the alcoholic ward and which would commemorate the great events which there took place.

Two years after Dr. Bob's death, Sister Ignatia was transferred by the Order to which she belongs to Charity Hospital at Cleveland.

But no account of the activity of church hospitals in this area would be complete without a recital of what happened at Charity Hospital over the years *before* her arrival there.

Old-time AAs will recall the wonderful publicity which the Cleveland Plain Dealer gave us in the fall of 1939. When these stories broke there was scarcely a score of AAs in the whole town. Because the pieces appearing on the Cleveland Plain Dealer's editorial page were accompanied by strong editorials and ran consecutively for about ten days, the ensuing excitement in the town was immense. The little band of alcoholics, some of

them dry but months, were flooded by hundreds of telephone calls and frantic pleas for help. The Plain Dealer had said to the good people of Cleveland "Come and get it!" And they certainly did.

This startling development ushered in an entirely new phase of AA. Pioneering had gone on since 1935 and the AA book was already off the press. But growth in Akron and New York had been discouragingly slow. A handful of Clevelanders had dried up by contact with Akron but held no meeting of their own until early 1939. It was then commonly supposed that nobody but "grey-beards" could look after new people. The supply of seasoned AAs in Cleveland was of course painfully small. What could these few do with the hundreds of alcoholics who now descended on them like a landslide? Was mass production of sobriety possible?

Well, those early Clevelanders proved that it was. Cases were dumped into hospitals willy-nilly all over town. Whether their hospital bills would be paid, no one knew. An AA would appear at a new man's bedside, snatch him out and take him to a meeting. The new man would thereupon rush to another bedside with the glad tidings. Then and there it was discovered that very new people could drive the opening wedge into a fresh case almost as well as anybody. Out of this confused scramble there soon evolved the great idea of organized personal sponsorship for each and every new man and woman.

Meanwhile Cleveland's membership soared to hundreds in a matter of months. There at Cleveland in the winter of 1939, they proved that mass production of sobriety was a glad fact. This is Cleveland's great and rightful claim to distinction as a pioneer group.

But this prodigious effort had to have help from the town's hospitals. Such amazing results could have been obtained in no other way. As in Akron, after the excitement died down, some of the hospitals got weary of drunks. But Cleveland's Charity Hospital never did. Since 1940 it has admitted alcoholics and has provided a ward for them. Though Cleveland was lacking a "Dr. Bob," the Charity ward did nevertheless prosper nobly under the guidance and devoted interest of Sister Victorine and Father Nagle, the hospital's Chaplain. Though work with the alcoholics could take up only a fraction of their time, and though Father Nagle suffered constantly from ill health, they continued to press on with such a result that their work will always stand a shining mark in our annals. St. John's Hospital in Cleveland, too, did provide a two bed ward for a time under the devoted Sister Merced, who was finally transferred to Akron where she became associated with Sister Ignatia and Dr. Bob.

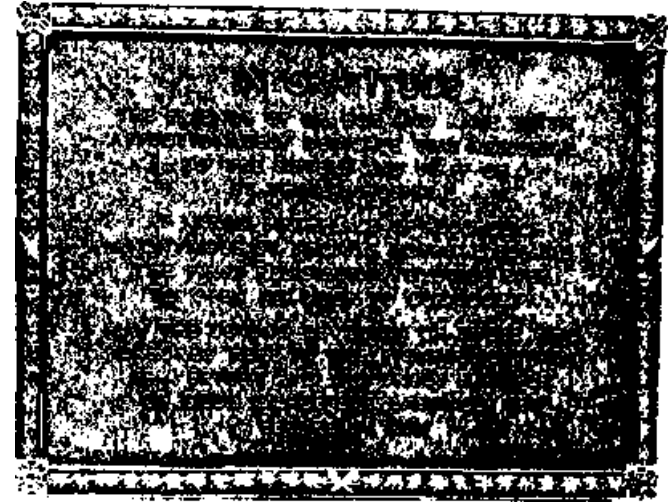
With the arrival of Sister Ignatia at Cleveland's Charity Hospital in 1952, plenty more began to happen. Suddenly thousands of AAs from near

and far who had sobered up in these wonderful institutions began to realize their long-standing debt of gratitude. Permission was obtained to modernize completely the battered old ward at Charity. Sister Ignatia, helped by the hospital authorities and the Sisters of her Order, and further buttressed by an enthusiastic committee of AAs, went to work. Money, and much more, flowed in. With special dispensations from their respective unions, AA carpenters, plumbers and electricians worked long nights. When they were done, the ward gleamed; it was possessed of every modern device. Neither were two indispensable adjuncts forgotten--the chapel and the coffee bar! A plumbing inspector summed it all up when, after looking at this astonishing result, he remarked:

"This was no professional job. The folks who worked on this thing had their hearts in it." More than \$60,000 in funds and night work was thus expended on this urgent labor of love.

In the one short year since Sister Ignatia came to Charity, one thousand alcoholics have there seen the light of their new day. Sister Ignatia, who has kept in touch with many of them, believes that about seven hundred are sober at this moment.

Is it any wonder, then, that the anniversary meeting of the opening of Rosary Hall was turned into a declaration of our personal love for Sister Ignatia and all her works? If the plumbing inspector had been present at this great meeting, he would have again exclaimed, "This is no professional job. It comes from the heart."



Plaque at St. Thomas Hospital, Akron, Ohio