

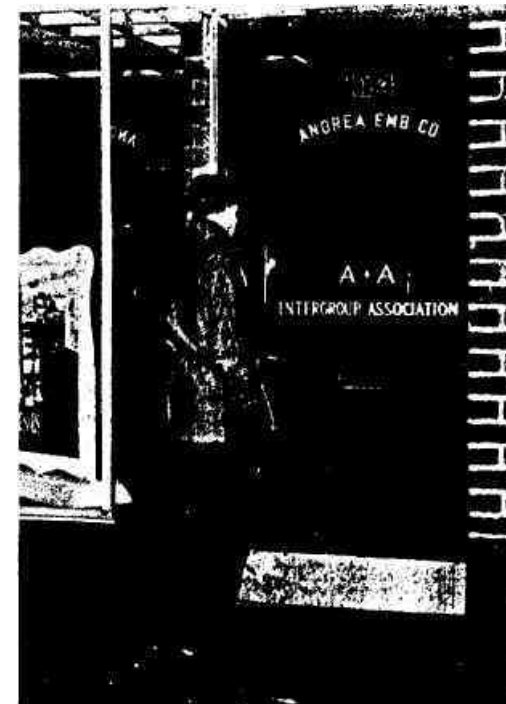
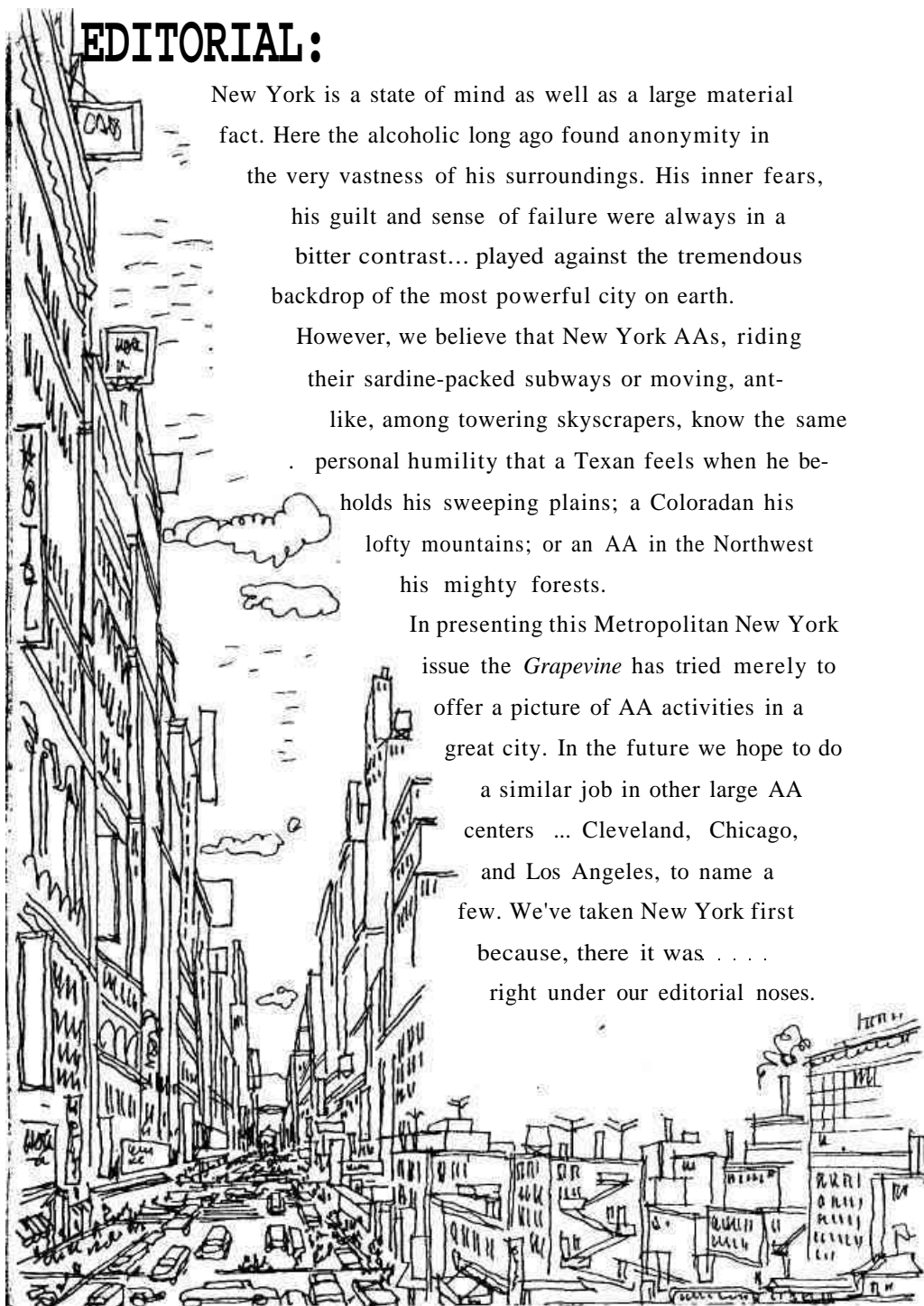
February 1951

EDITORIAL:

New York is a state of mind as well as a large material fact. Here the alcoholic long ago found anonymity in the very vastness of his surroundings. His inner fears, his guilt and sense of failure were always in a bitter contrast... played against the tremendous backdrop of the most powerful city on earth.

However, we believe that New York AAs, riding their sardine-packed subways or moving, ant-like, among towering skyscrapers, know the same personal humility that a Texan feels when he beholds his sweeping plains; a Coloradan his lofty mountains; or an AA in the Northwest his mighty forests.

In presenting this Metropolitan New York issue the *Grapevine* has tried merely to offer a picture of AA activities in a great city. In the future we hope to do a similar job in other large AA centers ... Cleveland, Chicago, and Los Angeles, to name a few. We've taken New York first because, there it was right under our editorial noses.



*Out of Blood,
Sweat and Tears*

THE NEW YORK INTERGROUP ASSOCIATION

AA MEMBERS in the metropolitan New York area are mighty proud of their Intergroup Association. Since 1946, when it was created in its present form, it

has become a smooth working example of near-perfect AA co-operation. 'Twas not always thus, however. Today's harmony was born of strife, sired by group jealousies,

and reared amid recurrent financial crises.

Nor is New York's Intergroup set-up the first in AA, not by a long shot. In fact, when we consult the records, about the only 'first' New York AA can claim is the movement's first Clubhouse, the one pictured on pages 35 to 37. That was in 1940 and from the 'management' of those modest quarters has evolved the present day's well oiled machinery which serves this great city so efficiently.

As we said, there were already central controls of AA activities in other metropolitan areas. We could have learned from them. But New Yorkers, drunk or sober, rather fancy themselves as pace setters, not followers. So, we did it the hard way. And it must be that a Higher Power was watching over the violent arguments, the petty personal animosities and the plain and fancy name calling which ensued.

The torturous path began when the Twenty-fourth Street Clubhouse was rented. Somebody had to sign the lease. In 1940, New York AA's (whose number could easily be ticked off on one's fingers) were more than somewhat insolvent. Among that little bankrupt band there was one who still had a small bank balance and whose signature had a little substance. He became, automatically and forthwith, the President of 'the corporation' — and, brave lad, signed the lease!

'The Corporation' didn't need to be much of an organization. And it wasn't. There were no other groups. Growth was slow, but growth there was. New drunks came to the clubhouse, were duly 'processed' by one of the voluntary secretaries,

114 Lexington Avenue...

clothes like new, downstairs...

new life, upstairs...

and then taken over into another corner to be '12th Stepped.' Meetings were held in the clubrooms on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights. The entire metropolitan operation of AA took place under one roof. And 'the corporation' ran things.

In order to be a voting member, a person had to be continuously dry a full year. This was to keep out the crack-pots, a rule which seems to have been based on the illusion that, after 12 months of sobriety, an alcoholic becomes — ipso facto — fully matured, and responsible! Actually, membership in 'the corporation' of 1940 gave a guy the privilege of pondering the regular monthly question, 'Who's got an extra buck to chip in towards the rent?'

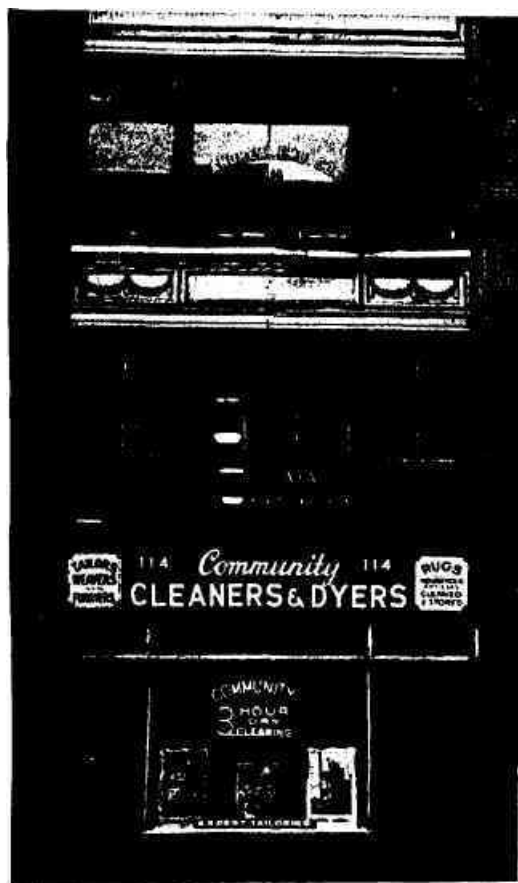
Meanwhile, other groups were beginning to spring up — in New Jersey, in Brooklyn, on Long Island and in nearby Westchester County and Connecticut. At first these were merely supplementary meetings concocted by suburbanites who had been, and still remained, clubhouse 'regulars.' But with the publishing of Jack Alexander's article in the Saturday Evening Post in 1941, the drunk business began really to flourish. The phones rang almost continuously and the nebulous suburban groups became useful in handling the traffic.

For the most part newcomers still got their first look at AA in

the Twenty-fourth Street clubrooms. Others, via the phone, were referred to the 'group in your own community.' Often the 'group' was one man. For months and months one Long Island group, formally listed, consisted of a lone alcoholic with an imposing sounding post office box number.

By 1942, however, outlying groups began to be real entities, not mere extensions of the clubhouse gang. Thus, the Subway Circuit came into being and any AA member who was a member made the Grand Tour. It became our proud boast that 'you can attend an AA meeting somewhere in the metropolitan area *every night in the week, except Saturday.*' (It wasn't until 1944 that the Bronx filled in that gap by bravely defying the illusion that nobody will come to a meeting on Saturday night.)

It was in 1942 that the first recognizable forerunner of today's Intergroup Association was formed. It was called the Central Committee with 'delegates' from each group in the area. This august body met once each month at Twenty-fourth Street and, aside from arranging exchanges of meetings, did little except deal with the always present problem of how to pay the clubhouse rent. And, by now, how to get up the pittance that was paid to the two clubhouse secretaries who, between them, manned the desk and phones 12 to 14 hours every day.



The clubhouse continued to be the nerve center of the new thriving AA activity in greater New York. It belonged to everybody and it had a deep sentimental attachment for those who first found their sobriety within its panelled walls. That affection still lives. Someday AA may have elaborate quarters here but to those who first walked down that long narrow hallway in Twenty-fourth Street, there will never be anything to replace the mantelpiece where we hooked an arm to keep from shaking as we delivered our first AA 'speech.' No food service will ever equal that little cubby hole where old Tom used to brew the meanest coffee ever to bite you back, poured from a battered and smoke smudged pot into big, chipped cups.

AA was growing into many self sustaining groups. It suddenly dawned on many of the boys and girls who lived, in hall bedrooms mostly, in the center of Manhattan and whose connection with AA was tied up exclusively with Twenty-fourth Street, that *they* were a group also. So, in the spring of 1944, they officially brought the Manhattan group into being.

As logical as this move was, it was also the beginning of trouble and confusion. Gradually, the Twenty-fourth Street Club became identified as a Manhattan group operation. They occupied it didn't they? The Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday meetings held there were iden-

tified as 'Manhattan' meetings, weren't they? So why should I, out here in Jersey (or Long Island, or Westchester, or Connecticut) help to support *their* clubhouse?

What a rat race! Because the mother of all N.Y. groups wanted to be a group itself, the club that had brought so many of us together was losing badly needed support! It was our first taste of group jealousies!

Actually the Twenty-fourth Street location had long since become too small for the traffic of 1944. So when Dr. Norman Vincent Peale offered us an abandoned church on 41st street, we grabbed it. The Grand Opening took place a couple of nights before Christmas of 1944.

It was a big barn of a place, easily large enough to accommodate the entire metropolitan district, as a central office, a clearing house for inquiries, etc. But obviously a new kind of 'management' was needed. For this was to be a 'big time' operation.

At a heated election a new body of officers took over. They in turn set up a different form of corporation. This time the requirement for membership was not length of sobriety, but money. A pledge system was instituted. Anyone who signed a promise to pay as little as \$1 or no more than \$5 a month (this last to put the quietus on 'big shots') was a member of the corporation. Budgets were fixed on the basis of the pledged income.



Sometimes the steering committee council table...

more often a work table for volunteers...

Fine. Except after the first few months the revenue dropped, and continued to drop until it got down around a mere 30% of the anticipated intake. Excuses for the non-payment of pledges were varied. Some just forgot. Others, alcoholically, had simply overestimated their power to pay. Others didn't

like the way things were being run. But perhaps the biggest obstacle was the recurrence of the Manhattan Group bugaboo.

The Manhattanites, by now the largest group in the area by far, had moved in with us. They continued to conduct their three weekly meetings in the new quarters,

paying a nominal rent for the meeting room. The 'Dry Manhattans' as they called themselves, also had agreed to take over the night desk after the new corporation's paid secretary's day was over. The outlying groups still considered that this, like Twenty-fourth Street, was a Manhattan proposition.

There were other headaches too. Poker, for one. To some, gambling was far worse than drinking had ever been and shouldn't be allowed in an AA clubhouse. The scoffers' argument lost some of its sting when people who couldn't afford to lose were getting hurt and, in some cases, getting drunk because of it. Then it was discovered that several 'sharpies,' probably not alcoholics at all, had got wind of the game and had simply wandered in off the streets to take the boys daily for anywhere from \$50 to \$100.

Then we started a restaurant in the clubhouse. It was perhaps the most philanthropic eating place ever to exist. Patronized heavily for coffee and snacks, we also seemed to be doing a pretty good business for full meals. Especially on meeting nights. It also became a handy way to start newcomers on the way back to job security. The kitchen help, counter men and bus boys were invariably rather shaky AA beginners. And let it be said here that many a good solid AA today got his start back to prosperity in that restaurant. But when the auditors came in, after nine months,

we were \$6,000 in the hole! Philanthropy ala carte went out of business — but quick! And the hat had to be passed to pay off our creditors!

Still it was the Manhattan group "label" that kept the club from being an area-wide service. So the Board of Directors decided to make the separation irrevocable! The clubhouse, henceforth, was to be actively operated by *all* groups; the meetings conducted within its walls were to be not only representative of the whole district but actually conducted, on a rotation basis, by outside groups.

The Manhattan group, seeing itself being dispossessed, set up a loud howl. There were also accusations that the Manhattanites were reluctant to give up getting first crack at the 12th Step work which flowed through the club. Whatever the causes, the result was a wrangle that might have been a scandal if it hadn't been so typically alcoholic. While the fracas lasted, AA friends who had been practically blood brothers were hurling insults at each other and threatening much worse. Emotions were at the breaking point. We had what Bill sometimes calls 'an incorporated dry bender' — and it was a little dandy!

The Directors had drawn up a new Constitution which gave representation to all groups. It has since proved to be a pretty sound document but when it was presented at a business meeting of mem-

bers of the 'corporation' (heavily loaded with Manhattanites) one of the most violent scenes in New York AA history took place. Epithets made the air an electric blue — 'thief,' 'crook' were among the more printable!

This was the culmination of months of hurt feelings. Slips were, alas, frequent. Old friendships seemed blasted beyond repair. The new constitution was passed by a narrow margin and the old Directors resigned in a body for a new set of officers to put the new plan into effect!

Violence and near-riot! But out of it came what we have today. The cracked friendships have mended nicely, thank you. And many of the wild-eyed antagonists of that brawl, closer friends than ever now, smile indulgently today when they recall it. And many of those who opposed the new order have since served faithfully and well in governing the Intergroup Association born of vituperation!

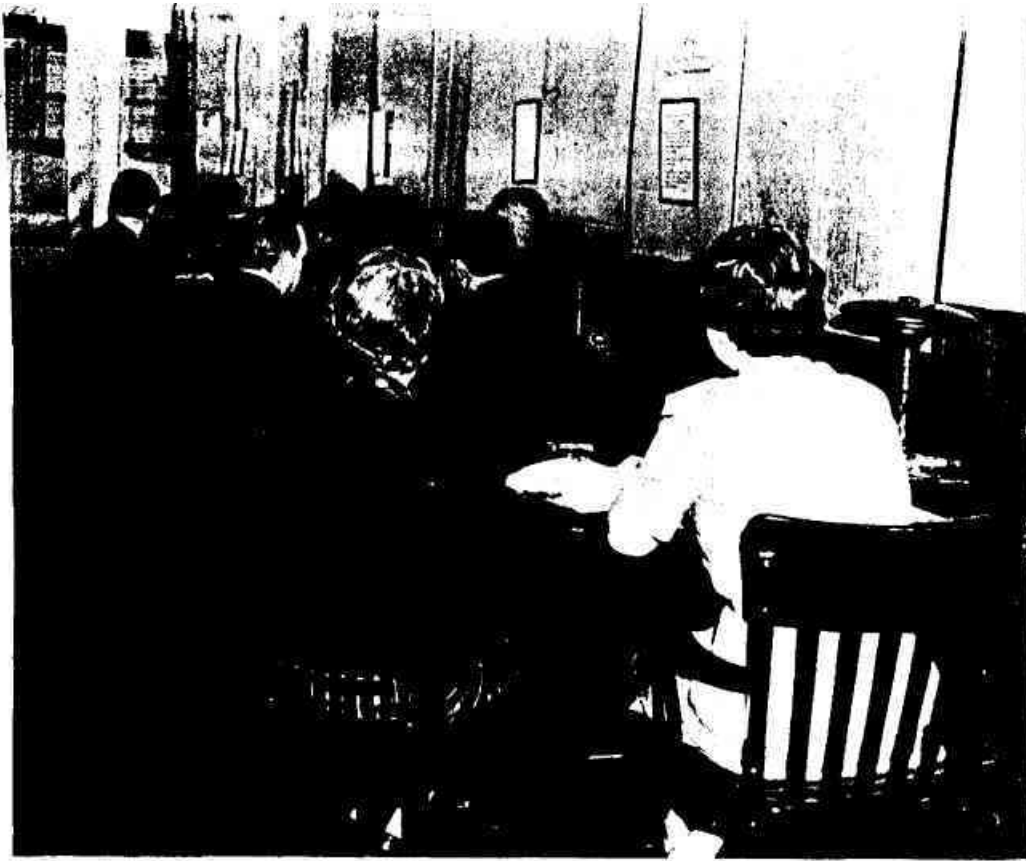
The new Board realized what none of the original Floundering Fathers had seen. *You can't run a*

clubhouse with social ends in the same establishment that caters to the basic, spiritual work of AA. The two just don't go together. Bill, whom both sides had tried to drag into the free-for-all, knew this and, from the sidelines, was quietly underlining Traditions Five and Six for it so happened that the Traditions were being put on paper at the very time all of this was going on.

Thus it was the the new-born Intergroup moved out of a clubhouse and into a modest storeroom



Thousands of incoming calls... more than 500 12th Step calls in one week...



Between two and three hundred inquiries each week...

many personal interviews...

somewhat off the beaten path. There, with new found wisdom and sober judgment, it began to do one job only, and do it well — seeing that the stranger at our door gets every possible chance at AA. With two paid secretaries and a battery of

volunteer helpers they began to whip things into shape. Proper sponsorship began to be a fact, not a hit-or-miss hope. Traffic into and out of hospitals (particularly Knickerbocker) became an orderly procedure rather than a clang! clang!

affair that had hospital officials, AA's and the drunks themselves in a never ending turmoil.

Telephone inquiries got the full, patient and serious attention they deserved. The person on the other end of the wire whether it be a desperate wife, a blubbing drunk, or someone 'calling for a friend' was handled with dignity and given specific information; not an emotional hodge-podge.

Order came out of chaos. Dignity overcame childishness and, with it, the realization that we were dealing with human lives, sometimes life and death itself. Gradually the confusion lifted. Members of suburban groups kept in systematic touch with prospects who had contacted AA in the city, being asked to participate in voluntary work at hospitals, etc., began to take real pride in their Intergroup. They were seeing results, and were actively part of an operation that was at last beginning to look and act like a truly community-wide one. In the beginning only about 50% of the groups subscribed to Intergroup and helped to defray its minimum expenses. Today, every group in the entire district is proud of its affiliation with

Intergroup and pays its group pledge even before it pays for its coffee and cakes.

In the meantime the traffic has become so heavy that New Jersey found it necessary to set up their own Intergroup. In Newark, in a clubhouse they bought outright, they have established their own operation as efficient, as heart-warming and as wonderful as the one that now functions at 114 Lexington Avenue in New York City. It is significant that, while the entire metropolitan area was one in 1946, many Jerseyites went through the famous 'purge of 1946.' The lesson was well learned — and worth all the hullabaloo!



In two weeks...

96 "cases" hospitalized.