

September 1951

EVOLUTION

(One of the earliest active lights in the Chicago group left a year or so after he joined. Since then he has been a member of groups in several cities and has visited hundreds of others across the country. Bill was asked to write about Chicago, from the standpoint of a national member who has been around a bit. His remarks follow.)

IF there is such a thing in AA, I'm a cosmopolite. But the AA I learned at Pop Dearborn's knee has served me well. Like a surprisingly large percentage of Chicago earlyies I've kept my powder dry without interruption for 12 years. Unlike most, I was uprooted from the Chicago scene and have had an opportunity to study groups on the firing line in the east, west and south. In one of these groups — Pittsburgh — I remained a member almost as long as in Chicago. Now I live in New York.

The Chicago influence is so wholesomely hearty that it spread to many groups in the south and west, where it is the habit of human beings to love one another without too much introduction. You can always sense a group that has been so influenced when you visit it, for you're made welcome.

Democracy is Keynote

From a national outlook, the important reason for the successful growth of the Chicago group is its basic democracy. There is no steering committee of a few biggies who

love their own voices and their own patented methods of drying up. Each small neighborhood group has its representation. No Chicago AA individual is too small to be heard, and if his idea is sound enough he may see his pipe dream embodied in AA tradition.

I want to talk a little about the early evolution in Chicago, because Chicago has something vital that may help other groups. I'm also a little homesick with a wholesome nostalgia, one that makes the rims of the eyes punkish even if it does not draw a tear.

His First Meeting

My first meeting was in the autumn of 1939 at Earl T.'s house. He, his non-AA wife, another AA man and Sylvia had contacted me earlier. I was not specifically invited but was told I'd be welcome. There were only six or seven members and they weren't too sure of themselves. I liked the looks of things. I resented the prayer and some Bible reading (since abandoned). Then Earl told me I better get out and do some AA work. That



Another corner of the Alano club

capped the climax. From a guy doubtful of his standing at the start of the meeting, I suddenly rose to a guy whose looks the gang seemed to like.

My first prospect was a dud and he still may be oozing at every pore. But I learned that not every drunk is an AA prospect. Shortly after I landed a fish - Chan F. - by letting him take the hook. Together we made every AA call we could get our mitts on for many months. Eventually we were swimming in AA fervor as was every

other member of the small, enthusiastic group.

Everyone - but Everyone

Before long editors came in from big papers, then other newspapermen, clergymen and a banker. With these thin skinned fellows there were butchers and bakers, advertising men, salesmen, bricklayers, steelmakers, a postman, cops, bartenders, at least one Fuller brush man, and an Indian. People got married in AA; some were divorced.

Babies were born. An AA judge performed the marriages. There were plenty of lawyers to get the divorces.

Check on Absentees

The group grew. The meeting shifted from Earl's apartment to a dining room in the Loop. Sylvia's friend, the late Grace Cultice, a non-alcoholic, became secretary of the group. At each meeting she would look over the audience and jot down who was missing. After the meeting we'd check into the absences.

Neighborhood Groups Start

The group had now reached 150. The first neighborhood group for closed meetings was set up in my house, the first get-to-gether of the neighborhood group idea that has spread throughout the country.

This smaller meeting was successful and the Chicago group was broken up into neighborhood groups that today number more than 200.

Midwest Hears Message

Johnny came in, kept sober, and took a traveling job. He carried the AA message along Chicago lines into the southwest, helping to establish AA outposts in Kansas City, Topeka, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Other Chicagoans helped organize groups in Milwau-

kee, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Des Moines, Birmingham, Little Rock, New Orleans and throughout downstate Illinois. During the bitter blizzard of 1940 Chan and I carried the gospel to Minneapolis. By spring there were 200 members there.

Saturday Night Klatsches

The weekly open house, started in Sylvia's apartment, became standard equipment. Soon there were open houses on all sides of town, where AA members and their families gathered on Saturday nights to exorcise the Demon by playing cards, bingo and indulging in heavy conversation, with coffee and food added. A downtown club was organized, then another and another.

Enthusiasm Rampant

The weekly Tuesday night meeting downtown was to endure undivided until a couple of years ago. They were open to AAs, AA prospects and AA families and provided a meeting ground in which weekly improvement could be gauged in the eyes and crow's feet of those attending.

There was always an incomparable zing in the atmosphere. Chicagoans are no folks to cry long in their beards. The faces were smiling and enthusiastic and the atmosphere electric with the grins and laughter of once hopeless

drunks getting back to their families, finding new jobs, or just jobs.

The Tuesday night meetings were the show case. The Thursday and Friday night closed meetings the working sessions. This remains so today. Speakers downtown were universally local boys or girls, usually three or four to a program.

It has been many years since I lived in Chicago. When I look back and think how fast AA has grown I realize how hard it has been to steer its many parts in right di-

rections. A lot of the personal attention I received as an AA beginner in Chicago is gone for good, except in small, local groups. There is no doubt that after a few years of international conferences, like the one in Cleveland last year, AA as such will begin to assert itself above the local frames.

But whatever happens we shall all be more completely warmed by the spirit of helpfulness and love that has made Chicago a fertile field for so many lonely hopeless guys and gals.

A card game in the Alano club, part of several recreational activities.

