

OAKLAND AND THE EAST BAY

ACROSS the bay from San Francisco . . . just a few swift minutes via the famous Bay Bridge . . . lies the sprawling, booming metropolitan area known as the East Bay. Its population center is the city of Oakland . . . humorously referred to by transbay commuters as "The Bedroom of San Francisco." For many alcoholics it has been more than just a bedroom. It has been a sick-room — bar-room — court-room and convalescent ward.

With a population nearing the one million mark, the Eastbay area has a considerable quota of alcoholics. Many of these live in the sanctuary of the AA Fellowship but many more still stumble hopelessly in the shadow-world of alcoholic delusion. The Eastbay includes the

cities of Berkeley, Alameda, Hayward, San Leandro, Piedmont, Richmond and many small townships and unincorporated areas — all served by the Eastbay Intergroup Office.

From the first faltering footsteps of a desperately sick alcoholic, who attended his first meeting in San Francisco in March, 1941, the growth of the Eastbay society has been constant. The current large membership is divided into about 25 thriving groups centering in Oakland and spreading out into the surrounding suburban territory.

It all started back in 1941, on March 15, when a "low-bottom" drunk read the article by Jack Alexander in the Saturday Evening Post. Some time before, this man's harassed wife had hopefully handed

him a small AA pamphlet only to have him give it a quick glance and pitch it into the stove ... it wasn't for him. Somehow ... the Alexander article kindled a spark of interest in him and with trembling hand he wrote a letter to New York requesting specific information. He was sent a few names to contact in Oakland and the long climb to sobriety began.

These early Oakland members traveled to San Francisco for meetings and gladly took the newcomer along. Pretty soon they decided to start their own group in Oakland. They were only four and one mem-

ber offered the use of his home for a meeting place.

Within a month, during which they eagerly spread the word to every drunk who would listen, the new group acquired about a dozen members and looked around for larger quarters. They managed to scrape up \$5 a month from the membership and rented a small room in the Oakland Y.M.C.A. for weekly meetings. They held open meetings now and then and on the occasion of Bill's first visit, in November of 1943, about a 150 hopefuls were crammed into the small room.

Bill's message instilled in the

The Oakland AA Center and Alano Club occupy a beautiful old colonial home on the shore of Lake Merritt in the heart of Oakland.



small society a feeling of kinship with other alcoholics across the nation and solid growth began. The ups and downs experienced by all new groups of these early days left some stragglers by the wayside but of the original Oakland membership three are still active in group work, some are inactive but still dry and others have moved to other cities.

In 1944, a corporation was formed which included the AA Group and an affiliated club known as the Alano Club. The membership numbered about a hundred and had outgrown the room at the Y.M.C.A. so a larger meeting hall was obtained uptown. It soon became evident that internal conflicts over club policy and AA public relations would destroy the singleness of purpose so essential to the unity of AA and the corporation was promptly dissolved.

The Alano Club formed its own corporate structure and AA was on its own with a tiny office in a downtown building. The entire East Bay was divided into zones, with a captain for each zone to handle Twelfth Step calls. Groups soon formed in these zones until they covered virtually every area and neighborhood in the metropolitan district and adjacent communities.

The Oakland-Eastbay Intergroup Office performs those services for groups and individuals which are now a part of our three-fold legacy from Bill, Dr. Bob and the Alco-

holic Foundation.

Open meetings are conducted in a large hall in downtown Oakland twice each month and a few groups in outlying areas hold open meetings under their own auspices.

The Intergroup Office is now located in the same building as the Alano Club but remains a separate entity. The two function smoothly as an AA Center housed in a spacious old colonial mansion, beautifully situated on the shore of picturesque Lake Merritt, in the heart of Oakland. The building provides a large lounge, coffee bar ... a glass enclosed veranda for card players and television fans, as well as numerous other rooms for meetings, beginners groups, and discussion groups.

The Nolano Club, composed of non-alcoholic members of AA families, also uses the facilities of the building for its meetings, and its members have furnished the building with new drapes, a touch of paint here and there, and generally added much to the friendly atmosphere of the center.

Incidentally, East Bay's non-alcoholic Family Group is one of the oldest in the country and pursues a highly successful program designed to spread understanding among those whose lives have been battered out of shape from years of intimate and heart-breaking association with the sick alcoholic. It is largely through the work of the group that many East Bay families

have been helped through trying days of drying out . . . those tense periods well known to many . . . when recriminations and ghosts of the terrible past threaten to knock the props from under the new life.

Like all large population centers, Oakland has a Skid Row and a Skid Row Group. Officially designated as "Number Seven," this group is a steadfast AA entity. From an obscure beginning, when a few uptown members, themselves former denizens of the alleys and doorways, became interested in the plight of the alcoholic down-and-outers and helped them form a group, Number Seven has won the respect of all. The group has spacious permanent quarters on "The Row."

Traditional with Number Seven are the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners when the doors are thrown open to all who have no place to go. It is routine for the group to feed a sumptuous holiday feast to as many as 600 lonely humans and to provide them with their first glimpse of the bounty AA offers. God alone knows where the provisions come from to supply these banquets and even he won't tell, but it is the very essence of the Twelfth Step in action. Many respected and successful members of the East Bay community glimpsed their first ray of hope over a cup of hot coffee at Number Seven.

The East Bay Intergroup Institu-

tional Committee performs a vital AA function in carrying the message to people whose problem swept them all the way out of society into confinement in the several institutions and the Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center. . . in reality the County Jail. In recent years local authorities have come to realize that alcoholics present a unique problem and that punishment by legislative action is valueless as a treatment for disease.

AA enjoys the enthusiastic support of the local judiciary, clergy and medical profession as a result of the success of its approach to the baffling problem of the incarcerated alcoholic. This work brings hope and help to those whose lives seem utterly blighted, with all hope gone. AA meetings are held in mental hospitals and the prison farm on a regular weekly basis. At regular intervals open meetings are convened where AA speakers from outside groups share the platform with inmate speakers.

As in other regions throughout the land, the original Oakland group started an expanding movement which has spread all through the surrounding territory . . . extending as far as Sacramento, the State Capital. The Sacramento story is a colorful bit of local AA lore. A woefully beset woman in Sacramento, whose brother was about to disappear down the drain of alcoholic despair, somehow got the name and address of one of Oakland's

first four AAs. She telephoned and poured out a story of complete distraction ... a story well known to AA people and their families.

She loaded the sodden brother in her car and drove the hundred miles to Oakland. Refusing to take no for an answer, the desperate woman dumped her befuddled brother into the laps of an almost befuddled group of alcoholics who were themselves still in the "baby" stage of sobriety.

With typical alcoholic zeal they shot the newcomer full of paraldehyde and started a drying out process. They watched over him like hawks — each member standing a shift — and after loading him with vitamins, food and the recovery program they finally got him on his

feet. As soon as he was steady enough they took him to a meeting and when it was over he grabbed the first bus to Sacramento. There he went into action . . . collaring his drunken friends and organizing a new group. When he finally rounded up a few who would attend a meeting he telephoned his friends in Oakland for help. The Oaklanders pooled their slender resources, promoted a rattle-trap jalopy, and took off for the State Capitol to conduct its first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

So the story goes ... all through the East Bay, down into the valleys, up into the Sierra Nevada ... it's the same story of growth that AA experiences wherever it starts.

