

August 1997

Alaska — Cold Sober

SPECIAL FEATURE

Cold Sober AA in Alaska

In September, AA in Alaska will celebrate thirty years. This article is based on material sent to the Grapevine by Cynthia S., of Anchorage, Alaska.

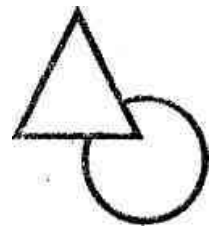
Way up toward Point Barrow in Alaska, a couple of prospectors got themselves a cabin and a case of Scotch. The weather turned bitter, fifty below, and they got so drunk they let the fire go out. Barely escaping death by freezing, one of them woke up in time to rekindle the fire. He was prowling around outside for fuel, and he looked into an empty oil drum filled with frozen water. Down in the ice cake he saw a reddish-yellow object. When thawed out, it was seen to be an AA book. One of the pair read the book and sobered up. Legend has it that he became the founder of one of our farthest north groups."

—As Bill Sees It, page 245



It didn't take long for AA to reach the frozen North. The first printing of the Big Book was in 1939, and the first mention of "Inquiry from Alaska" to General Headquarters (now GSO) came in 1940. By 1947, Alaska had two groups listed at Headquarters: the Anchorage Sourdough Group with eight members, and the Juneau Totem Club with five members. AA was well enough known in that year for someone to place the following advertisement in the Anchorage Times: "Wish to contact members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Write Box 551, Anchorage." By 1953, Alaska had 112 members in nine cities. (There is confusion about which is the oldest group in Alaskan history since many groups were formally registered much after their start.)

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SPECIAL FEATURE

In April 1976, E.V. C. recalled: "The Anchorage Group — originally called the Anchorage Sourdough Group — was started by Joe Y. and grew by leaps and bounds. By the time I attended my first meeting in July 1949, there were probably fifty people at that meeting. The featured speaker was Cecil M. that evening, who was a moving force in AA. Some of the things that have happened in and around Anchorage were tragic as hell, and some were hilarious; however, it is a miracle the number of people who have passed through AA in Anchorage and managed to stay sober."

Alaska's wide-ranging geography — with its mountains, valleys, glaciers, wide rivers, city-sized lakes, deep snows, icy roads, and extreme temperatures (80 above to 50 below) — makes carrying the message to many parts of Alaska a testament to going to any length. For example, AA began in District 10 (Wrangell, Ketchikan, Prince of Wales Island, and remote communities in that region) when an AA meeting was held aboard the fishing vessel "North Star" in the Wrangell boat harbor in 1958. The group continued to meet sporadically throughout the years, and today its thirty members meet at a church. A more recent example is the 1996 Roundup which was held in Soldotna during October, when the first snows of the year fell — over two feet in two days. What should have been a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Anchorage became a four-hour drive through whiteout conditions. But hundreds of Alaskans showed up, as well as AAs visiting from out of state, to spend a weekend fellowshiping with other AAs.

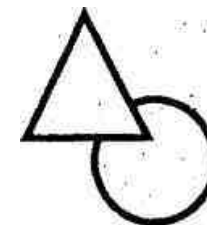
Poppa Joe E, often called the elder statesman of Anchorage AA, always said, "You can't run any farther — when you get to Alaska, you either sober up or die." The history of AA in Alaska includes many colorful characters and Poppa Joe was one. He was sober for nineteen years before he died in 1985, and during that time he helped hundreds of Alaskans gain sobriety — many of them destitute drunks from Fourth Avenue (there also were plenty of insurance brokers and bankers). He also managed the Alano Club for fourteen years. According to his close friend, Lou S., Joe arrived in Alaska as a drunk in 1961, after losing his job and leaving his wife and children in Tennessee. Lou said, "Joe lived on the streets, sleeping on the hot air grates downtown, stealing booze from grocery stores, and spending a lot of time in jail." In 1966, Joe de-

ecided he wanted help, and he called Lou one day from a liquor store. Lou said, "I told him, 'Just back out of the store and don't buy anything, and I'll be there in ten minutes.'" Lou became Joe's sponsor, and took a personal interest in helping him recover. Lou said that Joe would sometimes provoke drunks until they would stay sober "just to prove to that SOB that they could."

One of the members of the North Star Group with the most notoriety was a dance hall girl named Virginia M. who continued to practice her chosen profession after becoming a member of AA. She always brought her husky/wolf mixed breed to meetings. Later she married a photographer and moved to Los Angeles where she met Walt Disney, who said he was looking for a dog just like hers to star in *Nikki — Dog of the North*. Virginia made several trips back to Alaska to get dogs and wolves for different movies. She became very wealthy, moved to Montana, and died sober in 1990.

Jorgy J. joined AA in 1966, and went to the three meetings a week available in Fairbanks at that time. In 1971, four married couples, including Jorgy and his wife, bought property and co-signed a loan to build an Alano Club on it; it was completed in 1975. Jorgy says there was a big boom in AA membership in 1972, attributed to the pipeline oil boom, and also to the fact that the state started funding counseling centers for alcoholics (membership more than doubled from 347 members and forty-one groups in 1971 to 732 members and forty-four groups in 1975). Jorgy said that before the changes brought about by treatment centers in the sev-

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SPECIAL FEATURE

enties, new members were most frequently referred by a local judge. Jorgy also talks about how, at the 1975 International AA Convention in Denver, everyone held hands when they said the Lord's Prayer, and Alaskans brought the practice of hand holding back to their home state; at the time, Jorgy said, "AA's going to hell." In 1980, everyone began hugging and he thought, "Now we're really going to hell." But he said, "Who am I to say?" (He notes that the Hardcore Group, which he helped to found in Anchorage, still doesn't hold hands.)

David S. of the North Star Group helped Jorgy J. build the Alano Club, and he has been in correspondence with Smitty, Dr. Bob's son, for years. Dave says that he is from the old school. He makes his sponsees — even his computer-literate ones — write everything out by hand. He says he has chaired over 1,000 meetings, and not one of them was on gratitude: David asserts, "Gratitude is not a word in AA. I'll see it in your actions — washing ashtrays, making coffee, sponsoring people. I don't want to hear someone share for fifteen minutes about how grateful they are."



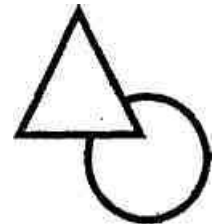
Jonathan from Fairbanks, speaking at an Old-timer's Speaker's Meeting, stated: "I went to my first meeting in October 1965. I was twenty-two and in the military. I got sent to AA by a psychiatrist in Germany after I ended up in a room with no door handles on my side. Back in those days it was a moral failing if you drank like I did. In the three years I was in Germany, I went to lots of meetings. I drank on the way to meetings, and I drank in between meetings. I sobered up in 1970. A lot of things I heard in meetings had happened to me, and I was desperate. I'm real grateful that I had had enough. When I came to Alaska in 1972, I asked Alaska Bob to be my sponsor. I could sense Alaska Bob just walking into a room — the spiri-

tuality he had. It took me about a year to start feeling better, I was so sick. They told me, 'No smoking left-handed cigarettes' — no dope. They'd pick me up and say, 'Get in the van and shut up,' and we'd visit some wet drunk. Poppa Joe did a hell of a job for the Alano Club. People grabbed hold of new people, and old-timers had meetings after the meetings where they met with newcomers. I've been involved with service work almost since the beginning. There were things I just didn't know how to do and people gave me lots of room to learn."

Marge F.'s first experience in AA was in 1953. She got sober and then drank again in Virginia, stayed drunk in Germany and Japan, started a group in Yokohama, had a glass of champagne at five years, came back in May 1960, her sobriety date. Marge says that when she came up to Alaska a second time, "There weren't many meetings, maybe one meeting a night. It was slow going here for a while. I joined the Gold Rush Group which has moved and moved lots of times. It's been in hotels, laundry facilities, bingo halls — it was like a traveling crap game. The group has about fifty members today and has met in a hotel on Lake Hood for a few years now. I used to go to lots of meetings, but now only one or two a week." Marge says she has been around Alaska AA for so long that "I'm part of AA. It's my life."

A Native Alaskan AA, sober since October 1977, recently told this story: "The people I remember from sobering up were Poppa Joe, John F., and Irish C., who encouraged me to stay away from Fourth Avenue in downtown Anchorage. Fourth is full of bars and staggering

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SPECIAL FEATURE

drunks. Everyone knew everyone else there, and they were always offering drinks, so I stayed at the Alano Club. I didn't have any money for dues, and when Poppa Joe came around hollering, 'Dues time!' he just stopped and put his arm around me and said, 'Don't worry about it, kid, just grab a broom sometime.' John F. was the fire chief, and I thought he was a policeman since his radio was always going off. There were seven or eight Native Alaskans in meetings then — like Esther (an Athabaskan woman), Sophie, Bill W. (who started a group at the Native hospital), and Ralph A. (who started what is known as ANARC — a Native recovery center). I looked at these other Native Alaskans staying sober back then, and I knew that Natives couldn't stay sober very long, so I waited, and I watched them. Bill W. died sober, Esther and Sophie are still sober, and so I'm still waiting."

There are still many areas in Alaska that have no phones, no AA companionship, and no meetings. Alaskan AAs carry the message into outlying areas through "village support," film libraries, and the Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM). Members of village support groups visit AAs in small villages, help set up AA meetings, and help the Native community to include traditional advisement and spiritual guidance. Speaker tapes in some Native languages have been produced. Fairbanks has produced many tapes of speakers meetings, with the permission of the speaker, to be borrowed and re-recorded at no cost — they are mailed out to doctors, teachers, pipeline workers, hunters, fishing families, and any AA who can get mail delivered to them.

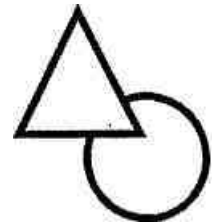
Slopers, Homers, Loners, and Internationalists

Slopers are pipeline and oil workers in remote northern sites who must drive many miles between pipeline camps, often in extremely cold weather, to hold meetings. Homers are homebound, ill, or disabled AAs. Loners are people who are in landlocked, and/or remote areas and Internationalists are seagoing members. Throughout the history of Alaskan AA, there have always been frequent listings of Loners, and Loner Sponsors are active all over Alaska, serving as connections to Homers, Loners, and Internationalists. The sponsors are people who can attend meetings on a regular basis, who call, write, or send tapes to their long-distance sponsees. One Internationalist is Cefas (pronounced "key-

fuss") S. who went to sea as a merchant marine for more than twenty years in his drinking days. Every time he sobered up from drinking, his pockets were full of AA brochures, and he didn't know how they got there. He said a lot of sober seamen had belonged to the Loner's Group, so he became a Loner and continued in the merchant marines for five years after he sobered up, but quit because he wanted to go to "live" meetings. Poppa Joe became his sponsor for ten years. Cefas has started many meetings in the Anchorage area, including the Salty Dog Group in 1976, and, with Jorgy J. and Jack G., the Hardcore Group which was to be the kind of AA that was a "no-nonsense" meeting. Cefas still runs the Hardcore Group, but he started the Dinosaur Group in 1996 — for an AA meeting which doesn't sign court papers. "You will not get your papers signed at the Dinosaur Group," Cefas said. "You come there not because you have to but because you want to."

Tom K., member of the Plug in the Jug Group, sober since October 1974, writes about his experience starting a meeting in a remote community: "I was in Anchorage for a short time prior to heading back out to Adak [one of a string of large and small islands called the Aleutians] to complete a king crab fishing season. That's where my last drunk took place. After attending meetings daily for about ten days, I needed to return to Adak or lose my slot on the boat. They already had a guy hired just in case I didn't show up. I'd heard all the horror stories of those who left the nest too early, and I knew I could easily wind up drunk. Eventually, with a Big Book under my arm, floating on a pink cloud, I flew back

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SPECIAL FEATURE

out there. The navy on Adak introduced me to another recovering alcoholic whose anonymity was top secret. This led to several of us starting the Adak Group. We met for another seven or eight weeks in between crabbing trips. When the season was over, I returned to Anchorage sober, with a few thousand bucks in my pocket to continue my new sober life. It was the first time I'd cashed my fishing check and actually used it to open an account and pay a month's rent in advance (on a one-room apartment a block away from the Alano Club). Several months later, in August 1974, the fishing season began in Cordova. There wasn't a group there, just a small box of AA literature from a minister. In the library meeting room, a few interested alcoholics and I started the Cordova Group, eventually known as the High and Dry Group, still going today."

In 1986, the Alaska area newsletter printed a story from "Sober in Sand Point," with a 1982 sobriety date, which states:

"Hi. My name is Dutch, and I would like to say that the newsletter makes my day. I live out in the Aleutian Islands, and it gets a little lonely being the only member of AA on my island. I have my Big Book, and *Came to Believe*, and I am fortunate enough to have six or seven persons with whom I write regularly. It is good to read the newsletter to see how other members are growing in sobriety."

John M. recently wrote about AA in one remote area: "The stove didn't put out heat very well, so we all huddled around it. Our breaths were blowing out clouds of mist from the cold. 'How it Works' and the Twelve Traditions had been translated into Yupik Eskimo for us. The meeting was pretty well attended. Bill H. became our first G.S.R., and we had designated officers and coffeemakers for awhile. When the oil

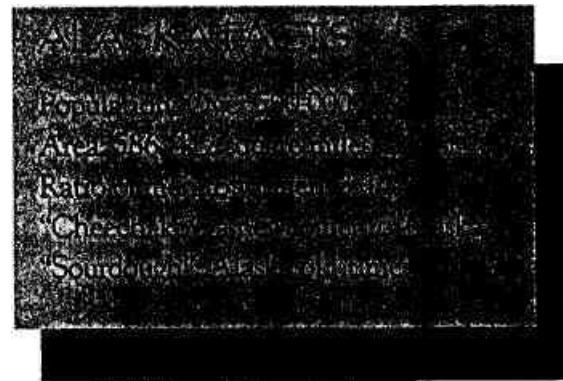


bill came, we usually had to chip in in order to pay it. The group is slowly growing, although members with some sobriety are usually transient. Most members are court-ordered."

Today, AA in Alaska is thriving. In 1975, there were about 11 meetings a week in the state; a decade later, there were 100 a week, and now there are about 200 meetings a week in the Anchorage area alone, and thousands of AA members around the state. AA in Alaska is a success story — the success of going to any length to carry the message.



On May 9-12, a Special AA Regional Forum was held in Alaska, with sessions in Ketchikan, Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. Members of the GSO and Grapevine staffs, along with the Pacific Regional Trustee and a Class A (nonalcoholic) Trustee traveled with the area delegate to all four cities to meet with interested AAs and exchange information.



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