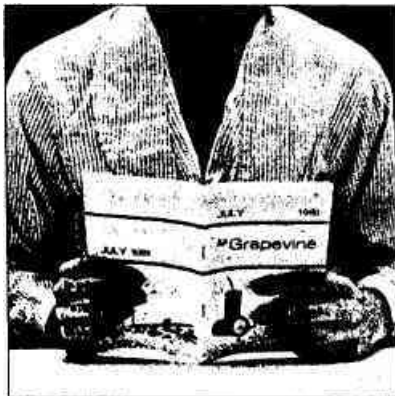


June 1994

THE AA GRAPEVINE: A GLIMPSE OF HISTORY



My first contact with the Grapevine was in July 1961 at a drunk farm in Kent, Connecticut, called High Watch, an AA-oriented, spiritual spot. I had been dumped there a few days before to sober up. After years of daily drinking, I had gotten cirrhosis of the liver. Unable to stop boozing, I had experienced two massive esophageal hemorrhages, each of which put me in the hospital close to dying. On the second of these visits, when my doctor discovered I had smuggled a bottle of vodka into my sickroom and was happily soused, he fired me and sent me to a psychiatrist



who practiced in the same suite of offices he did. The shrink's name was Dr. Harry Tiebout, who, with his patient Marty M., the first woman to have sustained sobriety in AA, had brought Alcoholics Anonymous to my town of Greenwich, Connecticut. Dr. Tiebout told me his science could not help my disease and phoned the man who became my first sponsor and took me to my first AA meetings. But I was too sick, too mokus, to stop drinking, so I was packed off to High Watch.

There, as I came out of my fog, full of anger, resentment, and gloom, I

picked up some of the dog-eared old Grapevines in the parlor of the main house. And in their soiled and worn pages, I got my first dim glimpse that it might — just — be possible to have a reasonably happy and productive life without alcohol. That was the first time this particular thought had occurred to me in my adult life. It was the beginning of acceptance. I have not had a drink since.

My next encounter with the Grapevine came a year or two later as an outgrowth of serving as my home group's representative to the New York Intergroup. Doris, the secretary of the Intergroup office, discovered I had writing and public relations experience and asked me to help out on their public information committee. There I met Barry L., another writer who volunteered at both the General Service Office and the Grapevine.

Persuaded by him that the magazine might use my services, I went with him, shyly yet eagerly, to 305 East 45th Street, the 18th floor, where both GSO and the Grapevine were ensconced. What a thrill! I was escorted on a tour around GSO and even met Bill W. He stuck out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Bill and I'm a drunk." That was the extent of our conversation.

At the Grapevine, I met Paula C., a kind of staff-member-of-all-work. In those days, the editors were outside volunteers; and at that time, it was Gurney W, which really impressed me, for I had known Gurney when he was humor editor of *Colliers* magazine. When Paula found out I was from Greenwich, she told me Jack M. was helping them as an art director, production assistant, and cartoonist. (Jack M. was creator of the long-running cartoon feature, "Victor E.") I knew Jack

from the Greenwich meetings, but hadn't known he worked at the Grapevine. So I began to do occasional volunteer chores for the Grapevine. Before long, a vacancy came up on the Grapevine Board of Directors, and I was invited to fill it. The nine-person Board of interesting and able people met quarterly to try to deal with the personnel and policy problems which beset the magazine — and most of all, the lack of money.

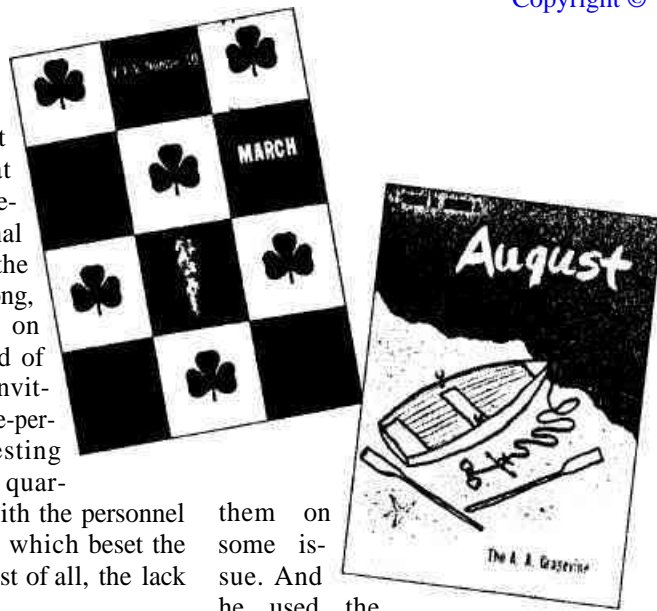
Bill W. used to drop in on the Board meetings on an ex-officio basis. I learned that he was a great friend of the Grapevine. He had given it his full personal support from its very beginning, and whenever he spoke of it or wrote about it, it was with obvious enthusiasm and affection. At one point, when the magazine had occupied dilapidated quarters in the basement of a condemned old building on Minetta Lane in Greenwich Village, Bill had kept a big, antique desk in the office. And he was always interested in its organization and operation, as well as writing frequently for it.

There were several reasons for his interest. Bill perceived early that this was a means for him to communicate directly with the Fellowship without going through the Board of Trustees — especially when he was at odds with

them on some issue. And he used the Grapevine for this purpose frequently and effectively. The Traditions were born and grew to their present form in a series of articles in the latter 1940s, beginning with a 1946 piece entitled "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future." In 1950, when a majority of the trustees seemed opposed to the idea, Bill and Dr. Bob used the Grapevine to propose a General Service Conference through which the AA membership as a whole would take over. Later, after nearly twelve years of trying to bring about a change in the ratio of alcoholic to nonalcoholic trustees on the Board, Bill wrote about it in the Grapevine, and the change was voted in that same year.

I also learned about some of the Grapevine's colorful history.

The idea for the magazine was apparently born in early April 1944 in



the apartment of Lois K., a three-years-sober, enthusiastic member, in the New York City suburb of White Plains. Lois K. recalls that someone pulled from his pocket a two-page newsletter gotten out by Cleveland. Obviously an amateur effort, it was nevertheless exciting. The next day, Lois hied herself up to Stepping Stones to see Bill W. While he sprawled full-length on the floor before the stone fireplace, she broached her idea: "How about a newspaper or magazine for the groups in New York?" After a brief discussion, Bill said, "Go to it. And blessings on you."

A few nights later, Lois K. found herself in a small eatery on 23rd Street with Marty M. and Priscilla P. Marty M. (whom I knew myself) later remembered, "We had no conception of what was on her mind, but when she laid out her plans, we were swept with enthusiasm. We agreed a monthly publication for AAs in the New York area was needed, and if it spread beyond that, so much the better. We agreed to help her get it started, and we agreed delightedly on a name: The Grapevine."

The three women immediately drew in Chase H., Abbott "Bud" T., and Maeve. Grace O. (and her nonalcoholic husband, Fulton, a noted magazine editor and book author, whom I also knew) helped as well, along with Kay M., who worked on the outside as a proofreader. Felicia G. (later Felicia M.) was a Grapevine writer from the very beginning — and was still con-

tributing to the magazine in the 1980s. (She was a friend of mine, as well.)

As World War II was very much in progress in 1944, part of the original concept was that the new publication would be a means of communication with AAs in the service. The initial issue contained a feature, "Mail Call for All AAs in the Armed Forces." The first issue was also mailed to the secretaries of all 300 groups in the country.

The little group of volunteers gathered on May 22, 1944 in a small Manhattan apartment to see the first issue off the press. The first print order was for 1,200 at a cost of \$187.10 to print and mail, and they had no way to know whether they would sell enough copies at 15 cents per, or gather enough subscriptions, to even pay for a second issue. But they did, with a heartening number of subscriptions coming in from AA groups outside the New York area.

Marty M., who was just organizing the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism (later the NCA), began touring the country in October in support of that cause. She carried copies of the Grapevine with her, talked about it with groups and individual members, and brought home material from distant locations — and many subscriptions as well. Within a year, the Grapevine was carrying on its masthead, "The National Monthly Journal of Alcoholics Anonymous," and only four years later, it had earned the right to change the word "National" to "International."

The first few months were utter chaos. The tiny staff was almost entirely amateur. There was no office; they worked in each other's apartments. How to handle and mail subscriptions baffled them. They had trouble finding a bank that would accept their account. They finally found their first office, which they furnished with a long work table, six chairs, a big standing lamp — and a coffeepot.

Around its first birthday, the Grapevine hired a part-time nonalcoholic typist-clerk, Bill W.'s younger half-sister, Helen Evans. She laughingly remembers the office was in disarray, with the subscriptions in confusion and the financial records kept on slips of paper in treasurer Bud T.'s shirt pocket. Shortly, the landlord appropriated their office space for wartime housing, and they moved to the basement of an old church building at 41st Street and Ninth Avenue that was then a clubhouse for AAs. It was impossible to get a phone in wartime, so they had to use a pay phone on the corner for Grapevine calls.

When the old clubhouse building was sold, the Grapevine was homeless again. By pulling strings, they got the city to permit the basement of a condemned building on Minetta Lane to



be used as an office. The accommodations were barely marginal — dark and dingy, with slanting wooden floors. Derelict drunks congregated on the stoop. Yet not only did the magazine grow at a surprisingly rapid rate, but a number of organizational improvements were introduced in the business and circulation side of the office.

Over the years, the "Monthly Journal" has been exciting reading. It reported on AA's Tenth Anniversary Convention in Cleveland in July 1945 — and every International Convention since. Bill wrote in 1945 about "pill problems." Lois W. wrote her story, presaging the formation of Al-Anon. Dr. E.M. Jellinek used the Grapevine to publish a questionnaire on alcoholism that led to his famous chart tracing "Phases of Alcohol Addiction."

Many articles by early friends of AA enriched the pages of the Grapevine: Sister Ignatia, Dr. William Silkworth, Dr. Harry Tiebout, Rev. Sam Shoemaker, Fulton Oursler, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, and San Quentin Warden Clinton Duffy. Other notable contributors included: Upton Sinclair, Charles Jackson, Paul de Kruif, Gerald Heard, James Thurber, Aldous Huxley, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dr. Karl Menninger and Senator Margaret Chase Smith.

The Preamble originated in the Grapevine. As the magazine began cir-

culating to outsiders, it was desirable to make clear to them just what AA is and what it is not. So in June 1947 the editor, Tom Y., wrote and published the succinct little Preamble, borrowing much of the phrasing from the Foreword to the first edition of the Big Book (and just incidentally, introducing five of the principles which shortly became Traditions). Although still used for public information purposes, the Preamble came to be printed in much of the Conference-approved literature. Along the way, groups and larger gatherings began to read it to open meetings, presumably as a painless way to inform the newcomer about the nature of the organization where he finds himself. The custom spread until today the Preamble is read tens of thousands of times every day at the beginning of meetings around the world.

The Grapevine is also credited with being the prime means by which the Serenity Prayer came into common use in the Fellowship. As related in *AA Comes of Age*, an early member who saw the prayer in a New York Times obituary in 1939 showed it to Bill W, who wrote, "Never had we seen so much AA in so few words." It was immediately printed on cards which were enclosed in letters from the office, and was printed in AA pamphlets. After the Grapevine commenced publication in 1944, it carried the Serenity Prayer



regularly, as it has ever since. Thus the prayer was widely and spontaneously assimilated into the group meetings, a source of help and comfort to millions of members over the years.

Between Tom Y. and Gurney W, the Grapevine had a number of other outstanding volunteer editors: Al S., who later helped Bill W. at the General Service Office and composed AA's Responsibility Declaration; Sig H. and Sig S., who were strong editors and experienced businessmen; and Don G., a well-known radio broadcaster who strengthened the Grapevine staff.

The first part-time paid editor, hired in January 1962, was Jerome "Jerry" E. A talented editor, Jerry was also strong-willed, sometimes contentious, and apparently caused serious enough problems that he was asked to resign fifteen months later.

About the time I became a director, we hired the next part-time paid editor, Tom W, who served three years but also caused problems. With a strong alcoholic ego, he was inclined to issue abrupt commands to his back-up staff and, in their view, to make hasty, pressured decisions. He also failed to consult us on the Board with some editorial decisions which got the



Grapevine in trouble with its subscribers, and through them, with the General Service Board. And so Tom W. was also asked to leave.

Meanwhile, as a member of the

Grapevine Board — a service responsibility I enjoyed from 1964 to 1972 — I came to have enormous respect and affection for Paula C., who had joined the Grapevine staff two years earlier. Paula, a tallish woman with deep-set eyes and a long, female-Lincolnesque face, was extraordinarily strong, capable, compassionate and wise. In addition to an intuitive editorial sense, she was superb in her relationships with people: staff, Board, contributors, everyone. In January 1968, Paula was appointed managing editor with administrative responsibility for the entire operation.

At the same time, my friend Jack M., who had joined the Grapevine staff in 1960, at first part-time and later full-time, was making great contributions to the magazine as artist, art director, and production person. He also had an excellent "feel" for material that would appeal to AA readers; but, by his own admission, he was no administrator.

Wisely, the Grapevine Board recog-

nized that Paula and Jack had a unique combination of abilities between them. So, in March 1969, the Board gave them joint and equal responsibility for the magazine. The way the arrangement worked out in practice was that Paula selected the material (subject to Jack's agreement), corresponded with contributors and others, and dealt with the Board and the General Service Conference. Jack designed and laid out each issue (subject to Paula's agreement) and carried it through production.

They were ably assisted by Janet G., who worked part-time as copy editor and proofreader. Janet had a lifetime of solid editorial experience on the pulp magazines of the day, and had such an eye for mistakes that she made the Grapevine (and other work she later did for AA World Services publishing) virtually error-free.

There followed a six-year era when the quality of the magazine was consistently excellent, the circulation nearly doubled, and the staff functioned smoothly, with good relations with the Board. The Grapevine Board enjoyed the services of some exceptional leaders: legendary Class A trustee Austin McCormick was its mainstay for eighteen years; Dr. Milton Maxwell, who later became chairman of the AA General Service Board, served the Grapevine for five years.

In 1972, I rotated off both the Grapevine Board and the General Service Board, only to become general

manager of GSO two years later, a position I held for ten years. The offices were then at 468 Park Avenue South, where I was able to keep in close touch with the magazine.

In the early 1970s, in recognition of the impending retirement of both Paula C. and Jack M., the Grapevine Board entered a period of restructuring. For many years, job responsibilities had been determined by the specific skills and strengths of two talented longtime staff people, and replacing them was difficult. There were several false starts:

a succession of managing editors was hired and then fired, and the operation began to shift from the primacy of the magazine and its editorial staff, to greater emphasis on "promotion" and production of magazine-related items — with some negative reaction from AA members. For a number of years, the chief executive was Retha G., a noneditorial administrator.

As the operation grew, the Grapevine directors added a full-time controller to the staff, in the person of Don Meurer, a nonalcoholic thoroughly familiar with all aspects of AA.

In 1985, the deaths of copy editor Janet G. and of Tom N. (who had taken Jack M.'s place in design and production) caused all job responsibilities to be reevaluated. Ames S. was hired

and designated managing editor, and a part-time freelance designer took over layout and some production.

The Grapevine's restructuring was not fully resolved until 1987, when team management was established. Ann W. assumed overall charge of the operation as executive editor, once again making an editor the chief executive; Ames S. as managing editor, and Bob Scherer, the current nonalcoholic controller, completed the management team which is now still in place.

This was the situation when I rotated from my GSO service in 1987 — and this was the end of my first-hand knowledge of the Grapevine. Today, as simply a subscriber and devoted reader of the magazine, I am gratified to see it is as helpful and exciting as it has always been — a "meeting in print," a sharing of AA experience, strength, and hope, and one of the Fellowship's important tools of sobriety.

Bill W. put it best himself: "The Grapevine is the mirror of AA thought and action, worldwide. It is a sort of magic carpet on which all of us can travel from one distant AA outpost to another, and it has become a wonderful exchange medium of our current thought and experience."

Robert P., Riverside, Conn.

