

The Longest-Running Story in Alcoholics Anonymous:

The Story of the AA Grapevine

Men of Extinction

(The first in a series of portraits of men who enjoyed the finer things in life.)



*Eustis Bagley, III,
Bon Vivant and Collector of Old Bottles*

"An alcoholic is a person with two feet firmly planted in mid-air."

"An alcoholic is a person who finds he has nothing in common with himself."

"I was a lot like the guy who shot his wife with a bow and arrow so as not to wake the children."

These one-liners from early issues of the Grapevine suggest one of the continuing threads that runs through every one of its 600 issues — humor. From the stale jokes of "Barleycorn" in 1945, via "Short Snorts" and "Once Over Lightly," to the even worse jests that often grace "Ham on Wry" today, the comedy that laughs at self, the wit that makes points with a gentle (or not so gentle) twist, the humor that hints at humility — these have characterized AA's magazine just as they do AA meetings.

Most people outside the AA Fellowship are puzzled by AA humor: Why do those alxies laugh at stuff that just isn't funny? A good answer can be found in a filler from the May 1950 is-

sue: "What profiteth a man if he has gained sobriety and lost his sense of humor?" And eleven years later, in the February 1961 issue, an editor's note observed: " 'We laugh,' a philosopher once said, 'because if we didn't, we'd cry.' The poignancy of this remark is peculiarly appreciated by the alcoholic whose life has so often been touched by a brush of humor along with the tragedy."

The laughter that heals is laughter at ourselves. The same issue contained an article asking, "How is your D.Q.? (Drunk Quotient)." Noting that the standard questions used to determine alcoholism often fell short of identifying "the real alcoholic," T. W. R. from Virginia suggested a new set, including: "Did you ever look through drawn shades to see if it was three A.M. or three P.M.?" "Did you ever drive a car because you were too drunk to walk?"

Although stories provide our best healing, cartoons can occasionally skewer even those who resist identifying. Early Grapevine caricaturists produced "Alky Album," which afforded a strong antidote to stinking thinking

in an era very conscious of slips. The January 1947 "Alky Album," for example, featured a garishly attired female flamboyantly proclaiming, "A few drinks help me get over my shyness."



Another early cartoon series, "Men of Extinction," parodied an advertisement for intoxicants: a sloppily dressed vagrant, for example, interrupted in his trash-can rummaging, straining to look dignified, is captioned "Eustis Bagley III, Bon Vivant and Collector of Old Bottles." And in the category of grandiosity even in the act of hitting bottom, the July

1945 issue recorded the reaction of a still-drinking alcoholic on seeing an American Airlines plane, the company's "AA" painted on its wings, passing over his house: "If they're going to all that trouble to get me, I might just as well give up now."

The Grapevine and AA Storytelling

But humor, and the sobriety it guards, is only one of the continuities to be found in fifty years of the Grapevine. Another is stories. Like the laughter that heals, stories are of the essence of



Alcoholics Anonymous, and the evolution of storytelling in the Grapevine reveals much about storytelling within Alcoholics Anonymous.

In AA itself, the practice of telling stories of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" was not planned; it sort of snuck in. The earliest AAs, leaving the Oxford Group, wanted to avoid the style of "witnessing" used by that group. They soon discovered, however, that the only way to answer the questions raised by newcomers was to tell the story of their own experience, strength, and hope.

The story of storytelling in the Grapevine is a little more complex. The Grapevine began as a local newsletter — a newspaper that linked the rapidly spreading groups of New York City by providing news of area events and activities. It was not the first such effort by members of Alcoholics Anonymous: such publications as the Cleveland *Central Bulletin* and the Los Angeles *Eye-Opener* gave impetus to the Grapevine. Its format consisted primarily of articles and reports: suggestions for "hospital work," columns recommending books to be read and hobbies to be engaged in, news of groups forming and reports on how they operated. Many of the early lead articles were by nonalcoholics: Doctors Haggard and Jellinek, writers Philip Wylie, Fulton Oursler, and S. J. Perelman.

Some stories, very brief ones, do peek in around the corners, and most of them entered the earliest issues as a result of a very specific circumstance. The Grapevine's editors sent copies of their paper to all AA members serving in the military in World War II — 300 of them, 40 of whom had lived in the New York City area. Letters in the "Mail Call for All AAs in the Armed Forces" column, which began in the first issue, attest that many groups wrote letters to keep in touch with their members in the military, but that "newsy papers" were most appreciated

by members cut off from AA life and companionship.

And the servicemen wrote back. Their letters, which frequently detailed the effort to hang on, often in isolated circumstances, began to set a style for storytelling. They related some problem, told what led to its resolution, and then reflected on the gift of a life enriched by the experience. Not quite "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now," but very close.

The war ended in 1945. In September, "Mail Call for All AAs in the Armed Forces" became "Mail Call for All AAs at Home or Abroad," and in the same year "Along the Metropolitan Circuit" was replaced by "AA's Country-Wide News Circuit," a change related directly to the Grapevine's new status as the "national monthly journal." In December, each issue began to include excerpts from group publications, a practice that continued through mid-1948.

The responsibility of being AA's national periodical and, beginning in January 1949, its "international monthly journal," reinforced the Grapevine's commitment to reporting what was going on in the various groups, which were in the midst of the early trial-and-error period of rapid growth. And that commitment extended beyond just reporting: In April 1946, Bill W. would publish "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future," the first appearance of AA's Twelve Traditions, which had their

roots in the need to guard against aberrations that could be dangerous to the Fellowship as a whole.

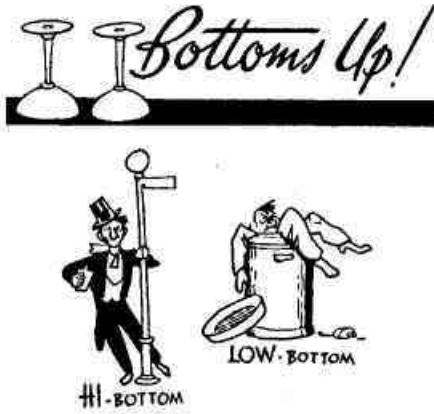
The Development and Concerns of Storytelling

Thus, for a time, the Grapevine moved away from stories of personal experience and printed more descriptions of and comments on the spread of AA and the adaptations that some localities developed to meet that growth. Most articles in the mid-1940s were about group practices: for example, ways of holding meetings for greater numbers, exchanges of speakers, and procedures used to "indoctrinate" new members. Diversity was honored in this period, AA members in general showing great tolerance of various understandings of even such basics as the Twelve Steps. Grapevine issue #18 (November 1945), for example, began a second series of articles on the Steps explicitly to give voice to "different views and interpretations." Not all readers were tolerant, however; as in the Grapevine today, descriptions of experience drew letters of comment and often of disagreement. And no sooner did some express disapproval of some practices than others wrote to warn against the dangers of criticizing others.

The climax of this process came in August 1946 with a piece by Bill W., "Who Is a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous?" This article achieved two ends. Directly, it suggested extend-

ing tolerance of other groups' practices to tolerance of the differences among individual alcoholic newcomers. Indirectly, Bill's gentle words invited a shift from detailing group practices back to telling personal stories — a shift that took place gradually over the next several years.

In December 1946, Bill W. described the AA Grapevine as "our principal monthly journal, devoted to the inter-



ests of Alcoholics Anonymous — and to nothing else. It tries to publish the news and portray the views of AAs everywhere. It aims to reflect a cross section of our thought and action . . . bringing us news of each other across great distances, and always describing what can be freshly seen in that vast and lifegiving pool we call 'AA experience.' " As time went on, it became clear that readers wanted to hear about *people*: on the basis of what they learned about people, they would de-

cide for themselves about practices and the applications of principles.

The evolving practice of storytelling apparently influenced the wording of the AA Preamble — perhaps the AA Grapevine's most historic contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous — which first appeared in the June 1947 issue, and is now commonly read at the beginning of AA meetings. Although most of the phrasing was borrowed from the foreword to the first edition of the book Alcoholics Anonymous, the phrase "experience, strength, and hope" is original, and it encapsulates what both AA and the Grapevine had become: a place where alcoholics could both offer and find the "identification" that helps in the never-ending task of penetrating the "self-centeredness" that "is the root of our troubles." To read Grapevine stories over time is to find a mirror of one's own growth, and lack of growth, in sobriety.

The usual theme of the earliest stories ran along the lines of "I didn't know what was the matter with me, and, whatever it was, I was pretty sure that nothing could be done for it." Earliest AA identification, then, consisted in the sheer sense of relief at the discovery that one was "not alone" — not unique.

But that basis of identification shifted over time. It had to change as more people got more sober, and an ever larger number of people heard about AA. The next generation of stories more often described the motif of hear-

ing about Alcoholics Anonymous, imagining a distorted idea of what it was and rejecting it, and then telling how one came to accept AA or give it a chance, and what had happened since.

At the time this format was developing, members were paying much attention to "slips," which seemed to them to be increasing. With greater concern about "stinking thinking," the "what happened" segment of AA stories became not only the point at which one stopped drinking, but any significant turning point in one's attitude. AA stories began to place more emphasis on experiences of a spiritual nature — the dawning of humility, consideration, and thoughtfulness in place of total self-centeredness.

Significant Issues

Humor and storytelling are two major areas of continuity over fifty years of the Grapevine; and not surprisingly, there is continuity in subject matter as well. Because what we find in the past tends to be shaped by what we know of the present, two topics especially grab the attention of any 1990s reader perusing Grapevines of earlier decades: women in AA and those who "use other drugs."

Issue #1 offered brief descriptions of the "six ink-stained wretches" who brought the publication into existence: "a cashier, a radio script writer, an author, a bookseller, an art director, a wife and mother of two." Unlike Alcoholics

Anonymous itself, which was saved from titling its Big Book "One Hundred Men" mainly by the timely arrival of Florence R., the AA Grapevine came into being primarily as a result of the dedication and effort of some early AA women.

Not only were four of the "ink-stained wretches" — Lois K., Marty M., Priscilla P., and Grace O. — female, but Felicia G., Maeve S., and Astrid L. soon also became very active in the journal's writing and production. And so it does not surprise that, although unannounced as such, the May 1945 issue, which marked the completion of a year's success, quietly celebrated with five articles devoted to women's experience. The lead article, by Marty M., acknowledged that "Women Alcoholics Have a Tougher Fight." "Women alcoholics do have special problems," Marty noted, "But we women can get there as well as the men — witness the number of us, good AA members (one in ten of our total membership)." Other titles were "One Woman Alcoholic Writes to Another," "A Daughter is Proud of Her AA Mother," "A Wife Takes Pleasure in AA," and "Credo for an AA Wife."

As the latter titles hint, a related topic, also still relevant in the 1990s, graced Grapevine pages from the beginning. We speak today of "family issues"; the usual phrase then was "wives of alcoholics" — although as early as April 1947 we find an article titled "Husband Sees Rich Rewards for Non-

Alcoholics," in which a writer from San Diego presented himself as "affiliated with AA as a 'dry-mate.'" The writer offered at least one observation that can still hit home: "At the first dry-mate meetings I attended, we were all in agreement that our mates had outgrown us...."

"Dry-mate meetings": the term, fortunately, did not stick. But the idea was more important than the name. In the earliest-described AA meetings, spouses participated on an equal footing with ex-drunks. Early on, however, as Grapevine articles and letters attest, some of the male alcoholics' wives intuited that some female alcoholic members seemed to understand their spouses better than did they. That realization brought some pain, but it also engendered deeper understanding of "identification."

A second "old" problem may surprise readers of "new" Grapevines — the long history within Alcoholics Anonymous of attention to "problems of other drugs." As early as August 1944, Grapevine issue #3 printed a letter from "Doc N.": "I'm sure there are other AAs who, like myself, are finding in AA the highway to freedom from narcotics." Suggesting "a 'hop-head's corner' in the Grapevine," the writer noted that "even if mine is essentially the same problem of all alcoholics, I occasionally wish that there were just one other narcotics victim in my AA group with whom I might share experiences."

A month later, another physician, "Doc M.," wrote in "to assure [Doc N.] that his experience is one that is beginning to be shared by quite a few. We have in our club five men who have had many years of drug addiction but who are finding complete freedom from drugs and are well on the highway to successful and happy living. . . . These men, with one exception, were all primary alcoholics, and I believe this is largely true of all 'hopheads.'" "

The Grapevine's second year, 1945, saw articles by Bill W. on "Those Goof-Balls," and by "an M.D. who also is an AA" cautioning on "the sleeping-pill menace." Another side of the question was tackled by a member writing from Greenwich Village in February 1948, whose article asked: "Does a Pill Jag Count as a Slip?" J. T. expressed his view strongly: "The AA who takes to pills is trading the devil for the witch. If you are using pills, openly or secretly, don't try to convince anyone that you're still sober or living the AA way of life. It just ain't so."

When AA Was Twenty-Five Years Old

The most critical period for Alcoholics Anonymous, if that can be judged from the pages of the Grapevine, occurred in the early 1960s. What was going on at this point, some fifteen years into the Grapevine's existence, around the time of AA's twenty-fifth birthday? One hint may be found in the stories that appeared during this era. Although Grapevine editors would title a series "Is

AA Changing?" only decades later, early 1960s letters to and articles in the Grapevine reveal a tug-of-war between those promoting and those denying change. This was not a new phenomenon in Alcoholics Anonymous: Bill W. had observed in the 1940s that "AA will always have both its fundamentalists and its liberals." What distinguishes the 1960s is that it seems to be the decade in which the membership as a whole discovered the reality of change, and the Grapevine was one vehicle of that discovery. January of 1961 witnessed an explicit rejection of the journal's "meeting in print" self-image, that understanding being replaced by the addition of the phrase "in all our affairs" to the masthead. In April of that year, Bill W. published the first of a series of articles originally intended to be part of a book (which was never completed) on the topic of AA spirituality. And as a spur to the complacent, Bill W. quietly observed in the first article of his new series, "God As We Understand Him": "Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again."

That three hundred thousand has grown to two million and more in the intervening years. Alcoholics Anonymous celebrated its fiftieth birthday in 1985 and now, nine years later, the AA



Grapevine reaches the half century mark. In every one of the 600 issues, Grapevine writers have shared their "experience, strength, and hope," most frequently in the form of stories rather than suggestions or advice.

In that spirit, for the Grapevine is a large source shaping the course of my own sobriety, I have offered the foregoing thoughts on some continuities in the Grapevine. I have drawn from my

own experience of reading and studying many years worth of magazines. And I hope that others will dig around the backrooms of clubhouses and meeting places, and will ask old-timers about possible

caches of old Grapevines — or look in the back of the closet for more recent issues. To find such a treasure-trove is to pass absorbing hours noting changes and continuities — in humor, about "other drugs" and "other problems," about wives, husbands, family, and more ... even about sobriety.

"Those who have no memory, have no hope," a wise person once observed. That is probably one reason why we tell stories of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now." AA's "remember when" has to do with more than drinking, and the AA Grapevine is a link with the people and the events that make up our fascinating past.

E. K., Michigan