

Alcoholics Anonymous History in Wisconsin

Written July 2013

Recently there have been several requests for the written words of my talks regarding the history of Alcoholics Anonymous coming to Wisconsin. The following is a brief narration of the very beginning. I intend to elaborate and compile information that is in Area 75 Archives to include other cities, club houses and so on.

The information you read here are excerpts from documents found in the GSO Archives and copied in their entirety for Area 75 Archives about seventeen years ago. The entire letter is in Area 75 Archives for you to read with last names, addresses, and phone numbers removed.

Please remember that Alcoholics Anonymous has not always been available. There have been many of us that had to suffer until the bitter end before there was AA. We cannot take Alcoholics Anonymous for granted anymore than our own sobriety. We all have a God given ability and a passion. God gave me the ability to organize and the passion for AA's history. I thank God for these things but even more, I thank him for the gift of sobriety. I first serve my God, and then each of you. I hope that you too have found your God given gifts and are using them daily.

Thank You!! Nancy S. Area 75 Archivist

As we begin keep in mind that AA's founding date is June 10th of 1935 and that the Big Book was published in April of 1939.

November 20, 1939 - Harry Smith of Waunakee, the man who brought Alcoholics Anonymous to Wisconsin wrote a letter to Works Publishing Co. (Later known as the Alcoholic Foundation) Gentlemen – Thank you for your letter of the 14th. I would be pleased to correspond with your Chicago membership and perhaps would go there to see more of it. Am inclosing my check for your book.

November 24, 1939 - The corresponding letter; We would very much like to have you correspond with our Chicago Fellowship and we assure you that you will hear from them in return. Please write to Mr. Earl Treat, Evanston, Ill. The book has gone forward to you under separate cover.

July 12, 1940 - Harry wrote; Since I received your wonderful book I have lost all desire for drink and have passed the good works along to several others who have derived benefit from it and I must say some of these cases surely seemed hopeless at the time. We are a group of five now.

July 23, 1940 – Reply; Your letter of the 12th was more appreciated than we can well put into words for although we have an average of perhaps fifteen requests per day for assistance at this office, the average of such letters as your advising what the book has done for you and assuring us of cooperation is relatively small. As you know, this work was originally carried on only by word of mouth from man to man until requests began to come in from people we could not possibly contact personally. It was principally for that reason the book was compiled in the hope that it would prove helpful to such isolated people – and it is indeed encouraging to note by slowly increasing correspondence such as yours that such is the case. We had been somewhat puzzled by several letters which stated that the book had been recommended to them by a Mr. Smith of Waunakee since we had no knowledge of your progress and the efforts you were making with others. We, therefore, take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of Alcoholics Anonymous from coast to coast, a membership which now numbers close to one thousand, for your perseverance and faith. It is interesting to note how basically similar the beginnings of such Fellowships as ours are, for each of our memberships in addition to passing the word along also makes every effort in aiding fellow members to rebuild their lives in a business way, just as you have been instrumental in reinstating several men there. More power to you and to those working with you!

July 24th 1940 - Harry wrote; Some time ago I obtained a copy of your publication Alcoholics Anonymous and since have been reading and studying its contents religiously each day and am sure that this is the answer to my problem. I can't honestly say that I shall never drink again, but I definitely know that I won't drink today and that tomorrow I shall awake with that same resolution and from then on, each day will take care of its self. My position as Chief Chef for the Mendota State Hospital brings me in close contact with all types of alcoholics. A good many of these are more than anxious to stop drinking and are well worth saving, as a matter of fact, I have talked to a number of them and have outlined your procedure stressing particularly your twelve steps. It has been very gratifying to me and has helped me a great deal to feel that I have been instrumental in

helping a number of these people to stop drinking thereby saving them from the disaster that is bound to follow. I am eager to start a group in Madison and would so much appreciate any information you might give me which would enable me to do so.

Harry Smith continued to correspond with Chicago members. A group from Chicago attended one of the first meetings and helped by sharing their experience, strength, and hope.

November 20, 1940 - The Alcoholic Foundation in New York; It was good as always to hear from you again though from what you tell us of yourself and AA activities and what we hear of you occasionally from Chicago, I realize that you can't possibly have much "spare" time. We have finally gotten together a trial bulletin of sorts and if everyone concerned likes the attempt and will send along suggestion, ideas, criticisms, and what have you we shall try to keep it up. Do let us have your reactions to it as well as those of the rest of the group there. Susan tells me that you are helping several people here and there to get groups started in various sections of Wisconsin. To simplify the traveling end of it can you let me have the names and address of any of these for our records and for the mailing of the bulletin, etc? You will have that car of yours worn out before very long if you keep up this AA traveling, but it is certainly worth it isn't it? By any chance, do you ever get near Milwaukee? That is one city where, if my memory serves me correctly without checking the files, we have several worthwhile inquiries. Have you contacted anyone there at any time?

October 23, 1940 - Gilbert King wrote to the Alcoholic Foundation; Gentlemen, Recently there has been called to my attention an article which appeared in the May 17, 1940 issue of the "Green Sheet" of the Milwaukee Journal that interests me very much. Several lengthy columns are there devoted to a general description of your unique attack, or rather approach, in the direction: "alcoholism." Since the common sense method employed by your "Foundation" seems more nearly to solve my own personal problem than any other I have heard of, I am moved to write you for a little further information. Is there an active group or "chapter" located here in Milwaukee whom I might contact? If not, any other details you may wish to offer me will be greatly appreciated.

December 3, 1940 - reply; As you already know, our work extends far beyond the book itself and is carried on mainly through the efforts of one alcoholic who has recovered in behalf of others. This mutual effort in various localities gradually leads to weekly

meetings which are held without dues, fees, or obligations of any sort whatever, merely a desire on the part of AA members, now numbering some 1,500, to aid others similarly troubled. Since you already acknowledge the fact that alcohol is a problem to you, you have already taken the most important step toward a solution. And too, since you are obviously seeking an answer to the problem you are naturally another step closer to reaching an answer. Therefore, if you are at all open minded to the principles and methods of AA you should have little difficulty in solving the problem as we have. We are sorry indeed to advise you that we have no A.A. Fellowship in Milwaukee or its immediate vicinity; the closest to you being located at Madison, Wisconsin or Chicago Illinois. If you are interested in contacting our members at either locality, and it is possible for you to do so, please let us hear from you again and complete information will be forwarded.

December 7, 1940 - Gilbert, (Gib) wrote back requesting the Alcoholics Anonymous book for \$3.50 and information about the meetings in Madison and Chicago.

December 13, 1940 – Reply; Gib was told how to contact Harry Smith of Waunakee, Wisconsin and Mr. E. Treat of Evanston, Illinois. It was also written – Since new fellowships are very often developed between two or three interested people in one vicinity with the help of the book alone, may we suggest that you get in touch with Mr. Chester Rose of Milwaukee. We have had some correspondence with Mr. Rose who is very interested in making a sincere effort along these lines and would very much like an opportunity to discuss the matter with other interested people. Please feel free to get in touch with him directly if you are at all inclined to do so.

Gib did make the call to Chester and like Harry Smith in the Madison area, Alcoholics Anonymous in Milwaukee began to develop. In a letter written February 19, 1941 Gib wrote he was having meetings on Saturdays at his house with four other members and their wives. He had also been going to the Tuesday night meetings held in Chicago for the past six weeks. And attended an “open-house meeting” in Evanston, Illinois. One or two of the others also went with him on occasions.

Gib continued to correspond and receive inquiries forwarded to him through the Alcoholics Foundation.

February 26, 1941 - Gib wrote; Our little group held a semi-social meeting on Saturday. Beginning Thursday the 27th we plan on having one weekly meeting, Thursdays, for

alcoholics only. Our thought is for the present at least to limit these meetings to discussions and which are intended particularly for the new initiates. It is felt that a new member has special difficulty in speaking his mind in a mixed audience. And since “confession is good for the soul” it seems quite proper, perhaps even necessary to provide conditions under which a man or woman may express him or her-self freely to known sympathetic listeners without fear of embarrassment. For the time being we plan on having our social meetings, which includes the wives, on Saturday evenings.

Gib and his group arranged a special meeting held on Wednesday, April 30th of 1941 in the Lotus Room of the Plankinton Hotel of Milwaukee. Gib talks about the meeting in a letter – We invited as many members as would come from both the Chicago group and the Madison group. Well they really turned out in numbers kind of far beyond our most fervent hopes. There were some 15 to 20 members here from Chicago and nearly that many from Madison, and a number of them also brought their wives. These together with our local group which stands at 20 now was tangible evidence for the visitors that we had invited. These included the judge of our district court who meets all the drunks that get into trouble in town here and who has a deeply sympathetic interest in AA from what he has seen it do; the head of our house of correction and the county sheriff both of whom have charge of “boarding and rooming” the alkiees that the judge turns over to them. Then too, there were probation officers, social workers, interested physicians, a clergyman, newspaper men and others who were interested for personal reasons. ‘Funny part of it was that not all the visitors were there by direct invitation from the group either. For instance a priest that was invited brought in the sheriff; someone else brought in the house of correction; the chief probation officer was brought in by still another visitor and so on. Some others called by phone and asked whether or not they could attend after having read an article in The Milwaukee Journal that ran the same afternoon.

The meeting came to order about 8:30 and after the usual quiet time a poem composed by an AA was read by Hildred K. (Now there’s a girl that’s coming along beautifully) after which the cream of speaking talent from the Chicago and Madison groups held the floor for the next hour and a half. A very important and impressive point about all of these men was that they all have been members for a considerably longer period of time than our local group. Earl T. who has about four years behind him gave the first of the talks. Harry S. of Madison followed with a resume of his experiences. Clem L, Frank L,

Luke H., addressed the gathering with brief talks. John T spoke for forty minutes and covered the ground as completely and systematically as only a lawyer of his capacity can do. Every speaker brought out points of view that were as inspirational as they were educational. That everyone there had greatly gained in understanding was evidenced by the fact that there were very few questions asked during the period of the fifteen minutes allotted for this purpose. Those that were asked were answered satisfactorily by Earl T., Ed O., Clem L, and Mr. H of Chicago. Another proof of a further realization of AA was given by the fact that the judge present let it be known to me that in the event any AA here has difficulty in obtaining employment because of a police record caused by his past escapades, he the judge will gladly give him a written recommendation, on the strength of AA, to clear the man of his past in that respect. That looks like co-operation to me or is it?

It was in the air, this feeling of mutual fellowship. I personally have never before experienced anything like it and I shall always feel indebted to the visiting members who made possible a meeting that was in every way more instructive, inspirational, generally satisfactory, and “easy” than I had dared to let myself hope for. I for one certainly will never be the same for it. Others of our group have given similar expression to their thoughts.

December 9th 1942 - A very angry Mac O. wrote to the Alcoholics Foundation; Yes, we are going to start another group here in Milwaukee. There are three of us to begin with, and from this humble start, it is our sincere desire to bring AA to the many who need such a plan of like in this city. Mrs. O. and I moved here last March from Minneapolis, immediately got in contact with the AA here and attended meetings faithfully. We noticed at once, the lack of fellowship which we had come to enjoy so thoroughly in Minneapolis. After attending meetings about a month, I was asked to speak and outline the Minneapolis set-up, as they had heard the Minneapolis group was very successful. This I did and immediately a committee was appointed. I had a new man at his first meeting, and Mr. H., the secretary, being honored for his first year of dryness, got up and spoke. In the course of his talk, he made the statement – I quote – “I have never apologized to anyone for anything I did while drinking and I never will – that was my business.” Imagine the feeling of my new man, I had been telling him of the necessity of righting wrongs and then to have him hear such a statement from one of the pillars just

isn't "Kosher." At the next general meeting, one of the powers, got up and said the Minneapolis plan hadn't worked out and that they were going to elect a new committee to handle affairs. This was done and we had the same old gang back in the driver's seat – so to speak. This didn't faze me, and our little group continued to get together until they left for the lake country this summer. That left me alone until fall. I continued to go to the meeting until one night an old member slipped. They were all set to throw him in jail and I objected. I was read out of the party right then and there – being told that my opinions didn't amount to a great deal and that I was not so solid with them – which of course I wasn't. I'll be honest, I dropped out and went on a roaring bender, finally coming to my senses, that this was no excuse for such actions and that AA was much bigger than any petty politics or jealousies..... -but the fact remains, I need action, for in working with others, I lose sight of my own problems. It seems that I can't get this work with the group now here. We can do so much good in this city and really have an up and coming organization – that is our aim. I have had several talks with Dr. King – he has a brilliant mind. He is sort of on the outside looking in after they ousted him because of his slip last Christmas. Out of respect for him, I am going to see him and tell him that we are going to start independently from the group all ready here and that we will appreciate any cooperation he might see fit to extend.

Reading the entire eleven page letter Gilbert King wrote to the Alcoholic Foundation one year later made me sit back and realize why our traditions are so important and need to be understood. His words were so moving I had to take a break so I wouldn't cry. I will tell you a few short sections of his letter and you will understand.

January 31, 1943 – Gilbert King wrote to the Alcoholic Foundation; I had a long distance call from a Mr. B. at Peoria, Illinois. Practically the first question he asked me was whether or not we still have an AA group here.....There is no accusations nor do I in any way want to place blame on any one or anywhere. What I am about to say is an expression of about fourteen months of curiosity about this mail situation. I believe that you may be in a position to enlighten me if you wish to. From the beginning of my correspondence with national AA in 1940 up until late November 1941 all correspondence from the office was sent to my address which I had for years. Then very

suddenly all communication ceased to come in. Some little time later I noticed that mail was being sent to the address of the club rooms we had recently moved to, and addressed to another member.What I am curious about is, "How Come?" It is true that I took a little spill on about the 29th of November 1941, alcoholically, just one short afternoon. I might say that this little lapse was probably the highest light in my career because when I awakened in the hospital the following morning, I had the nearest thing to a spiritual awakening that I can imagine, (I could write a book on it, but why?!) and was back on our important mission the following day. My feelings during the fourteen months since then convince me that I no longer fear or dread alcohol – many other fears passed on at the same time. As I see it now the slip saved me from a possible nervous breakdown. Keen observer that he is, Bill Wilson probably noticed it coming on when he was here in October. I have been totally dry for about a year then. At the same time I mistakenly carried the burdens of scores of alcoholics who came to my office to interview me, and who kept me up four or five nights of the week. Had they let me down in New York or was this a mere coincidence??????????? (True, I did have some drink that day.) But they even took me off their roster and inserted another name. Why do these fellows, most all of whom had their original contact with me, why do they look at me as though I were a ghost? (This at the very next meeting following my spree) Why can't they talk to me instead of getting into little huddles and cast occasional secretive glances in my direction? Oh, I see, instead of being the oldest member in the group, those few drinks now make me the newest. But why can't they at least give me the consideration of a new member then. These are but a very few examples of the thoughts that kept cropping up in my mind and torturing me without end. Here I believe was a crisis. I survived it. The survival can be attributable only to a blessed loving God who when I awakened that awful morning forgave me completely. He instantly and permanently removed from me that horrible craving I had for a drink and replaced that craving with a calm healthy appetite for food – of all things.And for all this I am indeed grateful to AA for pointing out the way and I am grateful to God for giving me the means to follow it. I am therefore glad and thankful that I was a drunkard else this could not have happened to me. Nor could the future look joyful.....P.S. I forgot to mention that my violin playing has also progressed some since he was here. Tell Bill when you see him that the violin is still in the making I hope someday to deliver it to him in person.

February 10, 1943 - Gib received a beautiful letter in return;Had we known you were having even the slightest of “slip” you may be sure that none of us here would have any feelings but sorrow that you had to go through it. Heck, it might happen to Bill or me any time ...Now I hope you know that we have not let you down in New York – it was mere coincidence.

Wednesday, June 9, 1943 - Bill Wilson and his secretary Margaret Burger stopped to visit the Milwaukee group.

June 22, 1943 - From Margaret Burger; Dear Gib: It is going to be hard to tell you just how much being with you and the Milwaukee Group meant to Bill and me. The whole trip of course, was an inspiration and each individual group visit was a highlight in our lives. Bill and I both realize how much you yourself have contributed towards making Milwaukee an AA center despite the fact that some of the group have tried to put you in the “doghouse”. Our very best wishes to all Milwaukee members for their hospitality while we were with you and much affection to you and Mrs. King.

November 1948 - Bill and Lois paid a return visit to Milwaukee, primarily to see Gib who was near death from cancer. The local AA’s arranged an evening open meeting on a few hours notice. Over 500 people turned out for it. Bill visited Group 7, and no one recognized him. Lois was taken to St. Michael’s hospital, the alcoholism unit to visit a woman patient. Lois talked a while with the girl and then started to leave. When leaving Lois turned, took off a small corsage from her suit jacket, and pinned it on the girl's nightgown. She said, “You know my dear, it’s as easy to kick yourself up as it is to keep kicking yourself down.”

November of 1944 - George S., a man of small stature and dynamic energy, came out of the county hospital and contacted Gib. George was active in AA in Dayton Ohio five years earlier but suffered 3 long bouts with alcohol. George and four or five other members began another meeting on Wednesday night at 8:00 at the odd fellows hall on 10th street. This was an open meeting. At 7:00 a beginners meeting was held attended by alcoholics that came before Judge Harvey Neelen.

About this time the Alano club opened and AA central office opened at 1012 N. 3rd St. with a full time secretary.

George S. sought Bill Wilson’s advice whether or not to go into the field of alcoholism on a full time basis, as he was already very involved as a volunteer. Bill, who was staying

at George's home, waited until the morning of his departure to answer. Over breakfast Bill said, "George, I don't think there is much of a choice. Someone must begin to spearhead the dreams we have of working with the public to make the lot of the alcoholic a better one." George made his decision and became an outstanding figure in the field. He also continued to be active in AA by serving as the 1st delegate of Area 75 on Panel 1 in 1951.

October 18 and 19, 1952 - Area 75 held its first Conference at the Pfister Hotel located at 424 E. Wisconsin Ave. in Milwaukee. It was called the Banquet Harvest Dance with music by Pete Ochs and his band. In attendance were: Lois Wilson, Helen B. General Secretary at the Foundation in New York, Marian M. General Conference Secretary at the Foundation in New York, Hank C. Foundation Trustee in New York, and Sig H. Editor of the Grapevine at the Foundation in New York.

The first three days of July in 1955 the second International Convention was held in St. Louis, Missouri. There Bill Wilson announced that A.A. had "come of age" Bill gave three major talks. On the first night Bill talked of what he called the first of the three legacies: "How We Learned to Recover." His second talk dealt with the second legacy "How We Learned to Stay Together." His third talk was on the third legacy: "How We Learned to Serve." The introduction of the circle and triangle represented these three legacies. Four o'clock Sunday afternoon was reserved for the final meeting of the 1955 General Service Conference. Bill formally turned over the stewardship of A.A. to the General Service Conference, giving up his own official leadership and acknowledging that A.A. was responsible for its own affairs. He would later say: "Clearly my job henceforth was to let go and let God. Alcoholics Anonymous was at last safe – even from me." Five thousand members attended the convention along with Fr. Edward Dowling, Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, Dr. Harry Tiebout, Bernard Smith (New York Lawyer who served as chairman of A.A.'s board of trustees), Ebby Thatcher, Bill's mother, Bill's wife Lois, and Henry A. Mielcarek who was employed to "look after" the alcoholic problem at Allis Chalmers. Henry A. Mielcarek spoke at a session called "A.A. and Industry" the first night of the convention.

Oct 1, 1940 AA Membership Report to the Trustees - Waunakee, Wis. 20 Members

June 1941 AA Directory Milwaukee 25 Members Madison 30 Members

Dec.	1941	AA Directory	Milwaukee 40 Members	Madison 30 Members
			Eau Claire 6 Members	Racine 6 Members
April	1942	AA Directory	Milwaukee 40 Members	Madison 30 Members
			Eau Claire 8 Members	Racine 8 Members
			Green Bay 3 Members	