

Elmira Area AA History

When AA was founded in 1935 it had an active membership of two men, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith. Until their deaths they were known as "Bill W. and Dr. Bob" in AA. Later their anonymity was broken and their stories told to the world. Bill was a stockbroker and Dr. Bob was an Akron physician. June 10, 1935 was the day that Dr. Bob took his last drink, with encouragement from Bill W., who was in Akron for a stock proxy fight. Working together, Bill and Dr. Bob found their ability to stay sober seemed closely related to the amount of help and encouragement they were able to give to other alcoholics.

For four years the new movement, in some ways a descendant of the earlier Oxford Movement, was nameless and without any organization or descriptive literature. Groups were established in Akron, New York, Cleveland and a few other centers. In 1939 with the publication of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, from which the fellowship derived its name, the society began to attract national and international attention.

AA is celebrating its 76th year of helping people to stay sober if they so desire.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking (Tradition Three). There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self supporting through our own contributions (Tradition Seven).

AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution, does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses or opposes any causes (Tradition Six).

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety (Tradition Five).

The first open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous held in Elmira was in March of 1946. By that time there were 10 members in Chemung County AA. They were encouraged by the growing acceptance that alcoholism is a treatable illness and that the Knickerbocker Hospital in New York was

admitting patients for its alcoholism ward *only* if they were referred by AA.

The two men responsible for starting AA in Chemung County were Art C. and Charlie S.. Art C. had found sobriety through AA in Florida. When he moved to Chemung County he soon established a relationship with Charlie S.. Before long another of the AA pioneers came into the fold. Coming straight from what he called, 'the Sally' (the Salvation Army). He was Edward M. Other early members of the group were Don M., Jack H., Victor H. and Morton M..

Soon after Art C. arrived in town he placed an advertisement in the Elmira Star-Gazette, inviting individuals with a drinking problem to get in touch with him.

He also went upstairs to the newsroom to obtain a news story about AA. As irony would have it, Tom B., who in a few years would be seeking the help of AA, interviewed him and probably was a bit patronizing as he wrote about "Those poor souls whose lives had been virtually ruined by their compulsion for alcohol". After interviewing Art C., Tom B. described his opinion that alcoholism is a "*sickness*" because of the headaches, shakes and general foulness, and doctors throughout the world would not admit that alcoholism was a sickness at that time. It would take many years before doctors would admit that it is a sickness. (*The American Medical Association did not acknowledge alcoholism as an illness until 1956*)

About two years after their interview, Tom B. sought the help of AA and found out that to remain sober he had to do it for himself, not his family or his boss.

Now for a brief account of the growth of AA in Chemung County:

- Meetings were held in homes in the early years. After the meetings there were social times, with coffee and cookies.
- The first regular meeting place was the Delaware & Lackawanna Y.M.C.A. in 1947. The meeting consisted of two or three 10-minute talks by the men and women there. Usually they told their "story", a

testimonial that they had paid their dues before crossing the threshold into alcoholism. When the Delaware & Lackawanna Y.M.C.A. closed in the 1950s, the 'Original Tuesday Night Group' was started at the Pennsylvania Railroad Y.M.C.A. at Pennsylvania Avenue and Miller Street. This meeting no, longer exists. After moving across the river to the Lake Street Presbyterian Church, this group faded from existence in the 1990s.

- A Sunday night group, often referred to as the 'Original Sunday Night Group' in the 1980s, began meeting at the Pennsylvania Railroad Y.M.C.A. at Pennsylvania Avenue and Miller Street in the early 1950's. Charlie Stempfle was the major-domo of this very popular meeting where attendance ranged to more than 75. This meeting eventually moved to the Lake Street Presbyterian Church, before fading into history.
- An early "closed" meeting was started on Thursdays in the early 1950's. It was held in the Catholic Daughters of America rooms at State Street and East Church Street, over the bus depot. Attendance ranged as high as fifty men and women. Ed M. and Bob J. were two of the leaders. This meeting no longer exists.
- A Wednesday night meeting started in St. Mary's Catholic Church on Mill Street in Horseheads, in the 1950's. This meeting moved to St. John's Episcopal Church in Elmira Heights, in the early 1960's, with a great old railroader, John C., as the dynamo. This meeting is still thriving as the 'Horseheads Group' at St. Matthew's Church Hall.
- A Saturday night meeting was started at North Presbyterian Church in 1958, with Rollie S. as the prime mover. It was an open meeting, well attended, and a small Al-Anon meeting held in conjunction with it. The 'Northside Group' has survived several location changes and a fire, but is now back at their original location, fifty-four years later.
- In 1958 a small group was formed for business and professional people who, because of their positions in the community, wished for fail-safe anonymity. This group met in homes in Elmira and Corning, even at a

law office, before settling in Big Flats, in 1965. This meeting is still alive and well after fifty-four years.

- The 'Hill Group', an institutional AA group meeting here in Elmira Correctional Facility is itself celebrating a fiftieth anniversary this summer having carried the message of recovery and hope since 1962.
- In 1976 the Monday 12&12 Study Group was started in a private home on Riverside Avenue. They currently meet in the Emmanuel Episcopal Church hall a few blocks from their birthplace.
- The Elmira Women's Group of AA began their existence in 1978 in a room provided at the old Chemung County Alcohol Council with Monday morning meetings before settling in at their current location.

Today, we have thirty-two meetings a week in Elmira, Elmira Heights and Horseheads alone. When you include all the meetings in the neighboring districts adjacent to us, there are one hundred five meetings a week listed on our meeting schedule, all within a thirty minute drive.

We are grateful for those dedicated people who brought AA to Elmira in 1946 and for the growth *and* the courage to move it a '*public*' meeting place in 1947. They discovered, early on, that we are an anonymous fellowship, but not a secret society.

It would be hard to give credit to everybody that helped, but with these dedicated people, past and present, AA has grown to be what it is in the Elmira area today.