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Confessions of an A.A. History Buff

William White (with Merton M.)

In my years researching the history of addiction treatment and recovery, I have met many wonderful people, including some truly “colorful characters.” I have particular affection for A.A. historians whose unrelenting investigations have constituted major contributions to the history of recovery in America. This column introduces the world of these investigators with a candid interview with Merton, one of the most dedicated and tenacious of these historians.

Merton, how did you first become involved in investigating the history of A.A.?

I got involved with A.A. history around 1990 as a purely personal quest. I wanted to know how the miracle of A.A. came to be. Reading *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (PIO), I was surprised to discover that the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was written in Newark, NJ. Living close by, I drove there to find the building where the book was written. Most of Newark was dilapidated at that time from a legacy of corrupt politicians and the summer riots of 1967. The 17-19 William St. building was boarded up and in shambles. However, it still sported a sleek black marble art-deco entranceway crowned with brushed metal letters spelling the word "Calumet" in Miami Vice font. I entered and made my way through the artifacts of the homeless, then navigated up 6 flights, being careful to avoid holes in the floor and two open elevator shafts. I finally reached Office 601, which according to PIO was the earlier office of Honor Dealers, or more formally Henry G. Parkhurst Inc. according to City Records. My mind whorled with fantasies of finding yellow-pad chapter drafts, a multilith copy or a first printing of the Big Book. Down the hall, the much smaller later Office 604 was brightly lit by sunbeams piercing the fallen window boards. I vividly remember saying to myself, "Wow, this is where it happened!"

I find something special in the places where historical events occurred, as if an invisible energy is timelessly etched there. This is particularly true with A.A. places. There was a special quality to the Calumet Building that one really can't put into words. Standing in this decaying wonderland, I felt the presence of Ruth and Bill, Hank and Fitz, and the guy off the street, me. I got the bug then and there and have been enthralled with A.A. history ever since.

Are there individuals who have guided you through the promises and pitfalls of your historical investigations?

There have been many. Frank M., then archivist at A.A.'s General Service Office in New York, was my first contact. His encouragement was decisive in my continuation to explore. He provided redirection and focus to my work when I was consumed with "who did it first". I wanted to know if the first A.A. meeting was between Bill and Bob, or Ebby and Bill, or Rowland and Ebby. Noting my disturbance Frank asked if I knew what the "F" word was among A.A. historians. I said "NO". He said, "It is First". This is a valuable A.A. Historian concept. Others who provided guidance include Ernie Kurtz, the foremost authority on the history of A.A.; Mel B., who coauthored PIO, and helped me locate and gain acceptance from Hank P.'s family; Paul Lang, who served as the curator at Stepping Stones; Charlie Bishop, who was helpful in locating books related to A.A. history; and other A.A. historians such as Mitch K., Ken and Howard of the North New Jersey A.A. Archives, and the late Earl H. of Tulsa.

Much of the historical work on A.A. has focused on the life and influence of Bill Wilson. What has most impressed you about Bill Wilson as you have studied his life?

My research deemphasized Bill precisely because of that emphasis. That aside, two of the most notable dimensions of Bill's multifaceted character were his commitment to helping alcoholics and his open mindedness. From reading the Stepping Stones and GSO archives, I was struck by the single motive behind so much of what Bill did. He had an unwavering commitment to help the drunk stop drinking.

When I say "Open-minded" I mean it in the extreme sense of the word! Its my belief that without this level of open-mindedness (and sales ability) there would probably be no A.A. today. Consider the package he was dealt. He had to sell a book that had not been written about a process

that had not been organized coherently regarding recovery from a condition that was considered medically incurable to the richest and most inquisitive group in the world, the Rockefeller Foundation. Even more challenging, it had to be sold to A.A. earliest members.

Bill's involvement in researching alcoholism treatment with LSD and niacin are profound examples of his open-mindedness. The former has brought some criticism. However, it seems quite unfair to criticize someone on this issue armed with hindsight. The experiments were the first into the substance by the still very active Dr. Abram Hoffer and the recently deceased Dr. Humphrey Osmond. The doctors were interested in it because it appeared to mimic schizophrenia. Bill was a member of the same research group, but was interested in it as a treatment for Alcoholism. Dr. Hoffer last year cited a 40% success rate in recovery by alcoholics in this study. Bill abandoned the research before it entered the counterculture. Bill's vitamin B-3 studies were conducted later in conjunction with the same two doctors.

I've formed a hypothesis regarding Bill's later life. It is this: after A.A. "Came of Age" in 1955 and the fellowship was formally turned over to the members, Bill spent the rest of his life trying to find a solution for the alcoholic who A.A. couldn't seem to reach, and to delve into areas precluded from A.A. by Traditions.

Who do you think is the least acknowledged figure in the early history of A.A.?

From the Eastern Branch history of A.A., which has been my focus, Hank P. would unquestionably merit that distinction. The current account of Hank staggering into the office to redeem his shares for drinking money is incorrect based on the extensive correspondence between the two at the time. What is sad is that the account has not been corrected. Bill was careful to minimize Hank's contribution in his own renditions. This was largely due to his fear of potential litigation stemming from representations he made to Hank about how proceeds from the book would be applied after the complete redemption of all stock and transfer of the book to the Alcoholic Foundation. Hank's failure to return to A.A. and his family's failure to set the record straight reinforce the adage that history is written by the winners. Under other circumstances, Hank might be referred to as A.A.'s third co-founder. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to interview Hank's family about his unrecorded contribution to the early history of A.A. and what happened with him after he left.

Have your investigations given you any clues as to the origin of the Twelve Steps?

Many say that the roots of the Twelve Steps came from the Oxford Group. To an extent this may be true and evidenced by Frank Amos' seven step account in his survey of the Akron Oxford Group's alcoholic members dated 2-23-38. Perhaps the greatest neglect regarding step source research has been with respect to the Jerry McAuley's Water Street Mission materials which I'll speak of below. When I read McAuley's three early books, the Steps jumped off the page at me.

It seems that A.A History buffs are interested in tracing the roots of almost every idea and practice within A.A..

Yes, nothing is sacred. We've even attempted to track down the origin of concerns about what is today known as the "Thirteenth Step." The thirteenth step refers to the concern over the danger that romantic sexual relationships pose to ones potential for success in the first year of recovery. Its documentation even preceded Bill's final enumeration of the Twelve Steps. Hank was the first eastern branch alcoholic who took hold of the program after Bill returned from Akron in 1935. He provided Bill with a handwritten list of ideas for what became the "Big Book". It included the topic of "sexual relapse" (also one of the earliest uses of the term "relapse" in recovery circles). A review of the marriage difficulties and drinking relapses of early eastern members suggests that these two problems were enmeshed. The serious business of getting sober in early A.A. was often interrupted by scenes resembling a soap opera. The first edition of the *Big Book* states that sober A.A. members were not the arbiters of anyone's sex conduct. Then it cleverly offers the metaphor of un-spiced and over-spiced food.

Your investigations led to some questions about A.A.'s founding date. Could you describe what you discovered and people's reaction to this discovery?

Good historians have to follow the evidence even if we don't like where that takes us, and even if others have a lot of emotion about what we are investigating. For example, I was advised by an editor reviewing my manuscript on early A.A. history to look into the events surrounding the Atlantic City AMA Convention in Atlantic City that immediately preceded

Dr. Bob's last drink. The dates from the detailed AMA records didn't line up and Dr. Bob was not indicated as signing in to any one seminar or the Convention as a whole. There was a second time misalignment with respect to Sue Smith's very specific accounting of an argument with her father on the date of his return. He refused to give permission for her to attend a dance at a named school. Wally P., another A.A. historian, was going to Akron he offered to check the Akron Beacon Journal for the date of the dance at that school. It occurred exactly one week later. So the date was actually June 17, 1939.

The Convention dates alone were enough to reasonably discount the possibility of the June 10th date. However two independent simultaneous events reduce the odds of mistake to an almost statistical impossibility. Keep in mind we're trying to track the exact location of people who are drunk at a time more than sixty years ago. It may seem surprising to go into such myopic detail over such minute triviality, but that's precisely how history is reconstructed. Of course it is hard to do this work and not get emotionally involved on some level. This happens to even seasoned A.A. Historians who are used to finding such inconsistencies.

Do you ever use your own experience to try to sort out historical truths?

Yes. As one example Bill Wilson is said to have read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James just prior to his "white light" experience and permanent sobriety. The book contains only two pages and one footnote dealing with alcoholism. I can't imagine anyone who has read this book honestly saying that it is possible that any alcoholic a few days out of the bottle, could make any sense of it. It seems more likely that Bill only read the brief alcoholism references that dealt with Jerry McAuley's Water Street Mission and S.H. Hadley's religious experiences that permanently removed their desire to drink. The descriptions of both Bill's and the McAuley/Hadley experiences are very similar and would be an accurate description of my own experiences. I think it natural to filter an account through our own subjective experience in arriving at what was in the minds of the people we explore. One can then estimate whether any particular account seems experientially honest.

Let me use a more risky but equally factual example about which there are two highly polarized but mutually exclusive accounts. One account states that Bill's LSD experiments were being investigated for the purpose of triggering or deepening a positive spiritual experience in new A.A. members to facilitate a deeper and more rapid recovery. The other account, stated by

Dr. Hoffer recently, is that LSD was being investigated as a potential trigger to induce negative delirium tremens. Documents written by Bill at the time of the experiments indicate the former purpose. Here we can use the historical evidence to arrive at a choice of which account is most accurate.

There seems to be a growing interest in the history of A.A. among A.A. members.

Do you think the study of this history can strengthen one's recovery?

It will certainly put someone in touch with a great group of people.

What do you think is the ideal approach of the recovery historian?

There is no ideal approach, as each person will approach their investigations from their own perspective. My beliefs about the history of A.A. continue to evolve, sometimes dramatically. All writings on the subject come from the author's perspective, but the key to this work is finding the original material-the best evidence we can access and then document those sources. This is why our Archives are so important.

There is much physical evidence regarding A.A. history to be discovered and there is much to confirm, expand or refute in the available histories of A.A., including my own. "Seek and you will find" and "Absence of proof is not proof of absence" have been my core mottoes. Few A.A. historians take offence when proved wrong. The goal is to confirm what really happened as clearly as available evidence will allow. Above all it is fun and can be enjoyed at any level. Local archives always need help such as builders, chemists, artists, framers, computer specialists, historians, financiers, audiophiles, typists, artists and photographers. Anyone can find a role in uncovering and preserving this history.

William L. White (bwhite@chestnut.org) is Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems and author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*.