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Alcoholic Mutual Aid Groups (United States) William L. White

Abstinence-based mutual aid societies organized by and for those experiencing severe alcohol-related problems have a long and rich history in the United States. The first of these societies rose in two cultural contexts: within Native American tribes in the eighteenth century and then within Euro-American communities in the mid-nineteenth century. The impetus for such societies was the rise of alcohol problems among Native peoples, and a three-fold rise in annual per-capita alcohol consumption and related personal and social problems within the new American republic.

Native leaders, including Papounhan, Wagomend, Neolin (the Delaware Prophet), Tenskwatawa (the Shawnee Prophet), Handsome Lake, and Kennekuk (the Kickapoo Prophet), introduced nativist religious and cultural revitalization movements that called for the rejection of alcohol and a return to Native traditions. The mid-eighteenth century recovery “circles” among the Delaware Indians constitute the earliest geographically de-centralized, sobriety-based support structures in the United States. Native religious and cultural revitalization movements, created by messianic leaders who themselves had suffered from alcoholism, emerged at a time when alcohol was being used as a tool of economic, political and sexual exploitation of Native peoples. These early movements were followed by “Indian Preachers” in recovery from alcoholism (Samson Occom, William Apress) who provided a Christian framework of recovery from alcoholism, and late nineteenth century abstinence movements that blended both Native and Christian beliefs and rituals (The Indian Shaker Church and the Native American Church).

Sobriety as a Cultural Phenomenon

By the 1830s, Americans suffering from what was about to be newly christened as “alcoholism” sought shelter within a rising temperance movement. It was within the local temperance societies that the drunkard would fine a

mechanism to stop drinking (signing the pledge), a forum for public confession and commitment, sober fellowship, and support for keeping the pledge. Between 1840 and 1875, recently sobered drunkards began to organize their own temperance societies that were focused more on personal reformation than public education and political reform. The first society founded exclusively for the purpose of such reformation was the Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society organized in April, 1840, in Baltimore, Maryland.

The Washingtonian Society emphasized the importance of public confession, pledge signing, mentorship of new members, continued sharing in the Washingtonian meetings, sober fellowship and service to other “hard cases.” The Society experienced explosive growth, quickly rising to a membership of more than 500,000, and rapid geographical dispersion that was due, in part, to the leadership of men like John Hawkins and John Gough, two of the most effective and widely traveled temperance lecturers of the nineteenth century. In spite of this dramatic increase in membership and public visibility, most Washingtonian groups collapsed within a few years due to the loss of their closed (“drunkards only”) meeting structure, internal dissension over political and religious issues, damaged public credibility, and co-optation by more powerful temperance organizations.

Following the collapse of the Washingtonians, fraternal temperance societies filled the void of mutual support for “reformed men” seeking to be shielded from the temptations of drink. Among the more prominent of such societies were the Sons of Temperance, Order of Good Templars, the Independent Order of Rechabites, the Order of the Friends of Temperance, and the Independent Order of Good Samaritans. The membership of some of these societies was made up almost exclusively of reformed men. The emphasis on sober fellowship and economic assistance eventually widened the doors of membership to include anyone willing to sign the pledge and meet other requirements for membership. Membership in these societies declined as conflict arose over whether their focus should be exclusively on the personal reformation of the drunkard, or the legal prohibition of alcohol.

Another genre of alcoholic mutual aid society, the Ribbon Reform Clubs, emerged in the 1870s under the leadership of men like J.K. Osgood, Dr. Henry Reynolds, and Francis Murphy. The Ribbon Clubs drew their name from the practice of members wearing a ribbon on their clothing to both publicly convey the hope of reform for the drunkard and to recognize one another as they traveled. The purple, blue and red ribbons became visible symbols of personal recovery in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The Ribbon Reform Clubs emphasized

pledge-signing, regular meetings for mutual support, rescue work with other drunkards, and a prohibition against political discussions at their sponsored events.

These early alcoholic mutual aid societies inspired calls for the creation of special institutions to care for the inebriate. Several hundred inebriate homes, medically-directed inebriate asylums, and proprietary addiction cure institutes opened in the last half of the nineteenth century. These institutions spawned patient-led organizations that provided mutual support both during and following treatment. Among the more prominent of these societies were the Ollapod Club (New York Inebriate Asylum), the Godwin Association (Franklin Reformatory Home for Inebriates), the Dashaway Association (The San Francisco Home for the Care of the Inebriate) and the Keeley Leagues (Keeley Institutes). The Keeley Leagues were the largest of these institutional aftercare groups with more than 370 chapters and 30,000 members during the mid-1890s.

Another type of alcoholic mutual aid society emerged from the work of Jerry McAuley. McAuley, an alcoholic ex-convict, achieved sobriety through religious conversion and went on to open the Water Street Mission in New York City in 1872. This marks the beginning of the urban mission movement in the U.S., out of which also grew the alcoholism programs of the Salvation Army and rural religious Inebriate colonies such as Keswick Colony of Mercy founded by William Raws in 1889. Mutual aid groups such as the Drunkard's Club, founded by Orville "Awful" Gardner in New York City were the earliest precursors to religiously-oriented alcoholism recovery support groups such as the United Order of Ex-Boozers, Alcoholics Victorious, Alcoholics for Christ, Mountain Movers, Liontamers Anonymous, High Ground, and Overcomers Outreach. There is a more recent trend toward offering recovery support groups within the framework of a larger addiction ministry, such as the One Church–One Addict program founded by Father George Clements of Chicago.

Groups like the Business Men's Moderation Society, founded in 1879, marked the beginning of mutual aid societies that were neither abstinence-based nor religiously oriented. The moderation societies pledged themselves to limit the frequency and volume of alcohol consumption and to avoid practices like "treating" that encouraged drunkenness.

Collapse and Rebirth

Most of the alcoholic mutual aid societies and alcoholism treatment institutions founded in the nineteenth century collapsed during the first two

decades of the twentieth century. One attempt to rebirth such support was Boston's Jacoby Club, founded in 1910 by Ernest Jacoby as a club for alcoholic men to "help themselves by helping others." The Jacoby Club was created as an appendage to the Emmanuel Clinic, which was seeking to combine religion, psychology and medicine in the treatment of alcoholism.

This dearth of mutual aid resources changed in 1935 when the meeting of two alcoholics, Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, reaching out for mutual support, marked the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). A.A. grew slowly, extracting its Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions from the experiences of its early members and groups. It stood alone as the dominant sobriety-based support structure from its founding into the mid 1970s. There were adaptations of A.A. to alcoholism (Alcoholics Victorious), Eleventh Step adaptations of A.A. for A.A. members of particular religious faiths (e.g., Calix Society for Catholic A.A. members), but virtually no major competing groups. A.A.'s survival as an organization and continuing growth mark it as the yardstick by which all other such societies are measured.

A.A.'s sole cultural ownership of alcoholism mutual aid was challenged in the mid-1970s and 1980s with the founding of new alcoholic mutual aid societies. This began with the founding of Women for Sobriety (W.F.S.) by Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick, which was later followed by another women-focused alternative to A.A., Charlotte Kasl's sixteen step empowerment program. Also emerging were secular alternatives to A.A.: Secular Organization for Sobriety (S.O.S.), founded by James Christopher and Rational Recovery (R.R.), founded by Jack Trimpey. Schisms within S.O.S. and R.R. spawned other abstinence-based secular other organizations--LifeRing Secular Recovery and the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Self-Help Network, the latter evolving into Self Management and Recovery Training (S.M.A.R.T.). The 1980s also witnessed the rebirth of moderation-oriented mutual support groups like Moderation Management (M.M.), founded by Audrey Kishline. M.M. provides a nine-step framework that includes a brief, 30 day period of abstinence, a self-analysis of life priorities and drinking patterns, drinking within prescribed limits, and mutual support in face-to-face and online support groups.

The other modern trend was the adaptation of A.A.'s Twelve Step program for those experiencing problems with drugs other than alcohol. The most significant of these were Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Pills Anonymous, and Potsmokers Anonymous. While the support group movement has broadened far beyond A.A. to encompass an ever-widening circle of problems, nearly three fourths of all support meetings attended in the United States are

meetings for the resolution of alcohol and/or other drug-related problems (Kessler, Mickelson, and Zhao, 1997).

The modern story of mutual aid groups is clearly one of expansion and specialization. In spite of their many differences, there are common threads within all of the above mutual aid societies. Each provided or continues to provide a framework for acknowledging and defining the nature of an alcohol or other drug problem, and initiating and sustaining changes in alcohol and drug consumption. They also provide a means of reconstructing personal identity and interpersonal relationships and clarifying one's personal goals and values. What distinguishes them from professionally-directed addiction treatment is that such change occurs in the context of relationships that are non-hierarchical, non-commercialized, reciprocal, and often long-enduring.

References

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Side Bar

Addiction Mutual Aid Societies

A Chronology

Native Recovery "Circles" (1737-1750)

Handsome Lake Religion (1799)

Washingtonians (1840)

Fraternal Temperance Societies

–Sons of Temperance (1842)

–Independent Order of Good Samaritans
& Daughters of Samaria (1847)

–Order of Good Templars (1851)

The Dashaway Association (1859)

Ribbon Reform Clubs (1870s)
-Royal Ribbon Reform Club (1871)
-Blue Ribbon Reform Club (1871)
-Red Ribbon Reform Club (1874)

The Ollapod Club (1868)
The Drunkard's Club (c.1871)
The Godwin Association (1872)
Peyotism (1870s) / The American Indian Church (1918)
Business Men's Moderation Society (1879)
The Indian Shaker Church (1882)
The Keeley Leagues (1891)
Jacoby Club (1910)
United Order of Ex-Boozers (1914)
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (1935)
Calix Society (1947)
Narcotics Anonymous (1947, 1953)
Alcoholics Victorious (AV)(1948)
Potsmokers Anonymous (1968)
Pills Anonymous (1975)
Women for Sobriety (WFS) (1975)
Overcomers Outreach (1977)
Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent People and Significant Others (JACS)
(1979)
Liontamers Anonymous (1980)
Cocaine Anonymous (1982)
Secular Organization for Sobriety (SOS) (1985)
Rational Recovery (RR)(1986)
Moderation Management (MM) (1994)
Self Management and Recovery Training (1994)
One Addict-One Church (1994)
LifeRing Secular Recovery (1999)
Teen-Anon (1999)

