

HOW A.A. CAME TO LOS ANGELES

In 1939, Genevieve Dodge had a serious drinking problem. It was not her problem. She was not an alcoholic. The problem she had was other people's alcoholism. She could not understand why, time after time, persons arrested for being drunk and disorderly, persons sentenced to 30 days in jail, persons battered and beaten up while drunk would go back out and get drunk again. She wanted them to stop drinking, why couldn't they stop drinking?

Genevieve Dodge was a social worker and she was employed as a probation officer in the Superior Court of the County of Los Angeles. She was convinced that alcoholics were not criminals. They were mentally sick. And she was convinced they could be straightened out. She suggested to the Superior Court that alcoholics be given an alternative to the drunk tank. Superior Court agreed. So, for the first time in this country, an alcoholic could be admitted to the psychiatric ward of County General Hospital. There he must attend sessions of a special class. It was an experiment.

Could the insanity of alcoholism be treated like any other severe form of mental illness?

Dodge had an equally enthusiastic partner in the experiment. He was John Howe, a young psychologist and social worker. Howe was convinced that men and women drank alcoholically because they had unconscious conflicts and if these could be explored and resolved in group therapy, the desire to drink would go away. In September 1939, Dodge and Howe started the session. It didn't help. They drunks went to the classes which lasted two hours and took place five times a week in the hospital. They sobered up. They delved into their lives. They resolved to live sane and decent lives forever more.

And they went and got drunk all over again.

Yes, Genevieve Dodge had a very bad drinking problem. She didn't give up though, and neither did Johnny Howe. They became obsessed with the mystery of alcoholism.

In December, Dodge heard about a lady who was going around Los Angeles giving interviews to newspapers; a crazy lady who claimed she had a book which explained why men and women drank and which had a solution to the problem that was driving Genevieve Dodge and Johnny Howe up the wall.

We know that Alcoholics Anonymous started in Akron, Ohio, in June 1935, when two drunks started taking to each other: two male drunks—Bill W. and Bob S.

Alcoholics Anonymous started in Los Angeles when two women started talking to each other—and neither one was an alcoholic! The lady with the book was Kaye Miller and Genevieve Dodge was the lady looking for a solution to the mystery of alcoholism.

Kaye Miller's pursuit of a treatment for alcoholism began when she married Ty Miller, the son of an Ohio Industrialist. He was a hopeless drunk. She loved him and tried every form of treatment known to dry him out and keep him sober. He got worse.

Ty's lawyer had a friend in Akron who told them about Bill W. and Dr. Bob's recovery and the Akron Group. Kaye phoned Bill W. in New York. She said Ty was sober at the moment and she wanted to bring him to New York. He was a periodic drinker. Bill W. suggested that she postpone hitting him with the idea of Alcoholics Anonymous until he was coming out of this next drunk. Well, Ty remained sober 2 years. They moved to Los Angeles to begin life all over again and, as Kaye later said, "Ty went on a drunk here to end all drunks. It lasted 4 months. He couldn't get out of it this time. He was scared and desperate. I was at the end of my rope..."

She had forgotten about Bill W., but he hadn't forgotten her. In those days, prospects were rare. Ruth Hock, Bill's Secretary, kept every inquiry on file and follow-ups were made.

In May 1939, the first draft of the original version of "alcoholics Anonymous" was completed. In order to raise money for its publication, 400 copies of the manuscript had been mimeographed and were sent to interested parties who were asked to buy shares in the Works Publishing Company which would print the book. (Bill W. and Bob S. called it the "Works Publishing Company" because they believed they had the first program for alcoholics that "really works.")

Kaye received one of the first copies of the manuscript. She didn't read the book, but strangely enough, Ty Miller did. He said it was the first time he had ever seen something which understood him—who he was and why he drank. He said this book was talking to him.

Kaye saw something in her husband's eyes she had never seen before. She did not have the patience to read the book, but she wanted to get her drunken husband to an A.A. meeting. She wired the New York office and they replied, "There is no group West of Akron, Ohio."

So she and Ty pulled up stakes and went to Akron and from there to New York. She would get the answers to her husband's problems right from the man at the top—from Bill W. himself. She finally cornered Bill W. in the office and asked him how she could make her husband stop drinking.

He shocked her. Instead of talking about Ty's problems, he talked about hers. He told her she was spiritually bankrupt. She must let go of her husband. "Bill told me," she recollected, "that I had been an extremely bad wife because I had broken all his falls for him and never let him hit bottom." She listened. For the first time this arrogant woman had met a man who humbled her because of his own spiritual strength and unselfishness.

She went to her first A.A. meeting in New York. She said goodbye to Bill W. and told him: "I'm going home to Los Angeles, and if Ty can stay sober on these 12 steps of yours for 6 months, I'm going to beat the drum of Alcoholics Anonymous up and down the state of California, I swear to God."

Bill smiled. He handed her the hard-cover first edition of "Alcoholics Anonymous" in its yellow and red jacket and its garish red binding.

She returned to Los Angeles by ship and now, for the first time, she read the book. She made a decision, "I didn't give a hoot whether Ty stayed sober or drunk—that's his life... my own life was just a beginning... I only knew that the most important thing was that never again should a wife, or any non-alcoholic in the position I'd be in, have to cross the country to find help. Yes, I could tell them in California that I had personally seen 50 or 60 people who used to be drunks, who were now sober and had been for a long time. I could say this and say I had seen it with my own eyes. I could tell them that it was all in this book and the very least I would do was tell them what I had found, if I did nothing else the rest of my life."

And it was this book which Kaye Miller gave to Genevieve Dodge who gave it to Johnny Howe.

The strangest thing about the first edition was the last chapter. It was called Lone Endeavor. It was the story of a man in, of all places, Los Angeles. Yes, the first drunk in Los Angeles who sobered up on the 12 steps and whose story was in the book, was a person named Peter C. So even before A.A. came to Los Angeles in the form of meetings, it had already come to L.A. through the written word. Here's how that happened. Pete C's mother had heard about A.A.; she had written to New York. She received a rough draft of the first 2 chapters of the book. When the manuscript was completed, Bill W. sent Pete C's mother a copy of the mimeographed edition. He wrote: "We would appreciate hearing about you son's condition and his reaction to this volume. Won't you please write us?"

Pete C. wrote and told the story of his recovery. It was the first time an alcoholic had found the answer through, and only through, the book. Bill W. was so impressed by the letter that he made it the final chapter of the book. It was not reprinted in the later editions. Pete C.'s sobriety was a milestone in A.A. history because it proved that you did not need direct contact to recover. This was the start of what became the Loners and Internationals group—persons who work in lonely jobs like the shipping trades. Through correspondence with the Loners and Internationals office at GSO in New York they maintain a link with A.A.

Johnny Howe read the book "Alcoholics Anonymous". He invited Kaye Miller to join the meetings of the psycho class of alcoholics. She talked the straight A.A. program as she had learned it from the book and her meeting with Bill W. Johnny laid out the psychological aspects of the disease. Among the first converts was Barney H., who was

sobering up in a psychopathic ward of County General Hospital. (There was no alcoholic ward at that time.)

Kaye Miller had not divorced Ty. She was living in a small house on Benicia Street in Westwood. Chuck and Lee T., a couple from New York, arrived in Los Angeles. Bill W. had given the, Kaye's number. Kate decided it was time to have a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in Los Angeles. The first meeting of A.A. in Los Angeles took place on December 19, 1939, at her home. Nobody knew exactly how to run a meeting. Kaye knew there had to be doughnuts and coffee. There were doughnuts and coffee. Besides Kaye, there were Johnny Howe, three other non-alcoholic social workers, Ethel and Barney H., Chucks and Lee T., Chauncey and Edna C., Joy S., Dwight S., Walter K., and Hal S.

Kaye Miller telegraphed Bill W.: Los Angeles held its first meeting tonight. Fifteen present.

On January 19, 1940, after Hal S. became sober for good, he started carrying the message to Lincoln Heights jail. He attended every meeting of A.A. in the area. Hal S. was one of the first Angelenos to get sober and remain sober.

In the Central Office Archives at 4311 Wilshire Boulevard, you can look at a torn and faded copy of the first edition of "Alcoholics Anonymous". This is the very book which Bill W. gave to Kaye Miller who gave it to Genevieve Dodge who gave it to Johnny Howe who gave it to Hal S. It was presented to the Los Angeles Central Office in 1977 by Ethel S. On the flyleaf she wrote:

"This is the original A.A. book brought to Kaye Miller in Los Angeles. I am not certain of the exact date when Kaye gave the book to Johnny Howe. Hal entered the County General Hospital on Friday, January 15 (1940) and left Tuesday, January 19. Hal must have been the first person to read this (book), probably January 16 through 18. Eventually Johnny gave the book to him."

Kaye continued to hold meetings at her place and at other person's homes. The meetings were informal and were by invitation and were rather disorganized. Very few persons maintained sobriety. Mrs. Miller became discouraged. Drunks came to a meeting or two and returned to their alcoholic habits. Had the experimental psycho class failed? Was jailing drunks the only way to get them off the streets? Kaye went to Hawaii. She returned and thought about starting another meeting. But she really had no heart for it. Would there ever be a person like Bill W. who could light a fire of A.A. in this city?

There was. He was not in Los Angeles at that time. He was living in Denver. He was a stockbroker. His name was Mort J., who was almost 80 years of age when he passed away June 16, 1984. He was a violent drunk, a blackout drunk, a geographic drunk. Mort J. wanted to change his life. He was powerless over alcohol. He attempted to treat his condition in hospitals and sanitariums. He had been in a long treatment process with a Denver doctor who specialized in alcoholism and drug addiction diseases. Mort J.

seemed to be incurable. He always went back and got drunk once again. Then, in 1939, the doctor gave him a copy of the first edition of “Alcoholics Anonymous”. He showed it to Mort J., who ordered a copy from New York. He read the opening chapters while he was sipping whiskey. By the time he had gotten to chapter 3, “More About Alcoholism”, he wasn’t reading it—he was living it. Well, someday, somehow, he would read this book and sober up and live a good clean life and become a very rich Denver stockbroker. But, meanwhile, there was still another bottle to kill and another trip to take. He went to Los Angeles. He saw his brother in Los Angeles. He was driving drunk, of course. He drove for weeks in a blackout. From Los Angeles he drove through California and Arizona, and he vaguely remembered, as through a shot glass darkly, crossing the Mexican border at Nogales and drinking in a bar at Guyamas and another one in Hermosillo and back to Nogales and then he found himself in Palm Springs, where he did thing he did in Hermosillo or Nogales or Denver.

He drank.

One morning, in Palm Springs, Mort J. awakened and he was shaking and his nerves were coming through his skin and he needed a drink or he would die. There were only empty bottles in his hotel room. He didn’t even know where he was for sure. He started ransacking his suitcases and then saw that copy of “Alcoholics Anonymous” which he had forgotten he packed.

Instead of waiting until the liquor shops opened, he read the book. He never knew what made him do this. He read the book from the first page to the last page, to the story about Pete C., Lone Endeavor.

Then he fell into a deep sleep. When he awakened, he went outside and had the first good meal he had eaten in a long time. He had bacon and eggs and coffee. Then he went back to his room. He read “Alcoholics Anonymous” a second time.

And from that day on he never had another drink.

Now a fire burned inside him. He had to carry the message. He drove home to Denver to start a meeting. He told his fiancée he was sober, but she did not believe him. She broke off the engagement. (Later, much later, Frances married him.) Broken hearted but sober, Mort J. came to Los Angeles. He telephoned A.A. in New York and Ruth Hock gave him Kate Miller’s number, and the address where she lived and had meetings. He went over.

“Where’s the meeting?” He asked.

“There are no meetings here any more,” Kaye said. “I’m disgusted. I’m going to Hawaii or Europe.”

“Where are all the members of A.A.?” he asked.

“They’re all drunk,” she said bitterly.

“Do you have any names for me?” he asked. I want to get in touch with some alcoholics in town.

“You’re wasting your time,” she said. She had been cleaning out her apartment. She had thrown all of her index cards with the names of A.A. prospects and all the inquiry letters into a waste basket. Mort J. cleaned out her waste basket. His pockets full of cards and letters, he departed. Kaye’s last words to him were, “Don’t waste your time on them. I’ve called on them all. They can’t stay sober.”

Mort J. started walking home. On his way, as he saw from one of the cards, was the address of Cliff W., whose wife, Dorothe had written to A.A. in New York for help. Dorothe had read about a group in Beatrice Fairfax’s syndicated column. (She was the “Dear Abby” of her period.)

As Mort J. walked to the Walker home, he did not realize that the entire burden of making A.A. live in Los Angeles had now fallen on him. He was a quiet, soft-spoken person. He was a Harvard college man. He was dressed in a dignified way. He looked like a bank president. He rang the bell at the home of Dorothe and Cliff W. Cliff answered the doorbell.

“My name is Mort J. I’m a member of Alcoholics Anonymous; may I come I?”

Cliff W. started listening to Mort J.’s story. Cliff had no desire to stop drinking or go to meetings. But he was spellbound as Mort told him the story of his last roaring drunk from Colorado to Mexico to Palm Springs. Mort J. said that, as he understood it, he could not remain sober, unless he carried the message to other alcoholics. Would Cliff W. come to a meeting if he could organize a meeting?

Well, Cliff W. kind of liked this high-class gent, and more as a favor to him, more to help Mort J. stay sober, he said he would.

Years later, Cliff W. said, “I had no desire to join Alcoholics Anonymous. But I had to see Mort again. He attracted me. And years later when Bill W. came out with the 11th tradition, I realized how true it was when he said A.A. is a program of attraction rather than promotion. And I believe this attraction starts with the man who makes the 12th step call...Always when I call on a new guy I shave and clean up, put on a tie and coat, try to look good, even if it’s a drunk tank I’m going to or the alcoholic ward in a hospital, because, after meeting me and if he’s attracted enough, he might come to his first A.A. meeting, just to please me, the way I went to Mort’s meeting, just to please him, because there was something about him that drew me...”

Looking around for a meeting place, Mort J. got in touch with Dr. Ethel Leonard. She worked with alcoholics. She happened to be house physician for the Cecil Hotel on Main Street. Through the good offices of Dr. Leonard, Mort J. rented a large room on the

mezzanine for \$5.00. This was the first public meeting of A.A. It was on Friday at 8PM in March of 1940. It was open to all who had a desire to stop drinking, Ted LeBerthon, a columnist on the Los Angeles Daily News, wrote about the meeting in his column. And it was in the heart of Skid Row.

“I chose this location,” Mort J. recalls, “because the price was right and there was a good psychological reason for holding a meeting down there because I knew it would show us where we were headed unless we did something about it—that was our destination, Skid Row, the drunk tank, sleeping in the alleys and under the bridges, winos, dead men...”

Present besides Mort J., were Cliff W., and about 10 men—men who had failed to sober up at Johnny Howe’s classes and Kaye Miller’s meetings. He pleaded with them to give A.A. one more chance.

Mort did not know how an A.A. meeting should be conducted. There was no coffee, no doughnuts. All he had was his copy of “Alcoholics Anonymous”. Mort opened the meeting and he told how he had not had a drink in 5 months. He asked if anybody present would like to read a few pages. Nobody volunteered. So Mort J. opened the book to Chapter 5 and started reading, “Rarely have we seen a person fail who...”

And that is how the practice of reading a portion of Chapter 5 started in Southern California.

A month later, Mort got a letter from Frank R., who was in a Phoenix, Arizona, sanitarium. He lived in Los Angeles. He wanted to know if it was true that A.A. helped the alcoholic at no charge. Mort J. invited him to come to the Cecil Hotel in Friday night when he got home and find out for himself. The next meeting Frank R. arrived, together with his attendant. He was now in Compton sanitarium and was not allowed to go out without a guard. He was a dangerous man when he was drunk.

Mort J. remembers Frank as a fierce, rough guy. He never smiled. He looked like one of those strong silent types who played in the Westerns, like a Gary Cooper or John Wayne type. He had a question for Mort J. after the meeting.

“What keeps you sober, Friend?”

“To the best of my belief it is trying to practice the principles of the book.”

“Yeah? No kidding? And all these men here tonight—what the hell keeps them sober, if they are sober, which I doubt?”

“The same thing.”

“I’d like to help you.”

“I need all the help I can get.”

Mort J. visited him in the Compton sanitarium three times. The first 2 times Frank R. had a bottle of Gordon's gin in his bed. The third time he was sober. Frank R. became part of the team.

And so it was on these three rocks—Mort J., Cliff W., and Frank R. —that the house of A.A. in Los Angeles was built. The A.A. number in Los Angeles telephone directory was the home of Cliff and Dorothe W.

They set up a meeting at the Embassy Hotel, where they moved from the Cecil. Then to the Elks Club, to the Regent Hotel, and to Parkview Manor, at 2200 West 7th Street.

Frank R. was a driving force in the fellowship. He had been a successful executive with the Southern Pacific Railroad. Cliff remembered him "as the hardest looking hombre I ever saw. He was cold and tough. He had these bulging eyes behind thick glasses." He became one of the most passionate 12th steppers that ever lived. Cliff W. always said it was Frank's example and teaching which imbued him with the love of the 12th step work. Hard as it is for those of us who remembered Cliff W. during the 1970's when he was a powerful and charming speaker, a smiling, loving and kindly man, that in the pioneer days he was a 'shy, introverted, scared' person. He was afraid of knocking on strange doors and talking with wet drunks. Frank R. had no fears. He was also a tough sponsor. He founded what Norm A. liked to call the Los Angeles College of Hard Hearted Sponsors. Frank R. was the first in a long line of uncompromising A.A. members who lived in the conviction that their lives had been given back to them in order to be of service to the alcoholic who was still suffering.

Once, recalled Cliff, over 100 inquires had piled up, Frank took him on the rounds for 2 weeks, all over the county. "We went into jails and we went into hospitals and insane asylums," Cliff said. "We went into dumps and we went into mansions and, well, all over the place. And Frank wasn't afraid of man or beast. I remember one time a man wanted to give us a check for \$500 and Frank refused it. He said to me that in A.A. you don't ever get obligated for more than a cup of coffee. A.A. has saved this man's life. He wanted to make a big donation. Frank showed me that love and service are not for sale."

They fought hard to get drunks to stay sober. They treasured every new member they got. Roy Y., who was to move to Texas subsequently, but was active in the Los Angeles meetings of A.A. during this period, remembers that they had a Goon Squad which was set up to corral any member who got drunk and they rode herd on him until he sobered up. They once got a call from a member's wife in West Los Angeles. She said her spouse was drunk again. They sent out the Good Squad to an address they had. They rang the doorbell. Nobody answered. They went around to the back door which was open. They went in. They looked for a drunk. There was a man in paint-spotted overalls sleeping in the bedroom. They picked him up and took him to a restaurant and made him drink coffee. He kept telling them to leave him alone and he didn't want the coffee.

Then they dragged him to a meeting. The man was definitely intoxicated. He thought the meeting was interesting. But he was the wrong man. They had gone to the wrong house. The man was a house painter who had gotten drunk while painting a room. He had been taking a little siesta when the Goon Squad captured him. Roy Y., who sobered up in Texas in February of 1940 and came to Los Angeles in August of that year, believes that the man became sober and never had another drink.

By the time, in March 1941, when Jack Alexander's article on Alcoholics Anonymous appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, the Los Angeles organization was already in position. Hundreds of inquires started coming in. They were a small band of men, these pioneers, but they were tempered by their experiences and know-how to outwit alcoholics at their self destructive games.

Among those who came in at this time, and who were known as the Saturday Evening Post Class of 1941, were Al M. and Sybil C. Sybil C. phoned the A.A. number and was given Cliff W. She was drunk when she called. She asked him to send the A.A. ambulance. Later, he became her sponsor. Sybil C. was the first woman to get sober and stay sober in Los Angeles. She now took all 12th step calls from women. She became a passionate bearer of the message.

Al M. was a trombonist who played in movie studio orchestras. He was a tall, good looking man, and, when he was infected with the spirit of sobriety, he became another driving, impassioned A.A. worker, who was a magnetic speaker and a hard-hearted sponsor.

So through these and other members, A.A. increased in numbers. By the end of 1941, there were about 500 members in Los Angeles.

By 1943, the membership was large enough to hold a big meeting. Money was raised to bring Lois and Bill W. here. The date was November 6, 1943. The place was the American Legion Hall on Highland Avenue.

Reporting on his arrival, the Los Angeles Times, November 3, 1943, described Bill W. as a "tall, lanky, Easterner, who requested that his name no be divulged nor his photograph taken..." the article stated that there were "13 groups in Los Angeles County, each of which meets once a week." The membership was estimated to be 1,500. There was no Central Office in 1943.

On a Saturday night, the hall was filled with a thousand happy, sober men and women. From the wings, backstage, Bill W. stood beside Mort J. He pulled the curtain a little so he could peek at the great throng. He shivered. He now knew that Alcoholics Anonymous could cross the rivers and the deserts and come over the mountains.

And to Mort J. he murmured, "Nothing can stop us now."

The Southern California Archives Committee originally wrote this pamphlet on August 1, 1986. The location of the Central Office was changed from Harvard Boulevard to Wilshire Boulevard. Other than that this pamphlet is as it was written in 1986.