

## Big Book History and Myths

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This portion of the workshop will be a brief history of facts and myths about the book “Alcoholics Anonymous” which we in AA affectionately call “The Big Book.” Co-founder Bill Wilson began writing it in April 1938 at the business office of New York member Hank P. (Parkhurst) at Honors Dealers, 17 William St, Newark, New Jersey.

Hank P, whose Big Book Story is “The Unbeliever”, started AA in New Jersey. He also had a significant role in the development of the Big Book. Ruth Hock, AA’s first National Secretary, wrote “If it wasn’t for Bill Wilson the Big Book would never have been written. If it wasn’t for Hank Parkhurst it never would have been published.” Hank is credited with writing chapter 10, “To Employers.” This is also alluded to in the book “Pass It On” (p. 200). Sadly, Hank returned to drinking in April 1940.

Bill Wilson was the primary author of the Big Book and 12 Steps but others did make major contributions and that is the way Bill wanted it to be. Bill wrote draft outlines on legal pads and dictated the expanded text to Ruth Hock. Each week he would read the drafts to those who met at his home. Edited copies were sent to Dr. Bob and the Akron members for further review and editing. As they worked their way through the chapters, New York and Akron members also wrote the personal stories to be included in the book.

In the spring of 1938, Bill wrote to Dr. Bob that he had drafted the chapters “There Is A Solution” and “Bill’s Story.” Bill suggested to Dr. Bob that “the completed book should represent the work of many people, particularly the individual stories which should be as little edited as possible. They will naturally be the heart of the book and must represent the feelings, experience and personalities of those who write them.” Dr. Bob’s wife, Anne, was invited to write the chapter “portraying the wife of an alcoholic” but she declined. As it turned out, the chapter “To Wives” was written by Bill, much to the dismay of his wife Lois. Bill informed Dr. Bob that nearly everyone in New York favored the title “Alcoholics Anonymous.” This was almost a year prior to the book’s publication.

On July 18, 1938, Dr. Esther L Richards wrote a very favorable letter to Bill regarding a 2-chapter book prospectus sent to her for review. She suggested getting a “number one physician” in the alcoholism field to write an introduction. Shortly after, on July 27, 1938, Dr. William D. Silkworth wrote a letter of support for use in fundraising for the book. It was incorporated into the chapter “The Doctor’s Opinion” together with extracts from a paper he wrote that was published in the Lancet medical journal in July 1939. Dr. Silkworth’s name was not added to the “The Doctor’s Opinion” until publication of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 1955.

### **The Recovery Program**

Prior to publication of the Big Book, there were two groups in Akron and New York. The recovery program consisted of six steps passed on to new members by word-of-mouth. The lack of any written material resulted in widely varying versions depending on who was doing the passing on. Different versions of the six steps can be found in the books “AA

Comes of Age” (p. 160), Pass It On” (p. 197) and a July 1953 *Grapevine* article by Bill Wilson titled “A Fragment of History” which can be found in “The Language of the Heart” (p. 195).

The Big Book pioneer story “He Sold Himself Short” (p. 263) also contains a version of the six steps recorded by Earl T. (Treet), founder of AA in Chicago. Dr. Bob was Earl’s sponsor and this version reflects a more orthodox Oxford Group influence that prevailed in the midwest. It should be noted however, that the Oxford Group did not have anything that they called or considered to be “Steps.” It was only the alcoholics in New York and Akron (or what was then called “the Alcoholic Squad”) that exclusively had and practiced ‘steps’ as their spiritual program of recovery.

In his July 1953 *Grapevine* article Bill wrote, “Though these principles were advocated according to the whim or liking of each of us, and though in Akron and Cleveland they still stuck by the Oxford Group absolutes of Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love, this was the gist of our message to incoming alcoholics up to 1939, when our present 12 Steps were put to paper.”

The 12 Steps were actually first put to paper in December 1938 at Bill’s home at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn, New York. An approximate reconstruction of the original draft is in the book “Pass It On” (p. 198). Bill claimed it took him about 30 minutes to do it.

There was much (often heated) debate on the wording of the new 12 Steps that continued right up to the publication of the Big Book. In a May 1955 *Grapevine* article titled “How AA’s World Services Grew” Bill described the book writing project as one where fierce arguments over the drafts dominated the small fellowship’s activities for months on end and that over time he became much more of an umpire than an author.

400 mimeographed manuscript copies were sent out for review and comments in January 1939. New York member Jim B (Burwell) suggested the phrases “God as we understood Him” and “Power greater than ourselves” be added to the Steps and basic text. Bill Wilson wrote in his July 1953 *Grapevine* article “Those expressions, as we so well know today, proved life-savers for many an alcoholic.” Jim B, whose Big Book story is “The Vicious Cycle” started AA in Philadelphia and helped start AA in Baltimore, Maryland.

The manuscript copies sent out for review were returned by March 1939 and produced very few changes. However, a major change did occur when a New Jersey psychiatrist “Dr. Howard” suggested toning down the use of “you must” to “we ought” or “we should.” Dr. Silkworth and Dr. Harry Tiebout offered similar advice. Tom Uzzell, a friend of Hank P, an editor at Collier’s and a member of the NYU faculty, edited the manuscript and reduced it to around 400 pages. The cuts came mostly from the personal stories.

## **Editions**

In April 1939, 4,730 copies of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of “Alcoholics Anonymous” were published at \$3.50 a copy. That would be equivalent to \$54 a copy today. It was a very expensive book for its time. The printer, Edward Blackwell of the Cornwall Press, was told to use the thickest paper in his shop. The large, bulky volume became known as the “Big Book” and the name has stuck ever since. In “AA Comes of Age” (p. 170) Bill wrote that the idea behind

the thick, large paper was “to convince the alcoholic he was getting his money’s worth.” The book had eight roman and 400 arabic numbered pages. “The Doctor’s Opinion” was page one and the basic text ended at page 179.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Big Book was introduced 16 years later at the historic 1955 International Convention in St Louis. Bill re-numbered the pages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition so that page one began with “Bill’s Story” instead of “The Doctor’s Opinion.” It is not known why he did this but there has been some very creative and entertaining speculation on the matter. 21 years later, the 1976 Conference approved publication of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. 25 years after that, the 2001 Conference approved publication of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

The US copyright to the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Big Book expired in April 1967. This was not discovered until 1985 when it was also discovered that the copyright to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition expired in 1983. It should be noted however, that the Big Book copyright has expired only in the United States and is still in force outside the US under international treaty agreements.

### **Changes**

The basic text of the Big Book is, for the most part, "protected" from radical change by the prevailing sentiment of the AA Fellowship as a whole. Changes to the basic text can be made by conference advisory action but it is doubtful they would get very far. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Bill sensed that the Fellowship was resistant to changing the basic text and was careful to inform the 1955 Conference that the main objective of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was to change the personal stories to better reflect the make-up of the membership. His report stated, "not an iota" of the first part of the text dealing with recovery principles had been changed.

Contrary to popular belief, a number of wording changes have been made to the basic text over the years. The wording of Step Twelve changed in March 1941 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> printing of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Big Book. The term “spiritual experience” was changed to “spiritual awakening” and the term “as the result of these steps” was changed to “as the result of those steps.” Step Twelve was changed again in 1956 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> printing of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. The term “as the result of those steps” was restored to its original form of “as the result of these steps.” Only one person on this planet could pull off something like that. To protect his anonymity I will simply say that his last name began with “W.”

In 1947, in the 11<sup>th</sup> printing of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition, the term "ex-alcoholic" was replaced by the terms "ex-problem drinker" or "non-drinker." Over the years changes have been made to reflect the growth in membership and groups (e.g. the word "scores" changed to "hundreds" or “hundreds” changed to "thousands" etc.) and footnotes were added. Several web-sites have tables detailing all the basic text wording changes from edition to edition.

The 2006 General Service Conference approved a change to the preface of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition so that it reads “Therefore the first part of this volume, describing the AA recovery program, has been left largely untouched in the course of revisions made for the second, third and fourth editions.” The word “largely” was added to correct the erroneous impression that the basic text had not been changed over the prior editions.

The major changes to the Big Book editions have been in the selection of personal stories so that they represent a good cross-section of the AA membership. In "AA Comes of Age" (p. 164) Bill wrote "We had not gone much farther with the text of the book when it was evident that something more was needed. There would have to be a story or case history section... [to] identify us with the distant reader in a way that the text itself might not."

29 stories were included in the 1<sup>st</sup> edition to reflect a 1939 US membership of around 100. 37 stories were included in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition to reflect a 1955 worldwide membership of around 136,000. 43 stories were included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition to reflect a 1976 worldwide membership of around 321,000. 42 stories were included in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition to reflect a 2001 worldwide membership of over 2 million. In 2003, the book "Experience, Strength & Hope" was published. It contains 56 stories that were previously published in the first three editions and later replaced.

### **Historical Accuracy**

There are two rather sensitive items in the Big Book that are historically and factually incorrect. One is in Dr. Bob's story, the other is in the "Spiritual Experience" appendix.

In his story Dr. Bob briefly describes his 3-day binge at an AMA convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Upon his return to Akron, Bill helped him through a 3-day sobering up period to get ready for a scheduled surgery. Dr. Bob had his last drink on the day of the surgery and gives the date as June 10, 1935. AA also marks this date as the beginning of the AA Fellowship.

"AA Comes of Age" (p. 147) "Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers" (p. 72) and "Pass It On" (p. 147) all erroneously state that the AMA Convention began the first week of June 1935. The AMA archives has long ago confirmed that the convention began in the second week of June 1935 on June 10. Allowing for 3+ days of binging and blacking out followed by 3 days of sobering up, Dr. Bob's sober date appears to actually be June 17, not June 10.

The "Spiritual Experience" appendix was added in the 2<sup>nd</sup> printing of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition when the wording of Step 12 was changed to use the term "spiritual awakening" instead of "spiritual experience. This was done because many members thought they had to have a sudden, spectacular spiritual experience similar to the one Bill Wilson had in Towns Hospital as described in the chapter "Bill's Story."

The 1<sup>st</sup> edition had a bright multi-colored dust jacket that was designed by Ray C. whose Big Book story is "An Artist's Concept". He began his story with a quotation he attributed to Herbert Spencer which said: "There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance - that principle is contempt prior to investigation." Ray C's story was not included in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Big Book when it was published in 1955.

In 1960, the quotation was added to the "Spiritual Experience" appendix in the 4<sup>th</sup> printing of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. The attribution of the quotation to Spencer is in error. It should be attributed to an English clergyman, author and college lecturer by the name of William Paley who lived from 1743-1805. Herbert Spencer, who lived from 1820-1903 was a great rival

of his fellow Englishman Charles Darwin who is credited with the theory of evolution. However, it was Spencer, not Darwin, who popularized the term "evolution" and it was also Spencer who coined the term, "survival of the fittest." But Spencer did not author the quotation attributed to him in the Big Book.

### **Summation**

In the remaining time I will try to sum up the key role of the Big Book in AA history and why I believe it enjoys and deserves so much respect and admiration from the AA membership.

AA's historic 1955 International Convention in St Louis introduced a new circle and triangle symbol that was prominently displayed on a large banner draping the back of the stage. In "AA Comes of Age" (p. 139) Bill Wilson described the circle as representing the whole of AA. The triangle represented AA's Three Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service. Each of AA's Three Legacies has a foundation of 12 spiritual principles. They are the 12 Steps for the Legacy of Recovery, the 12 Traditions for the Legacy of Unity and the 12 Concepts for the Legacy of Service.

There is an old saying that "Hindsight is 20/20." History is hindsight, particularly in searching for cause and effect. The common root action that caused the written evolution of the Three Legacies of AA very likely took place in October 1937. It was a group conscience decision by the Akron and New York groups to permit the writing of a book of experience that later came to be fondly known in AA as the "Big Book."

The book's contents explain the 12 Steps and AA's Legacy of Recovery. The "Foreword to the First Edition" defines many of the key principles that were later absorbed into the 12 Traditions and AA's Legacy of Unity. Finally, the service structure that was needed to produce and distribute the book and manage the public relations and funds related to book sales provided much of the experience and organization that later helped shape the 12 Concepts and AA's Legacy of Service.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Big Book introduced an appendix containing the long and short forms of the 12 Traditions. The 4<sup>th</sup> edition introduced an appendix containing the short form of the 12 Concepts for World Service. The Big Book now contains all 36 spiritual principles of AA's Three Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service.

The Big Book has a remarkable history of carrying the message of recovery throughout the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: 300,000 copies of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition were distributed from 1939-1955, 1,150,000 copies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition were distributed from 1955-1976, and 19,550,000 copies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition were distributed from 1976-2002. By 2005, distribution reached the 25 million mark and is now exceeding the 30 million mark (this is just the English language versions).

Big Book distribution milestones are celebrated with the presentation of a milestone copy to a distinguished recipient. The 1-millionth copy (a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) was presented to President Richard Nixon in April 1973. The 2-millionth copy was presented to HEW Secretary Joseph Califano in June 1979. The 5-millionth copy was presented to Ruth Hock in July

1985. The 10-millionth copy was presented to Nell Wing in July 1990. She was Bill Wilson's longtime non-alcoholic secretary and AA's first archivist. The 15-millionth copy was given to Ellie Norris in 1996. She was the widow of former trustee chairman John L Norris, MD, affectionately known as "Dr. Jack" to the membership. In 2000, the 20-millionth copy was presented to the fellowship of Al-Anon Family Groups. In 2005 the 25-millionth copy was presented to the Warden of San Quentin Prison, Jill Brown. In 2010 a 30-millionth copy will be presented.

### **Conclusion**

AA's story began with a 5-month sober and still shaky stock broker from New York. He had his last drink (a beer) in the lobby of Towns Hospital in New York City in December 1934. While on a failed business trip to Akron, Ohio, he met an alcoholic surgeon who desperately wanted to stop drinking. He had his last drink (also a beer) in front of Akron City Hospital in June 1935. It's probably safe to say that when AA's co-founders met they had no idea at all of the fellowship of alcoholics that would evolve from their humble meeting and how that fellowship would go on to save the lives of millions of alcoholics world-wide over the next 75 years.

Their legacies are today described as Recovery, Unity and Service. They were our gifts to freely receive and it is our duty to freely give them away. It has been a remarkable journey on the Road of Happy Destiny.

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A good website listing all the Big Book changes:

[http://www.silkworth.net/bb\\_changes/](http://www.silkworth.net/bb_changes/)