

Alcoholics Anonymous

Two Drunks Founded Fellowship Now Numbering 300,000

(Contributed)

Across the world some 300,000 sober alcoholics—including groups in Nelson and Richmond—have just been celebrating an unusual jubilee—the founding of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous by two drunks in the United States in 1935.

Sober alcoholics? They are just that, men and women who have come to realise the hard way that although the disease they have can be arrested it cannot be cured, and that one of the guarantees of their continued sobriety lies in helping other alcoholics to recover.

The only qualification needed for membership of Alcoholics Anonymous is an honest desire to stop drinking, and belief that only a Power greater than himself can restore the alcoholic to sanity.

The idea crystallised in Akron, Ohio, when Bill W. a New York businessman struggling on his own to keep dry after years of alcoholic torment, met another alcoholic, Dr. Bob. They conceived the idea of helping each other, and in doing so achieved what doctors and psychiatrists had been unable to give them—sobriety.

When Dr. Bob died in 1950 after 15 years of sobriety he was revealed to the general public as Dr. Robert H. Smith, noted Akron surgeon. Bill W., now in his early sixties, is still a sober alcoholic active in the voluntary work of helping others towards contented sobriety. That means acceptance by the alcoholic of the fact that while he himself cannot ever safely drink again, he feels no resentment that others can.

SLOW BEGINNING

By the end of 1935 the fellowship now known as Alcoholics Anonymous—A.A. to its members—numbered three, and by the end of 1936, 15. At the end of another year, membership was 40, divided between Akron, Cleveland and New York. That was all but the idea of this new therapy provided by ex-drunks for drunks was spreading.

With the publication of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" in 1939 after a financial struggle, and publicity in the "Saturday Evening Post" and other widely-read journals in the United States the

influence of A.A. spread rapidly. Also the recovery rate went up.

It was soon found that 50 per cent of those who really wanted to arrest their disease by following the A.A. method became sober right away and remained so. Another 25 per cent finally made the grade after one or more "slips," while the other 25 per cent who tried and rejected A.A. followed the inevitable path of the active alcoholic to madness and death.

N.Z. START IN NELSON

Those percentages are still general today in New Zealand—where there are an estimated 10,000 active and another 10,000 potential alcoholics—as in the rest of the world.

The first member of Alcoholics Anonymous in New Zealand was a "loner" in the Nelson district, a farmer who, after fruitless efforts to conquer his addiction, wrote to America for details of A.A. Having attained sobriety himself he made contact with sufferers in other parts of the district and the Dominion.

Progress was slow in this country in the first years—groups of three or four scattered through the Dominion—but today the 80 groups, two of them in Nelson and Richmond, have a membership of more than 1300.

Within the ranks of A.A. are to be found men and women from all ranks of life and of most creeds and denominations, or none at all. A.A. does not proselyte or evangelise, knowing from experience that alcoholics cannot be helped unless they want to be, and are prepared to admit, without

reservations, that alone they are powerless over alcohol. A.A. takes no sides for or against the use of intoxicating liquor, or on any other controversial issue.

CO-OPERATION

While Alcoholics Anonymous makes no claims to having the only means of arresting the disease of alcoholism, it has undoubtedly achieved the most spectacular results in this field, a fact now widely recognised by doctors, psychiatrists, clergymen of all denominations, and those who support such organisations as the National Society in Alcoholism. A.A. co-operates with such groups willingly, while still retaining its own identity.

A.A. recognises alcoholism as a three-pronged disease—physical, mental and spiritual. The success of the movement lies primarily in the fact that its members talk the language of the alcoholic, and can match his own tormenting experiences with their own, showing him that he is not alone.

The tradition of anonymity is a reminder that principles should always be placed before personalities, although individuals are at liberty to disclose their membership on a personal level if they think such a disclosure may be helpful.

SELF-SUPPORTING

Also, A.A. groups are entirely self-supporting, and get along with the barest minimum of organisation, recognising always the individuality of members.

Speaking to 15,000 members of Alcoholics Anonymous and their relatives at the 25th anniversary convention in California early this month, co-founder Bill W. noted that A.A. now counted 300,000 members in more than 8000 groups in 80 countries.

But A.A. did not congratulate itself for any wholesale success, he added. There were still 5,000,000 active alcoholics in the United States alone, perhaps 25,000,000 in the world.

"It is an awesome number that A.A. would be glad to help," said Bill W. "We are not going to chase them, chastise them or campaign for them. All we can hope for is that they will come to us for help when help is what they want."

(Contact with Alcoholics Anonymous can be made by writing to Box 337 Nelson or Box 54 Richmond.)