

## EARLY HISTORY OF AA IN NEW ZEALAND

Information Recorded on Tape by Ian MacEwan, August/September 1975

In 1946, I was living with my wife and her mother and our family of four boys in Richmond, Nelson, having recently had to leave a small citrus farm through neglect and poor management thereof. This had been the story of most of the things I had been connected with for some years. Looking back, I feel that I had been a chronic alcoholic for at least 10 years before that, and the family situation was the same as all families get into where the father, say, or one of the seniors of the house is an alcoholic. Before that I had had a good job in Auckland as manager of the old family firm, J.B. MacEwan & Co., and we'd had a nice home which had had to be sold with its contents to meet debts.

The state of chronic alcoholism developed over at least 10 years in a way we have often seen it develop since in people who start on this career and gradually lose control of their drinking altogether. The family situation, as I have said, was very strained and difficult. One day, I think it was a Saturday, I went into Nelson, as I often did, and spent most all the morning and part, I think, of the afternoon at one of my favourite pubs, Turf, at Stoke, and then, no doubt urged by the manager, I left the hotel. I wasn't a fighting or really objectionable alcoholic, I don't think, but I tended to settle down and go to sleep, and I was quite a weight then, some 18 stone or so, and if I settled in comfortably and went to sleep, of course I became quite a problem to get rid of. However, this day I left the hotel and walked up to the Ngawhatu Psychiatric Hospital, about 2 miles. The Superintendent was on the verandah of this house, Dr J. U. Williams, who knew us well, knew the family background, knew my problems and so on, and for reasons that I have no idea at all, I asked to be admitted. He was not very inclined to do this, but after consultation with my wife he did admit me and I then went into the admission ward where I was sobered up and nursed back to health over the following weeks and then transferred to one of the regular wards, Airdrey, run on our modern open ward type of idea, and the Sister in charge was Sister Val Andrews and this was a fortunate matter for me because she took an interest in me and worked hard to get me back to some sort of normal life and wouldn't have any lying about or sitting down and looking into space, as I was inclined to do. At this time I was having quite severe periods of depression. I finally got round into the regular routine of the ward and took an interest in what was going on.

And one day I was in the reading room and I picked up a copy of the "Readers Digest" and I read an article called "Maybe You can Do it Too". The article was by Edward McColdrick who had been an alcoholic and had recovered through the help of an organisation then known as Alcoholics Anonymous. I was able to identify with McGoldrick from this article as I had never identified before. Of course I had been told that I was just a drunk for years and years, and the idea of an alcoholic was not known in New Zealand at that time, nor was the disease concept of alcoholism. And McGoldrick - I was able to see that I was exactly like him: I drank like he did; I thought like he did; I behaved like he did, and he had recovered, and he recommended anybody in this situation who was wanting help to get in touch with Alcoholics Anonymous. So this I did, I wrote to the General Service Office in New York. They sent me back a copy of that wonderful book which is simply called "Alcoholics Anonymous". In this book I was further able to identify with being an alcoholic, and particularly with one of the case histories as the book consisted in those days of about half case histories at the back, and I was able to identify with one of those very closely. And so I must have, deep down within me, made a decision that this would be it for me and that would try what AA offered, and this I proceeded to do.

I read the book over and over again and had it constantly with me over the next weeks. I stayed in at the hospital some 3 or 4 months and then signed myself out and went back to the family in Richmond. Not too long after this we were able to persuade my mother's trustees - my mother said I was interested in both my father's and mother's estate - to finance us into a farm out at Wakefield. The dates of our moving to these places I can't remember, but these could be confirmed from our trustees, the Guardian Trust, as could the dates, I would think, of the time I spent in hospital be confirmed by the Health Department and the Mental Hospital, and previously of course I had been committed by a desperate family to the Island in Auckland, and this part would be confirmed I should think by the Salvation Army.

So, we moved out to this farm in Wakefield which had been a sheep farm, and the fine old house which had been the home house of the farm at one time, much of which had been sold off, I would think, by the owners who were finding the operation of the farm getting more difficult and more difficult. So I settled in there and tried to clean the place up as best I could. I had no farming experience and this got me fit and well, and by concentrating on the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" and their programme of

recovery, I was able to resist all temptations to go back into even Nelson to tryout or see how I was with drinking, as Alcoholics Anonymous stresses that no alcoholic ever gets back his ability to handle liquor again, and this I came to accept completely.

Two important things happened during my first year on this farm which did a great deal to solidify my own sobriety and understanding of AA and start the message by passing round New Zealand that there was an answer for alcoholics. First of these was the arrival of a film in the country in the series "March of Time", the film was called "Problem Drinkers". These were a very powerful set of news films done on subjects of public interest, and this one reviewed the situation of what we later became to know as the itinerant alcoholic and, incidentally, showed some details of Alcoholics Anonymous operating from a small office in New York. Incidentally, the General Service Office of AA in New York did a grand job right from the beginning with me by keeping me posted with anything that might be of interest or helpful to my sobriety, and the first thing that happened was the arrival of this film and I promptly wrote to the distributors in Wellington, told them of my interest in the subject and particularly in AA itself, and was invited to come over to meet the distributors, some 36 of them, and to preview the film. This film must have done a tremendous amount, I think. It was incorporated in programmes the length of New Zealand and must have done a tremendous lot to pass round knowledge of the new approach to this condition of drunkenness.

I eventually went over to Wellington and met all the distributors and told them my story ~ it was the first talk of that nature I ever gave -and got a very pleasant reception. After that I wrote to the newspapers. In all the cities where the film was shown they had given me the release dates, asking that perhaps some special mention be made of this film, but this was not taken to very kindly and I don't think appeared anywhere very much. I also approached Kerridge Odeon in Auckland to see if they would give the matter some special publicity, but they didn't feel inclined to either.

The second thing, and perhaps the more important thing, was the arrival in the country of Lillian Roth and Bert McGuire. Lillian Roth was a concert singer - I think they call it technically a torch singer. She was a singer of popular songs, a very beautiful girl, and she had been famous all over the States in radio and in concerts, and had become an alcoholic and had gradually lost all contact with reality and couldn't get a job of any kind or with any sort of entertainment people on account of her unreliability. She had

met Bert McGuire and married him: Bert was a recovered alcoholic and (tape interrupted here)

with a vaudeville company. They were to play in Auckland as long as the show would run and then go to Australia. And of course this was tremendously interesting to me and I thought I must go to Auckland and meet them, which I did - incidentally, our funds, like all alcoholic's funds, were very low at the time, I don't really know quite how I managed this or probably kidded the bank into letting me have enough money - I also stayed at the Grand Hotel - but of course had a wonderful time and I learnt a tremendous amount from Bert who was a very solid AA. Lillian, I found, was enthusiastic too, but she was quite shaky, and Bert was tremendously important to her in maintaining her sobriety. (Tape interrupted again)

what these two alcoholics had to say - there was no laughter, no fun-making, no derision at all. Incidentally, only one of them, and he was a very advanced alcoholic, came right as a result of this contact, but one of them did years later join AA and never drank again. But this was a great experience and Lillian and Bert later went on to Sydney (AA had started there in a small way) where they met those interested and did a lot to tell the story and carry the story over the radio and through her concerts.

I want to record a few observations about the farm and things that happened there in the early days. As I have said, it was an ideal place in which to relax and get healthy - do a bit of work about the place and get my health back - and several remarkable things happened, many remarkable things happened, from that centre.

In the first place, when I went to Wellington to see the film "Problem Drinkers," I called at the Health department and told them of my contact with AA and my interest, and how I thought the thing had probably worked for me, and made the acquaintance of Dr. Mirams, then Director of Mental Health, who later became such a good friend of AA and of alcoholics, and ever since has done a tremendous amount to help them help their lot in way of treatment and hospitals and other places where they can get a start on some programme of recovery. Very shortly after this, must have been after I got back from Auckland and the farm, I received a letter from the Health Department in Wellington saying that they'd had a letter from a Dr. Caughey, well known doctor in Auckland, to say that he had a relation urgently in need of help with alcoholism, and he understood that somebody in Wellington was in touch with some new approach and could they give him particulars. They passed the letter on to me and of course I was most excited about

this and immediately sent to Dr. Caughey the only book that I had and other literature and leaflets that had come my way. It was some time after before I heard that his relative badly in need of help was an old school mate of mine, Alf Jockin. Alf had been waylaid almost at his beach cottage out of Devonport and he had heard that somebody in Wellington knew something about a new approach and he had written to the Health Department, and I heard later that of course when this book arrived and the other literature he took it out to Alf and just threw it on the table in the batch and said "see what you can make of that". And Alf fortunately could make something of it and he stopped drinking almost at that point and has never drunk since. He is still alive and retired in Devonport, Auckland. This was a most exciting episode and consequently, in a way, my first attempt to pass the message on, although I was actually doing this all the time by writing to various newspapers where the film "Problem Drinkers" was showing.

So, shortly after this, I got a letter from a Bill Lovey at Lower Hutt, Wellington saying that he was in trouble with alcohol and had heard of the film "Problem Drinkers" and of my association with it and would be glad to meet me sometime. So the first time I was in Wellington after that I got in touch with Bill and we arranged to meet at all places in the lounge of the Midland Hotel where I had spent hundreds of hours I suppose of my recent life in drinking. Funny the sort of thoughts that pass through an alcoholic's mind: the idea occurred to me that I had spent so much money in the Midland Hotel one way and another that I had the right to use their facilities for the rest of my time. However, I well remember the occasion when I met Bill there and he came in looking very shaky and distraught, so much so that I asked him if he would like a drink, and he said yes, that he would, and I shouted him two double whiskeys after which we talked about drinking and how it affected each of us and found much in common in our approach and problems, and Bill told me that he had recently become a convert to Catholicism and as a consequence of this had not drunk on a Sunday since, out of deference to his new conception of God. The idea occurred to me, and I passed it on to him, that what he should do then if he could, reducing the situation to the AA concept 'One day at a time', that he should treat every day as a Sunday and thereby he wouldn't need to drink again. Now this sounds far too naive and simple to me even then but Bill walked out of that lounge and never drank again until he died a few years ago. He became a great worker in the cause of AA, and this was actually my first 12-Step job, and as I said, it sounds so

naive that I then pictured of course that we would be soon sobering up alcoholics by the hundred.

I think it must have been before I went to Auckland, following Dr. Caughey's enquiry, I had received an invitation to address the Rotary Club in Auckland. Now this was a tremendous surprise to me. The Rotary Club in Auckland was a big Club of at least 200 members, and of course well-known Auckland was the scene of my personal disaster. I had once been a well-known member of a community in charge of a big and well-known business and I had gone from that to almost being the town drunk, in fact, those words would have been flattering in the opinion of some, I think, when I finished up there. Again, I had the feeling that, no matter how I felt about this, this was something that should be done, so I undertook to give the talk, and I think it must have been when I went up to see Alf for the first time and met Dr. Caughey that I gave this talk, and to my surprise it had a deep and very solid impact on the Rotary Club. After the meeting, many of the members came round and told me of people they knew who should do something about their drinking and how were they to pass on the message of AA and all the sort of questions you know that became so common to us after that, and one had to plead how little could be done until the person themselves saw the need and called for help.

We stuck very closely to the directions in the book at that time - very wisely, I believe. Referring again to the Rotary talk: after this talk, which I said seemed to make a tremendously deep impact on the Club, I was asked to repeat the talk on radio. The radio people asked for a written script, so I prepared this and submitted it, and to my surprise it was rejected. A great friend of mine was in charge of one of the leading commercial stations in Auckland at the time and he told me afterwards that the talk that I had prepared was quite tame and unimpressive compared with the talk that I had given at Rotary which he had heard, and so this was another lesson, I suppose. These Rotary talks became almost a part of my rehabilitation. I later spoke to the Rotary Club in Wellington, in Lower Hutt and in Christchurch, and one of the things that I mentioned before that came out of it was the indication by the number of enquiries that came after each meeting was the obvious need for AA in the community. This of course was encouraging and helped me to press on with the 12-Step of carrying the message wherever I could.

To go back to the farm. I'd had a talk, quite early in my sobriety with Heather and said that I had no idea in mind of trying to use the farm as a treatment centre for

alcoholics, in fact I didn't think we should have them there at all. I felt that she had had enough hurt and problems and troubles with alcoholism with me without asking for more, and I think this was probably a very wise attitude to take. Although over the following years we did have a lot of alcoholics to the farm - some came who had dried out and were trying the AA programme and they came to try and solidify their understanding of AA or to go over a difficult period like Christmas, we became to have quite sizable and very delightful Christmas groups on the farm. But, as I say, many did come, but I don't remember any, or certainly there were no number, that learnt of AA on the farm and went away and didn't drink again.

Bill Lovey, who I mentioned as my first 12-Step, and successful 12-Step call, came with his wife and spent Christmas with us one year, and Bill had been doing good work around Wellington passing the message around and had actually got the basis of a little group going. It was here for the first time that the ugly head of personalities came into the picture for, after one of our Christmas gatherings at the farm of which Bill and his wife were part, the next time I went to Wellington I found that a small group was meeting in Wellington and Bill announced that I would not be welcome, in fact if I came to the meeting he said he would withdraw. Egotistical alcoholic that I was, I then felt, of course, that I held his future in my hands. I felt that no AA could continue indefinitely without group support, and I felt that if I went to the meeting and he withdrew that he would be sure to drink again. Well, curiously enough, you can imagine how disappointing this was to me and how I felt that the first group in New Zealand being held in Wellington and that I was not welcome. But eventually I went along, and good to his word Bill withdrew, but he never drank again as I said, and his AA was very solid indeed.

The next important event was a letter from Dr Minogue, Sylvester John - dear John as we came to know him - a well known, top-line psychiatrist from Sydney who had been Superintendent at a Mental Hospital there and had been in touch with AA and found that he could apply their teaching and stop drinking, and then gave a great deal of his time to passing the message on, and we had a letter from him to say he was coming to New Zealand for his holidays. He would be over here for two months and would be only too glad to do anything he could to help the AA cause. Of course, this was tremendous news - I think I went to Auckland to meet him, but if I didn't meet him there I certainly met him in Wellington. He was a good Catholic and I've always attributed the

valuable support that the Catholic faith gave to AA to the work he did amongst the Church heads in this country. He met the Bishop of Auckland, the Bishop of Wellington, and of course it was very readily accepted by them, because there are a tremendous number of Catholics who become alcoholics. Nobody, I think quite knows why this is - it has been said that you don't have to be Irish to be an alcoholic, but it seems to help!! There was an article that appeared in a Catholic paper here, some months ago now, and I was surprised that they would publish it, but it just shows how the attitude in these things is changing: the article was called "Alcoholism -the Catholic disease". Now, I imagine a few years ago that would have been promptly dispatched into the wastepaper basket. But of course times and views are changing everywhere in relation to this serious problem in our community

So, Dr Minogue eventually arrived down at our farm to stay with us and was there one Christmas .- I think this would be about 1950 -and we had a lovely time there as you can imagine. It was summer and we just lounged around and talked AA and relative subjects, and I remember one day an amusing incident: the Dr accepted a bed on the verandah in the open air and we had a hen that used to come in and lay an egg every day on one of the beds, and this hen was not in the least put off by the eminent psychiatrist from Sydney, and while he was there each day it would come in and lay an egg on his bed. *(recorded on 13 September 1975)*

Naturally I tried to get a group going in Nelson and was never successful in doing this. There was no group in Nelson until after I left, which is one of those things that happen in AA to cut us all down to size and show us that personally we are not so very important. But we had had one or two interested people: George Stoddard, a dour Scot, had sobered up and been out to the farm a few times and stayed with us. Heather was a close friend of his wife. And then a chap, Alex Sterling came in and made a very good recovery. But we didn't have a meeting - never able to start a meeting as we know them today. I was asked on one occasion to give another talk on AA of all things to the Women's Christian Temperance Society! There was a rather funny story about this: they'd had somebody addressing them on some subject, who had said that there was a new approach to drunkenness and alcoholism called Alcoholics Anonymous, and having heard a lot about this she was going to proceed to tell them all about it when she was interrupted by their Chairman who said, "Oh, but we've got a live one here in Nelson!", and that was how it came about that I went along and talked to them. I'll never forget the



hard looks that they gave me as soon as they discovered that I was not a prohibitionist. But all the same the talk hit home and you could see that quite a proportion of these members had had a hard time, one way and another with alcoholism. So it was always a disappointment to me that we got no group in Nelson itself until after we had left the district and come up north.

Now, something about the happenings that led up to the introduction of AA to Queen Mary Hospital, Hanmer. I don't remember the detail how it happened but a Mr. Moore must have got in touch with us, I presume, and brought his brother up. His brother was a doctor who had had a job in the Ashburton hospital - they were an Ashburton family and the family I think had quite a substantial business in the town. The brother Gordon, through his alcoholism, had lost his job and was the general despair of the family, and he came up and stayed with us for a time and caught on very well to the AA programme of recovery. Eventually, he returned to Christchurch where his wife was then living. A little later on I was in Christchurch and looked up Gordon, and I felt at that time that a visit to Queen Mary Hospital would be worthwhile and Gordon had a car and I didn't so I asked him if he was prepared to drive me up to Hanmer and he said certainly he would. So we went up and I went in to see the Superintendent, whom I'd already had talks with about my alcoholism and the AA approach, and I can't remember who this was but I think it might have been Dr Hay. (Whoever's preparing this History no doubt will be in touch with Dr Maling and I'm sure he will put them right on this matter.) I told the Superintendent that I had a doctor with me who had been an alcoholic and had sobered up through AA and was now not drinking at all, and he immediately expressed great interest and told me if my friend would be prepared to come into the hospital as a patient for a few weeks, so they could get to know him, so to speak, they would probably be able to offer him the local job of G.P. They always had trouble filling this one they always wanted somebody for the staff and the nurses and for the people in the town, and it was a difficult one to fill. Gordon Moore had almost given up hope of getting a job again or setting up in practice - he was very depressed about the whole situation - so he jumped at this. I remember that I went back to Christchurch in the bus and quite happy about that and left a very happy Gordon as a patient in the hospital. Well, true to their promise, he became their local G.P. in a few weeks time and was there for some years, and during this time he worked on many alcoholics and perfected his medical approach to sobering up the alcoholic, which I remember him telling me at one time he thought he

had made it too good. He thought it was a good thing for the alcoholic to suffer a bit during his sobering up, but he had devised a method of treatment that resulted in the alcoholic getting sober with practically no pain, and he was quite doubtful at the time whether this was a good thing or not. Well, a little later, one of the regular doctors on the Hanmer staff returned from overseas and it became necessary to transfer Gordon somewhere else and the Department to adjust the staff numbers correctly, and so he was posted to Tokanui Psychiatric Hospital in Te Awamutu. Later on from there he went to the Mount at Tauranga and set up as a local G.P. where he died a few years later. During his time at Hanmer, he had worked as I said with alcoholics that were available, and I think that Hanmer must have started about then to take a few as patients, and when he was transferred to Tokanui, I remember Tom Maling saying to him, "Well, what am I to do with the alcoholics?", and Gordon said, "You had better take them on yourself", and that was the circumstances that led Tom Maling becoming so interested in alcoholics and giving so much time and help to what literally hundreds of alcoholics as he has done since then, and then over the next few years of course they gradually worked up this regular treatment of alcoholics who were accepted then in hospital as such and this must have been a first in New Zealand because for a long time it was very hard to get an alcoholic into any hospital unless he was really very ill.

We like to keep the matter light and keep some humour in the situation which there was plenty, despite the serious nature of our mission. I had called at Hanmer long before I went there with Gordon and, as many of you will know, went into the Reception Hall and asked at the desk if I could see the Superintendent. A few minutes later a head came out of one of the doors around that big area and ( I think it must have been Dr Hay though not sure who was Superintendent at the time) a demanding voice said to me, "And what do you want" and I said, "I would like to talk to you about alcoholics". He said "Alcoholics! if we found one here we'd kick him out in the morning", Just another case of how things have changed. But he asked me in and I was an hour and a half with him, telling him what I knew of AA and my own situation and how I was getting on with my own recovery. Of how one or two others hadn't been able to take it up and that the idea was really to form groups in the various cities. *(Recorded Sunday night, 13 September 1975)*