

The Books the Good Old-Timers Read

Early A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley region of

Indiana and Michigan in the 1940's and 50's

A summary of their basic principles

Number 1. When Brooklyn Bob Firth (a much loved old timer from South Bend) was asked whether there were any rules in good old time A.A. about what books A.A. people could and could not read, he just laughed and snorted, and said, "**We read anything we could get our hands on that might get us sober!**" That was a good summary of the first basic principle they followed. Good old-time A.A. was totally pragmatic ("what works?") and not an authoritarian system of countless doctrines and dogmas and endless rules which had to be followed blindly.

Number 2. Nevertheless, it was usually assumed that **any piece that was authored or sponsored by one A.A. group could automatically be used to read from in meetings by any other A.A. group which chose to do so.** This was an extremely important principle, and meant that a number of books and pamphlets were automatically assumed to be appropriate for use without further discussion, such as the Big Book, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, *The Little Red Book*, and the Detroit or Washington D.C. Pamphlet. This was the official position taken by Bill Wilson and the New York A.A. headquarters (as recorded in letters from that period), in addition to being the common practice all across the United States and Canada.

Number 3. The question of whether a particular book or writing was "conference approved" was irrelevant in old time A.A. Nobody ever talked that way. The rigid idea that *nothing* can be read in an A.A. meeting which is not conference approved was the invention of a small group of people later on -- it did not appear in any widespread fashion until the 1990's -- and it would totally destroy traditional A.A. if it were actually practiced.

Number 4. In addition, **one could read from works at A.A. meetings which were written even by non-A.A. authors** -- people looked mainly to the wisdom of the more experienced A.A. members concerning which ones were useful and which ones were either trash or even outright dangerous -- and **groups and intergroups had these books available for loan or sale.**

A special note for AA HistoryLovers

This is a study which is primarily focused on early A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley region, which centers on north central Indiana but extends up into part of Michigan and the areas along the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan. Although it is a local study,

many of these observations seem to have been typical of early A.A. all across the United States and Canada during the 1940's, 50's, and early 60's.

Some names which may not be familiar to most readers are the names of the great old-timers from this St. Joseph river valley region: Ken Merrill, Nick Kowalski, Brownie, Bill Hoover and his wife Jimmy Miller, Ellen Lantz, Ed Pike, Goshen Bill, Brooklyn Bob Firth, Submarine Bill, and Raymond I. We did briefly meet several of these people though in the materials posted on the AAHistoryLovers about the early A.A. prison group at the Indiana state penitentiary and about early black A.A. along the Chicago-Gary-South Bend axis.

For members of the AAHistoryLovers from other parts of the world, it is frequently easier to visualize what is going on when one has some idea of the geographical scale and distances involved. The state of Indiana is not one of the bigger states, but it is roughly the size of Ireland or Portugal or Lithuania, with a population about the same as Scotland. So I suppose that if it were transplanted to Europe, it could be a small country on its own, even if it does not feel like that big a place. People who live in Indiana are called "Hoosiers," although no one has the slightest idea where that word came from. Even though the people of Indiana are sweet, gentle, pleasant and friendly folk nowadays, at least for the most part, the name Hoosier may be a corruption of the word Hussar, a Hungarian word that originally meant freebooter or pirate and later referred to ferocious light cavalry units.

The St. Joseph river valley area lies between the huge cities of Chicago on the west and Detroit to the east, but is a region all its own. The Potawatomi tribe (which still lives in the area) originally owned it, and then the French came in and used it as a bridge between their settlements along the Great Lakes in the north and the Mississippi river in the south. It was part of French Canada until the English won the French and Indian war and took it away from them in 1763. Otherwise the area would be French-speaking today.

It has a chain of large industrial cities running along the river and the lake coast, with the rest of the area filled with green rolling fields of corn and soy beans, and fruit orchards filled with trees that become a mass of flowers in the spring. The countryside is dotted with countless individual farm houses and barns, and a number of small lakes which sometimes have along their shores some very expensive summer homes built by wealthy people from Chicago or elsewhere. There are also a large number of small towns, which in spite of their size are always guaranteed to have at least one or two bars and taverns serving alcoholic beverages well into the evening. In their own way, these establishments help to keep Hoosier A.A. meetings full and prospering.

A few portions of this material have been posted on the AAHistoryLovers before, but this is an attempt to give *a broad and comprehensive account of all the books* which the good old-timers used in their meetings or gave to newcomers to read, so that we can get a general overview of the full range of material involved, and *how they decided what to use and what not to use*. One major concern here is to look at the reasons they had for using certain kinds of things and not using others. I apologize however for any small portions

of this that may just seem like a repeat of something I have already posted. I do not want to seem like a fanatic who has only one drum upon which to bang away, however merrily.

SOURCE: This posting is based on the appendix that will appear in the second edition of the two-volume work on *Lives and Teachings of the A.A. Old Timers* in the St. Joseph river valley region: *The Factory Owner & the Convict* and *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*, due to appear in January or February of 2005. See <http://hindsfoot.org>

The first edition was printed up for the groups in South Bend and Mishawaka as a single volume (in two columns with rather small type) for a memorial celebration of the founding of A.A. in this part of Indiana, held on October 26, 1996, at the Scottish Rite Temple in South Bend. One of the children of Ken Merrill, the founder, came out on stage to receive the first copy. All the A.A. people present rose to their feet almost simultaneously, in honor of her father's memory, for all of them knew that, directly or indirectly, he had saved their lives.

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The Books the Good Old-Timers Read

The Big Book

In early A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley region, the book which completely surpassed all others in importance was always *Alcoholics Anonymous*, published in 1939 and referred to simply as the Big Book. In fact, it proved to be impossible to establish A.A. groups anywhere in Indiana until this work came out. One of the original Akron people actually came to Indiana in 1938, a year before the Big Book was printed. This was John D. Holmes (they called him "J.D."), who had gotten sober in Akron in September 1936, and was the tenth person to get sober in the new A.A. movement.

When Dr. Bob's son Smitty came to speak in South Bend at our annual Michiana Conference a few years ago, I got to eat dinner with him, and I asked him whether he recalled J. D. at all. Smitty smiled with delight as the old memories returned, and told me that he not only remembered him very well and very fondly, but that he had been the one who had driven over and picked up J. D.'s wife Rhoda to bring her back to his parents' house when his father (Dr. Bob) made his first contact with the couple.

J. D. came to Indiana in 1938 after the newspaper in Akron which he worked for was sold and he was left jobless. His wife Rhoda had originally come from Evansville, Indiana, and they decided to make a trip to visit her family there for the Memorial Day holiday

which came at the end of May. He found a new job on the newspaper there and they simply stayed and did not go back. Evansville was a city on the Ohio river in the southern part of the state. Although Rhoda was not an alcoholic, she and J. D. held something like an A.A. meeting every Wednesday night in their home in order to help him keep sober.

The Upper Room

Like so many A.A.'s from the extremely early period, J. D. and Rhoda used a little work called *The Upper Room* for their private daily meditation and also to provide a discussion topic for this little Wednesday meeting. The spirit and philosophy of this meditational guide had almost as big an influence as the Oxford Group on early A.A. One can see this especially in the Big Book, where the ideas taught in *The Upper Room* shaped many of the most basic theological principles and assumptions. As far as is known, no one who played a shaping role in early Indiana A.A. was connected in any strong way with the Oxford Group or used any of their literature for A.A. meetings anywhere in the state. So the Oxford Group influence lay in the deep background in numerous ways, including the basic ideas behind many of the twelve steps, but was not an actual presence in Indiana A.A., even at its beginning.

The Methodist Episcopal Church South had begun publishing this extremely popular devotional manual called *The Upper Room* in the Spring of 1935 in Nashville, Tennessee, about the same time A.A. itself was founded. *The Upper Room* was a product in part of the Protestant liberals of the early twentieth century, who drew inspiration from works like Adolf Harnack's *What Is Christianity?* (1900) and Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* (1847). Bushnell argued in that book that although some Christians might be brought to faith by a sudden conversion experience of great emotional intensity (of the sort which were seen so often in the American frontier revivals of the early nineteenth century), that most Christians would gain spiritual awakening through a process which was more of the educational variety.

The *Upper Room* was designed to provide that "educational experience." Each page had one day's meditation. There were bible verses and readings, and a meditation for that day, and a prayer. Most important of all, however, *The Upper Room* was shaped by the fundamental Wesleyan and Methodist belief that real spirituality was not a matter of outward, formal religion but "the religion of the heart" (NOTE 1). So *The Upper Room* was written in a way which could cross the normal denominational boundaries, and it talked about spirituality in a way which any sincere and tolerant person could appreciate, no matter what his or her religious background. It continued to be the work used for daily meditations by most A.A.'s in the United States down to 1948.

J. D. made numerous twelfth step calls after he moved to Evansville, but was at first unable to get any other Hoosier alcoholic to join him. Things improved when Dr. Bob sent him a copy of the newly published Big Book right after it came off the press, and armed with this new tool, J. D. had a good deal more to work with than just his own claims about what their little group had accomplished in Akron. The first A.A. meeting in Indiana was held by him and a local surgeon, Dr. Joe Weldorn, after Dr. Joe's drinking

finally landed him in the county jail in April or May of 1940, and he finally became willing — sitting there in his cell staring at the bars — to do something about his problem.

A.A. quickly began spreading through Indiana from that point. On October 28, just a few months later, an A.A. group was started in Indianapolis, after Doherty Sheerin, a retired businessman there, traveled down to visit J. D.'s group and see how it was run. Dohr in Indianapolis and J. D. in Evansville continued working together through the years that followed, and eventually established A.A. groups over much of the rest of the state.

Dohr was a good Irish Catholic, and on November 10, 1943, he brought a young priest named Father Ralph Pfau into the A.A. program. Father Ralph was not only the first Roman Catholic priest to get sober in A.A., he also became one of the four most published A.A. authors when he began writing his famous Golden Books, published under the pseudonym of Father John Doe.

The only part of Indiana which did not initially receive A.A. from that Indianapolis-Evansville axis was South Bend in the north where A.A. got established when Ken Merrill (a factory owner) and Joseph Soulard "Soo" Cates (an engineer who worked as a sales representative for a large national corporation) started a meeting in South Bend on February 22, 1943, using just the Big Book for their guide. They do not seem to have had any contact during the first year or two with the Indiana A.A. groups further south.

Fulton J. Sheen

Presumably many A.A.'s in South Bend and the surrounding St. Joseph river valley area continued to use *The Upper Room* for their daily meditations, and to provide meeting topics. But Marty Gallagher in Elkhart, whose memory went back further than any other old-timer in the area, said that other things were used too, and that some A.A. meetings, for example, would be set so that everyone could sit and listen to Fulton J. Sheen speak over national radio on the Catholic Hour. They would then use his talk to provide the discussion topic.

Sheen, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian who taught at Catholic University, first went on the radio program in 1928. By the time A.A. came along, Father Sheen had over a million loyal listeners tuning in to hear him every week. He was eventually made a bishop in 1951. His style of preaching was attractive to A.A. people: Bill W. received instructions in Catholicism from him at one point, when Bill was flirting with converting to that faith (NOTE 2).

It would be wrong to speak of Sheen as a liberal, but he knew how to speak about spiritual matters in a way which non-Catholics could also appreciate and understand. So his radio talks were useful for the same reason that the *Upper Room* was useful: it was a way of talking about spirituality which crossed many of the normal Christian denominational boundaries.

The Move Away from Exclusively Christian Language

Many A.A. people however eventually began to be uncomfortable with the use of meditational literature which was so exclusively Christian, even if it was a very liberal or non-denominational version of Christianity. Already in the Big Book, the name of Christ was only mentioned once, on page eleven, where he was referred to merely as "a great man" who had an excellent moral teaching which was nevertheless not always wholly practical.

In the United States, going back at least as far as the New England Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), there were many who believed that a serious pursuit of spirituality required going to all the great spiritual classics for inspiration and help. The Bible was one great spiritual classic, but there were many other equally ancient and inspired spiritual classics found around the world: the writings of Confucius, various Hindu religious works, and so on.

And behind the Transcendentalists lay the great thinkers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment -- people like Voltaire, Kant, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson -- who believed that good spirituality had to reject the world of authoritarian religious doctrines and dogmas and infallible holy books, and speak in terms which would be intelligible to rational human beings anywhere in the world. A.A. from the beginning was deeply affected by the spirit of the Enlightenment and its morality of knowledge: it was fundamentally dishonest, it was believed, to ask intelligent people to take things on blind faith -- as dishonest as lying or stealing or trying to pass bad checks. Real knowledge always had to be based on either (1) rational explanation or (2) personal experience.

Also, up until almost the middle of the twentieth century, most Americans and Europeans who had any kind of education past the simple grammar school variety were taught Latin, and the brighter ones learned Greek as well. So all educated westerners were also influenced by the spiritual teachings of the ancient pagan Greeks and Romans, and particularly by the philosophical ideas of Plato and the Stoics. Many early A.A. people were professionals, who had learned at least a little about the classics as part of their college educations, and they sometimes found some sort of Platonic or Stoic concept of God more congenial than what they were hearing in the Christian churches: the higher power was the divine unity of all things (in which our spirits too were participants), or the creative divine Mind or Reason of which this material universe was an _expression.

Twenty-Four Hours a Day

In May 1942, a once wealthy Boston businessman named Richmond Walker who had lost everything due to his drinking, went to his first A.A. meeting and never had another drink again in his life. The little Boston A.A. group which he joined had barely gotten started, and had just split off from the Jacoby Club, to which it had been closely attached at the

beginning (NOTE 3). Rich also had a home in Daytona Beach, Florida, where he was also actively involved in the A.A. movement. He began writing some meditations for himself on little cards, which he would carry around with him, and finally in 1948, the Florida A.A. people persuaded him to print these up in book form. He printed some copies, under the sponsorship of the Daytona Beach A.A. group, and began distributing them from his basement. He gave it the title *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*.

Rich had been educated at a private school and then at Williams College, an old East Coast men's college (founded in 1785), located in Williamstown, Massachusetts, just a few miles from the Vermont border. He was an honors student who won a gold medal in classical Greek, and not only knew a good deal about the New England Transcendentalists and nineteenth century German idealism, but also had a thorough knowledge of the philosophy of both Plato and Kant. His meditational book started with a quotation from a Hindu author and made no reference to Christ or to any specific Christian doctrines. His idea, as he said in his Foreword, was to produce a book which expressed "universal spiritual thoughts" and carefully avoided using too much language which was too closely tied to any particular one of the world's religions. It was a book designed to be read and appreciated by intelligent people from any part of the globe.

The book was first printed just for the program people in Florida, but A.A. members from all over the country quickly began requesting copies. Jimmy Miller, who came into the program in South Bend in 1948, could not remember ever using any other meditation book. Publication figures show that there were soon probably more A.A. people in the United States as a whole who owned their own personal copy of the Twenty-Four Hour Book than there were people who owned a Big Book. At least half the A.A.'s in the country had their own copy of the little meditational book.

The two basic A.A. books

All the old-timers in the St. Joseph river valley who came in after 1948 report that they got sober on two books: the Big Book and the Twenty-Four Hour Book. The first book gave them the steps, but this also of course included the eleventh step: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." It told us to pray, but did not tell us how.

The Twenty-Four Hour book told us how. It showed in its little daily readings how to do all three things mentioned in the eleventh step: improve our conscious contact, obtain guidance as to God's will for us, and draw upon the power of the divine grace. Many early A.A.'s in the St. Joseph river valley carried the little black book around with them everywhere they went. Partly this was because it was so much smaller than the Big Book editions of those days, and could be slipped into a pocket or a small purse. But probably the most important reason was because when mental upsets occurred -- resentment, anxiety, fear, despair -- and they felt their spirits beginning to fall to pieces, the little black book contained the kind of message which could, as a kind of instant spiritual first aid, often calm the troubled soul better even than reading in the Big Book. They read

from both the Big Book and the Twenty-Four Hour Book in their meetings, and regularly used the Twenty-Four Hour book to provide topics for discussion meetings.

The Little Red Book

The Little Red Book (originally titled *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous Program*, first published in 1946) was also read from and used for topics in A.A. meetings in parts of the United States and Canada. It was written by A.A. member Ed Webster in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and sponsored by the Nicollet Group there. Dr. Bob helped Ed Webster write it and strongly supported it: we can learn a lot about Dr. Bob's strategies for working with beginners by studying this book. It was one of the four most read books in early A.A. It was not used for A.A. meetings in the St. Joseph river valley, but one old timer told me that there were strong supporters of this book in other parts of Indiana, such as in some of the A.A. groups in Fort Wayne, for example, and in Indianapolis.

Like the Twenty-Four Hour book, it does not talk of prayer to Christ or obtaining salvation through Christ, but speaks always of praying directly to God or "the Power Greater than Ourselves." The A.A. program was never in any way hostile to Christianity (or to any other of the great religions of the world), but it was nevertheless a firmly held belief that A.A. books and A.A. meetings had always to use language which everyone could use, not just devoted Christians.

The Detroit or Washington

D.C. Pamphlet

There was a little pamphlet, laying out a set of four beginners lessons for newcomers to A.A., which was also very important in many parts of the country. Its actual title was "Alcoholics Anonymous: An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps." Our best information is that it was put together in its commonly used form in Detroit by the North-West Group at 10216 Plymouth Road, which began conducting Beginners Meetings for newcomers on June 14, 1943, so it is often referred to in the midwest as the Detroit Pamphlet. The first printed version however was sponsored by the A.A. group in Washington, D.C., perhaps in late 1943 or the first half of 1944, so on the east coast it is often referred to as the Washington D.C. Pamphlet. It was also later reprinted under the sponsorship of various local A.A. groups in Oklahoma, over on the West Coast, and so on.

In the 1990's, some of the old-timers in both South Bend and Elkhart used the Detroit Pamphlet for working with newcomers in A.A. meetings, and had a good deal of success. They regarded it as the best, clearest, and most effective set of A.A. beginners lessons they had ever seen.

The South Bend Beginners Classes

Early South Bend A.A. gave beginners lessons, but unfortunately no notes or handouts have survived. According to Nick's List, it started out as a set of three classes, then went briefly to four classes, but ended up as a set of five classes, where Ken Merrill did the fifth class. According to Ellen Lantz however, it was a three class series in the mid 1950's, each one lasting two or three hours, and Ken taught all three classes. However it was done, the early South Bend beginners lessons do not seem to have been simply duplicates of the four-class format used in the Detroit Pamphlet.

The A.A. Tools of Recovery

A good old-timer named Don Helvey in Elkhart put together a short piece called the A.A. Tools of Recovery, which is still read at the beginning of many A.A. meetings in Elkhart, Mishawaka, South Bend, and other parts of the St. Joseph river valley region along with reading the twelve steps:

"ABSTINENCE: We commit ourselves to stay away from the *first* drink, one day at a time.

MEETINGS: We attend A.A. meetings to learn how the program works, to share our experience, strength and hope with each other, and because through the support of the fellowship, we *can* do what we could never do alone.

SPONSOR: A sponsor is a person in the A.A. program who has what we want and is continually sober. A sponsor is someone you can relate to, have access to and can confide in.

TELEPHONE: The telephone is our lifeline -- our meetings between meetings. Call *before* you take the first drink. The more numbers you have, the more insurance you have.

LITERATURE: The *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous is our basic tool and text. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and A.A. pamphlets are recommended reading, and are available at this meeting.

SERVICE: Service helps our personal program grow. Service is giving in A.A. Service is leading a meeting, making coffee, moving chairs, being a sponsor, or emptying ashtrays. Service is action, and action is the magic word in this program.

ANONYMITY: Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our program."

Many of the good old-timers, like Submarine Bill and Raymond I., believed that it was important to repeat these basic principles over and over, until newcomers had them instinctively drilled into their heads, and could repeat them almost like a litany. The first principle made it clear that the way an alcoholic kept from getting drunk was not to take even the first drink. The next five were the things that not only got people sober but kept

them sober. Good sponsors like Bill and Raymond noted that those who relapsed and returned to drinking had almost invariably failed to do one or more of these five things in any serious and dedicated way. And the seventh principle was a constant reminder that A.A. meetings could not function properly unless members could talk about all of their feelings and anything that was bothering them, in an accepting and shame-free atmosphere, without worrying about whether it was going to be repeated outside of the group. That was a solemn pledge which the members of the group had to make to one another.

If we want to ask what was the basic foundation of A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley, it was the Twelve Steps and the Seven Tools of Recovery. Everything else was based on these.

The Grapevine and Bar-less

In the 1950's, according to Ellen Lantz's reminiscences, they always read from something at the Elkhart closed discussion meetings, and frequently used this reading to provide the discussion topic. She said that it had become very common during this period to use an article from the *Grapevine*, the magazine which was published by the New York A.A. office (it first began coming out in 1944, under the editorial guidance of Marty Mann and some of her friends). (NOTE 4) But Ellen said that they would also sometimes use an article from *Bar-less*, the little magazine which was published by the A.A. prison group. Some of these articles were written by people who were not prisoners. Ken Merrill, for example, the founder of A.A. in South Bend, wrote a very good article for the magazine once, about the way alcoholics get locked into behavior patterns during their childhood years, and because of a traumatic event or a general dysfunctional family situation, are unable to grow past that stage, and continue to throw two-year-old temper tantrums, or become lost in ten-year-old daydreaming fantasies of romance and heroism, or whatever, even after they are adults.

The First Principle

When I asked Brooklyn Bob, one of the South Bend old-timers, whether there were any rules in good old-time A.A. about what books A.A. people could and could not read, he just laughed and snorted, and said, "**We read anything we could get our hands on that might get us sober!**" Good old-time A.A. was a totally pragmatic program, not an authoritarian system of doctrines and dogmas and endless rules which had to be followed blindly, and were imposed upon the membership by self-important people who thought they had the right to boss other people around ("for their own good" was these arrogant people's standard alibi).

In early A.A., people simply experimented and tried various things, and if they worked, they recommended them to other members. As is always the case in A.A., the recommendations of people who had a good deal of time in the program were taken more seriously. Pragmatically, if they had that many years of sobriety, they must have been

doing something right! So on matters of what sorts of books and writings should be read in meetings and made available for loan or purchase by groups and intergroup offices, people looked to the wisdom and experience of those who had time in the program and quality sobriety.

The Central Service Offices in South Bend and in Elkhart both still follow that principle. They have a variety of books on spirituality, recovery, and A.A. history available for loan or purchase -- books printed by various publishing houses and usually (but not always necessarily) authored by A.A. members. There are Al-Anon books as well. But the selection of books which are provided is made on the recommendation of responsible people who have a good deal of quality time in the program.

They do not have the sort of pop recovery books that can lead newcomers seriously astray or involve them in psychologically dangerous schemes (like one notorious book encouraging people to "get in contact with their inner child" in a way which actually produced in some cases total psychotic breakdowns requiring long hospitalization in mental facilities). But the South Bend office has carried some materials which were purely psychological, such as offprints (distributed by the National Council on Alcoholism) of scholarly papers written by Dr. Harry M. Tiebout for psychiatric journals and journals on alcoholism studies. Tiebout was not an alcoholic, but he was one of the most important of the handful of psychiatrists in the early days who appreciated and understood and backed the new Alcoholics Anonymous movement, and his statements about how A.A. works are still extremely insightful today.

The commercial bookstore chains do not have good material for A.A. people on their shelves, and the small commercial operations which sell "recovery materials" such as t-shirts and coffee mugs cannot be totally depended upon to have quality literature for sale either. If groups and intergroups do not make good books available for A.A. members, no outside commercial venture is going to take over that responsibility. Learning that we have to be responsible for ourselves, instead of just depending on others and demanding "to be taken care of," is a vital part of recovery from alcoholism.

The Second Principle

The first principle was that A.A. groups and intergroups, as well as individual members, have to make their own responsible decisions about which books and writings are going to be helpful for recovering alcoholics. However, there was a generally assumed principle that seems to have been followed, not only in the St. Joseph river valley, but in early A.A. all across the United States and Canada: **It was usually assumed that any piece that was authored or sponsored by one A.A. group could automatically be used to read from in meetings by any other A.A. group which chose to do so.**

That was also a guiding principle followed at New York A.A. headquarters. On November 11, 1944, for example, Bobby Burger, the secretary at the Alcoholic Foundation in New York (what is today called the General Service Office) wrote a letter

to Barry Collins, who had helped Ed Webster in assembling and publishing the Little Red Book (NOTE 5):

"Dear Barry,

. . . The Washington D.C. pamphlet [a.k.a. the Detroit Pamphlet] and the new Cleveland "Sponsorship" pamphlet and a host of others are all local projects, as is Nicollette's "An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps" [the Little Red Book]. We do not actually approve or disapprove of these local pieces; by that I mean that the Foundation feels that each Group is entitled to write up its own "can opener" and let it stand on its merits. All of them have good points and very few have caused any controversy. But as in all things of a local nature, we keep hands off, either pro or con. I think there must be at least 25 local pamphlets now being used and I've yet to see one that hasn't some good points. I think it is up to each individual Group whether it wants to use and buy these pamphlets from the Group that puts them out.

Sincerely, Bobby (Margaret R. Burger)"

Bill Wilson felt the same way. In November 1950, he wrote a note to Barry Collins about *The Little Red Book* making the same basic point, only even more strongly. Such locally sponsored works "fill a definite need" and their "usefulness is unquestioned." Most importantly of all, Bill went on to say in that letter: "**Here at the Foundation we are not policemen; we're a service and AAs are free to read any book they choose.**" (NOTE 6)

In other words, based on the principle of group autonomy, an A.A. group can in fact choose to read anything at its meetings which it wants to, if a group conscience has been held. Even if there are other A.A. groups which are convinced that they are wrong, a long-standing principle in the New York A.A. office, repeated over and over, is "the right of a group to be wrong." This is an extremely important principle which has even further ramifications: even if 51% of the A.A. groups in a particular area are convinced that the other 49% are wrong, they cannot force them to read what they want that minority group to read. Too many A.A. people came out of religious traditions where the leadership tried to stuff things down their throats in this fashion -- "you will read only what we order you to read" -- and they will not tolerate A.A. organizations trying to operate that same way.

But if the book or pamphlet or reading *was sponsored by some other A.A. group*, it was especially true that any other A.A. groups in the country could borrow and use that piece without having to go into any long debate about its appropriateness. So the Twenty-Four Hour book, *The Little Red Book*, the Detroit Pamphlet, the Tools of Recovery, and *Bar-less* (the little magazine produced by the prison A.A. group) were sort of automatically considered as appropriate for reading at meetings if a particular group chose to do so.

The Upper Room and Fulton J. Sheen's talks and other heavily Christian-oriented materials (such as *God Calling* by Two Listeners, the prayers of the Rosary, and so on) have continued to be employed by numerous A.A. people in the St. Joseph river valley for their own personal use. In fact nearly all of the most deeply spiritual members regularly use traditional religious materials in their private devotions and in their studies of spiritual issues. But things which were too obviously totally Christian, particularly if they spoke of salvation as only being possible through accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, stopped being used in meetings on the simple pragmatic grounds that it drove an excessive number of newcomers away, did not in fact prove to be necessary for getting people sober and leading them into the paths of true serenity and the greatest depths of love, and seemed to ultimately involve the group in too much pointless debate and endless hostile disputing over narrow Christian theological issues that did not help anyone get sober.

The last time someone tried to set up an A.A. meeting in the St. Joseph river valley on an explicitly Christian basis, with Bible readings and scripture verses studied at the meeting, was around ten years ago, and the group did not even last a year. This was in spite of the fact that Indiana is often regarded as part of the American "Bible Belt." Everyone except the old-timer who started it finally quit or went out and got drunk. That is why I am skeptical about trying to run A.A. meetings that way today. But everybody agreed that the good old-timer who tried this experiment had a perfect right to do so. There may be places in America or elsewhere where it would work. It certainly did not violate any A.A. "rule," and if it had actually worked, we would now have additional meetings in northern Indiana, I am sure, organized in this way. A.A. is pragmatic, not doctrinaire.

The St. Francis Prayer and the Lord's Prayer are still heavily used however, even though they were originally Christian prayers, because it is felt that they set out universal spiritual truths that any recovering alcoholic is in need of. A few people do not like the use of the Lord's Prayer at the close of meetings (an almost universal practice in the St. Joseph river valley), but some suspect that part of their objection is to the line which says "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." It may be a very hard and uncomfortable teaching indeed, to be reminded constantly of this universal spiritual truth, but if we refuse to forgive, resentment will continue to fester in our hearts, and we will eventually end up going back out and drinking again. All the great spiritual traditions of the world — Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Native American religion, and so on — make clear that *forgiveness* and *compassion* and *mercy* and the restoration of *harmony* (different religions use different technical terms here) are necessary to living a good spiritual life.

The Golden Books

Ralph Pfau, who wrote under the pen name of Father John Doe, was one of the four most published A.A. authors. He was a Roman Catholic priest who got sober in Indianapolis on November 10, 1943. He conducted a weekend spiritual retreat for A.A. members on June 6–8, 1947 at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. Eleven people from the South Bend A.A. group attended the retreat, a very large contingent: Harry Stevens (who

sponsored the A.A. prison group at the Indiana state penitentiary), Johnnie Morgan the barber, Ray G., Jack [Q?], Jim McNeil (who was extremely active in all sorts of A.A. service work), Art O. [A?I?], Russ S., Fred Clements, Joe R., Ed Young the newspaperman, and Les Beatty the electrician. Father Ralph gave everyone who attended, as a souvenir of the retreat, a 56-page pamphlet with a shiny gold foil cover, called *The Spiritual Side*, where he talked about how all of the twelve steps (except for perhaps the first step) were essentially spiritual in their nature.

People who had not been at the retreat began asking for copies, Father Ralph had to do another printing, and over the years that followed, produced thirteen other pamphlets of this sort on different spiritual topics. They came to be called the Golden Books because of the gold foil covered cardboard covers which most of them had. He traveled all over the United States and Canada, giving talks and conducting weekend spiritual retreats, all the way down to his death on February 19, 1967, which caught him on the road in Owensboro, Kentucky (NOTE 7).

One good old-timer, Larry W., told me that, in his early days in the program, those A.A. people in Michigan and Indiana whose serenity and sobriety most impressed him were invariably great fans of Father Ralph's books.

Specialized meetings

In the St. Joseph river valley, Father Ralph was certainly the third most read A.A. author. But a different kind of procedure was followed with his writings. Those members who were deeply interested in the spiritual life would form small private meetings in their homes to read and study the most recent Golden Book. Copies of these pamphlets were (and still are) sold at the Central Service Office in South Bend. Good old-timers like Submarine Bill would give copies to the people whom they sponsored, and tell them to read them carefully. But there was a kind of tacit understanding that it was not usually appropriate to read from one of the Golden Books or use it for meeting topics in official A.A. group meetings.

Part of this arose from the fact that Father Ralph's books *were not officially sponsored by the Indianapolis A.A. group*. He wrote and published those totally on his own. Writings which were not sponsored by a regular A.A. group or intergroup were not automatically regarded as necessarily wise for other groups to use for official A.A. meetings. The Golden Books also were *not for everyone in the program* (some people liked them and others did not), and perhaps even more importantly, they dealt with fairly advanced issues in the spiritual life which *would have probably been greatly confusing to a lot of newcomers who had just walked into their first A.A. meeting*.

We are talking here about the question of what sorts of things were appropriate to read in officially scheduled A.A. meetings, that is, those which were listed in the meeting directory for that town or county. These were meetings where one expected struggling alcoholics to stagger through the door, just having chosen a meeting at random off the

list, seeking blindly for help, and too new and befuddled to understand anything except the most basic A.A. material.

But there was in fact a whole tradition of specialized meetings which were not A.A. meetings in the formal sense -- particularly in the sense that they were not listed in the local meeting directories that were handed out to those who were brand new to the program. Private study groups meeting in people's homes were one sort of specialized meeting. For a long time, Submarine Bill had all the people whom he sponsored meet once a year to study the twelve steps, sometimes using a tape recording of Father Ralph's talk on the steps or something else of that sort to start off each session.

A private study group of this sort could read any sort of book which the participants wanted to, and groups sometimes chose very interesting sorts of materials to read and study. The general understanding, for example, was that A.A. people needed to be familiar with all sorts of different kinds of spiritual works, from various religious traditions, and other things that were important to the understanding of A.A. history. I have heard of groups on the West Coast, for example, meeting to study the medieval spiritual writer Meister Eckhart, or my own book on *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program*.

In the St. Joseph river valley region, Father David G. Suelzer, O.S.C., Prior of the Crozier Fathers and Brothers at Wawasee, Indiana, conducted weekend spiritual retreats for A.A. members. He was not an alcoholic himself, but he was a consultant at Hazelden during the 1960's and was very much a friend of the A.A. movement. **There never were any rules saying that non-A.A. members could not speak to A.A. groups.** Over the last ten or fifteen years, I have heard people try to claim that this was an ancient and sacrosanct A.A. rule, but that is just silly and historically ignorant. A *closed A.A. discussion meeting* is not supposed to have anyone present who does not have a desire to stop drinking (unless the group conscience decides otherwise), but this is not the same as an A.A. convention, conference, workshop, or international, which is an open meeting.

Or, to mention a different kind of specialized meeting, a group of A.A. people might set up their own private weekend spiritual retreat. For the people in the St. Joe river valley region there were for a long time well-attended annual retreats of that sort at Fatima House retreat center at Notre Dame University and at the Yokefellow retreat center in Defiance, Ohio. In the 1990's, meetings began being set up, bringing people together from various parts of Indiana -- and also large meetings at the national level where people came from all over the United States and Canada -- to hear talks about A.A. archives and A.A. history. These were not necessarily sponsored by any particular A.A. group, intergroup, or Area organization, but were the ad hoc creation of a group of interested A.A. members.

There were also workshops set up by the Elkhart intergroup at mini-conferences, where the A.A. people who attended could hear psychotherapists talk about specific psychological problems which recovering people often had to deal with, and where A.A.

members could attend Al-Anon workshops and vice versa, and where all sorts of other topics could be discussed, on A.A. history and other subjects.

In other words, real old-time A.A. was always pragmatic and flexible. About the only real rule which was followed, was that it was usually considered inappropriate to take an official weekly A.A. meeting which was listed in the official meeting schedule, and use any kinds of readings or topics except those which would be of general benefit to everyone in the program, including especially newcomers who had just walked in the door. On the other hand, the more specialized meetings which were intended for people who were beyond the newcomer stage, were often listed in monthly intergroup newsletters and on flyers which were distributed to all the groups in that city or county.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age

There are well-meaning people today who sometimes mistakenly think that the issue was whether or not a particular book or pamphlet was "conference approved." We remember that when Brooklyn Bob was asked about this, he simply snorted and laughed and said, "**We read anything we could get our hands on that might get us sober!**" When one says that a particular publication is "conference approved," all one really means is that a group of delegates meeting in New York decided to spend New York headquarters money on publishing it. New York never ever had enough funds to print everything that could be useful to alcoholics trying to get sober and stay sober. The principle of institutional poverty means that A.A. as such cannot set up a publishing house of the sort which one sees among various American religious denominations: the Methodists' Abingdon Press, the Lutherans' Fortress Press and Augsburg Press, and other such publishing houses which require a large investment in buildings and printing presses and large staffs of editors and so on, which are financially supported by denominational funds.

With enormous difficulty, the New York A.A. office finally assembled enough money to print the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. A number of A.A. meetings were subsequently created in the St. Joseph river valley called "step meetings," which would read through the part of the book dealing with one of the twelve steps every week, and then discuss that step as a group. Sometimes the traditions were also studied in the same fashion by the group.

(It should also however be said that there are some good old-timers in Indiana who still believe that *The Little Red Book* — which was Dr. Bob's baby — and the Detroit or Washington D.C. Pamphlet are actually better introductions to the steps for newcomers. They believe that the material on the steps in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* is too philosophical and complicated for newcomers, and that it just confuses alcoholics when they first come in.)

The old-timers in the St. Joseph river valley say that there was enormous excitement when *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* appeared in 1957. As one old-timer put it, a woman who remembers those days clearly, "it was the first chance we got to learn something about our history." But the interesting thing is, that although this book was approved by the delegates in New York and published by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services in New York, the A.A. people in South Bend met in small private groups in people's homes to read and study this work.

The Third Principle

In other words, in early A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley, A.A. meetings which were listed on the official meeting schedule would often read and study books which were not published by the central New York A.A. office, and on the other hand, they believed that some of the books which were published in New York and "conference approved," were nevertheless not appropriate for general A.A. meetings. What this meant was that **the question of whether a particular book or writing was or was not "conference approved" meant nothing in and of itself about whether it might or might not be judged as appropriate for reading at A.A. meetings.**

Books by non-A.A. authors

Going back to the very beginning of A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley, there were important books written by non-A.A. authors which good sponsors recommended to the people whom they sponsored, which were made available for loan or purchase by A.A. groups and intergroup offices, and which could be studied at private unofficial meetings in people's homes or at spiritual retreats.

Ellen Lantz in Elkhart told a story which was similar to that of many other early A.A. members in the St. Joseph river valley. A book written by a non-A.A. author played a crucial role in enabling her to get sober and stay sober. In fact in her case, after she first came into the program, she had to go through three and a half years where she was having periodic relapses before she finally gained permanent sobriety in March of 1951. From the beginning apparently, she was reading *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* every morning (which she continued to do all the way down to her death in 1985). But then Ed Pike's wife Bobby started meeting with her regularly to read in Father Ralph's Golden Books, and then, in particular, they made a very thorough study of Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount*. This helped Ellen finally turn the corner, and stop the continual relapsing. In South Bend, the *Sermon on the Mount* continued to be highly recommended by people like Grouchy John and Rob G., and a number of other good old-timers, all the way down to the 1990's.

Emmet Fox was not an alcoholic. He was a Protestant pastor who was a major leader in what was called New Thought, a form of Christian spirituality which stressed the ways in which the thoughts which run through our minds shape our lives and can even affect our physical health and the material world around us, for good or ill. A.A. people found his

writings uniquely effective in helping alcoholics learn basic spiritual principles, and free themselves from authoritarian and dogmatic forms of traditional religious teaching.

Another book by a non-A.A. member which the old timers in Indiana and Ohio frequently mention is Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which came out in 1952. Peale came from a Methodist background, and combined New Thought principles with a very sophisticated knowledge of psychiatry and psychotherapy. He also believed that A.A. was the most important spiritual movement of the twentieth century, and was very impressed by the A.A. program.

The Akron List

In the A.A. program, Fox's book was the most widely known and recommended book written by a non-A.A. author, but there were also other important works. The Akron Manual, a pamphlet that was written and published in Akron in 1940 or thereabouts, and that was intended to be handed out to newcomers when they were admitted for detoxing at St. Thomas Hospital in Sister Ignatia's alcoholic ward, gave a list of ten works in all, which were recommended reading for beginners. At the top of the list came the Big Book of course, and then the Bible, with specific mention of certain key portions. In the New Testament, it was recommended that alcoholics going through detoxification read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), 1 Corinthians 13, and the letter of James. Then in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), the pamphlet advised reading and re-reading the 23rd Psalm and the 91st Psalm (both of which are very good for people who are scared to death and coming to pieces). The other eight works were all by non-A.A. authors:

Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World*.

The Unchanging Friend, a series published by the Bruce Publishing Co. in Milwaukee.

James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh*.

Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Winfred Rhoades, *The Self You Have to Live With*.

Ernest M. Ligon, *Psychology of Christian Personality*.

E. Stanley Jones, *Abundant Living*.

Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*.

Mel B. from Toledo has just come out with a reprint of two of these books, the ones by James Allen and Henry Drummond (NOTE 8). Mel says that when he first came into the program back in 1950, these two works were made available for purchase by A.A. groups all over the country, and that when he started reading and studying them, they helped save his life.

Again, early A.A. was flexible and pragmatic. Many of the good old-timers found that these particular books were extremely useful and helpful, and so they recommended them to beginners, and they went to the effort to make sure that newcomers could purchase them at their A.A. groups if they desired.

Encouraging A.A. Members to Read

The Detroit/Washington D.C. Pamphlet stated at the beginning of each lesson that studying their class material was not intended to eliminate the need for such things as "the careful reading and re-reading of the Big Book" and the "reading of approved printed matter on alcoholism." This reference to other printed materials on alcoholism meant that the good old timers who had discovered particularly useful things for alcoholics to read would take steps to make sure that this material was available for the other A.A. members to look at.

This is the practice which is still followed today in A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley by both Mable (the secretary at the Michiana Central Service Office in South Bend) and Alice (the secretary at the Central Service Office in Elkhart). Mable and Alice work on the general principle that *everyone* in town does not have to agree that a particular book is good -- this is very important -- but that if a particular work is recommended by some at least of the wiser and more knowledgeable A.A. or Al-Anon old timers -- people with quality experience in the program -- they will carry the book. So they have a wide variety of volumes, including meditational books and materials on spirituality, works by both A.A. and non-A.A. authors, studies by psychologists and other experts on alcoholism, and important books on various topics in A.A. history. If it is a decent book you can almost guarantee that it will be available there, but if for any reason they do not have a copy in stock, they will cheerfully order one for you, and phone you the moment it arrives.

Varieties of Spiritual Experience

One book written by a non-A.A. author that was cited over and over again by A.A. writers from the very beginning, was a book by the psychologist William James called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He stressed the fact that there were a number of very different kinds of spirituality. There was a type based on a sudden highly emotional conversion experience. There were other types in which a long, gradual educational experience took place. There was the religion of healthy mindedness, as James called it (New Thought was one version of that), and another form designed to deal with what he called the torment of the divided self. In addition, James pointed out, at all points in religious history all over the world, there had been various kinds of spirituality involving mystical experiences of the divine realm which could be felt but not described in words.

It was necessary to have different kinds of spirituality, James said, because human beings fell into different kinds of psychological types. A small percentage of people were of a psychological type which could only make a significant spiritual breakthrough by having

a dramatic conversion experience. When psychologically tested, among other things, many of them tended to be people of the sort who were especially susceptible to post-hypnotic suggestion. But it was futile to try to produce a spectacular conversion experience of this sort among people of other psychological types. The attempt to make born-again Protestant revivalists or Catholic or Hindu mystics out of everyone was doomed to failure from the start.

Any attempt therefore to enforce a rigid uniformity upon everyone in A.A., even if it were, for example, a meditational book where each reading was voted on by all the delegates assembled in New York, would either drive large numbers of people out of the program, or be so bland and trivial that it would be no more than a kind of pre-chewed spiritual baby food which would be of little help to people desiring real spiritual meat and potatoes.

So when A.A. is healthy in any particular locality, there will be different kinds of A.A. meetings reading different things and using different approaches. To give a simple example, the first division in South Bend A.A. after it had begun was a split (involving the formation of a separate breakaway meeting) between those who followed Ken Merrill and preferred a type of A.A. which stressed the psychological aspects of recovery (NOTE 9), and those who followed Harry Stevens (NOTE 10) and wanted a variety of A.A. that was more oriented towards traditional religious language. This did not weaken A.A. in South Bend, but in fact helped it grow and flourish. Newcomers could decide which approach made the most sense to them.

There are A.A. people who are round pegs, and others who are square pegs, and others who are triangular pegs. Trying to force square pegs into round holes, and so on, does nobody any good.

The historical roots of A.A.

Only a very small portion of the traditional A.A. reading matter was published by the New York A.A. headquarters. Attempts by a few people nowadays to create rules saying that only New York A.A. literature can be used in A.A. meetings or sold by A.A. groups or intergroups, are dangerous. They would, if they were successful, totally cut A.A. off from most of its historical roots. What would result would not in fact be A.A. anymore, at least not in any form which the good old-timers would have recognized. It would be some sort of dogmatic, rule-bound neo-fundamentalism. Following mechanical rules, no matter how well-intended the authors of these rules, never got anyone sober. People who turn to authoritarian fundamentalist systems are excessively fearful but also extremely lazy people who do not want to take personal responsibility for themselves or their lives. And alcoholics who refuse to deal with both their many fears and their aversion to hard work and taking responsibility for themselves do not get sober.

With all its richness and variety, genuine old-time A.A. flourished and spread all over the United States and Canada, and then to all the other countries of the world. This was the period of A.A.'s rapid growth, and the period which saw incredibly high success rates in

getting alcoholics sober and keeping them sober. If we want to see a true revival of the old A.A. spirit, one of the best ways to accomplish this is to sit at the feet of the good old-timers, and read what they read, and do the things that they report that they did.

The good old-timer Ed Pike the railroad man probably put it as well as anyone. When he first started going to A.A. meetings, "I just made a deal with myself," he said, "that I will do anything that they tell me they do -- anything -- and if I'm big enough, I'll do it."