

## **Origins of Alcoholics Anonymous**

In the spring of 1971, the newspapers reported the passing of Bill W. of New York City, who as one of the two co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. The other co-founder, Dr Robert S. of Akron, Ohio, has passed on some years earlier.

Shortly after Bill's death, the Akron Alcoholics groups asked my mother Henrietta Seiberling, to speak at the annual "Founders Day" meeting in Akron, which is attended by members of Alcoholics Anonymous from all over the world. She lives in New York and did not feel up to traveling, so they asked me to speak in her place.

I agreed to speak but felt that it would mean most to them to hear some of her own words, so I called her on the telephone and asked her to tell me about the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous so that I could make sure my remarks were accurate. I made a tape recording of the conversation and played part of it at the 1971 Founders Day meeting, which was held in the gymnasium at the University of Akron with a couple of thousand people present.

So many people have asked for a transcript of the recording that I have finally had one typed. Attached is a copy of the transcript, which follows the tape recording as closely as possible, with only my own remarks and some of the conversational asides and redundancies edited out.

The first meeting of Bob and Bill, described in the attached transcript, took place in the summer of 1935 in Henrietta's house in Akron, which was the Gatehouse of Stan Hywet Hall, then my family's estate, now the property of Stan Hywet Hall Foundation.

Henrietta was not an alcoholic. She was a Vassar College graduate and a housewife with three teenage children. She, like Bob and Bill, would be deeply disturbed by any inference that she or they possessed any extraordinary virtues or talents. On the contrary, they would all emphasize the power of ordinary people to change their lives and the lives of others through the kind of spiritual discipline so successfully exemplified in Alcoholics Anonymous.

I am happy to make this transcript available to persons who are sincerely interested in learning more about Alcoholics Anonymous and its message. It is a way of sharing some of the insights which made and still make Alcoholics Anonymous a vital force in people's lives. I ask only that the transcript be held in the spirit in which it is offered and not used for publicity or in an effort to magnify any individual.

John F. Seiberling

## **Transcript Of Remarks**

Henrietta B. Seiberling

I would like to tell about Bob in the beginning. Bob and Ann came into the Oxford Group, which, as you know, was the movement which tried to recapture the power of first Century Christianity in the modern world, and a quality of life which we must always exercise. Someone spoke to me about Bob S.'s drinking. He didn't think that people knew it. And I decided that the people who shared in the Oxford group had never shared very costly things to make Bob lose his pride and share what he thought would cost him a great deal. So I decided to gather together some Oxford Group people for a meeting, and that was in T. Henry Williams' house. We met afterwards there for five or six years every Wednesday night.

I warned Ann that I was going to have this meeting. I didn't tell her it was for Bob, but I said, "Come

prepared to mean business. There is going to be no pussyfooting around. And we all shared very deeply our shortcomings, and what we had victory over, and then there was silence, and I waited and thought, "Will Bob say something?" Sure enough, in that deep, serious tone of his, he said, "Well, you good people have all shared things that I am sure were very costly to you, and I am going to tell you something which may cost me my profession. I am a silent drinker, and I can't stop." This was weeks before Bill came to Akron. So we said, "Do you want to go down on your knees and pray?" And he said, "Yes." So we did.

And the next morning, I, who knew nothing about alcoholism (I thought a person should drink like a gentleman, and that's all), was saying a prayer for Bob. I said, "God, I don't know anything about drinking, but I told Bob That I was sure that he lived this way of life, he could quit drinking. Now you have to help me." Something said To me – I call it "guidance" – it was like a voice in the top of my head – "Bob must not touch one drop of Alcohol." I knew that wasn't my thought. So I called Bob, and said I had guidance for him – and this is very important.

He came over at 10 in the morning, and I told him that my guidance was that he mustn't touch one drop of alcohol. He was very disappointed, because he thought guidance would mean seeing somebody or going someplace. And then – this is something very relevant – he said, "Henrietta, I don't understand it. Nobody understands it." Now that was the state of the world when we were beginning. He said, Some doctor had written a book about it, but he doesn't understand it. I don't like the stuff. I don't want to drink. I said, "Well, Bob, that is what I have been guided about." And that was the beginning of our meetings, long before Bill ever came.

Now let me recall some of Bill's very words about his experience. Bill, when he was in a hotel in Akron and down to a few dollars and owed his bill after his business venture fell through, looked at the cocktail room and was tempted and thought, "Well, I'll just go in there and get drunk and forget it all, and that will be the end of it." Instead, having been sober five months in the Oxford Group, he said a prayer. He got the guidance to look in a ministers directory, and a strange thing happened.

He just looked in there, and he put his finger on one name: Tunks. And that was no coincidence, because Dr. Tunks was Mr. Harvey Firestone's minister, and Mr. Firestone had brought 60 of the Oxford Group people down there for 10 days out of gratitude for helping his son, who drank too much. His son had quit for a year and a half or so. Out of the act of gratitude of this one father, this whole chain started.

So Bill called Dr. Tunks, and Dr. Tunks gave him a list of names. One of them was Norman Sheppard, who was a close friend of mine and knew what I was trying to do for Bob. Norman said, "I have to go to New York tonight but you can call Henrietta Seiberling, "When he told the story, Bill shortened it by just saying that he called Dr. Tunks, but I did not know Dr. Tunks. Bill said that he had his last nickel, and he thought, "Well, I'll call her."

So I, who was desperate to help Bob in something I didn't know much about, was ready. Bill called, and I will never forget what he said: "I'm from the Oxford Group and I'm a rum hound." Those were his words. I thought, "This is really manna from Heaven." And I said, "You come right out here." And my thought was to put those two men together. Bill, looking back, thought he was out to help someone else. Actually, he was out to get help for himself, no thought of helping anyone else, because he was desperate. But that is the way that God helps us if we let God direct our lives. And so he came out to my house, and he stayed for dinner. And I told him to come to church with me next morning and I would get Bob, which I did.

Bill stayed in Akron. He didn't have any money. There was a neighbor of mine, John Gammeter, who had seen the change in my life brought by the Oxford Group, and I called him and asked him to put Bill up at the country club for two weeks or so, just to keep him in town. After that, Bill went to stay with

Bob and Ann for three months, and we started working on Bill D. and Ernie G.

The need was there, and all of the necessary elements were furnished by God. Bill the promoter, and I, not being an alcoholic, for perspective. Every Wednesday night I would speak on some new experience or spiritual idea I had read. That's the way we all grew. Eventually the meetings moved to King School. Some man from Hollywood came, an actor, and he said that he had been all over the country and that there was something in the King School group that wasn't in any other group. I think it was our great stress and reliance on guidance and quiet times.

Bill did a grand job. We can all see in his life what the Oxford Group people had told us in their message: That if we turn our lives to God and let him run it, he will take our shortcomings and make them valuable in His way and give us our heart's desire. And when I got the word that Bill had gone on, I sat there, and it was just as if someone had spoken to me again on top of my head. Something said to me, "Verily, verily, he has received his reward." So I went to the Bible, and there it was, in Matthew VI. Then I looked at Bill's story in Alcoholics Anonymous where Bill had said that all his failures were because he always wanted people to think he was somebody. In the first edition of the book, he said he always wanted to make his mark among people. And by letting God run his life, God took his ego and gave him his heart's desire in God's way. And when he was gone, he was on the front page of the New York Times, famous all over the world. So it does verify what the Oxford Group people had told him.

Father Dowling, a Jesuit Priest, had first met our group in the early days in Chicago, and he came to Akron to see us. And then he went on to New York to see the others. And he said to one of four men, "This is one of the most beautiful things that has come into the world. But I want to warn you that the devil will try to destroy it." Of course, it's true, and one of the first things that the devil could have used was having money, and having sanatoriums as the men were planning. Much to Bob's and Bill's and Ann's surprise, I said, "No, we'll never take any money."

Another way where I saw that the devil could try to destroy us was having prominent names. The other night I heard on TV special about alcoholics, a man explaining why they are anonymous. And he showed that he didn't really know why. He just said that it wouldn't do to let people know that you were an alcoholic. That's not the reason. In fact, the surest way to stay sober is to let people know that you are an alcoholic because then you have lost something of yourself. I would say that the second way that I saw that the devil would be trying to destroy us was to have any names. Those you think that they are prominent or that they have become leaders, all fail people because no one is on top spiritually all the time. So I said, "We'll never have any names."

I feel that the whole wonderful experience of Alcoholics Anonymous came in answer to a growing great need in the world, and this was met by the combination of Bill, who was a catalyst and promoter, and Bob, with his great humility (if you spoke to him about his contribution, he'd say, "Oh, I just work here.") and Ann, who supplied a homeyness for our men in the beginning.

And I tried to give to the people something of my experience and faith. What I was most concerned with is that we always go back to faith. This brings me to the third thing that would be destructive to the early days, Bob and Bill said to me. "Henrietta, I don't think we should talk too much about religion or God." I said to them, "Well, we're not out to please the alcoholics. They have been pleasing themselves all these years. We are out to please God. And if you don't talk about what God does, and your faith, and your guidance, then you might as well be the Rotary Club or something like that. Because God is your only source of power." And finally they agreed. And they weren't afraid any more. It is my great hope that they will never be afraid to acknowledge God and what he has done for them.

The last AA dinner that I went to, over 3,000 people were there. And it was the first meeting that I went to which I was disappointed in. There were two witnesses there, a man and a woman, and you would

have thought they were giving you a description of a psychiatrist's work on them. Their progress was always on the level of psychology. And I spoke to Bill afterwards and I said that there was no spirituality there or talk of what God had done in their lives. There were giving views, not news of that God had done. And Bill said, "I know, but they think there were so many people that need this and they don't want to send them away." So there again has come up this same old bugaboo – without the realization that they have lost their source of power.

This makes me think of the story of the little Scotch minister who was about to preach his first sermon, and his mother hugged him and said, "Now, Bobbie, don't forgot to say a word for Jesus." Your mother always wants a word for God.

And then there is one other thought I'd always like to stress, and that is the real fact of God's guidance. People can always count on guidance, although it seems elusive at times.

*Congress of the United States House of Representatives September 11, 1973*

At the request of my mother, Henrietta Seiberling, I am sending to you the attached transcript of remarks on Alcoholics Anonymous.

Sincerely,

John F. Seiberling Member of Congress