

The roots: Al-Anon's early history intertwines with A.A.

Although Al-Anon is a separate entity from Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and each has its own story, the history of Al-Anon is intertwined with that of A.A.

A.A. is considered to have begun in 1935, when Bill W. and Dr. Bob S. discovered the power of one alcoholic to help another stay sober. Bill W. was a Vermont-raised New Yorker who, despite what Bill called "a desperate desire to stop" drinking and short periods of abstinence, had been unable to achieve stable sobriety. His wife Lois was counseled that Bill would soon either die or require permanent institutionalization. In 1934, Bill was visited by an old friend, Ebby T., who had apparently overcome his own alcoholic drinking after being introduced to the principles and practices of the Oxford Group by another sober alcoholic, Rowland H. Rowland sought to find a spiritual solution to his alcoholism after being counseled by Dr. Carl Jung that only a spiritual conversion could "cure" him of his disease. Rowland felt he had found a solution in the Oxford Group, an evangelical Christian group that believed in working towards absolute standards of Love, Purity, Honesty, and Unselfishness; absolute surrender to guidance by God; self examination and acknowledgement of character defects; restitution for harm done; and carrying the message to others. Rowland in turn carried the Oxford Group principles to Ebby at the Calvary Rescue Mission in New York, run by Reverend Sam Shoemaker of the Calvary Episcopal Church, who later became a friend and supporter of A.A. Although Bill initially dismissed Ebby's proselytizing as, "last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion," Ebby's visit provided Bill with both hope and new thoughts. A month later Bill had himself admitted to the care of Dr. William Silkworth at Towns Hospital in New York for detoxification. During his hospitalization Bill experienced a "white light" conversion experience and remained sober from that day until his death in 1971. Bill and Lois joined the Oxford Group movement, and Bill tried to carry the message to other alcoholics. Several months later, although Bill had not succeeded at sobering up any of the alcoholics he had worked with, Lois pointed out that as a result of his work with others, Bill himself remained sober.

In spring of 1935, Bill W. traveled to Akron, Ohio, on a business deal that did not go as he had hoped. Alone and discouraged in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, Bill felt a desperate desire to drink, and as an antidote he sought to find an alcoholic he could help. Bill phoned local churches, asking the pastors to refer him to an alcoholic who needed help. Dr. Walter Tunks, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, put Bill in touch with Henrietta Seiberling. Henrietta was an Oxford Group member and a close friend of Anne S., wife of Dr. Bob S. Dr. Bob was an alcoholic proctologist who had been unsuccessful at achieving sobriety despite his Oxford Group participation; Bob later became a co-founder of A.A. Henrietta and Anne arranged for Bill to meet with Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob reluctantly agreed to meet with Bill for 15 minutes; instead they spoke together for six hours. Bob had one relapse in June 1935; he remained sober from June 10, 1935, considered to be the founding day of A.A., until his death in November 1950.

Bill lived with Dr. Bob's family in Akron for several months. When Bill returned to New York, he left a small but active A.A. group in Akron. A.A. groups were started in New York and later in other cities. A.A. separated from the Oxford Groups and became a "spiritual not religious" program, although many of the Oxford Group tenets became incorporated into A.A.'s Twelve Steps. A.A. continued to grow in scope and numbers, and in 1939 the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" (often referred to as the A.A. "Big Book") was published. A.A. grew from two chapters and 100 members in 1939, to 360 chapters and 10,000 members in 1944, to over two million members and over 105,000 groups in 145 countries in 2007.



Bill W (right) and Dr. Bob S. (left),
A.A.'s co-founders