

25 December 1948

Transcript of Archie T.'s talk on the history of AA in Detroit

The talk was recorded by Tom H. of Lake Orion.

This is a broadcast (transcript) of the AA Meeting held at the Maccabees Building on December 25th, 1948. The speaker whose talk we are about to hear was Arch T. , looked upon by the AA Members of Detroit as the founder of AA in this city.

Introduction by Mike B:

Ladies and gentlemen, in the words of that great Galilean who lived almost two thousand years ago and who's birth we are commemorating this Christmas Day, "when you are well, you need not a physician. I come here to heal the sick..." And of the channels at his command, He chose as His instruments one alcoholic helping another. And tonight's speaker, ladies and gentlemen is one of those instruments that has carried the message of AA to all; the alcoholics in Michigan. So it's your privilege and both my pleasure to turn this meeting over to Archie Trowbridge, our founder.

Archie T:

Thank you. This is a wonderful place to be on Christmas night. I can think of a lot of places that all of us were on other Christmas nights that didn't turn out as well as this occupation of ours tonight will turn out for us. In fact, I only have to think back to eleven years ago this Christmas night to think of things that were not fitting and proper for Christmas. I remember distinctly that I was very drunk and was not doing any of the things I'd been asked to do.

However, I won't go into that or very much of my drinking career because I've been asked to speak particularly tonight on the history of AA in Detroit - the early history. In order to do that adequately, I'll have to skim over my own story down to a point where I approach the necessary conditions to join AA. In my case that meant because I was a stubborn and headstrong and conceited sort of a guy. That meant getting myself completely down and out before it occurred to me even vaguely that anything might be wrong with me. Before I launch into that part of the story, I'd like to say that your chairman used an expression which I hope you will bear in mind when I'm talking about my story and what little part I played in the development of AA locally. He used the expression "the Instrument of God". And I wish you to remember that I am very well aware in speaking of anything that I have done that it was done as the privileged "Instrument of God" and not because I was any world beater. Necessarily I have to talk about myself, but I want to approach that talk in the Spirit I just outlined to you.

Eleven years ago last Summer I was winding up an eighteen year career of drinking. I was 39 years old and I had started drinking heavily at 21. My drinking between 21 and 30 was what most of us feel was social drinking. Of course, once were in AA were not so sure that it was so social. Because I was the guy that always got drunk, especially if the whiskey was free. I think I used to really, sincerely feel that it was my mountain duty to take all I could consume in the way of free whiskey because it was free and I'm half Scotch by parentage. From the age of 30 to the age of 39, the latter half of those eighteen years, I was definitely an alcoholic. I marked that division of time because of my changed attitude toward drinking. I looked from the death of my mother and father, when I was 30 years old, I began to look on alcohol as a crutch, as a solution for every problem. It proved to be such a wonderful solution that at the age of 39 I had reached a point of, and a common one for all of you, or almost all of you, of no job. I hadn't been fired, I just quit. I didn't even quit, I just walked off the job.

No money. No place to live. No help. No morale left. No will to live left. That was my condition in the Summer of 1938. It caused me to park myself on an unsuspecting friend whose family were out of town and who didn't know much about my career for the past, or previous, several years and he unwittingly invited me to stay in his home because I was homeless. He had me on his hands for 19 days. Every one of those days I was drunk, continuously. I would come home and sleep off the effects of several hours of drinking, crawl out of bed and go back to the saloon and get drunk again. I managed in that cagey way that alcoholics have, of avoiding him pretty well. Or at least I thought I did. In fact, I was quite sure in my alcoholic way that he didn't even know I drank.

How wrong I was about that. I would like to say that I went to him after I returned to Detroit a long time afterwards and was sober and was in AA and said: "Ralph, I had an idea that I was keeping my drink pretty carefully concealed from you, didn't I, outside of the time I slept on the back stairs because I couldn't find the room. Did you have any idea how bad I was?" And he said: "Did I! I carried you up from the front doorstep twice and put you to bed. And you'd pass out at the keyhole." I didn't even know it. I give you these few details merely to qualify myself as a legitimate member of AA. Something went wrong with my drinking schedule on the 3rd of September, on a Friday night. Instead of getting drunk in the morning and being asleep in the afternoon and being out and getting drunk in the evening and coming home after Ralph went to bed, I got tangled up somewhere and found myself at home in bed at ten o'clock at night and he was home too. The time was drawing near when his family were returning from their vacation and I was going to have to get out of there and incapable of finding myself a room because I couldn't stay sober long enough to face a perspective landlady and I had no money with which to pay room rent although in that marvelous alcoholic way, I always had money to drink with. Now don't ask me to explain that. I lay in bed thinking about approaching him, and thought "no, he's been very good to me, he's done a great deal for me in the past. I don't want to bother him. I don't want to bother anybody anymore.

If I can't find a solution to this problem by next Monday, this was Labor Day weekend, I'll put an end to everything. But, I finally concluded that before I did anything like that I'd better go in and talk to him. I went in with nothing on my mind for the solutions to my problems except to ask him if he would lend me \$50. He got out of bed, where he'd been reading, and walked up and down the floor and said: "You don't need \$50, you need a great deal more than that." Well, I agreed with him on that. But he said "You need a new lease on life, a new interest. I can't give you those things, but I know someone who might. He asked me if I'd be willing to go and talk to this woman. I knew her very slightly, and I said "yes". Because I would have said yes to anything or anybody who might have some answers for me because I no longer had answers for anything. So he grabbed the telephone and started to make a date for me for the next day and I started to back water. But it was too late and he made an appointment for me to see this woman the next day.

At four o'clock in the afternoon! He took me out, bought me some drinks, brought me home, and put me to bed. And I lay there somewhat quieted by the drinks and I wondered how I was going to keep an appointment at four o'clock in the afternoon. And be reasonably sober! And I finally hit on a marvelous solution. I would get up a little earlier than usual and make an effort to get drunk faster. So that I would come home knowing my own habits and sleep off the first of the day's drinks and then go straight over and see her to keep this appointment. I did these things and they worked out that way.

I don't know when I had my last drink. It was on Saturday morning on the third of September before Labor Day in 1938. What time of day it was in the morning I don't know. I blanked out. I got in this car 25 minutes after six. At about half past seven is the latest my memory serves me. What time I left there and went home and passed out I don't know. I saw this woman, and to be brief, she offered me a chance to go down to Akron and to meet some men who had found a solution to their problem which was my problem. She offered to take me, she and her husband offered to take me there, and to do it the next day if I were willing to go. She however insisted that I make up my own mind about it, perfectly freely and without any pressure from her. This took me quite a while. I spent a long time in her house sitting there thinking about it.

I finally made the decision. I left her house with the full intention of hurrying as fast as my car would take me to the nearest saloon in getting a drink. Half way to the saloon something stopped me. I can't tell you what it was. I know what I think it was. Today I'm sure of what it was. I'm sure that her prayers, which were all that were left to her, to do after she let go of me, that her prayers did that. However, I went home and went to bed after 18 days of continuous drinking I went home and went to bed and sweated it out all night. I don't need to describe that part of it to you. It makes me shudder to think of it and it would make all you to shudder, but I was on deck the next day, pretty much of a wreck, but I was there to start to Akron.

In Akron I was turned over to Dr. Bob and his wife. And put in the hospital. At that time the City Hospital of Akron was where we put the occasional prospect who was interested in AA and I say occasional because we only had a prospect once in a while.

I spent Labor Day in the hospital reading Emmet Fox's Sermon on the Mount. It changed my entire outlook on life. It changed my direction. I was visited both in the hospital and in one of the homes of one of the members of AA by 15 or 20 men who came to me with their stories, each one as different as could be from the next. Every one of those men were clear eyed, neat, purposeful looking, full of confidence, not cocky. And they impressed me because they had all the things that I lacked. And I knew that whatever it was that they had, I wanted some of it. And whatever they could tell me that would help me gain the same sort of look they had, I was going to try those things that they told me.

My health was found to be practically, well, I don't know how to tell you about my health, Dr. Bob said there wasn't much left of it. At any rate, it was ten and a half months later before I could go to work. And I lived with Dr. Bob and his wife during those ten and a half months. Many times during those months I felt that it was very wrong for me to impose on them. They were poor. All members of AA in those days were poor by the way. In the 30's you didn't go out and get a job just because you were willing to and were going to reform. But I had to learn to accept their goodness in the spirit that it was given to me. But I often rebelled in my own mind about having to impose on them.

Looking back, however, in later years I've seen that time and time again as an example of how much better plans our Higher Power has for us than we make for ourselves. Because what I thought was wrong, that is to say my being delayed in Akron and left on the Smith's hands, was part of a plan under which I absorbed AA from one of its 2 oldest members where I learned to stand on my own feet and where I gained the strength and spiritual courage to go out alone. I don't think I could have done these things that I had to do later without those ten and one-half months.

In March, 1939, Bill Wilson was in Akron. He frequently stopped there whenever he could get some business excuse to come with, and he was sitting in the Smith's kitchen with me drinking coffee and he was on his way to Detroit. And I said "I certainly would like to go up there and see what the lay of the land is and look around and see whether I could take hold yet or not". And he says "why don't you?" I said, "well, why don't I?". Bill said "let's go now". This was Sunday morning. We were going to start right away. Well, we decided to wait until Monday morning. We went up to Cleveland and came up to Detroit in the Mercury. Bill spent Monday and Tuesday here with me. We stayed at a hotel. We visited some of my old friends and told them my story. Bill tended to his business. And friends of mine asked me to stay on here for a while. Bill went back to New York. I stayed here and worked entirely on trying to make some AA contacts that would later on produce prospects.

In order to get this picture you've got to realize that at the time alcoholism was with the exception of a few advanced men who had spent time and study on it such as Dr. Silkworth in New York. Alcoholism was unknown as a disease. The alcoholic in the public mind was an "ornery cuss", who didn't want to stop drinking and had no will power. However, by talking to people on street corners and anybody who would listen to me and by talking to personnel men in factories and to ministers and to those doctors that I could get hold of I got a seed planted amongst a number of people, not themselves alcoholic prospects, but people who were likely to come in contact with the problem of alcoholism. I should explain that my disposition was such that I couldn't and would have been no good at running in and out of bars and trying to sell this business cold turkey to some drunk. I had to go about it in a round a bout way of getting prospects where they were most likely to crop up.

However, I did get that Spring in March my first prospect, and he was a lulu. I was staying with a doctor, one of my closest friends, and he came home for supper one night and said " I've got a man for you. He's down on Park Avenue in a dollar a day hotel. He's tried to commit suicide twice this week". Does he want to stop drinking? "I don't know". Has he ever heard of us? "No". It's my duty to go and see him. I took a bus from the Eastside Downtown and went through a lot of torture for a half hour on the bus. What was I going to say to this fellow? Every time I got all wrought up about it I finally said to myself "wait a minute". Your job is get in the same room with the man and see what happens next. This wasn't a 24 hour program, this got down to be a 5 or 10 minute program. I got in the room with him. And he certainly was a cold potato. I found out afterward from him that he thought I was a detective trying to find out whether he was drinking or not.

But as everyone of you know, there's something about being an alcoholic that will win over another alcoholic if you've got 10 minutes with him. And in 10 minutes I had that fellow asking me if he could produce his bottle and go to work on it. And I said certainly, and then he felt easier about it. Fifty minutes later I had his consent to go to Akron. Twenty-four hours later I had raised the money amongst his former friends to send him to Akron. I'm afraid that most of them gave me donations of five and ten dollars with the thought that it would be fine to get him out of town. They didn't understand what I was talking about, but they were right to contribute one last five dollar bill or ten dollar bill towards after they had already thrown a lot of money down the sewer helping him.

I shipped that man out of the Union Depot the next afternoon on the 5:30 Red Arrow to Akron all dressed up looking pretty well with a pint of Seagram's in his pocket. I gave it to him to keep him happy.

Dr. Bob was waiting on the platform at the other end to take him off the train. But the point is I walked out of that station on a cloud. My feet weren't touching the ground. I'd done the first twelve step work all by myself and under pretty difficult conditions. And I just was up in the clouds somewhere.

After three weeks in Detroit, I found that it was impossible for me to stay here and work and find a job because my health was not good enough yet and I returned very exhausted to Akron. And I stayed there until July. And on the 10th of July, 1939, I came back here to start life over again. I had no place to live when I came here. I had no plans. I had no job. My health was still very poor, so much so that during those first few months that I had to spend as much as three days out of seven in bed. But I came back full of a new attitude toward life and a tremendous desire to live differently than I'd ever lived before. I made my living, the first six months, selling hosiery and men's made-to-order shirts. I did this partly because it was very difficult to get a job and I had to have a job that I could go to work at right away and bring home the bacon every night in order to pay the room rent and partly because it left me the freedom to do the AA work I wanted to do.

In the Fall of 1939 Liberty Magazine published the first national article on AA that had been published. And it furnished me with new prospects. During the Summer I had some other prospects as a result of the calls I had made in Spring. Thanksgiving rolled around and I went back to Akron to visit the Smiths. And I was very ashamed because I had nothing to show of AA groups or AA activities. There were 5 people who had gone through my hands between the Spring and Thanksgiving. Four of them were sober. Period. Of the four who were sober, one had no interest whatsoever in talking to me. He just was sober and had gone his own way. Another one was living in a different city although he had hailed from Detroit. The third one was going very nicely and the fourth one also. Both were going fine as far as staying sober was concerned, but they were not going to commit themselves to anything as definite as starting an AA group and being involved in anything that might keep them sober too long. One of those two men was Mike Eschelmann. And I have Mike's own statement today and I've heard him make it in talks that was the catch. He thought that being sober was fine, but if he got tangled up with anything like starting meetings with me and doing AA work that the following Summer when he went fishing and was away from home and he wanted to pitch one and maybe this thing would stop him from doing it.

How difficult that picture was. You can imagine that Mike got sober about the middle of September and it was at least the middle of December before he finally agreed to start having a meeting of some kind with me so that we could work on prospects together and have a regular weekly meeting.

He and this one other member and I finally in December, and I can't tell you the date, I was too busy to keep a diary, sat down at our first meeting, together with one non-AA member, Sarah Klein, who was our moral support. I had an idea that until we had such a meeting every week that we would never have a nucleus from which to grow and the point a center toward which people would gravitate. And it worked out that way.

We no sooner began to sit down once a week together that we began to get prospects. And we held the meeting in my bedroom in a rooming house on Merrick Avenue, near the public library.

By February our meetings were so big that my bedroom was crowded. We were borrowing all the chairs from the third floor. At this time the Bensons, a very wonderful couple, offered us the use of their recreation room out on Taylor Avenue for our meetings. And we in February of 1940, we moved in there for our first meeting. All six of us. Huddled down in a little circle at one end of the recreation room. That was a wonderful year.

By Fall we had, counting wives and friends and non-alcoholic members who were interested with us, we were able to muster a party for Dr. Bob and his wife who came here to visit us, of 25 people. By February or March of 1941, February I believe, we had grown to the point where we were packed in tight in that recreation room and were sitting on the basement stairs and in the furnace room. And we moved for a moment or two to Doty Hall and found it unsatisfactory, and then located what for a number of years was a very popular meeting place of ours, 4242 Cass.

In the first week in March, 1941, just as we were settling on Cass Avenue, the Saturday Evening Post published Jack Alexander's article. And we began to grow in leaps and bounds. Luckily we'd had a small growth up until then that enabled us to have the people on hand to cope with the growth that suddenly came on. That growth was relatively so great that by the fall of 1941, we split our one Detroit group into three groups- the Northwest Group, the Eastside Group, and one group, the Central or Downtown Group remaining at 4242 Cass. We were so loathe to leave each other, however, that we set aside one week each month when we'd have no meetings of our own in our own group but would have a general meeting back at the old home stand on Cass Avenue.

Out of those three groups, which I might say were very, very small, have grown all our present groups in the greater Detroit area and have grown into Windsor and through this part, the near part of Ontario. So much for the statistical data on what happened in the early formation of AA in Detroit. My dates are not very sure on a lot of these things except approximately.

But the thing I would like to point out to every one of you who are members of AA and who sometimes become discouraged with the behavior of your prospects, your babies, just remember that I had half a dozen of them before I got one that stayed continuously sober. And that there are only a handful of those who came to us in the Benson's Basement days who are still with us. It took a lot of work and a lot of prospects to produce some permanent members in those days. That was particularly true because of the lack of acceptance of AA by the public and by the alcoholic who needed help. Today we're almost a household word. It's hard for those of you who've come into AA more recently to conceive of the conditions that I've tried to picture. I gave a talk at the Rotary Club when I was first back here, and when I got all through I thought I'd explained alcoholism and our work in AA. And one of the members of the Rotary Club came up and said, "yeah, that just proves what I've always thought, you gotta have will power". And that was just what you were up against all the time.

It has been a very great experience and a great privilege for me to be part of this story. It has meant more to me than anything ever meant in my life and I hope it will always mean more right down to the last day of my life. In AA I have found the things not only that have enabled me to stop drinking but I have found the things that enabled me to meet the problems of life instead of running away from them. AA offered me a chance to give myself to other people in order that I might save myself.

And I want to mention one thing. In that connection. When I came back here I thought once for a while, I struggled with this for a while, I began to find that people wouldn't accept what I was telling them and I began to wonder what they were going to think of me. And I began to wonder how that was going to impair my chances of getting a good job one of these days. And I felt why can't I go ahead and do AA work when the opportunity comes but just keep my trap closed and get a decent job? Why advertise myself as an alcoholic? I don't know how long I toyed with that, whether it was an hour or a day.

But I finally was forced with the decision that if I wanted to stay sober I was going to have to put AA up at the top of the list and that I was going to do these things that I had been doing and keep doing them if I wanted happiness and sobriety. Never once in these past ten years have I regretted that decision. I not only got sobriety from it but I got a degree of content, happiness, and joy which is essentially impossible to describe.

I couldn't begin to tell you what AA has meant to me and what the privilege of belonging to AA has meant. I came into it an unwilling prospect who had no place else to go. And at the risk of telling something of you newer members may doubt and may wonder about I'd like to say that if I could drink today I wouldn't want a drink if I had to forfeit my membership in AA because it's the grandest thing that I know of. Thank you.

End of transcript.

Archibald L. Trowbridge 1900 - 1957

This information came from the Detroit Public Library, Main Branch, in the Burton Archives room from the card catalog.

Arch L. Trowbridge January 23, 1957

Arch L. Trowbridge, widely known as an accountant in business circles and as a benefactor and counselor to hundreds of Detroit men and women in his personal life, died last night in Bon Secours Hospital. He was 57.

Mr. Trowbridge had been taken to the hospital on Monday from his home at 16908 Cranford Lane, Grosse Pointe. He had been in poor health for some time.

Survivors include his wife, children, a brother Ed, and sister, Natalie.

Funeral arrangements have not been completed. The remains will be at the William R. Hamilton Funeral Home.
