

GLEANINGS FROM MARYLAND'S AA HISTORY

Part 1: The Birth of AA: Pioneers from Maryland (Written Jan, 1994)

Many of us came to AA feeling that a mysterious, malign force would do us in, no matter what we did. Then something strange stirred within us. As we became willing to accept the help of those who went before us, who understood us, good things happened. We followed in their footsteps and found freedom from the bondage of self. What resulted was a sense of identification, of belonging, of unity. But lest we become too clannish, we must remember that without guidance and support of nonalcoholic friends in the early years, AA would not be here for us. Maryland-born Samuel Shoemaker was the first of such friends.

His influence began on December 7, 1934, when a tall, gaunt, drunk—William Griffith Wilson—made his first visit to Calvary Episcopal Mission, where the reverend Samuel Shoemaker was rector.

At this stage, Bill was stealing money from his wife, pawning household items, falling down drunk and having blackouts and delirium tremens.

Bill had visited the mission under stimulus from an old drinking buddy, Ebby Thatcher, who had gotten sober through the Oxford Group, which was headquartered at Calvary Episcopal Mission, on 23rd Street in New York City. Shoemaker had helped convert drunkards at this Calvary Mission using Oxford Group principles.

Four days after he visited the mission, Bill was admitted to Towns Hospital for a one-week stay, during which time he had a profound spiritual experience and never drank again.

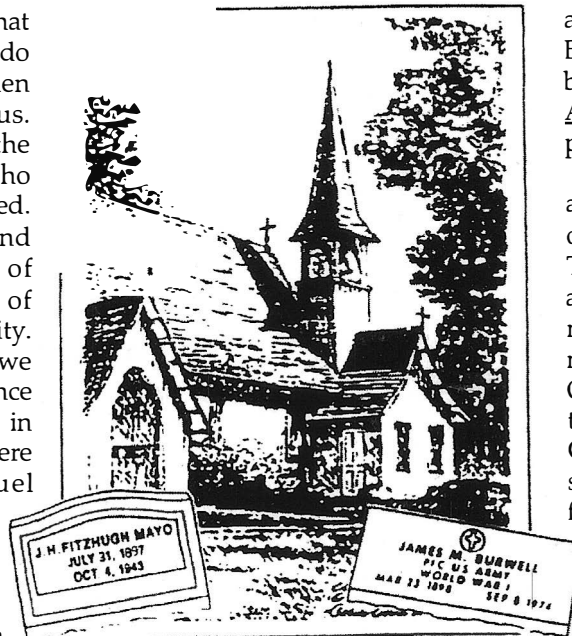
After leaving Towns, Bill associated himself with Shoemaker's Oxford Group, Calvary Mission and Towns Hospital, dedicating himself to other alcoholics.

Born in Baltimore in 1893, Rev. Shoemaker published over 25 books and many pamphlets on spirituality. One pamphlet, "What the Church Has To Learn From Alcoholics Anonymous," is an interesting commentary on how we learn by helping each other. Shoemaker died in October 1963 and was buried in Garrison, MD.

In Language of the Heart, Bill says, "Dr Shoemaker was one of AA's indispensables. Had it not been for his ministry to us in our early time, our Fellowship would not be in existence today. He will always be found in our annals as the one whose inspired example and teaching did the most to show us how to create the spiritual climate in which we alcoholics may survive and then proceed to grow . . ."

For the next few months after meeting Sam Shoemaker, Bill haunted the mission and Towns Hospital trying to help other drunks, but with little success. Then he made his fateful trip to Akron, Ohio.

We AAs say that our program began there on June 10, 1935, when Dr. Bob Smith had his last drink, one month



Christ Episcopal Church in Owensville, MD where two members of our fellowship, miles apart on spiritual philosophy but close family friends, lie at rest.

after his historic meeting with Bill W." But one could argue that it really began in April 1939 when the book Alcoholics Anonymous was published.

Up to the time the Big Book appeared, our program had no name or written guidelines or principles. The early "nameless bunch of alcoholics" followed a "word-of-mouth" program that had evolved mainly from their affiliation with the Oxford Group, a movement based on the philosophy of First Century Christianity. Bill W. summed up the six-point word-of-mouth program as follows:

1. Admit powerlessness over alcohol.
2. Take a moral inventory
3. Confess shortcomings with another person.
4. Make restitution for wrongs done to others.
5. Help other alcoholics with no thought of reward in money and prestige.
6. Pray for power to practice these principles.

After several years of association with the Oxford Group, the small groups in New York and Ohio broke off and started their own meetings.

Up until then, alcoholics were doomed, except for rare cases where they experienced profound religious conversions. But with the AA approach of one drunk trying to help another came hope for the previously hopeless. The several dozen members of the infant fellowship had come across something wonderful. They had discovered a way out, and it had to be documented so alcoholics everywhere could be helped.

Bill agreed to write the book. As he finished the rough drafts of the chapters, Bill would have them read and discussed at the meetings in New York and Ohio so all members could have their say.

The review of the first four chapters generated enthusiastic arguments. But things really became hectic when Bill released Chapter Five. (Bill said by then he had become the umpire rather than the author!)

Members had drifted into two opposite groupings—a pro-religion faction led by Fitz Mayo argued that the book should reflect the teachings of the churches, missions, and, especially, the Oxford Group. An agnostic faction spearheaded by Hank P. and Jim Burwell was passionately against theological orientation, believing in a practical, psychological approach.

Heated discussions went on for days and nights, but out of it all came the answer. The agnostics persuaded the others to accept the compromise language of "God, as we

understand Him." This non-dogmatic idea opened the door to uncountable numbers of alcoholics who otherwise would not have entered our recovery program.

Eventually the book was almost ready for printing, but still hadn't been titled. Various recommendations were dropped from consideration until two choices remained. The Way Out was Ohio's choice; Alcoholics Anonymous was New York's. A check of book titles in the Library of Congress by Fitz showed 12 books named The Way Out and none named Alcoholics Anonymous. The choice was thereby made easy, and both the book and the Fellowship acquired names.

In April 1939, the Big Book was published, and our program was

established. As Bill said in his 1953 *Grapevine* article, "Little did we guess that our Twelve Steps would soon be approved by clergy of all denominations and even by our latter-day friends, the psychiatrists . . ."

The Big Book is now 55 years old. Over 14 million copies have been published in 27 languages without one word of the basic text being changed. And our program has become the model for some 114 other self-help groups.

Although Fitz and Jim B. were miles apart on spiritual philosophy, they were always close family friends. And their final resting places are also close, just a few yards apart on the grounds of Christ Episcopal Church at Owensville, MD.

The two were born in Maryland and were boyhood friends in southern Anne Arundel County. As previously mentioned, Shoemaker was also a Marylander. Had not this Maryland trio played their critical roles in AA's infancy, our Fellowship in all likelihood would not have been born and survived its growing pains. They are among the many unsung heroes to whom we AAs owe a debt that we cannot repay but partially by continuing to carry the message to alcoholics who still suffer from our devastating disease.

(Future installments will reveal more about these Maryland pioneers and other significant developments in AA's emergence in the Free State.)

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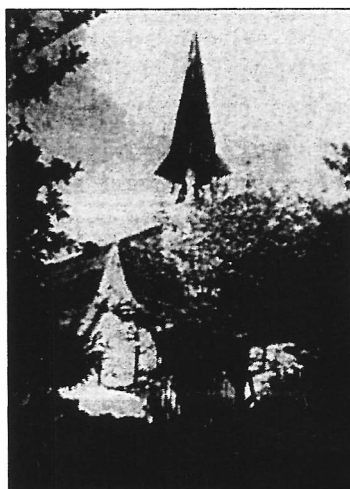
Part 2: Two Boyhood Friends Made Crucial Contributions (Written March, 1994)

Two friends from boyhood who lie buried in the cemetery of Christ Episcopal Church at Owensville, Maryland, made vital contributions to Alcoholics Anonymous in the Fellowship's infancy. But for their individual input, countless thousands would never have joined AA and the Fellowship itself might have been short-lived.

One of the pair—John Henry Fitzhugh Mayo, "Our Southern Friend in AA's **Big Book**"—was among the first few to get and stay sober in New York. The other was Jim Burwell, whose **Big Book** story is "The Vicious Cycle," in the second and third editions. Their early efforts formed the foundation of AA's rich history in Maryland.

The pair's friendship flowered in southern Anne Arundel County after Fitz's minister father became rector of Christ Episcopal Church at Owensville when Fitz was about four years old. Jim Burwell was the son of a Baltimore physician and grain merchant with family ties at Cumberstone, just a few miles from Owensville. As teenagers they attended the Episcopal School for Boys at Alexandria, VA.

Alcohol began to take its toll on both in their twenties. Fitz had a promising career with an established firm aborted by the Great Depression and took a teaching position in Norfolk, VA, where he drank heavily, lost his job, and his health deteriorated. Feeling great compassion for Fitz, another friend from childhood gave him part of his own farm at Cumberstone to homestead. Jim's story relates that,



Christ Episcopal Church in Owensville, MD where Fitz Mayo and Jim Burwell began their lifelong friendship and are buried in the churchyard.

after losing several fine positions, he drifted into sales work and lost 40 jobs in eight years "before AA found me."

In the fall of 1935, Fitz heard that Towns Hospital in New York was having some success in treating alcoholics, and he went there for the "cure." This was just a few months after Bill Wilson's historic meeting with Dr. Bob in Akron that marked the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. On Bill's return to New York, he had set

about trying to "fix" drunks he found at the Calvary Mission and Towns Hospital. His first successful project was Hank Parkhurst, whom he had rescued at Towns; Fitz was the second to be picked up there and maintain sobriety.

After returning to Cumberstone, Fitz brought a number of prospects into his home in a vain effort to get them sober, much to

the distress of his wife. He also began to make frequent trips to New York to join Bill and Lois Wilson and Hank at meetings of the Oxford Group, a "First Century Christian movement" with which early members of the fellowship were affiliated. When weekly meetings of the small group of alcoholics soon began to be held at the Wilson home, Fitz usually came up to attend.

Fitz formed a close friendship with the Wilsons, who were frequent visitors to his Cumberstone home for several years, starting in 1936. Lois Wilson recalled in her book, **Lois Remembers**, that they often visited "Fitz and Co" at Cumberstone and that on different occasions she was called on to care for Fitz's ailing wife and diabetic daughter. (When queried some years later, Lois said that Bill did not

Cumberstone, MD home of Fitz Mayo in southern Anne Arundel County. It was frequently visited by Bill & Lois Wilson for several years beginning in 1936. Some locals believe Bill W. made notes here while formulating his ideas for AA's Big Book.

write any of the **Big Book** at Cumberstone, but some Maryland old timers believe he made notes there as he formulated ideas for the book.)

At least as early as 1937, Fitz was spending much of his time trying to help drunks and gain a foothold for the Fellowship in Washington, DC, where his sister Agnes worked and provided Fitz shelter and a base of operations for his AA work. His early efforts met with minimal success, but by the fall of 1939 he and Ned Foote had established the nucleus of a small group with staying power that began to function in Washington as AA's southernmost outpost.

One of Fitz's early reclamation projects was the ill-fated Jackie Williams. Fitz sent Jackie to see his old chum Jim Burwell, who was just coming off a binge at his mother's home in DC. Jim describes the encounter in his **Big Book** story:

"January 8, 1938—that was my D-Day; the place Washington, DC. This last real merry-go-round had started the day before Christmas and I had really accomplished a lot in those fourteen days. First, my new wife had walked out, bag, baggage and furniture; then the apartment landlord had thrown me out of the empty apartment and the finish was the loss of another job. After a couple of days in dollar hotels and one night in the pokey, I finally landed on my mother's doorstep—shaking apart with several days' beard . . . That is the way Jackie found me, lying on a cot in my skivvies, with hot and cold sweats, pounding heart and that awful scratchiness all over.

"I had not asked for help and seriously doubt that I would have, but Fitz, an old school friend of mine, had persuaded Jackie to call on me. Had he come two or three days later I think I would have thrown him out, but he hit me when I was open for anything..."

Jim and Jackie took the train to New York, where they met Bill and Hank. It turned out that Hank had fired Jim from a job years earlier. Jim was impressed by the sobriety of the New Yorkers and decided to join them "and take all that they gave out except

the 'God Stuff'." He also took a job as a travelling salesman for a business Hank and Bill had started. Burwell later recalled that his association with the little band in New York started about the time that Hank began pressing Bill to put something of the program in writing; up to that time, the "program" was carried solely by word of mouth in the New York and Akron meetings.

The Akron contingent was initially against any publication—it was still closely affiliated with the Oxford Group, from which the New Yorkers had severed ties in September 1937. Akron finally acquiesced, and Bill began writing in the spring of 1938.

As Bill finished a chapter it would be reviewed and discussed by the New York members and a copy sent to Dr. Bob for review in Akron. This procedure brought lively debate in New York, particularly over the language of Chapter Five and the Twelve Steps. As related in Part 1 of this series, Fitz and Jim became central characters in the discussions, with Fitz favoring a Christian religious approach and Jim aligned with those wanting a philosophical text devoid of references to God. The resulting compromise language of "God as we understood Him" was hailed by Bill Wilson as a "ten strike" that opened the way for those of all faiths and little or no faith to embrace and be embraced by Alcoholics Anonymous.

And when disagreement developed over the title of the **Big Book**, it was Fitz to whom Bill turned for help: his search at the Library of Congress found a dozen books titled **The Way Out** and none named **Alcoholics Anonymous**. Thus both the book and the Fellowship were named.

Fitz and Jim were also prototype "service workers." In addition to "Twelve Stepping" prospects and founding groups, they were pioneering institutional and community/public relations emissaries.

Fitz's efforts in Washington led to groups forming in Georgetown, Chevy Chase, Silver Spring, Bethesda, Rockville and Colmar Manor in

Maryland; and Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, and Falls Church in Virginia. The travelling salesman Burwell's need for the company of other alcoholics led him to establish groups in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Harrisburg, PA and Wilmington, DE. His seed-planting in Baltimore doubtless eventually sprouted groups in Towson, Glen Burnie and other points in Maryland.

Both developed excellent relationships with hospitals in DC and Philadelphia to the point where AAs could admit and take home alcoholics from alkie wards to which they had access any hour of the day or night. Through his liaison with top government officials, Fitz also gained AA access to the workhouse to which drunks were sent by DC courts.

An invaluable bonus growing out of Jim's founding the first group in Philadelphia was the famous Jack Alexander article in **The Saturday Evening Post**, which Burwell was instrumental in getting published. Publicity in the immensely popular and widely circulated **Post** brought thousands of letters to AA and spurred phenomenal growth of the Fellowship in 1941 and subsequent years.

Burwell can also be credited with adoption of AA's Third Tradition—"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking"—as reported by Bill Wilson in **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions** (pp. 143-145).

In World War II, Fitz rejoined the army, where he was found to have cancer. He died October 4, 1943, eight years sober. Jim migrated to San Diego and continued active in AA until his death on September 8, 1974. Fittingly they rest a few yards apart just outside the chancel of Christ Church at Owensville, where their paths first crossed as youngsters.

Undoubtedly there were many other unsung heroes among "early timers" whose efforts helped Alcoholics Anonymous through its perilous first years, but few if any made critical contributions like those of the two Maryland men of south Anne Arundel County.