

Reprinted with permission from the *A.A. Grapevine*, JULY 1945

## **HISTORY OFFERS GOOD LESSON FOR A.A.**

A.A.s need to warn each other about becoming too confident. Overconfidence can have sorry consequences. Individual A.A.s need to take the warning to heart; A.A. as an organization of individuals can also profit from it.

All of us, attending meetings of our various groups, have heard, and taken part in, conversations like this:

"D'ja see that story about A.A. in this week's Squint?" "Not yet, but Joe was talkin' about it. Any good?" "Yeah, a pretty good piece. You know, those editors must think we got somethin'." Sure, they wouldn't be giving us space, what with the war and all, if they didn't think a lot of their readers wanted to know about us."

Rosy contentment settles over speakers and listeners.

How many of the readers of *The Grapevine* have heard about the Washington Temperance Society?

It was quite an organization in its time - in the 1840's. Its organizers called themselves "reformed drunkards" and they set about "reforming" other drunkards.

Does the idea seem familiar?

### **CLAIMED 100,000 IN 3 YEARS**

They did all right, too, They got going in the spring of 1840, in Baltimore. In early 1843, they were claiming that they had persuaded 100,000 habitual drunkards to sign the pledge.

Older temperance organizations had to stand aside - or climb onto the bandwagon. The new society was getting the headlines. It organized a mass meeting in City Hall Park in New York City in 1841 that attracted more than 4,000 listeners - the speakers stood on upturned rum kegs - and it had 1,800 new members when it closed its campaign in that city.

There were triumphal parades in Boston - where historic Faneuil Hall was jammed to the doors to hear the speaker - and in other eastern cities, Speakers toured the West and South.

The Press of the day gave the society uncounted columns of publicity. The society petered out.

The "why" contains a lesson - and a moral - for A.A.

There was no ONE reason, of course. A reason was that older temperance organizations hired some of the society's better speakers. That reason couldn't have wrecked the society if it had had its feet solidly on the ground.

Another reason was that politicians looked hungrily at its swelling membership. Some of them climbed aboard the wagon (there is inference that in those times,

at least, some politicians could qualify for membership) and they helped to wreck local groups through their efforts to line up votes.

The Abolition movement was gaining strength and there was division within groups as men took their stand on the issue of slavery.

The Washingtonians were confident. They rebuffed overtures of older temperance organizations, they scorned old methods. Local groups went their separate ways, made their own mistakes, learned their own lessons. Some, with larger membership, dipped into their treasuries to finance their own publications. There was no overall direction of educational policy. Editors of local society publications got into squabbles with editors of other temperance papers.

## **FACTORS WITHIN**

There was division, in those times, among the older organizations. Some of them plumped for total abstinence as a rule of conduct; others hedged and wanted to direct their efforts against use of spirituous liquors, accepting use of wines and beers as normal conduct. Some of the more hardy souls already were clamouring for legislation that would outlaw the traffic in beverage alcohol. All of these factions pulled and hauled on the society's members.

Older temperance organizations were finding it increasingly difficult to interest the public in their aims. The Washingtonians with their unique methods - their missionary work among drunkards, their open-air parades and mass meetings, their "experience" programs that afforded a thrill-seeking public the opportunity of enjoying vicariously the degenerate experiences of sodden sinners - were stealing the show. The older organizations borrowed Washingtonian speakers and methods to draw larger audiences to their meetings.

Because the Washingtonian movement, in its beginnings, was concerned only with the reclaiming of drunkards and held that it was none of its affair if others used alcohol who seemed to be little harmed by it, the makers and sellers of alcoholic beverages looked upon the new movement with a tolerant, even approving eye. The habitual drunk was no more welcome in the nineteenth century grog-shop than he is in the present day cocktail lounge.

## **ONE FATAL OMISSION**

But in its zeal to increase its membership as rapidly as possible, the society pledged many persons to total abstinence who were intemperate drinkers, probably, but who were not alcoholic in the present-day definition of the term.

The Washingtonian movement might have survived, however, might have triumphed over its mistakes, and its enemies (and well wishers), except for one fatal omission.

Its organizers believed they could get along without a Higher Power.

It wasn't a particularly religious time. And inebriates, then as now, had generally lost touch with Him. Many of them, in fact, were outspoken in their denunciations of all of His works, especially as demonstrated in the activities and attitudes of so-called Christian folk. The meetings of the society's groups were

conducted usually without reference to Him.

Washingtonians were not atheists; it just hadn't occurred to them that God as we understand Him could help them to stay sober. In fact, some of them believed that if they invited God into their councils, sectarianism also would push its way in, and their movement would be taken over by one or another of the churches.

The society wasn't on God's side and, consequently it disintegrated.

## **SOURCE OF STRENGTH**

An editor of that day wrote:

"That the exclusion of all religious forms and the entire abstraction of religion from temperance, was necessary for the reclamation of the drunkard, we have never believed.... The drunkard may have felt hostile to religion while in the bar-room and amid the fumes of liquor, and he may feel so after he has reformed and been taught to believe that he is better than a Christian, but never did a poor drunkard go up in sincerity to sign the pledge, without feeling himself a prodigal, commencing a work of return to his Heavenly Father, and needing that Father's help: and who would not have gratefully knelt and listened to a prayer for that help on his new endeavors. And we believe that if the hundreds of thousands of signatures in our country had been accompanied with prayer and some religious enforcement, their power and efficiency would have been incomparably stronger."

Is it necessarily true that there's nothing new under the sun," or that "history repeats itself?"

A.A. is new, a new partnership with God in a useful endeavor. History NEED NOT repeat, in the case of A.A., the sorry story of the Washingtonians, rise and fall.

There are, however, lessons to be learned from history.

C.H.K., Lansing, Mich