

Early A.A. History in Michigan

by Bob P.

From the unpublished book *A.A. History: The Next 50 Years* commissioned by GSO and completed in 1988.

Michigan

Arch T. was a drunk in need of help. Although he lived in Detroit, Michigan, word had filtered up to him in 1938 of a doctor in Akron, Ohio, who was somehow able to help people like him stop drinking. So on September 1 of that year, Arch went to Akron, where he was hospitalized and then began attending meetings of the new and nameless group of alcoholics who were managing to stay sober. He stayed with Dr. Bob until 1939, when he returned to Detroit with the admonition to seek other drunks to help.

In December 1939, the first meeting of A.A. in Michigan was held in Arch T.'s room in the Art Center in Detroit. Present, besides Arch, were Mike E., who became member #2 in Michigan, another alcoholic and a non-alcoholic woman. By February 1940, the fledgling group had seven members and began meeting in the basement room of a home of a non-alcoholic couple on Taylor Avenue, on the city's west side. Six months later there three groups -- West, Central and East. In October 1941, a Northeast group was formed, meeting on Thursdays, with a membership of about 20. A step meeting on Mondays was added in '45.

At the same time, A.A. was starting in the western part of the state, first in Kalamazoo and then in Grand Rapids. In the latter city, Clarence H. read Jack Alexander's article in *The Saturday Evening Post* and wrote to the A.A. office in New York. He was put in touch with the Kalamazoo group and with its help held the first meeting in Grand Rapids in September 1941 in the YMCA. By December, it had 16 members and listed Frank D. as contact.

In March 1942, Clarence H. broke away and started a new group, a stag group, Mac I., secretary. Three years later Group #1 had 10 members; group #2, 25. Growth continued with a third group starting in February '46 and a fourth in August. A year later a Central Committee was formed to coordinate the activities of seven groups in all. At the Life group's fifth anniversary banquet held in January 1948 at the Rowe Hotel in Grand Rapids, 165 people were present. They included visitors from Kalamazoo, Muskegon, Battle Creek, Allegan, Greenville and Saginaw.

Back in Detroit, Dr. Bob spoke at a dinner held April 12, 1942, at Webster Hall, before a crowd of 375. Pat N. was the chairman and founder Arch T. also spoke briefly. A.A.'s growth in the Detroit area was phenomenal following the Alexander article. When the tenth anniversary was celebrated in November 1948, there were over 50 groups with more than 1,500 members.

Detroit also had the first radio program featuring A.A. members telling their stories. It was on the air every Saturday evening at 6:15 on station WWJ.

In the early 1940's, the home of Sarah Kline, a non-alcoholic friend of A.A., became a kind of *ad hoc* service office. Her phone was listed as the A.A. contact number and twelfth-step calls were sent out from there. In 1946, the A.A. groups established a real central office which has had a continuous record of 24-hour service to the sick alcoholic ever since. Located first in the Ford Building and then for 23 years in the McKerchey Building, the office has been situated in Ferndale (still in the center of Greater Detroit) since 1972. Arne O. had been its general secretary for 24 years in 1985.

Gus J. from Warren recalls how the Fellowship spread from the early downtown groups to the suburbs. The Centerline group broke off from the Northeast group and moved to nearby Macomb County. Until his death in the early 1980's, Mike E., Michigan A.A. #2, was a member of Centerline, and as of 1985 the group still had two members, Bill M. and Joe Z., with 39 and 38 years of sobriety, respectively. Centerline spawned the South Macomb, Roseville, Mt. Clemens, McKinley and other groups.

The A.A. groups in Michigan are notable for their early and thoroughgoing adoption of a Conference structure. For the purpose of the First General Service Conference in 1951, the state had been divided into three areas: Eastern Michigan, centered in and around Detroit; Western Michigan, embracing much of the rest of the state; and (as mentioned previously) the Upper Peninsula, which was combined with Northern Wisconsin to form a separate area. Faithfully following the suggestions in a pamphlet on organization sent out from the Alcoholic Foundation, representatives from groups in Western Michigan held their first assembly meeting on March 8, 1951, in Battle Creek to elect a General Service Committee and a delegate to represent them on Panel 1 at the Conference in New York in April. Also, nine districts were formed.

Fisk M., committeeman from the Muskegon district, was elected delegate and also served as chairman of the area committee. The committeeman from the Battle Creek district, Jack M., was elected secretary of the area committee. Thus, in 1951, with two years' sobriety, Jack M. embarked on one of the longest careers of continuous service to Alcoholics Anonymous known anywhere. He served as Western Michigan delegate on Panel 6 and as East Central Regional Trustee '71-'74. He also served in various other key capacities on the Western Michigan General Service Committee and the Western Michigan Intergroup, was the driving force behind the Michigan State-Wide General Service Committee, and was of invaluable assistance to G.S.O. in computer processing membership survey forms and consulting on the introduction of the computer to the office. In 1985, Jack M. was as enthusiastic and dedicated to A.A. as ever, attending several meetings a week and still active in service.

Michigan's interest in service was evidenced by big open forums held in 1952 and 1953 and by the first Michigan State Conference in September 1953 at the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel in Detroit, where the principal speakers were Hank G. and Helen B., from G.S.O. To provide a new dimension of service was also the purpose behind the formation of the Western Michigan Intergroup. In this case, the term "Intergroup" was employed to describe a local service

committee rather than an office. Individual groups in the area were often geographically separated in the '50's and a need was felt for "inter-group" meetings to provide additional information and input to the groups, to give them an opportunity to exchange ideas and hear outside speakers, to help them coordinate their service activities such as public information and institutional work. "Individual groups were becoming too autonomous," observed Don W. the first Intergroup chairman.

Therefore, in 1958, meetings began on a bi-monthly schedule, rotating among the districts: the first in Traverse City, followed by Muskegon and Benton Harbor/St. Joseph, etc. It was clear from the beginning that the Intergroup supplemented rather than competed with the Area General Service Committee. Over the years, the Intergroup meetings served their original purposes well and became so popular they were held monthly. The Northern Michigan groups formed their own similar Intergroup in 1973. Also in '70's host groups began sponsoring whole weekends, adding sharing sessions and workshops on various service topics as well as special outside speakers. In 1985, according to Jack M., the meetings are still well attended and are a vital force in Western Michigan A.A.

At the State Conferences, Intergroup meetings and other gatherings, Michigan delegates from the several areas, past delegates, present and past trustees and other trusted servants would often meet together informally -- and usually ended such sessions by saying, "we should get together more often." They recognized that the need existed for a Michigan State-Wide General Service Committee, and in 1965 the idea became a reality. The State-Wide Committee has met quarterly ever since in the central location of Lansing. It has proved to be of enormous benefit in coordinating the work of the area committees -- especially in P.I., C.P.C, and correctional and treatment facilities work -- and in promoting unity. Says Jack M., "We are unified state. We do everything on a state-wide basis. We don't make a move without statewide discussion."

Not surprisingly, Michigan ranked seventh among the states in A.A. at the time of the 1955 St. Louis Convention, with 186 groups and 3,531 members. In A.A.'s 50th year -- and Michigan's 46th -- it reported 1,212 groups with an estimated membership of about 24,000.