

Bill W., 75, Dies; Cofounder Of Alcoholics Anonymous

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NEW YORK — William Griffith Wilson died late Sunday night and, with the announcement of his death, was revealed to have been the Bill W. who cofounded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. He was 75.

The retired Wall Street securities analyst had expected to die or to go insane as a hopeless drunk 36 years ago but — after what he called a dramatic spiritual experience — sobered up and stayed sober.

He leaves a program of recovery as a legacy to 47,000 acknowledged alcoholics in 15,000 A.A. groups throughout the United States and in 18 other countries.

Wife Aided Work

Mr. Wilson, whose twangy voice and economy of words reflected his New England origin, died of pneumonia and cardiac complication a few hours after he had been flown by private plane to the Miami Heart Institute in Miami Beach from his home in Bedford Hills, NY.



At his bedside was his wife, Lois, who had remained by him during his years as a “falling down” drunk and who later had worked at his side to aid other alcoholics. She is a founder of the Al-Anon and Alateen groups, which deal with the fears and insecurity suffered by spouses and children of problem drinkers.

Mr. Wilson last spoke publicly last July 5 in a three minute talk he delivered after struggling from a wheelchair to the lectern at the closing session of A.A.'s 35th anniversary international convention in Miami, attended by 11,000 persons. He had been admitted three days earlier to the Miami Heart Institute, his emphysema complicated by pneumonia.

Last Oct. 10, he was under hospital care for acute emphysema and was unable for the first time to attend the A.A. banquet at which his “last-drink anniversary” has been celebrated annually. His greetings were delivered by his wife to the 2,200 A.A. members and guests at the New York Hilton.

Mr. Wilson gave permission to break his A.A. anonymity upon his death in a signed statement in 1966. The role of Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith as the other founder of the worldwide fellowship was disclosed publicly when the Akron Ohio, surgeon died of cancer in 1950.

As Bill W., Mr. Wilson shared what he termed his “experience, strength and hope” in hundreds of talks and writings, but in turn – mindful that he himself was “just another guy named Bill who can’t handle booze” – he heeded the counsel of fellow alcoholics, and declined a salary for his work in behalf of the fellowship.

He supported himself, and later his wife, on royalties from four A.A. books — “Alcoholics Anonymous,” “The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions,” “Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age” and “The A.A. Way of Life.”

Explained Anonymity

In fathering the doctrine that members should not reveal their A.A. affiliation at the public level, Bill W. had explained that “anonymity isn’t just something to save us from alcoholic shame and stigma; its deeper purpose is to keep those fool egos of ours from running hog wild after money and fame at A.A.’s expense.”

He cited the example of a nationally known radio personality who wrote an autobiography, disclosing his A.A membership and then spent the royalties crawling the pubs on West 52nd Street.”

Frankness Impressed

In the program’s early years, Mrs. Wilson worked in a department store to augment the family income.

Over the years, the gaunt, 6-foot cofounder’s wavy brown hair turned wispy white, and his step slowed. In 1962 he retired from active administration of A.A. affairs and returned to part-time activity in Wall Street. He continued to speak in New York at dinner meeting celebrating the anniversaries of his recovery.

Mr. Wilson shunned oratory and euphemisms and impressed listeners with the simplicity and frankness of his A.A. “story”:

In his native East Dorset, VT., where he was born Nov. 26,1895, and where he attended a two-room elementary school, he recalled, “I was tall and gawky and I felt pretty bad about it because the smarter kids could push me around. I remember being very depressed for a year or more, then I developed a fierce resolve to win – to be a No. 1 man.”

Strength Limited

Bill, whose physical strength and coordination were limited, was goaded by a deep sense of inferiority, yet became captain of his high school baseball team. He learned to play the violin well enough to lead the school orchestra.

He majored in engineering at Norwich University for three years, then enrolled in officers training school when the United States entered World War I. He married Lois Burnham, a Brooklyn physician’s daughter he had met on vacation in Manchester, Vt.

At Army camp In New Bedford, Mass., 2nd Lt. Wilson of the 66th Coast Artillery and fellow officers were entertained by patriotic hostesses, and Bill W. was handed his first drink, a Bronx cocktail. Gone, soon, was his sense of inferiority.

Wife Concerned

“In those Roaring Twenties,” he remembered, “I was drinking to dream great dreams of greater power.” His wife became increasingly concerned, but he assured her that “men of genius conceive their best projects when drunk.”

In the crash of 1929, Mr. Wilson’s funds melted away, but his self-confidence failed to drop. “When men were leaping to their deaths from the towers of high finance,” he noted, “I was disgusted and refused to jump. I went back to the bar. I said, and I believed, ‘that I can build this up once more.’ But I didn’t. My alcoholic obsession had already condemned me. I became a hanger-on in Wall Street.”

Numbing doses of bathtub gin, bootleg whisky and New Jersey applejack became Bill W.’s panacea for all his problems.

Visited by Companion

Late in 1934, he was visited by an old barroom companion, Ebby T., who disclosed that he had attained freedom from a drinking compulsion with help from the First Century Christian Fellowship (now Moral Rearmament); a movement founded in England by the late Dr. Frank N. D. Buchman and often called the Oxford Group. Bill W. was deeply impressed and was desperate, but he said he had not yet reached that level of degradation below which he was unwilling to descend. He felt he had one more prolonged drunk left in him.

Sick, depressed and clutching a bottle of beer, Bill W. staggered a month later into Towns Hospital, an upper Manhattan institution for treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction. Dr William Duncan Silkworth, his friend, put him to bed.

Mr. Wilson recalled then what Ebby T. had told him: “You admit you are licked; you get honest with yourself... you pray to whatever God you think there is, even as an experiment.” Bill W. found himself crying out:

“If there is a God, let him show himself, I am ready to do anything, anything!”

“Suddenly,” he related. “the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man.”

Recovering slowly and fired with enthusiasm, Mr. Wilson envisioned a chain reaction among drunks, one carrying the message of recovery to the next. Emphasizing at first his spiritual regeneration, and working closely with Oxford Groupers, he struggled for months to “sober up the world,” but got almost nowhere.

“Look Bill,” Dr. Silkworth cautioned, “you are preaching at those alkies. You are talking about the Oxford precepts of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Give them the medical business, and give it to ‘em hard, about the obsession that condemns them to drink. That – coming from one alcoholic to another – may crack those tough egos deep down.”

Mr. Wilson thereafter concentrated on the basic philosophy that alcoholism is a physical allergy coupled with a mental obsession – an incurable though arrestable – illness of body., mind and spirit. Much later, the disease concept of alcoholism was accepted by a committee of the American Medical Association and by the World Health Organization.

Still dry six months after emerging from the hospital, Mr. Wilson went to Akron to participate in a stock proxy fight. He lost, and was about to lose another bout as he paced outside a bar in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel. Panicky, he groped for inner strength and remembered that he had thus far stayed sober trying to help other alcoholics.

Through Oxford Group channels that night, he gained an introduction to Dr. Smith, a surgeon and fellow Vermonter who had vainly sought medical cures and religious help for his compulsive drinking.

Bill W. discussed with the doctor his former drinking pattern and his eventual release from compulsion.

“Bill was the first living human with whom I had ever talked who intelligently discussed my problem from actual experience,” Dr. Bob, as he became known, said later. “He talked my language.”