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# The Eighty - Three

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Area 83 Archives Newsletter

Our Area 83 history through the eyes of those before us... A legacy of gratitude

History of AA in  
Ottawa

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## History of AA in Ottawa

### PREFACE

This started out to be a history of AA in Ottawa, it has turned out to be the current opinion the authors have reached about what happened, documented wherever possible with the help of available records along with the recollections of some of the “old timers”. That this “historical record” is at times inconsistent and conflicting should be of no surprise to faithful members. The contents are, however, the best recollections and perceptions around and are told in that sense. What is important is the result— the fellowship has been the means whereby many thousands have achieved sobriety, so does it really matter if there is some uncertainty about when the first group actually started, who was there and where it was held? We must always “put principles before personalities”, and so must admit with some humility that this effort at an historical record is a first effort, not absolutely correct and no doubt has left some important factors out. It is our hope that this story will shed some light on the evolution of AA in this region and that identification with this “story” will help the understanding of the fellowship and provide a basis on which to further clarify our beginnings and our history.

### THE AUTHORS’ OPINION

It is quite common for an AA member when speaking at a meeting about “what it was like, what happened and what it is like now” to preface the talk with the qualifier “any opinions I might give are my own, not necessarily those of AA”. For a fellowship that is “not organized (Tradition 9—AA ought

Never be organized ...), what else can one say? And what better way to introduce a history which of necessity is largely anecdotal, although the authors had the good fortune to have access to considerable documentation.

History in this sense is not important because of precise dates and events, although some might disagree. What is important is how the fellowship evolved and through trial, error and testing has come to respect the twelve traditions that allow it to “help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety”.

This collection of historical recollections of the evolution of the AA fellowship in the Ottawa area attempts to place in perspective the tremendous effort that has got us to where we are today. Because people move around, parts reflect activities and stories elsewhere. Although no one disputes the origins as set out in the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous), there has been considerable debate about who was the first in Canada. Many hold that AA began in Canada in 1943 in Toronto, although there are anecdotal reports of someone in Windsor sobering up prior to that through membership in a Detroit Group, and another in Halifax through contact with the New York Office. There may well have been informal groups in these and other locations. Does it matter—probably not. What is important is that the fellowship has flourished for nearly 50 years in this country and has been a source of inspiration for thousands who have “hit bottom” to begin recovering and leading productive lives.

### Of Special Interest

See the Archivist’s Blog:  
<http://archivist.area83aa.org/>

Contributions to ‘The Eighty -  
Three’ should be sent to:  
[archivisit@area83aa.org](mailto:archivisit@area83aa.org)

## History of AA in Ottawa

### RECOLLECTIONS

In the Ottawa area, documented contact was made by Jack F. with the Toronto Group on April 19, 1945, followed by a meeting with Tom G. of the Toronto Club at the Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa on August 3, at which time it was decided to form a group in Ottawa. Jack F. and Clem K. began meeting twice weekly— Wednesday and Sunday, beginning August 7. They were joined October 29 by Roy G. The first formally recorded meeting was held October 30, 1945 in room 317, 163 Sparks Street, involving all 3 members. A fourth member, Bob H, joined November 11, 1945. At the November 28 meeting, with all members present, Tom G. from Toronto addressed the Group and three new members were introduced. The minutes from that meeting note that Tom “gave an inspiring address, and introduced the custom, since adhered to, of closing all meetings with the Lord’s Prayer”. The practice of opening meetings with a moment of silence began March 5, 1946.

Anecdotal information suggests contact also was made directly to New York around this time and that could well have been the case. Father Hurlahey, a longtime devoted friend of AA, put Roy G and \_\_\_\_\_ in touch with the New York office in November 1945.

### BEGINNINGS

Most important is that a group, called the Ottawa Group, started in the fall of 1945 with three members and by May 30 of 1946 membership had increased to 47.

There has been some discussion about which was the first group to form in Ottawa. Some argue it was Tuesday/Friday while others talk about the Cameron Avenue group. Minutes taken at the first meetings of the Ottawa Group of Alcoholics Anonymous held at 68 Cameron Avenue, show that March 5, 1946 the group decided to meet on Tuesdays and Fridays—so everyone is right.

### MINUTES TELL US...

Minutes of the early meetings track in an interesting way how meetings and customs evolved to how we now know and accept them as “normal”. It is useful to remember that, although the Ottawa Group received a circular from the New York office proposing the adoption of “AA Tradition—12 Points”, which were read to the meeting April 5, 1946, these were circulated to the membership at that time, but not adopted as official until the International Conference in June 1950. In Ottawa, the “7th Tradition” began December 16, 1945 when the group voted to establish a “Kitty”. At the same meeting Bob H. agreed to investigate a “P.O. Box in the Club’s name”. Subsequently, on December 19, 1945, Bob reported that “no P.O boxes were

available in Ottawa now, except one at \$15.00 per annum”. The meeting approved that he keep continuous contact with the Post Office and obtain a box at any price, but preferably a lower rate. In anticipation of an article in the Readers’ Digest about the fellowship, members were anxious to be ready for a deluge of questions, and approached Mr. Hurlow, Citizen writer, who volunteered to give them publicity as required after the Digest article appeared in January. Arrangements were also made to contact the Police Court and Civic Hospital for referrals.

On December 30, 1945, members held a social gathering at 68 Cameron Avenue—a fore-runner to the Alkathon?

At the January 2, 1946 meeting, Bob H reported that Box 38 had been obtained, effective January 1, at the Besserer Street Post Office, in the name of Alcoholics Anonymous, for a cost of \$6.00 per annum. The minutes noted a 6 month contract was agreed to, and \$3.00 plus 35 cents for the key “were paid from the “kitty”. It was also agreed that Jack F would notify New York, Toronto and Windsor of the organization on a club basis, and submit the P.O. box number. At that meeting it was noted that Hurlow of the Citizen was composing a draft article (subsequently published Saturday, February 23, 1946). January 9 the following advertisement was approved for the Personal Column of the Citizen, to run for 3 days. “LIQUOR may interfere with a normal mode of living. Write Alcoholics Anonymous, Ottawa Club, P.O. Box 38”. Subsequent enquiries (some routed from New York) were assigned to members for follow-up.

On January 16, it was agreed there was a need for a regular routine for meetings. This was resolved by agreeing to appoint a chairman a week in advance to plan the meeting. At the same meeting, it was approved that one member following up a prospect would be accompanied by a second member if desired. Based on experience over a two month period, the Minutes for March 5, 1946 read “It b required that two members attend any call for assistance”.

### THE FELLOWSHIP MOVES OUT ...

By the end of February, in addition to local requests for information, contacts had also been received from Kingston and North Bay. As well, contacts with the police court and hospitals had begun to produce referrals (although in one case a person arrested had committed suicide before anyone had a chance to see him”).

Beginning March 26, 1946, the Group had moved its meeting location to the Carnegie Library on Rideau Street.

Many early responses to the advertisements came from women, most of whom were enquiring so that they could help their

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their husband, but not all: the March 29, 1946 meeting was attended by two women who became members. Prior to that several women attended to “learn more to help their husbands”. Another consequence of the ads, was that they had attracted the attention of Mr. Southam, President of the Citizen, who offered full support to AA. Subsequently, similar ads were placed in the Journal, and as a consequence of the growth and publicity, interest in the program grew rapidly. Crains Ltd. printed 2,000 pamphlets on AA free and Aithens Ltd. printed 1,000 letterheads. Envelopes and second sheets cost \$15.00.

### BUSINESS AND RECOVERY

The agenda of the early meeting varied somewhat, but business items were common to all, focusing primarily on how to seek out new members and who would follow-up on each contact. As was common throughout AA in the early days, new members were “sponsored” by a regular member, have essentially begun Steps 1 and 2 before coming to the meeting. The content portion of each meeting consistently focused on the steps—either through one or more members telling his story or giving their own views on the steps. Discussion always followed. Minutes frequently noted “discussion on the importance of the 12 Steps”. Particular emphasis was given to Step 12, and John Barleycorn was often referred to as “Old John”. It was quite common for meetings to start late and run for at least 1 1/2 hours, often 2. Speakers were asked to speak at the meeting, not in Advance.

Leo B from the Montreal Group attended the April 5, 1946 meeting, following his transfer to Ottawa, and remains a member to this day. He became President of the Ottawa Group January 14, 1947.

### STEPS AND TRADITIONS

Although as noted earlier, the 12 Traditions had been circulated for discussion, but not adopted, (April 23, 1946 it was agreed that the Executive Committee discuss them and decide what to do). They none the less had begun to have an impact. On April 30, the minutes read as follows: “It was moved by Ross McC that a regular Tuesday evening chairman be appointed for a 6 month period, but, since this procedure is contrary to AA tradition, the motion was turned down”.

The May 7, 1946 meeting was attended by 22 members (6 new). For the benefit of the new members, President Jack F “gave an inspiring talk and covered the 12 Steps”. It was noted that over the previous week Jack had made 15 calls on behalf of AA. From April 5 to May 7, 34 enquiries had been received in Box 38 and “had all been attended to”.

The May 21 meeting was attended by 28 persons, including Roy D from the Metropolitan Groups of New York City. The minutes read: “The 12 Steps were thoroughly outlined and discussed at length”. Roy also attended the May 28 meeting and reported on the work and procedures of the New York groups. At the same meeting, Dr. Little from an AA group in Toronto spoke about the 12 Steps. By the end of May, 53 inquiries had been received and attended to for the month resulting in 21 new

members.

At the regular meeting July 5, 1946, there was a discussion about admittance to meetings of those who had “a few under the belt”. The minutes record “... it being generally agreed we aim to help ALL who suffer from ALCOHOL. Hence a hearty welcome is our greeting. However, it was the consensus of opinion that any member or visitor in such a condition would be given a few minutes to state his case, but under no circumstances would he be allowed to disrupt the meeting by continuous interruptions. In other words HE either conducted himself like a GENTLEMAN or he would be requested to leave”.

By that time, contact with other groups beyond New York and Toronto had begun to pick up, partly generated by transfers to and from Ottawa. By way of example, the July 16, 1946 minutes read “the chairman read two paragraphs from a letter received by Bob H. by then in Vancouver, but one of the originals of the Ottawa group. The letter gave some details about the system used by the Vancouver group in regards to attendance and slips. The September 10 meeting was attended by Mrs. W. from the Calgary AA group, and the following week the group was visited by a member from Detroit.

A motion was passed August 6, 1946 that may be of some interest. “We should adopt the method of a Roll Call, same to be taken each meeting, but instead of answering present, your answer be “YES” or “NO” according to your own conscience with regard to your having had a drink within the past week, “YES” is sobriety, “NO” is you have had a drink”. For a short time after, this was the “feature” of the evening, often drawing smiles from members. Given that the group had only formed the previous October with 3 members, it is interesting to reflect that anyone with 2 or so months of sobriety at that time was well on their way to being a true “old-timer”. This practice of a roll call, however, only lasted about 5 weeks and was abolished September 17 because “we should not embarrass any member by having him admit HE HAS HAD A DRINK”.

In October of 1946 the Group again moved to new quarters in Room 24 of the Justice Building. In addition to welcoming new members from other cities, and in turn Ottawa members visiting other groups, while travelling themselves, several Ottawa members attended the Toronto anniversary December 8, 1946 signifying the attraction of the growing Fellowship.

### THE ALCATHON?

How times change but stay the same! The December 24, 1946 minutes recorded “refreshments were then served by the ladies and a most enjoyable time was spent comparing other Christmas Eves, and the members exchanging greetings. Before closing Allen T. moved a hearty vote of thanks to the ladies for their thoughtfulness in bringing refreshments and all responded with a warm handclapping”. In effect, this was the second forerunner to the Alcathon.

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On January 28, 1947, a lone member of AA from Sault Ste Marie was in town and introduced to the group. At the next meeting February 4 President Leo B gave a brief talk on attendance, stressing the importance of each and everyone making it a point in his or her life to attend meetings. On February 11 1947 Leo asked Roy G and Jack F, both original members to speak. Roy reviewed the 12 Steps and Jack drew attention to “the 3 days—yesterday, today and tomorrow, stressing the importance of 24 hour sobriety, one day at a time”. At the March 4 meeting, Leo called upon Mrs. A. to speak, and with four months of sobriety “she was emphatic in her statements and belief in the Higher Power and in our programme”. Cy F spoke at the March 18 meeting, stressing “the importance of daily meditation and was earnest in his faith in the Higher Power”. At the April 8 meeting, Jack F noted that he had made his first 12 Step call 54 weeks earlier, and since then had spoken to over 150 people about drinking problems and the AA program.

April 22, 1947 was somewhat of a turning point in terms of meeting discipline. Chairman Leo B, the minutes read, “Opened the meeting promptly at 8:30 pm and announced we were trying new arrangement for our meetings (i.e. commence promptly at 8:30 pm, and try for a closing time of 9:30 pm. This would leave the members with 30 minutes for a general chat and get together. It will also help the new man, and should result in a more friendly spirit toward one another—this proved very satisfactory, as many favorable comment were overheard)”.

The first “open” meeting of AA Ottawa Group was held in the RCMP Band Room May 13, 1947. Approximately 100 persons attended, including several clergy and out of town visitors from Hull, Arnprior, Renfrew and Smith Falls. At the June 10 meeting, members listened to a record of “Bill’s Talk”. On July 15 Joe Q spoke of his visit to Pembroke and the establishment of an AA group there. Jack F recommended reading the article titled “Hitting Bottom” that had appeared in the Citizen, to those attending the July 22 meeting.

On August 1, 1947 the Group moved, this time to the RCMP Parade Room, and on August 13 to the Church Hall on Lees Avenue off Main Street. Beginning September 5, 1947 the Ottawa Group met regularly, Tuesdays and Fridays at St Patrick’s College on Echo Drive.

By the fall of 1947 the group had found new quarters at St. Patrick’s College on Echo Drive. At the October 27 meeting, the minutes note that “A letter was read by the Secretary from the new Thursday Night Group asking for cooperation etc. This was enthusiastically endorsed by all the members present”.

For the banquet November 1, 1947, special invitations and tickets were sent to Reverend Father Pourpore, Father Dowsett, reporters from the Citizen, Journal and Le Droit, Dr. Beattie, Frank Ryan and CFRA.

A quote of some interest in the minutes of the meeting held December 5, 1947—“There was a small number of members present, owing no doubt to the stormy weather, or perhaps they stayed in to listen to the Joe Louis fight”. Either the weather improved or the fight was over by December 9, because 32 members attended the meeting that night. On December 26, President Allen T informed the members he had celebrated his second dry Christmas.

### MOVING OUT TO CORNWALL

Through a motion December 30, 1947 an ad was placed in the personal column of the Cornwall newspaper for a one month

period, with the hope that this would lead to the formation of a group there. On January 6, 1948, approval was given to arrange a trip to Toronto to hear Bill speak, but at the January 9 meeting, it was agreed that anyone planning to go should make their own arrangements. Subsequently, several members who attended the Toronto meeting, reported on their visit, noting that “Bill has planned to hold meetings for members representing each section of the country”.

### RESENTMENTS

On February 17, the President “spoke of the resentments existing among the members of the Ottawa group, and asked them to get together and straighten them out before they harm the good fellowship of the group. He warned the members that the only problem of the group was to deal with the alcoholic problem”. Tuesday, February 24, 1948 was the last written record available from the Ottawa group. The minutes noted that the Sunday afternoon group planned to have an open meeting, with the guest speaker being “the eminent Dr John of 1170 in Toronto.

### ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

The first birthday party of AA in Ottawa was celebrated at a birthday dinner on November 2, 1946 at the YMCA: dinner for 35 cents. For several years thereafter the anniversary was celebrated in late October or early November by a dinner. More specifically:

- Second Anniversary Banquet, Saturday, November 1, 1947. Church Hall, Blessed Sacrament Church: tickets \$1.50.
- Third Annual Dinner, AA Ottawa Groups, October 30, 1948. Church Hall, Blessed Sacrament Church (printed menu and guest speakers from White Plains, NY and Montreal).
- Fourth Annual Dinner, AA Ottawa Groups, October 29, 1949. St James United Church, 2nd Avenue. Guest speaker Grapevine Editor from New York, Al S. with Entertainment provided by soloist Enid P. accompanied by Wilfred C.

### EASTERN ONTARIO CONFERENCE

The first Eastern Ontario Conference was held in the Chateau Laurier Hotel on November 1 and 2, 1952. The format was similar to what we know today—out of town speakers and panels covering such topics as group problems (loners, small isolated groups, young peoples groups, and groups too large), sponsorship, the woman alcoholic, and Alanon Family Groups, God as we understand Him. Speakers and Panelists were from Ottawa, Eastern Ontario, New York City, Montreal and Toronto.

### THE “50’S”

Groups have proliferated since the modest beginnings in 1945. By the 1950’s several groups were in existence, including a Sunday Morning meeting at the YMCA, and evening meetings at the YMCA and over Bowles Lunch on Rideau Street, Monday evening at St Georges Hall, Gloucester and Metcalfe Street; Tuesday and Friday at Mazonod Hall, 88 Main Street; Wednesday at Guigues School, Murray Street (French); Thursday at St Dominic’s Auditorium, 33 Eccles Street (Social night on the last Thursday of each month—this meeting was begun as the original groups had grown, by Leo B in 1947); and Saturday evening, Beginners Class at the YMCA.