

HISTORY OF A.A. IN S.A.

In 1946 Reader's Digest published an article, extracted from the Grapevine, entitled "*My Return From The Half-world Of Alcoholism*". This story is responsible for two separate enquiries from South African alcoholics.

The first was **Solomon M**, a black translator at the Johannesburg Law Courts, living in Alexandra Township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. His last bender had brought him and his family to the brink of starvation. Hung-over and wandering the streets of his hometown, he passes an overflowing rubbish bin in which lay *the* copy of The Reader's Digest. Having nothing better to do, he picks it up, pages through it and finds an article on an organization called "**Alcoholics Anonymous**". This appeared to be the answer to his prayers. At last Solomon had found something that had given him hope. He hurries back to his one-roomed hovel and immediately writes down the address given in the article. He soon had a reply, including a pamphlet simply called "AA", containing extracts from the AA Big Book, which enables him to acquire and maintain the sobriety which the article had inspired. Although Solomon the 'Loner' is the first member of AA in South Africa, he never starts a group but remains sober for many years.

The second player to enter this drama was **Sister Maxwell**, a Catholic sister and nurse who maintained an alcoholic ward at the Johannesburg General Hospital. Quite by chance, a deserter from a US warship that had called in at Cape Town, had arrived at the hospital during World War II, drunk as a lord and with a suitcase, inside of which was nothing but AA literature from the US. It was this material the good sister held on to and used to form her own style of AA. Although not an alcoholics, she had deep empathy for alcoholics and accepted without conflict the newish concept that it is a disease. She treated the problem as such and in the process helped several dozen alcoholics to sobriety on this basis.

Arthur S. a successful stockbroker, during one of his periodic visits to a nursing home, was idly paging through an old copy of The Reader's Digest and came upon an article on alcoholism. Since he had more than a passing interest in the topic, he avidly read the article and was so impressed that he decided to find out more, especially about this organization called **Alcoholics Anonymous**, which featured prominently in the story.

He wrote to the head office of the association in New York and promptly received a pamphlet called "AA", which consisted of extracts from a larger work, "Alcoholics Anonymous". Meanwhile, a member of the clergy, **Reverend Peacock**, set about arranging a meeting one Friday night at the Johannesburg Public Library for the benefit of Arthur, who had been identified by Sister Maxwell, as an alcoholic who desperately wanted recovery. Word was passed around to known alcoholics and Arthur was to chair the meeting with the Reverend as first speaker. On the night in question, the Reverend found Arthur, if not drunkenly incapacitated, struggling to maintain an even keel. He introduced the Reverend thus: "*Ladies ... and ... gentlemen, you see in me an example of what alcohol does to a man. Don't be like me. Over to Peacock*".

Thus was Arthur's first step. However, he instinctively knew that, in order to succeed at establishing some kind of AA in SA, he must find other alcoholics to carry the message to. He enlisted the assistance of 6 people: Reverend Doctor JB Webb, whose respectability alone augured well for the budding project, Reverend AA Kidwell, for many years well-known as an enthusiastic member of the Temperance Union and a fiery teetotaler, a respected psychiatrist, a Mr Murray – Head of Johannesburg's Social Services, Miss Donovan, Lady Almoner at the Johannesburg General Hospital, who suggested the final member of the team, Sister Maxwell, whose contribution to the establishment of AA in Johannesburg was generally conceded to be the greatest. AA's New York office later put Solomon in touch with Arthur, and they had regular meetings where the two men discussed their common problem.

1946

On 18 October, 1946, Arthur S. became the first in SA to form an AA group, The Johannesburg Group, which met at the Spes Bona Club, in central Johannesburg.

Remember, during this time, the Twelve Traditions were in the process of being written, so Arthur had no guidelines to follow in the establishment and running of a group and meetings. Many of the drunks that Arthur encountered obviously needed material assistance as well as spiritual guidance as solutions to their drinking problem.

Arthur sensed that these 2 types of assistance should not mix, so he established the Spes Bona Club, handing it over to his nonalcoholic team to run, while he concentrated on AA 12th step work. While this distinction was clear in his mind, it wasn't to those he was attempting to assist, and AA became known as somewhat of an 'easy touch'. Notwithstanding those challenges, there were those inevitable few, for whom recovery was paramount – *Ronnie, Ray, and Charles*, to mention only a few, prove stalwarts in the lean days to come. In the first few months, hundreds received help in one form or another. However, this initial phase ended with Arthur's tragic death from pneumonia. With his departure, financial assistance dried up, and AA assumed its true role of helping only those who had a sincere desire to stop drinking. Membership dwindled until there was practically no one left. It was during this period that Sister Maxwell proved her worth.

Nothing kept her from attending, and leading, almost deserted meetings. It can truly be said, that it was almost entirely due to this friend of AA, herself not an alcoholic, that the group survived the first year. Without her constant and loving care, the few remaining, who honestly wanted an answer to their problem, would have found it much more difficult.

Meanwhile, in a dormitory mining town in Springs, Johannesburg, a third alcoholic was on the verge of despair. Valentine Dillon (Val D), a mining assayer, out of desperation, approached a local clergyman for help. However, nothing the clergyman said to him was helpful, and he was about to leave when the parson handed him a book and advised him to read it. It is the book that the clergyman had ordered from an American organization he had heard of – ***Alcoholics Anonymous***. This is perhaps one of the earliest South African examples of one of those miraculous AA 'coincidences' that Val goes to the one person in Africa who has an AA Big Book. Val had to read it just once to find the complete answer to his problem.

3 November, Val D, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in South Africa, gets sober. Then he finds out that a group is meeting in Johannesburg.

The first meeting he attended came as a shock. And could have had disastrous results for him had he not already studied the principles outlined in AA's Big Book. As it happened, he visited the group shortly after Arthur's death and things were not going too well. Sister Maxwell is on leave, and Val is the only sober person at the meeting. The meeting started late because some of the less-intoxicated members were scouring the area's bars for that evening's chairman.

1947

November, Robert McGregor (Bob M), arrived in Durban to take up duty as the American Consul. 3 November 1947, Cape Town: 25-year old Pat F, an a severe bender, was leaning against a hedge in Main Rd, Wynberg in Cape Town, when he encountered a friend, a woman called Jess, who recognizing his distress and the causes thereof, reached out to him and eventually persuaded him to accompany her to write a letter to an American organization she knew called Alcoholics Anonymous.

On 16 November, the Springs Group is formed by Val D.

December 1947: in Durban, an American ship's captain requested Bob M to discharge a seaman on a charge of alcoholism. Bob places the seaman in a nursing home in Hillary and visited him frequently, eventually leaving his AA Big Book with the man.

31 December: having continued his bender through Christmas, Pat F at last returned home to find he had received a reply from AA New York. Included was the AA pamphlet and he discovered he was not unique, and that here was the basis upon which to live a new life; he, however, disposed of the better part of yet another bottle on New Year's Day.

1948

The AA World Group Directory listed *Solomon* and *Pat F* as **South African Loners**.

1 January 1948, Cape Town : upon setting out to continue his drinking bout, Pat F saw the hedge upon which he was leaning when Jess found him two months earlier and it sparked off a train of thoughts, leading him to make the vital decision to quit drinking. He found Jess, told her he has had his last drink, and embarked upon an excruciating withdrawal from alcohol.

3 January, Pat F starts the Wynberg group – with a membership of one – the third AA group in the country.

January, Durban : Bob M's secretary tells him that there is a man who insists on seeing him, will not disclose why and refuses to leave until Bob agrees to see him. When Bob meets the man, he introduces himself as an alcoholic and shows Bob the AA Big Book Bob had given away to the seaman. The visitor had gone to visit an inmate – also an alcoholic – at the nursing home, where he had looked in the Big Book and seen Bob's name. Figuring that Bob McGregor and the American consul are one and the same, he had arrived to satisfy his curiosity. Bob shows the visitor – Robbie – into his office. Robbie is a small man with a fire in his eyes as he relates to Bob his attempts to reach AA in Johannesburg. Robbie had been referred to Sister Maxwell of the Johannesburg General Hospital by Reverend Joe Webb and was one of her successes, and he had been sober some time before he walked into Bob's office.

Robbie absolutely insists that the two men form an AA group, offering his home as a meeting place. Bob is somewhat reluctant, being sober for only a year and feeling his position in the public eye threatened. Robbie insists, however, calling back every two weeks or so, telling Bob that he'd found one or two others that needed AA.

September, Durban: Bob M helps to draft an advertisement for the evening paper publicizing Durban's first AA meeting.

17 September, 1948, Durban's first AA meeting takes place at 262 Chelmsford Rd.

Because Robbie's house is relatively inaccessible, only 5 alcoholics turn up – Alf, Eric, Bob H, and a man called Steve, who later translated the Twelve Steps into Afrikaans. These 5 were to become regulars and, with only an AA Big Book for literature and little meeting format, Bob M steers the first meetings, which turn into lively discussion. Relapses are a continual problem and none of the hospitals take alcoholics. The Matron at Chelmsford Nursing Home agrees to admit alcoholics until one runs amuck and creates bedlam with a fire extinguisher. Thereafter, alcoholics are admitted only if an AA member in good standing stays with the patient for the night. There is no money save for the little collected at meetings, and the meetings are prey to the usual freeloaders who think that AA is possibly a place where free liquor is dispensed to the needy.

Word spreads like wildfire in Natal (KZN), stretching the capacity of the membership. Bob H moves in with Robbie and his wife and the two of them spend most evenings on 12-Step calls. Owen S in Pietermaritzburg begs them to come to Towns Hill Prison, there to start a group. Bob M and three others make the journey, including Bob H who has just come off a relapse. On the way, he throws up, but, a successful meeting was had by all. ***A prison group is started.***

1949

Val D starts "The Tendril", a meeting-in-print that precedes the present-day "Regmaker".

In Natal, the Administrator, Mr Shepstone, hears of AA's efforts and Bob M happens to mention the problems they are having in terms of lack of facilities for alcoholics at hospitals run by the Provincial Government. Mr Shepstone's brother had died of alcoholism and so *he facilitates the establishment of an alcoholic ward at Durban's Addington Hospital.*

The Durban group outgrows Robbie's place and it is moved to the City Hall for Friday night meetings. The improved transport accessibility vastly improves attendance at these meetings. Bob M undertakes to approach magistrates, and jailers are consequently instructed to admit AA members for the purpose of speaking to prisoners during visiting hours. A week after one such talk, one of the magistrates calls Bob M to his house to speak to an alcoholic, whereupon the magistrate confesses that he, himself is the alcoholic and wants help. The magistrate remains sober and attends meetings.

The Town Clerk of Durban expresses reservations to AA concerning the presence of then-called non-white participants at AA meetings in an apartheid-era society so, for a year or so, the meeting is moved to the Blind Centre at St Dunstan's whereafter, without AA pressure, the Durban Group is invited to return to City Hall.

Val D travels to Fort Napier Mental Hospital to hold a meeting attended by a man called Liebe, who, after being discharged starts the Pietermaritzburg Group.

In Natal, a meticulously-worded newspaper editorial goes wrong when it is printed with the headline "Ex-drunks Cure Drunks" and causing a flood of mostly unwanted phonecalls. After a two-hour meeting debating the crisis – during which a pair of cavorting marmosets provide the only comic relief – it is eventually decided to turn the situation over to God. The following Thursday meeting attracts a fair percentage of newcomers.

Following Durban Group's first anniversary, the Pietermaritzburg Group continues to be nursed and groups open up at Margate, then Pinetown.

Subsequent to a windfall of 25 pounds, ***Durban is able to open a small office at Shelton House, West Street, complete with a vitally-needed telephone, with a lady called Enid G as office administrator.***

1950

Val D holds a meeting at the Zonderwater Work Colony after receiving a letter from a prisoner Rotary in Kimberly contacted him, and a group is started there after Val addresses a public meeting.

John H, whom Val sobered up, is transferred to Welkom where he starts up the Welkom Group.

21 September: Pretoria Group is formed.

Through "The Tendril", Toc H in Port Elizabeth contacts Val, and the postmaster of the city invites Val down to sober up his postmen. Val took up the invitation and in

November, the Port Elizabeth Group is formed.

Members from the established groups in SA, some 30 to 40 groups, meet in Durban for the first South African Conference / Convention. One of the positive things to come out of the meeting is the decision to establish a Service and Information Committee (SIC). Pretoria offers to host the office of the Committee.

Bloemfontein Group founded.

Pat F, Cape Town's AA founder, and Jess, his hedgerow savior, are married. Seventy five sober Cape Town alcoholics attend the wedding. Robbie, co-founder of the Durban group, and his wife Mona transfer to Cape Town.

1952

Marty Mann from NCA and AA World Services visits South Africa to cement relationships between South Africa's AA and General Services and to see about establishing a branch of the Alcoholic Foundation in Johannesburg.

The South African National Council on Alcoholism (SANCA) is a direct outgrowth of her visit.

Frank F of North Hollywood conducts the first American California-style AA meeting in South Africa.

1953

The Alano Club, Pretoria, is launched.

1954

Al-Anon is started in Johannesburg central.

Robbie, co-founder of the Durban Group, helps his wife Mona set up two babywear shops and the marriage then falls apart. He drinks again and returns to Durban. Thereafter, he is institutionalized many times. Finally, dried out, he finds employment in Estcourt at the Plough Hotel where he has to take liquor down from barrels and fill bottles. His comment is that he'd emptied many bottles in his time and never dreamt that he would end up filling them.

5 June: Rosebank Group is founded in Johannesburg.

1957

October: the New York AA General Service Office publishes "AA Comes of Age". Although guised as a 3-day diary of the 1955 Convention, it amounts to an entire history of AA up to 1955. There are 80 groups in South Africa.

1958

There is an unsuccessful attempt to form an AA publishing company in South Africa.

1959

There are 111 AA groups in South Africa.

1960

Val D tours South Africa to raise money for the translation of the AA Big Book into Afrikaans. November : the AA South Africa "Headquarters Newsletter" describes the national AA office as a 'little sanctuary open to all members ...its purpose is to provide a quiet place to which all members of AA may withdraw for a while, to seek peace and quietness, or maybe guidance or help.' The office is open from 07.00 to 23.00.

1962

The first edition of the Afrikaans translation of the AA Big Book is published. Bill W waives royalties on this translation, expressing the wish that AA in southern Africa should become as independent as possible.

AA South Africa's General Service Office records a financial deficit of ZAR401, caused mainly by unprecedented expansion of the movement.

1962

AA South Africa's Pretoria groups advise they can no longer provide the voluntary manpower required to meet the growing needs of the fast-expanding fellowship and the public and it is moved to Johannesburg. December: the General Service Newsletter numbers the total groups in South Africa to be 157, growth of 96% from 1957, 21 new groups listed in a six-month period to October.

1964

A part-time employee is engaged to run the South African AA Service and Information Committee office. In open defiance of government security authorities, mixed-race meetings take place – thinly disguised as “alcoholics”, security forces attend meetings but elect to do nothing, somewhat unusual tolerance for the time.

April: the General Service Office’s 32-page newsletter – a prelude to The Regmaker meeting-in-print – features recovery stories from members and also reports that a total of 26 996 books and pamphlets were sold in the previous year, made up of 581 books, 23 553 locally-printed pamphlets and 2 862 imported pamphlets. The publication costs 10 cents a copy.

The question of registering the service activities of AA in South Africa as a non-profit company in terms of the Companies Act is broached. However, when the Articles and Memorandum are put to Conference in Port Elizabeth, the group conscience rejects the proposal, much to the chagrin and disappointment of the proposers.

17 October, Brakpan Group formed.

1965

March: 150 groups in South Africa.

At an AA dance, members of “non-white race” attend dressed as waiters and waitresses to avoid confrontation with apartheid-era security forces.

At the Southern African Convention in East London, a resolution is passed asking each group to donate ZAR2 per month toward the running of the General Service Office.

The Pinetown Group is formed, and a women’s group, called the Eve Group, is started in Durban.

The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions costs ZAR3.

1966

May : in the “AA News”, a South African GSO publication, an attendee at the 1966 Convention in Windhoek, then South West Africa, reports on ‘what a lovely Alano Club they have, with its gay floral curtained windows, comfortable seating and long tea bar’ .

The film ‘Bill’s Own Story’ is screened.

7 May: the Mayor of Parys declares a meeting open at the Supper Room.

1967

The Krugersdorp group is established.

1968

Natal has 19 groups.

17 May: The Coronationville Group is formed.

The 44-page South African National Directory lists 25 groups in the Cape, 31 groups in Natal, 11 groups in the Free State, 59 groups in the Transvaal, and 11 groups in South West Africa, Rhodesia, Botswana, Malawi, and Zambia.

1969

AA in South Africa has its first meeting of a Board of Trustees and newly-structured Conference, held in Bloemfontein. It is at this Conference that South Africa elects its first two World Service Meeting Delegates.

Val D serves as Public Information secretary on the General Service Board of AA South Africa.

31 May to 1 June: first Thekwini Round-up takes place at Botha's Hill, Natal.

December: Oribi Group is formed.

1970

"Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" is translated into Afrikaans and published.

1971

24th January: William Griffith Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, 36 years sober, died. Val D. and Glen B. speak at a "Bill W Memorial meeting at the AKTV Hall.

Eastern Suburbs Group in Johannesburg is formed.

1974

01 March: AA holds meeting with the Executive Committee of the Federal Council of the Medical Association of South Africa – a directive is sent out to all local branches of the Association to include AA participation in the sphere of their activities.

27 October: Yeoville Group, now Norwood, is formed.

4-8 November, the First South African National Conference on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence is held in Cape Town – delegates from many countries extol the virtues of AA and outline its inclusion in a diverse range of therapies; a paper on AA, "Recovery and Service", is read by John B of Cape Town on behalf of AA and it is well-received – Professor Root (USA) requests permission to use the material for her work with social workers.

1975

Dr John L Norris ("Dr Jack"), non-alcoholic Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Alcoholics Anonymous North America visits South Africa. He addresses a public meeting in Johannesburg, primarily for the benefit of professions.

15 November: the Eastern Province Service Committee holds its first meeting of the Area Service Institutions Committee with a view to carrying the message to alcoholics in institutions and hospitals.

AA in South Africa's GSO publishes "AA in SA" to replace the General Service Newsletter.

1976

30 March: the Cape Times publishes an article entitled "Alcoholism and Salvation", independently acknowledging AA's contribution to meaningful recovery from alcoholism

27 October: Yeoville's Al-anon group starts.

1977

Neville R, “elder statesman” of South African AA, submits a dissertation entitled, ‘The Effects of Alcohol Abuse by Parents on the Achievements and Adjustments of their School-going Children’ to the Faculty of Education, University of Witwatersrand, leaning heavily on his experience of AA recovery.

AA is in 92 countries with 1 000 000 members – South Africa has 210 groups and 5000 members.

In a series of lectures entitled “Alcoholism: Disease of Denial” given at the University of Cape Town Summer School, Dr Jack Hirschowitz, Johan C, a recovering alcoholic in AA, gives a lecture on the ‘how’ of alcoholism treatment, entitled “Alcoholism – Acceptance or Rejection”, detailing the experiences of his recovery from alcoholism in AA and the principles and guidelines upon which it functions.

1978

3 June: Eldorado Park Group is founded.

August: AA attends a meeting called by the Port Elizabeth Provincial Hospital, a result of which was the opening up of the Evatt ward for suffering alcoholics. AA convened a special committee and the ward is manned on a roster basis.

The “Just For Today” card is published in Xhosa, with the approval of AA World Services.

9 July: Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa registered as a company not having a share capital, the conference membership being made up of 27 delegates, 11 general service board trustees, 4 nonalcoholic trustees and 2 executive committee members on the General Service Board, also, 2 World Service Delegates.

1980

In South Africa, there are 190 groups representing 4000 members.

2 April: second translation of the AA Big Book in Afrikaans is published. This is publicized, complete with photo, in Die Burger newspaper when a copy is handed to State President Marais Viljoen by AA Trustee Rex Wilson.

1981

Soweto Group, south of Johannesburg, holds its first annual AA Rally.

28 January: “Fair Lady” magazine publishes an anonymous account of a woman’s downward spiral into alcoholic oblivion and consequent recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.

South Africa’s German group has its first meeting.

7 May: The Star newspaper in Johannesburg carries an article by Michael Simpson entitled “Helping Alcoholics Escape Nightmare Life”, quoting John H of the Plantation Group at the South African National Convention held in Benoni.

19 June: Eikestadnuus newspaper, Stellenbosch (heart of the Winelands), carries a full-page advertisement, including a bold presentation of the ‘20 Questions’, for AA.

Val D donates his collection of AA literature and correspondence to South African GSO Archives.

1983

3 November: Val D, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in South Africa, celebrates 37 years of sobriety at the Springs Group.

1984

25 May: Ladies Discussion group, Yeoville, Johannesburg, is formed.

1985

227 AA groups in South Africa.

28 May: a story is printed in the Star newspaper – the story of Val D's recovery and the early days of AA. As the article says, Val D's will states that his anonymity could be broken in relationship to the telling of the AA story.

5 July: Scope magazine publishes a 4-page story entitled "Keeping the Demon at Bay" about the history of Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States.

A New Freedom

1st Monday Step meeting – June 1985

1986

First edition of the South African Service Manual is printed.

1987

Kensington Group, Johannesburg, is formed.

15 February: an AA spokesman welcomes the idea of alcoholic content displayed on medicines in an article in the Sunday Tribune newspaper.

A New Freedom

1st Saturday evening meeting – 31/1/1987

1 December: Southern Group is formed.

1988

3 December: Katlehong Group is formed.

Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa's Articles of Association from this year limit membership of the company to 12 trustees, 8 of which are alcoholics and the balance, non-alcoholics. Alcoholic trustees shall serve for a 4-year term and non-alcoholic trustees for not more than 3 successive 3-year terms. Two alcoholic trustees shall retire annually.

1990

28 April: Sunday Night Workshop, Yeoville, is formed.

1991

There are 282 AA groups in South Africa.

1992

Lenasia Group, southern Johannesburg, holds its first rally.

October: a special edition of Regmaker, South Africa's meeting-in-print, is published on the occasion of AA in South Africa's 50th anniversary.

The Industry Responsible for Alcohol Use (ARA) was established by the major producers of alcohol beverages in South Africa to coordinate and direct activities which counter and reduce the abuse of their products.

Lenasia Group, southern Johannesburg, holds its first rally. – the group was started in 1974. The 1st rally was held in September of the same year.

1996

October: a special edition of Regmaker, South Africa's meeting-in-print, is published on the occasion of AA in South Africa's 50th anniversary. – this was printed in 1996. AA in South Africa started in 1946. 50 years later is 1996.

Happy Destiny – 1st lunch time meeting in the South and 2nd in Johannesburg – July 1996.

1999

Richard Bush from AA World Services is present at the National Conference when an "Into Africa" initiative is mooted.

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2000

At the National Conference, attendees are informed that the "Into Africa" initiative will encompass sub-Saharan Africa and will evolve into a zonal meeting by 2003.

The Saturday Argus newspaper features an AA article by AA South Africa member Owen C commenting on AA's 65th worldwide anniversary.

2004

The South African Delegates' Conference made the following changes to the Conference structure: non-alcoholic trustees reduced to three; regional trustees increased to 5, and a new regional area created.

May: AA South Africa has 8 area general service offices and 314 groups.

The Zulu translation of the Big Book is published.

