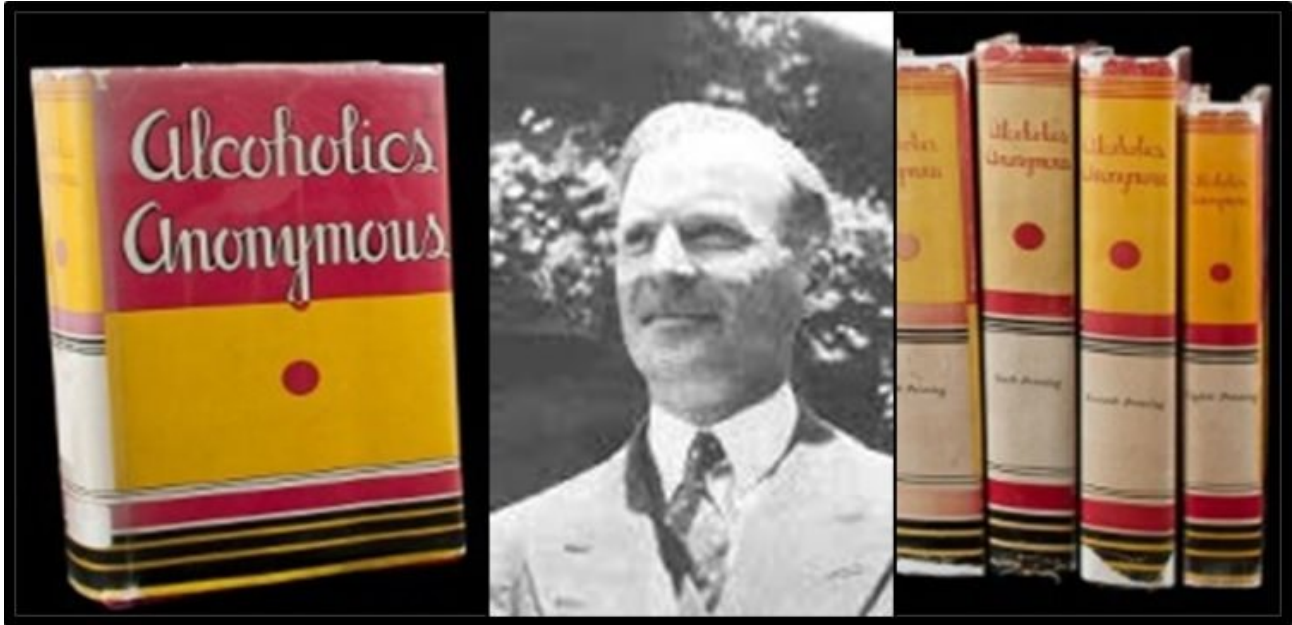


# Henry Parkhurst

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By **bob k**

Throughout the second half of 1938, the Honor Dealers' little office was abuzz with activity. The hubbub involved neither the sale of auto polish, nor the organization of a buying co-op, but the production of the text *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Two fallen, forty-something entrepreneurs viewed their new venture as an opportunity to help potentially hundreds of thousands, or more, alcoholics who were suffering as they once had. And in doing so, they dreamed of solving their own economic woes.

Earlier in the year, visions of paid missionaries and alcoholic hospitals, financed by Rockefeller millions, had vaporized when John. D. agreed with subordinate Albert Scott's cautioning query, "Won't money spoil this thing?" Fancied top management positions for the two men vanished. The book was their remaining hope of large profits, and social significance.

The would-be publishing magnates were William Griffith Wilson and Henry Giffen Parkhurst. Their secretary Ruth Hock, later famously reported that AA's Big Book "wouldn't have been written without Bill, and it wouldn't have been published without Hank". (Pass It On, p. 195)

Loyalty to her memory of these two men may have been what prompted her to add that she did not "believe that either man 'expected to make a fortune.' The motive, always, was to help the Fellowship; their original idea was to begin giving the books away as soon as possible". (Pass It On, p. 195) Ruth's ingenuous remarks are somewhat countered by the history of the events.

## Summer in Akron

As the summer of 1935 drew to a close, Bill Wilson was reluctant to return to New York. He and Dr. Bob had established a small core of sober alcoholics, and had “planted the seed” with others. His proxy battle had not gone well, and dreams of a management position that would resuscitate his career had collapsed in crushing disappointment, there was safety and strength amidst his new friends.

He had taken constructive action in May, in the Mayflower Hotel lobby, when he was panicked by a temptation to drink. The seeking out of another drunk to “work with” had led to the sobriety of Akron proctologist, Dr. Bob Smith. In turning his focus to the needs of the problem-laden physician, Bill had saved himself.

It was with sadness, and some trepidation that Bill Wilson returned to New York, on August 26, 1935.

## **Back in New York**

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In New York, Bill had a support base in the Oxford folk, but “it was clear almost from the beginning that Bill Wilson was not well-suited to be an Oxford Group member... He never shared in, or had much sympathy for, the Oxford Group’s goals”. (Bill W., Francis Hartigan, p. 65) Back when he had been approached by Ebby with the news of his salvation through the evangelicals, Bill “vaguely remembered having heard of them, but it was his impression that they were a bunch of Christers, rich folks mostly, all very chic and high-minded”. (Bill W., Robert Thomsen, p. 188)

He was less than impressed with the Oxford’s “reformed drunks”. He saw Shep Cornell as a socialite. “As a drunk he was sure Cornell was a pantywaist, a man who had probably gone wild one night on too many sherries at a Junior League cotillion.” (Thomsen, p. 189)

The Big Book promises that God “will show you how to create the fellowship you crave”. (BB, p. 164) Wilson seems to have chosen to get help instead from his old friend Dr. Silkworth who “was risking his medical reputation and career in allowing Bill to roam the corridor of Towns”. (Not-God, Ernest Kurtz, p. 43) Two of these clients, Henry Parkhurst and John Fitzhugh Mayo, got sober and joined Bill in his efforts.

Although it as yet had no name, AA now had a group in New York City.

## **Standard Oil of New Jersey**

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Very little is known about the early life of Henry Giffen Parkhurst beyond his being born in Marion, Iowa on March 13, 1895. He is frequently described as an ex-athlete, a former football player, but whether he played college ball, semi-pro, or just high school, we are left to wonder. We do know that the handsome redhead is said to have been “able to produce a good idea a minute for business. He had been a Standard Oil of New Jersey executive who was fired because of his drinking”. (Henry G. Parkhurst, Mike O.) At one point, Parkhurst and Jim Burwell had worked together in Louisiana.

There are conflicting opinions as to whether Hank actually wrote "To Employers", but he definitely is the "one time assistant manager of a corporation department employing sixty-six hundred men". (BB, p. 136) He is also, most likely, the "case of pathological mental deterioration" (BB, p. xxxi) who was almost unrecognizable a year later.

It is known that when Bill talked to Hank at Towns Hospital, it was Hank's tenth time there, the first several sponsored by Standard Oil, in attempts to rehabilitate their otherwise valuable employee. By the last trip, there was no employer.

Hank is variously described as being an agnostic, or an "avowed atheist". His First Edition story was "The Unbeliever", and though he seemed willing to cooperate in prayer, and the like, it is clear that he never accepted the notion of a personal God. "He and Jim B. led the fight against too much talk of God in the 12 steps." (Biography: The Unbeliever, silkworth.net)

The "unbeliever" did embrace sobriety, unquestionably. "Fitz, Hank and Bill were three extraordinarily healthy males... whose ambitions had been derailed. Now they had a new outlet and they brought to it a wonderful young exuberance." (Thomsen, p. 236)

## **Honor Dealers**

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Honor Dealers seems to have been started for the purpose of extracting revenge on his former employer, Standard Oil of New Jersey. Hank's small New Jersey office soon became the operating base of what would become Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill joined Hank at Honor Dealers, but not much work was done, as they were too consumed with "the work".

"Before long, Bill and Hank began to have difficulty paying both Ruth's salary and the rent on the office. Ruth went without pay for a while, but the landlord... eventually forced them out, and they moved to a smaller office... Until 1939, Bill's major headquarters was in Newark." (Pass it On, pp. 192-193)

In the autumn of 1937, Hank and Bill decided that rich people should finance their grand schemes of bringing a solution to America's alcohol problem. "The two of them immediately set to work approaching every rich man and every charitable foundation in Manhattan... After six weeks... not one cent (was) raised." (Thomsen, p. 245)

The rich folk had disagreed.

An introduction to "Rockefeller's people" spawned great dreams of literature, paid missionaries, and alcoholic hospitals, but the "world's richest man" thought the group should be self-supporting, and a mere pittance was granted.

## **The Book**

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"Bill began work on the book in March or April of 1938.... Bill soon completed his personal story and the chapter called 'There Is a Solution.' These... were Multilithed immediately to be used in a money-raising campaign in the summer of 1938." (Pass It On, p. 193) An offer from Eugene

Exman of Harper & Brothers prompted the idea in the two entrepreneurs that self-publishing would be more advantageous.

“Hank, whom Bill described as ‘one of the most terrific power-drivers’ he had ever met, convinced him they should bypass the trustees and sell shares in their own company to publish the book themselves...Finally, even the trustees could not keep Bill and Hank from charging ahead on the new venture.” (Pass It On, p. 194)

Years later, AA history has an innocent Bill Wilson being “dragged along” in Hank’s whirlwind schemes, but Bill Wilson had not fallen off a turnip truck in Nebraska – he was a Wall Street wheeler-dealer. His own “authorized” biographer wrote, “Bill had a thousand ideas. The stalled motor of his imagination had started to turn again; the old power drive was coming back full force”. (Thomsen, pp. 240-241)

## **Works Publishing Inc.**

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If there is anything more embarrassing to Bill Wilson than LSD experimentation, Ouija boards, séances, marital infidelity and possible sex addiction, it is his role in Works Publishing Inc. By the original deal, Bill owned a third of the book as did Hank.

Eugene Exman, of Harper & Brothers, had “agreed, quite contrary to his own interest, that a society like ours ought to control and publish its own literature”. (Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, p. 155) What transpired was substantially different. Bill and Hank formed a publishing company, and 67% of the book that Exman thought should be owned by the Fellowship, was owned by two men, two men insistently trying to sell the remaining 33% to supply working capital for the completion of the writing project.

AA would not own its own book at all, but the Alcoholic Foundation would receive the same royalties from Works Publishing that would have been paid by Harper & Brothers.

The histories describe Hank as the uber-aggressor in this project, Bill Wilson later regretting “this early haste, as ownership of the Works Publishing shares eventually became a sharply controversial issue”. (Pass It On, p. 195) Well – DUH!!! Bill was “convinced by Hank,” in the later retelling, to bypass the trustees who wanted the Harper book deal. The reluctance of the others alcoholics to purchase stock in a book not yet written, was overcome in large part by a story of interest by the then enormously popular Reader’s Digest. The words of historian Ernie Kurtz are somewhat cynical – “A *presumably promised* (my italics)... supportive article in The Reader’s Digest did not come to be.” (Not-God, Ernest Kurtz, p. 76)

Stock was sold (\$5,000 worth) and a loan from Charles Towns, initially for \$2,500, then \$1,500 more, provided the funding for Hank and Bill to finish the book. All of these funds were dissipated in advances to Hank and Bill, salary to Ruth Hock, rent for the Honor Dealers’ office space and other poorly accounted-for miscellaneous expenditures. Once the book had been written and edited, there remained only enough to pay Cornwall Press only a small deposit towards the first printing order of 5,000.

## Let's Save Everybody Who Has \$60

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Bill Wilson detaches himself somewhat from the decision to retail the book at the ridiculously high 1939 price of \$3.50 (about \$60 in 2014 dollars). "Some members had insisted on a \$1.00 book... They had turned deaf ears to Henry's plea that we must make something on the deal or else we could never operate a headquarters office, much less pay off the shareholders. But Henry finally won through..." (AACOA, p. 170) Kurtz says, "Stockholders Wilson and Hank P. argued for a price of \$3.50". (Not-God, p. 76)

Of course, Hank hadn't sold dreams of paying office expenses to the investors. His charts delineated the "per share" profits, based on various sales projections, up to the million that might occur in the first few years. The million sales number was reached, but some thirty years beyond his optimistic forecasts.

Today, in spite of copyright issues and the onslaught of paperless technologies, AA's Big Book sells at a rate of one million copies per year. Thirty-five million copies have been sold; total revenues have reached approximately 200 million dollars. Holders of 33% of that enterprise, and their heirs, would have fared extremely well.

One can be forgiven for thinking with all of Hank's aggressiveness and ambition, that poor Bill Wilson, owner of a 33.3% interest, was just being dragged along in the slipstream of the determined "power driver." Of course, Wilson had swum with the big fishes of New York's financial center, and he had been through law school. He was not some "Candide-esque" naif.

"Hank's son said... that his father and Bill both expected to make a million dollars from the project." (Pass It On, p. 195) Bill "did hope that income from the book would enable him and a few others to become full-time workers for the Fellowship". (Pass It On, p. 194)

In the end, Hank, fueled by a variety of resentments, started drinking again, most likely around Labor Day of 1939. "Part of Hank's unhappiness, Ruth added, involved her; 'Hank and I were interested in each other. I had at one time seriously considered marrying him.' When Ruth finally decided not to, Hank blamed Bill." (Pass It On, p. 228)

Only a few months earlier, Hank and his wife, Kathleen, had taken in the homeless Wilsons when they were finally evicted from Clinton St. in April.

## Does Not Play Well With Others

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"Throughout his life Bill Wilson provoked passionate feelings in men and women. Sometimes men who had been close to him turned on him; sometimes there were women involved. Hank... began to rail against Bill, accusing him of all kinds of things, including inducing Ruth Hock and keeping her from marrying him. Soon Hank started to drink again." (My Name Is Bill, Susan Cheever, pp. 163-164)

"Male friends and colleagues like Hank Parkhurst and Tom Powers stormed off after working with him." (Cheever, p. 206)

## A New Deal

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At the time of the “self-publishing” deal, Hank sold the New York members on the idea, and Bill convinced Dr. Bob to go along but Smith’s fear of the reaction of the Akronites left the Ohioans in the dark as to the details of the Works ownership. As the financials came to light, there was outrage, and in early 1940, Bill accepted a new deal from the Alcoholic Foundation.

He and Hank were to surrender their shares to the Alcoholic Foundation. The other share buyers were to be reimbursed what they had invested. When a Rockefeller loan financed this buyout, most were delighted to be “breaking even”, as the book was not selling well. “But Hank resisted all their pleas to turn over his one-third ownership in Works Publishing to the foundation.” (Pass It On, pp. 235-236)

One day, Hank turned up at the new Vesey St. office. Whether he was drunk, and taken advantage of, as his son claimed later, or just “completely broke and very shaky”, Hank was persuaded to sign a release in exchange for being paid \$200 for some office furniture that had previously been his.

“Hank’s son said that Hank always felt he had been treated badly. He thought Bill had made a deal with the foundation that excluded Hank from any future share of the book’s profits.” (Pass It On, p. 236)

Bill’s royalty on the Big Book “eventually became substantial and provided Bill and Lois a lifetime income”. (Pass It On, p. 236) By the time of Lois’s death in 1989, royalties paid to the Wilsons totaled 10 million dollars, and Lois’s legatees have received an additional 9 million.

Once more, Bill’s partner had received \$200.

## Resentment

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Hank’s life continued to be one of bitterness, and with no happy ending. In Cleveland, he found a sympathetic ear in Clarence Snyder, who was no fan of Bill Wilson. They supported themselves with some small business-type, marketing ventures. Nothing productive came of their rabble-rousing against the founder.

*Hank never recovered completely, although there were some occasional, brief periods of sobriety...*

*Hank and Kathleen divorced in 1939, and Hank married at least two other women. One of the women he married and divorced was a sister-in-law of Cleveland AA pioneer, Clarence Snyder. He later married an oil heiress from a wealthy Houston family...*

*(He) died on January 18, 1954 at Mercy Hospital in Pennington, New Jersey, within two months of his 59th birthday. (Mike O.)*



There is much wisdom in AA's Big Book, not the least of which is – "It is plain that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness. To the precise extent that we permit these, do we squander the hours that might have been worth while." (BB, p. 66)

That these resentments are warranted seems not to reduce their destructive power. To some extent, our friend Hank was poorly treated, but relentless clinging to his bitterness, and a return to the bottle, is "on him". He forgot the lessons of a book he had a great deal to do with creating.

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## About the Author, Bob K

Bob K. lives in the Metropolitan Toronto area, and has been a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous for 24 years, and an out-of-the-closet atheist for that entire time. He has been a regular contributor to the AAgnostica website for almost 5 years, and in January, 2015, published "[Key Players in AA History](#)" In 2013, he cofounded the Whitby Freethinkers meeting.

