

HISTORY of INDIANAPOLIS A.A

From several sources we have attempted to weave a new, but connected pattern of how AA was started here in Indianapolis and identify the crucial people who constitute the threads.

To quote a description of the man who founded AA in Indpls.

“... the boy who put AA on the Indiana map. I have always considered him the number 3 man in A.A., a statement I can boldly make after having been closely associated with Dr. Bob and Bill W. And there are others who think the same as I
“

Later is included the letter from Dean B in its entirety.

Who was this spectacular man who had such an affect on our lives? No doubt AA would have found its way to Indianapolis. But the Historical evidence seems to indicate this is how AA actually came together in Indianapolis.

Who was this man? His name was Doherty S. Other names that you will hear are “J.D’
JD was J.D. H. He was AA # 8 and lived in Akron, Ohio. His wife was from Evansville originally, and they relocated to Evansville where her family was still residing as this story unfolds.

Another essential man in this unfolding episode is Irving M. from Cleveland. Also in Cleveland was Clarence S, the “Home Brewmeister “in the Big Book. He was the dynamo who pioneered the printed word – pamphlets, advertisements and newspaper articles. In Clarence S’s train of ‘pigeons’ or sponsees was Irving Myerson. In fact, he introduced himself to Dohr S as “I am from Cleveland and I’ve come here to help you get to work.

The Liberty magazine article had been published and Dohr S saw this article and contacted NY and the Alcoholic Foundation. They might have passed the Twelfth Step opportunity to Irwin M., who traveled to Indianapolis on business. There is some evidence that Dohr S contacted Cleveland directly in response to one of the “Home Brewmeisters” advertisements.

Irving M. is sometimes referred to as Erwin. His last name was M. The long time Indianapolis Saturday Evening group still honors him. His final residence was on the West coast.

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September 30, 1991, Mary K. W* of our Intergroup Office received and carefully logged here and in the World Wide Archives an eye-opening memoir sent by Laura, the daughter of Tom S. He was the older brother of Dohr S.

During this narrative please reflect on “ The Family After”.{Chap 9 in our ‘Big Book’ }

“ This is the tale of two brothers: Tom, my father, and Doherty, my uncle Dohr. They grew up in a large Irish Catholic family. Tom was the oldest. Three sisters came along and then Doherty. He was followed by a little brother who died young and two little sisters.

Tom and Dohr were the brothers and, although there was an eight year difference in age, there was a strong bond between them.

Their families were close too. For years my cousins and I spent almost as much time in each other’s houses as we did in our own.

As an uncle, Dohr was affectionate, full of fun and steady as a rock. That’s also the way he was with his own children, his brother and sisters and his many friends. It seems never to have occurred to anybody except his wife that Dohr had any problems.

Suddenly, in the spring Of 1936, when his daughter and I were in our last year of boarding school, the blow fell. Uncle Dohr was seriously ill with a damaged liver. He had to stop drinking. His life depended upon it. He couldn’t do it.

He went to Menningers to be treated for alcoholism. He stayed a couple of months, but left without being discharged and resumed what was now clearly compulsive, destructive drinking.

Practically nobody was prepared for this. A devoutly religious, devoted family man, and a pillar of the community. Dohr was known to drink convivially, but his friends never saw him drunk. Some of them received the news of his illness with stark disbelief. My father told me of one encounter with an old friend, who came up to him on the street and said, “ Tom, please tell me, what is the matter with Dohr? “

Father answered, “He’s an alcoholic.” The man gave him a filthy look, turned on his heel and walked away without a word. In telling me about this, my father said:

I had decided that concealment was neither wise nor possible, but this came as a shock. Still, I had to understand it. Aunt Dorothy had been telling me for years that Dohr was drinking too much, but I just shrugged it off on the theory that all

* Full name used w/ permission . Confirming letter on file @ the Indpls. Central office

wives think their husbands drink too much. I was with him frequently, and I never saw the slightest evidence.

What to do? Since voluntary commitment had not worked, as a desperate last resort, the family obtained a court order declaring Uncle Dohr to be incompetent and placing him under guardianship. Father took the position that it was better for a man to feel anger and resentment toward his brother than toward his wife, a point of view Aunt Dorothy gratefully accepted, and so Father became his guardian.

I missed most of this because I was away at college, but during my first Christmas vacation, father left over New Year's to drive Uncle Dohr up to Sacred Heart Hospital in Milwaukee. When he got home, he said it was the hardest thing he had ever to do.

This time, Dohr stayed approximately two years. He was then released conditionally under the care of an attendant. They took up Residence at the family's country place, "The Tangle" (116th St., Carmel, IN). Dohr was able to occupy himself with a lot of physical work which he enjoyed. We all went out and spent time there as we always had. The attendant managed to keep almost out of sight, but the atmosphere was strained.

I went back to college in the fall, so I wasn't on hand for the next act in the drama. Dohr asked to be released from guardianship. Tom consulted the doctors who said, "If you release your brother from guardianship he will be dead in six months." He, therefore, refused to grant the release, and Dohr took him to court. From what my aunts have told me, it was a dramatic, emotional confrontation. In the end the judge ruled in favor of the plaintiff, Dohr – at which point the two brothers walked across the courtroom and shook hands. This was on January 17, 1940; almost exactly three years after the guardianship had been established.

Dohr didn't die in six months. He lived for thirteen years. While in the hospital, he had seen an ad about a new organization in Cleveland called Alcoholics Anonymous. On the day of his release he wrote to them. A Mr. M. appeared at his front door and said "I'm from Cleveland. I've come to help you get to work." That's how AA got started in Indianapolis.

It was slow difficult going. They began with one recruit, Fred. Uncle Dohr and Aunt Dorothy had Fred's whole family over for dinner time after time. Dohr worked unstintingly. As soon as there was an actual group in Indianapolis, he began branching out. "Doctor Bob and the Good Old Timers" reports, "Doherty S. is responsible for more groups in Indiana than anybody. He'd get a lone wolf from one town together with another one for Sunday breakfast..." Two people were enough to constitute a group and to call in a speaker from Ohio. The Big Book was now available.

By June of 1940, when I graduated from college and came back to Indianapolis to live, AA, though small, was a going concern. Uncle Dohr was busy and very much his old self. A few years after that, I remember my father saying, “ Everything is all right, but there is still constraint between us – because of the guardianship. I’m enormously proud of him, but I don’t think he’ll ever believe it.”

Some years later, Father suffered a heart attack and spent three weeks in the hospital. No visitors were allowed except for my sister and me, but every single day produced another wonderful note from Dohr. I have always believed he never understood what a talented writer he was.

The night that Father died, Uncle Dohr got to the hospital almost as soon as I did. The nurses greeted him with, “ Oh, you’re the one who wrote those notes. Every day I would read them to Mr. S and he would say, ‘ that’s my brother. That’s Doherty. He’s the most useful man in town.’ “

Finally, Dohr knew how Tom felt about him.

Charles Weldon M, the first Chairman of the Indianapolis Intergroup, received a letter postmarked October 28, 1955. Charlie presented this letter and the envelope to the Indianapolis Intergroup office and it has been treasured. The letter was sent by Dean L. B of the Indiana State Committee. This was the group that functioned to elect and support our Indiana AA Delegate at that time. We now refer to it as the Area 23 Committee.

Here is the complete Dean B statement containing the quote we opened with.

“ Early in the spring of 1940, when a certain Indianapolis man was concluding almost three years of sobriety, brought about largely by what is believed to have been individual will power, there came to his attention an article in Liberty magazine. That story dealt with an organization known as Alcoholics Anonymous and was the first national publicity given a group, which had come into being in 1935, when two men met in Akron, Ohio.

Our fellow citizen was interested in what he read and sent to New York for literature, which he learned, was available. He read what he received, without much further interest, but later in the year was called upon personally by a gentleman who said he was Irwin S. M, a member of the Alcoholic group in Cleveland. Hope was revived in the breast of our friend and or about October 28, 1940, he interested another sufferer in the program. So was born Alcoholic Anonymous in Indianapolis. The group, which still meets on Saturday nights, was named in honor of the Cleveland man, who fanned into a blaze the smouldering fire of an honest and sincere desire to be happily sober.

Mr. M is now a resident on the west coast, but Mr. S ceased his earthly work on Jan 17, 1953 at the age of 62 years.

J.D. H, who now resides in Akron, Ohio, where he made his original contact as the eighth man in A.A. and who was introduced to Mr. S by Mr. M, recently wrote an Indianapolis friend as follows: "S and I corresponded weekly, often talked on the telephone and were of mutual help. However, the growth of A.A. in Indiana is due almost entirely to S. While a few groups in the tri-state area and elsewhere stem from Evansville, S is really the boy who put A.A. on the Indiana map. I have always considered him the number 3 man in A.A., a statement I can boldly make after having been closely associated with Dr. Bob and Bill W. And there are others, who think the same as I. "

The start of more groups than can be recorded here, not only in Indiana but elsewhere, was due to the extensive and prolonged efforts of Mr. S. Included are those with an original impetus from the Indiana Home, an Indianapolis non-profit hospital for male alcoholics, in which he had a deep interest and where A.A. influence is still strong.

Dohr was instrumental in forming the Indiana Home. This is the forerunner to Fairbanks, now a facility on the campus of Community Hospital North. Significantly Dorherty S's Indiana Home preceded the world renowned Hazelden Facility in Minnesota.

Here are some of the other firsts for Indianapolis A.A.

- Indianapolis had an Intergroup office before New York City. Originally a Club at 124 West Georgia Street, opened on April 3, 1948. Harry L was the first Central Office Manager.
- We were the first in the nation to be incorporated. The attorney who affected this for us is still a very committed member of our Indianapolis Fellowship. Other Intergroups were able to follow our model.
- We were the pioneers of using the Telephone Answering Service to extend our availability. It is an opportunity for those who reach out for help. They can do it here in Indianapolis 24/7 for 52 weeks every year. This was launched in January of 1943.
- The introduction of Tokens or Medallions might have started here. We have the substantiating correspondence over the signature of the Archivist of AA World Wide Services Office.
- We might have been the second group to establish an A.A. meeting in a prison. Late in 1942 or early 1943 we initiated A.A. in the Putnamville Facility. The first AA

meeting in prison was San Quentin, CA-promoted by the Warden Clinton Duffy. A recent re-release article is available from AA Archives via a Grapevine re-print.

Back to Dohr S and Indianapolis. At the Indianapolis Intergroup office there is a two page typed copy of a “ Brief History of A.A. in Indiana” stored in the Archives of A.A. World Services in NYC. It references a talk late in 1954 - early 1955.

A.A. was first started in Evansville. J.D. H was A.A. # 8 and joined our program in October 1938. He and Mrs. H visited her family in Evansville. They then moved to Evansville from Akron. Later they relocated to Akron. These Geographical moves are pertinent.

The first A.A. meeting in Indiana was in Evansville at 420 South Denby Street, J.D.’s home, around April or May 1940.

This History references that, following the release of the Liberty Magazine article in the Spring of 1940, someone resembling Dohr S contacted N.Y. for information but “...experienced little reaction.”

Later in 1940 Irwin M visited Dohr. He took Dohr to Evansville to meet J.D.H. “ Hope was revived in Doherty’s breast ... he soon interested another sufferer in the program on or about October 28, 1940.” This is considered the first A.A. meeting in Indianapolis.

The History continues with some other data and statistics, such as from 1940 the two original Indiana meetings had expanded to four cities that each of these cities had several groups and by 1955 Indiana had 116 groups and three loners. Total members were 1582. Presently we have over 400 meetings just in the Greater Indianapolis Area.

Another early meeting site was at the Rauh (“Rah”) Memorial Library. It was razed and became the site of our Children’s Museum @ 30th Street between Meridian and Illinois Street. Father John Doe, the first declared Catholic Priest in A.A., and who later became the prolific writer, went to his first meeting at the Rauh Memorial Library , another A.A. meeting started by Dohr Sheerin and his successfully recovered alcoholics.

But that is another story and another History.

History compiled by Archives Committee, Indianapolis Intergroup March 2006 ©