

AA Grapevine, June 1974

Dr. Bob

*A journey into the past
in search of more intimate knowledge
of our co-founder*



AFTER CONJECTURING idly for a number of years, but with an increasing desire and *need* to know, this nosy member of the Fellowship decided recently to go forth and discover the Real Dr. Bob.

Through the written word, but more effectively through personal contact, I had come to know something of Bill W. beyond his basic drunkalog. But the good doctor had died before my time in AA, and my opportunity to study him closely had been limited.

So I began to explore the story-behind-the-story of the Akron surgeon who has been a vital influence in my life. I discovered that nobody can discover the "real" anybody.

The late Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith is not the easiest subject for research. His fellow alumnus at prestigious St. Johnsbury (Vt.) Academy, Calvin Coolidge, had departed the campus to become eventually the

widely photographed and documented thirtieth President of the United States — whereas Dr. Bob (to quote Bill, his fellow Green Mountain Boy and co-founder of AA) had "risen to *anonymous* world renown."

Moreover, if the six-foot-two, rugged-framed, bespectacled New Englander with the broad accent and broader smile had not died (in 1950), he would be ninety-four years old now, and there are few Vermont or Ohio contemporaries surviving to reminisce.

I did, though, come up with some clues.

There is, for instance, daughter Suzanne's reaction to her adoptive father's career as an active and later as a recovering alcoholic.

Sue, who was a teen-ager when Dr. Bob and Bill founded AA in 1935, is now employed in the library at Kent State University and lives in Akron a mile and a half from her

late parents' long-time home at 855 Ardmore Avenue. She was married to the late Ernie G., AA's member Number Four, whom she described as producer of "the first slip in AA."

"They didn't quite know what to do with him," explained Sue (or "Tee," her father's nickname for her.) "I never *did* find out what to do with him." The marriage ended in divorce.

Concerning the impact upon the family of Dr. Bob's alcoholism, Sue told this interviewer that "things were pretty rough before he got into AA. But after that, things were extra nice. When it came to a sense of humor, he *had* it — although my brother is a close second. The whole family had good laughs, and it was really a happy time. Of course," Sue added, "things don't always stay that way, due to boy friends and growing up. But as I look back, it was great."

The brother Sue referred to is

Robert R. Smith, fifty-four, who recently installed on his slightly accident-prone wife Betty's car special license plates reading "OOOOPS"! Like father, like son.

The Smiths (they have two sons and two daughters) live in Nocona, Tex., where Bob is office manager of the Jack Mercer Well Servicing Company, treasurer of the Oil Well Servicing Contractors Association (of the United States and Canada), a member of the board of Nocona Hospital, and a former member of the Nocona School Board.

Betty Smith joyfully told this questioner of her first encounter with the senior Smiths: "I flew with my Bob to Akron to meet his parents before our marriage — almost thirty years ago. I had never heard of AA. We went to a meeting that night, and I heard my first AA talk. I was almost overwhelmed — my father had a problem, and my mother and I were pouring it down the sink. I said to Dad Smith, This is such a marvelous program. You must be so proud!"

"I tell you truly, that was a no-no. He looked at me with his steely eyes till half of me melted right there, and he said, 'It is nothing I have done — I have merely been *used*.'

"I went home waving the AA book at my mother and said, 'We have the answer.'" Betty's father (now deceased) later was co-founder of a group in Clovis, N.M., where he and the group prospered.

Robert R. was sixteen when his father and Bill W. founded the Fellowship. Because "young" Bob was unavoidably preoccupied with a business problem, wife Betty spoke for him (and for herself) in discussing that period.

"I loved both Mom and Dad Smith very deeply (though I still had both my parents that I was also in love with). When they would come to see us, Dad Smith and I had a thing going about gin rummy. We would shout ugly words at each other, and we both had a marvelous time. His sense of humor was always at peak. Also, I do not know how many times he came up to me and slipped me a fifty and said, 'This is just between us — spend it any way you like.' I tried once not to take it, and that was a big mistake.

"We *all* had talks about profound things. You know, Dad read for at least two hours every evening. Most unusual to have the great humor with the profundities. Or is it?

"One of Dad's favorite hobbies was driving sleek sports cars. And he liked very good clothes and wore them. He had a fondness for diamonds and other precious gems and wore them and bought them for Mom. When she died, he gave me a beautiful diamond that was hers, and I will cherish it forever."

The Smiths in Texas and Sister Sue in Akron agree that Dr. Bob was a skilled swimmer, sailor, fisherman, tennis player, and card shark. "My Bob has told me how many sets

of tennis they played together at one time and of his dad's extraordinary fitness," Betty Smith recalled. "He played bridge with the best of them. We used to play with Mom and Dad, and they would teach us some of the finer points — they were *both* very good."

Dr. Bob was "very tall and fast — always took off at a run," Sue remembered. "Liked to play cards, travel, read — he wasn't idle much of the time. We often used to take long hikes in the woods with Dad — my brother and myself and a dog. We had great times like that. He loved to take his car down a dirt road to see where it went.

"Dad played cards every Monday night for as long as I can remember, and he always 'broke even,'" said Sue. "We never actually knew how he came out, which is the way he wanted it. He also would buy things for himself and put them in his dresser drawers and then come up with 'I found it in my dresser' — so your guess is as good as mine as to the outcome of his card-game finances."

On another point, too, there is no dispute. In competition, Dr. Bob's Number Two and Number Three goals were recreation and physical fitness. His Number One goal? *Victory*. This he demanded of himself.

I checked in one morning at the weathered, 123-year-old yellow frame St. Johnsbury House, a hotel at the hub of Dr. Bob's Northeastern Vermont hometown. There, an old-time

member of the local AA group, Joe C., sat me down for a chat on a lobby sofa he said had often been used by the Smiths on annual back-home visits.

Later, I walked one block west of the hotel to a nineteenth-century white clapboard residence occupied for the last thirty-three years by Mr. and Mrs. Roland T. La Perle. They served me coffee on the broad veranda that fronts the Central and Summer Streets sides of the house, and told me they were pleased to learn that a co-founder of AA had been born in a front bedroom above us.

In the course of a childhood outdoor comradeship, Bob and his much older foster sister, Amanda (later nicknamed "Aunt Nancy") Northrup, swam and sailed together in Sleepers River on St. Johnsbury's southwest outskirts, and at the Smith summer spot on Lake Champlain. After one of her visits with the Smiths, Amanda received from ten-year-old Bob a note on lined notebook paper:

St Johnsbury Vt
May 4 1890

Dear Miss Northrop

I have been meaning to write you every day but have been putting it off till now. I thank you very much for sending me the pictures and book. I have enjoyed the book very much and hope you will read it when you come up here again. I went over to Mr Harrington and played with Rover the dog. They have a bull



calf and he said he would sell it to me for a dollar. Mama says if there's any thing we need it is a bull. I went fishing Wednesday and caught about ten fish and a lizard. I have got the lizard in an pan of water and I expect to put him in alcohol. Pa got me a new bridle and saddle blanket and I ride every day. I enjoy it very much. Come up here as soon as you can.

With much love
Robert H Smith

In later years, Miss Northrup was a history professor at Hunter College in New York City.

After my visit at the house where Dr. Bob was born, I strolled two blocks to the two-story, red-brick Summer Street School, attended by our surgeon-to-be between 1885 and 1894. It was in the corridors and classrooms of this elementary school that Bob first publicly demonstrated his quiet waywardness and rebellion against strict parental discipline. To schoolmates, he was known as "Rob," and later, to Bill W., as "Smithy." His teachers called him "Rob-ert!"

"Rob-ert's" father, Judge Walter Perrin Smith of the Caledonia County (Vt.) Probate Court, was also a state's attorney, member of the state

legislature, superintendent of St. Johnsbury schools, director of the Merchants National Bank, and president of the Passumpsic Savings Bank.

But most significantly, in a sense, he was active in the towering, gray stone North Congregational Church and a "great light" in its Sunday school for forty years. He insisted that his son attend five services weekly, including Wednesday-night prayer meetings — until, that is, Bob grew old enough to rebel and quit church-going for two-score years.

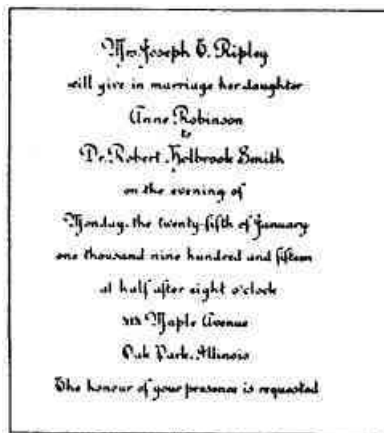
Daughter Sue strongly supports the theory that Dr. Bob's strict upbringing was at least in part responsible for his stubborn resistance to authority.

"Dad appeared to be very stern," she said. "But he wasn't at all, except when he felt he really *had* to be. He was quite a softy and was extremely concerned for his patients. As a father, he was the best. He was loving and at the same time would want to be obeyed. He was fun to be with. I enjoyed many an evening playing cards and had as good a time with him as I have ever had with anyone. Kids don't usually say that about their parents. He also gave us a certain amount of freedom. As I look back, I see he was ahead of his time, or didn't want us to go through what *he* did when he was a child and had to go to bed at five o'clock in the evening — that sort of thing."

I returned to Main Street and ex-

amined the impressive ten-building complex that serves St. Johnsbury Academy, established in 1842 with the philanthropic aid of the local Fairbanks (platform-scale) brothers as an independent secondary school "for the intellectual, moral, and religious training of boys and girls in Northeastern Vermont." It was at a dance in the gym here in 1898, his senior year, that Dr. Bob was introduced to Anne Robinson Ripley of Moline, Ill., by Anne's weekend hostess and fellow Wellesley College undergraduate, Laila McNeil.

After a whirlwind courtship of seventeen years, Bob and his "pleasantly plump frail" were married at



the home of Anne's mother, Mrs. Joseph Pierce Ripley, in Oak Park, Ill., "at half after eight o'clock" on January 25, 1915. "I don't know why the delay," said Sue, "but there was a lot of schooling and interning to do. Mother taught school for some of that time, I've heard."

Following his graduation from the academy, Bob studied and drank beer for four years at Dartmouth College, where he received a B.A. degree in 1902; worked and remained afloat at various jobs for two years; entered the University of Michigan as a premedical student and binge drinker in 1905; later matriculated at Rush Medical College in Chicago as a junior; won an MD degree with outstanding grades there in 1910 and obtained a coveted two-year internship at Akron City Hospital. Two years later, he opened an office for private practice in Akron's Second National Bank Building. By 1935 (as Bill relates the story in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*), Dr. Bob had been dropped from the hospital staff, and his practice was nearly gone.

Mrs. Henrietta McBrayer Buckler Seiberling, as an active follower of the Oxford movement, introduced the dry Bill W. to the still-drinking Dr. Bob in her Akron gatehouse residence on the day after Mother's Day in 1935. She attested to the surgeon's humility and trust in a Higher Power: "One day in our dell, shortly before Bob and Bill met, the doctor led an Oxford Group meeting and chose as his subject a passage from the First Book of Samuel, Chapter 3, Verse 10: 'And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy *servant* heareth.'"

To prove that Dr. Bob was ap-

proaching a level of desperation and degradation below which *he* would be unwilling to descend, Mrs. Seiberling quoted him as confessing, at another Oxford session early in 1935: "I am going to tell you something which may cost me my profession. I am a silent drinker, and I can't stop."

Henrietta, nicknamed "Henri" by Dr. Bob, is a native of Kentucky and the widowed daughter-in-law of the late Frank A. Seiberling, founder and first president of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company. She now lives in New York City and, although a nonalcoholic, remains close to AA.

Much has previously been published to confirm the fact of Dr. Bob's humility and strong spiritual faith. To this, his daughter-in-law, Betty Smith, has added: "My favorite remark by Dad was in a talk. He said, 'Christ said, "Of myself I am nothing. My help cometh from my Father in Heaven." Then how about you and me? Prayer is vital.'"

"Dad suspected that he had cancer five years before it was diagnosed," said Betty. "I know of his suspicions because he told me of them. When he made his last talk, in Cleveland [at the first International Convention of AA], he had the diagnosis. We left directly after the meeting, and Bob, Dad, and I went for a tour of New England — stopping, of course, in St. Johnsbury. We all had a great time in spite of Dad's illness. His faith was superb."

It was a little more than four months after that "Keep it simple" talk that Dr. Bob remarked to his attendant in Akron City Hospital, "I think this is it." Then he died, of prostate cancer, on November 16, 1950.

At the funeral in St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Akron, the Reverend Walter F. Tunks (through whom Bill W., identifying himself as "a rum hound from New York," had arranged his original meeting with Dr. Bob) noted in a eulogy the doctor's strong conviction that "no man need stay the way he is — with God's help, he can throw off the chains of any enslaving habit and be free again to be what God wants him to be."

In St. Johnsbury — roughly 100 miles northeast of Bill W.'s birthplace, East Dorset, Vt. — the Fellowship Group meets on Wednesday nights, with an average attendance of thirty-five, in a second-floor club-room above the Northern Auto Supply, Inc., shop at 26 Railroad Street. The site is in an industrial section, facing the yard of the St. Johnsbury & Lamoille Railroad, a few miles west of the New Hampshire border.

Late in 1946, Dr. Bob spoke at the first-anniversary meeting of the group, Ed G. recalled. Ed was a newcomer to the program when he heard that talk by an eleven-year man, and he is still very active in the group.

Despite a heart ailment and increasing blindness, Anne Smith remained Dr. Bob's "silent partner"

in Alcoholics Anonymous during her seven years of illness, before she died of pneumonia at the age of sixty-eight on June 1, 1949. Lois W., Bill's widow, recalled that "Annie was clear-thinking and, although a nonalcoholic, wisely counseled many members of the Fellowship."

Dr. Bob's identity as a co-founder of AA was disclosed to the general public in published reports of Anne's death. In an editorial accompanying its obituary, the Akron *Beacon Journal* wrote, "It seems a pity Mrs. Smith's wonderful work could not have received the public's recognition while she still lived, [but] she must have known of the gratitude in the hearts of the many persons she had helped.... Akron should always be proud of the AA movement which was born here and proud of the fine woman who did so much to foster that movement."

Speaking for "young" Bob and herself, Betty Smith said that "Mom was a rock. She was a person that others leaned upon. She was a person of compassion, patience, and courage. Not only did she endure the rocky times, but after the program was started and they had alcoholics living in the house, she was once chased by a fellow with a butcher knife."

Two final notes: Robert R. imbibes socially, but has not developed a drinking problem; Sue has acquired no compulsion and drinks socially "if I want to."

J. W. S., New Hampshire