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*Grapevine's 35th Anniversary***How It Was . . .***A visit with Bill's "little sister"*

THE STORY begins in 1945. "One late spring evening in Montreal, where I was working, my telephone rang," Helen Evans (nonalcoholic) told the Grapevine Editorial Board. "It was Bill, long-distance all the way from New York.

"I didn't know him too well," she said of AA's co-founder Bill W. "I'd met him several times and had been to Bedford Hills, New York, visiting him and Lois on vacations, after they moved into Stepping Stones. He had often said to me, 'Little sister, you come down here and stay with us, because we've got something here you can use, too.'" Helen is Bill's half sister, offspring of their father's second marriage. Undoubtedly, the "something" Bill offered to share was the AA way of life.

And that is how the Grapevine got its very first paid employee, thirty-four years ago. It was hardly nepotism, however. The GV could pay only \$40 per month, so there were no other applicants whose arms could be twisted to take the job.

Some months ago, Helen was

visiting Lois W., Bill's widow, at Stepping Stones, and the Grapevine staff invited Helen to share her reminiscences of the magazine's earliest days with members of its Editorial Board (see the May 1979 issue).

"Bill said," Helen continued, "that the Grapevine needed a paid clerk, that he personally needed someone to type some things for him, and that Marty M— needed someone to fill in as her secretary while the regular had surgery.

"I wonder now if he didn't dig up those jobs just to get me to New York. He knew, you see, I was a very scared little girl, the mousy one who sat in the corner and never opened her mouth, terrified of everybody," said the petite, modish, auburn-haired woman, who now has owned and operated a fashionable clothing business near Tucson, Ariz., for some years.

Her blue eyes sparkle behind glasses when she talks; that evening, her face was continually lighted with a smile. It would be difficult now to believe that this charming, assured

businesswoman could ever have been a retiring scaredy-cat.

"So Bill talked me into it," said Helen, whose arrival at the Grapevine (then housed in a tiny apartment not far from Grand Central Station) almost coincided with the magazine's first birthday.

"I met this wonderful staff, all volunteers, and they were so very excited. Up on the bulletin board, they had put their very first renewal order—and they had not yet even asked for renewals!

"I said, 'It's marvelous, but what do you do with it now?'"

"They suddenly got very quiet and just looked at each other. Finally, one spoke up. 'Well, gee, we don't know. That's something you're supposed to figure out.'"

"Then I discovered how they kept their subscription records. For each subscriber, there were three index cards, but I cannot for the life of me remember why three. One had the name and address; another had the date the subscription expired—those were filed by dates. But I've no idea what the third was!" Helen admitted.

"Then I found that the first Grapevine treasurer, a Greenwich Villager named Abbot ('Bud') T—, who was a real dear, kept all the other records in his shirt pocket—on tiny little pieces of paper! Anything we needed to know about finances or paper orders, we'd ask Bud, and he'd dig out these tiny scraps with figures all over them.

"All those index cards haunted



Minetta Lane, an early location of the Grapevine

me. I used to take them home—that is, to Bedford Hills—in the evenings and have them spread all over my bed and the floor, trying to get them sorted out.

"But then we got a new treasurer, Dick S—. He and I decided we could get all that information on one card per subscriber. We did—but it was a huge card. We had to have special metal drawers made for filing them, and they flopped all over the place. But the real horror of those cards came later.

"I went to see my folks in British Columbia, on vacation, and while I was away, the office had to be moved. You see, this was wartime, and apartments were extremely hard to get, and it was against the law to use one for an office. When the landlord found we didn't live there, he said the Grapevine had to get out.

"When I got back from vacation, there were all the Grapevine office

equipment and all those cards—packed in big boxes and dumped in a heap on the floor of the basement of an old church building at 41st Street and Ninth Avenue, which was then a clubhouse for AAs. We couldn't get a telephone—wartime shortage—so we had to use a pay phone on the corner for all Grapevine calls," Grapevine's employee No. 1 recalled with a chuckle.

"One day, the clubhouse secretary came rushing down to our basement and said, 'Call this number. It's the FBI, and you've just got to call them!'" "

Helen said she decided it was too late to call any government office (it was after 4:00 PM!), but when she met Bill at Grand Central to catch the train to Bedford Hills, she told him. Neither he nor she could figure out any reason at all that the FBI should want to hear from the Grapevine. Bill called the next morning, however, and discovered the call was really from a group of *former* FBI agents, who put out a newsletter called *The Grapevine*. They said they would sue if the AA publication did not change its name, but Bill and the "ink-stained wretches" who then were the editorial staff of the magazine (see *AA Comes of Age*) talked it over among themselves, and decided just to change the name to the AA Grapevine.

"Wouldn't those FBIs look silly if they sued a bunch of drunks over two initials?" Helen asked. "So



Our first salaried employee, Helen, and our current editorial secretary, Naomi—both non-alcoholics

that's how we got our present name."

Two more problems faced the Grapevine by 1946, Helen said. One was anonymity. When checks from subscribers first came in, they were endorsed by a stamp reading "The AA Grapevine." But not for long. One or two outraged readers cussed out the staff for "breaking my anonymity." Quickly, arrangements were made with the bank. Today, although the account is, properly, in the name of The AA Grapevine, Inc., the endorsement stamp just says "Grapevine."

In those early days, even the office was anonymous, with no "Grapevine" or "AA" displayed outside. So Helen was mystified when a big Irish cop knocked on the door and said, "Did you know your sign fell down?"

"What do you mean?" she asked the policeman.

"Come see for yourself," he said,

grinning, and led her up the few steps to the sidewalk. There, passed out before the old iron picket fence, lay one of our future brethren, who had researched himself into a coma.

The other problem was the flood of unwanted poetry and rhymes that people submitted to the Grapevine. "Oh my goodness, I never knew there were so many poets!" said Helen. "It seemed to me every alcoholic wrote verse, and I had to write all the letters saying we were sorry but we could not accept it. We wouldn't have had room for anything else, and most of it was dreadful. Besides, we'd find out later it had been clipped from some book or another magazine, and we would have been in serious trouble if we'd used it. So it was simpler just to say, 'No poetry at all!'" "

Regardless of problems, the Grapevine was growing at a thrilling and surprising rate. Helen remembers the whoops of joy when subscriptions totaled 1,000.

The Grapevine was sent free to AAs in the U.S. and Canadian armed forces throughout World War II. ("The only one whose name I remember is Yev G—.") Mail began to come from everywhere, including Ireland, where Sackville M., trying to get AA started in Dublin, wrote to AA members all over the world.

There were also many acts of friendship and kindness from nonalcoholics, Helen recalled.

When the old clubhouse building was sold, and the AAs had to move,

the Grapevine was homeless again. It was nonalcoholic AA trustee Leonard V. Harrison, welfare commissioner of New York City, who found the magazine new office space. In Greenwich Village, there was a small, old apartment building that had been condemned—too unsafe for people to live there, the city said. But Leonard got some city officials to agree that the basement space was not unsafe as an office. Without money for moving expenses, the Grapevine persuaded an ice-truck driver, who for years had daily delivered ice to the old clubhouse, to move the Grapevine's scanty furniture and all those cards. Cool and damp, perhaps, but intact, everything arrived safely on Minetta Lane.

"Being in Greenwich Village was very exciting to me," said Helen, "and I thought we should really go Bohemian. So I got some red paint, and painted the floor, doors, and window sills red." (Helen did not mention it, but there was no money to pay for paint or a painter, either.)

"The furnishings were pretty sparse—two canvas directors' chairs, Bill's enormous old desk, which almost took up the whole room, and an old table somebody had discarded when we were up near Grand Central," Helen said. "Only thing was, it was a draftsman's table, built so it could be slanted one way or the other easily. And somebody was always accidentally bumping against it, and all our big



Helen with our present subscription files
-by computer!

metal trays of more than a thousand floppy cards would fall all over the floor, out of order! It took days to get them refiled.

"We didn't have a sign there, either, but every morning a congregation of drunks with their bottles of 'smoke' got together on our stoop to drink. They were nice and friendly. As long as we didn't bother them, they didn't bother us," said Helen.

"One morning, one passed out on the steps, and we were afraid he would fall and crack his head. By then, we had employee No. 2," she recalled, "Katharine Swentzel. Or was it Winifred Sweet?" (Both, were nonalcoholics.) "Anyhow, she called the police and asked them to come. When they did and started to put him in their car, she said, 'Oh, you won't put him in jail, will you?'"

"The cops said, 'No, ma'am.

We'll just move him.' And they did—a few doors away, they put him on another stoop and started to drive off. But the landlady of that building came out yelling, 'Just because they don't want him in front of their house, you don't have to park him in front of ours!' "

Because the office floor sagged badly in the middle, Helen and the other employee, both working at the big old desk, had to wrap their legs around those of the desk to keep their chairs from sliding into collision. "Every time one of us heard a thump or some other noise, we didn't dare look, but we'd call out, 'Are you all right?'" Helen remembered.

Then came some expert help. Dick S., the second treasurer, had friends who worked at *Newsweek* Magazine, and they agreed to look over the Grapevine operation and make suggestions. What they must have said to each other in private is not recorded. At any rate, they suggested buying an Addressograph machine and getting rid of those darned cards.

A secondhand Addressograph was located, and the Grapevine employees (still only two) spent months putting the mailing addresses of all subscribers on the metal plates. (The Grapevine continued this manual operation until 1972, when it was forced to go into electronic data processing because of the number of subscribers—in 1979, about 116,000.)

The large cleaning woman who came to tidy up the place once a week had her own style, Helen remembered. She always wore a man's bandanna handkerchief tied around her head, and sang loudly most of the day songs of her own invention, her favorite being "I've Got a Telephone in My Bosom, and I Can Call Right Up to the Lord."

"Why she wanted to bother with that dark, messy little old place, I do not know," Helen said. "But a few years later, when we moved to a larger, lighter space, much easier to clean, on East Broadway on the Lower East Side, she came once, looked it over, and announced she preferred the old place! She never came back."

Helen recalled that during the years she worked for the Grapevine, there was a staff meeting once a month, a lunch at the Barclay Hotel. "That was usually the only time we saw any of the AAs who really put out the magazine," she said. "They were volunteers and had full-time jobs. But often, they would go to the office at night, and the next morning, Kitty and I would find lots of notes about things to be done."

Helen's last move with the Grapevine provided another instance of the friendship of nonalcoholics. The space located on East Broadway had previously been the office of some communications union, the members of which were mostly women. "And according to the landlord, they were always angry women!"

Helen said. "So he wasn't sure he wanted it to be an office for alcoholics, especially since he never saw the men—just us women workers. But he finally leased us the space, and turned out to be sweet and generous. When he died, his wife joined the Grapevine as its circulation manager, and stayed until 1967. That was Anne Rubenstein." (Anne was also a nonalcoholic.)

While the Grapevine was still housed on East Broadway, Helen left the magazine to get married—"I think three basements were enough!"

In addition to her Grapevine chores, she likes remembering the typing she did for Bill. "He was beginning to think about those ideas that later became the Traditions," she said. "And he had a one-track mind. Whenever he was figuring out something like that for AA, he simply could not put his mind on anything else. Many times at dinner at Stepping Stones, Lois and I would look at each other and start to giggle, because he'd picked up a fork to eat the soup, or something.

"Most of the time, he liked to dictate lying on the floor at the head of the stairwell in Bedford Hills, with his arms folded behind his head.

"I typed those Traditions over and over and over," she recalled. "He would think two or three of them were pretty good, but then he would share them with other AAs. The house was always full of people. Weekends, thirty or forty would

drop in, and Bill would read them what he had done, and the discussion would start," said his sister.

"Next day, we would tear up what we had done and start all over. It took months and months, so I sure hope they're right by now!" Helen exclaimed.

"Then Bill had a brilliant idea. He decided there had to be separate Traditions for the trustees, so we went to work on that," she said. (Remember — this was in the 1940's. The Alcoholic Foundation, as the AA General Service Board was then called, had no formal ties to the AA membership at all, because the General Service Conference had not been started, and Bill apparently wanted some way to make the trustees responsible to the Fellowship.)

"Finally," Helen said, "Bill realized we were up to fourteen special Traditions for trustees. He decided it was ridiculous, and he tore up the whole thing."

Later, both Helen and Lois W. were asked whether any scraps of those ideas survived. Neither remembers any. They agreed it is possible that some of Bill's ideas in the "trustee Traditions" found their way into *Twelve Concepts for World Service* or the Six Warranties of the Conference Charter, but that is just speculation now.

Alas, space does not permit our including here more of Helen's reminiscences, especially about Ebby T. and his first slip. (Bill and Lois were

away; Helen had to jail him and never stopped feeling guilty about it!)

But her feelings about Bill and Lois remain vibrant and clear, "although, of course, I'm prejudiced!" she said. "Bill was wonderful. I was just full of problems, and I guess any alcoholic knows what problems can be and how they can mix you up. Bill was so understanding. He never said anything like 'Why, that's stupid! Why don't you speak up for yourself, or do so-and-so?'"

"Lois was even more understanding. I could talk to her woman-to-woman. She was like my mother, my sister (not sister-in-law—sister), and my best friend all in one wonderful package. And she is still all of that, a very terrific person," according to Helen.

"But I'm talking too much," the Grapevine's first paid employee told the Editorial Board. "I've gone from the little girl in the corner who never opened her mouth, scared to talk, to where I am now. Now, you can't shut me up!"

The board members would have been happy to hear her talk much longer, for they realized how great a debt thousands of AAs owe to the people — recovered alcoholics and nonalcoholics alike — who saw our magazine through its difficult early years. The debt can be repaid in only one way, today's Grapevine people know. That is the AA way — by continuing the wholehearted effort to carry the message.

Anonymous, Manhattan, N. Y.