

EARLY HISTORY OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN NORTH FLORIDA

When we look at North Florida's beginnings in Alcoholic Anonymous, the same pioneer spirit prevailed as it did in New York and Akron. Many of the same obstacles were surmounted and many blessings received. The history here is as powerful and compelling as anywhere in A. A.

It took five years for A.A. to grow from two members (Bill W. and Dr. Bob S.) to one hundred. Florida experienced similar growing pains. Activity started in Jacksonville by two men (CMDR Junius C. and Tom S.) in December 1940. By Spring of 1947 there were 850 A.A. members in thirty-one groups reported in Florida. (Duval County now contains 4 Districts. **District 1** - Central Duval, **District 2** was deleted in the 1990's, **District 3** - SW Duval and N Clay counties, **District 4** - Nassau and N Duval counties and **District 30** - SE Duval and N St. Johns counties.)

Courtesy of S. Florida booklet, "Our Beginnings" prepared by Maria Hoffman (2002)

Jacksonville was the first registered group (January 1941) with the New York office when the Jack Alexander article in the POST was published (March 1941). The inquiries received in N.Y. were sent to them. As a result contacts were received from individuals in Miami, Daytona, and St. Augustine.

The North Florida Area (14) and the South Florida Area (15) were created February 1951 for the selection of delegates to the first panel of the General Service Conference held April 1951. The NFA was expansive in its size, stretching from Jacksonville in the northeast to Pensacola in the northwest (the "Panhandle" - Pensacola east to Apalachicola River - is now included in Area 1, Alabama. Research continues as to when this took place), south to Clearwater, directly east to south of Melbourne Beach. Over the years Areas and Districts have moved, changed and expanded to accommodate growth. The history of our Districts reported here indicates our *current assigned areas and numbers*. The NFA today has 32 active Districts with 558 groups.

DISTRICT 1 - JACKSONVILLE - DUVAL COUNTY

In the Fall of 1940 retired Naval Officer, Commander Junius C. was called into active service and sent to Jacksonville Naval Air Station. He and his wife, Marie, were living in Pasadena CA when he heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote to New York and purchased a copy of the Big Book. After their arrival Marie went to the NAS JAX dispensary and met local physician, Dr. S. Bedell.

Dr. Bedell helped Junius locate an alcoholic prospect so that he could continue his A.A. sobriety. This contact, Tom S., was a patient of Dr. Bedell's and they met in December 1940.

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In March 1941 the *Saturday Evening Post* printed an article by Jack Alexander entitled "Alcoholics Anonymous." This marked a milestone in fellowship history. Ruth, in the New York office, sent letters from Miami and Tampa to Tom but, "We didn't have money for groceries, let alone travel to see drunks, so we did what we could." Only one replay came in March, from Mack W. of St. Augustine. Mack had contacted Ruth in New York, received Tom's address and became the third active member of A.A. in Jacksonville, travelling by bus every week to Jacksonville to attend meetings.

In April 1941 Tom Sharpe went to the Jacksonville Journal newspaper, spoke with the city editor and told him of the national A.A. movement and what they were doing on the local level. As a result the Journal ran an article on April 18 written by Lowell Clucas that encouraged people to contact him through the newspaper and he would forward it to the local A.A. group. Hugh C. Charlie P. and Bruce H. were the first to respond. Ultimately, Hugh committed suicide after eight years of sobriety due to personal matters, unrelated to alcoholism. Charlie died with nineteen years and Bruce died with eighteen years of sobriety.

Meetings were held every Tuesday at Tom's home at 2747 Riverside Avenue as well as other members' homes through mid-1941. The first documented woman member was Elsie B. in May 1941. At this time Junius was transferred to Quonsett Point, R.I. as Executive Officer of their naval air station. Membership grew and a larger meeting space was provided at the downtown Windsor Hotel.

DAYTONA

During the first year Tom was contacted by Kathleen S of Daytona Beach, regarding her husband, George. Tom made two trips to visit George and both times found that he had "gone fishing." The next time George got drunk Tom instructed Kathleen to give him a call and put George on the northbound East Coast train. Several week later Kathleen told Tom George was on the train headed to Jacksonville. Tom and Bruce H. met George at the station and took him to a sanatorium. He stayed several weeks, attended A.A. meetings and returned to Daytona. In January 1942 George met David W., a new arrival to Daytona. In April 1942 the Daytona Beach group registered with the A.A. Foundation with two members. A short time later Tom received a call from George that the group was floundering. Ten members of the Jacksonville group drove down to the Daytona meeting. Meetings picked up after their visit and by September of 1942 reported a membership of 15.

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CORRECTION FACILITIES

The first mention of corrections work was in a letter to the A.A. Foundation from Bruce H in February 1942 and referenced successful talks at Florida State Prison in Raiford, FL. They registered as a new group in February of 1943. Prison chaplain, the Reverend Leslie A. Shepard was instrumental in starting the Hope Group, the first A.A. prison group in the state of Florida. In September 1945 the Hope Group secretary, on behalf of the Reverend Shepard, wrote to Tom S. to request guest speakers for their prison meetings.

BILL W. VISITS

Bill W.'s first trip to Jacksonville was early 1942 to visit the Jacksonville group and speak with Bruce H. Bruce was a natural promoter and arranged with Gulf Life Insurance Company to provide ten 4 minute radio spots. His radio program was a great success, bringing many local people to A.A. Due to the positive response, Bruce decided radio programs should be taken to the national level. He received backing from Prudential and Metropolitan Life Insurance companies. He wrote to New York for their approval, prompting a visit from Bill W. Bill W. spoke, the first of many times, to the Jacksonville group. Twenty-five people gathered at the Seminole Hotel for the meeting and dinner, at a cost of \$1.25 per person.

INCREASING MEMBERSHIP

During the summer of 1942 it was obvious larger meeting space was needed. The group rented space above Martin's Feed Store, 204 East Bay Street at the corner of East Bay and Newman streets. While these rooms remained open during the day, larger meetings were held across the street in Woodmen's Hall at 123 East Bay Street. Early members included Jack T., Harold S., Jimmy J., Easy E., Walter T., Andy W., and Doc W. They remained at this location until the summer of 1946. In December 1945 the first club to be organized to hold property was formed, ALCOAN, Inc. Tom S. served as President pro-tem and Peter H. as Secretary pro-tem.

SATELITTE LOCATIONS

During 1942-46 a number of meetings were held in the same 204 E. Bay St. location. The earliest group, *When and Where*, met Sunday, 8:30 p.m., the *Riverside Group*, Monday, 8:30 p.m., *Jacksonville Group*, Tuesday, 8:30 p.m., *Beginners Class*, Wednesday, 8:30 p.m., *Springfield Group*, Thursday, 8:00 p.m., *Downtown Group*, Friday, 8:00 p.m. and a *Southside Group* (no day or time listed). The *Beaches Group*, Saturday, 8:00 p.m., in the Atlantic Beach Town Hall was an open speaker meeting.

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EARLY RULES

Like many A.A. groups of the time (1943) the Jacksonville Group was run with stringent by-laws, including no women, by invitation only, and new members will be seen and not heard for the first three months, among other formal regulations.

ORLANDO

In 1944 Dave A. of Orlando, FL, attended meetings in Jacksonville and Daytona with the intent to start an Orlando group. He met Samuel E.W. and his wife who recently arrived from East Orange, NJ, where Sam met Bill W. and got sober. April 1944 he wrote to A.A. in NY for instructions and started the Orlando chapter.

FIRST ANNUAL DINNER

Monday, May 22, 1944 the combined groups of Jacksonville held their first official annual dinner at the Windsor Hotel. Guest speaker was Bill W. The third dinner was held in 1946 but the 1947 dinner was listed as the sixth to bring them in line with the founding of A.A. Jacksonville.

TALLAHASSEE

In 1945 Thomas M. came from Tallahassee to a Jacksonville sanitarium. Afterwards, he attended meetings, returned to Tallahassee and was listed as a loner in August 1945. He started a group with two members in February 1946.

SOUTHEASTERN REGIONAL CONFERENCE

In 1945 the Southeastern groups were notified by the Birmingham, Alabama group that they were planning a convention. At the time, Tom thought it a crazy idea, but the groups sent delegates to the two day meeting. This would be the first Southeastern Regional Conference, the oldest conference in A.A.

CONTINUED GROWTH AND WOMENS GROUP

The next notable move for the Jacksonville Group was in late 1946 to 121 East Forsythe Street. *Where and When, Riverside, Jacksonville, Beginners, Springfield, Downtown, Southside and Beaches* groups met on successive evenings at 8:30 p.m. in addition to the *Ladies Group* on Friday nights.

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The first women to break the all-men rule in the *Jacksonville Group* were Wynell J. and Loraine M. in December 1947.

Late in 1946 the new *Friendship Group* met twice a week, a Wednesday closed meeting and an open meeting on Sunday at 212 West Forsythe Street.

In early 1947 the groups meeting at 121 East Forsythe Street broke. The *Jacksonville Group* remained at that location and in 1948 changed their name to *Central Group*. *Riverside Group* met in members' homes three times a week, *Springfield*, *Downtown*, and *Ladies* groups met in various places, the *Southside Group* met in south Jacksonville.

In 1947 a bid was presented at the Third Southeastern Regional Conference in Memphis, TN to hold the 1948 conference in Jacksonville, FL. It was approved and resulted in the first A.A. conference/convention to be held in Florida.

September 1948 the Fourth Southeastern Regional Conference was held at the Hotel George Washington in downtown Jacksonville. The three day convention welcomed 503 members and 200 guests. Speakers included Bill W., Lois W., Father Ralph S. P., and the new pocket-sized "A.A. Grapevine" made its official debut.

TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF A.A. IN JACKSONVILLE

The Tenth Anniversary Celebration was held February 24-25, 1951 at the Hotel George Washington. Representatives from throughout Florida and the Southeast attended, due in part to the presence of Bill W. Bill presented the Third Legacy Conference plan that had recently been presented in Boston. On February 25 at the Mayflower Hotel the first North Florida Conference was held to select a delegate to the first General Service Conference. The North Florida District was formed under the guidance of Bill W. and attendees returned to their areas with the necessary knowledge to form their group districts. Tom S. was selected as the first delegate for the North Florida District.

At the anniversary dinner Tom read a telegram received from Junius and Marie C., living in Pasadena CA, that said in part that they sent their love and encouragement to everyone on the Tenth Anniversary of A.A. in Jacksonville.

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Groups sprang up - Pensacola in 1945; Neptune Beach, Gainesville, and Ocala in 1947; Cocoa, Leesburg, Crestview, Deland, Eau Gallie, Marianna, New Smyrna Beach and Panama City in 1948; Quincy, Chiefland, Palatka, St. Augustine, Sulphur Springs and Winter Park in 1949; Bradenton, Cedar Key and Live Oak in 1950; Century, Kissimmee, Valparaiso and Wildwood in 1951, Pass-A-Grille, Sanford, Stark and Tavares in 1952; and then Ft. Walton.

In 1952 the **Central Group** moved to 10 West Duval Street and in 1953 the final move to 1423 San Marco Boulevard where it meets today.