

AA's First Meeting on the West Coast

November 21, 1939 in San Francisco

Adapted from *C.N.C.A History*, prepared by the
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The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* first appeared in April 1939. The handful of recovered drunks who had put it together in Akron, New York, Cleveland and Chicago, in an effort to make their program available to every alcoholic who wanted to get well, still needed a way to distribute it. One of their number in New York, a newly sober Irishman by the name of Morgan, said he knew the nationally known radio commentator, Gabriel Heatter, very well. He contacted Heatter and sure enough the national broadcast was planned.

The other AAs were delighted, but they were also concerned. The date for the program was a week away and there was a fear that Morgan, following an old pattern, might get drunk the day of the show. That would be a calamity! The solution? They very gently told Morgan that he would have to be locked up until the night of the broadcast. But where? Then it was recalled that one of their more prosperous newcomers had a membership in the Downtown Athletic Club. As AA's founder, Bill W. put it, "Grumbling loudly, Morgan was conducted into captivity. For several days we took turns staying with him around the clock, never letting him out of our sight."

Thus it was that in April of 1939, Gabriel Heatter aired the following story as part of his show "We the People."

HEATTER

The man beside me now has had one of the most gripping and dramatic experiences I've ever heard. I'm not going to tell you his name. And when you hear what he has to say I think you will understand why. But after

checking the facts the Listeners Committee of We the People decided to grant him time because they feel that if one person is helped by hearing his story, then WE THE PEOPLE will have done a real service. All right, sir.

ANONYMOUS

Six months ago I got out of an insane asylum. I'd been sent there because I was drinking myself to death. But the doctors said they could do nothing for me. And only four years ago I was making \$20,000 a year. I was married to a swell girl and had a young son. But I worked hard and like many of my friends - I used to drink to relax. Only they knew when to stop. I didn't. And pretty soon I drank myself out of my job. I promised my wife I'd straighten out. But I couldn't. Finally she took the baby and left me.

The next year was like a nightmare. I was penniless. I went out on the streets — panhandled money for liquor. Every time I sobered up — I swore not to touch another drop.

But if I went a few hours without a drink — I'd begin to cry like a baby, and tremble all over. One day after I left the asylum I met a friend of mine. He took me to the home of one of his friends. A bunch of men were sitting around, smoking cigars, telling jokes — having a great time. But I noticed they weren't drinking. When Tom told me they'd all been in the same boat I was — I couldn't believe him. But he said. "See that fellow? He's a doctor. Drank himself out of his practice. Then he straightened out. Now he's head of a big hospital." Another big strapping fellow was a grocery clerk. Another the vice-president of a big corporation. They got together five years ago. Called themselves Alcoholics Anonymous. And they'd worked out a method of recovery. One of their most important secrets was helping the other fellow. Once they began to follow it the method proved successful and helped others get on their feet — they found they could stay away from liquor.

Gradually — those men helped me back to life. I stopped drinking. Found courage to face life again. Today I've got a job — and I'm going to climb back to success.

Recently we wrote a book called *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Working on that book made me realize how much other people had suffered — how they had gone through the same thing I did. That's why I wanted to come on this program. I wanted to tell people who are going through that torment — if they sincerely want to — they can come back. Take their place in society once again.

Among the many listeners to that show across the country was a woman, Mrs. Gordon Oram, a non-alcoholic, who ran a boarding house at 51 Potomac street in San Francisco.

Mrs. Oram had a boarder, a salesman, named Ted C. She liked him, but was concerned about him. He had been in and out of state hospitals and jails because of his drinking. He considered himself one of the “worst alcoholics” in California.

After hearing the Heatter radio program Mrs. Oram wrote to the New York office of Alcoholics Anonymous and obtained a copy of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* for Ted. Others in the Bay Area had also heard the program or read an article, “Alcoholics and God,” in the *Liberty Magazine* September 30, 1939 issue and they too had contacted AA’s New York office.

So it happened, that when an AA member from New York, Ray W., came to San Francisco for a sales training course in November of that year he brought with him a list of those who had made inquiries. Among them was Mrs. Oram’s boarder, Ted.

From his room in the Clift Hotel on Geary Street, Ray called those on his list. He finally arranged for some of them to meet with him in his room on Tuesday, November 21, 1939 — a beautiful evening much like today

It was there that the first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous on the West Coast was held. Aside from Ray and Ted, there were two others present, Don B. and Dave L., and the meeting lasted about two hours.

Ray then turned his local contacts over to the three local men and the four of them began to contact the people on the list. Aside from San Francisco, some of the contacts were from the East Bay, specifically Berkeley, Oakland and Alameda.

Ray reported back to New York on that first meeting:

The Clift
SAN FRANCISCO
Nov. 23, '39

Works Publishing Co.
17 Williams St.
Newark, N.J.
Miss R. Hock, Sec’y -

Dear Miss Hock -

You probably think I am an awful piker for not having acknowledged your letters sooner.

As a matter of fact I have seen quite a number of individuals whose names you sent — some of them several times. I won't go into detail here except to say that I had three (3) of the best "bets" — Ted C, Dave L, and Don B for several hours with the result that they are going to start a group here and start in by taking care of all the others who wrote you. Dave had his secretary make carbons of the lists you sent and I started them in by having them make some "dates" with some of our prospects over the phone from my room. I talked to them first then turned the phone over to the boys here. Things look better than I would have hoped for.

You know, I had the misguided idea that I had been busy at other times in my life, but until I made this trip I didn't know what it was to be busy. They have been "on my neck" day and night. You will hear from some of them and I will give you all the dope when I get back.

[At this point Ray spent two paragraphs on other matters]

Will be back Tuesday and give you a ring.

Best regards to everyone

Ray W

As Ray mentioned, it had become clear that they would need to form an AA group in San Francisco, where they all could meet regularly. Mrs. Oram offered her kitchen as a meeting place. **So shortly before Christmas, 1939, the first AA group, the "San Francisco Group," began meeting in Mrs. Oram's kitchen, and later in various members' homes.** In October of 1940 they found a more or less permanent site for their meetings in the Telegraph Hill Community House at 1736 Stockton Street in North Beach.

Gabriel Heatter had said that if just one person were helped by hearing the story he aired on the radio, it would be of real service. Well, many more than one person were helped as a result of that broadcast and what followed it. Today, 60 years after that first meeting, there are over 600 AA groups in San Francisco alone, many thousands more in California and other parts of the west.