

Henry G. (Hank) Parkhurst.

(1895-1954)

Hank Parkhurst was a business dynamo who was the first alcoholic to recover in New York, following Bill Wilson. Thus, Hank was New York's AA#2. His was a vital contribution to AA: without Hank Parkhurst the Big Book might never have been published.

Hank was born March 13, 1895, in Marion, Iowa into a family that had lived in that area for several generations. He was so gifted an entrepreneur that an associate once described him as being able to produce a good idea a minute for business. He had been a Standard Oil of New Jersey executive who was fired because of his drinking. Hank sought treatment at Charles B. Towns Hospital in Manhattan. He met Bill Wilson there during the autumn of 1935.

Parkhurst was the first New York alcoholic other than Bill to stay sober for any substantial amount of time. Hank was sober approximately four years, before he drank again.

He is mentioned in "The Doctor's Opinion" (page XXIX of the Big Book). Doctor Silkworth describes him as "--a case of pathological mental deterioration." But, Silkworth added, "He adopted the plan outlined in this book." And the doctor admitted he hardly recognized Hank when he saw him a year later.

But, perhaps more importantly, Hank is credited with contributing the major interview around which Bill wrote the chapter, "To Employers." (Some historians believe that Hank himself wrote this entire chapter except the first two paragraphs.)

After Bill and Lois Wilson lost their home at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn Heights, they moved to Montclair, New Jersey on April 26, 1939, and lived with Hank and his wife, Kathleen Nixon Parkhurst. Hank and Kathleen had moved to Montclair from Teaneck, after Hank got sober. (He's noted, again, in the Big Book, on page 163, as "--a man who was living in a large community." That reference is to Montclair.)

Parkhurst could be quite personable and was considered a handsome man. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and red-haired and had been a good athlete in school. He and Kathleen had two sons: Henry G. Parkhurst, Jr. (Hank, Jr., and Robert Stewart Parkhurst (Bob) and at least one grandson.

Hank was an agnostic when he came to AA. But he evolved spiritually into a belief in a "universal power." He and Jim Burwell led the fight against any mention of God in the Big Book. Parkhurst and Burwell wanted to leave God out of the book altogether, to make it a psychological book and refer only to the spiritual nature of recovery, produced by the practice of the principles of the Twelve Steps. The verbal war over the mention of God produced the compromise "---as we understood Him" which became part of the Book.

Parkhurst was renting an office at that time at 11 Hill Street, Newark. This office housed Hank's company, Honor Dealers. It was a cooperative firm. Through it, gas station owners could buy gasoline, oil and automotive parts at lower prices through joint purchasing. Some thought it was Hank's way of getting back at Standard Oil for firing him. But the business went nowhere. It is considered likely that Bill authored the first two chapters of the Big Book in this Hill Street office.

Hank then moved to another office at 17 William Street in Newark, one block north of the Hill Street address. The new office, #601, faced east, the preferred exposure. But Hank's money ran out, he didn't pay the rent and the county sheriff evicted him. He then moved to a smaller office on the same floor of the same building, #604, which faced west. Bill dictated much of the remainder of the Big Book to Ruth Hock in this building. Ruth was a secretary for Honor Dealers and served in a similar capacity to the energetic effort, which would produce AA. It was Hank who was the driving force behind the idea of forming a private company to publish the Big Book. The Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation had opposed the idea of self-publishing. There were rewards, to be sure. Self-publishing could produce a financial return six times greater than author's royalties. But, among the Trustees, the common feeling was that self-publishing was risky, that most such enterprises failed out of ignorance of the publishing business and that neither Bill nor Hank knew anything about publishing. That opinion was expressed by a majority of the Trustees at the Foundation's first meeting, April 11, 1938. (The Foundation was established on that date as a charitable, tax-exempt entity to provide the movement with a legally formed, New York-based center.)

Hank told Bill that since the Board of Trustees had not and would not raise a cent for the publishing project, he and Bill should not wait but should publish the book by themselves. They had little or no money, so: Hank convinced Bill that they should form a stock company and sell shares to their fellow alcoholics. Not only did Hank guarantee Bill that this approach would succeed, but he also insisted it was the only way to get the Book published. Bill felt somewhat reassured because a widely respected publishing executive, Eugene Exman of Harper Brothers, had told him that drafts of the first two chapters looked good and that a society like theirs really should own, control, and publish its own literature.

So: Hank and Bill formed Works Publishing Company, Incorporated, on September 21, 1938. (Some historians say that the company never was legally incorporated.) They issued six hundred shares of stock with a par value of \$25.00 per share. Bill and Hank each received one-third of the shares. The remaining two hundred shares were to be sold to their fellow alcoholics. Money from the sale of stock would be used to pay expenses of the Newark office and to enable Bill and Hank to continue their work full time on the publishing project. The Alcoholic Foundation would receive author's royalties from the book sales. Hank signed the certificates as "President." Sales were slow.

Parkhurst, the self-appointed "President," had handled all the finances for Works Publishing. But, later, when he was asked to account for the money, he had no records. It appeared he had mixed the funds for Works, Honor and the fledgling fellowship together, along with his personal money and had no idea how to separate them.

The publication date of the Big Book was April 1, 1939. It was printed by Cornwall Press, in Cornwall, New York. The US Copyright Office says there were 4,730 copies in the first printing. The first ten copies were delivered April 10th of that year to the Newark office Hank and Bill shared. It was a joyous moment!

But, things soon went downhill for Hank. First, Bill obtained a postal box for the young fellowship across the Hudson River in lower Manhattan. Bill felt this location was the most convenient for reaching the area they intended to serve; New York City, Long Island and New Jersey. Bill then proposed moving the Alcoholic Foundation office itself to a point nearer the postal box. He felt there was no need to keep an office in Newark; Hank had closed Honor Dealers. But, since it had been his office, Parkhurst was upset about Bill's decision. The actual move, on March 16, 1940, to 30 Vesey Street, Room 703, in lower Manhattan angered Hank.

And, when the furniture from his office moved across the Hudson, Hank was furious, even though he had sold the furniture to Bill. (That furniture remained with Bill Wilson for the rest of his life. First it went to AA headquarters in Manhattan. Later it moved to Bill's studio, "Wits End," at his home, "Stepping Stones," at Bedford Hills, in the rolling, wooded hills of picturesque, suburban Westchester County, just north of New York City.)

For Hank, this troubling episode appears to have been the least of it. In other respects, he was beginning to collide with life and getting bruised heavily in the process. He was becoming (as Dr. Silkworth previously described it) "--restless, irritable and discontented."

He had taken a new job-one he did not want -- in western New Jersey. He had intended to take the office, the furniture and Ruth Hock with him.

Further, Hank wanted to divorce his wife, Kathleen, and marry Ruth. But Ruth declined to go west with him and moved instead to the young fellowship's new office in lower Manhattan. Ultimately, she said "No" to Hank's marriage proposal. Hank blamed Bill for her refusal.

Hank further resented Bill's asking him to turn in his stock certificates in Works Publishing, Inc. Members of the fellowship had decided in 1940 that all book sales profits should go to the Alcoholic Foundation. They decided that Bill and Hank should return their shares in Works Publishing. And, they asked those other members who had purchased shares of the stock to sell them to the Foundation at par value. In this way, the alcoholics reasoned, the fellowship would own the Big Book and anything it published in the future. Bill and Dr. Bob were to receive author's royalties from the book sales, so that they both might continue to devote their full time to the affairs of the fellowship.

Bill complied immediately. He turned in his shares of Works Publishing, Inc. stock to the Alcoholic Foundation. But, Hank, who had started drinking again, refused. He held onto the stock until he appeared unexpectedly one day, scruffy, drunk, and destitute, at the New York office. He insisted the furniture in that office was his and demanded payment for it, even though he had been paid for it previously. Bill offered to pay for it again if Hank would hand in his stock. Hank accepted two hundred dollars and handed over his shares. He subsequently accused Bill of taking advantage of him in his drunken state. Later, Hank approached Bill several more times claiming he had never been paid for the furniture and Bill paid him again each time.

Then Hank learned that AA had granted Bill a \$25.00 a week payment from the sale of the Book. Hank considered the arrangement wrong. He resented it and was said to have become quite jealous of all the attention showered on Bill as A.A.'s co-founder.

Hank's oldest son, Henry G. Parkhurst, Jr., later that Hank always felt Bill had treated him unfairly with respect to the stock, the revenue from the Book sales and his office furniture. Years later sales of the Book mushroomed. But Hank received no share of the profits.

It is difficult to say precisely when Hank returned to drinking, but it appears to have been late in 1939. Lois Wilson's diary for September 6, 1939, says Hank was drunk. Kathleen Parkhurst had reported Hank was drinking on September 5th. He never recovered, completely, although there were some occasional, brief periods of dryness.

Hank and Kathleen divorced in 1939 and Hank married at least two other women during a return to drinking that lasted on and off for approximately eleven years. One of the women he married and divorced was a sister-in-law of Cleveland AA pioneer, Clarence Snyder.

He later married an oil heiress from a wealthy Houston family. She died about 1950 of a cerebral hemorrhage. Sources say Kathleen married a Wally van Arc, who, they say, was involved, somehow, in the publishing of the Big Book. (AA's Archivists at GSO New York say they have no information whatever on anyone named Wally van Arc.) Later, during a brief period of dryness, Hank re-married Kathleen. Several sources say Kathleen was also an alcoholic: an episodic or periodic drunk. Hank's obituary identified Kathleen as his widow. Exact dates of these marriages, divorces and the re-marriage have proven unavailable.

Hank moved to Ohio and began spreading malicious stories there about Bill, charging that Wilson had diverted AA's money to his own personal use. Despite the fact that Hank was drinking, some Ohio AAs believed him, including Clarence Snyder, who had started AA in Cleveland. A number of the Ohio AA's began calling for Bill's expulsion, accusing him of financial trickery and dishonesty. One Ohio A.A. swore he knew personally that Wilson had taken as much as \$65,000 from A.A. during the previous year. Several groups in Ohio wanted to secede from A.A. because of the charges and turmoil.

To meet the situation head-on, Bill and Dr. Bob, hosted a dinner for all concerned in June 1942 in Cleveland. After dinner, they all gathered in a hotel parlor, where a local committee, complete with its own attorney and certified public accountant, interrogated Bill. Both Bill and Dr. Bob quietly but firmly denied all allegations and answered all questions. Wilson presented the committee with a recent audit of all of A.A.'s financial affairs, showing, openly and clearly, his 25-dollar a week payment from sales of the Big Book. An identical payment had been arranged for Dr. Bob. (Bob had given some of his money to Bill and returned much of the rest to AA.) And, although it had nothing to do with the AA treasury, both Bill and Bob voluntarily told the committee of the 30-dollar-a-week income each received from a private fund set up to support them by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. so that both could continue their AA work full-time. The committee's CPA carefully examined the audit, read it aloud, pronounced it accurate beyond question, and thus completely exonerated Bill. The committee members apologized to him.

But the emotional scars remained for Wilson. All this grief and scandal had been caused by a man he had helped to stop drinking, a man who once had been his partner. Opinions vary as to whether they ever completely settled their differences.

Hank Parkhurst died January 18, 1954, at Mercer Hospital in Pennington, New Jersey, within two months of his 59th birthday. Lois Wilson said his death was due to drinking. Others claimed it was pills. Some thought it was both. His obituary says only that he died after a lengthy illness. Others noted that Hank's disagreements with Bill and his subsequent resentments, mostly over Big Book matters, apparently kept Parkhurst from returning to AA.

Despite the pain and trouble he caused during the final years of his life, Alcoholics Anonymous would appear to owe a huge debt to Henry G. Parkhurst. Ruth Hock, who was there for the entire adventure, said the Big Book would not have been written without Bill and surely could not have been published without Hank. His story, "The Unbeliever" appeared in the first edition of the book that he was so instrumental in publishing.

SOURCES: The archives of the AA General Service Office; AA publications: "Alcoholics Anonymous", "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age", and "Pass It On"; "Lois Remembers" by Lois Burnham Wilson; "Bill W." by Francis Hartigan; "Not-God" by Ernest Kurtz; "Bill W. And Mr. Wilson" by Matthew J. Raphael; The Hopewell (N.J.) Herald; the US Copyright Office, Washington, DC and AA historians Al R. and Joe H.

I'm grateful for the above sources. Any errors are my own.

Written/researched during 1997 by Mike O. of "The Just Do It Big Book Study Group of Alcoholics Anonymous," DeBary, Florida. (Author Revised: 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001.)