

EARLY HISTORY OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN NORTH FLORIDA 1941 TO 1951

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Compiled from oral interviews, and research of records.

In the summer of 1940 a retired Naval Officer, Commander (CDR) Junius Lee C. was called back into Naval service. He had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis on June 22, 1917 (class of 1918). He was a native of McComb, Mississippi, then living in Pasadena, CA. During his Naval career he had served aboard the USS Main, entered naval aviation in 1923 and served aboard the USS Saratoga (CV-3), surveyed and built a number of Naval bases in the Pacific during the early 1930's. On 10 August 1940 he received an assignment as the first Officer-in-Charge of the Aviation Trades Schools onboard the soon to be commissioned Naval Air Station (NAS) in Jacksonville, FL. He arrived at the Naval Air Station on September 15, 1940 and was tasked with organizing the first Aviation Training Schools at NAS Jacksonville. Naval Air Station Jacksonville FL was commissioned on October 15, 1940. The Trades Schools were the largest tenant command attached to NAS Jacksonville in WWII. The station Commanding Officer, Capt. Mason, was his immediate superior. He remained at the station until relieved on September 22, 1941.

Junius retired from Naval Service in 1939 one of the reasons for his retirement he stated was his heavy drinking. While in retirement and living in Pasadena CA, his wife Marie heard of this new society of Alcoholics Anonymous. So she wrote New York and got in touch with Bill W. and Ruth Hock and bought a Big Book and was given the address of the A.A. group in Los Angeles. Soon after their arrival in Jacksonville, Marie went to the station dispensary to see if she could find an alcoholic that Junius could work with. She contacted a Dr. Sullivan G. Bedell who had just entered Naval Service as a Reserve Medical Officer. Marie asked Dr. Bedell if he knew someone that was an alcoholic that Junius could meet and work with to stay sober. Dr. Bedell being a local psychiatrist had a man that met what Marie required, and so he called Babe S. and set up a meeting between Junius and Tom S.

Junius had gotten sober in the Los Angeles group and had had some success in staying sober for a number of months. The first meeting between two alcoholics in Florida was in the last part of 1940 at the on base quarters of Junius. Those present for this meeting were Junius C. and wife Marie, Tom S. and wife Babe, and Dr. Bedell and his wife. Dr. Bedell and the wives then excused themselves and for the next two hours Junius talked and read passages from the Big Book and told his story to Tom. Immediately Tom had a hope, which he hadn't had in years. Tom went home that night and read Junius's Big Book until three or four in the morning. Everything he read made sense to him.

Tom and Junius stayed in contact after the first night and soon Junius said to Tom, " We have to get something started around here if we are going to keep this program going". Junius asked Tom if he knew any drunks and Tom rounded up four of his friends who were heavy drinkers and probably alcoholics and had a meeting in the house Tom rented from his aunt at 2747 Riverside Ave. Dr. Bedell and Tom later believed this meeting was held sometime in the first week of January 1941. Of course these people had very little interest in sobriety so they had little success. The first meeting was Tom, Junius, Tom F, Henry R, Charles R, and Karl K.

On March 1st 1941 The Saturday Evening Post printed an article by Jack Alexander entitled Alcoholics Anonymous. This article marked a milestone in the history of the fellowship. Tom later stated that Ruth in the New York office sent him letters from the Miami and Tampa Bay area but we didn't have money for groceries let alone travel to see drunks so we did what we could. (*? When did*

Tom contact NY) Only one reply came from the local area, during the month of March, and that came on March 30th from one J. Mack W. of St. Augustine. J. Mack wrote Tom that he had written Ruth Hock at A.A. Box 658 Church St. annex in New York City and had received Tom's address from her. He had read the article in the Post had just finished reading the large red book and would be in Jacksonville that week. He would contact Tom at that time. J. Mack was a writer for Reader's Digest and he became the third active member of A.A. in Jacksonville. J. Mack came by bus to Jacksonville every week to attend meetings.

In April of 1941 Tom Sharpe went to the local evening newspaper, the Jacksonville Journal and spoke with the City Editor, telling him of the national A.A. movement and what they were doing at the local level. As a result of this contact with the Jacksonville Journal an article appeared in the Journal on April 18th written by Lowell Clucas. At the end of the article Mr. Clucas stated that anyone interested may write him care of the Jacksonville Journal and he would pass the inquiry on to the local A.A. organization. One of the first letters came the next day from Hugh C. wishing to get in touch with the local A.A. group. Hugh C. Charlie P. and Bruce H. were the first people to answer the Journal article. Hugh committed suicide, after eight years of sobriety; his suicide was not due to alcoholism but another personal matter. Charlie died with nineteen years of sobriety and Bruce died with eighteen years.

Meetings were held every Tuesday at Tom's house at 2747 Riverside Ave and at other member's homes through mid 1941. The group listed the first woman member of A.A. in Jacksonville in May 1941. Her name was Elise B. she was brought to the meeting by Bruce and his wife Joan. Elise is listed in the first members list as living at 725 Fort King Avenue, in Ocala FL. About this time Junius was transferred to Quonsett Point, R.I. to become the Executive Officer of the naval air station there. (He was relieved of his command on September 22, 1941). Soon the number of group members grew to a point that a larger space would be required to hold the meeting. The old Windsor Hotel (*find the address*) then offered a parlor room to the group for their Tuesday night meetings. Soon after the group rented a room on the second floor of 330 W. Forsyth Street this was in late 1941 early 1942.

It was during the first year of A.A. in Jacksonville that Tom received a call from a woman in Daytona Beach by the name of Kathleen S. about her husband George. Tom made two trips to Daytona to see George but George, found a pressing need to go fishing on the days Tom came to see him. Finally Tom informed Kathleen that the next time George got drunk to put him on the north bound East Coast train and give him a call. Several weeks later Tom received a call from Kathleen that George was on the train headed to Jacksonville. Tom and Bruce H. met George at the station and placed him in a sanatorium in the area of McDuff and Park. George stayed several weeks, attended meetings, and went back to Daytona Beach. In January of 1942 George meet David W. a new arrival in Daytona. David had gotten sober in Seattle Washington left there traveling to Daytona Beach via New York where he meet Bill W. In April 1942 the Daytona Beach group registered with the Alcoholic Foundation with two members. Tom recalls that a short time after the Daytona Group started George called him up and stated that the group was not doing very well and could some of the Jacksonville group come down to a meeting. The Jacksonville group got two cars and ten people and went to the meeting in Daytona Beach. The meeting seemed to pick up after that visit and became a very strong group. By September 1942 the Daytona Beach group was reporting a membership of 15.

The first mention of corrections work was in a letter to the Alcoholic Foundation from Bruce H. dated Feb 1942 referencing successful State Prison talks. The only State Prison in the Jacksonville area in 1942 was the Florida State Prison in Raiford.

The Florida State Prison, in Raiford FL. registered a new group with the Alcoholic Foundation on 2/24/1943. The prison chaplain Rev Leslie A. Shepard was instrumental in starting the Hope

Group the first prison A.A. group in the state of Florida. Rev. Shepard was still the prison chaplain in September of 1945 when the Hope Group Sec wrote to thank Tom S. for speaking to the group and requesting that more outside speakers come to the prison and speak

Bill W's first trip to Jacksonville was in early 1942. The reason for his stop in Jacksonville was to visit with the Jacksonville Group and speak with one of its first members, Bruce H. Bruce was kind of a promoter type who had arranged with the Gulf Life Insurance Company to give him ten radio spots, of three or four minutes in length. Bruce was very successful with his radio program and had many people coming to A.A. in Jacksonville and due to his success Bruce believed that a radio program on a national level would be even better for A.A. To this end Bruce solicited and received backing from the Prudential and Metropolitan Life Insurance Companies. Bruce wrote numerous letters to the Foundation stating his intent and the final answer from New York was a visit from Bill W. Tom met Bill at the train station and they went to visit Bruce. Bruce never did another radio spot for A.A. in Jacksonville. After the meeting with Bruce, Bill spoke for the first time in Jacksonville at a dinner held at the Seminole Hotel for twenty to twenty-five people. Price of the dinner was \$1.25. This was the first of many times that Bill spoke in Jacksonville.

After about a year larger quarters were needed and the group rented a space at 204 East Bay Street, above Martins Seed store located at the corner of East Bay Street and Newnan Street. (Summer-1942) These rooms stayed open during the day and the larger meetings were held across the street in the Woodmen's Hall. (123 East Bay Street) Some of the early members at that time were Jack T, Harold S, Jimmy J, Easy E, Walter T, Andy W, and Doc W. Records indicate that the Jacksonville Group stayed at the 204 East Bay Street from, summer of 1942 until the summer of 1946. The first club to be organized to hold property was formed about this time, it was ALCOAN INC. Started on Dec. 4, 1945 Tom S. President pro-tem and Peter H. Secretary pro-tem.

During the early 1940's (1942-1946) there were a number of groups meeting in Jacksonville and they all seemed to hold their meetings in the same building. The earliest *When and Where* on record listed meetings held at 204 East Bay Street (approx 1943/1944) Sunday night 8:30 PM *Riverside Group*, Monday night 8:30 PM *Jacksonville Group*, Tuesday night 8:30 PM *Beginners class*, Wednesday night 8:30 PM *Springfield Group*, Thursday night 8:00 PM *Downtown Group*, Friday night 8:00 PM *Southside Group*, it also lists a Friday night meeting in the Atlantic Beach Town Hall at 8:00 PM *Beaches Group*. The Saturday night meeting was an open speaker meeting for all the groups to attend at 8:00 PM.

Like many A.A. groups of the time (1943) the Jacksonville Group was run in a very formal way with very stringent By-Laws some of which were no women, invitation only, new members will be seen and not heard for the first three months etc.

In April of 1943 the Jacksonville Group Secretary J.L. A. sent copies of a paper edited by two members of the Jacksonville Group, working in the Gibson shipyard, to the Foundation in New York. The paper was called the "Ship Worker". (See if GSO still has a copy)

About 1944 a fellow by the name of Dave A. attended meetings in Jacksonville and Daytona from Orlando. He was very interested in starting a group in Orlando. He met Samuel E. W. and wife who had just arrived from East Orange New Jersey where Sam had gotten sober and met Bill W. On April 6th 1944 he wrote a letter to the Alcoholic Foundation in New York requesting instruction from New York on how to conduct their group. This was to be the start of A.A. in Orlando.

On May 22, 1944 the Groups of Jacksonville had their first official annual dinner. The dinner was held on a Monday evening at 7:00 P.M. at the Windsor Hotel and the guest speaker was Bill W. The third dinner was held in 1946, but the 1947 dinner was listed as the sixth dinner to bring the annual dinners into line with the founding of A.A. in Jacksonville.

In 1945 a man by the name of Thomas M. came from Tallahassee to Jacksonville and entered a local sanitarium. Upon leaving the sanitarium he attended several meetings and returned to

Tallahassee and was listed as a loner on August 1945 and finally started a group with two members in February 1946.

In 1945 the Southeastern groups got notice that the groups in Birmingham Alabama were going to hold a convention. Tom was later to recall, at the time, they thought it was a pretty crazy idea but they all sent delegates to the, two day affair. This was to become the first Southeastern Regional Conference the oldest regional conference in A.A.

The next move for the Jacksonville Group is in the last part of 1946. The group moved to 121 East Forsyth Street a *When and Where* from that time period listed the following meetings Sunday night 8:00 PM *Riverside Group*, Monday night 8:30 PM *Jacksonville Group*, Tuesday night 8:30 PM *Beginners Class*, Wednesday night 8:30 PM *Springfield Group*, Thursday night 8:30 PM *Downtown Group*, also Thursday night 8:30 PM *Beaches Group*, (at Atlantic Beach), Friday night 8:30 PM *Ladies Group*, Saturday night 8:30 PM *Southside Group*,

The first women to break the all men rule in the *Jacksonville Group* came in about this time the were Wynell J. (April.1947) and Loraine M. (December.1947).

The first group to split off from the groups meeting at 121 East Forsyth St. came sometime late 1946 or early 1947. The group was the *Friendship Group*, meeting twice a week, closed meeting on Wednesday 8:30 PM and open meeting on Sunday 7:30 PM. The Friendship Group met at the Alano Assembly second organized club in Jacksonville at 212 West Forsyth St.

In late 1946 or early 1947 the groups that were holding meetings at 121 East Forsyth Street broke up. The *Riverside Group* started meeting at the homes of its members and finally settled down at its new clubrooms at 1166 1/2 Edgewood Ave. They had three meetings a week Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday nights at 8:30 PM. The *Springfield Group*, *Downtown Group*, and *Ladies Group*, met at various places in the center of the city. The *Southside Group*, met in the southern area of Jacksonville. The *Jacksonville Group* continued to hold meetings at 121 East Forsyth St. In the spring of 1948 the *Jacksonville Group* formally changed their group name to the *Central Group*.

In 1947 a bid was presented at the Third Southeastern Regional Conference held in Memphis Tenn. for the Fourth Southeastern Regional Conference to be held in Jacksonville Fl. in 1948. Those in attendance approved it. This was to be the first A.A. conference / convention to be held in Florida.

In Sept of 1948 the 4th Southeastern Regional Convention was held in Jacksonville at the Hotel George Washington. This was a three-day affair, Friday thru Sunday, a total of 503 members and 200 guests registered for the convention. Some of the notable speakers at this affair were Bill W, Lois W, and Father Ralph S. P. The new "pocket-size" AA Grapevine made its official debut at the Conference.

The tenth Anniversary of A.A. in Jacksonville was held at the Hotel George Washington on February 24th and 25th 1951. This dinner was well attended by people from all over Florida and the other southeastern states due to the fact that Bill W. was to be at the two day event to pitch his idea for the Third Legacy Conference Plan. Bill had just introduced his plan in Boston and selected Jacksonville for the second address to cover the southeastern states. On Sunday Feb 25th 1951 at 2:30 P.M. in the assembly room of the Mayflower Hotel the first North Florida Conference was held to select their delegate to represent them at the first General Service Conference. The North Florida District was formed with the help of Bill W. to act as the "guinea pig" for the observers from the Southeastern Region, so that they could return to their respective districts with an excellent knowledge of the correct procedure in the formation of their group districts. Tom S. was selected as the first delegate for the North Florida district.

A side note to the dinner was a telegram that Tom received from Junius and Marie C. on Feb 24th 1951 "wishing love and encouragements to all there" on this Tenth Anniversary of A.A. in Jacksonville. The telegram was sent from Pasadena CA.

The following cities started groups in North Florida during the 1940's and early 50's 1945; Pensacola, 1946; Neptune Beach, Gainesville, Ocala, 1947; Cocoa, Leesburg, Crestview, Deland, Eau Gallie, Marianna, New Smyrna Beach, and Panama City, 1948; Quincy, Chiefland, Palatka, St. Augustine, Sulphur Springs, and Winter Park, 1949; Bradenton, Cedar Key, and Live Oak, 1950; Century, Kissimmee, Valparaiso, and Wildwood, 1951; Pass-A-Grille, Sanford, Stark, and Tavares, 1952; Ft. Walton,

In 1952 the *Central Group* moved from 121 East Forsyth St. to 10 West Duval St. and then in 1953 made its last move to 1423 San Marco Blvd. Where it still resides today.