

Gwen: Our next story investigates a strange letter that takes us to the early days of one of the 20th century's most significant social movements. From colonial times to the present day, drinking has often been an accepted and even celebrated part of American culture. But the social and economic toll from compulsive or so-called alcoholic drinking has always been a painful reality, too.

In the mid-1930s, a new approach to alcoholism was advanced by a small band of recovering drunks. Led by a failed Wall Street broker, Bill Wilson, Alcoholics Anonymous made the controversial claim that compulsive drinking was a medical and spiritual disease, not a moral failing.

Today, with an estimated 2 million members in 150 countries, A.A. is the most well-known recovery program in the world.

Almost 60 years after the birth of A.A., a man from Laurel, Maryland, has a letter that might shed light on a moment when the very existence of the organization hung in the balance.

Guy Miler: my mother had told us as young kids my grandfather had some involvement in the beginnings of A.A., but being young kids, we really thought that was -- okay, that's kind of neat, but didn't think too much about it.

Gwendolyn Wright: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and I'm meeting Guy Miler to get the story behind this mysterious letter.

Okay, "The Alcoholic Foundation, 1942. Dear Mrs. Wallace, we of the A.A. group have never had a better friend, nor a stauncher one, than Herb when the going was hard."

Guy tells me that Herb Wallace was a well-to-do customs attorney in New York City.

Guy: You'll see it's a very nice letter of condolence to my grandmother upon my grandfather's death, Herbert Wallace. It's signed by Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of A.A., and the language there suggests he's just very grateful for whatever my grandfather's support was.

Gwen: Tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out.

Guy: Well, I'd love for you to find out what my grandfather's involvement was with A.A. that would prompt such a nice letter from Bill Wilson.

Gwen: well, I have to ask the question: do you think he was an alcoholic? Was he a member of A.A.?

Guy: I don't think so. My mother never mentioned that to us, and it's not something that I think she would have kept secret. She did say that his connection may have been through a group called the Oxford Group. My grandmother, I think, at the time, thought it was some weird religious cult.

Gwen: Hmm, well, I'm curious. Your grandfather may tell us something about the beginnings of this organization that is now so powerful.

The letter's authenticity doesn't seem to be an issue. This stationery looks period, and it's been in Guy's family since 1942. But why would a supposedly sober well-to-do customs lawyer have been involved with down-and-out alcoholics and the beginnings of A.A.?

Okay, thanks very much. Bye.

Researching an anonymous organization is going to be quite a challenge. I just got off the phone with the A.A. offices, and they couldn't give me anything on Wallace, but they did have the names of a few experts on the early history of the organization.

I'm at Rutgers University's Center of Alcohol Studies.

Hi, you're Barbara?

Clinical psychologist Dr. Barbara McCrady tells me that before Alcoholics Anonymous came along, so-called problem drinkers were often viewed as weak-willed or as sinners. Some zealots saw banning alcohol as the only solution.

Barbara McCrady: In the Temperance Movement, people talk about demon rum. So the -- you know, the push really became, more and more over time, to get rid of the substance rather than trying to help the individuals, and that's when the 18th amendment, which was prohibition, came into effect.

Gwen: In 1935, a failed Wall Street stockbroker Bill Wilson, and an Ohio physician, Dr. Bob Smith, started what would eventually become known as Alcoholics Anonymous. Both had been fall-down drunks who couldn't get sober no matter how hard they tried.

Talking with each other, the two men came to believe that alcoholics weren't sinners of weak will, but had an illness that could be controlled if they supported each other.

Barbara: The big shift in terms of what A.A. does is shift from saying it's the substance, the evil drug to saying people who are alcoholic have problems within themselves.

Gwen: Wilson and Smith stayed sober for the rest of their lives. Wilson wrote A.A.'s famous 12 steps, which are outlined in the organization's main text, known as the Big Book. The steps start with admitting one is powerless over alcohol and asking God or some higher power for help.

Barbara: But the program itself is very clear that your higher power can be anything. It can be Buddha. It can be --

Gwen: It can be the A.A.

Barbara: Yeah, it can be the power of the group. It can be the photograph on your mantle. But the core is to say, "I couldn't do it on my own. I need to rely on more than myself in order to recover."

Gwen: Barbara's description of A.A.'s spiritual approach reminds me that Guy said his grandfather may have belonged to a religious organization called the Oxford Group.

Was there a religious orientation at the very beginning of A.A.?

Barbara: Well, Bill Wilson, as I understand it, got sober through the Oxford Groups, a nondenominational but Christian evangelical organization.

Gwen: That's fascinating, because the person I'm trying to find the link into the A.A. about is a man named Herbert Wallace, who was a member of the Oxford Group.

I want to find out more about this Oxford Group and its possible links to A.A.

Mel Barger is the author of several books on A.A. history. He tells me the Oxford Group had begun at Oxford University in the 1910s and became popular in England and the United States between the world wars.

Mel Barger: They had four absolutes that they believed in: absolute love, purity, honesty, and unselfishness, but they prided themselves on not being tied to any denomination or any political party or anything like that.

Gwen: But the group became controversial after its founder, Frank Buckman, praised Adolf Hitler in 1936, and Mel says that the group was also criticized as a social club for the upper classes. Meetings often held in posh hotels or country estates were sometimes called "dinner-jacket revivals."

Mel: Frank Buckman had a reputation of being drawn to wealthy people. When he was accused of not reaching the down-and-outers, we would say that there were up-and-outers that he had to reach.

Gwen: It sounds as if guy's grandfather, Herbert Wallace, who was a successful lawyer, would have been a typical Oxford Group member.

But by the end of his drinking days, Bill Wilson was a different story.

Mel: By the early 1930s, Bill Wilson had become a hopeless drunk, mainly supported by his wife, who had a job in a department store, and the turning point came when an old friend called on him in late 1934.

Gwen: That friend, a former drinking buddy, had finally gotten sober by finding religion with the Oxford Group. Looking down the barrel of an almost certain alcoholic death, Bill Wilson drank up the story of his friend's salvation.

Mel: And this made a profound impression upon Wilson and he had this illumination, spiritual experience, whatever you want to call it. But whatever it was, it changed his life. He never drank again.

Gwen: Mel says Bill Wilson and his wife, Lois, joined the Oxford Group and embraced its spiritual ideals.

Mel: Their principles were what became the 12 steps of A.A.: seeking guidance from a higher power, helping others, admitting your faults. It all came from the Oxford Group.

I'd like to show you something that's pretty important in A.A. history.

Gwen: OK.

Mel: This is 182 Clinton Street here in Brooklyn, and this is where Bill and Lois lived for nine years from 1930 to 1939.

Gwen: In the fall of 1935, Bill laid the unlikely foundations for a modern medical success story. He discovered that by inviting helpless alcoholics home, while occasionally he could help them, most importantly his selfless effort somehow kept him sober, too.

Mel: So in this house, they had some of their first meetings, the meetings that eventually became A.A.

Gwen: But how does Guy's grandfather fit into the story?

Let me show you that letter that I told you about. I'd like you to take a look. It's a letter of condolence from Bill Wilson to the wife of Herbert Wallace written in 1942.

Mel: Well, this is a very warm letter, and Bill was pretty good at this sort of thing.

Gwen: So have you ever heard of Herbert Wallace?

Mel: No, I never heard of him. I recognize two of the names here as early A.A. members.

Gwen: So you know all the other names?

Mel: Yes.

Gwen: But you don't know Herbert Wallace.

Mel: No.

Gwen: I'm researching some early histories of A.A. and the Oxford Group, but I'm not finding any mention of Wallace.

Ha! Here's one: page 173. It simply mentions that Wallace caused Bill Wilson to take some public-speaking classes at the

downtown athletic club. I'm not sure what to make of that. Let me see if Wilson's wife, Lois, has any clues in her memoir.

Huh! She mentions having taken a Dale Carnegie course on public speaking. She only refers to a Herbert W. In A.A. parlance, but that's likely the same person, especially since it's also in reference to a public-speaking class. I'll see what I can find out.

I show Guy's letter to William Borchert, author of the Lois Wilson story.

You ever heard of Wallace? He's never heard of Wallace either, but he's intrigued by the references to A.A.'s founder taking Dale Carnegie classes.

William Borchert: It wouldn't surprise me. I guess he thought this could help him win friends and influence people, which is what he really wanted to do.

Gwen: Bill also tells me something that makes Wilson's friendship with Wallace even more of a mystery.

As Wilson reached into the gutter to help fellow alcoholics, the snobbish Oxford Group turned its nose up at Wilson and his lowbrow mission.

William: After a while, the Oxford Group didn't like Bill bringing his drunks along with him to Oxford Group meetings.

Gwen: Bill and Lois soon felt unwelcome. Would it be fair, then, to say, that the Oxford Group froze Bill and Lois out?

William: Oh, absolutely, people weren't talking to them anymore, you know.

Gwen: Wilson left the Oxford Group in 1937. The fledgling A.A. was barely surviving, and Wilson was courting the poor-house.

William: Well, he didn't have a job. He was trying to build this organization of, you know, ragtag drunks. They couldn't exactly go to the Bank of America for a loan, and they were living hand-to-mouth.

Gwen: Bill and Lois were no longer able to pay the mortgage on their Brooklyn home.

William: They lost the house in 1939, and for the next two years, they moved 52 times living on the largess of their friends in A.A. it was a terrible situation.

Gwen: It's fascinating to see how -- how fragile it was in those early years. It could have not happened.

William: Absolutely, it could have fallen apart anytime.

Gwen: Was Bill trying to approach people who had wealth because this Wallace did have money?

William: Absolutely, Bill, in the beginning, felt that they -- they needed money to grow.

Gwen: Bill tells me that in these early years, A.A. got a small amount of financial support from some influential people, including John D. Rockefeller. But Wallace was an Oxford Group man and Wilson had been kicked out of that organization. So I'm not sure what to make of it all.

William: Well, Bill Wilson's papers are all in the archives at stepping stones, which is the home where they lived from 1941 on. So you might find something there.

Gwen: After years of hardship, the Wilsons finally found stability at the stepping stones farm outside New York. A wealthy

benefactor helped them buy the property in the early 1940s. It's now a museum and houses Wilson's personal papers.

At first, I don't find anything connecting Wallace to A.A. then I make a discovery that may explain Guy's mystery letter.

Well, Guy, this has been a fascinating journey for me through this early history. And I can tell you that, that hunch you had that there may be some connection between the Oxford Group and the A.A. is absolutely correct. I have a letter to show you. It's from your grandfather to Bill Wilson. This letter, it's short, but it tells us a lot. It's from Wallace --

"cordially yours, Herbert Wallace" -- to Bill.

He's lending him some money, but the most important thing is the date, February 3, 1938. He's continuing his support of Wilson and of what Wilson is doing at a point after the break with the Oxford Group. Herb Wallace is indeed being the staunchest of friends at a very hard time.

Guy: Well, this is fabulous.

Gwen: I tell Guy that just as many believe A.A. offers hope to alcoholics when they are at their lowest ebb, his grandfather had provided support to Wilson at a critical time.

What I really want to underline is it's not just that he's giving him the money, which is critical at that time, but he's giving him the friendship that Wilson then talks about in his letter of condolence to your grandmother. We could say that without your grandfather and other people like him, the A.A. might never have existed.

Guy: Oh, wow. Now that's going some. [laughs] That's tremendous.

Gwen: That make you feel proud?

Guy: Yeah, and I'm not even sure if my mother knows that he had that much influence. It also makes me think about that condolence letter a little differently. Actually, much differently now knowing what it was based on. I'm going to treasure it even more than I have and not just keep it in a drawer somewhere. I think I'm going to frame it and hang it on the wall. I'm proud. [chuckles]

Gwen: That's good.

In keeping with A.A.'s tenet of anonymity, Wilson would not allow his full name or image to appear in the media, but upon his death in 1971, the New York Times published his obituary on the front page.

Many believe Bill Wilson influenced modern perceptions of alcoholism more than any other individual.