

Why does an anonymous program need archives?

Carl Sandburg explained “why” very well. He wrote that “whenever a society or a civilization perishes, there is always one factor present: They forgot where they came from.”

A.A. co-founder Bill W., while aware of the confidentiality hurdles that could face an archives, nonetheless perceived the need for preserving A.A.’s past and had the vision to see that historical accuracy and anonymity were not incompatible. Noting in a letter dated 1957 that A.A.’s past was “still veiled in the deep fog,” he expressed a desire to preserve the Fellowship’s original papers and artifacts. “We are trying,” he wrote, “to build up extensive records that will be of value to future historians. . . . It is highly important that the factual material be placed in our files in such a way that there can be no substantial distortion.”

What are A.A. Archives?

Any historical collection at the local, district, area or G.S.O. level. In January 1971, the trustees’ Archives Committee was formed. Its mission was “to give the Fellowship a sense of its own past and the opportunity to study it and to keep the record straight so that myth does not predominate over fact.”

As Nell Wing (nonalcoholic), G.S.O.’s first archivist, put it, “The knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm of the oldtimers gave us the momentum. With Bill and his A.A. co-founder Dr. Bob (who died in November 1950) both gone, it was an idea whose time had come.”

By 1978 archival efforts were evident in almost every state from California to Florida and the provinces of Canada. There were fledgling archives overseas in England, Ireland and South Africa, with other countries soon to follow. Today, almost every area and many districts and intergroups have permanent archival collections open to the Fellowship.

How are local archives paid for?

The techniques for preserving and storing documents, photos and memorabilia are highly sophisticated—but the methods of paying for them are not. The operational budget for equipment, office supplies, duplicating service, taping, travel for the archivist, and other needs is generally part of the area or district’s overall budget. This way, the archives is seen as a valued part of Twelfth Step service.

How do local archives grow?

Judging from the interest shown in various archives exhibits at assemblies, conventions and round-ups, it is clear that we A.A.s are fascinated with our past and open to contributing what we can to it. Our archives are us, and they grow as we do.

For most A.A. archivists, preserving A.A.’s past is a labor of love. Many an archives has gotten its start in an A.A. member’s bedroom or basement, then graduated to a home of its own. An area archivist said: “We’ve found that communication—through workshops, area newsletters and person-to-person contact—is the number one key to success.”

How can you help?

There are many ways to participate in this rewarding aspect of A.A. service. Think of donating anything from an early-edition Big Book or Grapevine to a signed photograph of Bill or Dr. Bob. If you know oldtimers, ask to tape their stories of the past. You can volunteer time to sort through donated material and help organize files. Almost every archives has a backlog of material to be sorted. After becoming familiar with the collection, you may wish to help with visitors or take time to staff the display at events. If you have artistic talent, you may wish to build display cases or help with arranging material that travels to A.A. events.

To heighten members’ awareness that they may have valuable A.A. artifacts right under their noses, some archives furnish book plates and/or bookmarks saying, “Don’t throw me away, I belong to A.A.” These are especially handy for identifying books and other souvenirs that members wish to keep during their lifetimes, then bequeath to the Fellowship.

How has G.S.O. shared with area archives?

Since its beginning the G.S.O. has shared expertise with those struggling to set up their own archives. Currently, they provide a G.S.O. Archives Workbook, a service piece, Archives Guidelines, and newsletter, *Markings: Your Archives Interchange*. G.S.O.’s Archives has also developed a traveling exhibit that can be borrowed by local archives and set up with ease at meetings, assemblies and other events. Some historical photos that trace the beginnings and growth of A.A. are available from the G.S.O. Archives.

In addition G.S.O.’s Archives staff is a willing correspondent for questions about archival retrieval and storage. Local archivists are encouraged to share their experience with the G.S.O.

How is the Anonymity Tradition observed?

Seeking to safeguard A.A.’s Anonymity Tradition, the trustees’ Archives Committee determined, in 1975, that “any A.A. member may view the originals of any material that has been previously printed or published,” except for material classified as “personal, classified” or “personal, confidential,” such as letters between Bill W. and his wife Lois. Researchers working in A.A. archives are asked to adhere strictly to the Anonymity Tradition — among other things, to list only the first names and last initials of A.A. members.

Further, the trustees’ Archives Committee has recommended that there be no photocopying of private correspondence—to maintain the physical integrity of archival documents and to assure anonymity protection. U.S./Canada archivists are ever vigilant when it comes to anonymity, which places principles before personalities and protects both the individual A.A. and the Fellowship as a whole against exploitation from within and without.

Why are archives important to the Fellowship?

Historical records help us to sift through our day-to-day experience in recovery and reach back for the shared experience from the past. As we sort out the myth from the facts, we ensure that the original message of recovery, unity and service remains the same in a changing, growing, expanding Fellowship that constantly renews itself.

Why are archives important to you?

As one A.A. member said, “When I saw the archives display at the area assembly, I had no idea what it was all about. But after looking at the materials, I had a new feeling of “what we used to be like.” I realized that I could help by donating some time at the archives office and later I taped two oldtimers who told me a lot about the early days in our area. It has made me read some of the other A.A. books I had missed and has given me a real sense of “carrying the message.”

How do A.A. archives help carry the message of recovery?

The collective experience of the past reminds us of how little hope there once was for the suffering alcoholic—of how far we’ve come, thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous. And as we painstakingly sort out fact from fiction, we ensure that our original message of recovery, unity and service will continue undiluted and true.

This service piece is available, free of charge, from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10115. www.aa.org

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“History,” wrote Thomas Carlyle, “is the essence of innumerable biographies.”

Perhaps nothing better sums up A.A. history—millions of personal stories of recovery that come together as a priceless legacy in

THE A.A. ARCHIVES

