

How did a simple phone call change the lives of millions of people across the world?

Image: Joseph Cialdella



## Antonio Ramirez

Bill Wilson needed a drink. A potential business deal had fallen through and Wilson, an alcoholic desperately clinging to six months of sobriety, was standing in front of a bar in the lobby of Akron's Mayflower hotel, miles from his home in New York.

He broke into a cold sweat, panicking. He could hear ice crackling in a cocktail shaker.

What Wilson did that Saturday afternoon in 1935 would become the stuff of legend, a story that would be repeated in conversations, meetings, and books detailing the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous:

Wilson didn't take a drink.

Instead, Bill W., as he is fondly remembered, walked to a lobby telephone and started calling the numbers listed on a nearby church directory, hoping to talk to another alcoholic who would understand the gravity of his struggle.

A local minister directed Bill to Henrietta Seiberling, an Akron resident and a member of the Christian organization, the Oxford Group. Sieberling had dedicated herself to assisting alcoholics and she had been trying in particular to encourage Robert Smith, a local surgeon and

the husband of her friend Anne Smith, to become sober.

### The Meeting

After speaking with Wilson, Seiberling phoned Anne Smith and the two planned a meeting between the men for the following afternoon.

Bob couldn't meet that day, Anne explained, because at the time of Seiberling's call, he was passed out drunk under the dining room table.

Just before meeting Wilson, Bob Smith famously made Anne



Mayflower Hotel Postcard, c. 1940s, Public Domain (left)

You can visit the Smith's house today (below),  
Image: Joseph Cialdella



made Anne promise they would only spend fifteen minutes with the stranger from New York. Instead, the two men talked late into the night. They shared experiences about drinking and the physical and psychological damage it caused them both.

“Our talk was a completely mutual thing,” Bill would write later. “I knew that I needed this alcoholic as much as he needed me.”

That conversation would later be called the “first meeting” of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the practice of alcoholics talking to other alcoholics would become one of the foundations of the organization.

Within a week, Wilson had moved into the Smiths' Akron home and Smith had agreed to try to quit drinking. There, in the Smith home, the two men would later develop AA's famous Twelve Steps and hold AA's earliest meetings.

After a major slip at a medical conference in Atlantic City, Smith was truly ready to get sober. He took his

last drink—a beer Bill gave him to steady his hands before a critical surgery—in 1935, and Alcoholics Anonymous was born.

### After the Call...

Since 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous has grown from Dr. Bob and Anne's home in Akron, Ohio to a global network that has helped millions achieve sobriety.

Although AA states that there is “no practical way of counting members,” the group boasts nearly 2 million members and more than 107,000 local groups in 150 countries. More than 10% of American adults have attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at some point in their lives, and almost 3,000 books, dissertations and theses have been written on the organization. Both *Time* and *Life* magazines have recognized Bill Wilson as one of the most important people of the twentieth century.

Today, a 1930s era replica telephone and church directory in the lobby of the old Mayflower Hotel commemorates the phone call that led to the founding of one of history's largest, most enduring mutual-aid organizations.

No outward sign marks its presence in the hotel, but Akron residents and AA members know it's there. "You guys from AA?" a woman immediately asked when a group of us walked in the door of the now-defunct hotel.

"An alcoholic in his cups is an unlovely creature," Bill Wilson once noted. But understanding the "unlovely" nature of alcoholism has never been the same since Wilson made that first phone call.

### For Further Reading:

Ernie Kurtz, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*.

Antonio Ramirez is a PhD student in History at the University of Michigan where he recently helped complete a National Historic Landmark nomination for Dr. Bob's House (the Smith's home).