

Alcoholics Anonymous Sues for Return of “the Big Book” Manuscript

by Jeanne Schinto

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. (AAWS) filed a lawsuit in New York State Supreme Court on May 18, demanding the return of the original working manuscript of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known more familiarly and even affectionately to sober ex-drinkers as “the Big Book.” The heavily annotated draft of what the lawsuit calls AAWS’s “foundational document” was scheduled to be auctioned by Profiles in History of Calabasas, California, on June 8 with an estimate of \$2/3 million. In keeping with the bigness theme, AAWS has hired Dentons, which is the “world’s largest law firm” as measured by the number of lawyers, according to its LinkedIn profile. It was founded in 2013 after a merger of several law firms here and abroad, including China’s largest.

Named in the lawsuit is Ken Roberts of Daphne, Alabama, who consigned the manuscript to Profiles in History. Roberts informed AAWS in April that he intended to sell it. He was served with court papers on May 19. Two other parties were named as his codefendants. They are Profiles in History and Questroyal Fine Art of New York City, where the manuscript was on pre-auction display for three days in May.

“Commencing litigation is not something that A.A.W.S. generally does,” the lawsuit states, “since it focuses its energies on serving the Fellowship and the still-suffering alcoholics.” The court papers go on to say that this “emergency action” was necessary, because the manuscript is an “irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind piece of A.A. history,” comparable to the originals of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

At the very least, the Big Book must rank as one of the most successful examples of writing by committee ever, and the manuscript is the evidence.

William Griffith “Bill W.” Wilson, who cofounded Alcoholics Anonymous with Robert Holbrook “Dr. Bob” Smith in 1935, completed an early draft of the Big Book in 1938. It describes what became the organization’s famous Twelve Step program and its equally famous case studies section, which recounts the life stories of numerous ex-drinkers, from down-and-outers to housewives to physicians like Dr. Bob. It also lays out AA’s basic philosophy, which is that only an alcoholic can help another alcoholic stay sober.

Bill W.’s draft went out to dozens and dozens of people for critique. Their line-edits, additions, subtractions, suggestions, reservations, quibbles, and comments are handwritten all over the manuscript’s 161 typed pages. Some of them simply suggested stylistic changes, ways to make the prose flow more smoothly. The more substantive changes show how AA and its bible became what they are today. Crucially, any hint of a preachy tone was eradicated. For example, a sentence that originally read, “This volume will inform, instruct, and comfort those who are, or who may be affected” by alcoholism was flagged with a query handwritten in red pencil that asked rhetorically, “Do people like to be told they will be instructed.” As a result, both in the manuscript and in the published book, the word “instruct” was deleted, and the sentence was changed to “We hope this volume will inform and comfort those who are, or who may be affected.”

Equally important, the edited manuscript shows how the Big Book, and as a result AA itself, moved away from using specifically Christian references. That decision has made it possible for the book and the program to be embraced not only by agnostics and atheists but by a multitude of religions throughout the world.

The anonymous nature of the group was also key, and that is obviously reflected in the book’s title and in the group’s name. It wasn’t automatic that they settled on *Alcoholics Anonymous*, however. Some of the book titles they considered and that drew strong favor were *Dry Frontiers*, *The Empty Glass*, *The Way Out*, and *The Bill Wilson Movement*.

Although Harper & Brothers offered AA a \$1500 advance for the book, Bill W. and the others decided that the group should self-publish it instead. The reasoning was that self-publishing was the better way to achieve their goal, which was to have available a text to offer those who could not get to an AA meeting in one of the few places (New York City, Akron and Cleveland, Ohio) where they were then being held. The first edition was published in 1939 with a print run of fewer than 5000 copies. Sales were painfully slow at first. The book was reviewed in the

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New York Times, but it wasn’t available in bookstores, only from AA. After a *Saturday Evening Post* story, published in 1941, momentum began to build. Today *Alcoholics Anonymous* is considered one of the best-selling books of all time, with 40 million copies in 68 languages in circulation. In 2012, the U.S. Library of Congress designated *Alcoholics Anonymous* as one of the 88 “Books That Shaped America,” along with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*; or, *Life in the Woods*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, and Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. For the complete list, see the website (www.loc.gov/exhibits/books-that-shaped-america/).

So how did Ken Roberts come to be in possession of the manuscript? Bill W. was its owner until his death in 1971, when it passed on to his widow, Lois Wilson. On New Year’s Day 1978, Mrs. Wilson gave it to a close friend. Indeed, there is a dated inscription on the manuscript that says: “I joyfully give this multilith copy of the AA book, one of my most precious possessions, to you, dear Barry, as evidence of my deep gratitude for all you have done for AA, for Al-Anon, & particularly for me... 1/1/78.”

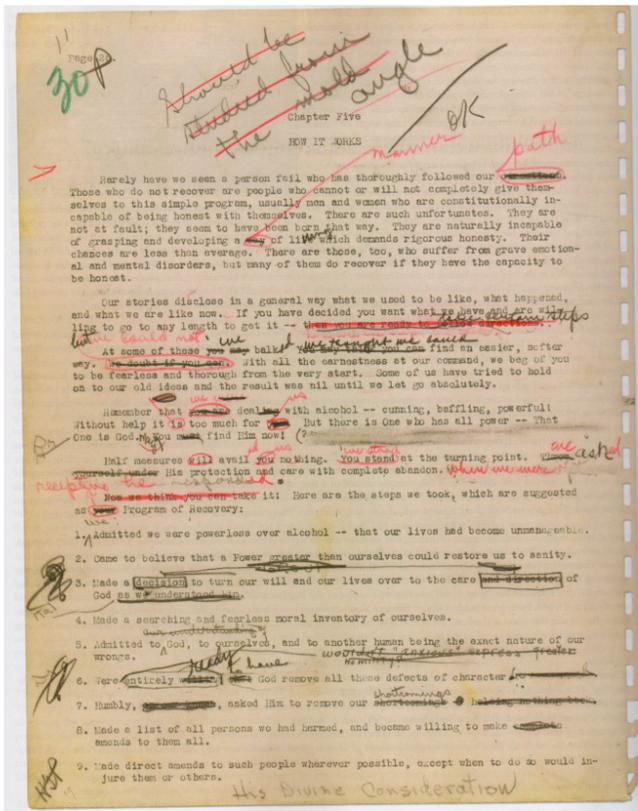
“Barry” was Barry Leach, a research psychologist, author of another highly respected book for alcoholics, *Living Sober*, and the one who helped Mrs. Wilson write her autobiography, *Lois Remembers: Memoirs of the Co-Founder of Al-Anon and Wife of the Co-Founder of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Both Leach’s book and Mrs. Wilson’s were published in 1979. According to the lawsuit, that same year, on April 10, Leach wrote, signed, and notarized a letter to AAWS, gifting the manuscript to the organization upon his death. Indeed, Exhibit 1 of the lawsuit is the Leach letter, which clearly states his intention. He added, however, this proviso: “... it is understood I may keep the manuscript in my physical possession for research and study until my demise, and this gift will not be announced, if at all, until then or thereafter.” Leach went on to say that a copy of his letter was going to be sent to the unnamed executor of his estate. That executor, his brother Thomas Fenn Leach, died in 2006.

After Leach died in 1985, the organization did not come into possession of the manuscript, “due to either extreme negligence or potentially wrongful actions by individuals outside of A.A.W.S.” (the lawsuit’s wording). In fact, it’s unclear where the manuscript went after Leach’s death—until, that is, almost 20 years later when it was consigned to an auction held at Sotheby’s in New York City on June 18, 2004.

William A. Sherk of La Jolla, California, was the winning bidder at that 2004 sale, paying \$1.576 million for it. (All prices include buyer’s premiums.) Records show that the consignor was one “Joseph B.” According to a story in the *New York Times*, Joseph B. was “an A.A. member who said he received it from an aunt who knew Wilson.” In keeping with the anonymity guaranteed AA members, Joseph B.’s last name was not revealed and isn’t in any records that this reporter could find.

Sherk, an attorney practicing in San Diego County, did not have the manuscript for long. It went up for sale at Sotheby’s again on June 21, 2007, almost exactly three years after the first auction. This time the buyer, at \$992,000, was Roberts. In 2010, Roberts arranged with Hazelden, treatment center for addictions based in Center City, Minnesota, to publish a facsimile of the manuscript. Titled *The Book That Started It All: The Original Working Manuscript of Alcoholics Anonymous*, it went on sale in a cloth hardbound edition (\$65) as well as in a leather-bound version (\$125). Currently, the cloth edition is discounted on the Hazelden website for \$45.

According to his website (www.kenroberts.com), Roberts is well familiar with publishing ventures. Among other books, he is the author of *The World’s Most Powerful Money Manual & Course*, which he self-published in 1983 when he was just over 30. The book purports to reveal how anyone can become a successful commodities trader



A page of the manuscript. Photo courtesy Profiles in History.

with a minimal investment. As he claims on the website, he himself “knew virtually nothing” about commodities trading until he learned all about it from an unnamed California deputy sheriff. “And then I was led to teach others how too, and my ‘World’s Most Powerful Money Manual & Course’ became legendary.”

(A writer for *Forbes Magazine*, among others, has published an opposing view of the book’s author. In the March 9, 1998, issue, calling Roberts a “prominent purveyor of hype,” William Green observed, “He hawks trading charts, a course on options, a newsletter and his novel, *The Rich Man’s Secret*. He also owns a piece of a California brokerage firm, Main Street Trading. It charges commissions so high [\$95 a trade] they virtually assure that most small active traders will lose money. The hype has paid off for Roberts. It has brought him tens of millions of dollars and an Oregon mansion with a cigar room. But where are the customers’ mansions?”)

In 2006, Roberts’s website goes on to say, he retired, having “made enough money to last several lifetimes.” Roberts then self-published a more general title, *The Ultimate Technique for Success: A Step of Faith That Makes Any Dream Come True*. “Let me take you by the hand and show you how, step by step—RESULTS-GUARANTEED or your money back!” Roberts says on the website. “Only \$29.95, includes S&H and 1st Class Priority Mail delivery!”

Nor is this Roberts’s first time in court. In 2003, the Federal Trade Commission settled with him over his use of deceptive claims to market commodities, stock, real estate, and other investment courses. In return, he agreed that his deceptive claims to purchasers of his investment courses violated federal law, and he was required to “disclose, clearly and conspicuously, the risks associated with investing.”

Why didn’t AAWS speak up either of the other two times that the manuscript was on the auction block? AAWS claims it was unaware that the Leach letter existed when the manuscript was auctioned the previous two times, finding it only a few months after the 2007 sale to Roberts. “This is the first known attempt to sell the Manuscript since A.A.W.S. discovered the original letter in its files that established its ownership of the Manuscript,” the lawsuit says.

A hearing is set for August 2 in New York. Either Roberts or his counsel must appear. He was also ordered to post bond in the amount of \$1.7 million.

For further reading about AA, Bill W., and the Big Book, see *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* by Ernest Kurtz (1979) and *My Name is Bill: Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (2004) by Susan Cheever, who has also written about her own alcoholism most recently in *Drinking in America: Our Secret History* (2015).