

History Corner

The Jacoby Club and AA

William L. White

There is a rich history of persons suffering from alcoholism coming together to organize recovery mutual aid societies. In America, these societies date from eighteenth century Native American recovery “circles,” which were followed in the nineteenth century by the Washingtonians, recovery-focused fraternal temperance societies, the ribbon reform clubs, the Dashaways and such treatment-linked support groups as the Ollapod Club, the Keeley Leagues and the Godwin Association. Most of these groups eventually collapsed, but there were a few groups (the United Order of Ex-Boozers and the Jacoby Club) that bridged these early efforts and the rise of Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930s.

A recent book by Richard Dubiel, *The Road to Fellowship*, explores the influence of the Jacoby Club on the development of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Jacoby Club grew out of the Emmanuel Movement—an attempt to blend religion, medicine and psychology in the treatment of nervous disorders. Rooted within the Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Boston, this movement quickly developed a specialty in the treatment of alcoholism using recovering lay psychotherapists. In 1909, Ernest Jacoby founded the Jacoby Club as a meeting place for Boston citizens recovering from alcoholism. The Club grew rapidly to more than five hundred members under the slogan “A Club for Men to Help Themselves by Helping Others.”

The Jacoby Club had several features that were later replicated in AA, including their emphasis on sober leisure and fellowship, an aversion to dogma and special support of new members (taking responsibility for a “special brother”). Publications about the Jacoby Club such as *The Lonesome Man* and *The City of Comrades* and annual reports with such titles as *Men Who Have Won* were filled with tales of “regeneration.”

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Jacoby Club experienced internal conflict related to its primary mission, with some of its leaders wanting to continue the focus on service to the alcoholic while others wanted the Club to focus on the needs of older men in the community. As AA was going through its early birth and development in Boston, there was a period of co-existence between the Jacoby Club and AA. Paddy K. used the Jacoby Club in his struggles to gain sobriety until he and Burt C. started the first AA meeting in Boston. As AA grew in Boston, the fortunes of the Jacoby Club declined. By the early 1940s, the Club was financially struggling, and Boston AA had taken over much of the Jacoby Club’s service work with alcoholics. The Jacoby Club continued its marginal existence serving older men until the Club’s final demise in the late 1980s. In an interesting twist of historical continuity, Boston AA met for a time in the facilities of the waning Jacoby Club, absorbing the legacy and lessons of the Jacoby Club into the growing body of experience that shaped the character of AA. Those interested in that influence will want to read *The Road to Fellowship*.

William L. White (bwhite@chestnut.org) is Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems and author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*.

