

Lois W. – 1891-1988

Lois Burnham Wilson – beloved Lois W. to millions of A.A.s and Al-Anons, and widow of A.A. co-founder Bill W. – died peacefully on October 5, 1988, at the age of 97.

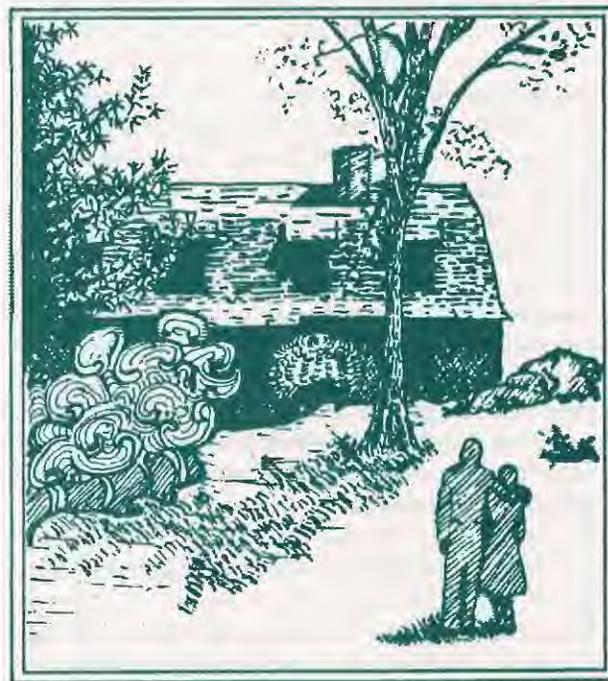
Just a month before, appearing rather frail but sitting alertly on the couch in the living room at Stepping Stones, the home she shared with Bill, she told a visitor, “I’m going to make 100, you know.” She didn’t quite. Two weeks after making this remark, she had to enter the Northern Westchester Hospital. Suffering from pneumonia in her last days, and unable to speak, she continued to communicate by writing on a pad.

Five days before her death, John B., general manager of A.A.’s General Service Office, called on Lois in the hospital. He expressed his personal gratitude and that of the Fellowship because, he told her, “A.A.s owe their lives to you.” A ghost of a smile crossed Lois’s features and she wrote on her pad, “Not to me, to God.” John replied, “But you were His servant.” And Lois wrote, “So are you.”

Upon hearing of her death, John said, “She was the last of the four: Dr. Bob and Anne, Bill and Lois. Her passing is the end of an era for Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Michael Alexander, chairperson of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, sounded a similar note in his letter announcing Lois’s death to the Fellowship: “In the early days the entire future of our Fellowship and of countless alcoholics hung on the thread of the determination and ability of Bill W. and Dr. Bob to persist in their efforts to put Alcoholics Anonymous on firm ground. Lois Wilson is regarded by many as someone without whom her husband could not have persisted in that crucial work. Bill referred to her as a ‘full partner’ in the struggles and joys of those early days. Indeed, many A.A.s feel their lives are owed to Lois as well as to Bill, Dr. Bob and Anne.”

The Saturday afternoon after Lois’s death, about 50 family and friends gathered for an informal, Quaker-style service in the living room at Stepping Stones before a roaring fire in the stone fireplace. On that occasion, Michael Alexander spoke of her many talents and many sides: not only the leader and organizer of Al-Anon, but writer, artist, poet, musician, much sought-after and



Lois used this sketch of Stepping Stones on her Christmas cards.

effective speaker, lover of nature, homemaker, tireless hostess, devoted wife to Bill. “She was a remarkable and great lady and we shall sorely miss her.”

That afternoon others shared poignant, bittersweet and even funny memories that emphasized her indomitable spirit until the end of her life, her sharp mind, her sense of humor, her feistiness. Ralph B., hired by the old Alcoholic Foundation to write some of A.A.’s first pamphlets and a frequent visitor to Stepping Stones from the earliest days, said that she was “a force that kept everything going while Bill was thinking or writing or visualizing.” He continued: “I would sometimes stand up to Bill, but I wouldn’t *think* of arguing with Lois.”

Ron S. told of accompanying Lois, a speaker at the Desert Roundup in California only three years ago. As he pushed her wheelchair across the hotel parking lot, she spied a huge, gleaming motorcycle, which she asked to go over and admire. Once there, she asked to be photographed alongside it. When she was introduced the next day, the motorcycle group of A.A. members

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made her an honorary member, to the cheers and whistles of the huge crowd. “She loved it!” declared Ron. Steve S., a Bedford Hills taxi driver, brought it home by telling in a few words how Bill and Lois had first touched his life when he was a drunk, and how they had helped turn his life around and gave him warm friendship through more than 20 years’ sobriety.

Lois never stopped. Until the last weeks of her life, she continued to accept invitations to speak, planned trips, appeared at the annual Bill W. Anniversary Dinner in New York to deliver “Bill’s Last Message,” attended the opening dinners of the General Service Conferences of both Al-Anon and A.A., welcomed visitors to Stepping Stones and frequently lunched out with friends.

She summed up her own life as it related to Bill and to A.A. in these words (from the Preface to *Lois Remembers*):

“Bill’s recovery came about in spite of me. Although it was what I had been working for all our married life, I had gone about it the wrong way. My love, deep as it was, was also possessive; and my ego was so great I felt I could change him. . . . Bill *was* my life. . . . For the first 17 years of my recovery and Bill’s, there was no fellowship for the families of alcoholics. . . . A.A. was therefore my first love. Although not alcoholic, I feel even today as much a member of A.A. as of Al-Anon, at least in spirit.”

Lois Burnham was born March 4, 1891, in Brooklyn, New York, the oldest of six children. “My childhood was an extremely happy one,” Lois wrote.

She also had happy memories of summers in Vermont with her grandparents and at a lakeside cabin owned by her parents. She was a tomboy, joyfully going barefoot, riding her bicycle, climbing trees. With the other youngsters, she swam and boated on the lake, and as she grew up, went into Manchester for tennis, golf or dancing.

There she met Bill, who was a friend of her brother Rogers. Bill and his sister Dorothy lived in East Dorset with their grandparents, their parents being divorced. Lois was not particularly impressed with Bill at first because he was four years younger and was a native Vermonter, whereas she was a sophisticated summer

resident. But as they spent many summer hours in mutually shared good times — hiking, picnicing, boating, and above all, talking — her interest quickened and all differences were forgotten.

The couple carried on a romance by mail — she on a daily basis, he more sporadic. Bill was in and out of Norwich University, and when the U.S. declared war in 1917, his class joined the Army Reserves and Bill was sent to Officers Training Camp. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in August and stationed in New Bedford, Massachusetts. During this two and a half year period, he and Lois visited as often as possible in Brooklyn or at his various posts and had wonderful times together. Then it was rumored that Bill’s regiment was about to go overseas, and they were married January 24, 1918.

They left for New Bedford and four months later were transferred to Newport, Rhode Island. During most of their courtship, Bill had not touched alcohol, as his father’s drinking had been a contributing cause to his parents’ divorce. Now, however, he occasionally drank at parties — and when he did, he got drunk. It didn’t worry his bride, as she believed she could “fix” him.

During the war, Lois worked at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. Upon Bill’s return after the Armistice, they lived in Brooklyn. Unprepared for any civilian job, Bill floundered. “To think things over,” Lois said, “we took an extended walking trip through Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont,” thus starting a lifelong habit. Bill went to law school for four years, while Lois worked as an occupational therapist.

During this period and the years that followed, Bill’s drinking grew steadily worse. Although they had dreamed of having children, Lois suffered three ectopic pregnancies with accompanying surgery. At the last one, Bill was too drunk to come to the hospital to see her. After learning they could not have children, they applied to an adoption agency — but without results, because apparently one of their references reported that Bill drank to excess.

A bright spot came in 1925, when they both gave up their jobs, bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle with sidecar, and took off for a year of vagabonding.

In 1929, “distraught over Bill’s incessant drinking,” Lois poured out her anguish in a document that was heartbreaking but remarkable for its insights. It read in part:

“What is one to think or do after so many failures? . . . If I should lose my love and faith, what then? I see nothing but emptiness, bickering, taunts and selfishness. . . . I love my husband more than words can tell, and I know he loves me. He is a splendid, fine man . . . everybody loves him . . . a born leader . . . so bighearted he would give away his last penny . . . has a delightful sense of humor and an unusual vocabulary . . . a

compelling talker . . . remarkable memory. . . . Details bore him, his mind being of the farseeing, long-perspective kind. . . . He continually asks for my help, and we have been trying continually for five years to find an answer to his drinking problem. . . .”

Lois was to need her remarkable spirit over the next five years, as her husband sank into hopeless alcoholism. He lost job after job until he became unemployable. Lois took a job clerking in a department store to buy food for the table. Bill “became a drunken sot who didn’t dare leave the house,” according to Lois. Twice, she put him in Towns Hospital to be dried out and twice took him on trips to the country, to Vermont, to nurse him back to health herself. Nothing did any good. Finally, he virtually stopped eating and drank around the clock.

Then one day in the late fall of 1934, Bill made his way once more to Towns Hospital. There he had his transforming spiritual experience.

Lois wrote, “The minute I saw him at the hospital, I knew something overwhelming had happened. . . . His whole being expressed hope and joy. . . . From that moment on, I never doubted that at last he was free.”

On leaving Towns, Bill tried to sober up all the alcoholics at the hospital, in missions, and anyplace else he found them – without success. He and Lois were also attending Oxford Group meetings. In May 1935, Bill carried the message to Dr. Bob in Akron. When he returned to New York he began to have success in working with alcoholics. And he began bringing them home to the house on Clinton Street. “We used to have as many as five in the house at a time,” he wrote later (in *A.A. Comes of Age*), “and sometimes they would all be drunk at once.” There were fights and one suicide – after the victim had sold hundreds of dollars worth of Bill and Lois’s clothes and luggage. Lois would come home exhausted from her work at the department store and then have to cook dinner for a houseful of drunks who didn’t even pay board.

Bill and Lois were still going to Oxford Group meetings during this time. One Sunday, a trivial incident occurred which Lois later called the turning point in her life. When her husband said casually, “We’ll have to hurry or we’ll be late to the Oxford Group meeting,” Lois, with a shoe in her hand, threw it at him as hard as she could and cried, “Damn your old meetings!”

As she analyzed her behavior later, she saw that she had always had great faith in her own power; she believed she was “master of her destiny.” She now resented the fact that Bill’s newfound friends in the Oxford Group had accomplished in a twinkling what she had failed to do in 17 years. She had also become accustomed to running things as nurse, breadwinner, decision maker; now Bill was living his own life, spending much of his time with the alcoholics who were beginning to form the first New York group. She wrote, “I

have come to see that well-intentioned good deeds often fail when they are done from our own power alone; the only real good is accomplished by finding God’s plan and then . . . carrying out that plan.” Out of this thinking, Al-Anon eventually was born.

As Alcoholics Anonymous began to take hold and grow – as an office was acquired, the Big Book written and published, and groups sprang up in other cities – Lois’s life, along with Bill’s was filled with furious activity. “It was a hectic and fruitful time,” she recalled. It was also a time when they had no money at all. After they lost their home in Brooklyn, they literally lived off the charity of friends. During 1939 and 1940, they moved an incredible 51 times! In February 1940, as they were going through Grand Central Station, she suddenly sat down on the stairs and burst into tears, wailing, “Will we ever have our own home?” They ended up living for several months in a tiny room in the old 24th Street Clubhouse in Manhattan with only a borrowed bed and two orange crates for furniture.

Their wanderings ended in April 1941, when it was made possible for them to buy the lovely house in Bedford Hills, New York, which was later named Stepping Stones. Brown-shingled and hip-roofed, it stands among trees on a hill, overlooking a valley. It was not only their home as long as they lived, but became a mecca for countless A.A.s and Al-Anons for the past 47 years.

The decade of the ’40s also saw extensive travels around the country by Bill and Lois; and in the spring of 1950, to eight countries in Europe as well. Lois found that in many places, wives and families of A.A. members were meeting in groups themselves, and she usually talked at these meetings. In 1951, Bill urged her to open a service office for the Family Groups. She was reluctant at first because she was so excited about working in the house and garden at Stepping Stones. But as she considered the need, and after meeting with other wives to explore the idea, Lois opened a service office with the help of a friend, Anne B. Beginning with a list furnished them by the A.A. General Service Office of family members or groups who had written requesting help, they soon had more work than they could handle alone. They moved their activities in early 1952 from Stepping Stones to the 24th Street Clubhouse, where they enlisted volunteers to assist. And thus Al-Anon was formed. Today, including Alateen, 30,000 groups exist worldwide.

In 1955, at the St. Louis International Convention, Bill stepped down as leader of A.A., turning the responsibility over to the groups working through the General Service Conference. Lois was present, of course, and made the first address after the “Coming of Age” ceremony. In fact, Lois attended every International Convention from 1945 until 1985, and participated in every one.

In early 1970, while doing a chore on the roof at home, Bill fell to the ground. It marked the beginning

of a decline in his health. His emphysema took a marked turn for the worse. Following a last brief appearance at the International Convention in Miami in July, he required Lois's constant care, and later had nurses around the clock. He died on their 53rd wedding anniversary, January 24, 1971. Lois was with him until his last few hours.

A symbolic culmination of Lois's life was her appearance in July 1985 at the 50th Anniversary International Convention of A.A., and the accompanying Convention of Al-Anon, in Montreal. At age 94, she addressed a hushed audience of over 45,000. The very appearance of her tiny figure on the stage in the center of the vast Olympic Stadium brought the huge crowd to its feet in a tumultuous standing ovation that went on and on.

From the time of Bill's death, Lois was concerned that Stepping Stones continue to be maintained and kept open after her own death for the benefit of A.A. and Al-Anon members. She also wanted to use a substantial portion of the money which had come to her from Bill's estate (largely from royalties on A.A. books he had written) for alcoholism education and prevention. Therefore, in 1979, she formed the Stepping Stones Foundation for these purposes.

Until her late 80s Lois insisted on living independently, with only her housekeeper, Harriet, to help. Then after suffering several falls and fractures, she surrounded herself with aides and helpers who, along with devoted friends, enabled her to live comfortably and graciously during her last years. This staff was supplemented by regular attention from Nell Wing, Bill's aide and secretary for 27 years and Lois's long-time companion as well; Ann Burnham Smith, Lois's second cousin; and other devoted friends.

On October 20, 1988, a memorial service for Lois W. was held at the beautiful, historic Marble Collegiate Church in New York. The large church was nearly filled for the moving service. In his eulogy, the minister, Dr. Arthur Caliandro, emphasized how unusual and remarkable it was for such a huge crowd to turn out for the funeral of a 97-year-old person – and how they symbolized the larger family of many millions who lived new lives because of Bill and Lois.

Lois's devoted day nurse for more than four years, Ethyl Dumas – whom she dubbed "Eternal Ethyl" – recalls that "this lady always knew what she wanted." She relates that on the afternoon of October 5, Lois wrote on her pad, ". . . want to go to sleep." "And," says Ethyl, "that's just what she did."

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