

John T. Is one of Jacksonville's AA pioneers, He has 44 years of sobriety (DOS11/5/1973). John taped his story for the Intergroup Archives and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. Interview by Tom F. transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewer: John where were you born and what was your life like and how did you get drunk and how did you get sober?

John: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. My daddy worked with the Texaco Company and he was sent Florida in 1934. I think I was 5 years old and I lived there until 1950 when I went in the service. Those were the depression years, and daddy had the only job in the whole extended family and we had a lot of family. At one time I think we had 5 families living in a 3 bedroom, 1 bath house. Daddy had the only job and he took care of everybody. I had a great childhood. We didn't have anything but we didn't know we didn't have anything because nobody had anything but we had each other. We lived on the river and every weekend we caught crawfish and shrimp. We would boil all that and then daddy would play the banjo and all the adults drank and sang until we went to bed Saturday night and then we got up and went to church on Sunday. I started working when I was about 8 years old and I had a job working for a man at his dairy. I went to school and I worked 6 days, Monday through Saturday. I was about 12 when I found out you could make \$10 to \$12 a week being a paperboy, so I got a paper route. I had to give mama money every week. It was room and board, and then I had to put so much money in the bank. It was the rule of the house that anybody that made any money had to contribute to the household and that's the way I grew up and it was a fun life. We lived close to the river and I was in the river a lot when I wasn't working. At school I was just an average student. I wasn't outstanding at anything until I got to high school. I don't remember if we had honor rolls or anything like that. I never was a straight A student. I didn't make a lot of A's. I made a lot of B's and C's. Anyhow we got into athletics and that's when my life took on a different thing. I loved athletics and I loved being part of the team. In those days in south Florida the town's identity was the high school athletic teams and so Daddy let me play football and basketball but I did not play baseball because I had to go back to work, which was fine. I really loved football and basketball. After high school I went off to the University of Florida. I was the first person in my family to go to college and I went up there to play ball for the University. I lasted 1 year, almost a year, but I didn't go to class, and that's when I started drinking. I think I only drank one time in high school and that was the night I graduated. I don't remember much about that night. At the University all of the veterans were back at the end of World War II and every night one of them would say, "Ya want to go get a beer?" It was amazing to me that I was free to go get a beer. You could get a glass of beer for a nickel. Of course I didn't have any money but I could afford a nickel. I started drinking that way and I drank. Daddy pulled me out of school before the end of that year and he put me to work back in Fort Pierce. I was working for him, which I didn't mind because I had worked for him off and on all the way through high school and I knew all about what he did in the oil business. However, I was drinking at night. I would come home and my parents had a baby when I was 16 and so now she is about 5 or 6 and I'm 19 or 20 and I'm coming home and I'm waking them up at night and they don't like that at all. In 1950 the Korean War started. I had wanted to enlist at the end of World War II but I was too young and the war ended. When the Korean War started daddy took me down to the recruiting office and I enlisted. I went in the service and within 6 months of enlisting I was in Korea. There was no drinking most of the time because we were trying to stay warm and stay alive. I spent a year there and when I came back I had enough points to get an early discharge. So, I got out early and went back to college and by now I wanted an education. It was kind of funny because by this time I had grown from 5' 10 " when I first went there to 6' 2" and weighed 180 pounds but now all I really wanted to do was get an education. I didn't want any more of the college life. I was ready to grow up. I went to study. I don't think I ever took less than 19 or 20 hours. I graduated in about 3 years. I met a lady and married her and we had our first baby before I

graduated. She was born in December of 1955 and I graduated in January of 1956. My drinking was pretty much under control. I didn't have any time while I was going to college.

I had the GI Bill and I also had a laundry route. I went to the fraternity houses, picked up their laundry, got it cleaned, and brought it back. Later, I got a job running a motel. We lived at the motel, which was wonderful because it was nice. We had enough room, a kitchen, a living room, and that's where the new baby was born. Every night I was renting rooms. The next morning I would get up at 7:00a.m. and pick up the laundry from the night before and take it and have it cleaned.

I studied marketing. At this point, I thought I was going to be a salesman. I wanted to learn as much about marketing and then I began to realize that nothing happens until the sale is made. It took an awful of effort to learn how to make the sale and what to do after the sale. To make a long story short, I went to Southern Bell in 1955 and my drinking progressed pretty good there. I came to Jacksonville and got promoted a couple of times, selling advertising, and did very well. I made supervisor there and they put me in the business office and then I became a manager and they sent me down to Orlando and I became the Orlando manager. I came back to Jacksonville and was running the state office of advertising and public relations and they were going to send me to New York and I didn't want to go to New York. By this time, I think I had 5 kids and I didn't want to take them up there and I didn't want to go. In those days you didn't tell the corporation what you wanted to do. The guy that ran the State called me and did everything he could to get me to go to New York and I told him I just couldn't. He said, "John you have a year to find a new job." The newspaper had offered me a job, so I quit and went over to work at the newspaper in 1965. I stayed there until they sold it in 1983. My drinking really got out of control. I had no boss. I was driving all over the country selling advertising and I had no supervision. I was in charge of all the sales and I got the sales going really, really good for them, and they began to make more money than they ever thought possible and they let me do whatever I wanted to do. So, my drinking went way out of control. I finally reached a point where they could no longer put up with my drinking and they sent me to a place called Willingway because they had an alcohol program. They sent me there for 30 days and that was the first time I had ever been to an AA meeting. I think I had heard of AA but I had no idea what AA was all about. I met alcoholics in recovery and I couldn't believe how they liked each other and I couldn't believe how they laughed and giggled and I realized how much I missed. Facing myself and admitting and being honest with me was very difficult. Once I got through that process I reached a point in the steps that I felt that God had forgiven me. I didn't spend a lot of time worrying about forgiving myself. By this time I knew if I did certain things I felt good, so I really was focused on how can I feel better, and better, and better, and then I began to learn new habits that the people that came before me shared with me what they did and it felt good to feel good. I really didn't fight it because the minute I quit trying to learn, chaos and conflict would come back in my life. All I had to do was work on one thing. For instance, if I was working on patience, I think I'm working on one thing but really when I became more patient, I became kinder, because I wasn't going crazy. Since I wasn't completely impatient, I wasn't abrupt and everything with everybody else, so I became kinder. I became more gentle and I couldn't become patient if I had not become honest. All these things are connected and I didn't know that. I started out working on one thing and everything improved which was really kind of fun to learn new ways to think. I really have enjoyed my time in AA. It has given me my family back. My family has grown. I've got so many grandchildren from seven kids and it has given me a chance to just love them and to be there and to constantly love them. I look at almost everything differently than I did before. Sometimes my wife will say, "Why are you smiling" and I'll be smiling because I'm thinking of what I would have said years ago if I hadn't been patient. I say, "Thank you Lord." and that is new in my life. There is so much gratitude in my life that didn't exist before. AA has given me so much and I will never be able to give back what it gave me but I am going to try.

I: What was your perception of AA's success in the general community?

John: I was a pretty active member of the business community so I was involved a lot and I don't ever remember anybody talking about AA. AA was a very secretive thing. I remember after I got in it if anybody said anything to me they said, "We heard you quit drinking." That is what they said. I'll never forget I went to New York and I was entertaining a bunch of people that I was selling to and we were having drinks before dinner. One of them asked me why I wasn't drinking and without thinking I said, "I've joined AA." I realized what I said and I thought, "Oh my Lord." They all just started laughing and said, "Hey man, old Bill is in AA, you need to call him and Fred is in AA." AA was very common up there. When I went to Chicago it was the same way and in Atlanta it was almost that way. In Jacksonville, at that time, when I was asked to join the Tom S. meeting, I met maybe 15 business guys who were prominent in Jacksonville. I didn't know any of them were in AA going to that meeting. I don't think anybody else in town knew it. AA today is a social club for people trying to change their lives. Back then nobody seemed to know about it and nobody wanted to talk about it.

I: How many meetings were there in Jacksonville?

John: I think there were about 10 meetings and that included Fernandina and St. Augustine. The Arlington Group where I went met at Christ The King Church on Wednesdays and at the little Christian church on Atlantic Boulevard on Sunday nights. The San Marco club was opened 3 nights a week but was not open at all during the day. Penman Road was open and it had meeting about 3 nights a week and also was closed during the day. The Arlington Group, which was a basic group, was about the only group on the Southside when I first came into Alcoholic Anonymous. I remember a guy named, Tucker F. he latched onto me. Tucker was 3 years into the program when I came in and he grabbed me and we started a meeting called, "The Group" off Arlington Road, and then we started one on Southside Boulevard.

It seemed that every meeting was Friday night at 8:00 and my oldest son was going to play ball that year. I had quit drinking, so I wanted to go. By that time I had a sponsor and he said, "Let's start a daytime meeting." So, we started one at 7:30 in the morning and it was still going a few years ago. I don't know if it still is or not. I had a place out at the Beach too, so we started a meeting at the Baptist Hospital on Friday mornings at 7:30 and I know that's still going. I also helped start the Dutch Group down there. I was involved. AA began to grow, and once enough people came to AA, they opened San Marco during the day. For a long time they didn't have meetings there during the day but then they finally started. Penman Road was the same way. They opened it up and people just sat around and drank coffee. I was not allowed by my sponsor. He never wanted me to hang out at the clubhouses without him. I was only allowed to go during the meetings. I could be a GSR and then he let me be on a committee one time. He did not want me involved in politics or the business and I think that has really helped me a lot.

I: When you got sober John, how were group members contacted?

John: You may think I'm exaggerating but I don't think more than 2 days passed that I didn't get a call about somebody in trouble. In those days you would sign up at the Intergroup office if you wanted people to call you but I had so many calls coming in from the business community that I only signed up once and after that I had my hands full. It's hard to go help the Jones family without the Jones' family telling the Brown family and the Smith family that you had helped them, so those other 2 families would start calling you and even the heads of businesses. It felt like I became the Employee Assistance Program for the Chamber of Commerce. It was fun. It was good. I think I was one of the first guys they had met who quit and stayed quit. That's how the 12 steps worked in my life.

I: John you have seen the number of meetings increase dramatically over the time you have been sober and here in Jacksonville. Bill talked a lot about struggles that the groups had and conflicts that that they had. Have you seen anything like that that you could talk about?

John: I don't really remember. I wasn't really at the level, nothing was big enough that I heard about. The only disagreement I know about is when Pappy got in an argument with someone and he started his own group. That was the beginning of the JABA club. We called it the Fiesta Group in the beginning. The owner let Pappy use the Fiesta Lounge and that's how they got the Fiesta Group name.

I: How do you feel about how we are actually helping people get sober and stay sober today?

John: The difference that I see in today are the club meetings, particularly the noon meetings are so large that there is no fellowship. People come in, newcomers, they raise their hand, they get there right on time, they leave maybe a little early or right on time. People don't know each other. I think AA has gotten too big. When I came in every meeting was 4 or 5 people, so you couldn't hide in any meeting. If you were a new person, everybody had a shot to try to help you. I see so many really big meetings now. I see people come into meetings and don't speak to anybody but their friends. They go sit with their friends. I miss the old days when everybody talked to everybody. Now, there are 100 people in the room and you don't get to know anyone.

I: When you were first getting sober how did you do your 12 step work?

John: One of the things we all did is we took newcomers to all different meetings to see who they connected with. If they connected with people in different groups then we would help them get a network of people and put new people together, not all new people, but we put 1 or 2 together, so they would have somebody to talk to. In the days when I came in if you said that you wanted me to come to such and such a meeting, you would say to me, "I'll pick you up." and I would say, "No, I'll meet you there," and you would say to me, "No, I'll pick you up." It was important that meeting before the meeting, the meeting, and the meeting after the meeting. If I was riding with you, you would take me to coffee with your friends and that would open up a network. It was more of a hands-on thing. Now I think we miss a lot of opportunities.

I: What did you think about the AA organization; Intergroup, World Service Office, GSO, group involvement in that?

John: I have been a GSR several times but never really been involved in the AA structure. It works and it is being run by people who have turned their lives over to God. It's all God driven. AA is not about me it is what can I do for somebody else.

I: Thank you John.