

This 3-part series of short articles designed to encourage and guide amateur historians interested in A.A. and other recovery mutual aid groups was published in *The No Name News & Networker* published by The Bishop of Books, Wheeling, WV. Vol. I, nos. 1-2-3, March 1995, December 1995, and November 1997. They are reprinted here with permission of the author and the publisher (Charlie Bishop, Jr.).

I. DOING HISTORY

Ernie Kurtz

Words like "amateur" or "hobbyist" are dangerous when applied to historians. All historians tell stories, stories based on their research. Is there something less valid about research done out of love for a topic?

No. Such motivation can in fact have advantages, leading to more painstaking and persevering efforts at finding material on a topic. Lovers don't give up. Most "professional" historians rely far more than they commonly admit on the work of their non-academic brethren.

But devotion to a topic may also have disadvantages. Enthusiasts may be less interested in finding the truth than in making some point. Advertisers and lawyers search for evidence to prove something already "known." Historical research begins in the admission of ignorance and a curiosity to find out what actually happened.

In practice, of course, the line between those two is not always clear. We all think of ourselves as open-minded; and we all harbor some pretty definite ideas about how and why some things happened, ideas based more on our preferences or on our sense of "how it should have been" than on any evidence.

And there us the key word: evidence. Knowledge, although it is never absolute, differs from opinion because it is founded in, drawn from, evidence -- as much relevant data as is available.

One can, of course, find "evidence" for just about anything. But the historian looks for all the evidence -- or at least for as much of it as may be available. Thus, in studying Alcoholics Anonymous, the careful student of A.A.'s early years looks to learn what was going on in both New York and Akron. And someone interested in A.A.'s more recent story is wary of generalizing from practices common in one state, no matter how populous.

Besides an open-minded search for as much evidence as may be available, "doing history" involves realizing that "lack of evidence is not evidence of lack." That means, simply, that negative statements require proof, just as do positive ones, though proving negatives is almost always more difficult.

Some axioms, then -- challenges that we who are interested in A.A.'s history must bring to bear on ourselves and each other, for this is one area where historians need each other almost as much as alcoholics need each other. First, on hearing or thinking anything new, we need to ask: "What is the (my, your) evidence for that?" And our second question perfects the first: "Might there be any other evidence on this matter that is being overlooked or omitted?"

The next question, "What else was going on at the time?" opens our next topic: the historical spine, chronology, its uses and abuses. In later issues, if readers show interest, we will pick up "lack of evidence -- evidence of lack" and will explore the historical storyteller's relationship to the classic journalistic questions: "Who, what, where, when, how, why?" And by that time, I trust, someone else will be ready to take over this column.

II. DOING HISTORY -- DOING TIME

Ernie Kurtz

Last time we thought about the historian's reliance on evidence -- all the evidence -- and the honest use of all the evidence that is available.

Now we turn to history's spine, chronology. Time, its flow and its connections, are a significant part of historical evidence. Thinking about time also introduces a topic that will occupy coming columns: memory.

Memory has little interest in the calendar. We recall not dates but connections -- we most often "date" an event by what else was happening at the time. Especially our autobiographical memory privileges what over when, for its real interest is the creation of meaning about the self.

Yet ordering is important to meaning. Did I go to my first A.A. meeting the week after I lost my job? Or did the job-loss come a month after I got into A.A.? The first sequence fits nicely into my story of "hitting bottom." The second tells the story of how A.A. helps me to deal with life's bumps.

Just as any story consists not of events but of the connections among them, chronology concerns not dates but their ordering. Whether Dr. Bob's last drink was on June 10th or June 17th, whether Bill W. and Dr. Bob actually approached "Alcoholics Anonymous Number Three" on the "next day": those details, albeit compulsively intriguing, bear little on A.A.'s story. But whether the New York A.A.s left the Oxford Group before or after work began on writing the Big Book, whether newspaper advice-columnists began recommending Alcoholics Anonymous before or after the American Medical Association referred to alcoholism as "disease" -- the way those and many other sequences run can make a real difference in our understanding of some aspects of A.A.'s story.

Historians are very interested in the calendar, in time, in sequence. This is one thing that distinguishes historians from other students of the human condition. Confronted by complex human action, the philosopher ponders its relationship to larger reality; the psychologist explores for motivation or conditioning; the historian arranges in chronological order.

How? Sometimes we find primary sources, contemporary documents. Yet even these harbor pitfalls. Many letter-writers, for example, continue well into January to date their correspondence in the previous year. And so, as is the case with a missive from Rev. Sam Shoemaker to Bill W., when confronted with a letter headed "January 22, 1935," the careful historian does not build an argument on that chronology but looks for other evidence as to whether the note was written in 1935 or 1936.

But most often, with so profoundly oral a phenomenon as Alcoholics Anonymous, written documents are few and the largest reliance must be on memory. Memory's evidence comes to us in two forms: (1) an aware, self-conscious remembering, as in an interview or recorded recollections; and (2) in documents that are not "primary sources" because they are not a part of the events they describe but derive from someone's reference to those events, perhaps at the time of the events but usually some time afterwards.

"Some time afterwards" means that knowledge of consequences, of what came later, has likely shaped the memory of the event. And that is a topic for future columns: is memory a storehouse, or a reconstruction site?

III. DOING HISTORY: THE ROLE OF MEMORY

Ernie Kurtz

What is memory? Bluntly, nobody knows. Most recent descriptions focus on brain physiology, current research emphasizing brain chemistry. But whatever the science underlying the phenomenon of human memory, the practical question is whether it is better understood as a storage area or a construction site. Does memory just give back what it takes in? Or does memory itself shape what it has absorbed?

Best opinion is that memory is *both* storage area and construction — or *reconstruction* — site. We do not have to choose between the two but rather try to integrate them. This is not a new idea. Millennia ago, the philosopher Plato offered a metaphor for memory drawn from a familiar technology of that age: memory was like a wax tablet.

Plato's was a sophisticated image. A wax impression is shaped not only by the object pressed into it but by the condition of the wax. Heat, humidity, and the passage of time as well as the precise quality of a particular piece of wax all have their effect. Moderns have not improved much on that image. Over-reliance on simple computer metaphor may suggest "storehouse," but artificial intelligence and expert systems clearly engage in constructions.

"Doing history" involves reliance on memory. This is most obvious when dealing with recent history, for — though we seek out all the documents that may be available — our primary method is careful listening to the recollections of those who in one way or another "were there" or at least who have living memory of having heard speak those who "were there."

But such sources must be used as carefully as any other document. Just as a written source may have been written for a particular purpose, even the most honest memories are all too easily contaminated over time. One famous research example demonstrated that individuals' five-year-later recollections of where they were when they heard of the Challenger disaster much differed from the descriptions they wrote down the day after that tragic event.

What most distorts memory is knowledge of what happened after. A simple example is any alcoholic's memory of his or her "last drink." Most sober alcoholics have had quite a few "last drinks." The way the one that was really "last" is remembered is powerfully shaped by the fact that it was really last . . . at least until now.

More complex examples abound. Memories of how a particular AA group began can be powerfully shaped by whether the group is still in existence and how it is flourishing. Stories of early relationships of AA members and groups with formal alcoholism treatment settings often reflect the impact of later experience, happy or sad.

Is there anything we can do about this reality of memory in our own interviewing? My experience suggests a few practices, and I invite those who have developed other approaches to write to Charlie or me so that we can pass them on to others. For starters, it is important to listen for and if necessary to ask for actual concrete detail. Interviewees' interpretations can be informative, and we enjoy them especially when they match our own. But we best serve accurate history by seeking to hear and then drawing in words actual *pictures*. Trying to remember those details often helps to bring our interviewees into closer contact with their actual recollections.

I also find it useful, after hearing someone's description of what they remember, to tell them respectfully but curiously that someone else's memory differs. My task, I tell them, is not to decide which one is "right" or "wrong"; it is rather to figure out what is the larger truth into which *both* versions might fit. Doing that, after all, is one fun part of our skill as historians; I see no reason not to invite our sources, who give so generously of their time and memory, to tackle that task and relish its fun with us. When I have done this, both I and my story have gained.

And that is enough from me for now. I hope to hear from you, your ideas on this fascinating topic of how we deal with the reality that our memories are as fallible as just about everything else about us.