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House of AA founder a draw for members

By JIM FITZGERALD, Associated Press Writer

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At least once a year, Bill T. gathers up a few of his fellow Alcoholics Anonymous members and makes a pilgrimage from Florida to honor those who saved him from a life of drunkenness.

The 56-year-old stopped drinking in 1990 and he likes to visit the former home of the co-founder of AA, Bill Wilson, and his wife, Lois.

"I like to come up here because it carries the message," Bill T. said during a visit in July to the brown-shingled Dutch colonial. "There's a connectedness."

Bill T. can sit at the kitchen table where in 1934 Wilson sat and drank gin with pineapple juice as a newly sober friend sparked his quest for a way out of alcoholism.

He can see the desk, marred by cigarette burns, where Wilson later wrote "Alcoholics Anonymous," better known as "The Big Book," and set out the 12 steps and other principles that have helped millions.

AA is an informal society of recovering alcoholics who help one another stay sober by following a 12-step, spiritual approach. An estimated 2 million members attend community meetings where they share their personal problems and triumphs.

Many visitors are AA members, who use their first name and last initial in public to preserve their anonymity. For many, the Wilsons were miracle workers, and visiting their home, called Stepping Stones, is tremendously moving.

"If you're sober in AA, you have this second life you never thought you'd have. It's very moving to see the books and the people and the things of interest that went into making Bill and Lois who they were," said Tim H., 62. "It's like learning about your Dad when he was a boy."

Bill Wilson died in 1971 and Lois Wilson — who founded Al-Anon, the organization for alcoholics' relatives — set up the Stepping Stones Foundation in 1979. She died in 1988, and the house is maintained to look like it did when she and her husband lived in it.

The four-bedroom home and the 8 1/2 acres around it in the New York City suburbs are owned and managed by the foundation. It's on the National Register of Historic Places.

Lois Wilson catalogued hundreds of books, photos and keepsakes, including a letter from Carl Jung, a blessing from Pope Paul VI and a collection of plastic dinosaurs.

A colorful towel is tacked to the wall, right where she placed it in the 1980s. Its label says, "This is a beach towel and I really don't remember where I got it."

The Wilsons came to Bedford Hills in 1941, six years after founding AA with Robert Smith. The couple had been evicted from their Brooklyn brownstone.

Executive Director Annah Perch says the foundation hopes to preserve the site and its contents, emphasize its educational value, and create a traveling exhibit that would spread the Wilsons' story. About 1,200 visitors came to the home last year.

"Some people will never be able to come here," Perch said. "We have to bring the legacy of Bill and Lois beyond Stepping Stones."

Among the items in need of preservation, and not currently seen on the tour, is Bill Wilson's original volume of "Alcoholics Anonymous," annotated by him as the first copy off the press in 1939. It was followed by 25 million more in English alone and millions more in other languages.

Stephanie O'Keefe, 78, of Larchmont, was a friend of the Wilsons and visited the house Tuesday for the first time since Lois

Wilson's death.

"This looks pretty much the same," she said. "They found peace here. They were able to regenerate when they were exhausted."

She remembered, however, that the Wilsons would occasionally steal away to another friend's house nearby for some privacy, since so many people were drawn to Stepping Stones.

"They found the adoration difficult but understandable," she said.

On the Net:

Stepping Stones Foundation: <http://www.steppingstones.org>

Alcoholics Anonymous: <http://www.aa.org>

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