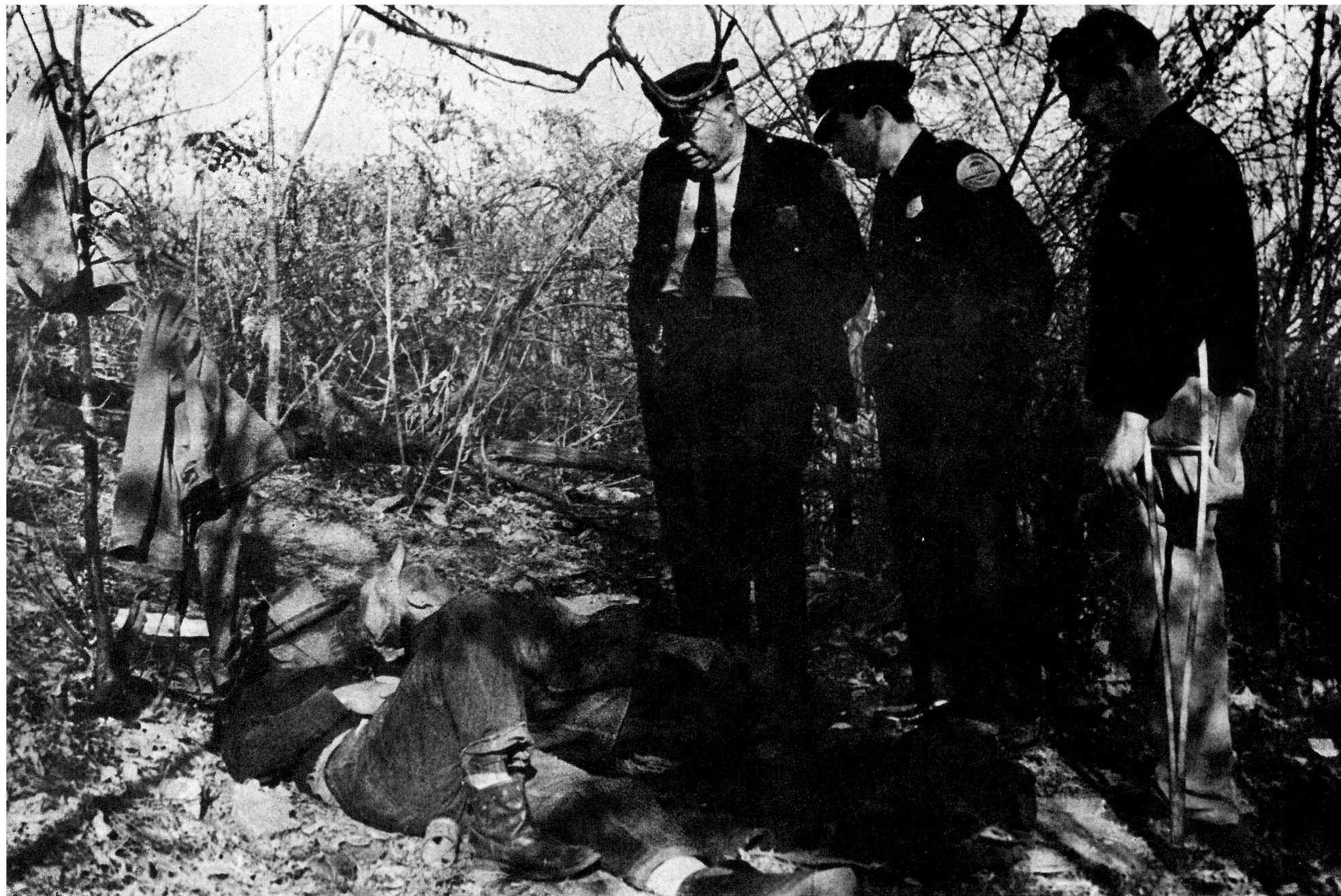


The judge who saves Alcoholics



Symbols of the end of the line, these emptied tins of canned heat litter the hobo jungle outside Des Moines. Bums and desperate alcoholics strain the jellied compound, called “derail,” through an old sock or other fabric, then drink themselves into a stupor.



Two drunken derelicts, only dimly aware of policemen and Tom, one of Ray Harrison’s “students,” are samples of the unfortunates the judge tries to salvage.



A chronic alcoholic gives the thoughtful judge the familiar promise to reform. In jail for safekeeping, he was drunk within an hour after he was released.

By GORDON GAMMACK

THE 16 DRUNKS being arraigned in Des Moines Municipal Court were typical of the dirty, disheveled and sickly alcoholics who clutter the jails of any American city.

The presiding judge was 53-year-old Ray Harrison, just appointed to the bench to fill a vacancy. Judge Harrison himself had been an alcoholic in past years and had been arraigned 16 times in this same courtroom for intoxication. He embarked on an experiment.

When the first drunk was called, the judge said, “Jerry, you’ve been in here eight times this year. Ever thought about trying to quit? Would you meet me here at 7 o’clock tonight to talk it over?” Jerry nodded.

“All right. Your sentence is two days, suspended. Now, coming here tonight is entirely up to you. But if you don’t have a drink today, and you do meet me tonight, that will be your first big victory.”

Judge Harrison made the same proposition to the rest. The drunks listened. They knew his record: 13 years of complete sobriety; the Des Moines Tribune Community Service Award (1949) for his rehabilitation

of alcoholics. They knew he was offering them a helping hand, not a reformer’s lecture.

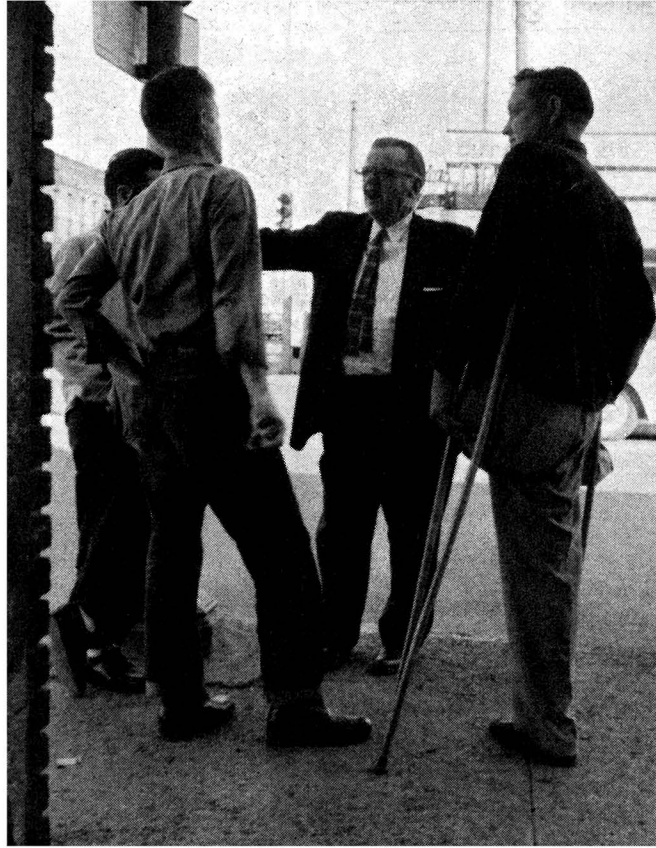
When the drunks were gone, he chuckled, “Won’t I look silly sitting here all by myself tonight? Right now, they intend to come, but some of them will be drunk by noon.”

At 7 o’clock, an apprehensive Judge Harrison was alone in the court room, but at 7:05, the first two members of what was to become his “honor class” arrived.

One was Allen, frail and elderly. He had walked 10 miles. The other
continued



Ever optimistic, Judge Harrison, left, listens attentively to two men’s personal problems before his weekly “class” starts.



Direct approach of Judge Harrison with alcoholics includes talking with them on a street corner as well as in his court.

Failures have been fewer than expected

was 40-year-old Gretchen. Her eyes were still bloodshot; her dirty black hair was straggly; her hands shook.

"Don't promise yourselves that you'll never drink again," he counseled. "Take it 24 hours at a time. Say that you won't take a drink until this time tomorrow night. Then do it again. And ask help from whatever God you believe in."

Allen didn't return. Judge Harrison doesn't know what happened to him. But Gretchen did return, not just once but many times.

She hasn't had a drink since that day in Judge Harrison's court. Her eyes today are clear. Her lips, once thin and drawn, now form an easy smile. She earns \$15 a week and her meals as a practical nurse. One of Gretchen's first purchases in her new life was a Bible. She lives alone in modest but clean quarters. And she never misses Judge Harrison's Wednesday-night "honor-class" meetings.

Eight habitual drunks showed up for the judge's second meeting. One was Marvin. He had a history of over 300 arrests, a virtual record in Des Moines. Marvin had gone to college in Indiana. His intoxication record in Des Moines started in 1940. Somehow, he served creditably with the Army in Europe. After the war, he lost his right leg in an accident and underwent 12 major operations. Constant pain aggravated his addiction to liquor. When Marvin got drunk, he discarded his artificial leg, and he became a familiar figure as he hopped in and out of court. Harrison's evangelism somehow took hold with Marvin. His "honor-class" record is matched only by Gretchen's.

Judge Harrison—as he tries to do for all who seek his help—got Marvin a job, paying \$1 an hour. However, it meant standing all day on an artificial leg; it was painfully hard. On two occasions, when Marvin failed to report for work, Harrison was afraid he had gotten drunk again, but it was only his leg that had kept him away. Marvin used some of his earnings to redeem a watch, given him by his father, that he had pawned for whiskey. He sent it to his own son as a high-school graduation gift.

Judge Harrison's program is still fairly new, but its failures have been fewer than he anticipated. More than 50 persons regularly attend the Wednesday-night meetings now. Only 16 who enrolled as "honor candidates" have dropped out. Of these, 10 have been arrested for intoxication after short spells of sobriety.

continued

Since Judge Harrison started his court program, arrests for intoxication have dropped sharply. Des Moines police credit the decrease to the judge's experiment. Between April and August, 1955, there were 2,437 arrests for intoxication; in the same period of 1956, there were only 1,968. The decrease is greater than the number of people rehabilitated by Harrison because most of the habituals formerly were arrested several times each month.

Ray Harrison has borrowed greatly from his own experience with liquor in dealing with Des Moines' drunks. As a student at Drake University in Des Moines, he was voted by his classmates "the most likely to succeed." He had his own band and was known throughout the state as a singer and saxophonist. From Drake, he went to the Yale Law School on a scholarship. In New Haven, he earned \$50 a week singing on radio station WDRC (Hartford) and with Barney Rapp's orchestra.

"I drank quite a bit at Yale, but I kept up my work at law school. Liquor wasn't yet a real problem," Harrison recalls.

When he opened his law office in Des Moines, it was assumed he would build one of the best practices in the city. Soon, though, he acquired a reputation as a drunk. Clients lost confidence in him.

"I think my greatest shame was when the police came to my law office and led me to the patrol wagon in front of my friends," says Harrison.

In 1928, he became an assistant county attorney, but he continued his drinking. Six of his arrests for intoxication occurred while he held that office. He tried to cover up his drinking—having only one or two drinks in one speak-easy before moving on to another. He frequented speak-easies in sections of the city where he was not well known. But he fooled no one.

Harrison not only has been completely "dry" these 13 years, but has devoted thousands of hours to helping alcoholics. He became so wrapped up in his "honor-class" work that he canceled his summer vacation. He means it when he tells his "honor class": "I've been able to stay sober only because of the help I've had from fellows like you."

The "honor-class" meetings always are informal. Harrison, usually wearing a sport shirt, sits at the courtroom counsel table.

When the meeting starts, he calls the roll, asking each one in turn to say how long he or she has been "dry." "Five months . . ." come the replies, "one week . . . 21 weeks . . . six months . . . six days . . . since April 15th . . . 16 weeks." Harrison feels it encourages the newcomers to hear of the successes of others.

Recently, he turned to two men who had just been released from jail.

"Ed and Bob, I mean this—I'd give part of my right arm if it meant you'd never take another drink. You're both 25. Do you know what it
continued

Ralph was looked upon as a hopeless case

means in terms of money if you quit drinking? It means 50,000 bucks to each of you before you die. That's what statistics say—50,000 bucks you won't have if you keep on drinking."

Harrison occasionally broke the seriousness of the discussion with humor: "Sam, how many kids you got? Seven? Well, we've got to get you a night job."

After an hour, he concluded: "I've got something new for you tonight. I've got cards for each of you, showing that you're members of the 'honor class' and how long you've been sober. We'll keep them up to date each week. I think they'll help you get jobs. Now Mama (Harrison's wife) has made a batch of chocolate cookies. Eat 'em up. They're good."

Later that evening, in his chambers, he went over the records. "I keep my fingers crossed all the time," he said. "Of course, we'll have failures. The ones who won't work—they're the worst prospects. But I'm tickled pink over what some of these people have done."

Ralph was one of the worst of the habituals and, as Harrison commented, "Everyone wanted to wash his hands of him." But he joined the honor class and got a job.

Usually, he took a 7:20 bus to work every morning, but one day, he missed it and caught the 7:40. Sitting near him was a youngster who looked like his son, whom he hadn't seen for 11 years, when the boy was four.

Ralph tapped the lad on the shoulder and asked him his name.

When the boy told him, Ralph said, "I'm your father." He talked with the boy for a while and then handed him a \$5 bill.

"I'd like you to have this if you don't think it would make your mother mad. And if it's O.K. with your mother, I'd like to take you to dinner Saturday."

Ralph now is reacquainted with his son. Often, they go fishing together. He also frequently sees his former wife, who divorced him because of his drinking. Judge Harrison has urged him to establish his sobriety a little longer, then remarry her if she is agreeable, as she has indicated that she will be.

Some weeks ago, another "student," Joe, arrived intoxicated at an "honor-class" meeting. He claimed that he had had only two pints of beer. Judge Harrison had information that Joe had had six quarts. He wanted advice on how to stop drinking.

One said, "When you get home tonight, drink a quart of milk." The courtroom rocked with laughter when Joe exclaimed: "A WHOLE QUART?" But Joe has had a quart of milk—no beer, no whiskey—every day since.

END

Look Magazine 02-05-1957