



The
TUERK
HOUSE

by

Rafael Alvarez



Portraits by
Philip Edward Laubner

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Dedicated to the memories
of
Isadore Tuerk & Walter Criddle

*“Dr. Tuerk was the seed,
that's why it was named for him.
And if it hadn't been for Walter Criddle
and Alcoholics Anonymous,
Tuerk House would not exist ...”*

— Wendy Maters



Tuerk House employees, 2011

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PREFACE

Project Hope



"You folks keep going forward with hope ..."

- Rev. Carl Greenawald

Once again, I didn't know what I was getting into. Someone wanted a book written and the call came my way.

Work was on the table and I made like a handyman with a Sanford & Son pick-up truck, pocketing half the meager payday while floating outlandish promises about when the job would be done.

That was almost three years ago. Yet writing the history of the Tuerk House - some 42 years and counting - was a breeze compared to how long it took to complete a history of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. That narrative merely encompassed more than 400 years of faith and politics on both sides of the Chesapeake.

The Archdiocese book, commissioned by then Cardinal William H. Keeler (a strict grammarian), took about six years. The pay wasn't much better than the Tuerk House gig but the publisher - Editions du Signe - did fly me to France to try and speed up the process.

The joke was on Francois, who fed me well.

Because in the end, the work takes what it takes, especially if you labor over the rivets that allow the girders to stand. After the trip to Paris and Strasbourg, it was another year-and-a-half of chasing down octogenarian ushers and women who launder the altar linens before the manuscript was ready.

Likewise, I continually stole time for one more Tuerk House story – poignant, sad, funny, and often but a half-truth - of anyone who kept the coffee going without expecting anything in return.

More than once, the search led to a loved one who said, “Oh, I’m sorry, he passed away last year.”

While this reckoning of the Tuerk House fills a long-standing void in the People’s History of the City of Baltimore, work should have begun at least 20 years earlier. As recently as half-a-dozen years ago, I could have interviewed the Rev. Robert “Rocky” Kearns, a Tuerk House board president and Josephite priest.

Kearns’ commitment to the sick and the poor put him in the path of violence at least twice during tenures at West Baltimore parishes. Once he was forced to hand over the poor box after a gunman pistol-whipped a fellow priest. Another time, he and parishioners subdued an intruder with a razor. Kearns died in 2008, taking a thousand other tales with him.

The Reverend Rocky could easily have appeared in both the Tuerk and Archdiocese books. The common denominator in the commission from Cardinal Keeler and the story of a pioneering alcohol and drug rehab was my favorite subject.

The City of Baltimore.

If the Archdiocese book was Baltimore history with a Catholic filter, this is Baltimore history through the lens of recovery. I have a personal and abiding interest in all of the above. In both projects, stories cropped up that didn’t quite fit the overall theme but deserve to be remembered.

Like Alvin Cohen’s memories of his 1930s childhood, one worthy of the great immigrant novel “Call It Sleep.”

“I remember cars you had to crank to start,” said Cohen. “I remember ice-boxes and ice men who made deliveries with horses,” said Cohen.

Now retired, Alvin was a social worker assigned to the University of Maryland Hospital ER where he helped find a recovery bed for many a street drunk. Sober for decades, he grew up

during the Depression as the only white kid in an East Baltimore African-American neighborhood on Lafayette off Central Avenue. His block was later torn down for public housing.

Cohen was reared by his mother and his immigrant grandfather, Jacob Stelmach, a member of the Lloyd Street Synagogue.

"It's impossible to describe what it was like being the only white kid on the block," said Cohen, who only realized the impact of it years later, long after his job as a soda jerk in a pharmacy at the corner of Broadway and Baltimore Street.

"I had a gun pointed at me when I was 11. The man might have been joking but it was no joke to me. I started crying."

Cohen recalls overhearing friends tell his "Zadie" (grandfather) to "get that kid out of the neighborhood" but the old man didn't listen.

"He had an Old World village mentality," said Cohen, who lists the experience among those that made him sympathetic to the plight of others.

Of the clients admitted to Tuerk House on any given day, about 65% are male. The average age, male or female, is close to 43. Of the patients arriving from Baltimore City, three-quarters are African-American. Virtually all are poor.

Said one counselor: "I always thought that if I'd led the life that a lot of these people have, I'd be shooting heroin too ..."



And so, hope.

I have a memory from way back in the days when my brother Danny and I sat with coloring books in front of the basement TV and watched Mighty Mouse and Popeye and the Three Stooges.

This was long before I knew about the many and inexplicable ways people destroyed their lives, before I'd seen some of the more improbable promises of the catechism stand up and walk like a man.

Between cartoons and scenes of Shemp being led around by the nose with a pair of pliers, an ad for a floating hospital – the S.S. HOPE out of San Francisco – flickered across our black-and-white Zenith. Launched in 1958, Project HOPE was exactly as old as me.

Because of my family's maritime history - ships were cool, adventures around the world even cooler, do-gooder adventures the coolest of all – images of the S.S. HOPE have remained with me all these years.

Though the former Navy hospital ship was retired in 1974, it sailed through my memory early in the writing of this book. I saw it clearly when the Rev. Carl Greenawald rose to speak at a reunion of Tuerk House pioneers.

“People talk about hope,” said Greenawald, a Lutheran hospital chaplain when the facility was on Greene Street. “When Tuerk House started, all we had was hope.

“It was like a bumble bee – aerodynamically unable to fly. But we did.”



Chapter

1

THE ODD COUPLE

Wendy Maters & Walter Criddle



*"I was seeing all these alcoholics and
there was no place for them to go . . ."*

-Wendy Maters, ER supervisor

On June 30, 1968, it was a crime to be intoxicated on the streets of Maryland. The formal charge was “found drunk.”

The following day, public drunkenness became a medical problem and the Old Line State was the first in the nation to codify it as such.

The headline in the Baltimore *Evening Sun* read: “Drunkenness Becomes Health Issue in Maryland starting July 1.”

Late in his career, the pioneering Baltimore alcoholism researcher Dr. Max Weisman [1912 to 2000] put it this way:

“Drinking ... is not the cause of alcoholism, no more than eating sugar is the cause of diabetes. Often, society doesn’t separate its attitudes toward drinking, drunkenness and the disease of alcoholism.”

With the enactment of the landmark “Comprehensive Intoxication and Alcoholism Control Act” - which immediately became a national model - cops were no longer tossing winos, rumpots and wet brains in the drunk tank.

The legislation stated that inebriates “either incapacitated or whose health is in immediate danger” must be taken to a hospital or detoxification facility.

Now that alcoholics were sick people and not criminals they were being dumped at hospital emergency rooms. And no one was quite sure what to do with them.

“The medical profession was both prejudiced and ignorant when it came to alcoholism,” said Georgina Y. Goodwin, a retired anesthesiologist and former Tuerk House board member.

A state survey from the time of the law’s passage indicated that less than half of the general hospitals in Maryland would admit a patient with the primary diagnosis of alcoholism.

And the typical nursing staff was not prepared to handle a patient going into delirium tremens.

Thus were planted the seeds of the Tuerk House.

And Wendy Maters - an expatriate nurse who made a deal with God as a teenager to help "those most in need" if she were saved while floundering in the English Channel - was there when it was sown.

"There was no poorer, sick person in the world to me than these alcoholics," said Maters, who ran the University of Maryland emergency room, one of three ERs charged with figuring out the best way to treat alcoholics under the new law.

[The other two were at Johns Hopkins Hospital and the now defunct Provident Hospital in West Baltimore.]

Before Tuerk House?

"Alcoholics were badly treated back then because they were [considered] the dregs of society," said Maters. "The best we could do for a drunk was to "give them [doses] of paraldehyde.

"One for now to take care of the shakes, one for later and send them out the door."

In the immediate wake of the new legislation?

"You couldn't lock people up anymore just for being drunk," said Maters. "They were all being brought to the ER, and I started thinking, 'All of our stretchers will be used for drunks and there won't be room for anyone else.'

"The first two counselors I hired would come in at night and take [the drunks] to the dining room for a cup of coffee before the bus came to take them to the state hospital."

Others, including the visionary Isadore Tuerk - the man for whom the rehab was named, then commissioner of the Maryland State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene - had a better idea.

"They thought there should be a place for alcoholics to detox instead of sending all of them to the state hospital," said Maters.



What was the hive of "let's-get'em-sober" recovery like in the early days of the Tuerk House?

“Talk about a conglomeration of psychiatrists, recovering alcoholics and lawyers!” marveled Maters.

Soon, counselors began noting generational patterns not immediately visible to the untrained eye.

“We learned a lot ... we began [understanding] the problems facing children of alcoholics, that there was something hereditary involved.”

The work of healing the alcoholic was much bigger - vast and circular and baffling in ways that did not hew to predictable arcs - than anyone realized.

“We weren't just treating alcoholics,” said Maters. “We were trying to teach doctors how alcoholics should be treated.”



It started with five beds in a derelict rowhouse in a rough part of town that has only gotten rougher as the epidemic of addiction continues to ravage Baltimore and large swaths of the nation.

As of 2012, Tuerk House formally marked its 42nd year.

Thousands of recoveries, many more disappointments, an encyclopedia's worth of stories and a handful of miracles have passed in those years.

The facility is now established in a former hospital building with a Fiscal 2013 operating budget of \$4 million. It occupies a building on the grounds of the old West Baltimore General Hospital on Ashburton Street - later Lutheran Hospital at the time of its demise in 1989.

[Originally, the structure was part of a late 19th century campus known as the Hebrew Orphan Asylum.]

In 2012, Tuerk House employed 73 full and part-time staff members: counselors, nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, administrators and support personnel.

The main facility and its various agencies - including a pair of halfway houses named for major figures in early recovery work in Baltimore and a third in Howard County - serve a rotating population of about 300 addicts and alcoholics.

Annually, some 1,200 clients enter Tuerk House for treatment.

The folks who wash up at the door have typically run out of options and sometimes have been through tonier rehabs and relapsed in their descent.

Presumably, they arrive with the desire to arrest and treat their disease. Some are merely trying to stay a step ahead of their probation officers or other authorities.

But many have sincerely – and often tragically – come to the end of the line and want help.

“I called someone and said I needed help,” said Bobby Marinelli, a city high school teacher who has been in recovery since 1988. “He made a call and that person made a call and there was a bed for me at Tuerk House.”

Diabetics need insulin, heart patients with clogged arteries undergo bypass surgery and a chronic alcoholic or addict – absent a miracle --needs a clean bed in a safe environment in which to begin the long road back to a life worth living.

In the City of Baltimore – where the population of alcoholics and addicts hovers around 65,000, some 10 percent of all residents – detox beds for the uninsured can be scarce.

[These figures are considered low by many in the fields of medicine and law enforcement.]

In any given week, according to the Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems organization – the substance abuse care and prevention authority for the city – only about 7,200 residents are in treatment.

“Tuerk House is at the epicenter of the heroin epidemic in the United States,” said Elliott Driscoll, executive director of the program from 2009 to early 2011.

The facility is also in the geographic heart of the scourge, at least on the westside of town. Driscoll noted that Maryland is typically ranked third in the nation in per capita admissions to hospitals for heroin abuse.

“By far,” he said, “Baltimore is the most concentrated area of use in the state.”

For Fiscal 2012, Tuerk House had \$4.3 million with which to put as many fingers in the dike against the flood of addiction as possible.

This was not the landscape of recovery funding when Wendy Maters was charged with beginning a “quarter-way” house to bridge an alcoholic’s journey from the street to a halfway house and, hopefully, toward a useful life.

[The term “quarter-way” house - a trendy idea in the early 1970s - is no longer used. The concept has evolved into “Intermediate Care Facility” or ICF.]

Tuerk House was legally known as “Quarterway Houses Inc.,” through January of 2003 when the name was changed.

“Tuerk House is what everybody called us,” said Lucy Howard, a board member from 1985 to 1990 and again from 1995 through 2009.

“It’s how we’ve always been known.”

In 1969, when Maters began accepting patients for the fledgling program (strictly male in the early years), she had “five dollars per patient per day” to spend on their care.

The per diem came through the Department of Social Services.

Audrey Evans, the University Hospital director of nutrition at the time, planned 14-day menus for the early residents - said to be high in protein and certainly



*Wendy Maters in the early days of Tuerk House, circa 1970
Courtesy of Tuerk House*

packed with calories to put on weight lost to booze - for \$1.50 per patient per day.

The five bucks for food and miscellaneous - everything from toothbrushes to shoelaces - was complemented by a state

grant of about \$45,000 earmarked to pay the salaries of a handful of counselors.

To make that money go further, the University of Maryland kept Maters on its payroll even though she was no longer supervising the emergency room there.

Maters was picked to develop the University Hospital program by the late Dr. Russell R. Monroe, then chairman of the department of psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

She didn't have much to start with, including an avowed ignorance of alcoholism beyond knowing when someone's liver was shot, when she was thrown on the front lines.

But she had a secret weapon upon which no one could put a price: a dynamo from Hampden named Walter Criddle.

A Korean War tank commando, Criddle owned a used-tire store and was known to his sober buddies - sometimes affectionately and sometimes not - as "the fat flying squirrel."

["For a big man, Walter was light on his feet," said a friend who credits Criddle with helping him get sober. "Walter could dance."]

Criddle and Maters: a match made on skid row.

He short and squat and frenzied with a thick head of black hair swept back like James Dean and a love of Corvette sports cars.

She tall and thin, not unlike a no-nonsense Olive Oyl with a pageboy haircut.

To this day, now 80 and living in Cockeysville, Maters remains the proper Englishwoman. Criddle, who died sober in prison at age 61 in 1991, made up the rules as he went along.



*Walter Criddle,
mad genius behind
the Tuerk House*

*Courtesy of
Tuerk House*



*Rev. Harry Shelley
Courtesy of Tuerk House*

"It was hard to keep up with Walter, I tell you," said Maters, sometimes laughing at the memories, sometimes shaking her head.

However combustible - many were the times Walter railed against psychiatry as the worst thing to which one could subject an alcoholic - they were good people with good intentions and not much money to carry out their mission.

First things first: Where to put the drunks?

Maters' initial attempt to find beds took her to the Salvation Army when it was

over near Russell Street where the baseball and football stadiums now stand.

But the Salvation Army had a rule that its guests must work during the day, and that was not what people poisoned by booze needed out of the gate.

"It didn't work out," said Maters, who took her frustrations to an Episcopal priest named Harry Shelley.

The Rev. Harry E. Shelley - a no-nonsense cleric who rode a motorcycle around town - had been a friend and sometimes life raft to Baltimore alcoholics at least since the 1950s.

Shelley's personal ministry to alcoholics began a generation before Isadore Tuerk began his fabled Saturday morning "open house" lectures on the subject at the University of Maryland.

It was the Eisenhower years, a time when scant treatment facilities were available to the average person and well-to-do alcoholics sent to asylums were often said to have suffered "nervous breakdowns."

Upon her husband's death at age 79 in 2001, Shelley's widow - the former Mary Louise Gosnell -- said: "I think every alcoholic in Baltimore knew where our front door was."

At the time Maters approached, Shelley was rector at the Church of the Guardian Angel in Remington and helped coordinate alcohol treatment programs for the Baltimore City Health Department.

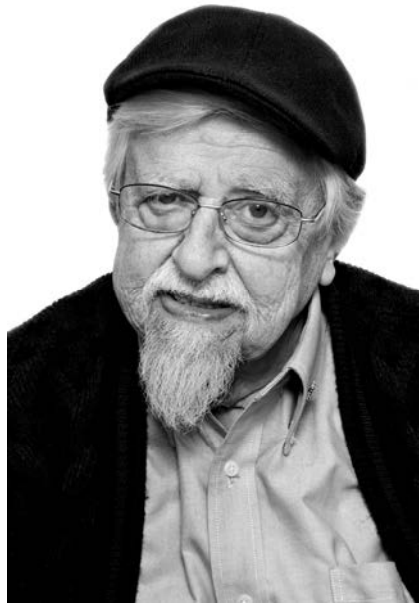
Maters: "I was telling Harry about the problems I was having finding a place to get started. And he said, 'You need to meet Walter Criddle.'"

Shelley - with the help of a Health Department colleague named Gladys Augustus, the first president of the Tuerk House board - had trained Criddle as an alcohol counselor.

Once Criddle got involved, the idea that would become Tuerk House began to run under steam, no matter that much of the early energy was high-octane bluster.

Criddle was the sort of guy that Hollywood would cast as the used-car salesman with the heart of gold - the kind of guy who knew a guy who knew a guy that could find whatever you needed when you needed it.

[And sometimes whether you needed it or not. Like the time Criddle got "a deal" on some 90 dozen eggs - it could have been ten times that much according to those who delight making the tale taller - and "stored" them in his Corvette until they rotted.]



*"How do you describe
a Walter Criddle?"*

- Alvin Cohen

"I decided that Walter was the person to be our senior counselor," said Maters.

It proved to be one of the most important and far-reaching decisions of her career. Even in a city as awash in eccentrics as Baltimore, one doesn't meet a character like Walter Criddle every day.

"How do you describe a Walter Criddle?" asked Alvin Cohen, a former University of Maryland ER social worker that guided alcoholics to the Tuerk House in the early 1980s. "An incredible human being."

So passionate was Criddle in helping fellow alcoholics put down the jug - including having them sweat out the shakes by working on his ill-fated pig farm in Snow Hill - that some said time moved faster in his presence.

"Larger than life," said Cohen. "He talked in a rapid fire delivery, never silent for very long. He was a conduit for something bigger than himself."

Criddle had gotten sober around 1966, the year the Orioles won the World Series, and somewhere along the line had helped a man with a drinking problem running a Christian outreach program in the city.

That man had the use of an ought-to-be-condemned rowhouse on Lanvale Street just off Greenmount Avenue on the eastside.

And this became the first place where down-and-out street alcoholics in Baltimore found real treatment - including physicals, the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and various forms of therapy - without having to sing a hymn for a bowl of soup.

"The place was in such terrible shape that your foot would go right through the floor," said Maters, noting that Lanvale Street was the first detox for the indigent. "But I got the pressure off of me to [utilize] the grant. I had the beds."

The place and the program operating inside of it needed plenty of work. Criddle met the challenge with verve if not panache.

“Whatever I needed, Walter would get,” said Maters, who learned not to question Criddle on things like getting a bus cheap from state surplus to take drunks to A.A. meetings.

“I said, ‘Walter, that would be nice, but we don’t have anyone who can drive it.’”

A mere pebble in Walter’s shoe.

“When someone has the kind of charisma that Walter did, well, you know, things happen,” laughed Maters. “He believed you always asked for more money than you needed.

“He stirred the pot and I spent a lot of time calming down whatever [tempest] Walter was stirring up with the hospital or the board.”

The early board members also learned that not everything was squared away as befitting a program receiving public funds and charitable contributions.

“We’d ask Wendy and Walter for an accounting and they’d promise to have it the next month,” said Goodwin, who sat on the board from 1980 to 1990 and again from 1995 to 2009. “We were never audited, we never brought in a CPA.”

The proof was no longer in the bottle but the pudding.

“Their aim was to help the drunk and that they did,” said Goodwin. “Tuerk House was the place to go. People were getting sober.”

Tuerk House client artwork

Courtesy of Tuerk House

