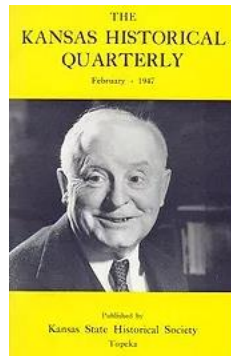


William Allen White

1868 - 1944



William Allen White was born on February 10, 1868 in Emporia, Kansas, the only surviving child of Dr. Allen and Mary Hatton White. A younger brother died in infancy.

In El Dorado, the family rented “the foundry”, a rambling one-story house of many chimneys located at Central and Vine, present-day site of the post office. In 1878, Dr. White replaced this house with a large two-story house with 144 linear feet of porches.

Dr. White had a habit of continually inviting company home, much to his wife’s chagrin; they ran their home as a hotel for a few years, losing money in the endeavor. Following his death, Mrs. White ran a boarding house.

Although he started college in Emporia, William quit in 1885, thinking it wrong for his widowed mother to work so hard to keep him in school. His future career was decided when he wrote to a grocer, a dry goods merchant, and a newspaper

publisher in El Dorado, seeking a job. Only the publisher, T. P. Fulton, responded with a job offer, and thus William Allen White entered the newspaper business.

As a printer's devil for the El Dorado Democrat, he was given all the little and dirty jobs, but also gained valued experience in how a newspaper was put out. He once ran a four-line item about a regular town poker game, intimating rather broadly that "officials should do something." Not knowing it was an ancient institution, possibly under the officials' protection, his days as a reporter for that paper were over.

At the Democrat, he developed a desire to make journalism a career. Realizing his need for further education, he returned to college in Emporia, while working as a printer for the Emporia News, and as a compositor and later reporter for the Emporia Daily News.

In the summer of 1886, White enrolled at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, working for area newspapers as well as some work for papers in St. Louis, Topeka and Chicago. He attended four years but with only fair grades, he never completed work for a diploma.

While later working for the Kansas City Star, he met schoolteacher Sallie Lindsay. Finding that she "had brains" and shared his love of books, theater, and music, they were married April 27, 1893. He liked to talk things over with Sallie, giving her great credit as his true helper. Two children were born to the Whites: William Lindsay in 1900, and Mary Katherine in 1904, who was to die in a horse-riding accident in 1921.

Choosing to live out his life in a small Kansas town, he was fond of saying he could make any kind of a fool of himself in Emporia and it was just between himself and his subscribers. Here he was free to express himself.

In July of 1899, the Whites moved into "Red Rocks", a house named for the red sandstone rocks quarried in Colorado. After a fire on the upper floor, the Whites turned the original Queen Anne-style home into a Tudor Revival-style. In this home, the Whites entertained people of national and international importance, including writers, artists, and seven presidents.

To the core of his being, White was a man of the country and small town. In 1895, he purchased the meager inventory and scant subscription list of the Emporia

Gazette for \$3,000, all borrowed with his mother's El Dorado properties as security.

Arriving in Emporia he had a moment of indecision: with only \$1.25 in his pocket, should he walk, lugging his heavy baggage, showing himself to be thrifty? Or should he hire a hack for 25¢ and arrive in style? Deciding to take the hack, he never regretted it, thinking "a good front is rather to be chosen than great riches."

In his first editorial as editor, he made it clear his aim was to "represent the average thought of the best people". His hands were busy in every part of the paper. Known affectionately around the Gazette office as "The Boss", he greeted his employees each morning with "Good morning, boys and girls. You can go to work now. The boss is here."

The Gazette's competitor, the Emporia Republican, devoted much space towards ridicule of the Gazette and its new editor. White chose never to reply; within a few years, the Republican folded. With a sympathetic understanding for those whose views differed from his own, his warm sympathies especially for minorities often made him a target of the intolerant.

As an observer and interpreter of most of the changes transforming America from 1868 to 1944, White also participating in many of them. Always he sought for and found the best in men. He was a man of understanding, wisdom, tolerance, and justice tempered with mercy. His main interests remained journalism, politics and literature in about equal proportions. Often speaking out on a variety of moral, social and political issues, White developed the small town as a metaphor for understanding social change.

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Sent by McClure's Magazine in 1900 to write a character sketch of William Jennings Bryan, White noticed Bryan's personal library held not scholarly books but books by partisans of the creeds Bryan preached. He thought it a shabby library revealing much about what he saw as a professional politician.

The greatest tragedy in the White's lives occurred in 1921 with the sudden death of Mary at age 16. She was struck on the head by low-hanging limb as she waved to a friend and her pony ran under a tree. Remembered as an avid reader with a heart of gold, always ready to help those in need, and also a fun-loving tomboy, Mary was a "Peter Pan" at heart.

White was unpredictable and wholly unconventional according to the formal codes, but his entire nature was based upon kindness and courage. He could fight savagely for a principle as needed, yet gained his ends without personally wounding those he opposed.

Although the Whites owned two radios, they seldom listened to them except for an occasional news broadcast or Presidential address. But when their son, Bill, broadcast as a CBS correspondent from Europe in the winter of 1939-1940, they listened avidly. When he appeared briefly in a newsreel at the local theater, they went daily to catch a glimpse of him.

White was a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity and an early member of the Western Artists and Authors Society, whose membership hoped to some day be noted for their art and writing. In 1930 at its inception, he was asked to be an honorary member of the Poetry Society of Kansas.

Later, he became a trustee of the College of Emporia and served for one term on the Kansas State Board of Regents. He was a member of the Walter Page Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Pacific Relations Committee, the National Illiteracy Association and others.

White was a Republican, and member of First Congregational Church of Emporia, the Chamber of Commerce, the Century Club, the National Arts Club and the Town Hall Club of New York; the Cosmos Club of Washington and the University Club of Chicago. He attended Rotary Club every Tuesday at noon, serving as the Chairman of the Menu Committee, one of his favorite jobs as he creatively designed each week's menu.

In 1943, in an attempt to regain his health, White underwent a major operation at the Mayo Cancer Clinic in Minnesota. But when he returned to Emporia, his condition steadily worsened; he died on January 29, 1944. On the same day, a London newspaper published a 1,500-word story about the editor's life, influence and character, a striking testimony to the world-wide fame he had known.

A flood of messages of sympathy swept in from admirers. President Roosevelt called White one of the "wisest and most beloved editors . . . As a writer of truth, forcible and vigorous prose, he was unsurpassed . . . He ennobled the profession of journalism . . ." Among those gathered for the funeral were the governor of Kansas, former governors, a US senator, congressmen, the chief justice and members of the Supreme Court. Emporia realized that they had lost a spiritual giant, that a glory long hovering over the town was gone.

White's open and understanding mind enable him to see as early as 1910 that "As men widen their sphere of knowledge they broaden their sensibilities . . . It pays to be decent . . . The good that a man may do is limited only by his talents . . . Whoever would achieve any worthy thing must found it upon the common law of kindness."