

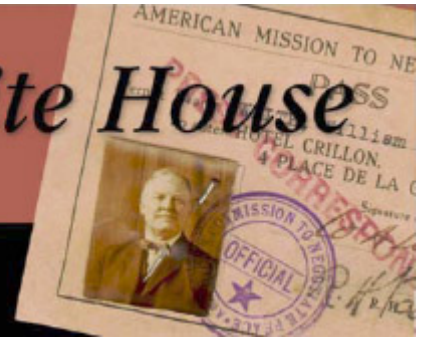


William Allen White House

STATE HISTORIC SITE



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Excerpts from "William Allen White: Country Editor, 1897-1914"

by Walter Johnson

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WHEN two run-away Emporia boys were apprehended by the police of Kansas City in 1913 and queried as to their reason for leaving Emporia, the older boy stated thoughtfully: "Well, there's nothing there but William Allen White, and we got tired of hearing of him." Long before this event, Emporia was known to the outside world as the home of Bill White. His political success on the national and state scene and his ability to write editorials that sparkled with excellent prose and pungent phrases had made him the leading citizen of the town within a few years from the day that he had acquired the *Gazette* on borrowed money.

White's great asset was his ability to express himself in a distinctive editorial style. "Taking the hide off somebody" was his particular delight. "We're all beef eaters, especially Bill White," an Emporian told Sam Blythe in 1907, "and that's what makes him the first-class fighting man he is. . . . He's a good deal of an idealist, but he can dream and fight at the same time, which, I take it, is a good mixture for any man. He does things and says things in his paper that make us hopping mad, but nobody ever accuses him of doing anything for any motive except that of his own conscience. He gets preachy, and that makes me tired. He gets personal, and that makes some others tired. Still, he's a vital force in Kansas, and Kansas knows it. Besides, what bully stories he can write! How I wish he would write more of them and let somebody else do the preaching."

As early as the first decade of the twentieth century, White was being looked upon by many as the spokesman of small town Middlewestern America. Feature articles about the Emporia editor began to appear in urban papers and nation-wide magazines, and his views on a variety of subjects were reprinted with regularity. All of these tendencies were greatly increased in the years between the two World Wars, but they had started long before 1914. An article in the *New York Sun* on October 20, 1910, hailed White as being "as much a part of Kansas as her cornstalks and sunflowers," and observed that "He thinks Kansas is the real United States, and had rather be the mouthpiece of Kansas' thought . . . than to be the richest man in the State or an United States Senator." By remaining in the small town, when his generation were flocking to the city, he eventually became not only the spokesman for Kansas but for much of the Midwest. He always maintained that the reason he stayed in Emporia was that people were more sociable and friendly. Emporia was a personal world where neighbors' joys and sorrows were shared with others. Furthermore, class lines were not hard and fast like in the big city. In Emporia the town carpenter had influence with the banker, but White asked, "Does the Bronx plasterer have influence with J. P. Morgan?"

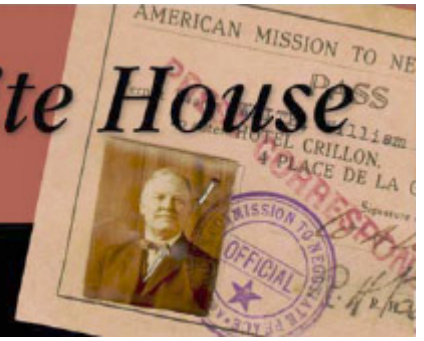


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In 1900 the Whites revealed their growing affluence by buying "Red Rocks," a fine house that had been built of red stone shipped from the Garden of the Gods in Colorado. They remodeled and improved the house and lived in it for the rest of their lifetime. After a serious fire in 1920, the house was rebuilt along broad and comfortable lines partially designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Famous for their hospitality, the Whites had a highly amusing experience during their second year in Emporia. In 1896, when Congressman Charles Curtis visited Emporia, they had him to dinner and White recalled the following incident:

We were running our house on \$5 a week in those days and Sallie budgeted everything. So she bought a chicken, cooked it, removed all the bones, placed it in a crock and covered it with melted cheese and cracker crumbs – oh, yes, and with mushrooms. Those mushrooms, ah!

We debated quite a while over whether we should buy a 75-cent can or a 35-cent can. I wanted the 75-cent can; Sallie's will was her way and we compromised on the cheaper assortment. Even at that it meant I had to go without a couple of 10-cent shaves to pay for this delicacy. Well, sir, Congressman Curtis came. Sallie and I were quite proud. Pretty soon I could see she was trying to catch my eye. She nodded her head toward the congressman's plate. I looked. Ye gods! There he was—deftly removing the mushrooms from his portion of chicken, placing the discarded fleshy fungi on the side of his plate of mushrooms for which I must sacrifice two shaves that week! The next noon when I got home from the office Sallie met me at the kitchen door. She saw the look on my face.

"Yes," she said, "I've retrieved the mushrooms—they're waiting for you."

People with national and international reputations visited the Whites in Emporia, and the townspeople became accustomed to seeing Edna Ferber, Ida M. Tarbell, and Anne Morgan walking the streets of the town. "When your world is awry and hope dead and vitality low and the appetite gone," Edna Ferber once wrote, "there is no ocean trip, no month in the country, no known drug equal to the reviving quality of twenty-four hours spent on the front porch or in the sitting room of the Whites' house in Emporia. . . ." John S. Phillips of *McClure's Magazine* and later the *American Magazine* recalled that "I once said to the novelist W. D. Howells . . . that my wife and I had been visiting the Whites in Emporia and that I did not know any more delightful place to visit in this country. Howells replied: I do not know any pleasanter place to visit in the world . . ."