William Allen White:
Editor and Businessman during
the Reform Years, 1895–1916

by Jean Folkerts

Turn-of-the-century Emporia

In the early 1900s, editor William Allen White of
the Emporia Gazette spelled out his newspaper-
man's business philosophy. He said that a success-
ful newspaper must be run by a man with character
who never pandered to special interests but who said
what he thought to be right. Such a position would
bring a newspaper financial stability which, in turn,
would give the newspaper standing in its community.1
He wrote:

No newspaper can make money or do any good in
this world, till it convinces its readers that their sen-

Jean Folkerts is assistant professor, Department of Journalism,
University of Texas at Austin. On leave of absence during 1984–85,
she currently is adjunct assistant professor at Mount Vernon College,
Washington, D.C. Formerly on the faculty of Washburn University,
Topeka, she received her Ph.D. in American studies from the Uni-
versity of Kansas in 1981 with a dissertation entitled "William Allen
Politics."

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1. William Allen White to E. W. Allen, November 5, 1914,
William Allen White Papers, Library of Congress, Washington,
D.C.
ments and views and opinions will not influence the attitude of the paper against what its owner thinks is right. . . As a cold-blooded business proposition, it pays to be honest with one’s self. When newspapers are poor, they are known as cowards. 7

White regarded himself as a businessman as well as an editor. He expressed a philosophy being developed by editors of his time that newspapers should be independent of party politics, financially secure, and oriented toward an entire community. This philosophy not only was the outgrowth of journalistic thinking, however, but also represented the business values of the profession’s editors. White, like many other Kansas editors, grew up in the business community of a small town, and he regarded his role as one of editor and businessman, rarely separating the two functions. He bought the Gazette in 1895 and within a few years achieved national fame with an editorial, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” which derided the Populist party. In the Gazette he sought not only a property from which to earn an income, but also a platform through which he could extend his own value system, adapted from friends and family and rooted firmly in a business-oriented concept of harmonious community progress.

Born in 1858, White acquired his idea of community progress from family and acquaintances who represented the business segment of the community and the dominant Republican interests of the state. When he bought the Gazette, he had already developed extensive, statewide connections through his father’s professional and political friendship network. Although his father was a Democrat, White learned early that power in Kansas lay within Republican ranks, and his father’s business connections often were Republican.

Among those who introduced White to state editorial and business circles were two editors, Marshall and Thomas Benton Murdock. The Murdocks were close friends of White’s father, and when Allen White died, leaving his fourteen-year-old son, the Murdocks assumed the paternal role, training White as though he were a son being trained to assume the family business. Thomas Murdock, El Dorado editor and director of a Santa Fe branch railroad, hired White for his first major newspaper job. When Murdock died in 1909, White wrote that he could not remember a time when Murdock was not an important part of his life. 3

Other Republicans also visited the elder White. Republican senators Preston B. Plumb and John J. Ingalls; Susan B. Anthony, the famous suffragist; and John P. St. John, the ardent prohibitionist and Kansas governor (1879–85), were guests at the family home when White was a child. Cyrus Leland, Republican boss from Doniphan County, was a witness to the elder White’s will and was long identified with William Allen White, having played no small part in helping to establish his reputation. 4

Republican connections were important because that party had dominated the governorship since the beginning of statehood, with Republican candidates for governor carrying ninety percent of the counties in the nine state elections from 1862 to 1880. In 1882, a Democratic governor was elected as a result of Republican factionalism, but Republicans followed until 1912 except in 1892 and 1896, when Populists won the gubernatorial race. 5 White’s Republican connections enabled him to move easily within state

4. White, Autobiography, 62. See also Allen White will, Probate Court, Butler County Courthouse, El Dorado. The date appears to be November 22, 1882 or 1883.
in order to encourage the investment of eastern capital and the resulting industrialization; he supported local business and local business control. He pressured businessmen to define themselves as "for" or "against" the community. Afraid complaints made by the Farmers' Alliance would drive away eastern capital, White blamed the farmers' adversity on poor business management and lack of crop diversification, all the while ignoring their very real economic plight. In Kansas, the 1890 census showed that more than fifty-five percent of owner-occupied farms were mortgaged, the largest ratio in the United States. Including mortgage payments, taxes to alleviate the public debt, and interest, each Kansas family owed a debt of more than one thousand dollars. This was a considerable burden when wheat was thirty cents a bushel, particularly when the price had dropped seventy cents a bushel since 1879.

White's opposition to the farmers reflected not only his fear of losing eastern capital, but also his desire for community adoption of unified values and goals. Before buying the Gazette, White worked as a capital correspondent for Charles Gled, a Republican editor in Kansas City. White had accepted the position from Gled despite a more prestigious offer from the Kansas City Star. He knew Gled's Journal was a party organ and that Gled was a director of the Santa Fe; but he thought he would be "happier writing for the Republican organ than for a mugwump Independent newspaper that had supported President Cleveland." White quit the Journal in anger, however, after one of Gled's wire editors buried his story on the nomination of Lorenzo D. Lewelling on the Populist ticket for governor in 1892. White then moved to the Star. He later admitted that in reporting from the Republican point of view and against the Populists, he "colored the news" but did not know that was what he was doing.

By voicing the same political views as community leaders, White said he "acquired some distinction with the ruling class." During the post- Populist years, White claimed business values pulled the farmer out of the depression, and the building up of the prairie exemplified the theory of the survival of the political, business, and editorial circles, and at the age of twenty-seven he confidently assumed the role of owner and publisher of a Kansas newspaper. 6

White used his newspaper, as did most Kansas editors of the time, as 1) a promotional tool for booster projects, 2) a platform for promoting his own political status and for selecting Republican candidates who best represented his values, and 3) an editorial voice for defining attitudes toward diverse social interests he believed would contribute to a unified society. In promoting booster projects for community development, White denied the economic plight of farmers 6. For biographies of White, see Everett Rich, William Allen White: The Man from Emporia (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941); David Hinshaw, A Man from Kansas: The Story of William Allen White (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1945); Walter Johnson, William Allen White's America (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947); and John DeWitt McKee, William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975). Rich's biography massed detail but includes little analysis. Hinshaw was a country correspondent for the Gazette and was White's right-hand man in organizing the Progressive party in Kansas in 1912. "Undoubtedly I have gilded the lily," he wrote in reference to his book. Probably the most authoritative account in Johnson's biography, which emphasizes the midwestern, grass-roots editor, folk-hero aspects of White's life. For more information about White's political and friendship networks, see Jean Kennedy (Folkerts), "William Allen White: A Study of the Interrelationship of Press, Power, and Party Politics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1981).


8. White, Autobiography, 196-99, 214. See also Terry Harmon, "Charles Sumner Gled: A Western Business Leader, 1856-1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1975). Gled and White later became political adversaries, with Gled remaining with the stand- pat Republicans and White moving into the Progressive group.

nity improvements. White’s first major promotional event as publisher of the *Gazette* was the 1899 Emporia street fair. White used his connections to attract promoters of the latest technological devices in the hope of creating the largest and best street fair in the state.15

When plans to have a fair were announced in May, White told his readers that in this endeavor the Young Business Men’s Association could consider the *Gazette* its property. In June, during the campaign for contributions, the *Gazette* used its power of the front page to pressure businessmen to support the fair. Throughout the summer the *Gazette* published on page one the names of firms and/or individuals and the amounts they contributed to the street fair subscription fund.14 Those who contributed money clearly were “for” the community and received recognition for their contributions, while those who were “against” the community were conspicuously absent.

Throughout his editorship, White continued his campaigns for business contributions to the community. In 1900, White urged townspeople to vote for bonds for the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railroad Company which was planning a road through Emporia and which would locate shops there. While White claimed the *Gazette* had no side to champion, but just printed the facts, he said it was a pure business proposition: rates would become more competitive, population would grow, property would rise in value, and business and wages would increase. White campaigned daily through November and December and printed a special railroad edition.15 Because the time limit on the bonds ran out, they had to be voted again in 1905, and White conducted a similar campaign. The bond issue passed the second time.

White also actively solicited funds in 1900 for the College of Emporia and published the list of donors in the *Gazette*. In 1911, when the college began negotiating with other cities for relocation, White began a front-page campaign to retain the institution, claiming that its loss would cause property values to decline by ten percent. As a New Year’s proposition in 1912, White asked for a new YMCA to promote moral development; a packing plant that would bring industry to the town; a new county home for care of the poor; a new high school; and a variety of measures, including a street car extension and more paving, that would attract population and industry to the town.16

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White's concept of business involvement in community growth did not rest purely on contributions by businessmen. He viewed the businessman as a natural leader and therefore supported local business control as well as local business contributions. White urged residents to support local business and local merchants to support the Gazette, saying, "the newspapers of this town are here to help you win this fight for home enterprise and investment of your capital. The entire patronage of Emporia belongs to the home merchants." White denounced traveling salesmen and mail-order stores as a "wolf in Emporia's fold." He described mail-order items as shoddy and pointed out the safety of trading with home merchants. 17

In early 1903, White and local businessmen agreed to cooperate in eliminating out-of-town advertising from the pages of the Gazette. White would discontinue advertising from Emery Bird Thayer and Company, a large Kansas City, Missouri, department store, and install the Associated Press report, hoping to discourage Emporians from buying what White described as "foreign" newspapers. In return, merchants agreed not to protest if White raised the advertising rates. 18 This action limited the information about out-of-town products that Emporians could receive, particularly for those financially unable to travel. While White and his friends traveled freely throughout the nation and often purchased household items and clothing when away from Emporia, those less fortunate were restricted to locally carried products. In addition, White's attempts to discourage out-of-town newspapers also limited the diversity of local, national, and international news. Further, they clearly illustrated that White considered himself a local businessman and merged that role with his role as a journalist.

White's reform measures, or desire for progress, were firmly grounded in his belief in a natural business leadership. As early as 1897 he advocated governmental control of public utilities and cautioned Emporia citizens to seek a maximum rate clause in the ordinance to protect the people. But he was also interested in protecting local business, and he wanted to ensure

Weller, January 30, 1915, White to W. Y. Morgan and David Hinshaw, May 21, 1914, White Papers. See also Gazette, June 6, 1912; May 10, 1912; June 6, 1914; November 27, 1911. For New Year's program see Gazette, January 1, 1912. For high school see Gazette, April 3, 1912. White dated an out-of-town architect for the high school, despite his trade-at-home philosophy. He argued that "no great architect would be living in Emporia, just as no great newspaperman would be living there. White to Charles Babbs, June 1, 1912, White Papers.

17. Gazette, February 25, 1896; February 16, 25, 1901; March 2, 1901.
18. Ibid., April 1, 1903.
that the Kansas and Missouri Telephone Company would not be granted any favors a home company would not enjoy. He also considered Emporia’s municipal ownership of the waterworks to be a successful experiment, which he attributed to the high average intelligence of a community which kept party politics out of this branch of municipal affairs. He encouraged the city, which had just purchased an electric light and power plant, to put the employees on a merit system, because to function well they would need security in their jobs. This philosophy in regard to municipal affairs reflected the thinking of other businessmen from as near as Wisconsin and as far away as New York and was easily compatible with progressive thought as it developed after the turn of the century.

White’s 1896 editorial, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” earned him added political status within the party, and he lost no chance to promote himself and the Gazette. In 1897, he was on the platform at the Lincoln Day banquet of the Ohio Republicans and had an invitation from Mark Hanna to President William McKinley. On the front page of the Gazette in June of 1899 he wrote that the newspaper had arranged for Theodore Roosevelt to stop in Emporia on his western tour, and he exhorted the citizens to turn out. “Let him remember this town. Cast bread upon the waters, and when Roosevelt is president it will return after many days.”

By 1899, White’s political connections had rewarded him financially, and he was printing pension blanks shipped to him by Cyrus Leland. White said at the turn of the century that the pension job produced three thousand dollars in income for him when his total income was eight or nine thousand dollars annually. White was actively Republican at this time, working hard to help elect the county Republican ticket and attending meetings of the Republican State Central Committee. This activity continued throughout the decade.

During the early part of the twentieth century, White used his newspaper to support candidates for political office, hoping to increase his own prestige in Republican circles and to further his reform goals, which were tied closely to his commercial interests. White viewed editors as part of the elite business class. While he never argued that newspaper editors would generate enough support to elect a candidate, he recognized the importance of the state press in creating grass-roots support for select candidates within a range of Republican choices. White worked within the Republican party except for his experiment with the Progressives, but he claimed to be an independent voice. Republican papers were not the same as party organs, he said. “Now this does not mean,” White wrote in a Gazette editorial, “that these editors will not support the Republican ticket, from top to bottom when the time comes.” Independence, White continued, meant that the Republican press of this country “says what it thinks; that it is fearless, intelligent, honest and unsubsidized.” A press that would turn from its party “because of one mistake in a minor matter, would deserve no credit for its sanity and should have no following.” The Republican party “is a party with too great a future and too formidable a past for one mistake to defeat it.” Most editors maintained concrete party identities well into the twentieth century, and many were either candidates for election or involved in precinct-level caucusing. White’s claims to an independent Republican press may well have been propaganda rather than fact.

White’s relationship to Cyrus Leland indicates the difficulty of using the term “independent journalist” to describe an editor like White. Clearly, Leland had some influence on White; whether this was in return for pension printing, a result of Leland’s position in the party, or because he was an old family friend can only be surmised. In 1899, White wrote to Leland that he would “make a few remarks along the line you suggest” and “put his spirit into the work,” in regard to the “Coulter matter.” White described the Coulter matter in the Gazette as involving claims by a disappointed office-seeker, O. H. Coulter, that Pension Commissioner H. Clay Evans was treating “old soldiers” unfairly. White painted Coulter as a bounty man who had not enlisted in the Civil War until 1864 and now was acting as a professional “old soldier.” White claimed that Evans was merely trying to check the “schemes” of swindling “old soldiers” like Coulter. He told Leland that he mailed the article to a variety of editors, asking them to print it, and that most had responded favorably. The response of an

19. Ibid., October 1, 1897.
22. Mark Hanna to White, November 14, 1898, William Allen White Collection, William Allen White Library, Emporia State University, Emporia; White to J. Leland, Jr., October 24, 1899, White to Cyrus Leland, September 8, 1899, White Papers; Johnson, William Allen White’s America, 86.
23. Gazette, April 6, 1900.
25. White to Cyrus Leland, n.d., but about July 20 and during August 1899, White Papers; Gazette, July 25, 1899; August 1, 4, 15, 21, 1899; September 20, 1899.
editorial network to Leland's request indicates a good deal of loyalty to either person or party.

Another of White's major efforts to mobilize editorial opinion within the state came in 1906 with the organization of the Kansas Civic Voters League, a group which supported railroad regulation and political reforms attractive to commercial interests. Local businessmen believed changes in discriminatory railroad rates and the prohibition of overcapitalization would allow them to retain control over commercial transportation and to create a rate structure favorable to commercial interests. White often claimed that discriminatory rates had hampered the industrialization of the state and had forced it to remain agricultural.\(^{26}\) Political reforms also were aimed at eliminating powerful corporate interests from controlling elections. When the commercially oriented Voters League organized in 1906 to promote railroad regulation, White organized Republican editors in Kansas. He wrote to the president of the Kansas Federation of Commercial Interests that he "had schemed to push the organization of the Civic League just a little further than it went":

It seems to me that there are a dozen papers in Kansas of somewhat more than local influence who would be willing to publicly support the League, and to pledge themselves not only to print the League's estimate of the candidates before party conventions and before the people, after the convention, but to give no candidate for office active support who is opposed by the League.

White suggested the Gazette and newspapers in Topeka, Atchison, Parsons, Salina, Wichita, Ottawa, and Iola. Many of the publishers were White's friends: Arthur Capper of Topeka, who became governor and senator; Ed Howe of Atchison, author of *The Story of a Country Town*; Joseph Bristow, later a Progressive senator from Salina who defeated incumbent Chester Long; Victor Murdoch, family friend and editor of the *Wichita Daily Eagle*; Henry Allen, who went to Europe with White in 1918 and returned to become governor; and Charles F. Scott, Iola publisher.\(^{27}\)

During the U.S. Senate campaign of 1908, White relied on his influence as an editor to secure favorable publicity for Joseph Bristow in his bid against incumbent Chester Long. Publicity was essential because the campaign was the first statewide preference primary for the Republican nomination and because Bristow was not well known. Long had been active in Republican politics since pre-Populist days. White attacked Long on a variety of issues but primarily on his reluctance to support railroad reform. While Long had been instrumental in getting Roosevelt to compromise with railroad interests to achieve passage of the regulatory Hepburn bill, White accused him of remaining silent until the battle was already won.\(^{28}\)

During the campaign, White acquired Long's voting record from Robert La Follette's staff and wrote columns of copy which he stereotyped and mailed to other editors. White scathingly attacked the longtime officeholder, claiming his voting record was squarely with Wall Street and against the people. White achieved the publicity Bristow needed, and when Long and the Emporia editor debated at Emporia's Whitely Opera House that summer, the columns of type became more heated and less objective. Long accused White of printing three errors in his voting record, but after White admitted in the Gazette to being

“peeled and bathed in salt by Long,” a Gazette story claimed that Long’s defense of his record presented a “curious combination of error, self-deception and bluff.” For days following the debate, the Gazette carried editorials from other newspapers supporting its own position.29

Another tactic White used was to print letters to the editor supporting Bristow and the reform candidate for governor, Walter Roscoe Stubbbs. Among the letter writers were Progressive James Troutman, former Lt. Gov. D. W. Finney, and J. S. George, former head of the Kansas Federation of Commercial Interests. To add polish to the campaign, White again stereotyped plates and mailed them to editors. He asked La Follette to come to Kansas and circulated his speech in advance to a variety of newspapers.30

In 1909, White used the Gazette in his attempts to get Attorney General Fred Jackson to run against the Fourth District longtime incumbent, J. M. Miller. White mailed an editorial to a variety of editors who also were friends, asking them to use the facts he reported as a basis for an editorial, since he believed Jackson would announce if properly urged. If enough newspapers used the editorial material, White could argue to Jackson that there was a ground swell of opinion promoting his candidacy. White then wrote a letter to Jackson, suggesting the Gazette run this notice:

Attorney General Jackson has been resisting considerable pressure to enter the congressional contest in

29. Ibid., May 10, 24, 25, 1908; White to a variety of editors, including J. W. More, Marion Headlight; A. P. Biddle, Minneapolis Messenger; T. B. Murdock, El Dorado Republican; Gomer Davie of Concordia; Harry Woods, Wellington Daily News; Charles Verity, Manhattan Mercury; A. L. Oesper of Hutchinson; John Junking, Sterling Kansas Bulletin; and S. C. McColm, Lincoln Republican, White Papers. See also White to J. N. Dolley, May 29, 1908, White Papers: Gazette, June 11, 12, 24, 1908.

30. Gazette, June 10, 24, 25, 1908; July 7, 18, 1908. Other newspaper tactics were used. In 1908, White entertained editors at the state meeting of the Kansas Editorial Association in Emporia. In usual fashion, he did not miss the chance to promote the town, and the Business Men’s Association awarded a prize for the best write-up of Emporia by the editors who visited. For a week after the event the Gazette printed the laudatory notices. See also White to La Follette, July 1, 1908, White Papers.
the fourth district. He has believed all along that it is too early to enter the fight. He has told his friends that he believes that developments [sic] at the beginning of the coming session of Congress will largely determine his course.

White said if matters continued to grow worse in the state, there seemed to be no doubt among Jackson’s friends that he would make his announcement on Kansas Day. Jackson ran and was elected.31

These examples show that White used a variety of techniques to encourage the selection of particular candidates. He mobilized editors to support candidates who were endorsed by the Voters League, which in turn supported commercial interests in the state. He stereotyped plates, sending them to smaller newspapers which could not afford a wire service; he printed guest editorials and solicited letters to the editor; he provided editorial material for other editors; and he used his own newspaper to solicit grass-roots support for candidates. White used similar techniques to organize newspapers in support of the public utilities law and to advance Walter Stubbs’ candidacy for governor.32 After the 1910 state congressional campaign, J. N. Dolley, chairman of the Republican State Committee, told White that he was “the backbone of the Republican party in this state.” Recognizing the power of the Gazette, Dolley noted that White gave not only his time to the cause, “but also the valuable space of your newspaper.”33

White’s identification with business was apparent not only in his promotional activity and in his attempts to influence the selection of candidates within Republican circles, but also through turn-of-the-century Gazette editorials which blurred distinctions among


32. Gazette, August 19, 1910.


"Red Rocks," William Allen White’s home in Emporia
diverse groups. As he had denied that farmers' interests were distinctly different from town interests, White also did not recognize that other political forces were in reality competitors with conflicting vested interests.

White supported unionism as long as it represented a cooperative brotherhood among workers and businessmen. Not recognizing that labor's problems might be systemic, White separated good workers from bad workers. Those who did not work in harmony for the good of all were termed "low grade men." He compared the organization of labor to that of the medical society, the bar association, and the federated women's clubs, again assuming all groups had the same interests and values in society and ignoring the difference in the social and political status of labor compared to that of the other groups.  

In 1900, White noted increased unionism on the local level and stated that the feeling of brotherhood that was the strength of the unions should be expressed not only by laboring men but by the whole town. He opposed class lines. It was through the union movement, White argued, that strong men could help the weak excel.

Like many men of his time who joined the Progressive cause after the turn of the century, White had a vision of the perfect society, a society based on equality of opportunity and equality before the law. Richard Resh described White's vision as one of "a society untrammeled by greed, of an America dedicated to a higher purpose than the churlish squabble over the rewards of capitalism." According to Resh, White addressed himself to the task of "creating a viable moral order that would provide the nation with a sense of community." But for all of White's hope for a unified nation, his vision was centered squarely on a value system based on a stratified society.

White's efforts to promote a booster culture through the encouragement of community development, the selection of candidates, and the harmonious interpretation of the goals of diverse groups clearly indicate that the Gazette did not simply reflect events. Instead, its content represented the value system of its editor, which he developed within his middle-class social context.

The concept of an elite business class was deeply ingrained in White's value system. This concept pervaded his attitudes toward government regulation, political corruption, progress, industrialization, the distribution of wealth, the labor movement, and the farmer. His religious and moral views did not conflict with his business values because his belief in cultural evolution and his sense of obligation to take care of those less fortunate than he were an integral part of his value system. To White, business people espousing business values were simply better. They managed better, they thought better, and they ran the country better.

In addition to his business values, the Emporia editor had distinct journalistic values, particularly on matters of style, pointing out to his readers in an editorial that the "Gazette never speaks of a dying person as 'lying at death's door,' it never lets a boy who has rustled for a job on a grocery delivery wagon 'accept a position.'" The Gazette abandoned euphemistic language and refused to print details of bizarre murders because White believed such details helped "breed crime." But although his editorial, "To an Anxious Friend," in 1922 earned him the reputation as a crusader for editorial freedom, he also said that every "decent newspaper would haul a law with joy that prohibited newspapers from printing the details of murders, lynchings, assaults on women and children, and all crimes where the element of sex motive enters." His was a philosophy derived from his own value system rather than from a consciously developed concept of press freedom.

White believed society as a whole would progress if it held the same values it held. Refusing the concept of special interest groups, White viewed labor and capital, shippers and farmers, as having the same interests. To allow special interests would have been to create divisiveness and halt the order of progress, just as divisiveness had halted the flow of eastern capital to western towns.

While discussing the lack of trade among Emporia retailers one Christmas, White clearly reflected his own belief in the importance of combining business values with religious and social beliefs to create stability in the nation. He editorialized: "We need to believe more firmly in the doctrine of Jesus Christ, to restore trade and to bring faith in civilization to the hearts of American people." Morality, unified values, business orientation, and cultural and spiritual evolution would continue, from White's point of view, to make America a country "blessed by God."