William Allen White outside his Emporia Gazette office in 1924.
S
hortly before Christmas in 1929, a subscriber wrote to the editor of the Emporia Gazette to extend thanks that the newspaper no longer advertised cigarettes. The writer attacked “the heartless money grabbing of the tobacco interests, who are by no means careful to keep within the bounds of truth . . . as long as they have no fear of contradiction.” Pivoting to a larger theme, the letter continued that “it seems to be a common failing of mankind to respect an evil when it becomes great in power and universal in practice, when the better rule is that its greater power is all the more reason why it should be challenged.” Critics of the powerful might be dismissed as cranks, the letter noted, but cranks were just what were needed for reform. The editor responded that the paper still accepted cigarette ads but endorsed the complaints, noting that “subscribers may write to the Wailing Place criticizing this, or any other policy of the paper, whenever they like.”

During the 1920s, 1,800 letters from nearly all segments of Emporia and the surrounding Lyon County appeared in The Wailing Place, the Gazette’s letters to the editor section. Predictably, some letters accused elected officials of doing things all wrong and the Gazette of obtuseness in everything from its editorials to its stubborn refusal to carry crossword puzzles, the latter implicating the editor as “a male beast of burden (seven letters).” Some letters voiced frivolous complaints, such as that of a writer who despaired that all of the restaurants in town served mayonnaise on every dish, with a dollop appearing even atop the applesauce side to a pork-roast dinner.

James H. Ducker has written on Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe rail workers, most recently those in Emporia during a 1922 strike in the Winter 2016–2017 issue of Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains. He wishes to thank the writers to the editor of the Emporia Gazette in the 1920s whose wonderful words he gleefully pilfered in service of the current article. He hopes to continue his research of Emporians during the Depression Era and welcomes reminiscences and other relevant information from those who experienced the town and Lyon County in those years at jimducker.inak@gmail.com.

1. “A Subscriber,” letter to the editor, and the editor’s response, Emporia Gazette, December 23, 1929. With few exceptions, all of the letters to the editor cited in this article were found under the heading “The Wailing Place.”
2. “Famous Woman of Troy” (five letters) and A. M. D., letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, November 20, 1924, and March 27, 1924, respectively.
Far more compelling are the letters that reveal everyday residents’ views on the burning social issues of the day. William Allen White, the Emporia Gazette’s editor, was one of the country’s most prominent commentators in the early twentieth century and was considered a spokesman for small-town, midwestern America. His son, William Lindsay White, who took over much of the editing in the second half of the 1920s, would also have a distinguished career in journalism. However, in The Wailing Place, hundreds of small-town residents spoke articulately—sometimes vehemently, sometimes with humor—for themselves on the most important issues that affected their lives. They wrote on issues of sex and gender, Roaring Twenties lifestyles, religiosity and patriotism, race and class, and the Ku Klux Klan. The letters in The Wailing Place show that Emporia housed a population with diverse views and reveal the varied impulses and ideologies of people attempting to navigate a way to a better society.\(^3\)

The elder White launched The Wailing Place in 1911, promising to print letters from anyone on any subject except party politics. He invited the full range of complaints—from gripes about city services, schoolteachers, and preachers to gripes about testy husbands, wives who drive their husbands crazy, and kids who “‘sass’ their dad.” One of the first wails objected to the encouragement The Wailing Place gave to grousers. Instead, the writer urged the editor to “fill your paper with beautiful sentiments and clean news stories.” White would not hear of it. Conceding that “optimism is the best thing in the world” and that the paper “tries to be better society,” he defended The Wailing Place because “it refreshes you and soothes your savage breast if you have a chance to say just what you think.” More than a psychological elixir, letters to the editor served a societal benefit that the 1929 “crank” would echo. “There would be no improvement, no progress in the world, if people didn’t kick,” White wrote. “The wail of the average citizen, or the average housewife, is worth listening to.”\(^4\)

Despite this defense, the section quickly disappeared from the Gazette. The Wailing Place resumed in 1920 to accommodate a minor flood of letters after White purposely stirred up a controversy regarding Sunday-school dancing.\(^5\) Other controversies would lead to a steady stream of letters for the rest of the decade.

The Gazette was not alone in printing letters from its readers, but few Kansas papers printed as many. Moreover, the Gazette’s policy throughout the 1920s of allowing anonymous publication offered the opportunity for more candid expressions of views. Katherine Polk of the Lyon County town of Agnes City wrote that The Wailing Place “stands in a small way for free speech in a free country. Even a fool can say what he wants to and say it in print without being arrested for it.”\(^6\)

Emporia was the business center for Lyon County’s 27,000 residents, and its stores and amusements drew customers from the farms and small towns of neighboring counties as well. The census counted nearly 11,300 people in the town in 1920; by 1930 the number had climbed to over 14,000.\(^7\) In addition to the wide range of merchants, clerks, professionals, civil servants, and small manufacturing workers, the town had two major employers. Far and away the largest was the Santa Fe Railway, which commonly employed a little over 1,000 workers in the town.\(^8\) Emporia also had three colleges with

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5. “Dancing in Churches,” editorial, Emporia Gazette, January 7, 1920. White called for letters on Sunday-school dancing “when news was slow,” called for a pause when news picked up, and said he would welcome the restart of the controversy in letters, as they added “zest and sparkle to an otherwise dreary winter news page.” “‘On with the Dance,’” editorial, Emporia Gazette, January 15, 1920. The Wailing Place appeared briefly in 1913, and the paper published scattered letters throughout the 1910s.

6. Katherine R. Polk, letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, August 1, 1922. Reference to being arrested was not hyperbole. At the time, those who expressed sympathy with the current railroad strike were subject to arrest. Of newspapers of Kansas towns roughly Emporia’s size, only the Parsons Daily Sun and the Salina Daily Union approached the volume of letters on local issues that the Gazette carried. White insisted that writers identify themselves to the paper, but he would then allow anonymous publication.


their students, faculty members, and other functionaries. It is impossible to break down the demographics of the wailers because a substantial number used pseudonyms, yet enough identified themselves to make it clear that all segments of the population, with the exception of Mexican immigrants, had their say through the Gazette’s letters section.9

“The women seem determined”

In 1929 a woman wrote in The Wailing Place that while driving with her husband one evening, she saw many parked cars occupied by young couples. “As the lights of our car flashed upon them many of these couples untangled themselves from what was obviously an embrace while others merely laughed brazenly or ignored us entirely. In a short ride of three hours we counted 47 of these cars and most of them were still parked when we made our second round and some were even there on our third and final round. Perhaps some of them are still there although I should think their parents would be getting anxious by this time.” Another writer questioned what motivated the repeated checks on the couples and providing better education for them. Mrs. C. E. Maher, “First Ward Taxpayer,” and Mrs. George Randolph, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, February 6, 9, and 27, 1923, respectively.


9. “County Gains 1,227”; “Census Returns Are In”; “County Has 28,181”; Ducker, “Strikers, Loyalists, and Replacement Workers,” 229; “Prosperity to Return.” Luis Silva, who worked road construction and wrote two letters to The Wailing Place in September 1929 defending Mexicans who decorated their cars to celebrate their native country’s independence, is the only known or suspected Mexican letter writer. More did not write presumably in large part because most had little or no ability to read or write English. Letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, September 19 and 23, 1929. Other letters concerning the Mexican population in town were written by non-Mexicans, mostly concerning

A view of Emporia’s Commercial Street dated between 1910 and 1919 in which a range of businesses as well as transportation vehicles are visible, including horse-drawn carriages, automobiles, and a trolley. Emporia, the business center for Lyon County, grew modestly from 11,300 residents in 1920 to 14,000 in 1930.
defended the young people. Earlier generations who had courted in buggies on cold evenings had not had the chance for privacy to talk about the future that he and his wife of six months had enjoyed when they were courting. If the police were to roust the couples, they might find seclusion in the countryside rather than parking in the safety of a neighborhood street.10

Contemporary observers and historians have documented the changing American sexual mores and women’s changing economic roles in the early twentieth century. A greater openness and acceptance of female sexuality that first became evident in the working class and elite urban sophisticates filtered through to large numbers of the middle class by the 1920s.11 The automobile’s abetting of romantic liaisons, more revealing women’s fashions, and the proliferation of risqué movies and other entertainments were all manifested in Emporia, as was women’s larger role as wage earners. These changes prompted many letters to the Gazette on gender issues.

“Emporia Woman” in 1920 wrote that “stalling”—men luring women into their cars—was rife during the summer session of the teachers’ college. “It was impossible,” she wrote, “for two girls to go on the street without being accosted two or three times in a block.” Three years later, “A Man” praised the Gazette for naming women who stepped into a man’s car, noting that a woman “gets as much enjoyment from a good snuggle-pupping as a man” and that “no woman needs to take a stall or get wound up in a lolly-gagging party unless she wants to.” He wrote that only rarely did a man pick up a woman who had not given him encouragement, and those men who did should not be fined but “put in an insane asylum.” In 1927, “Grandfather” condemned “the most animated exhibition of jallygagging (petting they call it nowadays)” while his family was picnicking nearby. He conceded, “I am not so old that I don’t remember my gay young days when I used to go sparking in the old buggy, but . . . I never was fool enough to spark in public. . . . In the days of long ago, there was a lot of petting, . . . but the young folks then were at least modest enough not to make a public demonstration of their affection or affliction as it may have been.”12

A remarkable letter from “A Lonely Wife” in December 1925 started an exchange on infidelity. The cars parked on country roads, she wrote, held “oodles of married men with a nice sweet young flapper or perhaps his neighbor’s wife.” “Just because the Good Book says ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ that does not signify our wives should be neglected.” She did not blame a wife who stepped out with other men if her husband neglected her; she admitted that she herself was tempted.13

Responding, one wife blamed wives for being too eager to step out on their husbands, while another wrote that in too many cases, “hubby is somewhere making a fool of himself,” leaving many lonely wives. One letter writer warned that straying from the straight and narrow would only bring “A Lonely Wife” more unhappiness and no respect and suggested that if she filled her life with charitable work, she would not feel lonely. A man defended his sex, saying that the vast majority of husbands were faithful and that wives should not feel themselves unloved or neglected when their husbands came home from work wishing just to rest and think.14

The discussion reignited the following summer, with “A Lonely Wife” charging that “all men are triflers” and that affairs took place in the downtown offices of doctors, lawyers, clerks, and bankers. “Goody Good” did not attack the morals of “A Lonely Wife” as much as her intellect. She wrote, “Is there nothing to fill your mind but man?” and noted that “A Lonely Wife” could play bridge, read library books, or use the YWCA. The lapses of the famous and wealthy might be overlooked, “but for us common folk, decency is the thing” that would position good women ahead of those who slipped. “If I am not always satisfied, if I am sometimes lonely, if my

10. Mrs. M. B. H. and Mr. C. B. D, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, February 16 and 19, 1929, respectively.
13. “A Lonely Wife,” letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, December 12, 1925. The editor, probably William Lindsey White, noted, “The really funny thing about this letter is that it is genuine!” One wailer raised the possibility that the letter was written by the editor. Because the Gazette permitted anonymous letters, that possibility exists, despite the editor’s protestation. Of course, without anonymity, it is doubtful that the letter, or many of the responses, would have been written. “Over-the-Back-Yard-Fence,” letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, June 14, 1926.
Women’s fashions of the 1920s also aroused debate. The new styles leaned toward covering less of the body—except with makeup. Defenders cheered the new styles’ practicality and healthfulness (and understood their allure), while traditionalists condemned them for immodesty. One wailer was struck by seeing flappers no older than fourteen. A writer who attended a play at the teachers’ college commented that “the front of the balcony far rivaled the scenic offering from the stage” and urged school administrators to require longer skirts or more demure postures in the balcony’s front row. Another wailer who “would love to just once more see . . . a girl with long hair, long skirts and the same face which God gave her” confessed to feeling “old at forty.”

Not all women approved of the new styles. One letter defended the bob, saying that it was modest, and because of its convenience, “women will never go back to the burden of long hair any more than they will go back to germ-sweeping skirts, or wasp-waist corsets, or high choker collars.” But two women responded, calling it a “silly craze,” saying, “it isn’t natural. It isn’t Scriptural,” and, implicitly acknowledging short hair’s practicality, urging employers to allow women time to care for their long locks, “even if we must all be taxed to pay for it.” Others urged women to refuse to buy extremely high-heeled shoes that are “not natural and detrimental to the health” and to abandon hose on hot summer days for greater comfort.

Wailers debated the moral corrosiveness of movies, plays, and especially dance. Katherine Polk noted that state film censors had axed much of the shootings, gambling, and drinking from movies but left romantic triangles. She complained that throughout the week, the young received the best education taxpayers could afford, and then on Friday night, “we send these children to have their sex instincts developed as some film . . . sensational writer sees fit.” In contrast, “One Who Was
There approvingly called the road musical *My Girl* “the jazziest, dancingest, booziest, leggiest, girliest show” ever shown at the teachers’ college. The audience loved it. The man in front of her used opera glasses to scrutinize the legs, and a ten-year-old boy “jumped up on his seat, and with clenched fists raised above his head and his eyes to the ceiling, . . . yelled ‘Wow, Oh, Boy.’”

In 1920 Emporian ministers and laymen argued about the place of dance in Sunday school. The vice president of the county Sunday School Association maintained that a dance could be held to lure people to a religious education–focused Sunday-school session, and H. Bixler, a mechanic, wrote that “all cultured, decent dancing is aesthetic” and “is practically religious.” A Methodist mother of children who had danced said her children had grown to be good adults, and “every girl who dances doesn’t go to hell.” More commonly, letter writers argued that “dance is bad in itself,” “one of Satan’s baits” with no place in church work, and “the greatest ally of the ‘red light’ interests,” which good people should “not only
Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova’s 1922 performance in Emporia prompted a debate on whether it was art or a “leg show.” One woman lumped the performance in with immoral movies in finding both responsible for “debas[ing] and degrading our young (and old) people . . . robbing them of their money and self-respect.” Another writer characterized the debate in class terms. Those who could afford three or four dollars a seat and expensive clothes—“men [who] wear claw-hammer coats and a collar so high that they have to jump up to spit”—called the show art. But if a man wore overalls and a woman a plain dress, and they paid a quarter to see the same show, it was “nothing but a low down vulgar leg show.”

“Uncle Billy,” however, approved of legs, on the stage and off, in a letter that was simultaneously sexist and sympathetic to modern women’s greater freedom. He could not condemn the display of women’s legs on stage “when the same legs, or similarly constructed legs are seen on the streets and viewed with glad acclaim and suppressed admiration. . . . Women so recently released from bondage, both as to dress and before the law might be expected to put on a few thrills of some kind. Men naturally slow to grasp a new situation, are much better pleased than they would have us believe. . . . Deep down in their hearts they would have us believe. . . . Deep down in their hearts they will, regardless of the peace of the suffering public. We whose innate modesty has been splashed all over with gall and wormwood have to shade our blushes, buckle on shock absorbers and meekly await another turn of the wheel of fashion.”

Emporians also expressed opinions on women’s wage employment. The 1920 census counted 920 working women in Emporia, up from 800 in 1910. By 1930 there were over 1,300, with roughly 200 each employed as teachers, housekeepers/secretaries/stenographers, followed by 180 saleswomen and 85 nurses. Dozens of women also worked in laundries or as waitresses or cooks.

In 1921 the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations estimated that a working woman in Emporia required at least $18 a week to subsist at a reasonable level. But when a store manager told the court that he thought a weekly wage of $9.50 was sufficient, and a café owner said a customer at his establishment could subsist on 60 cents a day, readers wailed. A. Ramsburg wrote that the businessmen who argued for lower wages would not want their wives to have to wear the clothes such wages could buy, nor would they hire a woman who was dressed so shabbily. The argument that many girls did not need a full wage because they lived at home did not convince Ramsburg since many girls were a primary support for their families. Laura French wrote that a $9.50 wage “is a blot on the Christian civilization of this country,” and C. C. McCullough compared it unfavorably to slavery. “A Business Girl” asked, “Why should a girl have her wages measured out according to what she can get along on? . . . Men are not paid according to what it takes for them to skimp along on. They are paid what their services are valued at. Shouldn’t a girl have the same right?”

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20. T. J. Strickler, “Not a Preacher,” and “A Reader,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, January 15, 19, and 21, 1920, respectively.
21. “Many See Pavlova,” Emporia Gazette, January 11, 1922; “A Reader of the Gazette” and Mrs. C. A. G., letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, January 16 and February 11, 1922, respectively. The show in the “Egypt” tent in a 1929 carnival that visited Emporia apparently fell into the “leg show” class. The show, wrote a reader, “was extremely vulgar, hideous, too nasty for our young men and girls to see and for any of us married people, too. . . . So full of passion was the show that it would have affected the strongest man in the world and left him trembling.”
The Wailing Place included letters on the trials and accomplishments of working women. One writer complained that employers worked domestic help like slaves and refused to allow them to have company or use the phone. A Newton correspondent mocked the state superintendent of public instruction’s rules for teachers. Women teachers were not to attend dances, wear short dresses, or be seen with a man who was smoking. “for such men are an abomination in my sight.” Viola Jung wrote that telephone operators handled up to three thousand calls a day and suffered the impatience and discourtesy of callers. Some women who worked at the county courthouse were, according to one letter writer, more knowledgeable than any man other than “a finished lawyer.” Beginning in 1923 women began to be called to jury duty at the county court; a male juror acknowledged that when Laura French presided as jury forewoman, she convinced him that women were equal or superior to men as jurors. French argued that the average wage-earning girl who lived at home was overworked. “Many working girls help with the housework and do their own sewing while their brothers rest after their day’s work... What the average working girl who helps with the work at home should do is to strike, and strike hard... Strike till the last armed foe expires!”

“Vices that besmirch the escutcheon of American perfection”

The Wailing Place also reflected ongoing battles over lifestyle choices. In the early twentieth century, Emporians and Kansans had passed laws to ban perceived vices, an effort that blended conservatives’ urge to perfect humanity on the basis of their moral values with the proclivity of the Progressive Era to enlist the government to solve problems—a blend consistent with reformers’ vision of the state’s puritan, abolitionist reform heritage. Wailers contested the enforcement of these laws during the 1920s.

Emporia passed an ordinance forbidding commercial pool halls in 1914, but a 1925 letter to the editor noted that there were four or five such halls in town. Pressure from the Ministerial Association of most of the town’s Protestant pastors and the City Women’s Club soon forced government officials to close all halls that charged customers to play pool. “Bab” blasted the hypocrisy of women who played cards to win a prize while taking away the livelihood of a man who invested in a pool hall. Another wailer pointed to the unfairness that those well enough off to join a fraternal organization were able to play on the lodge’s pool table, while those less favored could not play. “The professional busy bodies” in the women’s clubs, the writer charged, had been conducting “a gradual and well-organized attack upon the rights and liberties of the people of Emporia” and justified “their prying interference with other people’s business and pleasure” by expressing concern over the morals of young people. A young man was better off in a well-regulated pool hall, the letter writer opined, than parked with a girl in the countryside. Charles L. Wood, the manager of a major hotel in town, decried the anti-pool-hall law as one that “cannot be enforced without injury to our best interest and the interest of our best citizens.” In April 1926 large majorities in every precinct voted to allow pool halls.

Kansas had prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol in an amendment that had gone into force in 1881, yet enforcement fell far short of the goals of antiliquor

forces, prompting new legislation in 1917 that forbade the possession of alcohol.29 “Democrat” expressed optimism in 1921 that this “bone-dry” law and the federal Volstead Act of 1919 would rid Kansas of the scourge of intoxicating drink. “The old stock of booze is fast being consumed, the hooch from private stills is rapidly depleting the old soaks and the young generation is growing up without a booze appetite.” But a whiskey-drenched dance at the Country Club the following year made it clear that the law was being circumvented. Wailers were quick to point to a double standard when the Gazette named drunks picked up on the street but not the Country Club revelers. Editor White explained that the paper could list only those who were arrested, and evidence was hard to come by at the Country Club. A woman writer was not convinced; she suggested putting the paper’s society editor on the job to get the names, just as for other social affairs. Concerns with lax law enforcement persisted. In 1929 a wailer said that the community should blame not the police but rather those higher up, “who only see what pleases them.” Another letter blasted an Anheuser-Busch billboard advertising Bevo, a beverage lacking alcohol but formulated and marketed to mimic beer. The billboard featured “a scene of merrymaking suggesting the ‘joys’ of the open saloon.” The scene recalled to grown men “the fictitious delights of bacchanalian [sic] cheer” and propagandized in favor of alcohol among the young.

Cigarettes prompted far more letters than alcohol. “A Tobacco Champ” boasted that he had smoked a pipe or cigar for fifty years without ill effect. He worried that reformers pushing legislation against cigarettes, dancing, billiards, and card-playing, that is, “laws to prohibit their fellow men from enjoying life as they see fit,” would not stop at cigarettes but would go after all tobacco. R. A. Patterson responded that smokers should not impose cigarette fumes on others and noted that 90 percent of the local Grand Army of the Republic post of Civil War veterans did not smoke, nearly all the smokers having died.31

Octogenarian Robert Patterson responded to a wailer who charged those opposed to tobacco smoke for failing to live by the Golden Rule, presuming that since the smoker enjoys “vile tobacco smoke,” others should too. Patterson recalled his agony when confined in a room of smokers: “if Hell is any worse, deliver me.” Courtesy of Lyon County Historical Society.


30. “Democrat,” letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, October 18, 1921; Nicholas Wieland, letter to the editor and editor’s response, Emporia Gazette, February 8, 1922; and Mrs. C. A. G., “A Citizen,” and “For a Better Emporia,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, February 11, 1922, October 25, 1924, and April 15, 1929, respectively.

31. “A Tobacco Champ” and R. A. Patterson, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, April 15 and 22, 1922, respectively.
imposed a cost on stores that sold cigarettes under the counter, the law did little to stop cigarette smoking. In 1924 the Kansas legislature considered a proposal to license sellers and tax sales. “A Mere Man” wanted the law changed and blamed women reformers for scaring lawmakers away from passing such legislation. “Not a ‘Mere’ Woman” held nothing back in her response. Scientists, she said, warned that smoking “dulls the intellect, depraves the morals and deadens the finer sensibilities,” effects she suggested had overcome “A Mere Man.” If taxation would solve a problem, “let us put a tax on speeding, on murder, on stealing, on bank robberies. We could get so much more money to run the city. . . . Bah—you give me a pain, talk to some one of your own mental calibre not to Kansas women.”

The license and tax legislation failed in 1924 but reappeared in 1927. When a cigarette opponent decried the “fumes of the poisonous weed” and charged that cigarette addiction deprived families of food and clothing, “Nick O. Teen” sarcastically suggested that the solution was to lock all cigarette users in a room “until they smoke themselves into oblivion,” and then reformers could “pass a few more national prohibitory laws concerning coffee drinking, playing the saxophone, arguing with the wife, and the rest of the vices that besmirch the escutcheon of American perfection.” Another wailer objected to levity about “a great moral question.” “Last spring we opened the pool halls, now come cigarets, next year Sunday movies, then more lax divorce laws, then legalized

Along with their changing economic roles, women of the 1920s were scrutinized and criticized for their adherence to flapper fashion, including bobbed hair, which some derided as unnatural. The smoking flapper girl, as depicted in this Lucky Strike cigarettes advertisement from the El Dorado Times in 1929, prompted considerable wailing although smoking criticism was not reserved for women.

32. R. Alton Lee, “The ‘Little White Slaver’ in Kansas: A Century-Long Struggle against Cigarettes,” Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 22 (Winter 1999–2000): 261–62; Lee J. Alston, Ruth Dupre, and Tomas Nonnenmacher, “Social Reformers and Regulation: The Prohibition of Cigarettes in the United States and Canada,” Explorations in Economic History 39 (October 2002): 432. “Make Cigarette Raid,” Emporia Gazette, May 2, 1921, recounts a police action that netted seven arrests; other arrests occurred, especially in 1921. The Gazette reported that only two of the town’s doctors did not smoke. “Localettes,” Emporia Gazette, April 19, 1921. A letter to The Wailing Place in March 1926 estimated that Emporians smoked at least 40,000 cigarettes a month, but all the legal profit from the sales went to Kansas City, Missouri, businesses. Another letter charged that illicit sales in Kansas were so profitable that illegal cigarette vendors supported the lobbying of anticigarette activists to retain the existing law. “A Smoker” and “Another Smoker,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, March 31, 1926 and April 6, 1926, respectively. The Gazette in 1928, a year after the ban on sales was lifted, said the old law “was almost universally violated” and reported that cigarette manufacturers said that no more cigarettes were being smoked in Kansas at that time than had been shipped in and bootlegged under the old law. “Smoking Dollars,” Emporia Gazette, March 26, 1928.

33. “A Mere Man” and “Not a ‘Mere’ Woman,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, April 24 and 26, 1924, respectively. Studies for more
After cigarette sales became legal in 1927, the focus of the debate turned to women smoking. One letter took aim at a billboard showing a young lady advertising Camels. “It is bad enough for the men, and boys, to throw away their money on tobacco . . . , but I am sure it is worse for humanity in general, for the young ladies to be gradually forced into the habit by the advertising and contact with cigarettes every day.” “A Real Mother” condemned the Gazette for printing a story of a boy giving his mother a carton of cigarettes for Mother’s Day, opining that “smoking is a habit so vicious that decent men and women shun not only the habit but those perverts who have fallen victim to it. If there is a woman in Emporia who smokes she does not deserve the name of Mother.”35 To which “A Mother’s Daughter” responded that her corn cob pipe–smoking mother had done a fine job of raising thirteen children. When a man wrote that women should smoke in the cellar or attic because “nobody wants to see a lunatic walking up and down the streets, with . . . a cigarette stuck in her mouth,” a Quaker pastor responded that if a smoking woman was a lunatic, so too were thousands of smoking men. The pastor conceded that most people considered smoking morally more detrimental for women, “but that is because man’s moral standard has been lowered so long that we have become accustomed to it . . . . If it is all right for you to use tobacco, it is all right for your wife and daughter to use it too. She may drop ashes, or slobber in the biscuit dough; but you claim that the stuff is not injurious, and you like the taste of it, so why complain?” While the Friends pastor wished men to stop smoking lest women follow their example, “A Daughter” reversed the logic, asking, “Why shouldn’t women sit around and smoke and read the paper the same as husbands, fathers or brothers do?” Yet the social stigma of women smokers was apparent in the letter of a man whose schoolteacher mother, nurse sister, and Sunday-school teacher aunt all smoked. They smoked only in their homes because of the “narrow-mindedness and intolerance of many otherwise sturdy citizens” who might object to women smoking in those roles.36

Throughout the decade, the Gazette received letters on the local enforcement or lack of enforcement of the state’s long-standing blue laws, which generally prohibited non-essential commercial enterprises on Sunday. The letters mirrored the discussions of other religion-associated issues. H. S. B. was appalled by an airplane exhibition and baseball game played on a Sunday in 1921, worrying that “at the rate we are going, it is only a few generations until we will have no religion at all.” The Ministerial Association wrote to unanimously oppose Sunday baseball in 1921. Sunday baseball stayed, as did recreational venues for golf and swimming, prompting complaints of a double standard when several grocers were arrested for opening on Sunday. One opponent of the blue laws suggested tongue in cheek that strictly enforcing Sunday closings of every nonessential business would be a great draw for the oil industry: “If the oil workers could feel safe in coming to Emporia for Sunday and having fine church and vespers services, and being in no danger of contamination from business or pleasure, the town would be overcrowded every Sunday.”37

God and country

The controversy over the enforcement of Sunday closing was at root one about religion in society. Emporians expressed concern about weakened loyalties to both church and country or at least to outward manifestations of adherence to Christianity and Americanism. Sunday baseball was just one of the forces that Emporia’s
churchgoers blamed for empty pews. “Seer” placed much of the blame on the teaching of evolution. If the Bible is unreliable, “there is no hope for salvation within or without the church. So, why attend church?” Presbyterian minister David Kerr wrote that properly taught, the Bible and evolution were consistent, but many stayed away from church because “they get but little happiness out of church or the Bible or their own Christianity,” and church leaders who could inspire such congregants were rare.38

Aiming for greater appeal, some churches opted to show religious movies, and one wailer observed that “if the spoken word will not attract the people, perhaps the silent picture will.” This comment prompted a letter to the Gazette from a writer who worried that Emporians would be “disgraced with Sunday picture shows” and that if Jesus came to town, he would treat viewers as he had the money changers in the Temple. Others defended the church-run Sunday movies as better for youths than the alternatives, pleading with critics not to be forty years behind the times and suggesting that Emporians be “more broadminded and not so bigoted in our own ideas that we desire to punish the entire community for what we deem ‘Christian Thought.’” Another wailer blamed empty pews on families’ preference for a Sunday drive in the country. “Truthful” put it plainly—people “would rather do something else,” and they were not as scared by revivalists as former generations. “The time was when truth was their battle, and they fought it; but now they are frightened.”

Letters to the editor also lamented the lack of respect shown to patriotic symbols. A couple of letters noted that black onlookers showed more respect for the flag than whites, apparently trying to shame whites.40 Another writer observed that people paid no heed when a band played “The Star-Spangled Banner”: “Everywhere in the crowd, walked men and women jabbering like persons on a high school picnic party. . . . If this song does not mean anything to us now after the close of the World War, we assuredly are a dead nation.” However, another wrote, “There is danger of resorting to acts or words of tyranny to encourage ‘respect’ for a flag, which, . . . is more disgraced by that ‘respect,’ than by the lack of showy display in its honor. This demand for formal respect, is an outrage to the spirit of a true American. . . . Our country is being flooded with the poison springs of the Kaiser’s militarism, . . . which conceals a dagger for those who fail to obey.”

The carnage of World War I moved some toward pacifism. A 1924 letter praised the antiwar stance taken by national Presbyterian and Methodist leaders and added, “Let us Christianize and educate the world . . . , and it will never become necessary to fight.” “A Citizen” supported the churches’ stand against militarism and, referring to Mahatma Gandhi, wrote, “It takes a man from ‘benighted’ India to show us the way of Christ. . . . May India send us missionaries.” O. M. Wilhite, however, differed: “Let the world know you won’t fight and you will have to fight or lose your country. Pussyfooting, mealy-mouthed persons never get anywhere.” A World War I veteran reminded readers that wars had brought America independence and freed its slaves.42

38. “Seer” and David R. Kerr Sr., letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, October 11 and 21, 1921 respectively. In 1925 Emporians responded to the controversy that culminated in the Scopes trial with letters for and against evolution. For example, “Freshman” argued that “it is a waste of time for old-fashioned people to resist the modern ideas,” and C. S. Rees warned that “should the time come when the majority of Americans embrace the evolutionary theory and thus cast the Bible behind their backs we will then have without a doubt another Russia right here in these United States!” “Freshman” and C. S. Rees, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, May 4, 1925, and August 11, 1925, respectively.

39. “Modernist,” “An Interested Mother,” “A Tolerant Father,” “A Modern Mother,” “A Stay-at-Home,” and “Truthful,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, February 22, 1922, February 3, 5, and 7, 1930, December 17, 1924, and October 27, 1921, respectively. Rev. Carl Nau of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, who moved his pulpit to the local movie theater and showed religious films in the late 1910s, may have been the first pastor in town to incorporate movies into services. “Emporia and Her Preachers,” Emporia Gazette, August 9, 1920, quoting a Kansas City Star story of August 8, 1920. The arguments over Sunday-school dances and church-sponsored movies were local reflections of the internal Protestant church battle between modernists and fundamentalists. Dumenil, The Modern Temper, 185–94, and Entz, “Religion in Kansas,” 140–41.

40. “A White Protestant American” and A. M. Graham, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, April 26, 1924, and May 16, 1929, respectively. “Patrick Henry” and C. M. S., letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, July 8, 1920 and May 19, 1924, respectively. In 1916 President Woodrow Wilson had ordered that “The Star-Spangled Banner” be played at military ceremonies, but Congress did not name it as the national anthem until 1931.

41. H. W., “A Citizen,” O. M. Wilhite, and “World War Veteran,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, June 4, September 9, and May 29, 1924, and April 13, 1928, respectively. One wailer revealed cynicism about war in making an interesting proposal. She asked whether it was right for government to allow children to grow up in poverty only to “demand their life’s blood to protect a nation of many millionaires, who would not shed one ‘drop of taxes’ in order that these children might be well-born, well-clothed and well-fed?” The draft that filled the nation’s need during war “should be justified by a mother and child pension.” “A Mother,” letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, March 30, 1920.
**Castes**

The Wailing Place displayed Emporia’s class as well as cultural divide. These divisions were long-standing. In 1897 an article in the teachers’ college paper reprinted in the *Gazette* described the town as divided into “three castes”—the school and resident folk, the railroaders, and African Americans.\(^{43}\) Except for the introduction of Mexicans as track and other unskilled labor by the Santa Fe in the first decade of the new century, this characterization of Emporia was still valid more than twenty years later.

Several dozen letters provide glimpses into the lives of Emporia’s black residents. In 1922 the city considered acquiring land on East Lake for a park. Though black residents were scattered throughout the town, they were most numerous in northeast Emporia, the area closest to East Lake. Will Post wrote that only two groups in town did not recreate at Soden’s dam on hot summer days—Country Club members with their private pool and blacks, “who would be about as welcome as strike-breakers at Union Hall.” Post asked, “Don’t you think that the colored taxpayers of the town are entitled to some place where they can go? . . . We ought to be able to give them one place of their own.”\(^{44}\)

“One place of their own” characterized much of African American life in Emporia. Black veterans of World War I, barred from the newly formed American Legion post, formed their own. The black Legion took the lead in demanding admission for blacks to Emporia’s movie theaters, but their demand did not extend beyond being allowed a separate seating section.\(^{45}\) Such segregation was pervasive, from segregated civic organizations such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Elks to separate black churches, segregated use of the YMCA and YWCA, and the city commission allotting one of four authorized pool halls to black players.\(^{46}\) Sports teams were almost

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\(^{43}\) “A Good Piece of Writing,” *Emporia Gazette*, March 13, 1897. For the persistence of class division in Emporia, see Michael Smith, “In the news, a tale of two Emporias,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 30, 2017. Zillow.com shows that homes in the northwest part of town list for two or more times the price of most homes south of the tracks, a reflection of a more than century-old pattern.


always segregated, though black teams sometimes played white ones.47 Schools were integrated, but facilities at the schools were not equally available.48

C. D. Patterson, an African American painter, responded in The Wailing Place after two white women complained that their husbands could not get work because contractors hired black men for as little as 35 cents an hour. Patterson had sympathy for the white men but said the blame should not fall on black men. He could not get work. “Why? Because I am colored. I can’t join the painters’ union. Why? Because I am colored. I can’t find work on a union job. Why? Because I have no [union] card. . . . I can’t work for an honest living because I am colored.”

Robert S. Everett, an African Methodist Episcopal Church minister, complained that despite politicians’ promises, no African Americans had been called for jury duty, nor had any even obtained a janitor’s job in the courthouse or city hall.49

A black baseball fan protested a Jim Crow sign directing blacks to a separate section of the town’s baseball park. He said blacks had no desire to sit with whites, “but it doesn’t seem right to see a sign down there segregating us.” White lawyer Walter A. Jones acknowledged that blacks had the right to choose their seats but defended the sign, as “there are a great many colored folks who . . . insist on sitting where they please, and making matters very uncomfortable.” Alma Copeland, wife of a black barber, was quick to reply that Jones might consider that whites intruded on black events. “Quite a number of white people attend colored dances, . . . but think of the confusion if colored boys did the same at [white] dances.”50

Poorer white townsmen and rural residents also protested their treatment. Emporia’s most prosperous residents generally lived in the north, particularly the northwest, part of town, while the poorest living conditions were in the working-class neighborhoods in the southwestern Third Ward. The former featured two colleges and the Country Club. The latter had the large Santa Fe shops, switching yards, and station, which cut the southwest corner of town off from the better neighborhoods. The southwest neighborhood’s Methodist minister wrote, “We have no rich people. All of us are just common, every-day folk. . . . We are nearly all laboring people.” The minister spearheaded a campaign in 1919 to bring sanitary sewers to his part of town years after the rest of Emporia had them. Motivated by resentment of favoritism for the north, Third Ward residents the next year gave the minister nearly 80 percent of their votes, propelling him to the mayor’s seat.51

In 1922 supporters of a return to a city council, rather than the current commission, form of government held a meeting. South-side residents preferred a council in which each ward would be represented rather than the commission in which all commissioners were elected citywide and which north siders were able to dominate.52 While Gazette editorials normally were models of moderation, White characterized some participants at this meeting as “lame-brains” and “cripple-wits.”53 Esther Jones lambasted White. “Mr. Editor, do we all have to believe and conform to your ideas to be good


48. “Colored Girls Rest Room,” Emporia Gazette, June 8, 1921; and Bert Rich, letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, January 9, 1928. A white mother who attended an evening event at an elementary school noted that about a third of the students were black and there was “a close association of white and black children,” but white parents and teachers did not mix with the black parents. She commented, “If parents and teachers consider them our equals, why do they refuse this close association? If they do not so consider them, why do they not protect the children’s rights in this as well as other things?” Mrs. Grace Maddern [Madden?], letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, May 18, 1925.

49. “A Laboring Man’s Wife,” ”Another Laboring Man’s Wife,” C. D. Patterson, and Robert S. Everett, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, July 12, 16, and 21, 1924, and February 18, 1928, respectively.

50. “Fan,” Walter A. Jones, and Alma Lett Copeland, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, July 8, 10, and 14, 1926, respectively. The Kansas City Monarchs, a stellar black professional baseball team of the era, came to Emporia most years and played to large crowds. The Gazette fulsomely praised the team, but Charles Terry, a black bank custodian, scolded the paper for calling the players “darkies.” Charles Terry, letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, June 4, 1929.


52. Frank Clifford lived in Emporia and served two terms representing the Third Ward on the city council before it was replaced by the commission. He wrote that “there was considerable friction between ‘south of the tracks’ and ‘north of the tracks.’” Frank Clifford, Deep Trails in the Old West: A Memoir (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 236.

citizens? . . . You call citizens of Emporia (who are every bit as good as you are) ‘tight-wads and pinchbacks,’ if they don’t dig down in their pockets for every drive that you sanction, regardless of their circumstances. . . . If we all could make our money as easily as W. A. White . . . we could all be liberal in the drives. . . . This is a free country which you seem to forget and everybody has a right to his own opinion regardless of what the Gazette says to the contrary.”

In 1924 Emporia considered switching from streetcars to buses, prompting protest from the poorer areas of town, which still had dirt roads. Minnie Maher, wife of a Santa Fe fireman in the far southwest, protested that after rain, the roads became so muddy that taxis refused to venture over them, yet the streetcar could reach the area. Fearing that mud would stymie buses, she wanted to keep the streetcars in her neighborhood “until South [Avenue] is paved or graveled, oiled or something.”

In 1925 the city signed a garbage contract that placed a hog farm just outside the city’s southwestern boundary after northern locations closer to prosperous residents were rejected. Minnie Maher wrote again to protest this decision and other slights “too numerous to mention” and warned that “we south siders are beginning to stand

54. Mrs. Esther Jones, letter to the editor, *Emporia Gazette*, May 3, 1922. Jones is listed as a teacher living on the south side in the 1920 census. She also criticized White for supporting the state’s industrial court law, which was widely attacked by labor.

55. Mrs. C. E. Maher, letter to the editor, *Emporia Gazette*, February 18, 1924. Despite overwhelming opposition from residents south of the Santa Fe tracks, Emporians voted to switch to buses. Later that year, city commissioners approved abandoning the bus route to the southwest neighborhood, spurring a letter of protest to The Wailing Place, petitions, and an area delegation to the commissioners that resulted in the restoration of the route. “Majority for Buses,” *Emporia Gazette*, February 20, 1924; C. S. Rees, letter to the editor, *Emporia Gazette*, November 22, 1924; and “Must Reroute Buses,” *Emporia Gazette*, November 26, 1924.
up for our rights.” “We are asking for justice,” wrote another south-side resident, adding, “Why are a few of our citizens so selfish? Why not take it [the hog farm] to their own end of town?”

The following year, Edgar Brown protested the inadequate school in his neighborhood, saying that “the board of education does not pay any attention to it because we live below the railroad.” Nora Stevens wrote that only favored northern districts had storm sewers—sewers that dumped their water to the south. “The railroad district in this town always has been neglected. But tell me, . . . what would this town be without the railroad district and pay envelope? . . . We ask for our just share of the improvements.” Northern residents knew they were favored; when complaining about errant whistles from the new Catholic hospital in the neighborhood, a north sider wrote that “people who love quietness and seclusion have built their homes here because they felt sure they would not be molested by noise and other objectionable features of an industrial center. . . . We think the Santa Fe is able to furnish all the whistling there is demand for in the whole town.”

In addition to discrimination in improvements and offenses against environmental justice, some letter writers complained of inequality in law enforcement. As mentioned above, some Emporians charged that there was a double standard in prohibition enforcement. Similarly, a 1930 letter complained of favoritism in the enforcement of gambling laws: “A bunch of Mexicans playing dominoes for a penny a point in a boxcar, negroes shooting craps in an alley or white laborers playing for a 10 cent point while they wait for the rain to stop, are run in for gambling. But a bunch of white-kid-gloved ladies can play bridge for a silver teapot or a Martha Washington geranium and they get their notice in the society column.”

Lyon County rural residents struggled during the depressed farm conditions of the 1920s, one wailer noting that some had sold everything and moved to town, “and the most of them are walking the streets daily looking for jobs.” They resented what they saw as overbearing, prosperous, selfish, business-oriented townsmen. E. L. Bugbee protested the Gazette prodding farmers to buy locally when Emporia businessmen did as he did in buying cheaply and selling dearly regardless of local loyalties. E. W. Lumley wrote that town business leaders should consider how they could help the farmer save money rather than tell him how to spend it. In 1921 farmer John Hinshaw bristled at the...

56. “Lodge Hog Complaints,” Emporia Gazette, April 1, 1925; Mrs. C. E. Maher and “A Taxpayer,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, April 1 and 3, 1925, respectively.

57. Edgar Brown, Nora Stevens, and “A Listener,” letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, April 6, 1925, September 6, 1925, and January 21, 1929, respectively.

Chamber of Commerce and American Legion appointing themselves “guardians over the poor, downtrodden farmer” in a campaign against the Nonpartisan League. “The farmers as a class have a little sense and a few rights yet, but are very much human, and feel the dictators’ lash, and possibly may be driven to extremes of radicalism [if] certain forces ride their self-styled power too hard.” Farmer Lyman Hall in 1929 weighed in on a bond issue that the Emporia Chamber of Commerce had promoted to build an airport: “This airplane business belongs to the wealthy class. . . . So if they need an airport, let them pay for it.” “A Clod Hopper” wrote the following year that local merchants’ fight against chain stores gave farmers “a big laugh”; he hoped “the merchants and wholesalers will . . . give the chain stores a good fight so the farmer’s dollar will be worth at least 30 cents.”

The Klan

The cultural and class tensions felt by Americans in the 1920s spurred the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The Klan was evident in Kansas by 1921, sending an organizer to Emporia in July but failing to win recruits. An organizer returned the next spring, recruiting first among Masons and members of the American Legion and later in the railroad yards. By late September, the Klan claimed 1,200 members in town. In April 1923, in an election the Gazette pronounced came down to “klan or anti-klan, nothing else,” Earl Hawkins, a Klan-backed accountant, became mayor, polling especially strongly in the far southwestern part of town and weakest in the southeast ward home of Emporia’s Catholic Church and in the tony northwest neighborhood. That fall the Klan held a large meeting in the high school auditorium, and a Klan convention drew so many people that for the first time, the Broadview Hotel had to turn would-be listeners away.

While the Gazette did not report any violence, in 1923 threats drove one family from town, there were business boycotts and counterboycotts of Klansmen and Catholics and other KKK opponents, the nearby town of Hartford fired a teacher because she was Catholic, and the Gazette office received a threat of tar and feathering.

Though the Klan remained active, its electoral strength in Emporia waned beginning in 1924. The Republican candidate for governor, Ben Paulen, would not denounce the Klan in his race against the incumbent, Jonathan Davis, a Democrat with Klan sympathies, so editor White ran as an independent anti-Klan candidate. He received nearly 150,000 votes, about 30,000 fewer than Governor Davis but less than half the number received by Paulen. In Emporia, Davis, who had won the two southern working-class wards two years earlier, ran behind both Paulen and White in every ward, while White won every ward except the Third. In 1926 Klan-backed candidates fared worse. Mayor Hawkins was soundly defeated, and an anti-Klan lawyer replaced him, while later in the year, state and county Klan candidates were “Wiped Out,” according to the Gazette, and November returns “marked the passing of the Ku Klux Klan as a factor in Lyon county politics.”


The Klan’s activities elicited many contributions to The Wailing Place. The first letter was from the wife of the pastor of the First Christian Church. She understood that Klansmen were “churchmen and Masons, who believe in enforcing the law and placing . . . the Bible in the public schools.” She allowed that if the nation’s “elected officers turn out to be politicians,” rather than enforcers of the law, the public may have to “stand together on certain issues, and effect a clean-up.” Despite her support for enforcing laws against lifestyle vices and for conservative Christianity, she objected to “any organization that hides under a cover, or seeks to frighten the masses into doing its will.”

On the verge of a national railroad strike, one wailer saw a sinister plot by the rail lines to send Klan recruiters to towns with railroad shops, where their law-and-order evangelizing could blunt strike activities, many of which were against Kansas law. More saw the recruiters, who were paid for each new member, as sleazy hucksters. One letter compared the recruiter to the “well-dressed, plausible man” who several years earlier had sold Emporians fake packinghouse and automobile stock. Another agreed that the KKK recruiters appealed to “the ignorance and prejudice of their dupes in order to make some easy money.”

Because the Klan craved anonymity, and few supporters were keen on identifying themselves to the Gazette’s anti-Klan editor, it is not surprising that only a few pro-Klan letters appeared in The Wailing Place. P. H. Kemp said the Klan wanted “a square deal for every American citizen” and demonstrated “the same Kansas spirit that moved the pioneers to make Kansas a free state and that moved Kansas to grant to women the full right of suffrage.” “A Klansman” wrote that members were neighbors who came from a wide range of occupations. “They want the Protestant church to live, grow and prosper. It is not their intention nor desire to take from another his rights, they merely wish to preserve their own.” To portray the KKK as “an organization of bigotry is ridiculous,” and if it was as violent as White claimed, “he would most likely been horse-whipped and a liberal coat of tar spread long, long ago.”

Opponents of the Klan were less shy about expressing themselves. Lawyer J. Harvey Frith asked well-meaning Klan members if making Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants “pariahs and outcasts” was worth “provoking religious and racial irritation in a peaceful and, heretofore, tolerant community like Emporia.” Isabel Brown wrote that all knew the “dirty work the Klan has done,” and if the Klan were given power, “Russia would soon be a haven of refuge compared to what we would have.” Since God had made Catholics, Jews, and blacks, “Christians should love their neighbor,” for “you cannot improve on His plan.” Another wailer rebutted “A Klansman,” arguing that the KKK was not just defensive but attempted to hurt Catholics by forcing all children to attend public schools, thus depriving Catholics of the value of their investment in parochial schools. J. H. Shamel, an eighty-three-year-old Civil War veteran, wrote that he “wanted to strike the Ku Klux Klan before I die.” He remembered the murderous Reconstruction Era Klan in the South. He wrote that the KKK goal of the 1920s was the disenfranchisement of Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants expressing themselves. Lawyer J. Harvey Frith asked well-meaning Klan members if making Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants “pariahs and outcasts” was worth “provoking religious and racial irritation in a peaceful and, heretofore, tolerant community like Emporia.” Isabel Brown wrote that all knew the “dirty work the Klan has done,” and if the Klan were given power, “Russia would soon be a haven of refuge compared to what we would have.” Since God had made Catholics, Jews, and blacks, “Christians should love their neighbor,” for “you cannot improve on His plan.” Another wailer rebutted “A Klansman,” arguing that the KKK was not just defensive but attempted to hurt Catholics by forcing all children to attend public schools, thus depriving Catholics of the value of their investment in parochial schools. J. H. Shamel, an eighty-three-year-old Civil War veteran, wrote that he “wanted to strike the Ku Klux Klan before I die.” He remembered the murderous Reconstruction Era Klan in the South. He wrote that the KKK goal of the 1920s was the disenfranchisement of Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants expressing themselves. Lawyer J. Harvey Frith asked well-meaning Klan members if making Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants “pariahs and outcasts” was worth “provoking religious and racial irritation in a peaceful and, heretofore, tolerant community like Emporia.” Isabel Brown wrote that all knew the “dirty work the Klan has done,” and if the Klan were given power, “Russia would soon be a haven of refuge compared to what we would have.” Since God had made Catholics, Jews, and blacks, “Christians should love their neighbor,” for “you cannot improve on His plan.” Another wailer rebutted “A Klansman,” arguing that the KKK was not just defensive but attempted to hurt Catholics by forcing all children to attend public schools, thus depriving Catholics of the value of their investment in parochial schools. J. H. Shamel, an eighty-three-year-old Civil War veteran, wrote that he “wanted to strike the Ku Klux Klan before I die.” He remembered the murderous Reconstruction Era Klan in the South. He wrote that the KKK goal of the 1920s was the disenfranchisement of
blacks, Catholics, and Jews and would “undo the work of the old soldiers in the Civil war,” adding, “It sure is a treasonable act. The penalty of treason is death.”

“History proves that every cycle of intolerance moves on like all other temporary pests,” wrote a Protestant wailer, but “much of the harm done is like the wound: ‘It can be healed, but the scar remains,’ in the hearts of those unjustly injured.” Good Protestants owed their support to those under attack by the Klan. All Christian religions teach that one must love thy neighbor as thyself, but the Klan would add as an exception “unless thy neighbor is a Jew, Catholic or a colored citizen, in which case no matter how law-abiding and worthy he is, suspect him, hate him and traduce him.” The letter concluded that “our personal and national security rests upon, . . . that tolerant, Christian friendliness which was the exemplary spirit of the Divine Master.”

African Americans and Catholics also wrote to the Gazette. Frank M. Baker urged fellow blacks to ignore a Klan parade in 1926, trust in God, and heed the advice of black leaders who “think the way lies not through complaints or threats of racial action but through education, upright living with a better and true effort to work our racial salvation.” Daisy Brown Tipton had not held back in her complaints about a speech given by a Klan official to a packed house at the local movie theater the previous year. In a revivalist-style oration, Rev. William Woodward had explained why blacks, Catholics, and Jews were un-American. Tipton countered with a series of questions. The black man “closed his eyes to past wrongs and present discomforts and did his best [in World War I] to make the world a better place . . . Is that un-American? Does not the constitution declare ‘All men are created free and equal!’” and have rights under that constitution? God in “His wisdom gave a variety of hues to the skin: Three-fourths of the world being black, brown, red or yellow. Is there one supreme enough to criticize His work—man?” “Why should the Ku Klux Klan make the outside world look more askance than ever upon this Great Democracy, . . . as it goes down in history as the only race-hating nation under the sun?” Are not blacks “taxpaying citizens?” “Do not the colored races feel hunger, pain, gladness or shame just as much as the Caucasian?” Tipton concluded, “Is it not the Ku Klux that is truly un-American since it makes a mockery of the very spirit and principle of justice upon which the laws of this government are founded as well as the teachings of Jesus Christ as taught by Himself in the ‘Sermon on the Mount?’”

John Kelly, a Catholic, praised Tipton and added, “If all of thehooded knights had been as intelligent and patriotic as some of the colored people, foreign born and Catholic citizens, whom they dread so much, such men as the klan evangelist would not have found as fertile a field on which to sow their seeds of hatred and discord.” Kelly wrote that Catholics were leaders in all walks of life and were among the country’s most esteemed statesmen and gallant soldiers. Jack Hale, another Catholic, defended Catholics’ patriotism. He spoke with the authority of a veteran who had spent twenty-one months recovering in a hospital after being gassed in the Argonne Forest: “No one who has lived in Emporia can challenge the per cent of the Americanism of the boys of my faith who left this town and went to war. No well-informed or well-intentioned person would challenge the Americanism of about 35 per cent of the personnel of the army and . . . 40 per cent of the navy during the war.”

Other letters analyzed the Klan. During its ascendency in 1923, Walter H. Jones of nearby Olpe wrote that “the world is unsettled in its social and economic status. The lid may blow off anywhere, any time. It has done so for the farmer. His hat is in the fire. . . . with floods, bugs, low prices for products, high prices for purchases, war-time interest rates and higher taxes.” The KKK also had roots in a sense of social injustice, of elites flouting the law and getting away with it. The Klan, Jones wrote, “is but a state of mind: politically, a populist, progressive, nonpartisan, farmer-laborer.” The Klansman “has seen laxity in equal enforcement of law until he is rabid, wants to eat something while the blood drips; he has seen ‘justice’—bought and sold, officers wink and sneer at law enforcement, until he attempts to do underhandedly that which he knows the august body of law enforcement is a complete barricade against, equal justice. . . . In some cases . . . they tack on

68. J. Harvey Frith, Miss Isabel Brown, “Seer,” and J. H. Shamel, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, November 10, 1923, October 8 and 16, 1924, and January 6, 1927, respectively.
70. Frank M. Baker and Daisy Brown Tipton, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, June 26, 1926 and December 19, 1925, respectively. While one could not miss the adamancy and anger in Tipton’s letter, she did close with “Lest I too, forget the infant Jesus at Yuletide—‘Peace on Earth! Good will to man.’”
71. John Kelly, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, December 22, 1925 and July 5, 1926, and Jack Hale, letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, May 9, 1923.
race-hatred, religious mistrust and other kindred appeals to the discontented.” Yet the KKK is “but as boils on the surface of our social order which will pass away when the system is cleaned out.” Nora Stevens had a similar take: “The K. K. K. is merely the foam and froth of our civilization slopping over. Our hates, loves and prejudices must find a vent of some kind and this organization is a good place to let us get them off our chests.”

After the electoral defeats of 1926, a wailer analyzed Emporians’ sinking support for the KKK: “I was a Klansman. I got tired. So did hundreds of others who went in hoping to better conditions. Conditions were not improved. . . . The reason why things were not improved is that we klan men, when we get into office haven’t as much judgment as we have enthusiasm. We got to quarreling. We took advice of people who had no standing, and the rest of the people, seeing what kind of people we were consulting, quit us.”

The Wailing Place

Emporia, like much of the Midwest, was fortunate that the Klan’s heated propaganda did not result in major violence. The Gazette editors emphasized town unity. While The Wailing Place gave voice to many disagreements, the paper rarely printed letters that were disrespectful. When insults were flung, they most commonly went up the social scale rather than down, which would have acerbated resentment and conflict. In 1922 William Allen White referred to The Wailing Place as “the town’s safety valve. It prevents many an explosion. It is the best thing that can happen in any community—to have a place where people can air their grievances and find often that they are mistaken.” Perhaps it served that function during the Klan’s heyday and at other times of friction. In printing letters sympathetic to Klan victims, the Gazette may have helped lessen the scars on “the hearts of those unjustly injured” by the Klan. After disgruntled writers had unloaded on the editor or town leaders, they might, as White wrote when launching The Wailing Place in 1911, “forget the whole business and begin planting potatoes.”

72. Walter H. Jones, letters to the editor, Emporia Gazette, July 16 and 17, 1923; Nora Stevens, letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, July 19, 1926.

73. R. D. W., letter to the editor, Emporia Gazette, August 6, 1926. Agreeing with R. D. W., the editor added, “Prejudice and emotion will sweep men into office, but it takes good sense to keep men in office.” Hawkins might have won reelection had he not relied on Klan advisers, not one of whom “ever was connected as leader with a single proposition that ever helped Emporia . . . . The klan cabinet gave him perfectly rotten advice . . . . This town and every community in the long run is controlled by the men who make it . . . . the hustlers for good roads, the leaders in business, in the professions, in the schools and churches. The klan was going to put that crowd out of business. So the klan set up a council of fourth raters . . . . The fourth raters were tried. They were foolish. The people got their sense, and out went the klan and its fourth raters . . . . Every time [such movements] come their followers think that the laws of spiritual gravity will be overcome THIS time. But every time the dull-witted fourth rater sinks to the bottom.”

74. Pegram, One Hundred Percent American, 18; Edward Gale Agran, “Too Good a Town”: William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 38–39. The most common exceptions to respectful letters were those that ridiculed the Klan, a practice that White followed in his editorials.

Whether or not The Wailing Place soothed the “savage breast” of Emporians, it did reveal the local thinking on the clashes of classes and cultures that roiled the 1920s. Many letters cried out with the resentment of the aggrieved. Some writers felt that Jazz Age sexual mores, fashions, and amusements and their defenders threatened not only morality but a way of life. While the writer who felt “old at forty” seemed only mildly distressed by changes in women’s fashions, another wailer was alarmed by the multiplying changes that would lead to “ruin, ruin, ruin.” Fear of changes drove some to protect their vision of Protestantism and Americanism through joining the KKK, while Alma Copeland’s letter about white “confusion” if blacks attended a white dance dripped with the sarcasm of a race that many Emporians had long disrespected. Class resentment prompted farmers’ and south-side Emporians’ charges of neglect and unfair treatment by the established town powers and animated letters charging elites with hypocrisy in protecting Country Club carousers and drawing a distinction between highbrow art and lower-class “leg shows.”

Divided as the letter writers were on issues, their letters displayed two common themes: correspondents often appealed to Christianity and American values. Scripture was invoked against everything from movies, dance, and women’s short hair to war and women’s low wages. Both Klan supporters and detractors felt that Christianity was on their side. Wailers showed patriotism even as they argued about the proper observance of national symbols, and Klan opponents cited their service in the Civil War and World War I to prove their patriotism in the face of Klan claims of 100 percent Americanism. Daisy Tipton eloquently invoked both Christianity and the Constitution against the Klan.

At root many of Emporians’ cultural clashes—on cigarettes and alcohol, low- and highbrow entertainment, and the range of sexual mores—pitted arguments for modesty and individual and social health against arguments for freedom and tolerance. Freedom and tolerance also underlay letters attacking the Klan. Perversely, Walter A. Jones requested that blacks honor Jim Crow signs in an appeal for tolerance of whites’ racist sensitivities. Notwithstanding Jones, the dichotomy between moral interventionists seeking individual and societal improvement on the one hand and those who supported tolerance and the possibility of greater freedom in the modern pluralistic society on the other may be a better way to think of some of the political and social divides of the 1920s than a rural-urban or conservative-liberal split.

Examination of the letters of ordinary citizens, such as those published in The Wailing Place during the 1920s, brings us closer to the lives of the common folk. The Whites were excellent commentators on small-town America, but Gazette readers were not shy about contradicting them, nor could the paper’s editors possibly capture the full range of townspeople’s opinions or speak from all of their perspectives. The letters argued over how morality, religion, science, and the Constitution applied to issues of culture and class. They expressed sincerely held beliefs of what it meant to be a good person and how to form better individuals and a better society. They reflected hopes and grievances. While in retrospect we see historical dead ends and moral blind spots, the letter writers, if not always their views, deserve respect and a chance to speak directly to us. Their views, like diverse opinions on present-day issues—some of which are clearly echoes of earlier controversies—show Americans wrestling with how to live virtuously in a changing world.76