Thomas Benton Murdock and
William Allen White

ROLLA A. CLYMER

BUTLER county, in its long history—some say 100 years, some say 90—has been the home and working arena of numerous accomplished newspaper men and women.

El Dorado has had its full share of these—and it is significant that the most eminent were writers, gifted ones who wafted the glory of the Walnut valley and the Kingdom of Butler into far places.

Many of them were of pioneer persuasion. None of them ever knew wealth in any form. Few of them experienced even competence or comfort in worldly affairs. All of them were accustomed to grinding toil, to hardship in the routine of their vocation, and even to personal danger.

But all of them were filled with zeal for their work, and sustained with pride in the products of their art. So they came with their few fonts of type and their hand presses and other rude tools of their craft—and helped to write some stirring pages of Kansas history that shall forever shine with their ardor and their valiance.

It would be interesting, perhaps highly valuable in an historic sense, for someone, some day, to chronicle carefully the lives and works of these competent newspaper folk, who made valuable contribution to the sturdy progress that Butler has always known.

Today, however, we are concerned with only two of them—but those two among the most noteworthy of all, whose lives were singularly bound together by professional ties as well as long-enduring and affectionate personal relationship.

The elder of these was Thomas Benton Murdock, a figure of marked charm and character, whose color still gleams after the passage of many years. He was a power both politically and editorially in a period during which Kansas, after having thrown off its sod-breaking shackles, was seeking to blossom into the full stature of statehood. The times were hard, the public economy was weak, revolution and rebellion against established custom were in the air.

ROLLA A. CLYMER, of El Dorado, the 1956-1957 president of the Kansas State Historical Society, is editor of the El Dorado Times.

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Through this troubled scene, Mr. Murdock strode with calm mien and superb assurance. He was a born leader; he had faith in himself, and a way with people. He was friendly and down to earth in his contacts, and was made to be esteemed and admired. While he had enemies who worked at the job, few hated him with bitter intensity.

He was a handsome man, above middle height and built thick-about through the chest. As a lowly cub around the office of the Emporia Gazette, I remember seeing him many times. He had the "full, round, ruddy face of a man who loved good living, and the soft voice of one who persuaded rather than commanded." He was always faultlessly dressed, his collar flaring out to points and his cravat neatly tied, and he invariably wore a flower in his lapel.

He had suffered snow blindness during his army campaigning in the Rockies, and this affliction bothered him all the rest of his life. So he never appeared without glasses—and behind these glasses his kindly eyes twinkled with a canny and complete understanding of human kind.

He was born in the mountains of Virginia in 1841. His parents could not endure the iniquity of slavery, so freed their slaves and went to Ohio in 1849. After some wanderings, they came to Kansas—to Topeka—in the winter of 1856-1857—just 100 years ago.

They kept a tavern—and young Benton grew up in the company of Jim Lane, A. D. Stevens, and other famous border fighters. The family finally settled permanently near Emporia.

When the Civil War broke out, Benton enlisted with his father and brother, Roland, in the Ninth Kansas cavalry but was discharged in 1863 because of illness. Returning from the army, he learned the printing trade after having served as a hod carrier and a general workman around Topeka in his youth. He worked in the office of the Emporia News, then owned by P. B. Plumb—later a famous Kansas senator—and Jacob Stotler. His brother, Marshall, who later founded the Wichita Eagle, was then running the Burlington Chronicle.

Benton came to El Dorado, and on March 4, 1870, founded the Walnut Valley Times with J. S. Danford.

His first wife was Frances Crawford, the sweetheart of his boyhood, and Mary Alice Murdock (Pattison) became the survivor of their marriage. The wife and mother died in a tragic ending after ten years. Mr. Murdock then was married to Marie Antoinette Culbreth. They had five children, but only Ellina Murdock Starke, who died several years ago, survived to womanhood.
From the first, Mr. Murdock became a political leader in this county. In 1876, he was elected a member of the state senate. There he served with many of the distinguished men of that day both in the house and the senate. In 1880 he was defeated for re-election, unfairly he thought, so sold the Times to Alvah Shelden, moved to Topeka and became connected with the Daily Commonwealth.

But the lure of El Dorado still held him, and in 1883 he returned to this town and founded the El Dorado Republican. The daily edition followed the weekly in 1884, and the paper at once took a prominent place among Kansas publications.

Thus, Mr. Murdock established in this town the two papers which comprise the roots of the present El Dorado Times, as that paper came into being by merger of the two elder ones on December 1, 1919. These roots go back to the early date of 1870.

It is related that Mr. Shelden felt aggrieved when Mr. Murdock returned to start the Republican. Mr. Shelden claimed that Mr. Murdock had made a promise never to engage in the newspaper business in El Dorado, after selling the Walnut Valley Times. Whatever the truth of that contention, these two men—both strong, able leaders—were bitter enemies all the rest of their days.

In 1888 Mr. Murdock was again elected to the state senate. He was a member of the committee that tried Theodosius Botkin and canvassed the county-seat troubles of western Kansas. He was upset by the Populist and Farmers' Alliance wave in 1892, and never ran for office again. At the end of his career he was named state fish and game warden by Governor Stubbs. He took office on July 5, 1909, and died November 4 of the same year.

Volney P. Mooney's History of Butler County, Kansas praises Mr. Murdock in warm and cordial fashion. The late Judge Mooney wrote: "He was a public man all the time. His influence on the state was more rather than less because of the fact that he was not in office. In every Republican State convention for forty years Mr. Murdock has been a power of the first class."

That power and influence reached its zenith when he was in the state senate, for he was leader among the forces that ruled the roost in those days. That was a period in which all public officials, as well as most politicians of sorts, rode on railroad passes. But Mr. Murdock warranted much more than a pass; he had a private car—and when it rolled into El Dorado and stood on a siding while he spent a day or two at home, it was the focus of monumental pride and interest.
THOMAS B. MURDOCK AND W. A. WHITE

W. A. White said impishly in his Autobiography that even after Mr. Murdock was named fish and game warden, he still had his private car—though it was the car in which young fish were delivered from the state hatchery at Pratt to various points around Kansas.

Again Judge Mooney testified: “As an editor he was equipped as few men are equipped—with an individual style. He expressed something more than an idea. He reflected an ideal plus a strong, unique personality. He therefore in a way dramatized whatever he wrote—made it the spoken word of a combatant in the conflict.

...”

William Allen White is also on record as saying: “... he taught me more than anyone before him to write short sentences, to use simple common words, to say exactly what I meant in the vernacular. ...”

An illuminating aside about Mr. Murdock was related by Mr. White, also in the Autobiography. A noted criminal lawyer had made an eloquent plea in a court trial, and White had written a full column about it. Next day, the lawyer slipped a $5 bill into White’s hand.

Feeling conscience stricken and that he had been bribed and corrupted, the young reporter went to Mr. Murdock, told the story and asked, “What shall I do?”

The old man looked at me quizzically and broke out: “ Tried to bribe my reporters, eh? The damned scoundrel! Hasn’t he got any moral sense left?” He saw the bill still in my hand and said: “Willie, give me that bill. By Godfrey’s diamonds, plowing with my heifer, eh? I’ll show him he can’t buy my reporters.” And slipping the bill into his pocket, he gave me the funniest, quizzicallest and chucklingest smile, and added, “Now go to work.” He kept the bill!

And that reminds that Murdock, who was indifferent to business matters, was always hard up. He loved his fleshpots, and he never lowered his standard of good living, but he had to borrow from Peter to pay Paul, he always owed the banks—and there was never enough money to go around. His managers, like Sumpter Smith and Earl Forgy, had to “steal” money out and carry it in separate accounts to pay paper and material bills. But Mr. Murdock was serene and though he often was hagridden for lack of ready cash, he never failed to carry on in the comfortable way of life he set for himself.

Judge Mooney further related that Murdock always stood by the home folks. Of course he took part in local matters, and having taken part he had to take sides. He was never neutral in any
important contest here at home. But he always fought in the open, and he always fought fair. He never abused a man. He attacked causes, movements, administrations . . . [but not the personal character of his opponents]. He had no newspaper fights. . . . He had no office blacklist. . . Many [a county] politician . . . in the old days . . . fought Mr. Murdock knowing he could depend upon [him] . . . to keep to the issue, to be silent on old scores, to leave personal matters out of the question.

The other El Dorado and Butler county editor we consider today, of course, was William Allen White.

He had his first newspaper training in this town, and it led him into a career that reached the heights. No editor in the history of this state—which has produced outstanding members of the profession at all its ages—ever attained the breadth and quality of fame that came to him.

Mr. White was born in Emporia on February 10, 1868, the son of Dr. Allen White and Mary Hatten. "Old Doc" White was an individualist—a story in himself—a vocal Democrat in days when members of that party were almost poison in Kansas, and variously a doctor, a trader, and a merchant. Both the father and mother were well long toward middle age when "Willie" was born.

Shortly after "Willie's" birth, "Doc" White, who was always restless, came "down the Warnut" southwest from Emporia and established a store in what was then the straggling village of El Dorado. The White Autobiography relates this incident:

On the journey I came within an ace of my life. It was spring. The creeks were swollen. We were traveling by spring wagon. We were crossing a stream and missed the ford. The wagon lurched. I was wrapped in a big, brown shawl and was thrown into the swiftly moving spring flood. For two or three seconds I floated, and in those seconds I was rescued by the driver of the team and went on my way rejoicing in my deep, infantile sleep."

From the age of two until he finally went to work in Kansas City when he was 24 or 25, barring absences while he was off at college or the University, Mr. White lived in this town. Thus, he spent nearly a third of his life in the beautiful Valley of the Walnut. Here he romped and rollicked through the "Court of Boyville," drinking deep the heady brew of adventures which he later re-created in a book by that name. And here he came under the influence of "Bent" Murdock.

His own father died when he was about 14 years old. The Whites and Murdocks were closely akin in the little town. Murdock was the elder White's best friend. Will White, seeing the Murdocks every day and being a companion to their little crippled
daughter, Alice, was to all intents and purposes a member of the family. And so White wrote:

He [Murdock] was my foster father. Because my father held him as his little brother Benjamin, he took me as his spiritual child. I was proud of him, grafted him into the wound that death had left when my father went, and gave him a son's affection and respect which I never withheld.

Again White wrote:

Across the years, he stands before me, looking down over his glittering bifocal glasses, and making humorous self-deprecating noises, not words, more than grunts but less than giggles, framed by funny grimaces, when confronted with some shortcoming. Then he turns away airily sighing, "Well—oh, well—I guess we're all poor sinners!" and shuffles away.

It is a temptation to relate a number of Mr. White's joyous experiences in this town of the early days—this microcosm of Kansas pioneer life, which was decidedly not all grief and affliction but gilded heavily with joy and good cheer. Yet time will not permit that indulgence, so only a few brief high lights may be noted.

White learned to set type at Emporia during his college days, and his first newspaper job in El Dorado was under T. P. Fulton of the El Dorado Democrat—another intriguing character.

Then later, one summer between school terms, he went to work for Mr. Murdock at the El Dorado Republican for what he called the "princely" salary of $8 a week. He served as reporter, general roustabout, and boss of the carriers. Still later, as he developed, he drew $18 a week—when Murdock went off on political excursions and put him in charge of the paper.

He tells that once, when he was home for the summer, the "boys" took him on a raid on Sandifer's melon patch. It was a put-up job. Just as the young vandals began their melon thumping, one of the elder Sandifers started blasting with his shotgun. White said: "And I, who in childhood's happy hour had been regarded as a good second-class runner by my innocent companions, started out, fleet of wing as Eden's garden bird. Lord, how I ran!"

White had trouble with higher mathematics at the university, and consequently never received enough credits to enable him to graduate. But, friends of that period have reported, he spent more time with books than he did in classroom work.

When he finally left El Dorado, he worked a year or two for both the old Journal and the Star in Kansas City—his talent constantly expressing itself and a mild fame growing up about him. And then, in 1895, he bought the Emporia Gazette from Billy Morgan—and was firmly set on the way to glory.
This chronicle today need not recount the steps by which he rose. All of you, in a general way, and some in particular fashion, are familiar with the manner in which he increased his stature and broadened his favor with God and man. Suffice it to say, that in his middle 40’s a scant 20 years after he located in Emporia—he was a figure of national prominence.

None of the numerous able contemporaries of his day approached the dimension of his talent. He set the standard for professional competency, as well as a wide understanding of men and affairs, that not only encompassed the Kansas, but the American, heart.

Sometimes we hear the remark that someone of the writing craft hereabouts is “another William Allen White.” Nothing could be more carelessly said nor farther from the truth. In his day he stood supreme among the writers of his field for individual color, for clarity, and for stirring vigor of expression. Ellery Sedgwick has said of him that he was “as authentic a saint as ever wrote American.”

He gave the country press a lustre which it had not hitherto attained; there was not an editorial chair in the country which he could not have graced.

He was hugely gifted by talents above the run of ordinary men—and wielded dominance in three fields of endeavor:

In newspaper making,
In literary accomplishment, and
In the arena of politics and government, where he fought more valiantly for causes than for men.

I was fortunate to be in his employ for seven years at an impressive stage of my life. Not only did he influence me profoundly, but he gave me the kindest and most generous personal consideration. I have always looked upon him as a foster father of my own. It was at his urging that I came to El Dorado. I had held other plans in mind. I wanted to go to the Kansas City Star—where a job had been offered me.

In the years when I was a Gazette reporter, the paper was small. What gave it essential and outstanding distinction was the omnipresence of Mr. White himself. He literally—to employ his own expression—“ran about the paper in his shirt sleeves.” It was not alone the daily swing and sweep of his powerful editorials that lifted the Gazette from the ruck, but that his capable hands were busy in every nook and corner of the Gazette’s being.

He burst in every morning with suggestions for timely news stories, which usually meant that the town’s sacred cows were in for
another distressing series of shocks and outrages. He interpolated straight-away news copy here and there with some twist of his own that raised ordinary reporting to a high level. Upon occasion, he and Walt Mason would collaborate in blocking out display heads in rhyme—the main line and decks and sub-decks all forming a true jingle. I have never seen anyone else do this.

He himself worked with blazing fury. When something hot was coming off the griddle of his nimble mind, his flying fingers beat a tattoo on his old double-keyboard Smith-Premier that was little short of plain assault.

Many golden memories flood back from those years around the Gazette office, and I have time to recount only one or two of them. His comebacks in conversation were lightning thrusts of wit.

Once I hesitatingly told him that a shady politician, who thought he was running for congress but wasn't, had hinted that he might take me to Washington as his private secretary, in the event of his election.

Whereat, Mr. White gave vent to a roaring, gusty laugh as he exclaimed: "Boy, all you private secretaries to Joe Boltz ought to get together and hold a mass meeting."

Then again, I mentioned to him the quick and fat profit a certain miserly fellow had made on a land deal, and he flashed out with a grin: "Well, Rolla, the Lord shows how little he thinks of money by the kind of folks he gives it to."

During the years after I left his employ, he wrote me a total of more than two hundred letters—messages of friendliness and wisdom and faith.

Occasionally he would drop an offhand line to say that Joe Dobbins might be good material for attorney-general or lieutenant-governor, and that I might profitably look into his qualifications. Then, after I had done so and had timidly written a few words to the effect that Joe might shed glamor on the state service, Mr. White would pick up my remarks in his column.

Observing, in the manner of one making a great discovery, that "the papers around the state" were beginning to mention Joe Dobbins, he would forge ahead in slashing, 12-cylinder fashion to boost the candidate he had already hand-picked and launched upon his trail to the stars.

Thus, all the way and in many phases, his life was shed over mine as a great benediction. Nothing could ever come to me in the way of honor or riches or fame that would outweigh the encompassing friendship which he so bountifully extended.
One of his contemporaries has said of him: "He may not have been the greatest man that Kansas has ever produced, but undoubtedly he was the Kansan to have the greatest effect upon the country as a whole."

The world of William Allen White was spun from out his heart—a glowing, gorgeous, fervent heart—which keenly perceived all the lust and cruelty and evil with which this earth is encrusted, and yet—through the surpassing richness of his own character—made of it, for himself and others, a world of beauty and of joyousness and of love.

So, my friends, I have tried to give to you here today a picture of two men of unusual traits and sterling achievements whose lives ran partly parallel in what was once the little town of El Dorado. They lived and worked and complemented each other in the publication of a newspaper which was long housed in a building, standing upon a portion of the ground where this handsome, modern edifice has now been reared.

The officers and directors of the Eureka Federal Savings and Loan association, I believe, have performed a gracious act as well as one helpful historically, by having installed a suitable plaque which commemorates enduringly the names and fame of these two gifted men.

For myself, I have always felt a sense of unfitness and of futility in trying to carry on the destinies of a newspaper which grew partially out of the product which they so consummately created.

Today, we dedicate that plaque and its stirring memories, not so much by formal words of expression, as by the abiding gratitude and admiration that moves our hearts.
TWO FAMOUS KANSAS NEWSPAPER MEN OF OLD EL DORADO

Thomas Benton Murdock  
(1841-1909)  
Courtesy Charles E. Heilmann.

William Allen White  
(1868-1944)  
About 1910.