

William Allen White – 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Guess who's coming to dinner? A Hollywood movie star, a best-selling author, or maybe even the President of the United States. These were the remarkable types of visitors who came to call on rural Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White. In 2018, White's home in Emporia is celebrating 150 years since the birth of this amazing Kansan. It's today's Kansas Profile.

William Allen White was born in 1868 in Emporia. Roger Heineken and Kathie Buckman, volunteers with the William Allen White Community Partnership, shared the story of his home and his life.

White grew up in the rural community of El Dorado, with a population at the time of 3,466 people. Now, that's rural. He attended the College of Emporia and the University of Kansas.

"Sheer luck got me in the newspaper business," White would write later. As a student, he wrote three letters asking for a job: One to a grocer, one to a merchant, and one to a newspaper editor. The grocer and the merchant "knew my desultory ways and rejected me," White wrote in modesty. The newspaper editor knew White's father and hired White, and his journalism career began.

In 1892, White became an editorial writer for the *Kansas City Star* where he met and married Sallie Lindsay. In 1895, the Whites borrowed \$3,000 to buy the *Emporia Gazette* and moved to Emporia where they lived for the rest of their lives.

One day, White was accosted on the street by some men who disagreed with his politics. White was furious. He went to his office and dashed off an editorial which criticized what he considered the backward-looking, anti-business policies of the Democrat and Populist parties. The editorial was titled "What's the Matter with Kansas?"

The editorial went viral, as we might describe it in 2018. The Republican party distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of his editorial across the nation. Virtually overnight, White became nationally famous. In following years, White became a key leader of the progressive wing of the Republican party and a friend of Teddy Roosevelt.

In 1899, the Whites moved into a home named Red Rocks because of the red Colorado sandstone which covers the first story. The house is located at 927 Exchange Street in Emporia.

If only the walls of this home could talk. Through the years, it hosted some of the most famous people of its day. These ranged from actor Douglas Fairbanks to author Edna Ferber to scientist Albert Einstein – including, by some accounts, five Presidents.

"The main line of the Santa Fe railroad ran right through Emporia so it was convenient for major figures of the day to stop and see him," Roger Heineken said.

The Whites had two children, William Lindsay and Mary Katherine. William went to Harvard and eventually succeeded his father at the *Emporia Gazette*.

In 1920, sixteen-year-old Mary was tragically killed in a horseback accident. White's editorial tribute to her became one of his most enduring works, reprinted in textbooks for years. The White family dedicated a park in Emporia in her memory. It is called Peter Pan Park, in reference to the literary figure who would never grow old.

Today, a bust of William Allen White and a plaque with the text of that editorial stand on a peaceful place next to the lake in Peter Pan Park.

In 2001, Red Rocks was donated to the state of Kansas after 100 years of White family ownership. Today it is open to visitors as a historic site, managed by the Kansas State Historical Society with support from the William Allen White Community Partnership. The beautiful home is filled with fascinating historic artifacts and furnishings.

Guess who's coming to dinner? A remarkable list of guests visited this home in its heyday, and now the public can visit as well. We commend the volunteers of the William Allen White Community Partnership for making a difference by preserving and sharing this history. They provide a voice for the walls which cannot talk.

And there's more. In the next generation, a British war orphan came to join the White family permanently. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.