

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean. I've been a reporter for newspapers and for Kansas public radio stations for more than forty years. But it's work with the Kansas Oral History Project that brings me to Emporia and to this historic house, Red Rocks. It was once the home of William Allen White, the famous editor of the *Emporia Gazette*. Known as the Sage of Emporia, White's opinions on politics and other weighty matters widely published in columns and essays captured the attention of the entire nation.

Given White's legacy, we thought his home, now a state historic site, was an appropriate place to interview some more recent Kansas journalists, reporters who spent their careers covering politics and the policy-making process. But we also saw it as an opportunity to revisit White's history, and it just so happens we have the perfect person to help us do that. Beverley Olson Buller is a former teacher and the author of four nonfiction books including *From Emporia: The Story of William Allen White*, and she's waiting for us just inside.

[End of File 1]

JM: Welcome, Beverley, I appreciate you joining us.

Beverley: Thank you very much. I'm very glad to be here.

JM: Before we get into our conversation, I have a little business to take care of. So, just bear with me here. Today is October the 14th 2025. We're at Red Rocks, of course, William Allen White's home in Emporia. This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others who spent their careers informing the public about state and local policy making.

The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves the oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. Our videographer is former Kansas State Representative David Heinemann, and our producer, of course, is Susie Murphy.

Now to our conversation, again, thanks for being here. You are, I can just tell by our conversation prior to starting the interview, you are a true expert on William Allen White, and we're doing this series of interviews, many of them here at White's home, because we thought it was important. It set kind of the context for the journalism conversations that we want to have. So, what I'm curious about since you know so much about White, just kind of to start with, let's just backtrack a little bit, give me a little bit more of your bio. I gave a little bit of an indication of who you were, but you know, fill in the blanks for me, would you?

BB: Well, I was born and raised in Kansas, and I was a Kansas educator for a total of forty years, thirty-four at middle school and high school level, teaching English and social studies, and the final six years of the forty were spent here in Emporia, although I taught adjunctly for Emporia State University's Library School. I was, I mentioned, an English teacher, a Social Studies teacher, and for eighteen years in public school, I was a school librarian.

It was while I was a school librarian that I decided that not every child could read a book [*The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 1946] this thick about William Allen White, and there was an interest in him. So, I took it upon myself when I attended the grand opening of this home in 2005—I decided that day, and I talked to William Allen White’s great-grandson, Chris Walker, and said, “I’m going to write a book about William Allen White that middle school students can read and enjoy,” and I did that. And one of my goals was to have some type of photo or graphic on every page, and I was able to accomplish that. So, even a child who doesn’t want to read the text will learn about Mr. White just by looking at all of the graphics.

JM: And you’re continuing your work with the foundation and with his home and everything else. Describe that. What are you up to?

BB: I always joke that if William Allen White’s involved, I’m probably in there somehow. I have been on the committee that selects the books for the state—the children’s book award that is named after Mr. White—for 25 years. I recently as of two weeks ago finished my time as chairman of that committee. I did that for 18 years.

So, I’m now chairman emeritus. I will still remain involved. I will not read all of the books every year. I read 122 children’s books for our deliberations this year. The committee only has to read half, but as the person who will be directing the discussion, I read them all every year.

So, I do that. I am also on the William Allen White Community Partnership Board, which oversees the running of this state historic site, in which we are sitting. We generally meet monthly, and we do fundraising. We plan events here at the site to get people to come in.

One thing we’ll talk about at our meeting today will be a White Christmas, tongue in cheek. White Christmas is held at the home of William Allen White every December. We have local music groups come in. A lot of times there’ll be even elementary children, and they’ll gather here and sing if the weather’s nice. They’ve gathered on the wonderful porch. We get donations. So, that becomes kind of a fundraiser. We write grants sometimes as well and maintain the site.

We mentioned earlier Kevin Wilmott. When White was having the anniversary of his 150th anniversary of his birth a few years ago, a group of us decided a film was needed. We worked with David Seaton, bless his heart.

JM: David Seaton, the publisher of the *Winfield Daily Courier*?

BB: Yes, and the *Arkansas City Traveler* and Kevin Wilmott.

JM: The well-known professor at KU and filmmaker, Oscar winner.

BB: Yes, for his writing. So, we got Kevin to do a wonderful film, and he and some others wrote the script, and it was entitled *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* I was interviewed for that, but I was also in the group, the small group that worked for fundraising and setting up—I wrote grants and that sort of thing to make that film happen, and it’s available on the foundation website, also on YouTube.

JM: Good. I want to talk about “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” in just a minute, but I want to talk about this house briefly.

BB: Yes.

JM: Red Rocks. William Allen White bought the *Emporia Gazette* in 1895, and he bought it for \$3,000, all borrowed money. In those days, it was one of several papers here in Emporia. It wasn’t even the only Republican paper here in Emporia. So, he had his work cut out for him.

And they moved into this house, he and his wife Sallie moved into this house in 1899, did you say?

BB: Years earlier than that because they bought it in 1899.

JM: Oh, they rented it first.

BB: Yes, they rented it for a short time and then were able to purchase it in 1899. Then their first child, Bill, William Lindsay, was born in 1900, and then Mary in 1904. As he said in his autobiography, they lived happily ever after in this house. This is the house in which he died. Sallie lived on in this house. He died in ’44. She died in 1950, and she lived on in this house until her death in 1950. She died at a local hospital, but she was able to look out the window and see William Allen White Elementary School, named after her husband, being constructed. I understand she took a tour in a wheelchair before she died. She died in December in 1950.

JM: So, Red Rocks. You say they rented it first then purchased it.

BB: Yes.

JM: A local attorney built this house. It featured the red stone, the red rocks from Colorado even then, right?

BB: Yes. The Whites had taken a honeymoon to the Southwest and ended up in Estes Park. They would have been around the Garden of the Gods area. They were familiar with this red sandstone. When they bought the house and when they first lived here up until 1921, this was a Queen Anne Victorian. It was redesigned by Frank Lloyd Wright who was not someone that really enjoyed remodeling homes, but Mr. White talked him into it. I have wonderful letters between the two men. And Mr. Wright—this gets confusing—

JM: Wright and White, yes.

BB: Mr. Wright had designed and built from—he did everything when he built a house for you. So even the furnishings and the dishes and what went on the walls, all the decor, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for Henry Allen who had been governor of Kansas. He was a good friend of Mr. White. That beautiful home is still in Wichita. It’s a museum. And actually Mr. White had

seen the work for Frank Lloyd Wright when he had visited his editor in Chicago. His name was Williams, many years earlier. Then, of course, everybody was interested in him.

So, he got Frank Lloyd Wright to begin work on remodeling, making this into a more modern, 1920s-style house and yet maintaining a lot of its architectural integrity. Wright drew the line when White said, “No, I want to keep all of our antiques. This piece over here belonged to my mother. We already have dishes. We’ve traveled. We want to keep these things.” So, he set Mr. White up with an architectural firm in Kansas City, and guess what their name was? Wight.

JM: Wow.

BB: Wight [spells]. So, we have Wright, White, and Wight. So, White and Wight finished the design. They added dormer windows. They moved the front door. Mr. White wanted a large porch. That became kind of a room in the summer. There’s a wonderful photo of him with his grown son and wife sitting outside the window over here, and they have the phone coming through that window, and White’s laying in the hammock. So, that became another room.

For that remodel, they had to locate the red sandstone that this house—

JM: To match what was originally on it.

BB: Yes. They wanted to totally match it. And Mr. White said that he sent little chips of this red sandstone to all of the Chamber of Commerces that would have been on the front range of the Rockies. He knew it came from that area. He found the quarry, and it had been closed, but they opened it, and I believe Mr. White bought all of it. It would have been brought by boxcar back then.

JM: When you start digging into history, you can just keep going, can’t you?

BB: Yes. One thing leads to another.

JM: The minutiae, the details, it’s fascinating.

BB: It is indeed.

JM: I had no idea he knew Frank Lloyd Wright.

BB: Oh, my. The letters between the two, amazing, yes. And Mr. Wright was really a genius, which everyone knew, but you read these letters. He was so persuasive, and he told Mr. White, “Your home could be an oasis in the architectural desert of Kansas” or something like that. I have the letter. And, of course, Henry Allen’s home was definitely that oasis.

JM: Henry Allen, his name will come up later when we talk about the governor’s race in 1924.

BB: Yes.

JM: So, he bought the *Emporia Gazette*, and he had to prove to the Emporia community that 1) he was going to be a part of the community and a good business person and reliable, etc.

BB: Yes. A booster.

JM: And he was a lifelong Republican, a progressive Republican at that, but he was.

BB: Yes.

JM: And in those days, towns the size of Emporia had a Democratic newspaper, a Republican newspaper, typically more than one of each ilk. So, he had his work cut out for him when he first got here. It wasn't long after he bought the paper that he wrote that famous editorial, which was I guess never published in the paper but still widely circulated around the country.

BB: Oh, it was published in the paper.

JM: Was it? Okay.

BB: Oh, yes, in August of 1896. It went from there like all his stuff did—

JM: And other people politically who were opposed to the Populist movement at the time adopted it and used it nationally.

BB: Yes, including McKinley, Mark Hanna for McKinley.

JM: Called "What's the Matter with Kansas?"

BB: Yes.

JM: It was a screed against essentially Populism.

BB: Yes.

JM: The Hayseeds he thought were running communities and running state governments at the time.

BB: Yes.

JM: And he wrote it in a fit of anger because he just had a confrontation with some people on the streets of Emporia, right?

BB: Yes. It was a hot August day, and he was anxious to get things squared away at the *Gazette* so he could travel out to Colorado and meet his wife. They were married, but they hadn't had their children yet, and they were renting a place in the Estes Park area. So, he was anxious to get out of town, and this small group—I don't know how small they were. In his autobiography, it sounds like it's practically a mob. They are assailing him, making fun of him. He claims that one

of them even got a stick and was poking at him, and he just was done with them. And so he needed to write an editorial, and so he dashed this off, this “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”

JM: Quickly.

BB: Written very tongue in cheek, that they’re running us into the ground. We’re the laughingstock of the whole United States.

JM: Other states are growing, but we’re not, and here’s the reason why.

BB: Yes. So, he put it up to be composited, and his compositor told him later, “Mr. White, you don’t know how close I came to just putting that in the trash can.”

JM: She was a Populist.

BB: Yes, Laura French. She was supportive of them. And also she knew he might have been committing political suicide.

JM: Right.

BB: If she put that in the paper, but she did, and, of course, it was the whole other direction. It was immediately picked up and republished. Mark Hanna who he had met before and McKinley who he had met—I believe he had met him in 1894, and they wanted to use it to help with McKinley’s re-election. So, he met McKinley for a second time.

JM: You’re talking about the president.

BB: The president, yes. And Mr. White commented, “I became famous overnight” because he really did. And if we can backtrack just a little bit, there’s another very important editorial when you talk about his early days at the *Gazette*. The first editorial he wrote in June of 1895 was called “Entirely Personal” in which he introduced himself to the people of Emporia and shared a little bit of his vision of the paper. And he says in there that “I hope to always sign my name from Emporia, whether home or abroad.” He hadn’t even been west of the Mississippi at this time, but he knew he was going places.

And he also said something I really like. He said, “I believe that local news, if honestly and energetically presented, would do more for subscriptions...than its editorial page.” And he did that. He focused on local news. He had a telegraph. He could pull stories and republish them, but he really focused on being on what we would say Main Street, Commercial here in Emporia, and talking to people and finding out what was going on.

And he specialized in obituaries. He would write lovely obituaries about people. It might have been a dogcatcher, but he knew them, and they had an interesting life, and he knew people would buy papers.

JM: He made himself a central figure in the community.

BB: He did. He truly did. And something else, he says, "The new editor desires to make a clean, honest local paper... If he could get an office, he wouldn't have it."

JM: He said right off the bat that he wasn't going to seek political office, right.

BB: And he took it a step further. He told Mark Hanna, "You may use 'What's the Matter with Kansas?' but I want to meet with McKinley face to face, and I want to have him sign whatever was needed saying I don't want an office. He could have been made Postmaster General or something. He didn't want any kind of office. So, there is a letter. It's probably still hanging on the wall of the *Gazette* from Mark Hanna that has that.

JM: And who was Mark Hanna?

BB: He was the manager of McKinley. He was his campaign manager, his person that he worked with.

JM: He somewhat later came to regret that editorial. It did make him famous, but he certainly evolved politically from the views expressed in that editorial.

BB: Oh, yes. Don't we all? We do. We change as we get older. And, yes, he was going to seek no political office until it was almost an office he didn't seek. But we'll talk about that in a few minutes.

JM: Yes. So, talk a little bit about just his evolution. It gets very interesting. He becomes an ardent Progressive.

BB: Yes.

JM: Not the same as Populism, but Progressive. At that same time, Theodore Roosevelt was just coming to the fore politically in the late 19th century, 20th century obviously.

BB: Yes.

JM: And he was the trustbuster.

BB: Yes.

JM: The Gilded Age had just finished. Theodore Roosevelt, even though he was of that class, a rich person of the Roosevelts of New York, really decided it was time that the federal government needed to be empowered to start regulating some of these trusts, these big businesses and so forth.

BB: Yes.

JM: And White joined that cause.

BB: Yes.

JM: Just talk a little bit about his evolution and how important, what an important voice he had here from the Midwest, the Sage of Emporia, in terms of kind of the everyman voice relative to that progressive movement.

BB: Yes. And speaking of Mr. White's political stances, it's probably important that we go all the way back to El Dorado, Kansas, where William Allen White's father was mayor. He was born in Emporia, but when he was about a year old, his father said, "It's getting too crowded. We're going to move to the prairie." So, they went to El Dorado.

JM: And that was where his first journalistic experience was, too, in El Dorado.

BB: Exactly, yes, was in El Dorado and Emporia. But his father was a Democrat, and his father was very interested in politics. And he would take young Will up to the Statehouse. They were building the Statehouse. He remembered seeing the foundation going up on the Statehouse.

And his dad was really interested in Democratic politics, and he was mayor of El Dorado. He died when Will was fourteen, and Will became the man of the house. His mother was a very independent woman. She was a Republican, and the two of them got along. They just never discussed politics particularly, but now it was Will and his mother, and he realized when he was going to college at KU that he thought, "I have got to make a decision. Am I going to be a Democrat, or am I going to be a Republican?" And he talked to several of his professors at the University of Kansas, and they said, "Yes, you do need to decide, and don't waste your time being an Independent. You need to be either Democrat or Republican."

Well, the Democrats, of course, later kind of absorbed the Populist Party.

JM: Right, they did. William Jennings Bryan became their nominee for president at one point, the Democratic Party. So, they did.

BB: Yes. So, he decided—I know his mother did not even influence him other than the fact that he had to live with her, but he decided he was better suited to the Republican Party. And I know that made his mother happy because his mother had gone to school at Knox College in Illinois, and she had been able to witness one of the Lincoln/Douglas debates. That was one reason she was a Republican. She loved Abraham Lincoln.

So, yes, he became a Republican, and he made friends with a lot of Republicans in Emporia and around the state. Some of them were—I won't say "shady" but they were deal makers, that type of thing, and he tried to always be in the middle as much as he could.

Then once he met Teddy Roosevelt, he said, "Teddy bit me, and I went mad."

JM: That was a quote, yes.

BB: And he did. The two of them, I can only imagine the talk that they had in this house, in Teddy's house, in the White House. The talk they had about what our country could look like. So, he evolved. And Mr. White once wrote in an editorial that "Consistency is a paste jewel." In other words, it's worthless. It's normal to say one thing when you're twenty and another thing when you're forty, and that's exactly what he did. He evolved.

He had a wife whose father had been a Confederate officer, and yet both of them fought for civil rights. His wife grew up in the South, but she was open minded. I know she talked to him a lot about "Why can't women vote, Will? What are we going to do about this? Look how women are treated in hospitals. Can't we have maternity wards?" That sort of thing, and that comes into his politics, too.

JM: It's really interesting, too, because you mentioned the straight line back to Abraham Lincoln.

BB: Yes, with his mom.

JM: The Republican Party in those days was known as the Party of Lincoln.

BB: Yes.

JM: You have to really separate the vision of what that party stood for.

BB: And the Republican Party nowadays is totally different, the evolution.

JM: Then versus now because Kansas, of course, was a Republican state, and generally speaking, I think you could characterize the governing philosophy of the Republicans in Kansas as somewhat socially progressive but fiscally conservative.

BB: Yes. I think that's accurate.

JM: I think that's kind of the way the state was run for so many years. Certainly White fit into that. But you're right. When he and Teddy Roosevelt got—do you know how they met?

BB: Yes, I can tell you how they met. They were introduced—I need to check a name here. I don't want to say something wrong.

JM: I'm glad you brought these.

BB: I have to have notes. Oh, yes, because I'd forgotten this. I spent quite a bit of time yesterday with his autobiography, which I have to do sometimes, and I like that I do it. Charles Curtis.

JM: The Kansan who was the vice president—

BB: Who eventually became vice president. He was a senator at the time. He said, "Will, there's someone that wants to meet you, and he's the secretary of the Navy. His name's Theodore

Roosevelt, and he'd like to meet you." So, Curtis set up their meeting, and Mr. White said, "I've never met a man like him, and I know I never will again."

JM: A lot of people who met Teddy Roosevelt had the same—

BB: I think he was just charismatic.

JM: He was one of those people that when he walked into a room, he just sucked the air out of the room.

BB: Yes, I think so. Wouldn't you just like to have five minutes? I'd like to have five minutes in this house when the Whites lived here, but to have five minutes to actually—you can watch a speech of Teddy, and he was forceful. You could see that. But I bet, yes, to actually get to meet him the way Mr. White did, you could see why he bit him, and he went mad. [laughs]

JM: He once gave a speech after an assassination attempt with a bullet—he talked for more than an hour and then went to the hospital.

BB: His speech was folded up in his pocket.

JM: And his speech typically was so thick because he talked—

BB: Exactly and being a hunter, he knew that he probably had not been injured in an artery or anything. So, yes, he gave a speech while he was bleeding. Then he was very pale, and he went to the hospital for a while.

JM: He had a friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, and Teddy was actually in this house several times.

BB: Yes, he was. And you think about—and when I give tours of this house, especially with children, I'll say, "Okay, so presidents visited this house, and when Teddy Roosevelt visited this house, it was the early 1900s. Where do you suppose they went to the bathroom?" Well, they didn't know. So, I can show them a picture. The outhouse is back here.

JM: It's still here?

BB: No, it's long gone, but the picture is here. But I can show children the picture of where the outhouse—you go out the back door, and it would have been out there. I said, "The White House would have even had an outhouse in those days. That was the way things were."

But when they bought this house, it had nothing in it. They had to put in gas. They put in electricity. They put in the plumbing, running water, modernized it as they lived in it.

When Teddy visited—the most important time when he was here was probably in 1912. The was the Bull Moose thing. Mr. White wrote an editorial thanking the people of Emporia for minding their own business because Teddy was able to have a relaxing time. He sat on the porch. He

played with William Allen White's son's dog who was named Teddy on the porch. There's a picture. Will took him to church on Sunday, and he was so proud that Teddy didn't even have to use a hymnal. He could sing every hymn.

Then they came back here for lunch in the dining room. They had fried chicken. Teddy said it was the best meal he ever had. Then they went for a ride in the buggy, and Old Tom, the horse, pulled him, and they went around town. I'm sure they waved at people, and people went, "Oh, my gosh, that's Teddy Roosevelt," but nobody accosted them.

So, that next week, Mr. White wrote an editorial. He said, "Thank you for giving a tired man some rest."

JM: Yes. Roosevelt had been president.

BB: Yes.

JM: He was out of office. His heir, somebody who he had mentored, a great friend.

BB: He chose him.

JM: William Taft was the president, and Roosevelt was counting on him to continue his Progressive policies became disappointed that Taft wasn't being aggressive enough.

BB: Yes.

JM: So, he decided he was going to mount another campaign for the presidency, and that's when the banner of the Bull Moose Party—

BB: Yes, the tickets to the convention, they call it the Progressive Convention. But it began to be called the Bull Moose Party when someone asked Teddy, "Well, how are you feeling?" "I'm as fit as a bull moose."

JM: Right.

BB: So, they began to call it the Bull Moose Party. William Allen White said that was the biggest political adventure of his life, and he was just brokenhearted when Teddy refused to run again when he lost the first time. He said, "No, I'm done." And, of course, he died in 1919. So, in some ways, he was done.

JM: Right. Now, White though, how do you describe his national influence? How did he become such a national figure?

BB: It is interesting, and a point I make in the first book about Mr. White that I wrote, he became world famous in a time where the only media was newspapers, the occasional radio—it wasn't like—he was not a talking head on TV. He didn't have a Twitter account, and yet he was known around the world. It started with "What's the Matter with Kansas?"

But then I think people—he used to work for the *Kansas City Star*. There were no journalism schools when Mr. White bought the *Gazette*, but he got a really good education working for newspapers in Emporia, in Lawrence, in El Dorado. In fact, he dropped out of the University of Kansas after his final first semester. He didn't finish because he got the opportunity to run a newspaper that he had worked at previously in El Dorado. He did everything. He worked as a reporter. He did advertising. He said, "I really didn't quite know how to run the presses, but I could if I had to." Now, that changed once he bought the *Gazette* because you can't do everything. You can't have your thumb in everything. But, yes.

JM: He was called the Sage of Emporia. But it was this voice, eloquent writing, passionate writing, coming from the Midwest.

BB: Right.

JM: In those days, he had the—"If it happens anywhere, it happens in Kansas first."

BB: Yes, he said that. That's true.

JM: In those days, Kansas had a very progressive reputation and was kind of a bellwether state.

BB: Yes. You'd want to check in. I feel like editors in other states and even across the water would check in with Mr. White. "What does White have to say?" He became known as a voice of reason. And, you know, he wasn't a trendsetter, and yet he wasn't a follower either. He was a booster. But you could always check with him, "What does he have to say? What does he think about this?"

JM: And then a really famous chapter in his life, he was a crusader against the Ku Klux Klan.

BB: Yes.

JM: To the point where he actually ran—despite his pledge many, many years earlier that he wasn't going to seek office, he ran for governor in 1924.

BB: Yes.

JM: Because he was really worried. The Klan, its ascendancy at the time across the country, but particularly, surprisingly not just the South, but here in the Midwest, Indiana, Kansas.

BB: Indiana was taken over.

JM: And Kansas, there were Klan marches up and down the streets in Topeka and other communities in the state.

BB: Yes.

JM: So, talk a little bit about why he took that on to the point where he decided he was going to run for governor.

BB: He tried very hard not to take it on. There are letters between him and say Victor Murdock from Wichita, another editor and newspaper owner, where he says, "Henry Allen," the former governor—now, Jonathan Davis was the incumbent. He was the Democrat incumbent that was running again, but Henry had been before him.

And Henry was the one—I give him a lot of credit—he was the one that tried to run the Klan out of Kansas. He tried legally while he was governor to prevent them, and he did all kinds of interesting things including saying, "Masks could not be worn in public." That way, they were not allowed to parade in their masks. Well, they weren't going to parade barefaced, and this was in Ark City [Arkansas City] when he started all that, and they cancelled their parade. So, I give Henry Allen a lot of credit.

JM: Because they wanted to be essentially incognito.

BB: Absolutely. They're the invisible empire. I give Henry Allen a lot of credit.

So, when 1924 rolled around, fall of 1924 rolled around, and we had a Democratic and a Republican gubernatorial candidate that both had ties to the Klan, not overtly.

JM: Right.

BB: If you would ask them, they'd say, "Not at this time." I guess Jonathan Davis, the incumbent, just wouldn't even talk about it. But there was plenty—some newspaper articles would even say "Ben Paulen, the Klan endorsee." It was not done publicly, and yet it was in the papers.

JM: The book I read suggested that Paulen won a tight primary mainly with Klan votes.

BB: Yes, most likely. Anyway, people like Henry Allen were encouraging—and White was also trying, "Who would do this? Who would run?" You don't have to win. You just have to run.

So, finally, in September of 1924, he literally threw his hat in the ring. There's a picture of him with his hat. He threw his hat in the ring, and he came out with a little flyer. They called them "dodgers" back then that "White Announces." And he announced that he was running for governor. He waged a six-week campaign.

JM: More than 100 speeches across the state.

BB: I used to know that number. I used to know how many miles

JM: 105 is what I read.

BB: 105, that's right, and it was over 2,000 miles. He did not drive. His son, Bill, came home from Harvard and was one of his drivers and traveled around the state. He stayed in the homes of other newspaper men. Every week, he would take \$25 out of the bank and probably had some left over. They mainly paid for gas. He would get fed and housed at the homes of newspaper men. They were proud to host him. The newspapers were very supportive of what he was doing, and the world was watching him. They had reporters even coming from London to report on him.

I think he was about fifty-six years old, which would have been considered quite old back then and here he was, like you say, giving all these speeches. He would talk wherever anyone would have him. Up until about the week before the election, his whole platform was anti-Klan.

JM: And then he broadened it a little bit.

BB: And then he broadened it, and I brought my little copy. An ad appeared in many newspapers. This one was from Council Grove. "White is Right. Help Him Fight." "If White is elected, the Klan will be put out of business in this state, declares the high-powered rag-face of the Ku Klux Klan of Kansas."

All of a sudden, he's got a platform, and it's some of the things that he and his wife had talked about like maternity wards and things like that.

JM: And banking reforms.

BB: And railroad reforms. All of a sudden, he has that, and he used that fabulous cartoon that appeared in the *New York World* that Rollin Kirby did of Mr. White holding a gun—he didn't own a gun—but running the Klan out of Kansas, and that is effectively—two ways he did that, ran them out. He made sure that whenever he gave a speech, he pointed out the fact that there were other anti-Klan folks running, and one of them was an attorney general who years earlier had started an ouster of the Klan. And another one was—it seems like he was superintendent of education. And those people got elected.

JM: White didn't, but the attorney general candidate did.

BB: White came in third, but the people that he hoped would get re-elected got re-elected. And then the other thing that was so important, and I know being in the media, he knew this. By doing what he did, he shined a spotlight on Kansas because Indiana, there was no William Allen White in Indiana. They were just inundated, and it took forever for them to get out of it. All the crimes that happened, it was just awful.

But we had William Allen White in Kansas, and it shined a spotlight on what was happening. Like I said, reporters came. The one from London even followed him around. She said he was like a little Don Quixote.

JM: I read some quotes from his speeches. He didn't pull any punches.

BB: Oh, no.

JM: The language, do you have any of his quotes written down there?

BB: You know, I probably do. I do when I talk about this.

JM: I was struck by some of the quotes about how pointed he was in describing the Klan.

BB: Oh, my, yes.

JM: He called them “masked”—I can’t recall the language, but if you have any.

BB: Yes, I’ve got some. This is a letter that he wrote to Herbert Bayard Swope on the 17th of September, 1921. This was when the Klan was first starting to come in. And I quote, “An organizer of the Ku Klux Klan was in Emporia the other day. The men whom he invited to join his band at ten per join turned him down. Under the leadership of Dr. J.B. Brickell”—he always put names in there. He didn’t want them hiding. “Under the leadership of Dr. J.B. Brickell and following their own judgment, the Emporians told him they had no time for him. The proposition seems to be anti-foreigners, anti-Catholic, anti-Negroes.” And then he ends by saying, “It is to the everlasting credit of Emporia that the organization found no suckers with \$10 each to squander here. Whatever Emporia may be otherwise, it believes in law and order and absolute freedom under the Constitution for every man, no matter what birth or creed or race to speak and meet and talk and act as a free law-abiding citizen. The pecunious cowardice of a man who would substitute Klan rule and mob law for what our American fathers have died to establish and maintain should prove what a cheap screw outfit the Klan is.” He pulled no punches.

Also, real quick, in his announcement, the flyer, of course, he knew—that flyer was—I traced it in newspapers across the United States. It was already hitting the East Coast the day he announced. In other words, he sent out a press release early, which he should. But in that flyer, I love this, he says, “I want to be governor to free Kansas from the disgrace of the Klan, and I want to offer Kansans afraid of the Klan and ashamed of that disgrace a candidate who shares their fear and shame.”

And something he did that I found remarkable and very much like Mr. White, he wanted to run as an Independent. Every now and then, I hear someone talking about this gubernatorial race, and they’ll comment that he was a write-in. Well, they’re confusing Dr. Brinkley. He was a write-in and thank God because that saved us from him, but you needed 2,500 signatures to get your name as an Independent on the ballot.

Mr. White did not have any of his organizers get signatures in Lyon County. He got 10,000 signatures in support of him being on the ballot as an Independent, and they were all from outside this county. So, no one could say, “Oh, it’s just your people.” Kansas was William Allen White’s people. Obviously, they didn’t all vote for him because he came in third.

JM: But that was a strategic decision on his part.

BB: Oh, yes. I thought that was very—I was very impressed when I read that he did that. That was also a very big political adventure for him.

JM: What was?

BB: Running for governor.

JM: Absolutely.

BB: He always said, “I will take no political office.” First, there was the Bull Moose adventure and then there was the gubernatorial adventure. As I say when I talk about him running for governor, he was not even sixty. He lived to about seventy-three, if I remember right. He still had life left in him to serve his country.

JM: Yes. We’ll talk about that. It was interesting because he, just to put a cap on that, he didn’t win that race.

BB: He came in third, a close third to the second. He said, “I wished I would have come in second.”

JM: He got lots of votes.

BB: Yes.

JM: And the attorney general candidate who was supportive of the anti-Klan platform did win.

BB: Yes.

JM: And eventually the Supreme Court ruled, and the Klan was—

BB: They were not granted a charter.

JM: Essentially pushed out of the state.

BB: They also were said to not be a charitable organization because that was their big thing.

JM: That was their claim.

BB: Yes, they wanted to be in all the papers. Mr. White was fair to them. He would report things. They had a state conference here, and he reported it. He published the name of everyone attending, in the hotel register, he put that in the paper. So much for secrecy. But they loved it if they could get in the paper, “Sunday night, the Ku Klux Klan of Emporia came down to the aisle of the church and made a”—they would always name the substantial donation, and honestly, in the 1920s, it would be a substantial donation, and they wanted that in the paper.

When Wesley Hospital was being built in Wichita, they made a substantial donation. It was in all the papers. They wanted to be seen as benevolent.

JM: We can draw an analogy between organized crime. Some of the big crime bosses in the country had a benevolent side to them because it was public relations.

BB: It was good for business.

JM: Public relations.

BB: I loved that, that not only did the state Supreme Court say, “No charter for you. You cannot charge \$10 to have your hood and your uniform, but you are not benevolent. You’re not going to be a tax-exempt organization” or whatever the benefits were back then. I don’t know. They loved to say that they were charitable.

JM: In the context of the interviews that we’re doing, with journalists for this series, we’ve talked a lot with former reporters about the power of local newspapers across the state in the day. The Harris News Group in Salina, and the Salina, Hutchinson, Ottawa, I mean Garden City, various communities, very good, strong newspapers with strong editors, strong publishers much like William Allen White.

BB: Oh, yes.

JM: There’s a long history of that in Kansas, and they did help shape the political environment. This is a very good case in point in that White was a journalist to the core. As you pointed out, he did report—he was fair to the Klan in terms of he reported on them and didn’t just editorialize about them, but it just shows you the power of the local press in the state at that time.

BB: Yes.

JM: Editors when they wrote their editorials about who they were endorsing, the reasons they were endorsing, that carried some weight in those days.

BB: Yes. We have a photograph in the dining room here of a dinner that Mr. White held for newspaper editors when Hoover was running. Of course, that got a lot of votes. He invited all of the newspaper editors to come. It’s out here in the garden. It was held here in the garden, and he did that sort of thing a lot because he knew he had influence.

In his autobiography which is kind of written kind of tongue in cheek, he jokes that if you were a newspaper man or if you were a newspaper editor, everyone respected you, and you got a pass. You could go wherever. He traveled all over on the Santa Fe [railroad]. He had a pass, and he got a pass when he was just a young reporter because that was the way it was back then.

JM: Yes. So, Kansas has a long history of really quality newspaper publishers and editors.

BB: Yes.

JM: He's probably preeminent among them.

BB: Yes.

JM: But he wasn't the only one. We have a long history of that in this state.

BB: Yes.

JM: And his service. So, he ran for governor in the 1920s.

BB: Yes.

JM: And he died in 1944.

BB: Yes.

JM: Late in life, he was respected, and this was another indication of his evolution, right?

BB: Yes.

JM: He helped Alf Landon. He was a big supporter of Alf Landon when Alf Landon ran for president against Franklin Roosevelt.

BB: And it was because he was a Republican.

JM: That's right. But then on the heels of that later on, in the early forties when the world was at war, America was not in World War II at the time, and there was really an isolationist sentiment in this country, wanting to keep us out of European wars at all costs.

BB: Yes.

JM: And White essentially favored neutrality as well.

BB: Yes.

JM: He took on the task of helping Franklin Roosevelt convince the country that we needed to help the Allies in any way we could against Nazi Germany essentially. So, we talked a little bit about it. He headed a committee at Roosevelt's invitation. It came to be known as the White Committee.

BB: Yes.

JM: Even though that wasn't its formal name.

BB: Right. Well, and this all started in 1939, there was a committee, and FDR asked White to chair it, and it only had to meet for a matter of months, but they had to work with the neutrality laws because they were laying the groundwork to be able to aid the Allies.

JM: Lend/lease, of course.

BB: Yes, lend/lease. And then in 1940 came the—then it became called, it was the committee to aid the Allies [Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies]. It had a very long name, but everyone called it the White Committee, even though Mr. White only served on it for one year. He laid the groundwork, and he got off of it—I have a quote here from him, which I think is real interesting. He was able to lay the groundwork. It began in 1940. There were 300 branches around the country by November of 1940, and he decided, he announced that he was leaving the committee in December of 1940, effective January '41. They had 750 chapters, and the committee published a book for which he wrote the foreword. It's called *Defense for America*. I have a copy of it, and it basically was trying to make people realize, yes, we fought the Great War. That was the war to end all wars.

JM: World War I.

BB: Yes, World War I, and nobody wants to be in this war, but there are people suffering, and we want to be their Allies. It doesn't mean we have to send our boys over there. A quote by him, he says, "Take off political buttons and wear just one button, 'Defend America by Aiding the Allies'."

Well, he had gotten sick. His wife's health had never been good. I think there were some pressures within the committee that he didn't always agree with. He was by no means pushed out. People were very happy including FDR. They were happy with what he did for the committee, but his health was failing by 1940, almost 1941, and his wife really had health problems. So, he published this statement, "The job was too big a one for me, and after all, I had my own life to live, and after all, I wanted to celebrate my 73rd birthday in peace and devote the year or three that may be left"—he was right—"to me in writing some books." He had started writing his autobiography. "And helping with some other chores around the house here in Emporia and in Kansas."

Then January 4 of 1941, which would have been that first week, there was a new chairman. The *New York Times* had an editorial that said, and I quote, "His name and personality made the White Committee a going concern in its first and difficult days." Like I said, he laid the groundwork, and he was seventy-six when he died. I'm bad at math. He was seventy-six when he died.

JM: That's very important.

BB: It is.

JM: Roosevelt knew Britain was standing alone very early in the war.

BB: Yes.

JM: And Churchill wanted America in the war in the worst way.

BB: Yes.

JM: He made that clear in his meetings with Franklin Roosevelt at the time.

BB: Yes.

JM: Roosevelt knew there wasn't political support for that, but he had this policy of lend/lease where we were going to initially give the British Navy a bunch of old American destroyers to aid with the convoys and everything else. There was a lot of political opposition to that, but then it became lend/lease. We were going to lease them to Great Britain.

BB: Sure.

JM: And the White Committee was instrumental in helping build essentially some sentiment for doing that.

BB: Yes, and it was a groundswell, and Mr. White knew this, being in the media. You can't just have FDR do one of his Fireside Chats and say, "Oh, by the way, we're going to do this." It spread across the United States. People loved Mr. White. It doesn't happen anymore, but I wrote that book about Mr. White over ten years ago. Every now and then, I would run into someone who knew of the White Committee, and they were so complimentary of it.

JM: Yes.

BB: Another interesting thing that you probably know, somewhere in this room is a copy of a *Life* magazine that has—from 1940, that has an article written by William Lindsay White while he was traveling to London to England on a destroyer, one of the destroyers that was being lent to them, and he covered the Blitz. He went out on the street. He would hide when the bombs were coming, but the minute they ended, he would go out on the street and interview people for the North American Newspaper Alliance.

So, he had a different view than his father about the war. He would telegraph, "Look at these people. They're being bombed every night. They have such a stiff upper lip. Can't we do more for them?" Then when he came back, he gave speeches.

He also brought William Allen White a grandchild. He and his wife knew they could not have children. His wife worked for *Life* magazine, and they lived in New York. They adopted a war orphan. She then ended up running the *Gazette*, and her son runs the *Gazette* now.

JM: That's great history.

BB: Great history going back, but I found it real interesting that Mr. White—I don't really see that he was particularly an isolationist.

JM: No, I wouldn't put that.

BB: He was just very reluctant to commit. He understood why people would not want to, and then Pearl Harbor solved all that.

JM: Right.

BB: And he died in '44. He said, "We're going to win the war" when he died. He knew.

JM: I want to put a capstone on our earlier conversation about his evolution politically because he was a very big supporter of Alf Landon, of course, who only won two states. Franklin Roosevelt clobbered him at the polls.

BB: Yes.

JM: Nevertheless, White was very supportive of some of Roosevelt's New Deal policies.

BB: He was. He liked the New Deal.

JM: He did, parts of it.

BB: I mean publicly liked it.

JM: Again, I think that's an indicator of what kind of person he was in terms of based on certain information and certain circumstances and the times and everything else, he wasn't just hard and fast.

BB: No. He was open minded, and I think that's one of the reasons that he was chosen to be on the first jury for Book of the Month Club. He was with all of these intellectual people choosing books that would go into subscribers' homes. I think it's because they knew that he was openminded. They read books like *Grapes of Wrath*. They just weren't sure about that. Boy, he was. "We need that book." So, yes, I think he was a very openminded, friendly, fair-minded person, willing to at least hear both sides.

JM: So, we've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you think that we'd need to talk about?

BB: I could go down quite a rabbit hole with many stories.

JM: You know this history in definite detail.

BB: One thing that's kind of funny about FDR because you know, Teddy Roosevelt was his best friend.

JM: White's best friend, right.

BB: But FDR being a Democrat had to be a little bit more careful about that friendship, and there is an autographed picture, it used to be at the *Gazette*, and it's of FDR giving a speech, and it says, "For my friend, William Allen White, all forty-eight months of the year" or something because Mr. White made a joke that "FDR is my friend three years out of four" because he had to support the Republicans during election years. But if FDR was going to run, he couldn't support him, at least not publicly, but he did support, like you said, the New Deal and what he was trying to do.

JM: I love some of the correspondence between William Allen White and Teddy Roosevelt because when Teddy Roosevelt would write him, it would be "White." That's the way he would address him.

BB: And White called him "The Colonel" a lot of times.

JM: Well, a fascinating life.

BB: Yes.

JM: I really, really appreciate this discussion because it does create a context for what we're trying to do here to celebrate this man who was perhaps the preeminent editor in Kansas history and the characteristics that made him such a great journalist and such a great public figure, both.

BB: And I so appreciate you realizing that including White in these interviews is important because he inspired so many people. His name is not one that is known, and being so involved with the book award, I think I can say if it wasn't for the book award, his name would not be nearly as well known. Children learn about him, and we do teach about him. I know my book is used a lot to help teach about William Allen White because children can begin voting for those books in third grade. So, the name William Allen White, they've heard of it at least. Of course, we hope they'll come to this beautiful home, which is a state historic site someday and get to see how the Whites lived.

JM: We just can't lose touch of that history. Thank you.

BB: I agree.

JM: Thank you very much again.

[End of File 2]