

# Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy

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Volume 1  
Issue 2 *William Allen White and "What's the  
Matter with Kansas?" Once More*

Article 1

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2006

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James E. Sherow  
*Kansas State University*

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### Recommended Citation

Sherow, James E. (2006) "William Allen White and "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Once More," *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*. Vol. 1: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/ojrrp.v1i2.30>

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## William Allen White and “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” Once More

[JAMES E. SHEROW](#)

*Kansas State University*

*Recommended Citation Style (MLA):*

Sherow, James E. “William Allen White and ‘What’s the Matter with Kansas?’ Once More.” The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy 2 (2006): 1-7.

*Keywords:* What’s the matter with Kansas, William Allen White, newspaper, 1896, rural, research, academic, peer-reviewed, university, college, geography, sociology, political science, architecture, law, science, biology, chemistry, physics, leadership studies, community service, agriculture, communications, mass communications, new media, Internet, web.

While certainly history never repeats itself, numerous historical problems associated with creating a civil society do. The history of Kansas seems to highlight this assumption quite well, and within the last 110 years, two popular writers have asked the same question: “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” William Allen White had a clear answer to this in 1896, but as is often the case with people, as he aged, matured, experienced life, he came to a different set of conclusions decades later. The ripening of his thinking, especially that pertaining to those traits defining a viable human community, has much to recommend present-day Kansans as we struggle to shape our modern lives.<sup>1</sup>

What’s the matter with Kansas? William Allen White asked his newspaper readers in 1896. He knew the answer for sure – farmer hooligans, old clodhoppers, shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatics were ruining the state. These were senseless people, who like the farmer plagued by drought, locusts, floods, and his own poor farming techniques, would raise his fits to the air and exclaim ‘Goddam the Santa Fe Railroad!’ These enemies of the state, White charged, had mistakenly indicted the people of wealth, the captains of industry, for their own self-inflicted miseries:

That’s the stuff! Give the prosperous man the dickens! Legislate the thriftless man into ease, whack the stuffing out of the creditors and tell the debtors who borrowed the money five years ago when money “per capita” was greater than it is now, that the contraction of currency gives him a right to repudiate.

Whoop it up for the ragged trousers; put the lazy, greasy fizzle, who can’t pay his debts, on the altar, and bow down and worship him. Let the state ideal be high. What we need is not the respect of our fellow men, but the chance to get something for nothing.

Oh, yes, Kansas is a great state.

As a young, ambitious, and highly impressionable Republican, White wrote his diatribe to prove himself worthy to an all-knowing, elder generation of stanch party leaders in the state. He castigated the Populist of Kansas in a fit of political bashing and ridicule. His words rang out

across the nation as Republican editors reprinted his editorial over and over again. White had become the darling of the Republicans and the bane of the Populists.<sup>2</sup>

Who were these horrid Populist anyway? They were a third party threat to the status quo of Democratic inertia and Republican pandering to big business. Populists, you see, did not question the value of government; rather, they questioned who should government serve. For those folks, a coalition of small, rural, middle-class merchants and professionals, farmers, and social activists, government too often bowed down before the powerful while causing great harm to the weak.

White had castigated Frank Doster, who was elected that year to the Supreme Court of Kansas and became its Chief Justice. He lambasted Mary Elizabeth Lease who roused farmers to raise more Hell and less corn. Yet Justice Doster was a man of high principles and ethical standards. Doster vowed to protect the weak from the oppressions of the strong, and to ensure the free voice of every man and woman. "I believe," Doster proclaimed, "in the Ten Commandments and in the Golden Rule, in the initiative and referendum, and evolution and woman suffrage, and I am edging toward theosophy and Christian science, and open to conviction in favor of any vagrant fad that nobody will admit believing in until enough do to make it respectable." Lease, who believed in birth control and evolution, openly scorned moral reforms like prohibition and openly espoused economic justice and income redistribution: "Give us planks on money, land and transportation and the farmers will be satisfied. Who cares if the people can get whisky, so it is pure and they have plenty of money to pay for it with?" The Populists saw themselves answering a righteous call—taking a firm and tall stand against the excesses and abuses of corporate and industrial power.<sup>3</sup>

Later in life, White recognized the legitimate concerns of the Populist movement. He deeply regretted his emotional intemperance in print. "Perhaps if I had known the real significance of that election, perhaps if I had realized that it was the beginning of a long fight for distributive justice, the opening of a campaign to bring to the common man a larger and more equitable share in the common wealth of our country, I should have been more consciously ashamed of my political attitude than I was. . . . But in some way, in those days, I was blind to the realities."

Still, even given his apology, there are themes in this famous editorial that White would expand upon throughout the rest of his notable career, and with these themes he held Kansans accountable to several noble ideals. First, and foremost, he believed strongly in community and local control. Secondly, he harbored in his heart the cause of the underdog. Third, he had an abiding love of the land, especially his precious Flint Hills.<sup>4</sup>

Let's see how White approached community as a businessman in Emporia. He had bought the *Emporia Gazette* in 1895, and from that point on he was a firm booster of business enterprise in his city. But what kind of enterprise did White champion. Certainly his was no "free market" approach. He viewed himself, and kindred business people of Emporia, as the natural leaders of the community, and he used his paper to protect the interest of "home enterprise and investment." In 1903 he eliminated all out of town advertising by large corporate, department stores such Emery Bird Thayer and Company, a large store based in Kansas City, Missouri. He

added Associated Press reports to the pages of the *Gazette* hoping to discourage Emporians from purchasing “foreign” newspapers.

White endorsed the municipal ownership of utilities and the setting of maximum rates for charges. While he argued this position as a protection for the people, a type of progressive reform that also worked to benefit the local business community. Public ownership of telephone facilities, waterworks, electrical and natural gas service, all important to the success of industries and retailers, would be run efficiently, honestly, and in keeping with the needs of the community when owned and managed openly by the community. As one biographer wrote, White desired the creation of a “moral order that would provide the nation with a sense of community,” and Emporia was his proving grounds.

White’s sense of community also included a demand for moral justice for all, and this belief led him into several political and social controversies. For example, in 1922 a regional railroad strike was called which affected companies like the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Company in Kansas. Emporia had some of the largest rail shops of the company, and so the little town filled with striking workmen. In 1920, the state legislature had created the Industrial Court, which was to decide conflicts between labor and capital. Through the powers of this act, Governor Henry Allen called out troops to protect various railroad companies, and labor reacted angrily. The vast majority of the strikers were solid community men who were members of the same churches and lodges as were the merchants, and White himself. The strikers asked the merchants to display in their windows signs reading “We are for the strikers 100 per cent.”

Governor Allen ordered these signs out of the windows and White took great exception to this. In fact, he placed one in the window of the *Gazette* office building, and dared Governor Allen to arrest him. A friend of White wrote a letter protesting his decision to display the sign and White responded with an editorial entitled “To an Anxious Friend,” which won him a Pulitzer Prize for the best editorial of the year.

White penned an eloquent defense for freedom of speech. Even though White felt the strike ill-advised, his plea landed him firmly on the side of labor’s voice in this strike. “You tell me,” White replied to his friend, “that law is above freedom of utterance. And I reply that you can have no wise laws nor free enforcement of wise laws unless there is free expression of the wisdom of the people—and, alas, their folly with it.” He followed with “if you are interested in peace through force and without free discussion—that is to say, free utterance decently and in order—your interest in justice is slight. And peace without justice is tyranny, no matter how you may sugar-coat it with expedience.” Even though White demanded his day in court, the attorney general of Kansas had more sense than Governor Allen, and dismissed the case altogether.<sup>5</sup>

In another notable situation White advocated the just treatment of all people regardless their race, creed or religion. In 1924 he decided to run for governor as a write-in candidate on the single plank of opposition to the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas. The 1920s were a terrible time of economic distress in the state. After the end of the Great War to End All Wars, federal price supports for agricultural production were removed and farmer and ranch economies throughout the state fell flat to the floor. With their fall came the collapse of small town merchants, banks, and rail

traffic.

In such hard times many people were looking for scapegoats and the Klan provided them with their targets—African Americans, Jews and Roman Catholics. The Klan hypocritically proclaimed itself the bastion of 100% Americanism, Christian Fundamentalism, and morality, and many joined thinking they had found the cause that could right the wrongs of the nation.

White recognized the how the Klan preyed on fear and ignorance, and he courageously campaigned openly against the Klan in the state when the Democratic candidate, Jonathan M. Davis, and the Republican candidate, Ben Paulen, remained silent on the issue fearing the loss of potential votes. The Klan certainly exerted political power in the state, and even in those cities such as Manhattan where the progressive Republicanism of Theodore Roosevelt had once prevailed, a Klan rally could draw as many as 4,000 people in attendance as had happened in October 1923. White worked tirelessly to expose the Klan members in Emporia where a Klan supported mayor was elected. He moved into the state arena when Paulen equivocated in a statement as to whether or not he was ever a member of the Klan. White even saw a conspiracy of the Klan and large corporations to control the state. He saw this personified in John S. Dean, who was the attorney for the Klan and the Associated Industries, an organization of Kansas corporations opposed to any welfare legislation.

White rallied Kansans with stirring messages appealing to their sense of place and history.

Kansas, with her intelligence and pure American blood, of all states should be free of this taint. I was born in Kansas and lived my life in Kansas. I am proud of my state. And the thought that Kansas should be a government beholden to this hooded gang of masked fanatics, ignorant and tyrannical in their ruthless oppression is what calls me out . . .

While White failed to gain the governorship, his candidacy did aid the re-election of Attorney General Charles B. Griffith, who as a strong opponent of the Klan, would successfully revoke its state charter because of its illegal formation as a secret order.<sup>6</sup>

White's passionate love for his home state also came out in an intense reverence for the beauty of the land and an art that glorified it. He chastised Kansans for their apparent inability to appreciate art and the land, and he felt chagrined at the undue ridicule heaped upon the famous Regionalist artist John Stuart Curry as he painted the marvelous murals in the capitol. Curry, a Kansas expatriate, returned to the state at White's, and other editors', request to paint the murals. Before he finished his commission he returned to the University of Wisconsin disgusted with parochial complaints about the way in which he painted the curl of pigs' tails, or the length of the farm wife's skirt.

Still, White had a faith in the reasonableness of Kansans, and he could articulate the enduring strengths of the citizenry that characterize the state to this day. He believed Kansans generally a people grounded in the value of practical knowledge in terms of making an honest living; a people who live in a high degree of common comfort; and a people grounded in a political morality, one that obeyed the "legally expressed will of the majority with no very great patience

for the vagaries of protesting minorities.” But still, something was missing in life if that’s all there was to being a Kansan. White feared that Kansans had too narrow of a sense of justice in thinking only in economic terms or moral strictures. He begged the question, “Should a state brag of the fact that it distributes its wealth equitably—almost evenly—when it has produced no great poet, no great painter, no great musician, no great writer or philosopher? Surely the dead level of economic and political democracy is futile if out of it something worthy—something eternally worthy—does not come.”

White hit the nail on the head when he wrote:

What we lack most keenly is a sense of beauty and the love of it. Nothing is more gorgeous in color and form than a Kansas sunset; yet it is hidden from us. The Kansas prairies are as mysterious and moody as the sea in their loveliness, yet we graze them and plow them and mark them with roads and do not see them. The wind in the cottonwoods lisps songs as full of meaning as those the tides sing, and we are deaf. The meadow lark, the red bird, the quail live with us and pipe to us all through the year, but our musicians have not returned the song.<sup>7</sup>

What would White say is the matter with Kansas today? How would he respond to being asked ‘How is it with Toto and Dorothy?’ by some condescending and overly sophisticated West or East Coast snob or wit? Would he relish a depiction of Kansas as a flat, lifeless, black and white landscape? How would he respond to the Kansas State School Board’s decision to de-emphasize the teaching of evolution? Given his sense of human rights, how would he react to the rants of Reverend Fred Phelps and his followers, people who have elicited concerns across the nation about how well Kansans respect human individuality? How would he see his beloved Flint Hills today and the waters coursing through them? Would he take pleasure and comfort in knowing that these streams have some of the poorest water quality in the nation? What would he say to those who oppose the creation of the National Tallgrass Prairie Preserve? Given his strong advocacy of local businesses, would he welcome the arrival of corporate hog farms, the giant big box stores that destroy local business communities throughout our state, or urban sprawl that crowns the hill-top ridges throughout the Flint Hills? How would he react to Thomas Frank’s, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* Would he agree with Frank that Kansans had lost their sense of community and economic justice by the politics of religion that obscures the harsh and growing economic disparities between the rich and poor?

The central questions White still poses to us Kansans today is how do we preserve our communities and strengthen their citizens’ local control over their economic destinies? How do we protect and promote the rights and freedoms of all individuals? And last, and perhaps most important, how do we recognize, relate and protect the beauty implicit in the waters, grasslands and woodlands of this state? Every single Kansan relies upon these ecosystems to sustain their lives, much less their economics. Perhaps William Allen White, if here today, would recognize these pressing problems as non-partisan issues, and the future well being of Kansas may very well depend upon its citizens doing the same.

**End Notes:** Jim Sherow. "William Allen White and "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Once More," [Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy](#) (2006.2).

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3. O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969); O. Gene Clanton, *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854-1903* (Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 2004); Dorothy Rose Blumberg, "Mary Elizabeth Lease, Populist Orator: A Profile," *Kansas History* 1 (1978): 2-15. [\[back\]](#)
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5. William Allen White, "To An Anxious Friend," *Gazette* 27 (1922). [\[back\]](#)
6. Traylor, "White's 1924 Gubernatorial Campaign," 180-91. [\[back\]](#)
7. White, "Kansas: A Puritan Survival," 460-62. [\[back\]](#)

## Author Information

### James E. Sherow ([back to top](#))

Associate Professor  
Department of History  
Kansas State University  
[Web Site](#)

James E. Sherow was glad to return to his home state when he took a position in the department of history at Kansas State University in 1992.

In addition to teaching courses in environmental history, Kansas history and the history of the West, he has extensively studied the Konza Prairie, its history and how it has been affected by changes through time.



Sherow was awarded the William L. Stamey Teaching award for the College of Arts and Sciences at K-State in May of 1995. He has also been active in the Endowment for the Humanities, both in Kansas and nationwide and has worked as a consulting historian in various aspects of public history.

Sherow, associate professor of history with an emphasis in environmental history, earned his bachelor and master of arts degrees from Wichita State University in 1976 and 1978. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado in 1987, and that fall his dissertation, "Discord in the Valley of Content," won the Westerners International-Phi Alpha Theta Award for the best dissertation in Western history. He taught as an assistant professor at Southwest Texas State university before arriving at KSU in the fall of 1992.

He is the author of two books, four book chapters, and thirteen journal articles.

His 1991 summer-teacher institute in environmental history for public school teachers was the first such program underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and NEH awarded funding for a second summer-teacher institute for the summer 1995.