

A RECORD OF FRIENDSHIP:
UNPUBLISHED LETTERS FROM WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE
TO LOVERNA(E) LAWTON LITTLE MORRIS *

Edited by

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William Allen White, editor and publisher of The Emporia Gazette, confidant to the political noteworthy, major force in American late nineteenth and early twentieth century journalism, and writer of short stories and novels left a myriad of material (including his Autobiography) from which scholar/biographers have attempted to assess his mind and heart. It seems appropriate that the nine letters written to Loverna Morris between the years 1919 and 1940 become part of the record. Indeed, we might consider that these letters are valuable because they offer insights more to the heart than to the mind of the man. White's many editorials, essays, speeches, short stories, and novels reveal his social, political, and moral positions; and, we can infer the sort of man he was.¹ On the other hand, letters, written in response to the questions and needs of a friend and a former neighbor, offer glimpses of thoughtfulness and concern for another

* Loverna (Loverne) Lawton Little Morris was born in Americus, Kansas, September 23, 1896. At the age of twenty months she was sent to Emporia, Kansas to live with her aunt and uncle in a house across the street from the home of William Allen White. She was a babysitter for the White children (Mary and William L.); became a favorite of the Whites who introduced her to the great and near-great (including Teddy Roosevelt); and received White's encouragement to pursue her interest in writing. After graduating from Emporia High School and attending Kansas State Normal School (now Emporia State University), she taught briefly in Kansas, moved to California where she taught for two years, and, finally, gravitated toward newspaper work and free-lance writing. She has been active in writing ever since, publishing several children's books, numerous newspaper articles, and, as recently as 1975 and 1978, articles in Ms. magazine.

The nine letters, presented in this article, are part of a gift of material made by Mrs. Morris to her alma mater. Mrs. Morris initiated the gift by writing, on October 28, 1980, to John E. Visser, President of Emporia State University, offering her collection of unpublished material (subsequently including her papers and the White letters). President Visser referred her to Patrick G. O'Brien, Professor of History and Director of the ESU Center for Great Plains Studies. Professor O'Brien was kind enough to pass along to me the White letters. I am grateful to Professor O'Brien, the Center for Great Plains Studies, and especially to Mrs. Loverna Morris for the opportunity to present the letters. I am also most grateful to Mrs. W. L. White for her permission to publish the letters.

human being that may help us, some thirty-five years after his death, see the man as well as the "legend." The passage of time, as most of us are aware, often obscures the human qualities of a noteworthy public figure and makes that person "larger than life." Perhaps White's correspondence with Loverna Morris can illuminate the one and diminish the other.

The letters that follow speak for themselves. I have, however, where it seems helpful and not intrusive, provided a context to the times, the places, and/or the activities that motivated a particular letter. For example, the earliest letter, though sent to Mrs. Morris for her use and at her request, carries the salutation, "To Whom It May Concern." It is dated July 28, 1919, typewritten on Gazette letterhead, and recommends LaVerne Little for a teaching position in the California schools. White writes:

To Whom It May Concern:

I understand that Miss LaVerne Little is an applicant for a position in the California schools. I have known Miss Little since she was a child. She was my neighbor for nearly twenty years, and I think I am in a position to speak advisably (hand-corrected to read advisedly) about her.

She is hard working, conscientious, and capable, has good judgment, and is dependable. Her educational record speaks for itself. She is a graduate of our Kansas State Normal School, one of the best Normal Schools in the world, and she is a fine, strong, intelligent woman.

Truly and sincerely yours,

White wrote again on December 4, 1920, once again in reply to Mrs. Morris's request for assistance in obtaining employment. Typewritten on Gazette letterhead, characteristically hand-corrected,² the letter reads:

My dear Verna:

There is some sort of a Civil Service way into the State Department. Write to the State Department and ask them how one qualifies for clerical positions in the various councils (handcorrected to read consulates) tell them what you want and where you want to go and ask for blanks and for notification when and where the civil service examinations are to be held, and also ask for the topics upon which civil service examinations are

given. In that way I think you will be able to find out what you want. If there is any way in which I can help you, please let me know.

Sincerely yours,

In 1925, White wrote a series of articles for Collier's magazine about Calvin Coolidge. His editorial duties, the Coolidge articles and his other correspondence (some directly with President Coolidge³) notwithstanding, he took time to express his interest in Mrs. Morris's problems. Dated February 10, 1925, typewritten on Gazette letterhead, and containing the handwritten addition bracketed below, the letter states:

My dear Verna:

I was glad to get your letter. I am greatly interested in all that you say but, alas, I don't know any answer to your philosophical queries. I wish I could help you. [handwritten insert: I am as you know not a metaphysician. I am greatly interested in your problems] I hope you are well. We are getting on fine.

Mrs. White sends her kindest regards.

Sincerely yours,

The two letters that follow were written on March 7, and March 12, 1927, while White was on a speaking tour in California. The first notes that Mrs. Morris and White had visited briefly in Pomona, California. The second is advice from a published writer to a beginner and is noteworthy for White's encouragement and his "test" for literary merit. Both letters are typewritten on Hotel Constance, (Pasadena, California) letterhead. The stenographic notation and use of an inside address (not shown below) indicate that White may have dictated the letters.

Dear Verna:

My plans have been all upset by a telegram from Mrs. White announcing the death of her brother, Milton. I am tied up until Friday with speaking dates every day. I expected after Friday, to find time to do a little visiting, but alas, this news will probably call me immediately back to Emporia.

I am so glad I could see you even for that brief moment in Pomona. It was lovely of you to come there. You have a fine, handsome husband and I am proud of you.

Sincerely yours,

Dear Verna:

I have your letter and the enclosures came which I read with interest; but alas, there is only one test, and that is the test of an editor who will buy the material.

It seemed to me that you have ideas and that you express them very well, but I would not know what to advise you. Send them to any magazine where you see stories of a similar kind. I wish I could help you but it doesn't seem possible.

When I come out here again, we can talk them over and perhaps we can get somewhere.

Sincerely yours,

White's letter of February 5, 1930, typewritten on Gazette letter-head, once again shows that Mrs. Morris sought White's advice on a variety of issues and problems.

Dear Verna:

Your letter is too much for me. I couldn't answer it in twenty pages. You are a dear girl and we are both very fond of you, but the problems you state and the issues that rise [handcorrected to read raise] in them are deep fundamental problems that humanity never has answered conclusively, and never will because the answer is based upon some hookup of finite mind to infinite essence, and the hookup never has been made.

We are both very well. We are going to Europe with Bill and the car early next month for ten or twelve weeks. I wish indeed that we might see you the next time we come to California.

Mrs. White joins me in love.

Sincerely yours,

Mary White died May 13, 1921, from a skull fracture suffered when she hit a tree limb while riding her horse. White's tribute to his daughter, in the form of her obituary, is widely-known. Mrs. Morris had often been a babysitter for the White children. White replies to a remembrance of Mary written by Mrs. Morris. His letter, typewritten on Gazette letterhead, is dated November 1, 1934.

Dear Verna:

What a sweet and beautiful letter was yours about Mary! It made her live again. Mrs. White and I are grateful to you for a precious half hour.

I hope you are well and am glad that your daughter is enjoying school. Children are about the only comfort of one's middle and declining years.

Mrs. White joins me in dearest remembrances.

Sincerely yours,

On February 13, 1939, William Allen White gave the major speech at the annual dinner of the Los Angeles Lincoln Club. His letter to Mrs. Morris, typewritten on Gazette letterhead but carrying the return, 2000 Spindrift Drive, La Jolla, California, February 16, 1939, refers to the publicity his talk received in the Los Angeles Times. Two articles appeared: One, under the headline, "White Urges Party's Rebirth," reprints the text of his speech. Another (an interview with White in which he compares California to paradise,) "Famed Editor Praises State;" and with the sub-head, "Common Man Gets Best Break Here, Says William Allen White," appears with a picture captioned, "Sage of Emporia Speaks." His speech concludes, "What then shall be our cause? Let us make it Lincoln's cause, revived in these changed times -- the cause of human liberty as a way to self-respect!"⁴ White's speech was also reprinted in the Los Angeles Daily News in a front-page feature, "Views of the News" by Manchester Boddy. Boddy introduces the text of the speech by stating, "Last night I had the good fortune to hear William Allen White of the Emporia Gazette deliver as profound a message as I have heard in more than a decade."⁵

The reference, in the same letter, to Mrs. Morris's liking "Bill's book" is to the publication in 1938 of the novel, What People Said, by White's son, William Lindsay White. The February 16, 1939 letter follows.

Dear Verna:

I know you will not mind my inability to recall your husband's name. I had it in my mind when your letter came and it is just stalled there.

I certainly appreciate your kind words about my speech and I suppose that I was one of the few men who could get that kind of a speech in the Los Angeles Times in full, but it was there through no merit of the speech but chiefly because I am a good friend of Harry Chandlers.

Mrs. White and I were delighted to know that you still think of us and of course we are pleased that you liked Bill's book.

I wish we could see you but we are going home in a few days and I am afraid we won't get into your part of the world. Let us hope for better luck next time. Mrs. White joins me in affectionate greetings.

Most cordially yours,

The last of the nine letters was written on June 20, 1940. It is, perhaps, the most interesting because it shows the kind of anti-isolationist thinking that accompanied what appeared then the certain defeat of the Allies by Hitler's Germany. It is also interesting in that it shows White's involvement with the movement. In fact, the letter mirrors his preoccupation with a forthcoming book. Only the day before his writing to Mrs. Morris, he received a letter from George Platt Brett, Jr., his editor at Macmillan Publishing Company. Brett gave White a carte blanche authorization to organize and introduce a book of essays dealing with America's defense.⁶ The book, Defense for America, was published by Macmillan in late 1940; however, White's Preface is dated June 25, 1940; obviously, the project was mostly culminated by the time Brett's letter arrived. In addition to White's introduction, the book contains fourteen essays by well-known public figures such as Barry Bingham, Henry Sloane Coffin, James Bryant Conant, and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. The collection concludes with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Message to the Congress of the United States, May 16, 1940."

The letter may also be read as an effort to convince a most skeptical audience -- Mrs. Morris is a Quaker.

Dear Verna:

I am not trying to send your boy to war. I have a boy of military age and I am trying to keep us out of war. Briefly it is this:

If we have the goodwill of the Allies when they are defeated, which seems likely, we can make arrangements to get their fleet. If we have their fleet we can defy Hitler with our fleet in the Atlantic Ocean and theirs in the Pacific Ocean. If we do not help the Allies, if we turn our backs on them, they will see no reason for helping by giving us their fleets. In which case if these fleets go to Hitler he will have the power to take the British possessions in the West Indies. These islands control the Panama Canal. In a few months he could build air and naval bases there and make

much trouble for us. If we let him move in after defeating the British he would be violating the Monroe Doctrine. He will not move in without the British or French fleets. But he will move in then and war will be certain. I am trying to keep your boy out of war. I am trying to keep Bill our(sic) of war. I am sending you a list of the men and women who belong to our committee--some of the best minds in America are with me.

Sincerely yours ,

[handwritten below signature:
Affectionate Greetings]

These nine letters, spanning twenty-one years, indicate that William Allen White found the time to respond to his former neighbor's needs in a variety of ways. He was a sounding-board for personal and philosophical problems; he advised and assisted in employment and career situations; and he maintained, in spite of geographical distance and passing years, a concern for the well-being of another. The letters serve as a record of friendship.

NOTES

¹Walter Johnson's book, Selected Letters of William Allen White, (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), mainly presents White's correspondence with public figures. Only occasionally does Johnson include a letter from "ordinary folk" and only then to illustrate the sort of letters that White received asking his advice on mundane problems. Johnson notes that White "followed the practice of answering all these letters." (p.143).

²Johnson, p. vii.

³Johnson, p. 246-7

⁴Los Angeles Times, February 14, 1939, 6-8. (Clippings file, William Allen White Collection, William Allen White Memorial Library, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas).

⁵Los Angeles Daily News, February 14, 1939, 1 and 8. (Clippings file, White Collection).

⁶Letter to W. A. White from George Platt Brett, Jr., June 19, 1940. (Letter file, White Collection).