

WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE AS SEEN BY  
THE LITTLE GIRL ACROSS THE STREET,  
LOVERNE MORRIS' UNPUBLISHED MEMOIR

by

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Loverna (Loverne) Lawton Little Morris included the manuscript of her memoir, The Little Girl Across the Street, among the material that she gave in 1980 to her alma mater, Emporia State University. Because, in fact, Mrs. Morris did live across the street from William Allen White, noted editor and publisher of The Emporia Gazette, did consider White her mentor, and did correspond with him until his death, her gift of material has provided a unique opportunity to see William Allen White in a less formal manner than that offered by his biographers. This article is the second to use her material toward that end (see "A Record of Friendship: Unpublished Letters from William Allen White to Loverna(e) Lawton Little Morris," Heritage of the Great Plains, Winter, 1982).

As I did in the earlier article, I shall let the material, in this case Mrs. Morris' memory, speak for itself, intruding only to introduce, clarify, and elaborate. But while we listen to "the little girl across the street," we should keep in mind that the manuscript covers the years 1904-1917--Loverne Morris from the age of seven until about the age of twenty-one; and, we should also keep in mind that Mrs. Morris wrote the memoir some forty years later. Though memory is part of reality, of course, we should not, nor would Mrs. Morris expect us to, take her conversations with White as reportage.

By the way of introduction, we need to know that Loverne Morris was born in Americus, Kansas, September 23, 1896. She was sent to Emporia, Kansas at the age of twenty months to live with her aunt and uncle in a house across the street from the home of William Allen White. Her memoir begins, "My earliest memories of the Exchange Street house show me a picture of my seven-year-old self standing behind the lace curtains and watching William Allen White and his wife, Sallie, coming down the wide steps of Red Rocks, their 1890 vintage house of Colorado sandstone blocks."<sup>1</sup> But it was not until her Aunt Lina (whom she calls Mother Lina) suffered a stroke that young Loverne actually met the Whites. She tells how the Whites visited her aunt, offering assistance and friendship to their neighbor across the street. "From that hour on," writes Mrs. Morris, "my loyalty to the Whites never swerved . . . They took me and Mother Lina into the wide reach of their concern. They ever afterward loomed large in my world" (p. 7). Obviously, the views that we are to receive are tempered not only by the passage of time but by Loverne Morris' "adopting" the Whites, especially Will as she calls William Allen White, as parent-figures to replace those that she had never known. Early on she tells us that, as a result of her aunt's illness, the Whites knew "I could not have

playmates at our house on account of Mother Lina being sick, and they kept telling me to come over and play in Billies's and Mary's playroom. The White house became a second home to me" (p. 12).

Although there are no truly clear boundaries, it seems most useful in excerpting from the memoir to collect the memories within some general categories which give us a more or less organized approach to the 125 page manuscript. In particular, Mrs. Morris shows us William Allen White's humanity and sense of fairness, the ways in which others viewed him and his accomplishments, and his wisdom, both personal and political.

## I

A child's first encounter with racial prejudice offers us our initial glimpse of White's liberal tendencies and their influence upon Loverne Morris. She tells us that the part of Emporia where she and the Whites lived was the less affluent section of Emporia, housing only a few of the wealthier families and bordering "String Town," the black community. Consequently, she attended Fourth Ward school where also the black children attended. There she was victimized by a black classmate named Lucy. Lucy, it seems, delighted in flipping Loverne's pigtails in the inkwell until, urged on by an older classmate, Loverne confronted Lucy after school "yelling, 'Nigger, Nigger let me be. Don't you dare to bully me!'" (p. 19). The enraged Lucy chased Loverne to her home, leaving only after Mother Lina took Loverne out of Lucy's sight. The memoir continues:

That evening when Lucy had hardly had time to get home I saw Big Bill, her granddad, coming from town. I knew he was her granddad, for he had brought her to school the first day. I wondered if some way he had heard about Lucy and me and was coming to our house. No, he came up the Whites' side of the street. Then to my amazement I heard Will White shout from his porch. "Evening, Bill," and heard the big Negro answer. "Evenin', Will."

I heard Mr. White say, "Come up and sit. Rest your bones." I watched in wonderment as Big Bill plodded up the walk and sat on the step beside Will White. Bill was about six feet three, brawny, black and shiny as a chunk of anthracite. He and Will sat and visited about horses. I gathered that Bill worked at the livery stable . . . .

Then one evening, to cap the climax, Big Bill came along with Lucy by the hand and Will invited them both up to the porch. Bill proudly introduced Lucy and Will shook hands with her and then patted her on the head telling Bill what a fine girl she was. Lucy looked so pleased and happy and shy, and not like the Lucy I knew at all (pp. 19-20).

Another incident along the same lines concerns a relationship that Loverne Morris and Mary and Bill White established with Hannah, a black washerwoman whose cabin the children discovered on their way to the Neosho River. Their association with Hannah covered several years. During that time, Hannah told them about her early life as a slave, impressing the children with the brutal treatment she received and the independence she achieved in her later years. With the approach of Thanksgiving, the children became aware that all was not well with Hannah. She no longer had sufficient washing, she often appeared to have little to eat, and she was not certain that she would have food for Thanksgiving. It was at this point that Mary and Bill White decided that Loverne should bring the matter to White's attention. Mrs. Morris remembers his reaction:

AS soon as Bill and Mary and I saw Will White trudging homeward from his days work at the Gazette office, we ran down the block to meet him.

Spilling out the words fast and interrupting each other, we told him all about Aunt Hannah. I wound up the tale with, "Isn't there any way to give her a happy Thanksgiving?"

"You mean you think I can do something about it?" asked Will White with a quizzical grin and his head tilted to one side.

"I know you can," I said stoutly.

"Will you help?"

"Of course," I promised.

Will took a pad from his pocket, penciled a note on it, tore off the sheet and handed it to me, saying, "All right. Tomorrow, you and Bill and Mary get Old Tom harnassed and go down to our grocery store. Bill will show you. Give this note to Mike and he will let you have anything you pick out. Get a turkey and pumpkin and sugar for pies and get cranberries and celery and all the rest. Mike will load it into the surrey and you take it out to Aunt Hannah. Mind you don't take any short cuts. You will have to go the long way 'round-- past the lake and down the lane . . ." (p. 67).

Hannah's problems, however, were not over. She no longer could support herself because she could not see well enough to tell when her clients' clothes were clean. She was going blind.<sup>2</sup> Once more the children took the matter to White:

That evening after supper Mary and Bill and I buttonholed Will in the library and told him the whole tale. Sallie was bustling in and out of the room and she caught enough of the story to stop and say, "Oh Will, that poor old thing. It's awful. We just must help."

"Maybe glasses would help," said Will, scratching his ear. "We can send her to Matt and tell him to take care of glasses for her and send us the bill if that will help her eyes. I'll phone him about it. Remind me in the morning" (pp. 69-70).

Both of these incidents support not only White's compassionate nature but also his popularity with children and his willingness to acknowledge children as persons. Those of us who are old enough to remember know that such was not the usual case in the early decades of this century. Walter Johnson in his book, William Allen White's America, writes, "He [White] won over the children of the town by devoting a column a week to them. One Emporia girl demonstrated White's appeal to youth when she said in 1902: 'The thing I like about White is that he takes an interest in the young people and stands by them. He is the friend of every boy and girl in this town.'"<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Morris remembers White's treatment of her in a similar manner.

. . . the Whites would meet all sorts of prominent Emporia people and chat with them. They would introduce me casually as "Our young neighbor, Verna." The folks we would meet would nod and smile absent-mindedly and turn away.

It was the same way at the White home. If I was alone with Will and Sallie and the children in the early evening I loved that. Will might finger out a tune on the piano or might talk about what Cougness had done that day or pick up a copy of McClure's or Collier's or Munsey Magazine and comment on some article. If I made comments, too, he listened and answered as though I were grown up (p. 74).

On another occasion, she asked White to speak to her high school debate club. She relates the conversation:

Feeling that all was propitious, I told my errand.

Sallie immediately said, "No. Will has too much to do now. Will, you mustn't take on anything more." Feeling my way with wife, I said, "Of course it is nervy of me to ask you. We kids can't pay anything. When important people are wanting you, a bunch of kids wouldn't have a chance if you didn't like kids. I've been telling the club members that you aren't a bit snobbish and that kids count with you as much as some senator."

"I do like kids. I'll come." The twinkle in Will's blue eyes told me he had probably sensed my quile, but his round Kewpie face wore a beneficent smile (p. 93).

Another example that illustrates White's sensitivity to his place in the community and, in a larger sense, his egalitarianism, appears earlier in the manuscript.

One day I heard Sallie telling Mother Lina, "Some of our friends from back east laugh at us for taking the wine off our table. They don't understand. It isn't that we've decided that it is a sin. Will appreciates good vintages and I grew up seeing wine on the table. But we live in a state that has a prohibition law and we live in a town where we are all neighbors. We can't be doing things that we wouldn't want to see all the people of Emporia do. Will says that we have been setting a bad example. There are many people in this town that can't afford liquor, and a lot of the railroad people are tempted to drink too much. They are out in all kinds of weather -- fighting rain and freezing cold. It's natural for them to want to warm themselves with whiskey. But if they drink too much, their families go hungry, and if they drink on the job, they get fired. Will says we have no right to be serving liquor when we don't want to see them using it (p. 14).

## II

Public figures, as we know, must endure, the public's displeasure as well as its approval. So it was with William Allen White and his hometown neighbors. But the realization that not everyone shared her admiration of White was not easy for White's young disciple. Her surprise and chagrin are expressed in several places. She writes:

Mother Lina said it was ridiculous for Lyon County folks to be picking on Will White after he was a political power in Kansas and the nation and a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. She told her brother-in-law when people like that respected Mr. White and were glad to count him a friend, it was silly for some Lyon County folks to say that he was too big for his boots. But he only said that Will was awfully green and simple about a lot of things and would "come a cropper." He told of being a delegate, and contemptuously said Will white did not know his way around at all and the old heads made a fool of him. Said he did not have enough sense to train with the regulars (pp. 27-28).

When I was a gangling long-legged girl, two things puzzled and distressed me. I did not like the way some of my Scotch Irish relatives and their friends talked about Will White and I could not at all understand the ways of many of the people who seemed to be accepted in the White's social circle. Perhaps I would have felt differently about those friends of the Whites if I had

been inside the circle. Still, if my feeling was a matter of sour grapes, I did not know it.

The story of that early political caucus to which young Will White and Mother Lina's brother-in-law had both been delegates was told over and over when relatives were together.

He would say, "It was the first county caucus Will ever attended and I sat right beside him. He didn't know the ropes at all. He acted simple. He even looked simple -- no expression on his fat baby face. He kept asking questions in that squeaky falsetto voice of his. He seemed like an overgrown child. I just cannot understand his success" (p. 78).

Even the people who grumbled about Will White read his editorials in The Gazette. Sometimes they were little sermons, but no preacher ever talked in that piquant language.

Will White called sins by their plain names and was never tolerant of sin. But he loved sinners and found some good in them. I remember he was not afraid to stay friends with two of Emporia's biggest sinners after they were found out. But they may have some relatives still alive and it is no good telling that tale.

As I look back, I am inclined to think that what deceived people about Will before they really knew him was his utter lack of pretense. They had never encountered anyone like that before I imagined. He didn't wear a false front the way most men do, and he wasn't afraid to let his naked soul show.

He was a man of faith. Sometimes he quoted the Bible to Bill and Mary and me. . . . I know my Scotch-Irish relatives did not think he was orthodox enough. They were staunch Methodists and thought that some of the things Will White wrote did not line up with the Apostles Creed [sic] (p. 79).

While Will and Sallie were my pet dieties, I insisted on their maintaining Olympic stature. Not vocally, of course, but I suffered inward pain when they laid themselves open to criticism. Especially Will. A lot of people in town and on the farms thought he was flighty and not nearly respectful enough toward their longheld [sic] ideas in politics and religion. Particularly his latter day ideas. I gathered that they thought him a very solid young man when he first bought the Gazette--a dependable old-line Republican

without any disturbing political or social ideas. Now, he wrote things that disturbed them.

His religious ideas, which they judged from occasional hints in the Gazette, disturbed these good people even more. They said he didn't make it plain where he stood. They couldn't even tell for sure whether he believed the Apostle's Creed. They even found some evidence that he had doubts about what some Bible passages meant. They knew what these passages meant.

The critics were somewhat mollified by the fact that Will and Sallie went to the Congregational Church every Sunday they were in town. Also by the fact that Will's writings gave much evidence of Bible study (pp. 111-112).

Even though some of his fellow Emporians disparaged White's fame, Mrs. Morris makes it clear that the town was also proud of his accomplishments. The publication in 1909 of his first novel, A Certain Rich Man, was also the year of his first visit to Europe. She tells how the town greeted the White's upon their return.

. . . I watched the clock and listened for the train whistle. Finally I heard the long wailing toot of the Santa Fe passenger train that was to bring the travelers home. A little while afterward I heard the town band--the one that played a band concert in the park every Saturday night.

It seemed ages before the band got louder. Some of the neighbors had gone to the station, and they told me afterwards that there was a regular home talent show. The townsfolks were trying to represent Will White's first novel, "A Certain Rich Man," and they were all dressed up in funny old-fashioned clothes to represent the characters in the book.

I suppose all the hubbub at the station must have lasted twenty or thirty minutes. I was rocking on toes at the curb. Finally the music of the band began to sound a little louder and I knew the procession was coming (p. 46).

The account in the memoir is consistent with White's version in his Autobiography. White writes:

As we came into Emporia, we ran into the town's surprise for us . . . There was a crowd, and as we stood on the platform we began to see men and women in strange old-fashioned costumes. The town and a half a dozen friends in the state had worked out some sort of a costume party of characters in "A Certain Rich Man."<sup>4</sup>

White, however, concludes his account with an insight that is characteristic of both his and Mrs. Morris' emphasis on

White's humility. He recounts that "the next morning a funny thing happened--one of those blessed events which have always come along to take the starch out of me."<sup>5</sup> He met with a neighbor, a doctor who felt that White and the Gazette were somewhat responsible for having his license revoked though no personal animosity existed between the two men. White recalls the meeting:

I said, "Good morning!" He replied pleasantly, and, by way of exchanging a word, I said: "It's good to be home again."

Quicker than a flash he saw the opening I had left and said, "Oh, have you been out of town? I hadn't missed you!"

I grinned. He snickered. And the episode was closed. It did me good. I needed just that.<sup>6</sup>

### III

Loverne Morris' memoir is perhaps best represented by those passages that capture White's personal and political philosophies; capturing them in a way that allows us to see an era that has passed but has left its imprint upon us. Consistent with her "adopting" White as a father-figure is her seeking his advice as she matures into young womanhood. We learn from the memoir that Loverne has a problem with her interest in boys and her Aunt Lina's attitudes about those relationships. She takes her frustration to White who replies with both advice and theory.

Will winked hard as though something had gotten into his eye. Then he said gently, "Verna, your foster mother is a good woman. She means the best. But she never had any children of her own and she must have been forty five or so when she took you as a baby. She just does not understand. She takes life hard, she feels responsible for you, and she wants to do the right thing. Even if you and I know that what she is doing is not the right thing, she would never understand. I can't very well tell you not to mind her. But you can learn to make friends with boys at school. . . ."

Mr. White sat up in the hammock and put his feet on the porch floor. He looked at me earnestly before he spoke. Then he said, "Verna, I want to tell you something. A woman who is all there can marry practically any man she wants. All she has to do is believe that. Men are putty in the hands of women."

I looked incredulous, I know. Will White went on, "I mean that, Verna -- every word of it. A woman's main business in life is to get herself a good man. A man that wants to be good -- tries to be good. The choice is hers. It's up to her to choose a man who wants to do right. He won't make it all the time, and wives need to be



forgiving. Men are naturally polygamous creatures with roving eyes. But if a man has decent instincts and wants to do the right thing, a good woman can keep him in line " (pp. 103-104).

Certainly Mrs. Morris' recollection of White's advice illuminates attitudes toward male-female relations and marriage that readers today find outdated but still in existence. Equally as interesting is White's political philosophy. While walking to the meeting with Loverne's debate class, the disciple and her mentor discuss tariffs; a discussion that leads to White's thoughts on socialism, political influence and reform.

. . . I asked Will what he thought about tariffs.

"Oh Verna, there are no easy answers. If the tariffs are too high, and no competition from skilled European workers, the monopolies charge us two prices. If the tariffs are too low, competition undermines living standards here. We just can't ask self-respecting American workmen to live the way workmen in southern Europe live, and sweat out the same long hours. That's what would happen if cheap goods made by sweated labor were competing in our market. I don't know the answer, Verna."

I ventured, "I've been reading about Hull House and Jane Addams and the robber barons, and reading about the Socialist campaign for an eight-hour law and safer working conditions and sanitary factories and fairer wages. Are the Socialists right?"

"Of course they are right. Absolutely right," Will declared vigorously.

"Then why aren't you a Socialist?" I asked, remembering that Will was a member of the Republican National Committee -- shoulder to shoulder with the plutocrats. "Why don't you join the Socialists?"

"Because they can't accomplish anything. Verna, the Socialists have a lot of good ideas, but the party is made up largely of the ragtag and bobtail of the country, and they will never get anywhere. They are the agitators and they are needed, but agitators are never the ones to put reforms into effect. We must sell the solid people on their best ideas. When you want a reform accomplished, get a conservative to accomplish it" (p. 95-97).

The questions of social equality, and reform were by 1916, according to Mrs. Morris, bothering her; especially, she tells us, "The part about equal opportunity bothered me a little -- some seemed to have such a headstart" (pp. 119-120). She took her confusion to White.

. . . he explained that we just have to wait on public conscience. He said we can afford to wait and be patient -- that the democratic way is the only way to secure any good that endures. He said that while an absolute ruler may provide social benefits, they go when he goes. He said that demagogues make a lot of noise and promise much that they cannot do. The caesars {sic!} rise and topple. The United States lumbers along, its social conscience growing, and a few more wrongs being righted in each decade, when the people will no longer tolerate them.

He said, "Verna, a country grows much the same way a child grows. Learns by trial and error. I ate green apples and I'll bet you ate green apples. The United States has eaten green apples--gone foolish things. But the common people are patient. That is what makes democracy possible. The sovereign people are patient with their bungling leaders."

"How can people be sovereign when they don't all want the same things?"

"That's what I mean by trial and error. The majority votes for this or that as public opinion changes from year to year. The voters try something as a solution for the farm problem or the labor problem, and if it does not work, they try something else. It takes fifty or a hundred years to find the right answer. The Supreme Court acts as a brake to see that the majority does not run right over the minority. Patience is the important thing. Keeping heads level and not giving way to mob emotions" (pp. 120-121).



*William Allen White circa 1915*

*Courtesy of Mrs. W.L. White*

The Little Girl Across the Street concludes with Loverne Morris returning from a trip in 1917 shortly after the United States entered World War I. Caught up in the patriotism of the time, she decides to enter the Army Nurse Corps. White was on the committee to nominate Emporia girls for free nurse training. Naturally, Loverne took her wishes to him.

Hopefully, I explained what I wanted.

"No, Verna, no!" Will said emphatically.

I was too stunned to speak. At my crestfallen look, my questioning eyes, he looked kind and said, "It's bad enough to send our fine young men away to be cannon fodder. This war is bloody business. And it's brutally hard work. The women who go as nurses will need to be strong as plough horses. They will need strong stomachs, too. No, Verna, it is not for you."

I argued, I coaxed. It was no good. I do not remember all that Will said, but I remember that he kept shaking his head.

"Finally, he did say, [sic] "Verna, we are in this war, and we have to fight our way out. But there is no glory in it. It is just a dirty beastly job that has to be done."

"But isn't the war to make the world safe for democracy?" I asked.

"Verna, I am not sure that war can make anything safe. War is folly -- madness. It unleashes all the savagery in the human heart. It drowns the still small voice."

I looked at him with my mouth open. Then I said, "But -- but won't the Kaiser come over here and make us slaves if we don't fight? What can we do?"

"Fight is all we can do now. It is too late for anything else. About the slaves part -- I don't know. We are committed. We didn't think at all until we were on the dark edge of the abyss. Then we were too excited to think straight. Then we plunged in."

"Is it all so very bad?"

"Verna, neither I nor any other man can add up the whole score. War brings out the best and the worst in men. There will be great courage, sacrifice, heroism, feats of human endurance past belief. There will be savagery. Men will suffer and die for their faith in democracy, and what is more noble than that? The issue is joined and we must not lose. The fighting men have us back of them all the way. But there could have been a

better way. Never forget, every war is a confession of human failnre." . . . "Maybe I have talked too much. I sit in comfort while our fine young men go away to war. I have to cheer them as they march away. Then you have got to look beyord, look to the time when mankind will have learned how to immunize against this war sickness -- this emotional infection. I dcubt if I will live to see that time. But you and your children may. Verna, when you marry and have children, teach them the truth about war. And now, all we can do is to keep our chins up, have a smile for the fighting men, and pray that the war ends quickly. Pray that they come safely home and that this expericnce will help mankind learn that war is folly" (pp. 123-125).

And with that, Loverne Morris ends her memoir by stating, "I went home sobered but also comforted. Yet the world was never quite the same again" (p. 125).

Even so brief a look into Loverne Morris' memoir shows us the value of first-hand, informal glimpses into the lives of those who become noteworthy public figures. And we would perhaps agree that we also receive a fresh expression of "the way it was" to grow up in smalltown America in the first two decades of this century.

#### NOTES

1. Loverne Morris, The manuscript is part of the Normaliana Collection in the William Allen White Memorial Library, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, page one. All other references to the manuscript are noted parenthetically by page number.

2. In December 1983, Mrs. Morris enclosed in a letter to me the manuscript of a short story based on the same incident. She had written the story only recently. The director of the retirement complex where Mrs. Morris, now age 87, resides entered the story in a contest for senior citizens sponsored by Humboldt State University. The story received an honorable mention and was subsequently published.

3. Walter Johnson, William Allen White's America (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 82.

4. The Autobiography of William Allen White (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), 422.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 422-423.