

**“Mary White”**  
By Beverley Olson Buller

*Originally aired May 2021*

William Allen White, editor of the popular newspaper the Emporia Gazette, was a prolific writer, political strategist, and spokesman for the heartland. May 17, 2021, marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of what is probably the most famous editorial Kansas editor William Allen White ever wrote. Entitled simply “Mary White”, it was occasioned by the death of his 16-year-old daughter in a horse accident. Mary’s accident, which occurred on May 10, 1921, during her routine after-school horseback ride, left her in a coma from which she never regained consciousness and led to her death on May 13. Following her funeral, her famous father felt the need to share memories of his lively daughter with the community that knew her well. As he wrote in his autobiography, “The day after the funeral, I knew that I must write something about Mary. Sallie and I walked down to the *Gazette* office together, and I hammered out her obituary. We went over it together, and revised it three times in the proof before the type was put into the forms. I had said my say and felt eased in my soul.”

The editorial pulses with details of the life of Mary White, who was a junior at Emporia High School in May 1921. Her father describes her many achievements, her love of books, her drives in the family car filled with other students, her growing talent for cartooning, her efforts to help young and old in Emporia, and the “continual bubble of joy” that was her humor, tempering these remarks with the observance, “She was mischievous without malice, as full of faults as an old shoe. No angel was Mary White, but an easy girl to live with for she never nursed a grouch five minutes in her life.”

He describes Mary’s last horseback ride, peppered with greetings to those she passed, and her funeral which was “...as she would have wished it”.

The editorial was clearly written for the people of Emporia who knew Mary, but White expressed surprise when it was reprinted in the Kansas City STAR and from there in newspapers all over the country and on to women’s magazines. Within a year, it was included in anthologies used in high schools and colleges. White and his wife kept track of the inclusion of his editorial in such books and the number reached more than 40 after 20 years. He found it a “strange immortality” for the girl he called his Peter Pan. William Allen White went on to win two Pulitzer Prizes, but this editorial received no awards. White knew, however, that he had written something powerful, stating in his autobiography written at the end of his life, “Probably if anything I have written in these long, happy years that I have been earning my living by writing, if anything survives more than a decade beyond my life’s span, it will be the thousand words or so that I hammered out on my typewriter that bright May morning under the shadow and in the agony of Mary’s death.”

White’s words speak as strongly to modern readers as they did in 1921-- to bring them comfort, to remind them to celebrate lives well-lived no matter how short, and to reassure them that, like his daughter, they are not forgotten by any who knew them. As he concluded in his editorial, “The soul of her, the glowing, gorgeous, fervent soul of her, surely was flaming in eager joy upon some other dawn.”

Read the editorial online in the Kansas State Historical Society Kansapedia collection at [ksks.org](http://ksks.org).

*This transcript of “Mary White” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*