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2012 – The Prairie: Its Seasons and Rhythms  
(Laurie J. Hamilton, Editor)

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## William Allen White's Prairie

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### Recommended Citation

Averill, Thomas Fox (2012). "William Allen White's Prairie," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.  
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2012/prairie/9>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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## William Allen White's Prairie

These things--the air, the water, the scenery and we who fill these scenes--hold many and many a man to Kansas when money would tempt him away . . . Here are the still waters, here are the green pastures. Here, the fairest of the world's habitations.

-William Allen White, Circa 1912

William Allen White called himself a prairie town boy, and he celebrated the prairie in his writing. From his earliest fiction, *The Real Issue* (1896), to his final novel, *In the Heart of a Fool* (1918), to his *Autobiography* (1946), White's natural world is the Kansas he grew up in and loved as "the fairest of the world's habitations."



WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE  
Kansas State Historical Society

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In his autobiography, he describes the influences of growing up in El Dorado: the home, the barn, the river-swimming, and the roaming through the timber. The home was full of "reading and considerable intelligent guidance." The rest of his list is more physical. One of Kansas literature's best descriptions of boys and barns is from *God's Puppets* (1914):

*The barn was our real abiding place...*

*The very rafters were sacred. There our trapeze swung; there the rigs dangled on which we turned buss-wheels; there was our springboard before the haypile in the manger; there we gave our shows; there we played our first casino and seven-up; and there we learned in whispers the great mysteries of life. The barn was the boy's Eden. He entered it in the sweet*

innocence of childhood and played ghosts there, and talked with voices there, and held communion with the gods, and when . . . its creaking doors banged on him, . . . he walked past the flaming sword into life, filled with the knowledge of good and evil! What will boys do when there are no more barns?

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*...we can never have lovelier hours than those Saturdays we spent in the woods, on the Cottonwood River, roving the fields, enjoying God's unfolding universe where youth sees so many new, strange, and lovely things.*

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White was proud of his swimming abilities, as he describes (in the third person) in the *Autobiography*:

. . . he could dive clear across the

creek, and sometimes he would dive so far upstream beyond the swimming hole and hide under a stump where there were supposed to be snakes—but weren't—that the whole parcel of young savages at the swimming hole would be scared white, fearing he was drowned.

No bathing trunks were ever heard of in that young savage band. They loved to smear themselves with mud and make indecent patterns with sticks upon their bodies and stand near the railroad bridge, yelling when Number Four passed, waving and making obscene gestures at the passengers. For they were dirty little devils, as most kids are when they are leaving the portals of babyhood and becoming boys.

As for the woods, he recalls in the *Autobiography* his experiences with his roommate, Bill Jones, at Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia:

. . . we roamed the woods together Saturdays with our lunch—gay sixteen-year-olds. . . we rowed on the Cottonwood and stripped betimes and

jumped in and stretched out on our bellies, kicking our toes in the mold in the woods, reading Tennyson and Byron . . . In his diary, after his death, I read an entry of November 1, 1884: "Went swimming with Bill White this morning, thin scum of ice." And, reading it, I recall that it was so cold that my measles came out and I was scared for a bit. But if Bob and I meet again in heaven we can never have lovelier hours than those Saturdays we spent in the woods, on the Cottonwood River, roving the fields, enjoying God's unfolding universe where youth sees so many new, strange, and lovely things.

Whether barn, swimming hole, or woods, the environment is formative, instructional, life enhancing, appreciated at the time and in reflection. White's enthusiasm for place goes well beyond the nostalgia that the prairie and the Flint Hills often invoke. White understood how environment shapes character. The prairie is not just a place, it is the place that made him what he

became. He early made a decision to always be "from Emporia," a citizen of the prairie. But from Emporia he traveled the world and shaped the politics and culture of the United States from his 1896 "What's the Matter with Kansas?"

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to his death nearly 50 years later.

Growing up in El Dorado, White was not familiar with the Flint Hills until he was a young man, and his first encounter reflects the wonder so many have expressed for that landscape:

*One Sunday in late August, I . . . set out for Agnes Riley's home, and we two went on an all-day picnic excursion, headed east-ward into the Flint Hills. I had never seen them. I had no idea of their loveliness. . . beauty in the*

landscape was a new sensation. The hills were clad in summer green, and in those days the deep ravines were wooded and the road, a dirt road, a farmer's road, ungraded, wound around the contour of the hills, crossing the ravines on wooden bridges which rumbled under the horses' feet and the buggy wheels as we passed. . . . we were so enthralled with the beauty around us that life itself suddenly became a part of that beauty. We talked only a little. . . . But I do know that we were happy and took a deep joy in the loveliness of the soft lines of the hills. They had a sort of vast monotony of curve and lines. The colors in different shades of green, all innocent of the plow, brought us a delight that only youth can have in those first experiences which bring new stimulation to the senses. To see a new world in youth is to approach the ineffable.

So, at noon, we found in a deep ravine a quiet grove and ate our lunch there by a spring. . . . We rode home through the long afternoon and the late twilight

and saw the hills in the new light when the horizontal light lines from the west made strange shadows. The pleasure that had run through the day was turned, at night, into exquisite silence. Thus we rode back across the upland under the stars.

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...from Emporia he traveled the world and shaped the politics and culture of the United States...

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Like so many, White is both dumbstruck and articulate about encountering the Flint Hills—note the vocabulary he needs to describe his enthrallment: *exquisite, ineffable, delight, joy*.

Once White began writing fiction, he used the stuff of his experience to set scene. An early novel, *A Certain Rich Man* (1909), begins with the childhood of John Barclay, who will be deformed by a boyhood experience with a Civil War battle, and go on to be one of the robber barons that Kansas Populists railed

against, and that were finally regulated by White's trust-busting hero Theodore Roosevelt. White makes it clear that his character started life in innocence:

. . . there was a mottled memory of the woods—woods with sunshine in them, and of a prairie flooded with sunshine on which he played, now picking flowers, now playing house under the limestone ledges, now, after a rain, following little rivers down rocky draws, and finding sunfish and silversides in the deeper pools. But always his memory was of sunshine, and the open sky, or the deep wide woods all unexplored, save by himself. . . . his eyes followed the bees and the birds and the butterflies and the shadows trailing across the hillside . . .

One fine fall day they went up the ridge far above the town where the courthouse stands now, and there under a lone elm tree just above a limestone ledge, they spread their lunch, and the mother sat on the hillside, almost hidden by the rippling prairie grass . . . while the

boy cleared out a spring that bubbled from beneath a rock in the shade . . .

At the end of his life, John Barclay must decide between all of his riches and the happiness of his daughter. His capitalist kingdom is nearly a wreck, and he seeks out nature. Like him, the natural world is in the winter of its cycle, yet it gives him understanding, solace,

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*The pleasure that had run through the day was turned, at night, into exquisite silence. Thus we rode back across the upland under the stars.*

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and peace. He feels a redemptive power as he stands outside:

. . . when Nature is shifting her scenery, making ready for the great spring show. It is bleak, but not cold; barren, but not ugly, —for the stage setting of the hills and woods and streams, even

*without the coloured wings and flies  
and the painted trees and grass, has its  
fine simplicity of form and grouping  
that are good to look upon.*

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In White's world, the redemptive power of nature is directly associated with...all that is virgin, unbroken, wild.

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And then he makes the right decision, soon returning home to bless his daughter's love and to burn his ill-gotten stocks.

In White's world, the redemptive power of nature is directly associated with its innocence, with childhood, with all that is virgin, unbroken, wild. He describes a young girl in a story from *God's Puppets*: "Across the unfenced fields among the spring flowers, innocent and beautiful—the dogtooth violets, the wild lupines, the anemones and primroses—the brown,

unshod feet of the little girl wandered."

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial, "Mary White," written just days after his daughter's death, he notes:

*The last hour of her life was typical of its happiness. She came home from a day's work at school, topped off by a hard grind with the copy on the High School Annual, and felt that a ride would refresh her. She climbed into her khakis, chattering to her mother about the work she was doing, and hurried to get her horse and be out on the dirt roads for the country air and the radiant green fields of the spring.*

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*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.*

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White lived his life in the radiant green fields of spring. When he died, on Kansas Day of 1944, he left behind a body of work infused with a love of the prairie. In an essay published in 1922, he lamented, "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."

In fact, White did see them. If he did not cry out more often for their beauty and heritage and preservation, it was because he, like so many Kansans, took them for granted in their abundance. Too often, only when a landscape is endangered does it become spoken of as treasure.

Perhaps in White's lifetime, the Flint Hills was a symphony he moved through and heard every day. Now, we bring a symphony to the Flint Hills in order to highlight and protect it, to help others appreciate what White could take for granted.

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Thomas Fox Averill is Writer-in-residence at Washburn University, where he teaches courses in creative writing and in Kansas Literature, Folklore & Film. His *Thomas Fox Averill Kansas Studies Collection* is housed in Washburn's Mabee Library. His most recent novel, *rode*, was published in 2011 by the University of New Mexico Press, which reprinted his *Secrets of the Tsil Café* in the spring of 2012.