

“Small-Town Life Won Over Kathrine White”

By John Mark Lambertson

(EDITOR’S NOTE: This is the final article in a two-part series on the life of Kathrine White of the famous White family in Kansas Journalism.)

Originally published in The Ottawa Herald August 27, 1988

In 1931, Kathrine Klinkenberg left Time magazine to marry the writer William Lindsay White, son of “The Sage of Emporia,” William Allen White. The junior White used to tell how Henry Luce, Time’s founder and publisher, shed tears over Kathrine’s departure.

Previously, she had turned down another proposal of marriage from another writer, the noted novelist John O’Hara.

The new Mr. and Mrs. White returned to Emporia and to the family newspaper. “Young Bill” also served in the State Legislature.

Two years in Washington, D.C. followed while Kathrine’s husband wrote for the Washington Post. But in 1937, they returned to New York where they established their home for more than 30 years.

Bill White was a war correspondent for many of those years and trips to Europe, Russia and Korea became a big part of their lives.

Numerous critically acclaimed books also came from White’s pen, although he was forever somewhat underneath his famous father’s shadow—something Kathrine tended to resent. She, always the editor, edited most of the first drafts of Bill’s work.

One of his volumes on the Korean war received considerable scrutiny years later and heavily influenced one of America’s most popular television shows. The director of “M-A-S-H” was so impressed by White’s accounts of the war that the book became the “bible” and required reading for all “M-A-S-H” writers.

The years spent covering World War II also brought the Whites their daughter, Barbara. Orphaned by the London blitz, she was adopted by Bill and Kathrine and the new father recorded the experience in the book “Journey for Margaret.”

A movie by the same name was released in 1942, starring Robert Young and Lorraine Day as the Whites. The film also made a star of little Margaret O’Brien in the title role.

In the latter part of his career, Bill White was able to stay closer to New York while he served as an editor of Reader’s Digest and the Book of the Month Club, as well as other writing projects.

During those years the Whites were an active part of New York society. Their friends and acquaintances included many of the famous, wealthy and powerful people in America in the 1950s.

The communist hunt of Sen. Joseph McCarthy threw New York society into a spin during this period, with many of the friends of the Whites being investigated, such as Alger Hiss, while others were called to testify, like their close friend Whittaker Chambers.

Richard and Pat Nixon were “acquaintances, not close friends,” Kathrine later recalled, but former President Herbert Hoover was a longtime family friend.

Hoover and the Whites frequently had dinners at each other’s apartments. Kathrine later wrote that while it was widely known that Franklin Roosevelt had had polio, “few people knew that (his political opponent) Hoover also had suffered from the disease at some point. He always had me cut his meat, as he could not maneuver the knife.”

When Bill White became ill with cancer, he and Kathrine chose to return to the family home, “Red Rocks,” in Emporia. When asked why, Kathrine replied, “There is no place like a small town when you are in trouble—in a city no one cares, but a small town is family.”

Despite that reasoning, it still could not have been easy for her to leave the life she enjoyed in New York. Emporia may have been “family,” but it was not a family with which she felt comfortable.

“My mother,” Kathrine’s daughter wrote last week in her eulogy, “was not popular with Emporians and had few friends here. Many people felt she was stuck up and had picked up Eastern ways.

“This hurt my mother, but she confessed to me that it was true that she did feel like a misfit in a small Kansas town, once having experienced the excitement and intellectual stimulation of New York City.”

Bill White died in 1975, but Kathrine stayed in Emporia and took up the reins of the Gazette. At work she was known for her intelligence, high professional standards and critical editorial eye. She also earned a reputation for being difficult and demanding.

Allegedly, “Mrs. Pyncheon,” the strong-willed newspaper publisher in the TV show “Lou Grant,” was partly based on Kathrine Graham of the Washington Post and partly on Kathrine White of the Emporia Gazette.

Though always a gracious and charming hostess, Kathrine largely remained a recluse in her late years. Her home, dark with paneling, beams and a sunken dining room, was filled with an astounding collection of treasures from around the world—plates from the czar’s summer palace, a silver and brass German helmet, ancient porcelain from Canton and a vase reportedly once owned by Catherine the Great.

A private woman, not given to shows of emotion, Kathrine insisted on formal decorum. Men conducting business or dining without coats and ties were frowned upon, and the titles of “Mr.,” “Mrs.” and “Miss” always were used in her presence.

Tall and regal, she remained unbent by age, even when reduced to having to steady her walk with a cane. As cancer slowly claimed her body, Kathrine continued to conduct long days of business, attending to correspondence and giving directions to her household staff from her bedroom, study or hospital room.

Death finally claimed this strong-willed and fascinating woman Aug. 17, 1988.