

“Local Chapter in the Kathrine White Story”

By John Mark Lambertson

(EDITOR’S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series on Kathrine White and her eventful life as a member of journalism’s famous White family, which included spending her childhood in Ottawa.)

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Last week Kathrine White, the editor of the Emporia Gazette, died quietly at an Emporia hospital. She was 85.

News of her death was dutifully carried by the Associated Press and briefly recorded in newspapers across the state.

She was, the papers said, the end of an era.

Together with her famous father-in-law, William Allen White, and her husband, William Lindsay White, they had controlled the Gazette for nearly a hundred years. But, more than that, Kathrine White was a strong, talented and intriguing woman who led a rich and fascinating life.

What only a few people locally realize is that her life took root in Ottawa.

She was born at Cawker City in 1903, but moved to Ottawa with her parents, Peter and Fannie Klinkenberg, when she was five years old.

Her father, a druggist, was a traveling agent for a pharmaceutical company when he first settled his family here. But in 1915 he purchased his own business and opened the Klinkenberg Drug Store at 304 S. Main.

In 1926, the business was sold and the name changed to Crown Drug Store. Despite subsequent changes of hand, it remains a drug store today—the Allegre Health Mart.

Klinkenberg later went to Kansas City where he was president of his own drug company at the time of his death in 1939. His wife served as a sorority housemother at the University of Kansas for 20 years and lived until 1972. Both are buried at Highland Cemetery.

For most of the years the Klinkenbergs were in Ottawa, they lived at 416 S. Elm, now the home of Wayne and Cathy Duderstadt.

Ironically, Kathrine’s next-door neighbors to the south were the founders of another dynasty of noted Kansas editors. Ralph Harris and his sons Sid and Jack formed the group of newspapers known today as Harris Enterprises, with which The Ottawa Herald is affiliated.

Kathrine was educated and grew to womanhood in Ottawa, later writing with approval of the “dedicated and well-trained” teachers who taught her.

She recalled her first day at school (probably the old Eugene Field) when her mother urged her to “go over and sit with that little girl by the window.”

She found herself seated next to Jane Davis, later Mrs. Ransom Bennett Sr., and the two became fast friends.

Although they followed different paths, the two women remained in contact. Kathrine White’s last visit to Ottawa was in 1982, to attend the graveside service of her girlhood chum.

At Ottawa High School, Kathrine was literary editor of the school newspaper and society editor of the yearbook during her senior year.

The yearbook that year, 1922, calls her “a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair.” Her chief characteristic was given as “sophistication” and her “probable destiny” that of a movie actress.

Other 1922 classmates were Roy Browning, Mildred Eldridge Berlin, Floyd Durm and Eleanor Lloyd, who remembers her as “a lovely lady” who, although a city girl, “was not too stuck up to be friendly with us country girls.”

Kathrine attended the University of Kansas that fall “for a rather unhappy stretch,” and later went to the University of Wisconsin.

“But, if I ever have learned anything I was supposed to learn in college,” she later wrote, “it was from a dear little man who taught Greek (at Ottawa University) in my home town.”

Undoubtably, she was referring to Leonidas R. Higgins, an eccentric but beloved OU professor the students fondly called “Zeus.”

In 1926, doors began to open that led to the colorful and eventful life she later led. She first was hired by a German professor who exhibited his collection of 15th century books in major American libraries.

The following year she was hired by Time magazine as an office girl and eventually worked her way up to a researcher position in the editorial department.

The woman who hired her was Priscilla Hiss, wife of the man later to be convicted in the celebrated “pumpkin papers” espionage case, Alger Hiss.

During her happy and formative years with Time, Kathrine briefly filled in as sports editor, which was ironic since she knew nothing about sports. During that period she was treated to a memorable experience—a flight over New York City with Amelia Earhart.

(Next: The conclusion of Kathrine’s eventful life.)