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WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?*

The cry of William Allen White, who found the state too radical, is now repeated by a fellow-Kansan, who sees it hog-tied by conservatism.

By

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When a youthful William Allen White, back in 1896, published in his Emporia Gazette an editorial entitled "What's the Matter With Kansas?" he was indulging what has, from the first, been a favorite exercise of Kansans -- namely, self-castigation. Kansas, cried he, was a bad joke, made so by an excess of radicalism. The Populists, who then dominated here, were "shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained" fanatics; "harpies" who believed the state should raise hell and let the corn go to weeds; and "mossbacks" who "snort and howl because there's a bathtub in the State House."

A little later, and for the rest of his life, White was sure (between election campaigns, anyway) that what was the matter with Kansas was the precise opposite of radicalism. We suffered, he thought, from an excess of conservatism. But from first to last, like the symptomatic and influential Kansan he was, White was sure something was the matter with us and should be corrected. Other states are distinguished by boastfulness (Iowa, California and Texas come to mind); Kansas is distinguished by self-deprecation. There's a broad streak of puritan masochism in our character, and in 1954 some of us are stimulated to ponder how and why this came to pass.

For 1954 is the year of Kansas' Territorial Centennial. A special Governor's committee is hard at work sponsoring publicity, speeches, celebrations and exhibits to remind us that, just 100 years ago, Senator Stephen Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska bill repealed the Missouri Compromise, virtually inviting pro-slavers and free states to fight it out for possession of the new land and that the invitation was heartily accepted. In the "Bleeding Kansas" of 1854-57 was held the dress rehearsal for the Civil War; by 1861, when the new state was accepted into the Union, a numerically inferior but intellectually potent group of New England Abolitionists had done much to set the cultural tone. There followed the Kansas of Indian wars and railroad building and buffalo hunts; of wild cow towns (Abilene, Hays, Dodge City) and such gun fighters as Wild Bill Hickok; of droughts and grass-hopper plagues; of world-record wheat crops, and of creative vision and bold social experimentation.

*Davis, Kenneth S.: What's the Matter With Kansas? The New York Times Magazine, p. 12, June 27, 1954.

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