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# DECODING THE FAMILY LEGEND OF TIES TO WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

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Do you have a family legend that you've always wanted know the truth about? I think that's one of the best parts of genealogy. It's the detective work unpacking fact from fiction among the family stories that we all carry forward. Was grandpa a bootlegger? How did that family make their fortune? Did our family encounter the Native Americans on the frontier? Did we cross paths with a famous person?

We all love shaking the family tree to see what falls out.

One tool I've found indispensable in researching my ancestors and even shining light on a family legend is timelines. The reason timelines prove so helpful is that they can clearly outline - and in this ancestor's case - contrast time and place for two persons, making the conclusion about their paths crossing pretty clear.

Let me show you what I mean.

## The Legend of William Allen White

One of the many family stories I heard growing up was that my great grandfather, Frank Watson (b. 1864, MA, d. 1954, KS). He allegedly worked for or, more specifically, set type for William Allen White, the famed newspaper publisher and activist. Wouldn't that be neat if my great grandpa Frank played a role - no matter how small - in the work of this historic American figure? The story is all the more exciting because my father was a career printer, following his grandfather in a related career.

As the self-appointed family history researcher, I set out to prove or debunk this mystery once and for all.

## Research Road Traveled

### Step 1. Outline the Ancestor's Life

Long before investigating the William Allen White legend, I dutifully built a detailed timeline of Frank Watson's personal history, which included: 1) how and when he came to Kansas; 2) when and where he married; 3) his employment history; 4) the birth of children in Atchison, Kansas; 4) the family's migration to Wichita, Kansas, his employment history, and church involvement there; and finally 5) his death in Wichita. With his personal story in hand, I could turn to peeling back the details on the family legend.

### Step 2. Make a Plausible Hypothesis

When Frank Watson's timeline was complete, I had several facts upon which to make a comparison with William Allen White's life. Frank was a professional printer in Atchison, and he worked at the Atchison Globe. He was in the right profession for at least part of his life to make the legend that he knew or worked with Mr. White plausible. He lived in Atchison, then Wichita, which geographically bookend Emporia. Finally, I had a five year gap in Frank's migration from Atchison to Wichita which made a stay in Emporia possible. With a handful of hope, and a few loosely tied together facts, I had a working theory that my ancestor, Frank, could have worked for William Allen White. The legend could be true.

### Step 3. Paint a Timeline of the Historic Figure

At this point, I have a pretty good handle on my ancestor's life timeline, but only a vague knowledge of where and when William Allen White lived. So my next step was to create a timeline of Mr. White's life. Honestly, this was pretty easy. A quick visit to Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)), gave me the basic dates and facts about William Allen White. He was born in Emporia, Kansas, briefly lived in El Dorado, Kansas, then returned to Emporia, where he spent the rest of his life. So his migration map - and opportunity to encounter my ancestor - was pretty limited to Emporia and/or El Dorado.

## William Allen White, continued

The Emporia *Gazette*, according to the [Kansas State Historical Society](http://www.kshs.org) ([www.kshs.org](http://www.kshs.org)), was published from 1890 to 1900. Mr. White purchased the Emporia *Gazette* in 1895 and owned it for the next five years. (This would prove to be the critical piece of information in resolving the legend.) Beyond the information found in Wikipedia, a quick search on [Ancestry](http://Ancestry.com), brought up many, many US and state census records, passport records and passenger records. Combined, these records painted a pretty clear picture of a life primarily spent in Emporia, Kansas.

To the right are the highlights of Mr. White's migration map from these records -  
i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi, vii, viii, ix

William Allen White's Migration

Date	Location	Source	Comments
1870	ElDorado, KS	1870 US Census <sup>1</sup>	
1880	ElDorado, KS	1880 US Census <sup>2</sup>	
1895 - 1900	Emporia, KS	Wikipedia <sup>3</sup>	Owner, Emporia Gazette
1905	Emporia, KS	1905 KS Census <sup>4</sup>	
1910	Emporia, KS	1910 US Census <sup>5</sup>	
1915	Emporia, KS	1915 KS Census <sup>6</sup>	
1918	Emporia, KS	Passport Application <sup>7</sup>	
1920	Emporia, KS	1920 US Census <sup>8</sup>	
1925	Emporia, KS	Passenger Log <sup>9</sup>	
1930	Emporia, KS	1930 US Census <sup>10</sup>	

### Step 4. Contrast the Timelines of the Two Men

Event	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905
Emporia Gazette Published																		
William Allen White Buys Emporia Gazette																		
W.A. White owns Gazette																		
Frank marries in Atchison																		
Typesetter for Atchison Globe																		
Frank Lives in Atchison																		

The last step is simply to put the two timelines (left) together and compare and contrast. For Frank Watson to have worked for William Allen White, he would have had to do so at the Emporia *Gazette*.

Mr. White owned the *Gazette* from 1895 to 1940. At which time, Frank Watson was living in Atchison, married, and working for printing companies and at the *Atchison Globe*. Unless Frank Watson free-lanced, moonlighted, or worked on a special assignment for the Emporia *Gazette* while at in Atchison of which we have no evidence — it is not probable that he worked for William Allen White. Further, Emporia and Atchison are 110 miles apart. The distance to travel makes the relationship less likely.

If you're wondering about the gap in the Frank Watson migration timeline between Atchison and Wichita that was a possible basis for this theory, the gap proved to be long after the time in which Mr. White owned the *Gazette*. In the end it didn't support the theory.

### What Do I Make of This?

Although I didn't prove the family legend to be true, I feel assured that my deduction was based on real historical facts, some sound analysis, and good, old fashioned genealogy sleuthing. Sure, I'm sorry I don't have the story to add to my tree, but Frank's story is good enough as it is. Each of our stories is good enough.

<sup>i</sup> "The 1870 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry.com* (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009), <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [Digital copy of original records in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.], subscription database, accessed March 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> "Index to the 1880 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry.com* (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009), <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [Digital copy of original records in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.], subscription database, accessed March 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)) William Allen White

<sup>iv</sup> *Ancestry.com*. 1905 *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> "Index to the 1910 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry.com* (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009), <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [Digital copy of original records in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.], subscription database, accessed {March 2012}.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ancestry.com*. 1915 *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; *Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925*; Collection Number: *ARC Identifier 583830 / MLR Number A1 534*; NARA Series: *M1490*; Roll #: 650

<sup>viii</sup> "Index to the 1920 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry.com* (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009), <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [Digital copy of original records in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.], subscription database, accessed {March 2012}.

<sup>ix</sup> *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897* microfilm publication M237 (Washington, National Archives and Records Service