
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Back to the Bellwether

Whenever I tell someone I'm from Kansas, I always get this all-knowing-somewhat-familiar-apologetic-slight-raise-of-the-eyebrow head nod.

I was never quite sure what these out-of-staters had in mind with the head nodding and until recently, I thought this was just a phenomenon of our current events in Kansas. However, as it turns out, folks have been nodding their heads and paying attention to Kansas for quite some time.

Iconic Kansas journalist William Allen White, writing in 1922 said:

"Kansas is the Mother Shipton, the Madam Thebes, the Witch of Endor, and the low barometer of the nation. When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas. Abolition, Prohibition, Populism, the Bull Moose, the exit of the roller towel, the appearance of the bank guarantee, the blue sky law, the adjudication of industrial disputes as distinguished from the arbitration of industrial differences these things came popping out of Kansas like bats out of hell."

Many of us are familiar with White's thoughts about Kansas leading the nation in political ventures and public policy experiments. And indeed, his list is in no way exhaustive of the many firsts among Kansas civics.

Journalist W.G. Clugston, a contemporary of White, writing about politics in 1945 cites the following list of Kansas firsts:

"The Kansans forced a bill through the legislature providing for the state publication of school books. They were among the first to establish the direct primary for the nomination of candidates for public office... and they quickly followed the lead of Wisconsin in the establishment of a regulatory body to fix the rates charged by public utility corporations."

But perhaps the most significant and little known Kansas first is the 1934 creation of the Legislative and Research

Council. This group still works tirelessly today. Although the name has changed to the Legislative Research Department, its mission, to provide nonpartisan, objective research and fiscal analysis for the Kansas Legislature, remains as it did 80 years ago.

Journalist John Gunther, most noted for his "Inside" series of non-fiction books, said that of the dozen or so forces running Kansas, the employment of a nonpartisan agency to assist the legislature was quite remarkable.

"Kansas is the innovator of this sensible device," Gunther said, "and 11 other states have so far copied it."

Kansas continues to draw national media attention as we navigate our uncertain economic times. Recent mentions include the New York Times, Moyers & Co. Online, and multiple Associated Press pick-ups in newspapers from Arkansas to California.

As I write this, the legislative session is just under way and many details about education, the courts and taxes, among other issues, have yet to surface. And by the time you read this, we will be well into the thick of things. If the past is any indicator, we will be living up to our bellwether status.

Now is a good time for Kansans and our lawmakers to review our history of firsts. Let us find our patience and be good listeners. Let us find our common goals. And let us lead the way forward in education, in healthcare, in economic development and let us do this with unabated bipartisan conversations.

Progress can again come popping out of Kansas. Let's try it in Kansas first and then watch our fellow citizens nod their heads in agreement.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
