Esther Griffin White: An Awakener of Hoosier Potential

George T. Blakey*

Only a handful of people gathered at the graveside service in Richmond, Indiana, to commemorate her death. The modest gravestone in Earlham Cemetery would bear just her name, Esther Griffin White, and the year of her death, 1954. Blind and nearly destitute at age eighty-five, she had spent her final months in a nursing home, dependent on various charities. Most of her mourners knew of the eccentricities that characterized her life; a few could recall the more recent parts of a journalistic career that spanned roughly fifty years; but almost none were aware of the earlier significant contributions that she had made to Hoosier life. As a feminist, suffragist, and politician she had crusaded for women’s rights and political reforms. As a creator and patroness of the arts she was a prolific poet and an impresario of cultural programs, and her home was a salon for Indiana artists whose work she gathered into one of the richest collections in the state. Esther Griffin White’s life thus deserves more than the cryptic gravestone and virtual anonymity that have become her legacy.

A number of community and family forces shaped White into the person that she was. The fact that she grew up in a Quaker family in a town founded and influenced by the Society of Friends contributed to many of her strongly held principles, individualism and the rights of women among them. Antislavery Quakers founded Richmond in the early nineteenth century. White’s parents, Oliver and Mary White, attended a neighborhood Friends meeting, and relatives from both sides of her family were trustees of Earlham College.¹ At the time of White’s birth in 1869 this Quaker school was less than three decades old, but it nevertheless

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¹ Carolyn Maund, interview with Esther Griffin White, undated typescript, Esther Griffin White Collection (Wayne County Historical Society Museum, Richmond, Indiana). Maund was a close friend and newspaper associate of White.

exerted a strong intellectual influence on Richmond's population of approximately nine thousand people.2 Several members of White's immediate family helped to reinforce her belief in Quaker egalitarianism and to polish her innate intellectual gifts. Throughout the course of his life Oliver White wore many hats, and his daughter seemed to follow his lead. From her father's varied occupations—during Esther's lifetime he operated a bookstore, edited a small newspaper, and taught school—Esther White gained a respect for ideas and a love for the printed word. After her father's death she would recall in her personal journal his "brilliant intellect and artistic tendencies."3 With his encouragement she had attended a few classes at Earlham College when she was only seventeen to enhance an incomplete public school education.4 She and her three siblings—Robert, Ray, and Winifred—all had creative temperaments, and each excelled at either art, music, or literature. Esther remembered that in their younger days they would tip back their chairs after dinner and talk endlessly about the arts and politics. "Such a brilliant flow of wit, epigram and repartee... we sharpened each other's wits. We were fine foils for one another's talents... we were a stimulating group."5 Esther lost all of her family within a five year span: her father and both brothers in 1908 and her mother and sister in 1913. Unmarried, she lived alone for the remaining forty-one years of her life, during which she frequently exaggerated the genius and brilliance of her family's accomplishments. Nevertheless, she was surrounded in her younger years by intelligent, ambitious people who convinced her that she was their peer.

Two extraordinary women in Wayne County served as role models for the young White. Both were writers and prominent feminists whose success testified to the possibilities available for assertive, independent women in Indiana. Mary F. Thomas, the daughter of a Quaker abolitionist, moved to Richmond with her husband in 1856 shortly after becoming a physician. Twice denied admittance to the Wayne County Medical Association because of her sex, Thomas finally gained entry in 1875 and the following year became the first female member of the state medical society. Politically active, she petitioned the state legislature for female
ESTHER GRIFFIN WHITE
LATE 19TH CENTURY

Esther Griffin White Collection, courtesy Earlham College Archives, Richmond, Indiana.
suffrage in 1859 and was chosen president of an Indiana suffrage association eight times. Thomas's death in 1888 prompted a massive outpouring of community tributes that surely made a lasting impression on nineteen-year-old Esther White. A memorable ceremony for Dr. Thomas included six female pallbearers and a speech by one of White's relatives. Many years later White continued the homage by calling Thomas one of the luminaries of the women's rights movement.

Louise Vickroy Boyd's contributions to White's character followed a similar pattern. Boyd was a published author and crusading feminist prior to moving to Wayne County with her husband in 1865. Throughout White's childhood Boyd encouraged the young girl's creativity and vocational goals; and when Esther was sixteen years old, Boyd wrote in her autograph book:

The Throne, the sceptre and the crown were hers
The regal Esther of the olden time . . .
But would'st thou, Esther, Indiana born,
Though never crowned, be nonetheless a queen.

Shortly after her friend's death in 1909, White edited and published Poems by Louise Vickroy Boyd with a brief biography and tribute. For a young woman seeking self-fulfillment, equality, and a degree of fame, White could not have found two better mentors than Thomas and Boyd.

What produced White's eccentricities can only be surmised, but they were obvious and memorable. Her brother Robert once called her a "bohemian," which she accepted as a compliment, and she lived up to the description's usual connotations. As early as 1915 she smoked publicly and criticized those who disapproved. Her fashion sense was either a step ahead or behind contemporary styles; her skirts were either shorter or longer and her hats larger or smaller than those worn by other women of the time. She often affected a masculine look, abetted by a cane carried in the manner of a swagger stick. She befriended and championed the rights of

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5 Richmond Item, [1920], clipping, File VI (Suffrage File), Esther Griffin White Collection (Earlham College Archives, Richmond).

6 Autograph Book, 1885–1886, File 1, ibid.

7 Esther Griffin White, ed., Poems by Louise Vickroy Boyd (Richmond, Ind., 1911).

8 White Journal, September 11, 1910.

9 The Little Paper, September 11, 1915 (the White Collection in the Earlham College Archives contains a large, although incomplete, run of The Little Paper); Ed Kaeuper, interview with author, August 12, 1986; Esther Kellner, interview with author, August 19, 1986; Mary Lane Hatt, interview with author, July 25, 1988; Susan Castator, interview with author, October 12, 1986.
African Americans and was an active member of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People during a time when such behavior generated considerable scorn for a single white female. White's recreations also called attention to her distinctiveness. Before many women took up golf, White was a regular player at the country club; and she walked widely and frequently—once to Indianapolis, a feat that drew much newspaper coverage. Her opinions were firm, her wit caustic, her temper volatile; she demanded cooperation, favors, and applause, yet her self-conscious detachment made her appear aloof and unfriendly. Many people found her temperament endearing or considered it a reflection of her high standards and ambition. Others, less charitable, regarded her as rude, profane, and condescending. Some of her eccentricities might have been consciously cultivated to enhance her career. As a self-supporting woman in a predominantly male profession, her uniqueness was marketable. Her status as a "character" or public personality, for example, probably assisted her as a newspaperwoman.

The vocabulary of journalism was familiar to White from an early age. When she was a child, her father edited a small weekly newspaper, the Dublin Wayne Register; and her uncle, Charles W. Cotton, was an influential Indiana newspaperman. Her brother Ray's brief newspaper career and Boyd's encouragement of her writing both helped her develop an affinity for journalism. By the time White was in her thirties, newspaper work had become a natural, and an ultimately necessary, vocation. She had no formal training in the field; instead, she applied her natural inquisitiveness to topics that intrigued her and ferreted out interesting features. Local newspapers that could not spare staff reporters to cover distant meetings paid her a small fee to do so. In 1890 she attended a literary conference in Warsaw, Indiana, for the Richmond Palladium, and the newspaper's editors informed readers that she would be doing similar work in 1891 for another gathering of writers. They hoped that her work would prove again to be "descriptive, gossipy, delightful." Sometimes White wrote under a pseudonym—possibly to add curiosity or humor or to avoid sex discrimination. Her feature stories on travel and cultural events such as the Chicago and Atlanta expositions in the 1890s appeared in

Indianapolis News, October 13, 1923.


Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Dayton newspapers under the by-lines "Z" and "Graveyard Ripplings." Such part-time assignments gave her experience in competing for stories, writing readable prose rapidly, and finding publishing venues. Later she would hold in contempt young reporters, fresh from schools of journalism, who had not traveled her rough-and-tumble road to success.16

White's prose style was highly idiosyncratic despite the fact that she regarded herself as a professional, was a charter member of the Indiana Women's Press Club, and gave lectures to college journalism classes. She once told a young reporter that to be successful in the newspaper business he had to deliver simple, unbiased prose,17 yet her copy was usually the reverse of her advice. It was personal, argumentative, often satirical, and frequently inflated. She once critiqued a vaudeville act as "putrid clear to the core . . . common, coarse, unutterably sordid," and she characterized Vice-President Charles Warren Fairbanks, a fellow Hoosier, as "old dog-eared, moth-eaten Charley." Her praise could be as effusive as her criticism was eviscerating. In a review of a concert by Madame Johanna Gadski, she compared the soprano's voice to a "satin ribbon undulating in a breeze."18 Some readers found her writing style amusing; others regarded it as offensive. Early advice and suggestions from writers whom she respected apparently had no tempering effect. Historian John C. Ridpath from Greencastle warned her not to use too much satire and to be careful lest her sharp bodkin "impale the wrong bug." An Ohio editor suggested that she slow down and write with more "circumspection." Meredith Nicholson offered her advice for several years on writing and publishing. "You would have to grab your pencil a little tighter," he counseled, "and tame the young mustang of your style—less exclamatory and interjectional."19

White's florid style reflected her personal temperament and was probably one of the reasons for her erratic employment record. Her half-century of journalism was marked by frequent firings, resignations, and searches for outside income from free-lancing. During her long career she worked for most of the newspapers in Richmond: the Morning News, the Sun-Telegram, the Item, the Palladium, and then the combined Palladium-Item. As a female she generally earned less than male counterparts, and with her

15 Scrapbook clippings, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
16 Speech manuscript, undated, File VII, ibid.
17 Interview with Ed Kaeuper.
18 Richmond Palladium, September 23, 1912; The Little Paper, September 18, 1915; Richmond Morning News, scrapbook clipping, undated, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
19 John C. Ridpath to Esther Griffin White, August 15, 1891, Box III, White Collection (Earlham College Archives); J. C. Ochiltree to White, February 15, 1902, Box VII, ibid.; Meredith Nicholson to White, August 10, 1913, ibid.
volatile temper she never built up much seniority so her pay scale remained low. During periods of unemployment between 1915 and 1944, White sometimes published *The Little Paper*, an inexpensive tabloid that contained an unpredictable mixture of editorials, poetry, art and theater reviews, gossip, and occasional photographs. It carried few advertisements and seldom made a profit, but many people read it avidly, knowing it would be entertaining, anti-establishment, and frequently outrageous. White also published many articles on cultural topics in a variety of magazines such as *American Art News, House Beautiful, Art Digest, Craftsman, Dignam’s Magazine*, and *Woman’s Home Companion*. In 1914 she ventured to New York City in search of work. While there, she wrote to former Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge for a letter of reference, indicating that she was “one of the best known professional newspaper women in Indiana.” Beveridge diplomatically declined the request, pleading innocence of any exposure to her work, and White returned to Indiana to resume her local career. Apparently the only other time she attempted to pursue her craft outside Indiana was in 1937 when she tried to get Senator Frederick Van Nuys to assist her in finding employment at one of the national press agencies or with the American unit at the Paris Exposition. Neither of these attempts proved fruitful, so her career—despite several attempts to change it—was based in east central Indiana from start to finish.

White’s work for newspapers and magazines reveals her versatility, thoroughness, and uncompromising opinions as well as her colorful style. From the 1890s to 1944 her career as a newspaperwoman involved almost every phase of that profession. White compiled “society” tidbits for the women’s pages, wrote editorials and special columns, reviewed cultural events, and covered political, police, and court news. For *The Little Paper* she wrote articles, did layout, designed headlines, took photographs, sold advertising, solicited subscriptions, and handled circulation. Regardless of which local newspaper she worked for, she was the “reporter of choice” for special occasions. Coverage of the concert by Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink in 1904 or the grand opening of the Leland Hotel in 1928 would not have been as detailed or colorful in the hands of another reporter. Countless weddings received her close atten-

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20 Interview with Hazel Thorne.
22 White to Albert J. Beveridge, February 10, 1914, Box 201, Albert J. Beveridge Collection (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); Beveridge to White, February 19, 1914, File VI, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
23 Frederick Van Nuys to White, March 19, 25, 1937, File VI, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
24 Richmond *Palladium*, February 12, 1904; Richmond *Item*, September 16, 1928.
vention. She conferred with the bride's dressmaker, consulted the church musician, noted how the sunlight through colored windows cast spectrums over the nuptials, and concluded that each ceremony was the highlight of the social season. This loving coverage of weddings could well have served as a vicarious betrothal and union for White, who had conceded at age forty-one that she would "never marry."

The annual Chautauqua in Richmond received the same indefatigable attention. Each summer in the early twentieth century, musical, oratorical, and religious attractions that lasted approximately a week were held in a wooded glen near the town. White would attend all of the events in the afternoon and evening, review each for the next day's paper—coverage that sometimes filled two pages—and repeat the enterprise the next day until the Chautauqua ran its course. This "persistent application to the finish," she confided to her journal, was the quality that "makes me beloved of the newspapers I've worked for."

Respected or feared might have been more accurate than "beloved" as a description for White's reputation among her employers and readers. There was consensus, however, that the results of her dogged research and uncompromising principles would appear in print no matter who got hurt or offended. Because of her religious affiliation White generally covered the Indiana Yearly Meeting, an annual Quaker policy-making conference. Her reports of rancor and self-serving decisions belied the image of gentle Friends in silent meditation and frequently earned her angry criticism and editorial pressure. Similarly, her survey of presidential candidates in 1912 revealed a balanced grasp of the issues but a thoroughly subjective conclusion that all right-thinking people could vote only for Theodore Roosevelt. Her reviews of theatrical and musical performances often devoted more space to chiding audiences than to appraising the productions. Frequently White railed about the rudeness of people who arrived late for performances or the vulgar taste of local theatergoers who would not support higher-quality attractions. When she battled city government, as she often did, she resorted to more extreme measures if her written articles did not bring satisfaction. In an effort to stop the Richmond Board of Public Works from altering a section of the historic National Road, White recruited the aid of Richard Lieber, director of the Indiana Department of Conservation, and also filed for an injunction to pre-

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25 Scrapbook clippings, undated, White Collection (Earlham College Archives); interview with Mary Hart. Mary C. Cates, interview with author, June 6, 1988; White Journal, August 18, 1910.
26 White Journal, August 18, 1910.
27 The Little Paper, 1915–1916, passim; Richmond Palladium, June 17, 1912.
28 Richmond Morning News, scrapbook clippings, White Collection (Earlham College Archives); The Little Paper, February 3, 1915.
vent city action. Her series calling attention to unsanitary privies in close proximity to park springs forced the city to move the offensive structures. A subsequent editorial crowed that she had brought about the correction and quoted a municipal official who admitted that her articles had been the catalyst for improvement.

One of the most dramatic displays of White's journalistic skills came when she was retained as an editor by the People's League in 1921. This bipartisan ad hoc group worked to prevent Richmond from changing its city government from an elected mayor and council to that of an elected commission and appointed manager. The Indiana General Assembly had recently passed legislation to permit city adoption of this form of government if the required percentage of the electorate petitioned for, and then won in, a special referendum. More than 3,000 Richmond voters had so petitioned, and the local Chamber of Commerce and both local newspapers favored the change. For five weeks prior to the referendum White edited The People's Paper, a free weekly newspaper distributed to every household in the city. Her editorial work revealed the same tenacity, thoroughness, and sarcasm that characterized her previous articles for the two daily papers, now the indirect target of her attacks. She reported that Kalamazoo, Michigan, had doubled its taxes since implementing the commission/manager system and that the former mayor of Akron, Ohio, had become the first city manager there at triple his former salary. She further pointed out that of the eight Indiana cities that had voted on the option, only Michigan City had adopted it. White bragged in The People's Paper that little, if any, of this information could be found in the local press and that these discouraging facts should convince Richmond voters to reject the change and retain the mayor/council system. The People's Paper occasioned considerable local discussion, and the Richmond Item attempted to discredit it as a disreputable scandal sheet. Voters, however, rejected the governmental switch by a three-to-one margin. White basked in her brief and victorious foray into crusading journalism, sent copies of the paper to Beveridge after the referendum, and took inflated credit for the defeat. The whole exercise, she concluded, had been great fun.

White demonstrated in her political activities the same fearless, impulsive, principled behavior evident in her newspaper work. Politics, in fact, was interwoven with her journalism.

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29 Richard Lieber to White, January 13, 1921, File VI, White Collection (Earlham College Archives); Complaint for Injunction against Richmond Board of Public Works, January 7, 1921, copy, ibid.
31 Richmond Item, June 15, 1921.
32 The People's Paper, May 14, 28, June 11, 1921; Richmond Item, June 2, 1921; Richmond Palladium, June 15, 1921.
33 White to Beveridge, undated, Box 230, Beveridge Collection.
White’s firm belief in female equality was rooted in her Quaker heritage, and her admiration for Thomas and Boyd strengthened this belief. William Dudley Foulke’s presence in Richmond further encouraged her activism. This lawyer, former Civil Service commissioner, editor, and author was an outspoken advocate of the franchise for women and had been twice elected president of a national suffrage organization. In 1912 fewer than ten states—all of them west of the Mississippi River—permitted women voting rights; but in their party platform of that year the Progressive Republicans behind Theodore Roosevelt favored female suffrage and encouraged the hopes of women in other states. White was one of the women who began an active crusade that lasted until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Starting in 1912 White’s newspaper columns became more feminist and political than previously. She assessed candidates’ suitability for office according to the stand they took on women’s suffrage. Giving women the vote would clean up politics, she maintained, and she cited evidence from states that allowed equal franchise: in California, for instance, to attract the female vote candidates appeared more ethical and forthright than they had been when only males voted. White’s longtime admiration for Robert Dale Owen soon became ammunition in her political arsenal. Owen’s credentials as an advocate of female equality reached back to the utopian experiments at New Harmony and included his efforts to protect women’s property rights in the Indiana Constitution of 1851. White had earlier been secretary of the group responsible for commissioning a bust of this Hoosier reformer and placing it in the statehouse. She insisted that Indiana now owed it to Owen’s memory to enact legislation that would fulfill one of his goals, that of female suffrage. Owen had laid the philosophical foundation, she argued, but the state needed to finish the task. In one issue of The Little Paper she emblazoned the proposed Susan B. Anthony Amendment (Nineteenth) across the entire front page; in another she demanded “universal, equal, nation-wide suffrage” and vowed to “defeat any candidate of any party who . . . declares himself against suffrage.” The following week she listed all known Indiana candidates for local, state, and national offices and their stands on the issue.

The Women’s Franchise League (WFL) was the largest of several suffrage groups in Indiana and was a state affiliate of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). White joined this organization, attended its conferences, and held several
Text for Susan B. Anthony Amendment

The entrance of the Congressional Union into Indiana with its suffrage propaganda has resulted in much excitement among the women of the state. The Congress of the National American Woman Suffrage Association has been active in securing the passage of the Federal Amendment in Indiana. The work of the Indiana Federation has been carried on with energy and success, and the women of the state have shown great interest in the movement. The Little Paper, which has been published weekly, furnishes valuable information on the progress of the suffrage movement in Indiana and elsewhere.

The Little Paper sets the pace

Written and edited by Esther Griffin White, 10 South Main St., Richmond, Ind.
Esther Griffin White

offices, including the chairmanship of its Publicity Committee in 1916. Following one convention in 1912 she wrote that it was a fine thing to see women working “for their own emancipation. For active freedom. For something else besides a prize for a bridge party or a box for a charity ball. . . . they have too long been confined to competition for the minor prizes in the game of life.”

During another convention the following year in Indianapolis, she became the subject of a major feature story that garnered headlines, a picture, and inclusion in several newspapers. Therein White sang the praises of militance to win the vote. “I don’t believe in window smashing and bomb throwing, . . . but it has been demonstrated that the suffragists get nowhere unless more-or-less strenuous measures of propaganda are employed.” She lamented the failure of previous attempts by women to get the state legislature to pass a state suffrage amendment; and she speculated, sarcastically, that if those women “had been chorus girls, not one over 20 years old, . . . woman’s suffrage in Indiana would have gone through with a swing and a whoop.”

White’s enthusiasm for suffrage extended beyond newspaper publicity. To generate excitement for a speech in Richmond by franchise advocate Grace Julian Clarke, White and her friends plastered the town with bright yellow posters—the suffrage color—announcing the occasion. Clarke, the daughter of Hoosier politician and Wayne County native George Washington Julian, arrived by train from Indianapolis and described Richmond as “absolutely yellow” in anticipation of her address. Although not a frequent public speaker herself, White regarded the struggle for women’s votes worthy enough to schedule a series of brief talks between vaudeville acts at Richmond’s Murray Theatre in 1914. Theater advertisements in the daily papers on the days of her presentation gave her equal billing with featured artists. She also organized a street rally for several suffrage speakers. The event drew huge crowds and good coverage in both local papers, and White declared it a “splendid success.”

Doubtless the highlight of White’s suffragist activity came in 1916 when the Republican and Progressive parties held simultaneous meetings in Chicago. She and thousands of other women converged on the city to pressure both parties to include planks favoring female suffrage in their platforms. Coordinated by the Congressional Union and the NAWSA, delegates from most of the women’s suffrage organizations in almost every state attended. Af-

38 Richmond Palladium, April 20, 1912.
39 Indianapolis Evening Sun, May 1, 1913.
40 Scrapbook clippings, undated, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
41 Richmond Palladium, August 10, 1914; Richmond Item, August 8, 1914.
42 The Little Paper, July 1, 1916; Richmond Palladium, June 27, 1916.
ter meeting for several days in the Blackstone and Princess theaters, the women were to form a mammoth parade on June 7 to swing by the Chicago Coliseum where the Republican party would be holding hearings on platform issues. As publicity chairman for the Indiana Women’s Franchise League, White attended the meetings and was designated a “side marshall” for the parade. She marched beside the automobile of the Indiana WFL president and wore the official yellow and white outfit for suffragists. Three days of driving rain reduced the numbers of participants from the anticipated thirty thousand but did not dampen their spirits. Approximately five thousand women plodded through seven miles of Chicago’s puddles carrying soggy signs that proclaimed “Women, The De-Voted Mothers of our Country.” When the suffragists arrived at the Coliseum, their opponents were trying to convince the Republican Resolutions Committee that women really did not want to vote. “Just then the doors burst open,” White reported the following week, “and five thousand drenched women . . . filed in.” Shortly thereafter, Republicans adopted a platform plank that approved the concept of female suffrage; Progressives subsequently concurred.43

The end of White’s suffragist activity and the beginning of her political campaigns for public office overlapped rather than followed in sequence. She became a candidate in 1920 before she could legally vote. In undertaking this ticklish feat she accomplished one of the things of which she remained the proudest for the rest of her life; she became the first woman in Indiana to have her name appear on an official election ballot.44 Prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, White had consulted the Wayne County prosecuting attorney about running for a delegate’s seat at the 1920 Republican State Convention. He discovered that regulations did not specify gender as a qualification. As an adult Hoosier citizen, she could run. The Wayne County Board of Election Commissioners refused, however, to print her name on the ballot, and the board’s refusal received support, in turn, by the State Board of Election Commissioners, the Indiana attorney general, and Governor James P. Goodrich. White later recalled her conversation with the governor. “Why, Esther,” he said. “You know you can’t vote.” She replied, “I know that, Governor Goodrich. I’m not trying to vote. I’m going to ask people to vote for me.”45 Thereupon she filed for a writ of mandamus to force the placement of her name on the ballot. At a special hearing of the Wayne Circuit Court, Judge William Bond ruled in her favor. Vot-

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43 Richmond Item, June 8, 1916; Chicago Tribune, June 8, 1916; The Little Paper, June 17, 1916.
44 White to Beveridge, undated, Box 230, Beveridge Collection.
45 Maund interview with White.
ers subsequently selected two delegates from her district, and of the five candidates White polled second. Consequently, in May she became the only female delegate among 1,500 Republicans convening in Indianapolis. It was an auspicious beginning for a longtime suffragist, feminist, and politician.

This initial victory was White's most successful venture in politics despite several more attempts to gain public office. Her later political efforts, however, did generate considerable publicity for issues that she chose to highlight. Her campaign for the office of mayor of Richmond in 1921 is a good example of triumphant principles in the midst of insufficient votes. Less than a year after Hoosier women had won the vote, White filed her candidacy for the mayor's position. Democracy demanded leadership from its women, she believed; merely voting was not enough. She told Beveridge, now her political confidant, that she had collected many pledges of support. "I believe I have a fair chance of success, she wrote." Winning the Republican primary in Richmond was usually tantamount to victory in the general election, and eight Republicans, including White, attempted to unseat the incumbent, Dr. W. W. Zimmerman. Limited financial resources prevented White from conducting more than a perfunctory campaign, although she did pay a neighborhood boy a dollar to distribute fliers in her behalf. White came in fourth, but her feminist friends rejoiced that she had outpolled four other male candidates. Moral victories aside, White lost the primary and did not take it lightly. She complained of sex discrimination to a prominent Quaker in town; Quakers, she argued, had always stood "for the equality of women and they should be the last to dodge behind that argument that this town should not have a mayor because she is a woman."

Gender may have contributed to White's defeat in 1921, but it became less important as an issue in later campaigns. By 1926 when she entered the Republican primary for Congress—the first woman in Indiana to seek a seat in the national House of Representatives—three women were already members of Congress; and prohibition of alcoholic beverages had become the major issue. White declared that her work as a journalist, covering police and court news, had made it clear that the Eighteenth Amendment and its "bone dry" enforcement in Indiana was ineffective and was creating a legal shambles. She campaigned, therefore, to modify the

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46 Richmond Item, April 17, May 5, 1920.
47 White to Beveridge, undated, Box 230, Beveridge Collection. White and Beveridge had become friends after her unsuccessful attempt to find employment using his influence.
48 The Little Paper, April 25, 1921.
49 Interview with Ed Kaeuper; Richmond Palladium, August 24, 1921.
50 White to Timothy Nicholson, undated, copy, File I, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
Esther Griffin White
Candidate for Congress in the
REPUBLICAN PRIMARY
First Woman Candidate For Congress in Indiana
Miss White invites your attention to her candidacy and would be glad to have your vote on May 4

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT
1926

Esther Griffin White Collection; courtesy Earlham College Archives, Richmond, Indiana.
statutes to make prohibition enforceable. This distinctive stand aroused national interest, and accounts of her campaign appeared in newspapers in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Washington, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, many of which featured her picture, complete with flamboyant hat.\textsuperscript{51} White's employer, a staunch prohibitionist, would not grant her any time for campaigning, but attacks from the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union gave her much free publicity. Her major opponent, the incumbent congressman, was an avowed "dry," and his stand polarized the campaign even though White was not a "wet" and was frequently quoted as saying that she had never tasted anything stronger than tea.\textsuperscript{52} The incumbent won the primary, but White, who had come in second among three candidates,\textsuperscript{53} vowed following the race to continue her crusade for legislation that would accomplish, not inhibit, prohibition. True to her word, she ran again for the congressional seat in 1928. The issue remained the same as before, as did the results. Her principles, however firmly held and publicized, did not convert enough voters to her cause.\textsuperscript{54}

White's final foray into the electoral arena in 1938 revealed her principles still flying high, but her eccentricities flying higher. She was sixty-nine years old, angry at the local newspaper for firing her that year, and estranged from the Republican party, which she felt had never adequately supported her despite her many efforts in its behalf. She ran for mayor of Richmond once again, this time as an Independent. A handful of her friends met in her home in September to create an Independent party and nominate her as its candidate. They received incorporation papers in October and then left White pretty much on her own to run the campaign.\textsuperscript{55} She resuscitated The Little Paper, and the front page of the November issue boldly proclaimed: "HELLO, EVERYBODY! THIS IS ESTHER GRIFFIN WHITE . . . REMEMBER ME? I'M THE INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE FOR MAYOR." She listed a few planks from her platform, such as strict enforcement of traffic laws and better protection of shade trees, but her major plank was personal. "I'm going to be frank," she wrote. "My sole and only purpose in running for mayor is for the salary."\textsuperscript{56} As a serious candidate in 1921, and again in 1926 and 1928, White had endured her losses somewhat philosophically. Now, in a frivolous campaign,
Candidate for Mayor
Remember Me? I'm the Independent
This is Esther Griffin White Speaking!

HELLO, EVERYBODY!

Richmond, Indiana, November 9th.
she was less generous about defeat. What disappointed her more than losing was that she had been ignored, and she waged an attack on the local press for not giving her meager efforts any coverage.57 Apparently the mixture of printer's ink and politics in her blood demanded public documentation of her decline.

White, whose creative instincts and bohemian temperament were better suited to the arts than to politics, left a more valuable legacy through her cultural pursuits than through her political activities. Her brother Ray, who had been a cartoonist and had worked in several artistic media, had undoubtedly intensified her appreciation for the fine arts; and in her travels White gravitated to museums, concerts, and art galleries. As a journalist she had access to outlets for publicizing her artistic interests and of course was not shy about using them. Whether as poet, author, impresario of cultural programs, or patroness of local artists, White considered it her mission to raise Richmond's artistic tastes to a higher level. One of her acquaintances from Yale University assessed her work admiringly when he wrote, "you have done all kinds of good things as an awakener."

White's aesthetic goals and financial needs helped turn her into an energetic artistic impresario. Richmond's population in the early twentieth century—18,000 in 1900 to 26,000 in 1920—could not support a local orchestra, opera, or professional theater.59 Persons wishing to attend such performances traveled to Dayton, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. The National Road and several rail and interurban lines passed through Richmond, making these artistic pilgrimages possible. They also brought to less venturesome local audiences a steady diet of traveling vaudeville acts. White's newspaper reviews of these shows revealed her growing impatience with their lack of refinement and her desire for better cultural fare. If she could attract a higher level of artistic performance, her cultural appetite might be satisfied; and if these attractions were financially successful, they would supplement her always sparse bank account. With these dual motives she brought to Richmond a wide variety of attractions not previously available.

For roughly a decade White worked with booking agents to acquire suitable attractions at affordable costs. After negotiating a contract, she would reserve a theater, sports arena, or hotel lobby in which to hold the event and through her newspaper columns, fliers, and personal contacts would generate interest and promote ticket sales. Sometimes she would entertain the visiting artists with receptions, teas, or dinners in her home. Programs distributed

57 Ibid., February 11, 1939.
CONCERT ADVERTISEMENT
ESTHER GRIFFIN WHITE, IMPRESARIO
1913

Esther Griffin White Collection; courtesy Earlham College Archives, Richmond, Indiana.
at performances generally displayed her name as prominently as that of the artist, and her newspaper review of the event was invariably positive. Few people seemed to resent these obvious conflicts of interest, and many—although not all—of her productions realized a profit. Among those appearing in Richmond under White’s auspices were Lady Augusta Gregory, the Irish actress and playwright (1915); the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and the Russian Symphony Orchestra of New York (1913 and 1917); Alfred Kreymborg, the American poet (1926); and Margaret Sanger, a lecturer on birth control (1922).60

Tenor Carl Morris’s song recital in September, 1912, generated the most publicity of all White’s impresarial activities. White booked this performance at the Murray Theatre for a Sunday afternoon in willful violation of the 1908 Indiana “blue law” that prohibited theatrical events on the Sabbath. Uncompromised principles fully evident, she thumbed her nose at the controversial statute. In her newspaper column she protested that she would not try to avoid breaking the law by including in the concert only the sacred music that was permissible under the blue law. “Good music,” she insisted, “is always a propos, anytime, any place.”61 The Richmond Ministerial Association denounced the forthcoming event, but ticket sales moved briskly, perhaps in anticipation of an altercation between the feisty impresario and law enforcement officials.62 The county prosecutor pointed out to White that Section 2364 of the 1908 Burns Statutes defined theatrical performances as common labor, therefore illegal. He indicated that other commercial enterprises were watching to see if they, too, could transact business on Sunday without paying the consequences. “If they arrest you and bring you before me,” he warned her, “it will be clearly my duty under the law to prosecute you.”63 Later at the sold-out performance attended by much of Richmond’s “society,” two policemen made half-hearted attempts to arrest White but failed to follow through. A favorable review of the performance followed the next day, accompanied by an announcement that police would not “interfere” with future Sunday concerts due to public support for them. Three years later White was still chortling at the expense of the two policemen whose nerve had faltered on that dramatic September Sunday.64 Exaggerated versions of how she bludgeoned the blue law have since become legends.

60 File V (Agent File), White Collection (Earlham College Archives); interviews with Susan Castator and Mary Lane Hiatt.
61 Richmond Palladium, August 27, 1912.
62 Richmond Palladium-Item, September 6, 1954.
63 Joshua H. Allen to White, September 21, 1912, File VI, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
64 Richmond Palladium and Richmond Item, September 23, 1912; The Little Paper, November 2, 1915.
Aesthetic and financial impulses also motivated White to write and publish poetry. Encouraged in this endeavor by her brother Robert and by Boyd, she was writing poems as early as age eleven and publishing collections of them as late as age seventy. She committed to paper hundreds of poems—primarily sonnets—about things that brought her happiness. Once on paper these ruminations often helped to fill a newspaper column or, occasionally, were sold to help pay bills. Within her highly disciplined lines is a wealth of testimony to her love for her brothers, close friends, music, art, and nature. She revealed in rhyme many happy memories and a tender sensibility rarely displayed elsewhere. The sonnet "Abington Pike" commemorates the joy she realized from hiking along one of her favorite Wayne County routes.

It winds and curves through lovely rural scenes,
And twines round the river's rocky rim,
Through green wheat-fields and lanes and woodside dim
Where blue-birds flutter and the red-bud leans
Upon the dogwood's snowy breast . . .
. . . This road means
A Sunday afternoon in budding May,
With turquoise sky and clouds of dazzling white,
And little lapping breezes and the song
Of water over stones—and laughter gay—
And blue larkspur and melt of gold sunlight
To silver moon's enchanting shadows long.65

White took the writing of her poems seriously. She commented once about the "exquisite pleasure there was in composition,"66 and she revised constantly to achieve her desired effect. Sometimes typing, often writing on the backs of bills or newspaper stationery, she worked diligently at her craft.67 As a member of the Western Association of Writers, she attended conferences to meet other poets and to sharpen her skills by reciting her work and critiquing that of others. In 1915 White proclaimed James Whitcomb Riley "the greatest living poet," and she corresponded and visited with him frequently. She and African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar sustained a close friendship for several years, exchanging poems, suggestions, and visits between their homes.68

White's poems—like others at the turn of the century—appeared irregularly in local and regional newspapers. Critical reaction was

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65 White, Poems about Richmond (Richmond, Ind., 1937); Harriet Wadsworth, interview with author, July 27, 1987.
67 File III (Poetry Folders), White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
68 The Little Paper, November 9, 1915; White Journal, September 13, 1910; Paul Laurence Dunbar to White, undated, File VII, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
mixed. The editor of *In Which*, a small poetry journal in Detroit, read one of her verses and wrote to her for permission to reprint it in his publication. White agreed, and their continuing correspondence gave her much positive support for her literary efforts. On the other hand, when the postman once delivered in the mail a sarcastic parody of a poem that she had recently published in the *Indianapolis Star*, she flew into a rage that lasted for hours and then stretched for pages in her diary. Her work is now dismissed as of little or no importance. Arthur W. Shumaker gives her but scant mention in his standard history of Indiana writers, and her poetry is not included in either of the two recent anthologies of Hoosier writing compiled by Richard E. Banta and A. L. Lazarus.

Regardless of the merit of her poems, White gathered them into four booklets and several random pamphlets, some of which were illustrated with photographs or artwork by her friends. She sold these collections for a dollar or less, depending on her financial situation at the time. *In the Orchestra* (1915) thematically featured a sonnet about, and a pen-and-ink sketch of, each orchestral instrument. Likewise, *In the Garden* (1935) was a collection of verses, each devoted to a different flower, many of which grew in the backyard where White frequently served tea to guests. *Poems about Richmond* (1937) described her family, scenic spots, and favorite haunts. White published the final booklet, *Passion’s Jewels* (1939), strictly for financial gain. In its preface she admitted that a banker’s obligation had to be met and that the poems were marketed for that purpose. On occasion White would sell one poem packaged in attractive folio fashion; *St. Andrew’s Bells*, named for a church in her neighborhood, appeared twice with illustrations by two different artists.

Bookplates—small paper rectangles for pasting inside books to identify ownership—constituted a minor art form at the turn of the century. White collected them, wrote a book about them, and eventually became one of the acknowledged authorities in the field. Her book was also one of the first substantial studies of Indiana art in general. Ray White designed a personal bookplate for his sister with a portrait of her surrounded by books and immersed in read-

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89 The Norman Geddes-White correspondence for 1915 appears in File III, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
70 White Journal, September 7, 1910.
72 Interviews with Elmer Porter and Jamie Cooper; White Journal, August 30, 1910.
73 Interview with Elmer Porter.
This gift, combined with White’s love for books, probably pushed her into her bookplate enterprises. She belonged to several Ex Libris societies in American and Europe, wrote numerous articles about the field, and exhibited her collection in galleries or libraries in Indianapolis, Richmond, and Fort Wayne.74 The book itself, entitled Indiana Bookplates, appeared in 1910 and was the product of years of research and exhaustive efforts at securing bookplates from Indiana artists and notable Hoosiers. Two established publishers apparently wanted to publish the volume, but White chose to have it printed in Richmond where she could oversee all aspects of production. It cost her approximately $350.00 for the 250 copies; and after she sold some for $2.50 and gave several to friends and newspapers for reviews, she netted little if any profit.75

Indiana Bookplates, approximately 170 pages long with 90 illustrations, featured the work of such well-known Hoosier artists as painter William Forsyth and cartoonist Gaar Williams. It also introduced to many readers the work of several unknown artisans, such as Mary Overbeck, who would later gain fame in ceramics. White’s brother Ray had the largest number of illustrations in the book. Some of the notable Hoosiers whose commissioned bookplates appeared were James Whitcomb Riley, Booth Tarkington, Charles Major, Edward Eggleston, and Indiana governor Thomas R. Marshall. Indiana Bookplates is actually little more than an annotated scrapbook. White wrote brief biographical material about most of the artists and collectors but made little attempt to place either bookplates or the state in a broader perspective. Nevertheless, she received some pleasant reviews, which she continued to quote for years. The New York Times and the Indianapolis Star both commented favorably on the volume, as did an Australian magazine, Art and Architecture.76 Analytical or not, the book represented a unique contribution to Hoosier arts, if only as a compendium. White regarded its publication as one of two lifetime accomplishments of which she was most proud; the other was being the first Indiana woman to be listed on an official election ballot.77

Perhaps of more significance than the compilation of illustrations in Indiana Bookplates was the inclusion of essays about artists whom White admired. These accounts were unrelated to the subject of the book and were, ultimately, of more value. She dis-
cussed the work of the Hoosier Group—T. C. Steele, Otto Stark, J. Ottis Adams, and others—before other critics had canonized them. While not denigrating the skill and rising fame of the Hoosier Group, she argued that its influence did not extend far beyond the capital city, that it did not command a statewide "school" of painters, and that it should be called, more correctly, the Indianapolis Group. In contrast, she extolled the virtues of Wayne County artists John E. Bundy and Charles Conner, whose talents she compared favorably to the finest in America. As "an awakener" she attempted to draw wider attention to local artists. White praised Bundy as "one of the leading American landscapists" and admired his "delicate, refined and exquisite art." Likewise, she stood in awe of Conner's "astonishing talents" and his "faultless draughtmanship." He was, she said, "an artist's artist."78

These sincere, albeit gratuitous, essays on Bundy and Conner were not just filler for her bookplate volume. White sought a broader audience and market for artists in east central Indiana. As a free-lance journalist she sent many articles about local talent to magazines and regional newspapers. She later recalled, "As I ballyhooed Richmond artists, their names and activities became widely known."79 As a columnist for local papers White frequently reviewed a painting in the same way that she assessed a symphony concert or theatrical production. In these columns she also reminded local collectors that hometown artists needed purchasers of their work so that they would not have to seek outside employment to sustain themselves. The pages of The Little Paper, in particular, carried news of completed works, prizes won, and the activities and progress of her current favorites.80 In addition to Bundy and Conner, White lavished praise and encouragement on George H. Baker, whom she called "one of the greatest landscapists this country has ever produced." Never one to hedge her opinions, she proclaimed that "the Old Masters were the Bundys and Conners and Bakers of their day."81

White's friendship with local artists was as warm as her praise was generous. She visited their studios frequently, sometimes purchased their work when they needed funds, and entertained them at her home for teas, parties, and dinners.82 Neighbors recall the often raucous gatherings that spilled out into her flower garden and prompted gossip. One grateful guest returned her generosity with a bit of free verse that described

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78 Esther Griffin White, Indiana Bookplates (Richmond, Ind., 1910), chapters II and X, unpaged.
79 Maund interview with White.
80 The Little Paper, August 7, 1915, July 1, 1916; Richmond Palladium, June 14, 1912.
81 Earlham College Earlham Press, October 9, 1920.
82 Interview with Elmer Porter; White Journal, September 30, 1910.
Reproduced from Esther Griffin White, Indiana Bookplates (Richmond, Ind., 1910).
this charming garden
Where visitors imbibe
That thing called art and culture
And wild bohemian life.
There is a hostess, charming too,
Who dishes out the tea . . .
And as to scandal whispered here
It’s all a joke . . .

White’s little brick townhouse also served as a private gallery and salon for her circle of artists. Several rooms were covered from floor to ceiling with works that she had purchased or received as gifts. On occasion she opened her home for tours and charged a small fee to allow the public to view her collection. Adorning her walls and tables were works by state luminaries such as Steele and Forsyth; regional artists Bundy, Conner, and Baker; and, of course, several by her brother Ray. At the time of White’s death the inventory of her estate revealed that she owned more than one hundred pieces by her favorite painter, George H. Baker, proving that she had been his patroness in deed as well as in word. Earlham College, where she had briefly studied, became the recipient of this extensive collection of Indiana artists.

The last sixteen years of White’s life—from 1939 to 1954—were sad and unproductive ones in which some of her eccentricities became grotesque and overshadowed her earlier positive accomplishments. White was unemployed during these years; and, without a pension or steady income, she resorted to selling her books of poetry and *The Little Paper* door to door. She would plant herself in the doorway of hotel dining rooms, and when a civic club lunch adjourned, members had to purchase copies of her publications in order to leave peacefully. Neighbors and friends remember having to purchase her last book on several different occasions whenever she was short of funds. When these literary sales proved inadequate, White pawned family jewelry, secured loans using some of her art collection as collateral, and even sold some of her beloved Baker paintings. Increasingly blind toward the end, White grew

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63 George E. Drury, poem to White, File I, White Collection (Earlham College Archives).
64 Interviews with Jamie Cooper and Louise Whisenhunt.
65 Earlham College *Earlham Press*, October 9, 1920; White estate appraisal, April 30, 1956, Probate Papers, Packet 203, Wayne County Superior Court, Wayne County Clerk’s Office, Wayne County Courthouse, Richmond.
67 Interview with Mary Cates; Record of loans, File I, White Collection (Earlham College Archives); Loan certificate, Box I, Rudolph G. Leeds Collection (Indiana University East Archives, Richmond); Will Book 31, p. 306, Wayne County Clerk’s Office.
ESTHER GRIFFIN WHITE
1930S OR 1940S

Esther Griffin White Collection; courtesy Earlham College Archives, Richmond, Indiana
progressively unkempt in appearance, and her home fell into a state of dangerous disrepair. Neighbors observed her stumbling to a nearby grocery to purchase one egg or potato and saw bats flying through broken windows of her home. She had drifted away from her Quaker church, her professional colleagues were dying, and her traditional aloofness became a lonely—almost reclusive—existence. Church groups sent money and food baskets to her; community leaders saw that her utilities were paid and her home mortgage not foreclosed. After her death most of her private belongings had to be sold to satisfy the many claims on her estate. The once fiercely independent White had become dependent on loan brokers, charities, and institutions.

Beyond her obvious and memorable eccentricities, Esther Griffin White was an “awakener” of Hoosier potential. She pioneered and prevailed in serious journalism for roughly fifty years during a time when only a few females ventured outside the society section of newspapers. Her longevity as a writer, editor, and publisher is alone significant. White was also considerably influential during the crusade for women’s suffrage. Her publicity work and physical presence helped awaken many Hoosiers to the need for voting rights for women. Although a perennial loser in campaigns for public office, White created a vibrant model for other women wishing to emerge from political passivity. Richmond’s cultural life would have existed without White, but it would have been poorer. Her impresarial activities, poetry, bookplates, and patronage of artists added color and texture to the aesthetic richness of east central Indiana. Furthermore, White awakened in many people a heightened sense of human, political, and artistic potential that had been dormant or drowsy. A continued awareness, rather than a laconic gravestone, should be her legacy.

9 Interviews with Esther Kellner and Jamie Cooper; Argus Ogborn, interview with author, August 8, 1986.
90 Interviews with Susan Castator, Argus Ogborn, Jamie Cooper; David W. Dennis, interview with author, October 22, 1986; Luvena Dethridge, interview with author, August 1, 1987.
90 Probate Papers, Packet 203, Wayne County Superior Court; interview with Elmer Porter.