

## William D. White

William D. White was born in rural Fairfield, Illinois in 1842. His father was a friend of Abraham Lincoln from their days in the Illinois Militia during the Black Hawk War. Lincoln, then still a country lawyer traveling a circuit, stayed at their home whenever he was in Fairfield, and White remembered perching on Lincoln's knee as the two men talked politics, and that Lincoln promised to turn the young boy into an abolitionist.

In 1862 when White was 19, that family friend was now president and the country was at war with itself. White enlisted in the 87<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry. He and his company battled in Arkansas and Mississippi in a number of battles, the most notably at the siege of Vicksburg under the command of another future president, Ulysses S. Grant.

When his regiment was mustered out at the end of the war, White was reassigned to the 18<sup>th</sup> Illinois, promoted to Lieutenant and sent to the frontier until December 1866. Shortly before his discharge he became a Captain.

Returning to Fairfield, White became a farmer and married Elizabeth Borah. But White soon decided to move farther west. After trying out several places, they settled in Colorado for 10 years. There White ranched and ran a sawmill, and served as a county commissioner.

But White again wanted to move on. In 1892, the family moved to Montana, and settled on a homestead in the Blue Creek area, the first settlers there. White started a ranch, and raised and sold his stock, as well as being the first in the area to sow alfalfa. White and neighbor Alfred Cardwell had a long dispute starting in 1904 with newcomer Fred Barling over water rights to Blue Creek, when upstream landowner Barling diverted most of the water for his own use. White and Cardwell eventually prevailed in a lawsuit.

In 1910, Elizabeth White's health became poor, and the Whites moved to a warmer climate in Arkansas, leaving the Blue Creek property in the hands of their son. White farmed and was a banker there for fifteen years, but missed Montana. They moved back in 1925, but Elizabeth passed away three years later.

White continued his interest in civic affairs. At the age of 85 in 1930, White filed to run for the state legislature, though his candidacy was unsuccessful. In 1935, he attended the national meeting of Grand Army of the Republic, an organization for Union Veterans. The meeting was in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and 90-year-old White took his first airplane ride to get there.

Prior to White's death at the age of 93 in September 1936, he had been the last member of the local GAR. Businesses on Broadway closed while the funeral procession moved by and schoolchildren and businessmen lined the street as it passed by. The procession was led by the Billings Municipal Band, and included delegations of the National Guard, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the



Spanish-American War veterans, the U.S. Navy, and members of the police and fire departments. The procession led to Mountview Cemetery, where he was buried with military honors.

Sources:

- *Billings Gazette*, "Billings Honors White at Rites Held Thursday", September 25, 1936
- *Billings Gazette*, "Billings Veteran as Boy Sat Upon Lincoln's Knee", February 17, 1926
- *Billings Gazette*, "Commander White to Take Plane to G.A.R. Meeting", September 8, 1935
- *Billings Gazette*, "Death Claims Capt. W.D. White Here on Monday", September 22, 1936
- *Billings Gazette*, "Water Right Case in Court", November 21, 1905
- *Billings Gazette*, "White Records His Candidacy", June 3, 1930

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