

WALT WHITMAN'S 1879 VISIT
TO
MISSOURI, KANSAS, AND COLORADO

by

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Walt Whitman first visited the Mississippi River valley in 1848, going down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to and returning from New Orleans via steamboat, and he even spent a few hours walking around St. Louis on his return trip, while waiting to change boats.¹ Thirty-one years later, Whitman passed through St. Louis again, spending the night of September 12, 1879, there, this time headed further west, first to Kansas and later to Colorado. He had left Philadelphia by train on September 10, accompanied by Colonel John W. Forney, a prominent Philadelphia publisher; both men had been invited to address a Kansas Quarter Century Centennial Celebration at Lawrence. Much of the rest of September he traveled in the region between St. Louis and Denver, but for the remainder of 1879 and the first few days of 1880, Whitman lived with his favorite brother, Jeff, and family in St. Louis.² Sixty years old and in poor health because of his stroke six years earlier, as well as the stresses of travel, Whitman gradually recovered some vigor in pleasant family surroundings; using \$100 provided by a generous friend back East, he left St. Louis on January 4, 1880, returning by train to his home in Camden, New Jersey, across the Delaware River from Philadelphia.³

Whitman had not gone on to San Francisco, as he had wished,⁴ and in fact had gotten no further west than Leadville, Colorado, hardly one hundred miles beyond Denver.⁵ But according to Whitman's foremost biographer, Gay Wilson Allen, "Emotionally this trip was one of the most thrilling experiences of his life. . . ." ⁶ He had finally made "a trip which he had dreamed of for many years--indeed, in his early poems had often made in his imagination."⁷ Nor did the reality of the West disappoint Whitman, beginning perhaps with the sunsets, in St. Louis and elsewhere. Some of Whitman's auto-graph notes from the trip, now in the Philip Ashton Rollins Collection of Western Americana at The Princeton University Library, include this description:

Impressive sunsets

Three beautiful sunsets--over an hour each time.

One in Illinois

west of Columbus; [probably Columbia, Ill., across the river
from St. Louis]

one at Tower (Grove) Park St. Louis,

and one crossing west Missouri.

The golden sun & light blue clouds.⁸

On September 19, in Denver, he also wrote his sister-in-law, Louisa Whitman, "I have seen the mountains just before sunset--It was only ten minutes but I shall never forget it--." ⁹ Because of such experiences, Allen says that "for the remainder of his life [Whitman] never tired of talking about his trip West." ¹⁰ Certainly his memories of those Western sunsets were the foundation of his 1888 poem, "A Prairie Sunset":

Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver, emerald, fawn,
The earth's whole amplitude and Nature's multiform power
 consign'd for once to colors;
The light, the general air possess'd by them--colors till now
 unknown,
No limit, confine--not the Western sky alone--the high
 meridian--North, South, all,
Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows to the last. ¹¹

Yet only rarely did Whitman's 1879 Western sojourn result in poetry.

Whitman had long since visited the West in his imagination, as amply demonstrated by such poems as "Starting from Paumanok" (1856), "Facing West from California's Shores," "The Prairie-Grass Dividing," "A Promise to California," "Our Old Feullage" (all 1860), the popular "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865), and "Passage to India" (1871), especially Section 3 with its references to the geography and topography of the Trans-Mississippi West. (Martha Scott Trimble ably surveys Whitman's poetic references to the West in her essay, "The Westerning of Walt Whitman"; she estimates (p. 45) that Whitman "evokes the frontier, western sights, images, and individuals, and the qualities or characteristics identifiable primarily with the American West" in about one-fifth of the poems included at one time or another in Leaves of Grass.¹²) In fact, as Edwin Fussell demonstrates in Frontier: American Literature and the American West, Whitman had for most of his literary career considered himself a poet of the West.¹³ And it is easy to see familiar, often stereotypical, features of the West in Whitman's writing, both poetry and prose, with constant emphases on democracy, freedom, opportunity, fortitude, expansiveness, inclusiveness, newness, individuality, and the like. ("Song of Myself" and "Democratic Vistas" are two obvious cases in point here.) During Whitman's lifetime, which began in 1819, the West--or the frontier, at least--was constantly moving, until 1890, two years before his death, when the U. S. Bureau of Census declared it closed. But except in his imagination, Whitman never visited the true, raw, "wild West." In 1848 he floated comfortably on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers by steamboat, and in 1879 he went West by railway train, heaping praise on the sleeping car, "with perfect bedding and fee," despite experiencing a wreck on the way out.¹⁴ Civilization's representatives and machinery had already driven out many of the manifestations of wilderness by the time Whitman finally arrived in the West. The buffalo of which he had written in "Song of Paumanok"

and elsewhere were nearly gone--in fact, he seems never to have seen a live one. The Indians were, three years after Custer's fall (a subject for Whitman's occasional poem, "From Far Dakota's Cañons," published in the June 10, 1876, New York Herald Tribune¹⁵), mostly subdued, curiosities for tourists like Whitman; he did record seeing some on the 1879 trip, in the Rollins Collection notes:

Wapalingna chief
 Died 2 years ago
 116 years of age
 a brave blind Indian
 never spoke English
 /The squad of Indians at Topeka
 --Mr. Smart on the Indians--¹⁶

But he apparently never wrote another word based on the brief experience recorded in these notes on Indians.

Instead, what most impressed Whitman was the least changeable aspect of the West--its topography. The man who could write of the unfathomable mysteries in a blade of grass was of course greatly moved by the immense natural displays of the West, even if viewed most often from a train window. Whitman rode the train from St. Louis to Kansas City, changed trains, and went on to Lawrence, Kansas, arriving the night of September 13. He stayed there in the home of Judge John P. Usher, the Lawrence mayor, and also visited in the Topeka area, touring extensively around Topeka in a carriage during September 15-17. However, Whitman became so engrossed in a dinner conversation at Judge Usher's that he missed his scheduled time to deliver a poem or speak at what he called "The Kansas State Silver Wedding"; thus the original purpose of the poet's trip West was never accomplished. On the 18th Whitman boarded the train for Denver arriving on the evening of September 19. From Denver Whitman made some day excursions by train, notably to the Platte River canyon above Denver, to Leadville, Kenosha Pass, and South Park. He left Denver on the morning of September 23, traveling south on the Rio Grande railroad, past Pike's Peak; of that already famous mountain he wrote: "I took a long look at Pike's peak, and was a little disappointed. (I suppose I had expected something stunning.)" Arriving in Pueblo, Colorado, he boarded an Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe train bound east, down the Arkansas River valley. He got to Sterling, Kansas, on the 24th and spent that night with a Civil War friend and family before going on to Kansas City. After a few days there, Whitman returned to St. Louis, repeating the train route he had used going west.¹⁷ A month later, still in St. Louis, he traced the routes of his western travels on railroad maps which he enclosed in letters to two friends, John Burroughs and Mrs. Anne Gilchrist.¹⁸ The excitement aroused by the trip is reflected in Whitman's surviving letters to his relatives and friends, as in this excerpt from the November 10, 1879, letter to Mrs. Gilchrist:

. . . Two months ago I started off (make or break) on a long jaunt west--have been to the Rocky Mountains (2000 miles) and Denver city, & Colorado generally--with Kansas and Missouri--wonders, revelations I wouldn't have miss'd for my life, the great central area 2000 miles square, the Prairie States, the real America I find, (& I find that I wasn't realizing it before)¹⁹

Within two years after his return to the East, Whitman converted many of his notes and memories of this "real America" to twenty-nine brief essays, usually single paragraphs. Published as part of Specimen Days (1882), in these selections Whitman repeatedly exclaims in wonder at what he saw:

One wants new words in writing about these plains, and all the inland American West--the terms, far, large, vast, &c. are insufficient (p. 218).

But perhaps as I gaze around me the rarest sight of all is in atmospheric hues. The prairies--as I cross'd them in my journey hither--and these mountains and parks, seem to me to afford new lights and shades. Everywhere the aerial gradations and sky-effects inimitable; nowhere else such perspectives, such transparent lilacs and grays. I can conceive of some superior landscape painter, some fine colorist, after sketching awhile out here, discarding all his previous work . . . (p. 214)

Talk, I say again, of going to Europe, of visiting the ruins of feudal castles, or Coliseum remains, or kings' palaces--when you can come here. The alternations one gets, too; after the Illinois and Kansas prairies of a thousand miles--smooth and easy areas of the corn and wheat of ten million democratic farms in the future--here start up in every conceivable presentation of shape, these non-utilitarian piles, coping the skies, emanating a beauty, terror, power, more than Dante or Angelo ever knew (pp. 213-4).

Talk as you like, a typical Rocky Mountain canyon, or a limitless sea-like stretch of the great Kansas or Colorado plains, under favoring circumstances, tallies, perhaps expresses, certainly awakes, those grandest and subtlest element-emotions in the human soul, that all the marble temples and sculptures from Phidias to Thorwaldsen--all painting, poems, reminiscences, or even music, probably never can (p. 211).

But it was in the Platte River canyon, ten miles from Denver, that the Western landscape most emphatically moved Whitman. In a single,

characteristically long sentence, he proclaimed:

"I have found the law of my own poems," was the unspoken but more-and-more decided feeling that came to me as I pass'd, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon--this plentitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammel'd play of primitive Nature--the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream, repeated scores, hundreds of miles--the broad handling and absolute uncrampedness--the fantastic forms, bathed in transparent browns, faint reds and grays, towering sometimes a thousand, sometimes two or three thousand feet high--at their tops now and then huge masses pois'd, and mixing with the clouds, with only their outlines, hazed in misty lilac, visible (pp. 210-1).²⁰

Later in Specimen Days, Whitman wrote, "Grand as the thought that doubtless the child is already born who will see a hundred millions of people, the most prosperous and advanc'd of the world, inhabiting these Prairies, the great Plains, and the valley of the Mississippi, I could not help thinking it would be grander still to see all those inimitable American areas fused in the alembic of a perfect poem, or other esthetic work, entirely western, fresh and limitless--altogether our own, without a trace or taste of Europe's soil, reminiscence, technical letter or spirit" (p. 219). Unfortunately, he never managed to create that "perfect poem" about the West, or even much poetry at all about it after his 1879 trip. There is the 1888 "Prairie Sunset" poem quoted earlier, and this 1881 poem, clearly based on his Platte River canyon vision:

Spirit That Form'd This Scene
Written in Platte Cañon, Colorado.

Spirit that form'd this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit--we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own;
Was't charged against my chants they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicatessé?
The lyrist's measur'd beat, the wrought-out temple's grace--
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou that revelest here--spirit that form'd this scene,
They have remembered thee.²¹

Otherwise, only a few minor poems resulted from this Western visit,

such as "The Prairie States" (March 1880) and perhaps "Italian Music in Dakota" (1881).²²

However, in some ways Whitman's most interesting writing from the trip is in his notes in the Rollins Collection, and the transmutation of three of their eleven pages into a part of a single paragraph, entitled "The Prairie and Great Plains in Poetry," in Specimen Days:

Everywhere something characteristic--the cactuses, pinks, buffalo grass, wild sage--the receding perspective, and the far circle--line of the horizon all times of day, especially forenoon--the clear, pure, cool, rarefied nutriment for the lungs, previously quite unknown--the black patches and streaks left by surface-conflagrations--the deep-plough'd furrow of the "fire-guard"--the slanting snow-racks built all along to shield the railroad from winter drifts--the prairie-dogs and the herds of antelope--the curious "dry rivers"--occasionally a "dug-out" or corral--Fort Riley and Fort Wallace--those towns of the northern plains, (like ships on the sea,) Eagle-Tall, Coyote, Cheyenne, Agate, Monotony, Kit Carson--with ever the ant-hill and the buffalo-wallow--ever the herds of cattle and the cow-boys ("cow-punchers") to me a strangely interesting class, bright-eyes as hawks, with their swarthy complexions and their broad-brimm'd hats--apparently always on horseback, with loose arms slightly raised and swinging as they ride (p. 219).²³

The basis for many of the details in the foregoing can be seen in the Rollins Collection notes (manuscript page numbers in parentheses):

Friday Sept 19 '79

On the Plains (western edge of Kansas, on to Colorado)--
plains--plains--plains

The Dug-outs

antelope

the Prairie-Dog

emigrant wagons

camped for the night

The vast stretching plains

hundreds of miles area

The buffalo grass

The yellow wild flowers

The clear, pure,

cool, rarified air

(over 3000 ft above

sea level)

The dry rivers

(ms. p. 3)

Tongahocksa

Monotony Eagle Tail after a Chief

Mirage

see mirages train of cars

Agate

signs of fires

a cedar woods, ridge

the long furrow for fire-guard

an occasional corral (ms. p. 7)

The ant hill

the buffalo wallow

-The cow boys ("cow punchers") to me

a wonderfully interesting class

--clear swarthy complexion--with broad brimmed hats--their
loose arms

slightly raised & swinging as they ride--their splendid eyes--

(Fra Diavolo and his men in the opera)

--a herd of horses numbering 200 (ms. p. 5)

Whitman also described the Plains and the cowboys in a letter to Peter Doyle on November 5, 1879:

But the most interesting part of my travel has been the Plains, (the great American Desert the old geographies call it, but it is no desert) largely through Colorado and Western Kansas, all flat, hundreds & even thousands of miles--some real good, nearly all pretty fair soil, all for stock raising, thousands of herds of cattle, some very large--the herdsmen, (the principal common employment) a wild hardy race, always on horseback, they call 'em cow-boys altogether--I used to like to get among them & talk with them²⁴

Here are clearly the details, the raw materials, for a fine poem that Whitman might have written about the Great Plains and its most characteristic inhabitants during the 1870's. Instead, all we have are these notes, these lines from a letter, and part of a prose piece. Much the same was the fate of the rest of Whitman's experiences in the West: notes, letters, a few short poems, plus the prose pieces in Specimen Days. He seems to have treated those experiences rather as he wrote at the bottom of page 17 of the Rollins Collection notes: "Stored with exhaustless recollections."

Clearly Whitman's 1879 visit to the West had been of major importance to him personally (as witnessed, for instance, by his Platte River canyon declaration, "I have found the law of my own poems"), but the visit was not to result in a major work of American literature. Busy with many other interests and projects, including a tour of eastern Canada in 1880 and two more editions of Leaves of

Grass, Walt Whitman was never to write the "perfect poem" about the American West. And he was never again to visit the West, except in his "exhaustless recollections."

Notes

¹Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 92-99.

²Allen, pp. 486-489; Walt Whitman, Daybooks and Notebooks, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1977), I: 155-165; Walt Whitman, The Correspondence, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1964), III: 150-151, 163-173; Walt Whitman, Prose Works 1892, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), I (Specimen Days): 204.

³Cf. Letters 936, 940-943, and notes, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 165-166, 169-172; Whitman, Daybooks and Notebooks, ed. White, I: 165.

⁴Walt Whitman, "Autograph Notes made during his railway journey from Camden, N.J. to Colorado and return. September 10, 1879 to January 5, 1880.", Philip Ashton Rollins Collection of Western Americana, The Princeton University Library, ms. p. 19.

⁵Prose Works 1892, ed. Floyd Stovall, I (Specimen Days): 209-210.

⁶Allen, p. 488.

⁷Allen, p. 486.

⁸Whitman, "Autograph Notes . . .", Rollins, ms. p. 2. This and all other quotations from the same manuscript are used with the kind permission of The Princeton University Library and Alfred L. Bush, Curator, The Princeton Collections of Western Americana.

⁹Letter 935, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 165.

¹⁰Allen, p. 489.

¹¹Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 530-531. All later poetry citations are also to this edition.

¹²Heritage of Kansas: A Journal of the Great Plains, 10 (Summer 1977), 42-51.

¹³Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 397-441.

¹⁴Allen, pp. 92-94, 99, 486-489; Whitman, "In the Sleeper," Prose Works 1892, ed. Stovall, I (Specimen Days): 205-206.

¹⁵Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Blodgett and Bradley, pp. 483-484.

¹⁶Whitman, "Autograph Notes . . .", Rollins, ms. p. 1; Stephen F. Smart was General Traveling Agent for the Kansas Pacific Railway, cf. Whitman, Daybooks and Notebooks, ed. White, I: 158.

¹⁷Whitman, Prose Works 1892, ed. Stovall, I (Specimen Days): 206-212, 216-220, 227; Whitman, Daybooks and Notebooks, ed. White, I: 157-164; Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 164-171.

¹⁸Both maps survived--the one sent to Burroughs is reproduced in Clara Barrus, Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades ([Boston]: Houghton Mifflin, 1931; reprinted Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1968), facing p. 188.

¹⁹Letter 940, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 169. See also Letters 934-936 to Louisa Orr Whitman and Letter 939 to Peter Doyle.

²⁰Pages cited are from Whitman, Prose Works 1892, ed. Stovall, I (Specimen Days).

²¹Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Blodgett and Bradley, p. 486.

²²Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Blodgett and Bradley, pp. 402, 400-401.

²³This parallel is also discussed, in somewhat different form, by Walter H. Eitner, "Some Further Autograph Notes of Whitman's 1879 Western Trip," Walt Whitman Review, 26 (March 1980), pp. 20-21.

²⁴Letter 939, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 168.