Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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THE PRAIRIE STATES

A newer garden of creation, no primal solitude,
Dense, joyous, modern, populous millions, cities and farms,
With iron interlaced, composite, tied, many in one,
By all the world contributed—freedom’s and law’s and thrift’s society,
The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time’s accumulations,
To justify the past.

Leaves of Grass, 1881
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In *Specimen Days* Whitman pretends that he “staid several days” in Denver after his return from the mountains.\(^1\) In fact, he and his companions left Denver the next morning, Tuesday the twenty-third, taking the eight o’clock narrow-gauge Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, then still part of the Santa Fe system.\(^2\) Running south, they enjoyed the panorama of the Rockies which in the changing autumn sunlight seemed to Whitman “the most spiritual show of objective Nature I ever beheld.” What he could see of Pike’s Peak, however, disappointed him; he thought perhaps he had expected “something stunning.”\(^3\) “I was at Pike’s Peak,” he later wrote Peter Doyle.\(^4\)

When the men were in Denver they had been impressed by how far they had traveled, and by the relatively shorter distance remaining to San Francisco. Undoubtedly they talked about the possibility of going farther west—but other plans and obligations at home (including the *New Era*’s libel suit) kept them from even stopping to visit the Garden of the Gods near Colorado Springs, much to Geist’s regret.\(^5\) Whitman wrote in his notebook: “I did not go to San Francisco, though I hope to do so one of these days. Indeed I have a good deal of travel laid out; (among the rest Tennessee and Alabama).”\(^6\) In *Specimen Days* he changed this to regrets about not visiting Yellowstone National Park and, in the other direction, Veta Pass—“wanted to go over the Santa Fe trail away southwestward to New Mexico.”\(^7\)

At Pueblo the party turned east, boarding the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, and had, or imagined they had, “whetting
glimpse-tastes of . . . Bald Mountain, the Spanish peaks, Sangre de Christos, Mile-Shoe-curve ( . . . ‘the boss railroad curve of the universe’ ) fort Garland . . . and the three great peaks of the Sierra Blancas.” Following the Arkansas River eastward they again traveled through the plains, alternating “long sterile stretches” with “green, fertile and grassy” sections where they saw large herds of sheep. 

We pass Fort Lyon—lots of adobie houses—limitless pasturage, appropriately fleck’d with . . . herds of cattle—in due time the declining sun in the west—a sky of limpid pearl over all—and so evening on the great plains. A calm, pensive, boundless landscape—the perpendicular rocks of the north Arkansas, hued in twilight—a thin line of violet on the southwestern horizon—the palpable coolness and slight aroma—a belated cow-boy with some unruly member of his herd—an emigrant wagon toiling yet a little further, the horses slow and tired—two men, apparently father and son, jogging along on foot—and around all the indescribable chiaroscuro and sentiment, (profonder than anything at sea), athwart these endless wilds.

On this eastbound part of his journey Whitman saw again the yellow flower that had greeted him all along the way. He had seen it first days before when they were crossing Ohio, and had jotted down in his notebook: “Yellow flowers thick every where clear / light yellow. What are they?” Crossing the plains on his way to Denver he had again noted “the yellow wild flowers.” By the time of writing Specimen Days he had identified the flower as “the coreopsis,” with which he then claimed an old acquaintance in his walks around Timber Creek and on his wider travels in the East.

At 4:50 on Wednesday morning, the twenty-fourth, the party got off at Sterling in central Kansas, and took a break (a day and a night) from train travel. Whitman looked up Ed Lindsey, an “old-young soldier friend of mine of war times,” now married and with a son, and “running the hotel” in Sterling. Presumably, Whitman stayed at Lindsey’s hotel, as did his companions, though the latter might have visited in private homes. Sterling, according to Geist, was a Lancaster settlement, and they “enjoyed the hospitality of . . . big-hearted Lancaster friends there.”
That night Geist and Martin were guest speakers at a meeting of Republicans in a storeroom in the town’s central block. According to the next-day’s Sterling Weekly Bulletin, Martin “made some excellent points against the Greenback movement, and opened the eyes of many who were inclined toward that party.” However, the next-day’s Rice County Gazette, also a Sterling weekly, thought that every position which Martin took against the Greenbackers “has been overturned time and time again by Greenback speakers and writers.”

Both papers also noted Whitman’s presence in town. The Gazette reported “the old poet” as saying that “much as the grandeur of the mountains impressed him, the impression of the plains will remain longest with him.” The paper added the hope that “Mr. Whitman will embody these impressions in some of his elegant poetry.”

The next morning, Thursday the twenty-fifth, the men made another early start, departing on the same 4:50 train. Whitman later wrote to Doyle that he had “hard work” getting away from Lindsey, who wanted him to stay the winter.

We have Whitman’s views of this part of the trip in Specimen Days:

The sun up about half an hour; nothing can be fresher or more beautiful than this time, this region. I see quite a field of my yellow flower in full bloom. At intervals dots of nice two-story houses, as we ride swiftly by. Over the immense area, flat as a floor, visible for twenty miles in every direction in the clear air, a prevalence of autumn-drab and reddish-tawny herbage—sparse stacks of hay and enclosures, breaking the landscape—as we rumble by, flocks of prairie-hens starting up. Between Sterling and Florence a fine country.

Around six that evening the party arrived at Kansas City where they were reunited with their railroad friends, Smart and Devereux. This time they did go to the Coates House, the famed hotel operated by Geist’s Lancaster friend, Kersey Coates.

That Friday, the twenty-sixth, must have been a busy one for the men. Whitman tells us in Specimen Days that he visited a hog-packing plant. Geist reported in the New Era that he explored the Missouri “flats” and visited an agricultural implement works belonging to friends from the East, and that Smart and Devereux took them to the
Kansas City Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition, which was on its last day. The *Kansas City Daily Times* reported that Whitman attended the horseraces there: “WALT WHITMAN, the famous American poet, tarried in Kansas City yesterday, on his return from Leadville. He took in (or rather was taken in by) the races, and fooled away an hour or two listening to the ‘barbaric yawp’ which ironically greeted
the favorite as he passed under the wire, at the expense of the suckers in the pool box. It is safe to say MR. WHITMAN didn’t contribute to the pool box nor indulge in any poetic gush over the Imposition.”

There are two other Kansas City “pictures” of Whitman. One has him in what we might judge to be an invented scene, sitting “leisurely in a store in Main street” and writing about the women he sees in the “streaming crowd” flowing by on the sidewalks:

The ladies (and the same in Denver) are all fashionably drest, and have the look of “gentility” in face, manner and action, but they do not have, either in physique or the mentality appropriate to them, any high native originality of spirit or body, (as the men certainly have, appropriate to them.) They are “intellectual” and fashionable, but dyspeptic-looking and generally doll-like; their ambition evidently is to copy their eastern sisters. Something far different and in advance must appear, to tally and complete the superb masculinity of the West, and maintain and continue it.

The other picture is of Whitman strolling down Main Street, the very figure of good health and well-being. That description appeared in the *Daily Times* on 28 September, two days after the poet’s visit in Kansas City. It is probable that Whitman wrote it himself and left it behind as another press release:

Walt Whitman is aging fast—he is in his sixtieth year—but those who had the pleasure of meeting him in Kansas City perceived that his mental vigor is unabated and he has been so much recuperated by his western trip that his herculean constitution may hold the enemy at bay for years to come. Tall and robust, six feet high, red face, profuse and uncut beard, long white hair, gait easy and slow, and weighing nearly 200 pounds, he looks outrageously healthy and till his paralytic stroke some years ago, prided himself on his perfect bodily condition, muscle and clean blood. He loafed along down Main street as leisurely as he would have done on Broadway or Pennsylvania avenue, and hundreds who saw his imposing figure, clad in English gray, with a wide, turned-over shirt collar open at the neck, and a drab plantation hat, would have eyed him still more curiously if told that the large, dispassionate, handsome, splendidly proportioned “animal,” as he calls himself, was the clerk, farmer, carpenter, hospital nurse, and printer who wrote “Leaves of Grass,” and put it into type with his own hands.
That Friday evening the four men again boarded a St. Louis, Kansas City and Northern train and headed for St. Louis. After another night in reclining coach seats they arrived in that city Saturday morning, the twenty-seventh. There, as Geist recited it, "[we] dropped our Poet to the care of his friends, and in twenty minutes were on our way home . . . , and arrived 'on time' in Lancaster on Sunday evening."