

Doris Kellogg Neale

How often I bless Walt Whitman for his influence on my life. I first discovered *Leaves of Grass* in 1908 when I was sixteen. From then on, until this very day when 86 years have rolled away since I was born, I bless and thank dear Walt. Back in 1914 I sought out the birthplace in Huntington, L.I. and found weeds and broken fences around the house. I was so full of enthusiasm that I all but bought the place (could of for a song), but let that idea fade away. Next I bought a "first" 1855 edition and after that many other "firsts." And autographed photos too. And so it went, always with those precious verses going with me. At one time I "looked up" a Miss Bertha Johnson, in Brooklyn, N.Y. and in her home I saw many objects connected with her father's friend, Walt Whitman. In 1948 Miss Johnson sent me as a Christmas card the photo of Walt sitting with two little children, the little boy leaning on the poet's shoulder. Hanging on the wall of Miss Johnson's sitting-room was an oil portrait of Whitman. How I wish I had bought it. Where is it now? Well, years passed and one day when I was staying in New York City, I thought I'll just see if Miss Bertha is still living. I phoned the house in Brooklyn and a very quavering man's voice answered. I asked about Miss Bertha, and was told "My sister has passed away." Then I said, 'I have always wondered who the children were in the 1879 photo your sister sent me.' An old, quavering voice answered, "I am the little boy leaning on Walt's shoulder." I almost weep as I write these words. I am enclosing a copy of the photo. Since 1948 the years have rolled on. Lately I had the thrilling experience of visiting Walt's last home in Camden, N.J. I was so emotional when I stood in that front bed-room where Walt died, and where I had been so many times in my imagination. It is a sacred place. I hope and pray that this shrine will never be dismantled. So, at the ripe age of 86 I am always aware of my debt to THE POET who charted my course in life and whose words are a constant inspiration and guide.

