

A WHITMAN ORAL HISTORY

(Editor's note: The following narrative was first published in the Camden Courier-Post for July 6, 1950, by the columnist Charley Humes. In it he records the memories of his "narrator-inventor friend," John Browning. What part of the narrative is owing to Browning's invention the editor does not presume to say. Most of Browning's highly personal observations cannot be substantiated by academic methods of historical research, and so do not appear in the standard Whitman biographies. Perhaps they are worth preserving for that very reason.)

"Those were the happiest days of Walt Whitman's life," Browning began. "I was 12 years old when the particular incidents took place, but I remember Walt Whitman quite well...Walt, you see, lived at 431 Stevens street before he moved to West and Stevens. It was not until 1884 that he moved to 330 Mickle street, and, although that address is noted as a historic residence of his, he actually did his best work while residing at West and Stevens streets.

"It was here, in 1881, that he issued a completed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. And it was also here, that he wrote *Specimen Days* and *November Boughs*. Although it doesn't add to Walt's fame, I lived at 413 Stevens street at the time. Some of the neighborhood boys, whom some folks hereabouts might remember, were Howard Matlack, Lex and Joe Dewees, and Frank Jess, who became a judge. James Elverson lived across the street, and he published a newspaper call 'Golden Days.' He later went on to start a great metropolitan newspaper.

"Two of Walt's closest friends were Bill Clark, who lived next door, and Mr. Parks, who lived on the opposite corner. Bill Clark had a beautiful flower garden behind his home and Walt thoroughly enjoyed walking about it. Another close friend of Walt's was the sister of the pastor of the neighborhood German church. Walt loved to listen to the old hymns, sung in German, and spent many pleasant hours chatting with the pastor's sister, who, last I heard from, was still alive (February, 1948) and was 99 years old.

"Walt had a pet dog which he called 'Spotty' and it accompanied him on most of his Sunday afternoon walks. He loved all animals and was one of the kindest men I've ever met. He also loved a tiny house, located at 411 Stevens street, which was the smallest in the block. The porch was his favorite writing spot... set behind a flowered garden back off the street. Walt would spend countless hours there, writing away in his ever-handy notebook, and he came very near to buying 411 instead of 330 Mickle street.

"Walt's brother, George, was a colonel in the old GAR post 37, located across the way, and Walt spent hours listening to some of the Civil War vets recounting their experiences in the 'Battle of the Wilderness.' That was the battle during which the old Salem 'Brick and Ball' Regiment made history. (He also observed) the Sunday funeral services for a departed comrade. The Ivy Fife and Drum Corps tuning up before GAR post 5. The music of Jennings's 6th Regiment Band approaching Post 37...and the clanging of the old horse-car bell adding to the sounds of horns, fifes and drums. The traditional military funeral march, out Haddonfield road to the old graveyard, as they were then called.

"Walt (would) walk up Stevens street to Broadway, where a common branched off into three paths--one which led to the old city hall, another to Cooper's hospital, and the other to the West Jersey railroad station, at Haddonfield pike--(where he would come to) the most famous oyster saloon across the street, which

served a stew, loaded with oysters, pepper hash, four-pound dish of Trenton crackers, horse-radish, for 15 cents.

"But Walt's favorite Sunday afternoon stroll took him up to a spot known then as 'The Diamond Cottage,' so named because of the diamond-shaped windows of the cottage. It was set amidst a grove of trees where the Bridge Plaza now is. In earlier days it was the largest beer garden around. Scattered throughout the grove were sets of church pews from St. Paul's Church, and the backs of each were painted with the names of various youth singing groups from various churches.

"Walt loved to sit far back in the grove listening to the blending of the young voices...and jotting down notes in his well-filled notebook. Walt Whitman loved those afternoons. And he loved to walk down Cooper street, the finest street in town, and watch the mansions lit up at Christmas time. He thrilled at the sight of a carriage whisking by, drawn by a spirited horse, its nostrils breathing steam into the cold, crisp air.

"Camden was Walter's home. He loved it, and he dwelt in seeing it then as we look back upon it now... wishing we could bring back those happy, care-free days of yesteryear."