Walt Whitman Fellowship Papers: 14
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WALT WHITMAN, SCHOOLMASTER: NOTES OF A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES A. ROE, 1894.

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[Charles A. Roe was born at Little Bay Side, in the town of Flushing, Long Island, February, 1829. He lived there for nearly forty years, and moved into Flushing village in 1867.

He was elected supervisor of the town of Flushing in 1860, serving six years. In 1866 he was made Treasurer of Queens County, continuing in that capacity through two terms of three years each. In 1874 he moved out on a farm at Westbury, Long Island, among the Quakers, where he remained three years, making his next place of residence Brooklyn.

While residing in Brooklyn he was in business in New York City. On the last day of 1889 he removed to Lakewood, New Jersey, where he has since resided and where this interview took place, October, 1894.

I report Mr. Roe practically in his own words. Some repetitions have been eliminated and the matter has been redeemed from the inconsecutiveness of an unpremeditated conversation. Otherwise, Mr. Roe speaks for himself, without interferences or interlineations on my part. Certain editing was necessary.

Whitman says, "Specimen Days," page 16: "1836-7 worked as compositor in printing offices in New York City. Then, when little more than eighteen, and for a while afterwards, went to teaching country schools down in Queens and Suffolk counties, Long Island, and 'boarded round.' This latter I consider one of my best experiences, and deepest lessons in human nature behind the scenes, and in the masses."]

You want to know what I remember about Walt Whitman? Well, put it down your own way. But I do not suppose that I can tell much you can use. And I will have to talk in a rambling sort of fashion, just as the things come to me.

I went to school with him in the town of Flushing, Long

Island. He taught the school at Little Bay Side. His boarding place was with a widow lady. We became very much attached to him.

His ways of teaching were peculiar. He did not confine himself to books, as most of the teachers then did, but taught orally—yes, had some original ideas, all his own. I know about that, for I had heard of others who tried oral teaching. But the plans he adopted were wholly of his conception, and most successful.

He was not severe with the boys, but had complete discipline in the school. Before and after school, and at recess, he was a boy among boys, always free, always easy, never stiff. He took active part in games of frolic. It seemed to be his object to teach even when he played. He had a game of twenty questions. He would mentally select an animal, or some other object, and then give us twenty chances to guess what it was. We combined a good deal of fun and instruction in this game.

Walt never was trifling. I could see that he always kept in mind the serious nature of his task and its responsibility. At the same time he would never betray by anything in his manner that he felt above us, or condescended, or wished in any way to put on a tone or an air of superiority.

Every day of a certain hour we would go out in an unoccupied room together, to practice in mental arithmetic. He made a prominent feature of this. At that time it was a new method of instruction—since then it has become more or less general.

Walt was very fond of describing objects and incidents to the school. He would not do this privately, but to all hands. He would give quite a good deal of time to any subject that seemed worth while. He was always interesting, a very good talker, able to command the attention of scholars, of whom, by the way, there were seventy or eighty. Our ages ranged sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old—yet many, too, were young shavers like myself.

I never heard the least complaint of Walt from any scholar or from the parents of any scholar. We were all deeply attached to him, and were sorry when he went away.

The girls did not seem to attract him. He did not specially go anywhere with them or show any extra fondness for their society.

He would call over at our house and spend an evening. He did not prefer to talk of books. Nearly any every-day subject attracted him. My father had been a great reader, however, and naturally they would converse on books, too.

He spent his Sundays mostly at home. I never remember his going out to any of the churches. If he took walks, I did not know it. He had a brother, then, who was with him and went to school. They were much together.

He was not religious in any way. His views were not of a religious turn. It was remarked by the lady he boarded with that he was rather off from anything like church. This fact produced no feeling that I saw except with this one old lady. She had four young daughters. I had heard her speak of his views on religion as being rather atheistic. Very friendly to him otherwise—just a trifle suspicious, or sorry, that was all.

It is my impression that he was at Bay Side one school year—it was not longer. I was thinking perhaps it was only the long winter term. I cannot be positive about it. Yet there's hardly anything which took place in that time I do not recall. He made such a deep impression upon me, that even insignificant things became important and long-remembered.

His kindness, affability, his close association with us, were unusual and agreeable. Uniformly kind—yes: without the least variation; always exactly the same.

Walt was a good story-teller—Oh! excellent: was both funny and serious. Did I say he had his own notions how to punish a scholar? If he caught a boy lying he exposed him before the whole school in a story. But the story was

told without the mention of any names. No punishment beyond that. He had such a way of telling his story that the guilty fellow knew who was meant. He would do this in the case of any ordinary offence. But if the offence was grave enough, the whole school was taken into the secret.

He was the soul of honor. If anyone attempted anything dishonorable he would be out on it at once. There was an examination or something. I had a paper with names on. I did not use it but he saw the paper. After examination was over, and the school was about to be dismissed, he said that he was sorry any scholar should do such a thing as this he had seen me do. He did not mention my name, but I know I never committed the offence again.

He did not take walks with the scholars. The school hours were long, and we only had the one hour recess in the middle of the day. The school was held in the basement of a building put up by Samuel Leggatt, who formerly had been President of the Franklin Bank, New York. This building was intended for a church. Before Whitman came we only had an ordinary schoolhouse. He was among the first teachers in that school. The building still stands. It was designed for a free church for all denominations—located about a mile and a half from the village of Whitestone.

My parents liked Whitman very much as a teacher. Though Episcopalians, themselves, they had no feeling about his being an infidel.

He was not aggressive—did not talk of his religion. His not attending church, or some chance observation, probably to Mrs. Powell, may have caused some persons to remark his heterodoxy. Mrs. Powell only spoke of it casually, was sorry, wished it might have been otherwise, and so on. Walt always boarded with her as long as he had the school.

He was above anything of the woman kind. Did I say that before? He did not care for woman's society—seemed, indeed, to shun it. Young as I was, I was aware of that fact.

I do not think he became very closely acquainted even with our young men of his own age. He seemed retiring, diffident, yet he was friendly to everybody—was not offish—made no enemies.

My memory of Walt is cute—unusually cute—probably because his personality had such a powerful and peculiar effect upon me, even as a boy. I had other teachers, but none of them ever left such an impress upon me. And yet I could not mention any particular thing. It was his whole air, his general sympathetic way, his eye, his voice, his entire geniality. I felt something I could not describe. What I say, others will also say. I think he affected all as he did me. They have admitted it—yet, like me, can give no definite reasons. No one could tell why. Their memory of him is exactly like mine. There must be something in it—it is not imagination.

Walt always dressed in black—dressed neatly—very plain in everything—no attempt at what would be called fashion. He wore an old style frock coat, vest and pants black. I judge he wore a white shirt. He dressed mainly as other people dressed. My impression is that his shirt was cut low. His hat not out of the usual at that time. There were only soft hats and silk hats and I know he never wore a silk hat.

Walt's face was entirely beardless. He was never sick; did not smoke; never, that I saw or heard of, drank any liquors. As to his eating, I never knew him to have had any peculiar habits. He was a hearty eater—ate simple foods, being so healthy and strong.

I was talking a while ago of his ways of punishing us. I should have said that he would sometimes stand the scholar up before the school—perhaps put a fool's-cap on him. But he never inflicted corporal punishment. He never asserted himself in a brutal way. Gentle—yes, but firm.

All they taught in schools at that time, was reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar. It was a very primitive district school. Walt had no assistant. I remember no celebrations

during his stay and no ceremonies when he left. We lived in what was strictly a farming district, and such things, even sociables, were infrequent, or did not occur at all. We were not close-settled.

School hours were from eight to four: in the winter they were just as long as we could possibly see.

We played ball, but I don't think Walt ever took part in it. He associated more with the younger scholars, frolicing rather than playing games. We had a fine ball ground. He was active as a boy—very quick, agile, supple in all his movements. His complexion? It was ruddy, clear, beautiful.

Whitman's boarding place was a mile and a half from the school. He carried his lunch with him, in a basket. On pleasant days he ate outside with the pupils. As long as it was anyways comfortable at all, even in cold weather, they would eat out of doors. It was his custom to be out every possible moment of his time. He always walked to and from his boarding place, stormy weather or clear. Sometimes we would walk together. He talked a great deal—was always calling our attention to this thing or that—some tree, bird, the sky, rock, or what-not. He was talkative, then—seemed let loose—and our enjoyment was great. There was a walk through the wood that we almost always took. It was almost direct from his boarding place to the school. He liked the fresh air: liked to be alone, also liked to be with people.

Whitman had dignity and yet at the same time he could descend down to sociability. The very moment he stepped across that school door-sill he was master. He had authority, but was not severe. We obeyed and respected him.

He was well proportioned, physically. Did not seem unusually big. Very rugged and healthy. A fine red in his face. Eye clear, lips firm. I could not speak of his strength from any particular circumstance or incident. We all understood it, however, from his general carriage.

The Powell folks told me then that he had written poetry. I knew nothing direct. He wrote something that he called "The Fallen Angel." It commenced:

> "Oh he was pure! the fleecy snow
> Sinking through air to earth below
> Was not more undefiled!
> Sinless he was, as fleeting smile
> On lip of sleeping child."

We had at that time speaking lessons, and he would give the scholars verses to recite. This was one lesson. They said it was his own composition. That was the rumor. The poem was quite long, having a number of stanzas. My version is very faulty, no doubt, but the lines I have given you are substantially correct.

My father was a good conversationalist. He and Walt were very friendly. Walt would have remembered me in later life by remembering my father. They were uncommonly congenial. I can recall very little or nothing of their conversation. My father was a man of very liberal views. This would have made him interesting to Walt. They were much together.

Now, this has been a rambling sort of talk, but you are welcome to all that can honestly be made of it.

One thing is sure. As far as Walt's goodness and character goes, you can report me pretty full and as strong as you choose. Even back in the school-days, those of us who knew him, his scholars there on Long Island, felt, somehow, without knowing why, that here was a man out of the average, who strangely attracted our respect and affection.