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*Walt Whitman*

WALT WHITMAN AND THE  
SIERRA GRANDE MINING COMPANY

WILLIAM WHITE

ONE OF THE MINOR and little known incidents in the life of Walt Whitman has to do with two hundred shares of stock in the Sierra Grande Mining Company of Lake Valley, New Mexico, one hundred miles northwest of El Paso, which he obtained on February 26, 1883. The incident is worth a footnote in Whitman lore; and it is in a footnote to Whitman's correspondence that we learn as much as we now know.<sup>1</sup> This footnote is to a letter from the poet to Mrs. Susan Stafford, of Kirkwood, Glendale, New Jersey, where Whitman used to visit frequently. At the time he wrote Mrs. Stafford, on August 6, 1883, Whitman was staying briefly at the Germantown, Philadelphia, home of Robert Pearsall Smith (who is important to our story). He told Mrs. Stafford:

Nothing specially new with me—I am only middling well—seem to be getting clumsier than ever, more *loguey*—rheumatic & other ailments—My loss (money, dues, &c) I alluded to, from the letter rec'd when I was down there, is worse than I expected—(I knew all the spring & early summer there would be *something*, for I was feeling too well & prosperous & *sassy*)—

It is to this remark in Whitman's letter that Professor Miller adds his footnote:

What loss WW sustained at this time is not known, unless he referred to the 200 shares of stock he purchased on February 26 [1883] in the Sierra Grande mines at Lake Valley, New Mexico. According to a prospectus mounted in [Whitman's] *Commonplace-*

*Book*, shares in the company had a par value of \$25. He received his first dividend (\$50) on March 6, but he did not receive the second dividend, evidently payable on July 6, when he was with the Staffords, until October 3. Perhaps the delay in payment made him think that he had lost his money. He may have fabricated this story because Mrs. Stafford wanted to borrow money. He lent her \$50 on October 24, 1882.

These are, of course, quite valid guesses; but to me the last one seems the closest. As for the Sierra Grande stock, that is a different story, for we now learn the circumstances from several new-found documents in the collection of Mr. Charles E. Feinberg, who has given permission for their first publication.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Pearsall Smith, Whitman's Germantown host on that August day, was a rich and successful Quaker glass manufacturer. Smith had met Walt Whitman during the Christmas holidays in 1882 when his daughter Mary Smith—who had heard at Smith College about the poet living across the Delaware River—insisted on visiting him in Camden. The father went along to "protect" his daughter, for the poet's reputation, based on *Leaves of Grass*, which many genteel folk would not even allow in the house, was not of the highest. The whole Smith family, with the exception of the mother, Hannah, took a liking to the old poet—Whitman was 63 years old at the time, and had already written and published his greatest poetry.<sup>3</sup>

So charmed—if that is the right word—were the Smiths with Whitman that they invited him to visit them at 4653 Germantown Avenue in residential Philadelphia. And Whitman came with them, stayed three days, December 23, 24, 25, then returned the next week to stay from December 30 through January 2 of the following year. R. Pearsall Smith and his children continued to be friends of the poet until his death in 1892.

Whitman was never a rich man, far from it; neither was he a starving poet. He was his own publisher and sold his own editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as contributing poems and articles to various magazines and newspapers from time to time. He received

a decent fee for his lecture on the death of Abraham Lincoln delivered on the anniversary of the assassination, April 15, and at other times. At this period he had enough money to lend his brother George \$250. He paid for the support of his feeble-minded younger brother Edward. Again and again he records in his *Daybook* sending his two sisters, Mrs. Hannah Heyde and Mrs. Mary Van Nostrand, small sums of money. Later he paid \$1,500 for his tomb, a considerable amount of money in those times.

Yet, while he actively dissuaded those who would picture him as the neglected, ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-treated, and wholly misunderstood poet, he did not discourage his affluent friends from giving him gifts, such as a horse and buggy, a wheel chair (so he could be taken out, later, when his health was poor), or even sums of money, sometimes fairly large ones.

Now, the footnote to Whitman's *Correspondence* quoted above, states that he "purchased" two hundred shares of mining stock. This is a perfectly valid assumption, for Whitman wrote in his *Daybook*:

Feb. 26 '83  
the 200 shares  
Sierra Grande stock  
Mines at Lake Valley  
New Mexico

The upper left corner of an envelope is pasted on the same page in the *Daybook*. The printed return address reads:

Return to Whitall, Tatum & Co.  
410 Race Street.—Lock-box P.  
Philadelphia, Pa.  
If not delivered within 10 days.

"Whitall, Tatum & Co." has been cancelled, and "R. P. Smith" written above it. No one has ever made a connection between R. P. Smith and the two hundred shares of Sierra Grande stock, but there is a connection—a very close connection.

Just how much of an impact Whitman made on R. Pearsall Smith can be seen in a letter, written in Smith's hand two months to the day after he first laid eyes on Walt Whitman. It is on the letterhead of Whitall, Tatum & Co., Glass Manufacturers, No. 410 & 412 Race St., P. O. Box P., Philadelphia:

2 23 [188]3

Walt Whitman  
Camden N J  
My dear friend

I claim the privileges of the name I claim of you—a *friend*—in sharing with you the means which have come to me in silver mining. I send certificate of stock of 200 shares of the Sierra Grande Mining Company made out in your name. So far very regular dividends of twenty five cents per share per month have been made to the shareholders, but whether they will continue for twelve months only or for a course of years, no one can say. The Experts predict a long course of years. In any case you will receive from the Treasurer by mail, sent about the first of each month, a cheque for fifty dollars till the mine shall work out.

As it is a personal matter between our two selves, you will kindly, as you proposed, devise it back to me in the final disposition of your means—may the which be in a far distant future!

And may its use prove of as much pleasure to you as it gives me to ask to place the income at your disposal.

Yours faithfully  
R. Pearsall Smith

In the same envelope (though the envelope itself is missing since Whitman cut it up to paste part of it in his *Daybook*) was the stock certificate, No. 5044, 200 shares of capital stock, 200 shares, par value \$25, dated February 23, 1883, made out to Walt Whitman, signed on the back by Whitman and witnessed by his sister-in-law Louisa Whitman. Attached by a pin to the certificate is a small slip of paper, on which Whitman wrote:

This certificate of Sierra Grande Mining Stock is to be returned to Robert Pearsall Smith at my death

Walt Whitman

April 24, 1883.

The next document in the case is a postcard, addressed to Walt Whitman at 431 Stevens Street, Camden, New Jersey, postmarked March 24, 1883, on the back of which is printed the announcement that the company was paying Dividend No. 6, twenty-five cents per share. It is dated from the Transfer Office of the company, 18 Exchange Building, Philadelphia, and signed by Benjamin H. Shoemaker, president, and George L. Smedley, secretary, the same two men who signed the stock certificate.

For more on the Sierra Grande story, we now return to Whitman's *Daybook* and the somewhat cryptic entry about the two hundred shares. Under the date of March 6, 1883, the poet wrote:

March 6—rec'd first dividend Sierra Grande (50)

Two pages later, under the date of April 21, 1883, are these two lines:

the next Sierra Grand[e] divvy will be July 2  
(won't come however till Oct 3d)

It is quite likely that the second line was not entered until the later date. On the next page—the left-hand *Daybook* page, which Whitman used for pasting in assorted clippings, calling cards, and addresses—he wrote:

Sierra Grande Mining Company  
Geo: L Smedley Secretary  
18 Exchange Building

Several pages further on is another notation, confirming the second sum mentioned above:

Oct. 3. 50 dividend Sierra Grande—rec'd

That Whitman did not list all of his financial matters in the *Daybook* is obvious because there are no more entries during 1883 about the mining stock. Under August 21, 1884, he wrote:

30 rec'd—8th dividend Sierra Grande

Then a few entries later in September:

[Sept.] 5—9th Sierra Grande dividend rec'd—50

The final mention in the diary of this whole business occurs opposite this page, where Whitman has pasted a clipped card—not a finely printed one this time, but a far less expensive card, made by a rubber stamp—of the Sierra Grande Mining Co., 330 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa., signed by Francis Bacon, Secretary. To judge from the card's appearance, the company may not have been doing well, and this seems to be confirmed by a comment of Whitman's. On another card attached to the page, of John K. Randall, attorney, Baltimore, Whitman wrote one word:

*dead*

Could this word be applied to Whitman's relationship with the Sierra Grande Mining Co. also? A relationship which began with a generous gift from the poet's wealthy new friend, R. Pearsall Smith, brought him nine dividends of \$50 (or less) each, and then ceased to bring anything, on the basis of the evidence in the poet's *Daybook*.

Another Whitman document appears to confirm this. We find in the Feinberg Collection, on the letterhead of the Walt Whitman Fellowship: Internation, Camden, New Jersey, of which Horace L. Traubel was secretary and treasurer, the following in Traubel's hand, dated three years after the poet's death:

Mar 9 1895

Among the last of Walt's letters which I sorted the other day I found the enclosed. Shall I return it to Smith?

H. L. T.

In another hand are these two lines:

Return to Mr. Smith

It has no value.

This page, along with the stock certificates of the Sierra Grande Mining Co. and R. Pearsall Smith's letter were found among Whitman's papers. There was also an envelope, docketed to Thomas B. Harned, the Camden and Philadelphia lawyer who was—with Traubel and Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke—Whitman's literary executor. It was Harned who wrote the two lines beneath Traubel's query and told Traubel to return the stock to Smith.

Though Whitman's one venture into capitalism as a stockholder may have ended for him, it is not the end of the story, for we know from other sources that the Lake Valley deposit was "one of the most remarkable bodies of silver ore ever encountered in New Mexico." The Bridal Chamber ore body, also operated by the Sierra Grande Mining Company, was never "equaled in richness by any silver mine in the world." This rich discovery was made in 1876 and a half interest was taken by George W. Lufkin in August 1878. After some development three companies, including the Sierra Grande, absorbed the best and most promising claims.<sup>4</sup> All three companies were composed of Philadelphia capitalists, which explains how R. Pearsall Smith happened to buy the stock that he gave to Whitman.

The company was not dead, because it was under Sierra Grande's management that the famous Bridal Chamber was found, just a short time and with only two more feet of digging to go, after Lufkin had sold his interest for a song. "This small pocket of very high grade ore . . . yielded more than \$1,000,000."<sup>5</sup> An earlier report on the mines was made by Professor Ellis Clark, who had charge of them for a number of years. Clark says that the mines "were worked almost continuously until August, 1893, [for] a period of fifteen years. . . . Company work by day's labor in the mines was stopped in August, 1893, on account of the low price of silver, and at the present writing [February 1894] has not been resumed."<sup>6</sup>

Since August 1893 is a long time after September 1884, it is difficult to understand why Whitman stopped receiving dividends. All this has nothing to do with the poetry of Walt Whitman, but we are interested in almost everything he did. And in one of his few experiences in the stock market, and in one of his few connections with New Mexico, he was personally and monetarily far less successful than in sounding his barbaric though poetic yawp over the roofs of the world.

## NOTES

1. Edwin Haviland Miller, *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman* (New York, 1964), vol. 3, p. 346.
2. The *Commonplace-Book* is also in the Feinberg Collection. I prefer to call it the *Daybook*, as Whitman did. Incidentally, I am editing it for use in *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, to be published by the New York University Press.
3. See Logan Pearsall Smith's charming essay, "Knowing Walt Whitman," in *Unforgotten Years* (Boston, 1939), pp. 92-108; Robert Allerton Parker, *The Transatlantic Smiths* (New York, 1959). Logan became a distinguished writer (he was the boy in the family). Mary married Bernard Berenson, the renowned art critic, and was for years the celebrated hostess of I Tatti, their home in Florence. Alys, the quieter daughter, was to be the first wife of Bertrand Russell.
4. Fayette Alexander Jones, *New Mexico Mines and Minerals* (Santa Fe, 1904), pp. 89-94.
5. Charles R. Keyes, "Genesis of the Lake Valley Silver-Deposits," *Transactions of the American Institute of Mining Engineers*, vol. 39 (New York, 1909), p. 141.
6. "The Silver-Mines of Lake Valley, New Mexico," *Transactions of the American Institute of Mining Engineers*, vol. 24 (New York, 1895), pp. 138-67.

