In 1879, eager to see the prairie again, Walt Whitman (1819–1892) left his home in Camden, New Jersey, and embarked on a trip that would take him through Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado. On a previous trip in 1848, the poet had caught only passing glimpses of the prairie; on this second trip, however, Whitman devoted several weeks to touring the Midwest before spending nearly three months in St. Louis visiting his brother Thomas Jefferson Whitman, the city’s water commissioner.¹

The Kansas section of this western “jaunt,” as he called it, took Whitman to Topeka as well as Lawrence, where he attended the Old Settlers Reunion. The reunion commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the 1854 congressional legislation that had ushered in the settling of Kansas Territory. Whitman was already known for his poetic eulogies of President Abraham Lincoln, particularly “O Captain! My Captain!” (1865–1866) and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865–1866), in which he expressed his admiration for the Republican statesman and his frontier origins. Given Whitman’s association with Lincoln, republican ideals, and the Union cause during the Civil War, it is likely that Kansans appreciated his presence at the Old Settlers Reunion—particularly as it occurred at a time when the state was still very much steeped in republicanism, the legacy of the Civil War, and the mythologization of John Brown and the Bleeding Kansas era.

Vanessa Steinroetter is an Assistant professor of English at Washburn University, where she teaches classes in American literature. Her scholarly interests include nineteenth-century American literature, periodical literature, literature of the Civil War, and literary portrayals of life in the Great Plains.

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¹ Much of what is known as the Midwest or the Great Plains today was simply considered part of the larger “West” at the time of Whitman’s trip to Kansas, Missouri, and Colorado. Whitman himself considered this to be the “West” or the “Western country,” as he called the vast regions west of the Mississippi.
As Walter Eitner, Ed Folsom, and others have shown, this trip to the West left a deep impression on Whitman. In fact, as Whitman himself made clear, it became an important touchstone both for his ongoing project of constructing a public persona and for his vision of an ideal American democracy. His trip also yielded notes and ideas that he incorporated into four poems ("Italian Music in Dakota," "The Prairie States," "Spirit That Form'd This Scene" and "What Best I See in Thee") and selected prose writings, especially *Specimen Days*. Whitman lauded the people he met on this trip as friendly, warm, and genuine; one example is his description of Judge John Palmer Usher of Lawrence and his sons as "true westerners of the noblest type."

So enamored was Whitman of what he perceived to be true western manhood that he himself began to lay claim to it, fashioning himself into a "prairie wanna-be," as Folsom has stated. In one interview with a St. Louis newspaper in 1879 for instance, Whitman even proclaimed: "I am

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3. Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1892), 141. John Palmer Usher (1816–1889) was born in Brookfield, New York, but spent much of his life living in Indiana and Kansas. He served as the secretary of the interior under President Lincoln and became the general solicitor for the Union Pacific Railway. The Usher house in Lawrence is still standing and is located on 1425 Tennessee Street.

called a Western man…. Although born in New York, I am in sympathy and preference Western—better fitted for the Mississippi Valley.” One month later, another St. Louis newspaper printed an interview with Whitman in which he was quoted as saying, “I have come now a couple of thousand miles, and the greatest thing to me in this Western country is the realization of my ‘Leaves of Grass.' It tickles me hugely to find how thoroughly it [the Western country] and I have been in rapport. How my poems have defined them. I have really had their spirit in every page without knowing. I had made Western people talk to me, but I never knew how thoroughly a Western man I was till now.” These reported statements reveal that Whitman, as a result of his trip, sought to portray himself as an elective westerner—more at home in the remote, less settled western regions of the country than in the eastern cities.

The interest, it seems, was mutual, as many regional periodicals printed poems by and articles about Whitman from the 1870s through the 1890s. In 1872, for instance, two of Whitman’s poems were published in the Topeka-based Kansas Magazine. A significant number of smaller publications also reprinted selected Whitman poems, parodies, and essays on the poet’s life and work during his lifetime. Just as Whitman seized on western states such as Kansas and the landscape of the prairie as metaphorical vehicles for his vision of an American democracy of the future, so did Midwesterners—such as the editor of Kansas Magazine, Henry King—see in Whitman a cultural figure whom they could enlist in helping to promote literature and negotiate a specific Western or Midwestern identity distinct from that of cultural centers in the East.

As stated previously, Whitman clearly viewed this western jaunt—including his stay in Kansas—as a highly positive, formative experience. But what did Kansans think of him? More specifically, how did Kansans view or respond to Whitman? What image of the poet did Kansas newspapers present at the time of Whitman’s visit and in the following years? What texts by Whitman would Kansas readers of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s have encountered in their daily reading? While these questions regarding Whitman’s early reception in Kansas may never fully be answered, given the lack of material evidence and notorious difficulty of studying and reconstructing the history of readers and reading, this article represents an important step toward a more complete understanding of Whitman’s relationship with Kansas. Based on a careful review of texts by or about Whitman that appeared in the Kansas press in the second half of the nineteenth century, I argue that the image of Whitman was more complicated than the celebratory attitude suggested by the poet’s invitation to the Old Settlers Reunion or the publication of his poems in Kansas Magazine. As this article will show, newspapers and periodicals from Kansas made unique and illuminating contributions to Whitman’s larger national reception by printing selected poems, parodies, and satirical pieces; commenting on the poet’s life and work; and discussing his western trip in the context of nineteenth-century discourses on the West. This textual record indicates that Kansas newspapers not only knew of and engaged with Whitman’s work and public image at a time when Eastern publishing centers liked to think of the Midwest as a cultural and artistic hinterland, but that they displayed a variety of reactions that ranged from the celebratory to the satirical—thereby showing a more nuanced reaction to Whitman than mere praise or pure ridicule. While the publication of texts by and about Whitman in newspapers is only one part of Whitman’s early reception in Kansas, it is nonetheless an important counterpoint to the monolithic constructions of Midwesterners typical of Eastern publishing centers at the time. Indeed, since newspapers are shaped by—and to various degrees representative of—the interests of editors, contributors, and the local communities of readers to which they cater, the material presented in this article shows the complex and diverse attitudes that Kansas editors and readers appeared to evince toward the American bard.

6. The corpus of texts that forms the basis of this essay is taken from newspapers published in Kansas between 1850 and 1900 and consists of printings of Whitman’s poems and fiction, reviews of Whitman’s works, reprinted essays about Whitman, parodies of the poet’s work, short news items about his life (especially his struggle with illness and disability in the 1880s and until his death in 1892), and reprinted lectures that Whitman gave. I have relied primarily on the extensive collection of digitized newspapers available through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America site. I have also reviewed several magazines and newspapers on microfilm at the Kansas Historical Society. Finally, my work builds on existing scholarship on related topics, although there is currently no existing study of Whitman’s reception in the western press.

7. Previous scholarship on Whitman and the West has focused predominantly on Whitman’s own view of the West and the ways in which his western trip and his ideas about the West influenced his work. What has not been studied in any detail so far is how the western press in a larger sense responded to the poet’s work.

In 1872 two of Whitman's poems, “The Mystic Trumpeter” and “Virginia—The West,” as well as his essay “Walt Whitman in Europe,” were first published in the Topeka-based *Kansas Magazine*, a monthly literary journal edited by Henry King (who would eventually become the editor of the highly regarded St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*).8 An editorial in the inaugural issue (January 1872) explained some of the reasons for “sending forth to the world such a literary creation from off these vast, monotonous, sparsely-peopled prairies.” Acknowledging a certain presumptuousness in doing so, the editor proudly justified the undertaking by pointing to the unique qualities and perspectives that Kansas and the West could offer but also to the fact that “Kansas history is National history,” not merely regional history. “Kansas people are cosmopolites; and Kansas enterprise fully reflects that splendid spirit of faith and pluck which is carrying civilization horizonward.”9 Given this statement, the choice of Whitman as one of the few poets from the Northeast to be featured in the magazine is an interesting one, as *Kansas Magazine* primarily published original articles, poems, and stories by Midwestern writers. Whitman’s inclusion suggests that King (if no one else) saw in him a cultural figure, both well-known and different enough from the mainstream literary establishment in the East to help the editor achieve his own goals of promoting literature and negotiating a specific literary and cultural identity distinct from that of cultural centers in the East. In the pages of this and other periodicals discussed here, Whitman alternated between hero and counterpoint to the West, serving both functions well. He and his poetry contained much of the idealism that settled the West but also represented some of its eccentricities. The contradictory attitudes that characterize Whitman’s early reception and portrayal in the Kansas press reflect some of the contradictory aspects of the state’s image that publications such as *Kansas Magazine* sought to portray. In its inaugural issue, for instance, Henry King simultaneously speaks of the “vast, monotonous, sparsely-peopled prairies” and makes the claim that Kansans are “cosmopolite”—two images that are in tension with one another yet reflect important cornerstones of the self-image that Kansas publishers and writers were constructing during the second half of the nineteenth century.11 Read against the background of this

Thomas Jefferson Whitman, depicted here, hosted his brother Walt in St. Louis during Walt Whitman’s western trip. During Walt’s travels, Thomas, a water commissioner for the city of St. Louis, held regular correspondence with his brother. In a letter to his brother Thomas, Walt Whitman observed that the *Kansas Magazine* was designed in the “same style as the Atlantic—intended for Western Thought & reminiscences &c—.”

In 1872 two of Whitman’s poems, “The Mystic Trumpeter” and “Virginia—The West,” as well as his essay “Walt Whitman in Europe,” were first published in the Topeka-based *Kansas Magazine*, a monthly literary journal edited by Henry King (who would eventually become the editor of the highly regarded St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*) that was conceived as a western response to the prestigious Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly.* In a letter to his brother Thomas Jefferson Whitman, Whitman observed that *Kansas Magazine* was designed in the “same style as the Atlantic—intended for Western Thought & reminiscences &c—.”

11. Ibid.
larger cultural discourse, then, the conflicting responses to Whitman and his poetry in the early Kansas press became part of a larger negotiation of local and regional identity in dialog with popular images of the East.

That many readers within Kansas and the surrounding states read *Kansas Magazine* and encountered these poems by Whitman cannot be doubted. A June 1872 editorial states that over the course of the first six months of publication, the editor had received “stacks of letters… from critics, contributors, subscribers, newsmen and personal friends! We have just been running through a half bushel of them, and we are sorely tempted to print a batch of them. Here, for instance, is one asking the meaning of a certain stanza in one of Walt Whitman’s poems. (What an idea!)” On the one hand, the confusion and inability to make sense of Whitman’s poem suggest that Whitman and his work were oddities that did not fit the expectations or tastes of the community of readers of *Kansas Magazine*. On the other hand, the readers’ comments also reveal that, whether they enjoyed it or not, some Kansas readers in the early 1870s clearly read and tried to engage with Whitman and his poetry.

A similar impression is created two decades later in the pages of the *Wichita Eagle*, a daily newspaper that by 1890 boasted a circulation of nearly 10,000 in a county with almost 45,000 inhabitants. From 1890 to 1892 the *Wichita Daily Eagle* reprinted articles on Walt Whitman’s house, religion, New York ties, and burial. One article from May 1892 titled “Walt Whitman: Fine Tribute Paid to the Poet of Humanity at the Unity Club Last Night,” even describes in detail the readings, speeches, and other honorary activities held at a Wichita club in memory of the recently deceased poet. The article began, “Last night a most profitable meeting was held by the Unity club at council hall, to discuss Walt Whitman’s poetry. From a purely literary point of view the essays maintained a high standard.”

The article then describes the event as follows:

Mr. B. L. Keenan led off with a carefully prepared biographical paper. His emphasis was upon the personal character, the breadth, the spirituality and the kindliness of the man, rather than the chronological details of Whitman’s life. Mrs. Nora Scott followed with a brief account of the poet’s ancestry and personal history, taken from an authoritative biographical article. Dr. Stephen’s paper discriminated between Whitman’s genuine poetry and his vague unmeaning rhapsodies, paying at the same time a tribute to his manly recognition of sex equality. Mr. W. P. Cleaveland then read a brochure that was capital in its way, bright and witty, but not altogether appreciative of the good gray poet. Mr. C. evidently has an ear for music, poetic melody in particular, that Whitman does not satisfy. Mrs. Toler gave a quotation from the poet which seemed to place him among the theosophists. Mr. J. F. Craig followed with a brief paper emphasizing inspiration as the essential quality of poetry, without which Matthew Arnold, classic in style, falls short of being a true poet, and with which notwithstanding literary crudities Whitman rises to a high place in the world of poetry, Mr. —. Nan W. Healy’s poem at this point marked the climax of the evening. It was a sympathetic song of tribute to the seer, full of loving gratitude for the vision of universal things he had given to those who understand him. It was a fair picture the figure in white with a spray of “leaves of grass” at her waist, softly repeating her musical Hues to the listening friends present. Miss Blanche Martin’s contribution to the program was a recitation of Ingersoll’s eloquent funeral oration over Whitman. Mr. Shippen followed with a clever parody on Whitman from a recent novel of Richard Grant White’s, with the prefatory comment that Whitman’s place was too secure to be threatened by the darts of a witty paragrapher. Even ardent friends of the poet could appreciate a good satire. Mrs. Huff had a eulogistic paper on Whitman’s poetry with abundant quotations from distinguished critics, showing considerable painstaking search. Mrs. Olive Richards paid a graceful tribute to the “Poet of Democracy” in the form of an ode.

The idealistic and idealizing language with which the article describes Whitman is telling in its defense of the poet against attacks on his character and poetic or literary merit, both of which were common throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Whitman is referred to as
So much for Kansas and Kansas citizens; but great injustice would be done non-residents if we attempt to claim all the credit for the grand results of the last quarter of a century. At the opening of Kansas, slavery seemed upon every town and district except such towns and districts as were settled by the agency of the Emigrant Aid Society. Without those settlements, it is safe to say, Kansas would have been a slave State, with not even an attempt at resistance. Without the Emigrant Aid Society these towns would not have been, and without Eli Thayer, Amos A. Lawrence, Edward Everett Hale, Wm. M. Evarts and their co-laborers, that society would have had no existence. And these men would have been powerless with all their machinery had not the Liberty party and free soil candidates, under the lead of the Birneys, Hale, Julians and others been fought; and these campaigns would have been still-born had there been no Garrisons, Parker Pillsburys, Theodore Parkers and Wendell Phillipses to cry in the wilderness and prepare the way for the agencies that followed.

Another class of actors rendered invaluable service near the close of our struggle and must not be forgotten on this gala day. The Walkers, Stanwixs, Denvers, Forneys and other conservative Democrats, by their impartial and honorable course prevented much bloodshed and cut short the struggle, perhaps years, by crushing out fraud and giving the government to the legal majority as demanded by the Organic Act.

Also to our former pro-slavery antagonists who have so honorably acquiesced in the result, we must cordially extend the right hand of fellowship. We have reason to believe that many are well pleased with the institutions of the State, and all are willing to forever close the "bloody chasm" that once divided us.

In conclusion, let me congratulate Kansas and our guests and all friends of Kansas, that the close of the first quarter of a century from its settlement finds peace and good will among all its inhabitants, and unprecedented prosperity throughout its borders.

SONG OF A THOUSAND YEARS.

At the conclusion of Governor Robinson's address, Messrs. Thomas H. Edwards, Wm. C. Edwards and Captain Henry Booth, of Larned, sang the following appropriate song, written by Walt Whitman, the venerable poet, who had accompanied Col. Forney to Kansas and was present at the celebration:

Lift up your eyes, desponding freemen;
Fling to the winds your needless fears;
He who unfurled your beauteous banner,
Says it shall wave a thousand years.

In the pages of Kansas periodicals, Whitman was set up alternately as both hero and counterpoint to the West, serving both functions well. He and his poetry contained much of the idealism that settled the West, but also represented some of its eccentricities. The contradictory attitudes that characterize Whitman’s early reception and portrayal in the Kansas press reflect some of the contradictory aspects of the state’s image that Kansas publications sought to portray. Whitman’s “Song of A Thousand Years” is shown in this 1880 publication, *The Kansas Memorial: A Report of the Old Settlers’ Meeting Held at Bismark Grove, Kansas, September 15th and 16th, 1879*, edited by Charles Gleed.

“the poet of humanity,” “the good gray poet,” the “seer,” and the “Poet of Democracy”—all of which were common titles applied to Whitman by himself and others at the time. Moreover, the article refers to Whitman’s “manly” defense of equality between men and women, thereby showing both his progressive political views and casting him as a man secure in his masculinity. Even though the literary tributes to the poet included some parodistic elements, the article makes clear that these harmless remarks are meant to entertain those who appreciate
Whitman’s poetry rather than attack or ridicule the poet and his work. Ultimately, the image of Whitman as portrayed in the *Wichita Daily Eagle* is one of an American literary and cultural icon, beloved among the intellectual and literary circles of Wichita. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, eight years after this article (and the poet’s death), the *Wichita Daily Eagle* even listed Whitman among the “Century’s Fifty Great Men.”

This celebratory tendency, however, is only one of many attitudes toward Whitman and his work displayed in the Kansas press of this time. Other common responses included editorial comments, humorous pieces, or satirical texts reprinted from other American newspapers that questioned or mocked the poet’s literary talents, masculinity, and claims to western manhood. For instance, the *Dodge City Times*—a newspaper with a circulation of slightly over 700 in the 1880s that served southwest Kansas, including unsettled frontier regions—featured a short notice on September 22, 1881, informing readers that “Walt Whitman does not love nature’s walks as well as those in the city. He says: ‘I can no more get along without houses, civilization, aggregations of humanity, meetings, hotels, theaters, than I can get along without food.’” Short though this notice might be, it clearly does not associate the eastern poet with key ideas of western manhood as it was viewed by many native Midwesterners in the mid-to late nineteenth century. Consider, for instance, the following definition of western manhood published in the July 19, 1867, *Emporia News*. In an article titled “A Wail from Omaha,” the editor, Jacob Stotler, begins by quoting a complaint from a letter written by “some chap” with the initials I. B. R. and published in the *New York Tribune* on July 9. The “chap” laments the so-called claptrap and false promises that led him to seek his fortune in Omaha, where he has been unable to find work. After quoting from the letter and implying that its writer was arrogant and lazy, Stotler adds his own commentary: “Let all such go back to their mothers. Nebraska, Kansas, nor any of the vigorous, growing new Western States, want them. The sooner they leave the better. We say to such, go back to your native villages in the East, get behind the counters of some store and sell tape. Don’t undertake Western Manhood. It is too big with events, and calls forth the exercise of manly qualities to too great an extent for such delicate nerves.” Clearly, given such a definition of what makes a “western man,” Whitman fell short in the eyes of the editor, and probably also in the eyes of readers of the *Dodge City Times*.

This range of responses to the poet, from laudatory to critical and irreverent, also characterized and informed the selection and reception of original and reprinted poems in western periodicals. A significant number of smaller newspapers reprinted selected Whitman poems, parodies, and essays on the poet’s life and work in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In addition, many regularly reported trivia and featured news updates—often humorous—about Whitman, suggesting an awareness of and interest (even if only half serious) in the poet’s activities. On September 1, 1870, for instance, the *Leavenworth Weekly Times* published a short notice (on the same page as the poem “The Ballad of King Corn” by G. H. Barnes) that “Walt Whitman has gone to ‘Grass’ again. Some more ‘Leaves’ will appear soon.” Beginning in 1885, short notices on Whitman’s declining health were regularly published. In 1887 many newspapers included short articles or news items about the debate over granting Whitman a pension for the care he had provided to wounded soldiers during the Civil War. Many newspapers in the region also included regular jokes and mocking notes about Whitman’s poetry. The *Leavenworth Weekly Times* of January 1, 1874, exclaimed, “Good news! Walt Whitman is weary of writing poetry.” On one hand, such irreverent comments implied a lack of appreciation for Whitman’s poetic style, but they also suggest that the poet’s works were well-known enough for such a joking note to make sense. After all, one can successfully mock or parody something only if it is well-known.

One small-town Kansas paper in particular featured many Whitman-related items that were, more often than not, meant humorously. Founded by Solomon “Sol” Miller in 1857, the *White Cloud Kansas Chief*—later the *Weekly Kansas Chief* when Miller moved to the Doniphan


16. For more information on the *Dodge City Times*, see the entry on this newspaper created by the Kansas State Historical Society for Chronicling America: http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/essays/202.


18. [Jacob Stotler], “A Wail from Omaha,” *Emporia News*, July 19, 1867.

19. Other poems in Midwestern newspapers included “To a Locomotive in Winter” (*Andrew County Republican*, March 10, 1876, 2) and “A Death Sonnet for Custer” (*Fair Play* [St. Genevieve, Mo.], July 20, 1876, 6).


21. For example, a short notice in the *Wichita Eagle*, February 2, 1887, 1.

County seat of Troy to increase his readership and profits from ad sales—this four-page paper continued to be published under Miller’s editorship for over forty years. Miller had considerable hopes and ambitions for his paper, as evidenced by his statement later in life that “in those times, Kansas was full of aspiring towns, each destined to become a metropolis, and every town, at the very start, must have a newspaper…. We have been told that had we located in some large city or political center, the Chief might have become some great paper. They forget that when we came to Kansas, every town expected to become a mighty city.” As a biographical note by the Kansas Historical Society states, “Miller was the epitome of the frontier editor—outspoken, sometimes humorous, and often vitriolic.”

He was also, it seems, both interested in Whitman’s work and amused by it. From an early point, Miller’s paper featured items by and about Whitman. These were usually short news updates or jokes about the poet but also included reprintings of poems and even one fictional text by Whitman as well as articles about Whitman circulated in other newspapers. As early as 1862, at a time when Whitman and his poetry had not yet gained the widespread fame or notoriety of later years, the White Cloud Kansas Chief reprinted his poem “Old Ireland.”

The inclusion of poems in newspapers was standard throughout the nineteenth century, and readers in urban as well as rural areas would have expected poetry in the pages of the papers to which they subscribed, no matter how small they were. Similarly, fictional selections were common features of nineteenth-century newspapers; they presented a big draw for communities of readers who not only perused the papers in private but frequently read from them aloud in small circles. Miller’s White Cloud Kansas Chief was representative in this regard as well and even included one of Whitman’s lesser-known fictional tales in its pages. In 1874, for instance, the paper featured Whitman’s “The Death of Wind-Foot: An Indian Story.” This revenge tale involving Native American warriors from enemy tribes was originally part of his 1842 temperance novel, Franklin Evans. It is likely that Miller featured it in his newspaper because one of the tribes featured in the story was the “Kansi” tribe, which his readers might have understood to be the Kanza or Kaw tribe after whom their state was named.

Another reprinting of Whitman’s work in the Weekly Kansas Chief had a connection to the West. The poem “What best I see in thee” appeared in an 1880 issue of the paper. This poem was later published in the book Sunflowers: A Book of Kansas Poems (1914), edited by Willard Austin Wattles and Ivan Schuler.

under the heading "Walt Whitman on Grant." Though Whitman claimed to have written it in St. Louis, it had first appeared in the Philadelphia Press on December 17, 1879. It cast Grant as a heroic figure who "walks with kings" but who also had "these average prairie sovereigns of the west, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Ohio's, Indiana's millions, comrades, farmers, soldiers," invisibly walking with him and symbolizing his roots in the West. Though he reprinted the original poem, Miller added a subtitle in parentheses revealing his ambivalent attitude toward Whitman's work: "Supposed to Be Poetry."

Similarly, Miller regularly showed his humorous or sarcastic side in such purported news updates as the following notice from July 1871: "Walt Whitman is 'loafing and inviting his soul' on Long Island, preparatory to 'sounding his barbaric yawn' anew in the fall." Under a category titled "The Fun of the Thing," the Weekly Kansas Chief reprinted a parody of Whitman's poetry from the St. Louis Democrat: "Extraordinary Result of Walt Whitman's Last Effort." A prefatory note to the poem falsely announced the poet's death two decades before Whitman's actual passing. As the note informed readers, "The public will be pleased to learn that the great poet is dead. This last effort, in the present state of the weather, was too much for him." Another parody was printed the following week, this one taken from the Minneapolis Tribune and signed by "What Wilt-Man." This parody was based on an actual Whitman poem by the same title, "A Kiss to the Bride," published on May 21, 1874, in the New York Daily Graphic.

Perhaps the most unusual text about Whitman to be reprinted in the Weekly Kansas Chief, however, was a tongue-in-cheek account of a meeting and conversation between Whitman and Oscar Wilde. While based on an actual meeting known to have taken place and drawing on an interview with Whitman in the Philadelphia Press in which he comments on it, this less serious rendition of their meeting and possible romantic encounter published

30. "A Kiss to the Bride," Weekly Kansas Chief, July 16, 1874, 4. The following excerpt provides a good example of this parody:

Scarred, blistersome, undefined,
With venison from East and West,
And saleratus North and South,
And numerous other ingredients from Northeast and Southwest,
And several Counties yet to hear from.
Through me, to-day, 1,000,000 tarts and hams,
Perhaps the most unusual text about Whitman to appear in the Weekly Kansas Chief was a tongue-in-cheek account of a meeting and conversation between Whitman and Oscar Wilde, published on February 9, 1882, under the heading "Oscar and Walt." Although based on an actual meeting known to have taken place and drawing on an interview with Whitman in the Philadelphia Press in which he comments on it, this less serious rendition of their meeting and likely romantic encounter reprinted in a small Kansas newspaper raises interesting questions about how widespread knowledge of Whitman's homoerotic inclinations was outside of the eastern states.
in a small Kansas newspaper raises interesting questions about how widespread knowledge of Whitman’s homoerotic inclinations was outside the eastern states. The piece, titled “Oscar and Walt: Reported Interview between Wilde and Whitman,” appeared in the Weekly Kansas Chief on February 9, 1882, and credited the Louisville Courier-Journal as the source. “At last. It is done. They have met,” begins the account.

“Yes, it is true,” said Walter, or in words to this effect; “he came to see me, this evening, here in my eyrie in Camden.”

“And I took him in—

“In and in, and up and up; to the innermost, uppermost dins and ups of my den” ...

“Here we were as ‘thee and thou’ each to the other.”

Suggestive phrases such as a “kissing conflux” and a “communion” are then used to describe this meeting, and Wilde purportedly leaned over and laid his hand on Whitman’s knee. The narrator, supposed to be Whitman, says, “We spent two hours together; he and I; me and him.... And when he left, I lifted up my lips.”31 By the end of the essay, even the most obtuse reader could not have missed the heavy-handed allusions to homoerotic activities between the two men.

This fictional interview was part of a wave of satirical and subversive newspaper articles, parodies, and essays on Oscar Wilde sent out by the Associated Press in advance of the Irish author’s American tour. This tour, which began in January 1882 and took him from New York to California and many states in between, also included four stops in Kansas—Leavenworth, Topeka, Lawrence, and Atchison—between April 19 and 22, 1882. As Charles Harmon Cagle observes, “Long before he reached such diverse places as Fort Wayne, Ind., or Pawtucket, R.I., the newspaper caricatures, lampoons, and hard ridicule had been spun out ahead of him by the Associated Press

Kansas newspaper coverage of Walt Whitman is an important and underutilized source that can help us better understand the history of his reception in the state. Careful study of these publications, the editors, readers, and writers, reveals unique and illuminating contributions to Whitman’s larger national reception. This photograph of Whitman was taken in 1887, five years prior to his death. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division, Washington, D.C.

Wafting 2,000,000 clubs, 3,000,000 soul-felt swears,
With 40,000,000 reserve fund in the Treasury

Compare to Whitman’s original:
Sacred, blithesome, undenied,
With benisons from East and West,
and other sources. Wilde was marked for satirical attacks by editors and reporters hiding behind the conventional journalistic anonymity of the time.” While deliberately taking aim at Wilde, however, the fictitious interview also did much to satirize and ridicule Whitman.

The publication of this text in the *Weekly Kansas Chief* and many other newspapers across the nation is also remarkable for a number of other reasons. In 1882 Whitman had not yet been openly confronted by the English author John Addington Symonds about the homoerotic nature of several of his poems, and Oscar Wilde had not yet gained international notoriety for his public trials brought on by the exposure of his homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas—events that occurred in 1890 and 1895, respectively. The implied homoerotic inclinations of both Whitman and Wilde featured in the *Weekly Kansas Chief* article are therefore based on subtler clues and speculations circulating in the American and British periodical press in the early 1880s. It is intriguing to imagine the reaction of Kansas readers to this piece in the context of Whitman’s visit to the state just three years earlier as a respected cultural figure and visitor from the East. Regardless of where the fictional description of the meeting between Whitman and Wilde was first composed, it ended up in the pages of a newspaper from Troy, Kansas, forcing its readers to consider Whitman in a light that challenged traditional notions of (stereotypically heterosexual) western manhood.

From a perusal and study of the assorted Whitman-related texts printed in the *Chief*, it becomes clear that the editor, Sol Miller, was very well acquainted with Whitman’s poetry and life and actively followed news updates and parodistic or humorous notes about him in other newspapers. While we may not have direct, written evidence of his readers’ reactions to these texts on Whitman, their inclusion in the pages of Miller’s paper nevertheless shows that a significant part of the population of Troy and the surrounding area would have been confronted with these irreverent and even unflattering portrayals of Whitman, who, as we have seen, was celebrated elsewhere in Kansas at least as often as he was mocked in Miller’s paper.

While this example and the other newspaper items discussed in this article can only begin to explore the full range of responses to Whitman’s works and his western jaunt by Kansas readers and editors, they present important contributions to the larger history of his reception. We know much about how Whitman’s trip to Kansas and the West in general affected the poet and his work, but almost nothing about how Kansans responded to or may have thought about the poet in the last few decades of his life. Careful study of the contemporary response by editors, readers, and writers in the press reveals the unique and illuminating contributions to Whitman’s larger national reception made by these publications through their selection of poems, parodies and sketches, commentary on the poet’s life, and discussion of his western trip. As these early contributions show, Whitman’s reception in the early Kansas press was largely shaped by nineteenth-century ideas about Kansas and western identity on the one hand and discourses on Whitman’s homoerotic tendencies and supposed lack of poetic talent on the other.

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