

STORIES of New Jersey

Then, as his days began to decline, the aging poet could enjoy life, as he wished. Camden people bought him a horse and buggy, and he was the delight of the town, driving at full speed, his great white beard streaming over his shoulders. Nothing disturbed him, neither popular opinion nor physical inconvenience. He took whatever life offered, even the smell of the neighboring guano factory and the shouting of a nearby congregation.

In his bedroom was an iron stove. In cold weather he kept the wood piled about its base, while in an outer circle were stacks of books and manuscripts. When he went to bed he would hang his clothes on the higher piles, dropping his shoes between the islands of books, sticking the ink bottle where it would hold. His housekeeper was a brave woman, leaving the poet to pursue his work undisturbed by any criticism of his disorderly habits. Even when he took his work to the kitchen she did not complain. His spotted dog ambled around and the cat smoothed itself against his legs. Sometimes a rooster paraded in with his wives and picked around contentedly.

Many famous people journeyed to the little house to meet Whitman, and he received them all with the same enthusiasm and informality as he offered the children and neighborhood friends.

In the autumn of 1891 he began planning his tomb, which can be seen in Harleigh Cemetery in Camden. The inscription "For That of Me Which Is to Die" was written by the poet and engraved on the stone at his request.

All through the winter he lingered, confined to his bed in his cluttered bedroom, surrounded by a sea of books and a mass of manuscripts. Finally, on March 26, 1892, he closed his eyes for the last time. The tomb was waiting for his body, but his spirit has been kept alive in the little house which reflects so much of his personality and life.