

Dandelions on the lawn, whether it brings a person frustration or joy, is a sure sign summer is on the way. A non-native species, the dandelion has grown in great profusion in this area since early pioneers settled here, often to their dismay. Early settler, John M. Longyear writes of late 1890's, "Marquette was proud of its beautiful lawns, upon which the dandelions encroached remorselessly. A constant fight was waged by the owners of these lawns against the pestiferous plants. In my own case, I had tried everything I could think or hear of to destroy the dandelions in the lawn. Every spring I employed numerous boys to dig the dandelions in the yard. Thousands had been destroyed, but one morning, at the end of four years of digging, I looked out on the lawn and saw at least one thousand blossoms, and I realized that the contest was hopeless."

Was this desire to rid Marquette of dandelions part of the inspiration for the well-loved children's tale by local author, Carroll Watson Rankin? *Dandelion Cottage* is a novel about the adventures of four girls who earn the right to use a small cottage as a playhouse for the summer after they pull all of the dandelions out of the yard (which was not an easy task!). Most people know the small bungalow formerly owned by St. Paul's Episcopal Church gave her the inspiration for the playhouse. It had been used as the sexton's house, and was just the perfect size for a girl's clubhouse. But, what about the dandelions?

John M. Longyear goes on to write that the Marquette Improvement Association (which sounds suspiciously like the "Village Improvement Society" in *Dandelion Cottage*) held a contest to rid the town of dandelions, offering prizes to school children who could collect the most: they offered five-dollars for first prize, three-dollars for second prize, two-dollars for third prize and one-dollar for fourth prize. They also offered one-dollar for the largest dandelion. The organization had worked on many projects in the community, and now hoped to rid Marquette of the dandelion, once and for all!

The contest was the talk of the town. For weeks, children pulled dandelions, some employing friends and family to work for them, storing the dandelions in baskets, bags, sheds, coal bins, and wheelbarrows, hoping to win the prizes. Eventually the weather turned hot and the dandelions fermented and rotted. On the day of the contest, dandelions were measured and recorded and the winners announced. The drop off locations were at the Ridge Street schoolhouse and the Rock Street schoolhouse. After hours of deliveries, they were overrun with three thousand five hundred bushels of rotting dandelions! The disappointed children who did not win were given flower seed packets as consolation so that they may help beautify the town, but many of them promptly poured them out in the school yard.

One boy had an entire wagon load of dandelions which he had gathered by hiring his friends to work for him. Although he received no prize, he still had to spend his entire allowance over the summer to pay the other boys for their work. A widow with two daughters thought she might be able to buy one of her daughters a new pair of shoes with the prize money, so they spent much of two or three weeks digging. Although she did not win a prize, locals made sure her daughter got the shoes she needed. Another fellow misunderstood the contest and thought he would be paid five cents a bushel for the dandelions. He spent a week digging them, and was furious when he found out, departing without the prize money as well.

So, dandelions were on people's mind in the community in the early 1900's.

Carroll Watson Rankin was a Marquette resident her entire life, born May 11, 1864, the daughter of pioneer residents who came here to open a trading post in 1855. She began writing at an early age, recording events happening in her home and drawing pictures that entertained her family. Her first story was published in a juvenile paper when she was just 11. This led her to her first job at the local paper. She writes, "I was sixteen when the *Daily Mining Journal*, then in its infancy as a daily, advertised for 'a bright boy to do reporting.' I applied for the job. I can still see the twinkle in Mr. James Russell's eye as I explained that, while I wasn't a boy, I was almost sure I was bright. I got the job and kept it until I was married."

After she was married, she became interested in gardening and began to write articles for publications such as *Ladies Home Journal*. Her career writing children's stories began one night after she told her own children a story at the dinner table based upon their bad behavior. The children loved it, so she wrote it down that night and sent it to the *Youth's Companion*. They sent her a check for forty dollars and a request for more stories, much to her amazement. Encouraged by her success, she sent stories to other magazines and was published time and again.

But, how did the story *Dandelion Cottage* come about? Mrs. Rankin writes, "One day during the summer of 1903 -- in August, I think -- my little daughter Eleanor announced that she had read all the books for little girls that the world contained. It was a warm day. I was lounging on the porch doing something quite unimportant with a pencil and pad. 'Very well,' I said, 'I'll write a book for you.' So I wrote just as fast as I could and handed the sheets of paper to Eleanor who read them eagerly and waited quietly for more. While this was going on, several other small girls joined the party. They, too, scrambled for those first few pages and devoured them eagerly. This went on for several days until the pad was exhausted. So was the game. By this time, there were seven chapters -- too much for a short story -- too little for a book -- but it seemed a pity to waste all that writing so it was laid aside for some possible future use."

In early 1904, Mrs. Rankin received a letter from Henry Holt and Company wondering if she would write a book for girls. They had noticed her work in the *Youth's Companion*. Mrs. Rankin replied she "had something that looked a lot like the beginning of a book." By April, *Dandelion Cottage* was finished, and by May she received acceptance of its publication by telegram.

But is it a true story? She writes, "People often ask me if the story in *Dandelion Cottage* is a true one. It started as a true story, but no story teller can be trusted to stick to the exact truth -- his pencil runs away with him. There was a cottage, there were four little girls, and there were dandelions, but the rest was cut from the whole cloth."

The most amazing things happen when we pay attention to the clues leading us to inspiration. From her early days watching family interactions right through observing the adventures of a growing northern town, Carroll Watson Rankin was always searching for her inspiration. One time it came in the form of a prolific yellow flower and a bored child's summer vacation.

Carroll Watson Rankin died in Marquette in 1945 at the age of 81, her books still well loved classics by people of all ages. John M. Longyear made his mark on the community in many ways, including founding the Marquette County History Museum, the current publisher of *Dandelion Cottage*. The actual *Dandelion Cottage* still stands today, lovingly remodeled and moved two blocks east on Arch Street in Marquette. The dandelion is also still alive and well in the community.