



## The View from Right Field

*by Rick Ohler*

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**“Fine and Dandy”**

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I drove by my house the other day—at least, I still think of it mine. Of course, I don't live in the house anymore except in my childhood memory and my ageless soul. I haven't lived at 472 Oakwood Avenue since 1972 when my dad died and I came home from college for a year to offer whatever comfort I could to my mom. Other than that, I've been gone for 46 years, two thirds of my life. And Mom sold the place in 1989, so an interloper, a newcomer has had his name on the deed for nearly 30 years. Heck, before we arrived in 1953, the Crains owned it, and we were the newcomers.

Anyway, the point is that I was out and about early on Mothers' Day and I chanced to be dodging the potholes on Oakwood when I went by “my” house. Something out of order made me pause, something I couldn't quite figure. It wasn't the building itself; I long ago become inured (RIP Snake) to the fact that the fellow who traded city living in 1989 for the relative calm of the geographical center of East Aurora set about undoing, upgrading and otherwise correcting everything my well-intentioned, but hopelessly ham-handed father had done in his many “No need to pay someone to fix that, Dear; I'll do it myself” frenzies of home repair braggadocio. In our day, the two-story, high-peaked, century-plus old, almost elegant, Victorian wannabe homestead with its floor-length windows and high ceilings was what you might have called comfortable, or functional, or perhaps lived in. We forgave her sags and creaks, rough edges, punky wood and waiting to-be-repaired state, because it was the perennial winner of Best House to Grow Up In Anywhere Award, if you asked my brothers and me. By 2018, three decades into the new regime, it had become positively palatial—spacious new front porch, state-of-the-art windows, attached two-car garage with an in-law apartment and a concrete driveway you could land a small plane on. None of that surprised me, though; I come down Oakwood on foot, bicycle or car a couple thousand times a year, so I've watched 472 molt, refeather and gentrify in an otherwise blue collar neighborhood. No, something else was terribly wrong.

Then, it hit me. Four seventy-two Oakwood stuck out from the rest of the homes because it alone on the block, actually, it alone for a block either way had no dandelions in its lawn. Up and down Oakwood, I saw a sea of luscious yellow emerging in yard after yard, the true sign of spring. I stopped to look and wondered. Perhaps he had mowed early, I thought. But it was Mothers' Day, and the unwritten rule in the unwritten *Homeowners' Guide to Suburban Etiquette* clearly states that you shan't mow your lawn on the second Sunday in May while Mom is still breakfasting in bed. My inspection (thank goodness, the owner didn't discover me snooping on his lawn) turned up not a single weed of any genus or species. It was clear: the new (well, 29 years new) owner had had poisoned my, well, his lawn.

Dandelions were central to our landscape as kids. I suppose we knew that others called them weeds, but who can forget those halcyon summer days when we would sit for hours picking dandelions and thumb-popping the flowers at each other? I remember making necklaces and bracelets from the stems, carefully inserting the slender ones into the fat ones, weaving and braiding them, then adorning ourselves in lavish garlands. I remember blowing the fluffy seeds when they matured and watching them sail off on the breeze to have their offspring in another yard. And I remember neighbors, back before pesticides became the rage, rooting out dandelions one at a time with a special forked digger, Sisyphus like, only to have them reappear, seemingly overnight.

I restarted my trusty '00 Black Yukon, the Official Pace Car of Right Field, and motored around the village. Most of the lawns in our fair burg looked properly festooned with the *Taraxacum officinale*, Latin for the common dandelion, a member, by the way, of the daisy family. Certainly the more modest, normal, regular-folk village homes all had dandelions spreading like laughter across their grassy areas—Oakwood, Grove, Park Place, Prospect, Walnut, Willow, Sycamore, and so on. I wondered, though, if there was a proportional relationship between real estate values and dandelions, if 472 Oakwood had by dint of its prosperity, deemed dandelions a pariah. So I headed up into some of the tonier neighborhoods in town, the ones we Middle Oakwood dwellers of the '50s and '60s used to call the Gold Coast. While plenty of those lawns were antiseptically green, with a near astroturf fakeness, I was relieved to find some of the grassplots in the finer homes of our zip code sporting a few renegade *Taraxacum officinale* and offering a contrast to the *Argrostis stolonifera* (common lawn grass). A few spreads of fescue were in fine fettle, hosting robust populations of yellow heads. I thought that maybe the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the one where realize that we don't have to dump toxic chemicals on the areas where our kids and pets play, just to have the illusion of an outdoor carpet surrounding our houses.

Disappointment returned when I toured the newer, still growing neighborhoods on the edges of the village—startling the inhabitants with my junker Yukon in their midst—and found the former pastures of timothy, clover, alfalfa now given over fescue and Kentucky bluegrass and not a dandelion in sight. But it's early; they can't

keep the wind out of those developments, and fluffy dandelion seeds will find a way to wing their ways there.

A thousand words in the world's best hometown newspaper probably seem like a lot of fuss for a simple weed. But out here in Right Field, we love dandelions; in fact, we can't wait for them every spring. My sweetheart, Kateri, even has You Tube videos from her Dandelion Lessons studio, where she spreads her love of art, and the techniques for creating it, dandelion-like, to the winds. Maybe loving dandelions is like rooting for an underdog: a whole industry of chemical makers and lawn sprayers exists simply to eradicate a harmless, bee-attracting, edible, medicinal, fermentable plant, so we, naturally, champion the dandelion's cause. Maybe it's because [Warning: possible allegory coming] dandelions represent resistance to homogeneity, they represent the struggle to exist in a pre-ordained world, too-ordered world. Maybe dandelions teach us that lawns, just like societies need diversity. We aren't any of us so cool that we don't benefit from having a few weeds among us. Or maybe we just think they're pretty.