

**BRIGHTON AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Brighton, MI 48116-0481

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**WILL CARLETON ??**



Michigan’s unofficial poet laureate, Will Carleton, was born in a pioneer farmer’s cabin in Lenawee County, Hudson, Michigan October 21, 1845. Of English ancestry (to America in 1600s) his family had, in 1837, moved from a comfortable village home in New Hampshire, to Michigan where land was \$1.25 an acre.

His father, John H., born October 16, 1801, decided to follow the call to “Go west” and get some of that inexpensive fertile land. With the fertile land came the usual wolves, bears, mosquitoes, etc. Any settler who delivered to the county office one dead wolf, would receive \$5. A good shot could earn some cash.

Will’s education was acquired in nearby Hillsdale, where he attended school. At 17 he entered Hillsdale College for a year, then began teaching, later graduating in 1869. Utilizing his rare ability to paint pictures with words he began writing newspaper articles and poems. Lecturing opportunities about everyday scenes of life of that day, took him throughout the country; also Canada and Great Britain.

The Bard of Michigan wrote of life in early rural Michigan, late 19th century, employing the rural manner of speaking. His poem “Over the Hills to the Poor House” was inspired when he saw a 70 year old woman actually trudging her way to the Hillsdale Poor House. Widely published, this poem is credited with a nationwide movement to improve conditions in homes for the elderly.

Michigan State legislature passed a law, in 1919, memorializing the birthdate of Michigan’s “Pioneer Poet” as a special day dedicated to the recognition of all literature in all Michigan schools. Without any penalty involved, the law was disobeyed and is now forgotten.

Brighton historian Bill Pless, writes that had Will Carleton known about the law, he’d not care about being forgotten. His many writings tell us that.

(Compiled by Marieanna Bair from: Bill Pless writings; “Will Carleton—Poet of the People” by Jerome A. Fallon and data from Judy Bair. Additions/corrections requested: 810-229-6402.)

Over The Hill to the Poor House (1872)

Over the hill to the poor-house I’m trudging’ my weary way -  
I, a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray -  
I, who am smart an’ chipper, for the years I’ve told,  
As many another woman that’s only half as old.