

## THE LEGEND OF OPAL WHITELEY

Adapted from article by Steve Williamson



Every town has its legends. Most are unknown to outsiders. However, our legend, Opal Whiteley, is known worldwide. Visitors come to Cottage Grove each year to see where she lived and wrote about. People love to take selfies by her mural on Main Street.

In 1918 Opal was the most popular teenager in Oregon. She was an energetic teacher and youth leader blending science and faith in lectures to thousands of people. She had a nature **specimen** collection that numbered in the thousands. Everyone thought she would be a great teacher or scientist. Instead, she became perhaps Oregon's most **controversial** author and a lasting mystery.

It can be hard to separate fact from fiction in legends. We don't know for certain what her younger years were like, but she came to Cottage Grove in 1904 when she was six years old. Her family's farm was near today's Row River Trail Head on Mosby Creek. She was from a family of loggers and miners. Her writings are filled with both her love of nature and the people who work in the woods.

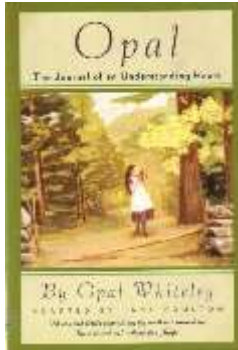
By the time she was in high school, Opal had lived in over a dozen lumber camps up and down the Row River. She could hunt, fish and sew her own clothes. She also had a talent for teaching. Opal was nine when she started taking children on nature walks, describing the beauty of the outdoors. She attended the Church of Christ at 6th and Gibbs.

Opal impressed professors at the University of Oregon and was admitted before she had finished high school! She took a lot of classes and set a record for most library books checked out. She had a photographic memory, which some researchers attribute to autism. Despite the strong start, Opal dropped out her sophomore year.

In 1918 Opal Whiteley moved to Los Angeles in **pursuit** of her dreams to writing nature books and building a children's museum. She even tried to get into acting. Opal never became an actor, but she did teach the children of many Hollywood stars and producers.



She also published her first book, *The Fairyland Around Us*. Opal then moved to Boston, home of the nation's most influential universities and publishers.



In 1920 her childhood diary, *Opal, the Journal of an Understanding Heart*, was the number two best-seller. At the young age of twenty-two, Opal Whiteley was a major international success! Her diary tells the story of being an orphaned child growing up in the Oregon lumber camps. Opal's tales of talking with trees, animals and their fairy spirits captivated audiences.

But with the same speed as she rose ... Opal fell from the public's favor. Just a year later her diary was out of print and Opal was accused of fraud, and lying about her family. She claimed that the Whiteleys were not her real parents and that her real father was a French prince. Many also believed that she had written her diary as a young adult, not when she was a child as she claimed.

Disgraced, Opal went to India and Europe to prove her story. She would never return to Oregon. The final years of her life were spent in an English mental hospital. She died there in 1992 and was buried in London's Highgate Cemetery under both her French and her American names. Her story of royal birth is more accepted in Europe than in America. Opal Whiteley's work and writings were forgotten for many years, only recently regaining popularity. Her books have been reprinted in at least four languages, including French and Chinese. Statues of Opal stand at the entrances of both the Cottage Grove Library and the University of Oregon's Knight Library.



#### Discussion Points

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1. Imagine you are taking a group of kids on a nature walk, what types of things would you show them, what type of questions might they ask?
  2. Opal has a mural, statues, and many landmarks named after her, why do you think people are still so interested in her a hundred years after she moved away from Cottage Grove?
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#### Vocabulary

Controversial: giving rise or likely to give rise to public disagreement.

Pursuit: the action of following someone or something.

Specimen: an individual animal, plant, piece of a mineral, etc., used as an example for scientific study or display.

