

# In the land of the little people

by Rich Warren

Once each year, the streets of Chesterton, Indiana turn into a sort of Yellow Brick Road.

That's because each September the annual "Wizard of Oz" festival blows into town, just like a cyclone, complete with a theme parade, trivia contests, trinket and memorabilia booths, and real-life movie celebrities.

You thought all the stars of the *Wizard of Oz* had departed this side of the rainbow? Well, yes, the Dorothy, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lions riding on parade floats are only look-alikes, but those wizened, elderly midgets madly waving at you are authentic Munchkins, the last of the surviving troupe of little people who welcomed Judy Garland to Oz in 1939 and danced and mugged their way into cinematic history.

And there's no doubt these little people

another's goings-on. It's heartening to know that one of the most famous family movies of all time has produced a family among the Munchkins.

And, of course, one thing they share—and are eager to talk about—are their memories of the nine glorious weeks in late 1938 when they worked on a film they never dreamed would become a Hollywood legend. Call them up—I did. They'll be glad to regale you with their memories.

Before the film was made, many of the Munchkins had been working professionally in troupes of midget singers, actors, and wrestlers. When MGM put out the call for Munchkins in early 1938, it was originally hoped 300 could be located. Little people all over the U.S. were astonished to get phone calls from Hollywood scouts, and many of them jumped at the chance to be in the movies. They arrived en masse in Hollywood

in November and had the breath knocked out of them at the splendor of the sets. In the end, 124 little people were gathered, ranging in height from 2'3" to 4'8". The smallest of them, Karl Slover, could barely reach a doorknob and took baths in a sink.

What tidbits can they offer about the big-name stars of the film? Not surprisingly, the Munchkins only interacted with those principals of the movie that appeared in the Munchkin scene—Judy Garland, Billie Burke (the "Good" Witch of the North), and Margaret Hamilton (the Wicked Witch). Ironically, it was the wicked witch who went out of her way to make the little people feel at home, while the good witch held herself aloof. In fact, Slover, who played one of the Munchkin soldiers and was a Munchkin Trumpeter, remembers the day Billie

Burke arrived. "She looked a hundred years old, hunchbacked and walking with a cane.

She threw off her overcoat and they went to work on her. They really fixed her up."

Fond memories of Judy abound with the Munchkins, who remember the thoughtfulness of the young star who gave each of them a box of chocolates for Christmas; they plopped themselves down on the Yellow Brick Road and shared the chocolates with one another. They remember the teenaged Garland as vivacious but also anxious and concerned about making a good impression. Dona Massin, who worked with the Munchkins in the dance sequences, remembers that Judy was predisposed to gaining weight. She also wonders if Judy's drug problems later in life may have begun as early as *The Wizard of Oz* if the studio provided her with "assistance" to keep her weight down.

But the predominant memory is of hard work. The Munchkins arrived on the set each day at 6 a.m. and would sometimes work as late as 11 p.m. Hours were spent in makeup, donning pug noses and rounded apple cheeks that were molded individually for them each day. The elaborate costumes, made of felt, were heavy with silk tassels, silver chains, and wide buckles. The huge (for them) costumes and jewelry were designed to make them look smaller than they even were. One Munchkin, enshrouded in his elaborate costume, fell into a toilet during filming and was so encumbered he had to be rescued.

Days of preparation went into learning their dances, which Massin said weren't really dances at all, "just little hoppy things, cute little movements." And no, those squeaky, helium voices are not really theirs, but they still had to spend time learning the lines they lip-synched. Before filming, the Munchkins were culled for the solo, "speaking" roles. Meinhardt Raabe scored a coup by landing the part of the Coroner. His one line: "As Coroner, I must aver, I've thoroughly examined her. And she's not only merely dead; she's really most sincerely dead" has been enough to bring him 50 years of fame. Likewise, Jerry Maren, one of the Lollipop Kids (the one in the middle, he is quick to inform you) has become a hot commodity on the Munchkin celebrity circuit on the basis of his few moments on the screen.

Over the years, there have been persistent stories that the Munchkins offscreen engaged in drunken fistfights and nightly sex orgies at the hotel. The Munchkins who visit Chesterton each year feel that these stories have been grossly exaggerated, although they admit a few incidents did take place. Meinhardt Raabe remembers two midget twins who were real troublemakers and who beat up an unfortunate colleague. Slover witnessed another Munchkin pulling his wife on the floor by her hair. There were isolated incidents of drunkenness, and it seems that a few of the Munchkin women did offer themselves to shocked stagehands, but for the most part the hardworking Munchkins were far too busy to stray towards sin. "We didn't have time to even kibbitz," remembers Raabe.

The novelty of so many midgets in one place did make the Munchkins Hollywood celebrities during filming. Dona Massin remembers Clark Gable dropping by to ogle the little people. And after the Munchkin scene was a "wrap," fame followed many of the diminutive stars, who went on to appear in other films like *The Terror of Tiny Town* and *Tiny Troubles*. Others went on to tour in vaudeville, USO shows, night clubs, and Broadway shows.

Over time, the *Wizard of Oz* faded from most Americans' memories, but in the 1960s, when the film began its annual television airings, new generations fell in love with the endearing story, until the movie and its characters achieved the cult status they enjoy today. As longest-living survivors of the film's actors, the Munchkins now enjoy superstardom wherever they appear. Margaret Pellegrini, who was one of the Munchkin Maidens and one of the Sleepy Heads, has said that she can't even go to the bank without being asked if she was in the film. Belated or not, the celebrity status is enjoyable for the

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are big celebrities. The traditional "Meet the Munchkins" assembly line of autograph-signing and photo-taking is always mobbed. You need an entrance time and special admission card just to get into the place, and many people who wish to commune with the Munchkins must be turned away.

It may have taken them 50 years to become this famous, but clearly the couple dozen Munchkins who remain revel in their celebrity status. They also travel to similar festivals in Kansas and in Tennessee and to the Judy Garland Festival in Minnesota. And even though they reside all over the U.S., they have formed a tight-knit community, calling and visiting each other, keeping track of one

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# Little people

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Munchkins. For Meinhardt Raabe, what really makes it all worthwhile is when he sees a child who is awestruck when faced with a real live character from the movie. He knows then the magic will continue to be passed on to future generations.

Now that the surviving Munchkins are in their 70s and 80s, they look back on their lives with a sense of satisfaction. Many of them cite the sense of community they found through the years by working together in troupes of midgets. Rather than seeing themselves as objects of fun, they found it validated a sense of their own worth by being part of a group of people similar to themselves. They learned that if other people had a problem with their stature, the problem was the other person's, not theirs. Slover, who went on to be a manager in a Florida hotel, remembers a surly bellhop who stated

he "had trouble taking orders from a shrimp." Slover showed him who was boss; he fired him.

Many of the Munchkins actually see themselves as lucky they were born so little. They feel their stature has brought them advantages they wouldn't have otherwise enjoyed. Rabbe, the Munchkin coroner, claims to have had eight careers in his eight decades. Besides playing in the movies, he was the voice of Oscar Mayer weiners for many years, served as a carnival barker, taught German, was the smallest licensed pilot in uniform during World War II, and is currently a horticultural consultant in his retirement community.

"Over the years, because of my size, people kept telling me, 'You can't, you can't.' I guess I showed them that I could, I could," Raabe mused. "If I'd been normal size, I'd have spent my whole life on a farm." Instead, his diminutive stature has taken him on a trip over the rainbow—and beyond.