

Childhood Remembered

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By Kiley Kellermeyer

True, there may be no place like home. But technically, there is no place quite like the OZ Museum in Wamego, Kan., either.

Built on a local gentleman's gift of OZ memorabilia, the OZ Museum was created to celebrate 100 years of OZ history. And, though most fans normally recall the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland, the OZ haven houses artifacts ranging from the earliest L. Frank Baum books to OZ Parker Brothers board games to memorabilia from "The Wiz," which featured Diana Ross and Michael Jackson.

There are four galleries in the museum, each gallery covering a certain time period. The first gallery starts covers first edition Frank Baum books up to the silent movies. The second covers the MGM era, and the third gallery has items from the 70's, including the dress Diana Ross wore in "The Wiz." The final gallery has more current pieces. "Every generation since the book has done something different with the story," said OZ Museum gift shop manager Ellie Coots. "From peanut butter jars (from the 1950's and 60's) to Flying Monkey Beer, which is available today."

The most popular item in the museum, Coots said, is the giant Tin Man. The man of metal was so large he would not fit through the museum doors. He has found his place, however, greeting guests as they enter the gift shop.

Also popular are the realistic characters that stand throughout the museum.

"We have duplicated Dorothy's trip through OZ as guests go through the museum," Coots said. "Our gift shop is in the sepia-toned barnyard theme. Once guests enter into the museum they are in Munchkin Land and encounter life-size characters as they go through."

Remember the Wicked Witch of the East? The OZ Museum also displays an authentic death certification from the State of Kansas stating that the Wicked Witch of the East is in fact dead due to a house being dropped on her.

And, in case there was any question, Coots said, "Although the Witch died in OZ, the tornado that dropped the house on her originated in Kansas."

If the death certificate alone isn't enough, Meinhardt Raabe, the original coroner from the 1939 movie classic was "deputized" as an official Kansas Coroner for the specific purpose of signing the death certificate for the state of Kansas. Wamego is a town that is deeply dedicated to the tradition and history of OZ. The OZ Museum's parent company, The Columbian Theatre, shows five theatrical performances a year, one of which happens to be "The Wizard of OZ." The classic musical is performed every October, coinciding with the OZ Museum's

"OZtoberFest." The annual tradition gives guests the opportunity to meet munchkins from the 1939 movie, attend presentations such as "Judy Garland: The dressing of a star," and enjoy the classic movie outdoors.

With more than 2,000 pieces on display, the OZ Museum is the only museum of its kind that can be found this side of the rainbow.

"We [the public] are used to merchandising for current movies and stories, but to see what was done in 1939 for merchandising is really amazing," Coots said. "There is definitely a sense of awe."

According to Coots, that sense of wonder is also found in those who follow their own yellow brick roads to Wamego. Everyone from major OZ collectors to bikers clad in full leather have passed through the doors from reality and stepped into the land of OZ.

"The Wizard of OZ," be it the book or movie, is universally accepted and loved, said Coots. The appeal is that it is about family, roots and how the best things in life are often in your own backyard.

"These are things that anyone can identify with, so it's appealing to a diverse group of people."

Perhaps, however, it is not only the message in "OZ" and the museum that honors it that brings guests to its doors. For many guests the museum is a trip down not only a yellow brick road, but also down memory lane.

"People come here and remember their childhood," Coots said. "It's fun to see grandparents come in with their grandchildren and share a common experience with a movie they both love."