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'Wizard Of Oz' Munchkin Mickey Carroll Dies At 89

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Mickey Carroll, one of the last surviving Munchkins from the 1939 beloved film "The Wizard of Oz," died Thursday. He was 89.

His caretaker, Linda Dodge, said Carroll died in his sleep at her home in suburban Crestwood. He had heart problems and received a pacemaker in February. Until January, he had lived in his own home in suburban Bel-Nor.

Carroll was one of more than 100 adults and children who were recruited to play the movie natives of what author L. Frank Baum called Munchkin Country in his 1900 book "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

Carroll told The Associated Press in a 2007 interview that the Munchkins made only $125 a week while filming the movie that would become a classic.

"The Wizard of Oz" was Carroll's only movie. When it appeared on television in the 1960s, he found a new career at charitable events, retail events and Oz-related events.

"It's not me; it's the movie," Carroll said. "When they see me, they think of their childhood, and it makes them smile."

Carroll was born Michael Finocchiaro on July 8, 1919, in St. Louis. The son of immigrants, he grew up in an Italian neighborhood on the city's north side with a twin sister and four older siblings. All preceded him in death.

A pituitary condition caused Carroll's short stature. Stephen Cox, a friend of Carroll's and the author of a book on the Munchkins, told the St.Louis Post-Dispatch that Carroll was 4-foot-3 when he stopped growing in his 40s.

Carroll danced at the Muny Theater in St. Louis when he was in grade school, he once said, and in the 1920s worked in Chicago clubs and on the Orpheum Theater vaudeville circuit.

His gift of gab and comedic timing helped his popularity. He warmed up crowds for President Franklin Roosevelt while campaigning in New York City and served as a crowd-getter in President Harry Truman's whistlestop campaign.

He did Phillip Morris live radio ads and appeared in shows with Mae West. He later did radio shows with George Burns, Gracie Allen, Jack Benny and Al Jolson.

But it was his role as one of the "Oz" Munchkins that defined him.

Carroll played the part of the Munchkinland "Town Crier," marched as a "Munchkin Soldier" and was the candy-striped "Fiddler" who escorted the movie's wide-eyed orphan, Dorothy Gale, played by Judy Garland, down the yellow brick road toward Emerald City.

In the mid-1940s, Carroll returned to St. Louis to run the family business making cemetery monuments. After he sold it in 1996, he filled his time with charity work, Dodge said.

In November 2007, Carroll and six other surviving Munchkins received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Carroll was joined on that occasion by former Munchkin colleagues Ruth Duccini, Jerry Maren, Margaret Pellegrini, Meinhardt Raabe, Karl Slover and Clarence Swensen. Swensen died in February.

At a special screening of the film in 2005 in Los Angeles, Carroll said talking to longtime fans about the movie brought back their childhoods.

"They have tears," he said. "I'll say, 'May the magic of Oz always be with you.' And, 'Follow the yellow brick road!' And they're all excited. I bring back their childhood. Ain't that something?"

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