Oz and Kansas Culture

by Thomas Fox Averill

One can walk into any gift or souvenir shop in a Kansas town, or drop into one of the tourist traps along a Kansas highway, and find Dorothy and other characters from The Wizard of Oz. They are reproduced on postcards, T-shirts, mugs, posters, plates, or whatever holds their images, or our image of ourselves. The people of contemporary Kansas are intricately, ambivalently, and inevitably linked to Oz.

Kansans have not always been. When L. Frank Baum published The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in 1900, neither national nor Kansas journalists noted as significant that Dorothy was from Kansas, even though Baum’s depiction of the state is one of the bleakest literary portrayals in Kansas literature. Dorothy lives “in the midst of the great Kansas prairies,” where there is “nothing but the great gray prairie on every side.” Baum uses the word “gray” eight more times. Aunt Em is “thin and gaunt, and never smiled, now.” Uncle Henry “never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was.”

Baum humorously depicts the differences between Oz and Kansas. In the fourth chapter, after Dorothy tells the Scarecrow about “Kansas, and how gray everything was there,” he responds:

“I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas.”

“That is because you have no brains,” answered the girl. “No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home.”

The Scarecrow sighed.

“Of course I cannot understand it,” he said. “If your heads were stuffed with straw, like mine, you would probably all live in the beautiful places, and then Kansas would have no people at all. It is fortunate for Kansas that you have brains.”

Similar passages pepper not only the rest of The Wizard, but Ozma of Oz (1906), Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz (1908), The Road to Oz (1909), and The Emerald City of Oz (1910).

In The Emerald City, Dorothy takes up permanent residency in Oz, bringing Aunt Em and Uncle Henry with her. Henry is broken, tired, and in poor health, about to lose the farm to a mortgage company; Em is careworn, still thin and gaunt, but hardworking. When transported, clad in her apron, she is holding a just-dried supper dish. They immediately begin a tour of the magical fairyland. Uncle Henry loves Oz, pointing out to Em how beautiful, wonderful, exotic, and, best of all, work-free it is. Em is a grump. Without work, she finds no pleasure or meaning. The Ozies let her care for the single chicken, Billina, who has just had her first chicks. The two have rich arguments over chick care (all animals in Oz can talk), Aunt Em insisting on her superior knowledge after having raised chickens for over fifty years. Baum’s comic portrayal shows that Kansans do not retire easily, and tend to remain Kansans wherever they go, just as Dorothy did in the first book.

Still, in spite of Kansas characters and themes in the fourteen books from The Wizard of Oz in 1900 to Glinda of Oz, published posthumously in 1920, nobody, inside Kansas or out, chose to highlight the Kansas/Oz connection. In fact, after Baum’s second in the series, The Marvelous Land of Oz (1904), the books were ignored by all reviewers—no citations exist for them in Reader’s Guide to Periodicals or Book Review Digest.

2. Ibid., Chapter 4.
3. Ibid., Chapter 5.
From 1900 to 1920, fourteen Oz books were published. Although each contained Kansas references, the Kansas/Oz connection was not emphasized by anyone, in or out of Kansas.
Kansans, or at least the Kansas press, saw no need to respond to Baum's image of Kansas and Kansans. Kansas was experiencing a fine couple of decades: crops were relatively good; the economy was fairly stable; the state had nationally prominent journalistic spokespersons in William Allen White and Edgar Watson Howe; and Kansas was on the cutting edge of much social reform—Carry A. Nation with prohibition, Samuel J. Crumbine with public health, and William Allen White leading Kansas into the era of Progressive Republicanism. Additionally, readers of the Oz books were young, not shapers of a national image of Kansas.

The most pertinent question at that time, though, might have been why Baum set the book in Kansas in the first place. Surely, he had no idea his book would play such an important part in Kansas' identity, that through *The Wizard of Oz* Kansas would be defined, remembered, reviled, and ridiculed by people from New York to Hollywood, from Japan to Australia to Africa and all around the world. It was impossible for Baum to foresee that, for out-staters, Kansas would become synonymous with grayness, tornadoes, Dorothy, and the Scarecrow, even confused with Oz itself. Nor could he have known how confused Kansans themselves would become. One wonders if Baum's decision to choose Kansas as the “realistic” location of the book was arbitrary, or if he had reasons. It seems he had reasons, and plenty of them. Baum showed that he had brains when he chose Kansas.

Contrary to popular belief, as well as the many biographies and articles, L. Frank Baum did experience Kansas. His first success as a playwright and actor was *The Maid of Arran*, a sentimental, romantic, five-act, Irish drama: "...a play to ensnare all hearts and leave an impress of beauty and nobility within the sordid mind of man." *The Maid* took him on tour from New York, to Chicago, and as far west as Lawrence, Kansas, in the winter of 1882. His troupe of actors, including "Four recognizable stars" (the Misses Agnes Hallack and Genevieve Rogers, Mr. Frank Aiken and Baum himself), came to Lawrence from December 4 to 6, playing Monday and Wednesday evenings at the Bowersock Opera House. From there, the show played Olathe and points east.

The Monday night performance was a success. On Tuesday it began to rain, and by Wednesday the rain turned to snow. After *The Maid of Arran*’s second performance, the *Lawrence Daily Journal* reported: "Yester-

day was a dismal, dull day." About the show, it reported: "The troupe that presents this play was unfortunate as to weather. Owing to the extreme cold the house was not so large as the one that met it on Monday night." At noon Wednesday, the temperature was twenty-four degrees. The paper's weather report seems echoed, though very faintly, in the opening description of Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Baum based his description on more than a brief excursion into Kansas. Baum lived in Aberdeen, South Dakota Territory, from 1888 to 1891. He started his business career in dry goods, and failed. Baum then published the weekly *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, and failed again. David L. Greene and Dick Martin, in *The Oz Scrapbook*, write:

...Baum edited the Pioneer with enthusiasm, writing witty verse and editorials, and a column called "Our Landlady." The central figure in the column is Mrs. Bilkins, the fictitious proprietor of an Aberdeen boarding house. "Our Landlady" is filled with humorous comments on Aberdeen people and on the world in general; it shows that Baum had developed considerably as a writer since his Amos days. In one week's installment a farmer tells the landlady that he has put green spectacles on his horses so they will think that they're eating grass rather than wood shavings; ten years later the wizard used green glasses to make people believe everything in the Emerald City was green, and the drought that forced the farmer to deceive his livestock is described movingly in the opening chapter of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.*

Baum left Aberdeen for Chicago in 1891, having been only a Saturday pioneer, after all. One wonders why Baum did not choose South Dakota as the setting for his novel.

The second terrible thing in the book (the first being Kansas itself) is the tornado. Kansas often averages fewer tornadoes per square mile than several other states, including Georgia, but quite close to Baum's Kansas tour, one of the most frightening, devastating, and noted tornadoes of the nineteenth century struck Irving, Kansas. On May 30, 1879, Irving became the only town hit twice by a tornado in one day. The town of four hundred had been touted that same year by *The Emigrant Guide or Hand-book of the Central Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad*: "It is one of those places where seems to dwell something in nature that imparts the best

6. Ibid.
of thoughts and feelings. But the double tornado levelled thirty-four homes and businesses, and killed nineteen people. The disaster was covered by the national press, and circulated reports fixed the event in the national mind:

The effect upon the people was pitiful. Night after night hundreds of people never went to bed, but remained dressed and with their lanterns trimmed, watching for a fresh onslaught, which they expected momentarily. Every dark cloud seemed to them filled with forebodings, which could not be allayed until every vestige of the supposed danger had vanished.


The Irving tornado became legend, creating a close connection between violent wind and Kansas. Baum, as editor of the Saturday Pioneer, published many stories about tornadoes, sharing the Great Plains residents' fascination with the weather and all its doings.

Irving had literary connections, having been organized on the day of Washington Irving's death, November 28, 1859. Also, among the ninepeople Irving dead, six were members of the Gale family, a fact Baum must have been unaware of when he finally gave Dorothy a last name in the third Oz book.

Every writer needs to create a landscape. Baum conjured Oz. For the “real” place, he needed another

place to conjure. Kansas is the geographical center of the contiguous United States, as the Emerald City and the Wizard are the geographical center of Oz. Kansas had prominence in the national consciousness, with its "Bleeding Kansas" Civil War connection, its place in the rapid expansion into the West after the Civil War, its grasshopper invasions and legendary blizzards, and its place in the saga of cowboys and cattle towns. Kansas was also important because of its early experiments in prohibition and woman suffrage (Baum's mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a prominent suffragist and friend of Susan B. Anthony, who traveled in Kansas, and whose brother, Daniel Anthony, settled in Leavenworth), as well as with its prominence in the national politics of Populism.

Interestingly, Henry Littlefield, a New York high school teacher, wrote in 1964 a Populist interpretation of Baum's novel as midwestern political allegory, with Dorothy as the "everyperson" from the Populist heartland who joins with a brainless farmer, a mechanized laborer, and a regal, pompous and finally cowardly buffoon (William Jennings Bryan) to regain her place in the world. During her journey, she kills the Wicked Witch of the East, who, with her silver slippers, represents the stranglehold of the eastern money monog on capital. Dorothy meets an ineffective ruler unable to control either the East or the West (this could be any of the Republican Presidents between Lincoln and McKinley). She also encounters the winged monkeys, whose story sounds very familiar to one any Native American might tell. Dorothy conquers the West with water, and leaves each of her companions to rule a different sphere of Oz. Then, with the power of the silver slippers, reflecting the free silver issue of the
Populists, she returns home for a happy ending. The Populists, of course, were not as successful.

Littlefield's interpretation points to one reason Baum might have chosen Kansas as a conjure-name for the book. But whatever the reason, Kansas has never been quite the same, especially since 1939, the year of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's great movie. By then, Kansas was a different place than when the Baum books first appeared, a place ready to bow its head to, even accept, the image of careworn, gray, flatness beset with the difficulties of poverty, dust, and erratic weather. Ten years of the Great Depression and six years of Dust Bowl had taken their toll. Kansas was less a cutting edge, and more a blade on for social reform. William Allen White ruminated about this loss of power and cultural distinctiveness as early as 1934, in a magazine article entitled "Just Wondering."  

Coincidentally, in 1939, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote "Bleeding Kansans" for the Kansas Magazine. He speculated that Kansans

have gone off the deep end with desperate seriousness, and in doing earned for themselves the name of being a humorless, puritanical people, incapable of joy and grudging in their attitude towards those happier than themselves.

This is not a pretty reputation and naturally one
shrinks from accepting this description of oneself and his friends and neighbors. Oddly enough, however, we do accept it almost unanimously and meekly endure the opprobrium and ridicule of other states. This I believe to be due to a humility and self-distrust so great as to be crippling to our energies.  

Dorothy never experienced self-distrust in Baum's books. She was proud of Kansas. But the movie image survives, hitting home for a people who, as Menninger also wrote, "had an ascetic disapproval of joy or anything that would make it appear that we were a happy, progressive, successful state."

Menninger's analysis helps explain why the MGM movie had such an effect on Kansas and Kansans: it hit home, but not immediately. Although successful in first release, the film was not shown again until a celebrated re-release in 1949. A 1955 showing was unsuccessful, and in 1956, the rights sold to CBS, it appeared for the first time on national television, the first of over twenty-five showings over the last thirty years. The Wizard of Oz has been seen by more people than any other movie. It is a part of the national culture, part of America's sense of self, and of Kansas.  

Also, in 1956, the copyright on The Wonderful Wizard of Oz expired, and new editions, elaborately illustrated, and sometimes abridged, flooded bookstores. L. Frank Baum would have loved it. During the last twenty years of his life he made attempt after attempt to keep Oz in

15. Ibid., 4.
front of the American public. A 1902 musical played first in Chicago, and then moved to New York's Majestic Theatre for 293 performances before touring the country for most of the decade. The musical *Wizard of Oz* created a new character, Pastoria, who, before being swept to *Oz*, was a trolley operator in Topeka. Another Topekan, Fred Stone, played the Scarecrow, giving the part the whimsical, slapstick touch that all other Scarecrows, from Ray Bolger (1939) to Hinton Battle (*The Wiz*, 1975) have been unable to improve upon.

Baum also created a musical based on *The Marvellous Land of Oz*. Titled *The Wogglebug*, it failed, but Baum used the Wogglebug and other *Oz* characters in his next scheme, *Fairylogue and Radio-Plays*, which can only be described as a crude but effective early-day slide show, with Baum narrating adventures projected on a screen next to him. *Fairylogue* was entertaining, but too expensive, with too limited an audience, to make money. To continue the promotion of *Oz*, Baum began a film company and made four silent movies; he wrote another musical, this time based on his *Ozma of Oz*; he became partner in yet another movie company; and he moved to California and bought an island with the idea of starting an *Oz* theme park. Most everything he did, except writing and publishing the *Oz* books themselves, brought him little return. Still, over and over he tried, and let others try, to promote *Oz* in every part of the popular culture—film, radio, stage, advertising (*The Wogglebug* says "Drink Hammi's Beer"), board games, clip-out paper dolls, and even as decorations on peanut butter tins. Baum would have been celebrating in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the reprinted books with their serendipitous television/film tie-in insured his American fairy tale's endurance in the national mind. 17

---

17. Greene and Martin, *Oz Scrapbook*, Chapter 1. This discussion of Baum's career includes his many promotions of *Oz*. See also, Chapters 4-5.
It also insured a Kansas image, one based on the book and movie. During the 1960s, Kansas was starting to look closely at itself. Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House. William Inge's Kansas plays were top draw on Broadway. At home, Kansas was between centennial celebrations, territorial (1954) and statehood (1961). It is no wonder Kansans were self-conscious and began reacting to and exploiting the Oz image.

Ashland poet Ronald Johnson uses Oz in his long poem "Letters to Walt Whitman" (1969):

All is Oz.
The dusty cottonwoods, by the creek,
rustle an Emerald City.
And the Mystic, immemorial city
is rooted in earth.
All is Oz & inextricable,
bound up in the unquenchable flames of double suns.18

Poet Philip Wedge reacts to the Ozian image in his "Catechism and a Prayer":

What did I tell them about Kansas?
I told them all the lies:
that under every haystack, a farmer's daughter hides,
that Oz was really a place
just north of Wichita,
a small hill outside Newton, full of grace,
that the yellow brick road was a metaphor
for the breadbasket of the world,
symbolized in a field of wheat.19

Radical-feminist poet Karen A. Snider of Milwaukee reinterprets Oz and Kansas in her 1980 book Aunty Em Is a Prisoner in Kansas. In her introduction, she writes:

Baum…expressed an interest in writing a non-sexist children's story—thus the girl protagonist—and was, as an occultist, concerned with writing the possibilities of a good witch back into the imaginations of his countrymen and his children. However, one who is thinking as a crone will slowly become aware of the false polarization created among the women characters in his story, the polarization that results when male-defined feminism is set up against male-defined sexism. It is a nice touch that Baum chose Kansas, the first state to include the issue of women's suffrage on the ballot, as Dorothy's home, but I am not as comfortable with his decision to tell what I perceive to be Dorothy's journey from nymph to maiden in a way that the good witch must triumph over the wicked witch—who is after all protesting the death of her sister to dorothy—and the virgin must destroy the crone (dorothy and the wicked witch of the West) in order to re-unite with her estranged mother, Aunty Em. Of course, he would have us believe that the Wizard is just a silly, absent-minded old man, instead of the force of the patriarchy, plotting out another divisive trick.20

In her novel Charleyhorse, Cecil Dawkins, a New Yorker living in New Mexico, writes about Juna, an easterner who comes to teach in western Kansas and meets a tough young ranching woman, Charley. Here is their different response to the sky:

Juna pointed to a big, heavy cloud the color of a bad bruise rolling along toward them with so much going on inside it might have been pregnant with wrangling giants. Charley thought twister and tried to remember the last overpass they'd seen on the highway, just in case, but Juna, looking up, the wind stirring the soft wisps alongside her face, said, "Kansas is Oz."

Charley said, "Your Kansas is."21

A dual image emerges from these works: first, that Kansans are innocents, virginal, and wide-eyed in the face of anything exotic—hence the most quoted line from the movie, "Gee, Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore"; second, that Kansas is not Oz, and is, in fact, the opposite—a bleak, harsh, flat, boring land from which anyone would do well to be removed, even by a tornado. In both cases, Kansans are the butt of jokes: on a postcard from a San Francisco gay bar, Dorothy utters her famous line to Toto; her innocence and love for home are questioned by T-shirts that read, "Dear Aunt Em. Hate you. Hate Kansas. Taking the dog"; and there is the postcard from the Motel of Oz, Emerald City, that reads, "Dear Dorothy. Sorry about last night. Hope you will still respect us in the morning. Scarecrow, Tin Man, Lion." The image of landscape appears in a T-shirt cartoon by Guindon of a dusty bag lady with a black dog in her shopping bag on a brick road leading to nowhere. The simple caption says: "Kansas, gateway to Oz."22

This leads to the campaign designed to exploit Kansas' Oz fame, mounted by the then Kansas Department of Economic Development: the slogan, "Kansas, Land of Ah's"; its purpose, "To dispel the image of the State of Kansas as dry, flat and boring in the minds of

22. Slogans, cards, and T-shirts all observed on sale at Fountain of Youth and Town Crier Bookstore, Topeka, during a visit in the spring of 1986.
Kansans and potential tourists and tour companies." The KDED initiative was well received and highly criticized. Geared at first to Kansas residents, it confused people about whether Kansas was or was not Oz. Kansas was both “over the rainbow” and “home.” When the nation sniffed out the campaign, Kansas was upbraided in a Wall Street Journal article which could not understand why Kansans would take the most negative association, their albatross of the past thirty years, and use it to promote the state. In the journal’s opinion, the campaign could only reinforce the dual images: that Kansans are naïve, wide-eyed hicks and Kansas is a place to escape from. From inside the state came similar complaints. Kansas had better images to promote. Reminding people of the Oz image could only hurt Kansas. But many Kansans put bumper stickers on their cars and appreciated the pun. The legislature designated U.S. 54 to be “The Yellow Brick Road,” but stopped short of funding the highway signs to christen the route. Recently, the “Land of Ah’s” slogan was dropped in favor of “Ah Kansas!” Asked about the campaign, Cathy Kusick of the Kansas Department of Commerce said it was better received than not, and that Kansans seem more disturbed by the Kansas image projected by The Wizard of Oz than non-Kansans, who see it simply as an image, rather than a slur.

Kansans both love and hate the Oz image in the ascetic, self-denying way Dr. Karl Menninger analyzes. Kansans do not want to enjoy themselves, to find the positive image, and need The Wizard of Oz exactly so that they can complain about it and embrace it furiously at the same time. Kansans also want to claim their innocence and deny it at the same time. Kansans want to live in Kansas, but they also want everybody to know how hard it is. That is just like Kansans—-they have had the same relationship to alcohol and its prohibition all these years and, as Menninger points out, to most other pleasures, too. Perhaps Kansans need to be psychoanalyzed to get over this great schism in their personality.

Ironically, in the recent Disney movie, Return to Oz, Dorothy is seen as a very disturbed little girl and is taken to an electric heater, who promises Aunt Em she will drain the excess electrical currents out of her head and make it so she does not dream about Oz anymore. He looks very Freudian—short beard and pipe—and Dorothy escapes just in time, when a thunderstorm cuts the power of this doctor’s terrible machine, and the subsequent flood carries her to Oz. In Return to Oz, Kansas is bleak, but the new Oz is worse. The talking chicken, Billina, says, “If this is Oz, I’ll take my chances in Kansas.”

It would be nice to enjoy Kansas and Oz at the same time, for Kansans to be at home with what they are, rather than to complain about how others see them. After all, it is others who have been reinterpreting Oz—from the all-black The Wiz, to the radical-feminist poetry of Karen Snider. Kansans have only been reacting. They steam when people in New York ask them how Dorothy is, if their dog is named Toto, or if they have an Aunt Em. Kansans have been trying to control the Oz image rather than trying to understand, appreciate, and reinterpret it and its part in Kansas culture.

Kansans should remember that Baum himself was ambivalent about the Great Plains. He tried to live there and failed. Yet he returned for the setting of his best novel. Perhaps Baum needed only a gray contrast to the beautiful, colorful, watered Oz. Perhaps, too, he was

23. Kansas Department of Commerce, clippings and brochures file, inspected at KDC offices, spring of 1986.
25. Walt Disney Production, Return to Oz, 1985, video cassette.
examining the brains, heart, and courage it takes to survive the Great Plains and Oz. This leaves readers with Dorothy—more the center of the book than either of the landscapes. One cannot think of a better representative for Kansas, considering her behavior after she kills the witch:

...the Witch fell down in a brown, melted, shapeless mass and began to spread over the clean boards of the kitchen floor. Seeing that she had really melted away to nothing, Dorothy drew another bucket of water and threw it over the mess. She then swept it all out the door. After picking out the silver shoe, which was all that was left of the old woman, she cleaned and dried it with a cloth, and put it on her foot again. Then, being at last free to do as she chose, she ran out to the courtyard to tell the Lion that the Wicked Witch of the West had come to an end, and that they were no longer prisoners in a strange land.¹⁶

Later, Dorothy explains again her desire to return to Kansas:

"My greatest wish now," she added, "is to get back to Kansas, for Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning; and unless the crops are better this year than they were last I am sure Uncle Henry cannot afford it."¹⁷

Dorothy is loyal, logical, considerate, practical, sympathetic, straightforward, strong. She is unafraid to show her anger when necessary, and when she does, she finds positive results: Dorothy exposes the lion for a coward and melts the Wicked Witch of the West. She solves problems, moves steadily ahead no matter the odds, and, most important, she triumphs.

Kansans might not always appreciate Baum for choosing Kansas as the setting for The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. But they should at least appreciate that Baum also gave them Dorothy, a person strong enough, with enough brains, heart, and courage to endure the bleak and forbidding Kansas he created. He also gave us a big portion of Kansas folklore, and a genuine part of the Kansas and American mind.¹⁸

27. Ibid., Chapter 29.

Welcome to the Land of Ah’s!

Come to Kansas and discover a vacation at the rainbow’s end. It’s a pot of gold rich in recreational, historic and cultural attractions.

The images of Oz have been translated to a multitude of sale items and campaigns to increase tourism in Kansas.