

'Wizard of Oz' munchkin publishes memoir

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It's a simple proclamation that can bring you instantly back to the land of Oz: "As coroner, I must aver / I thoroughly examined her / And she's not only merely dead / She's really, most sincerely dead!"

The munchkin coroner who made that familiar recitation in "The Wizard of Oz" - a confirmation that the Wicked Witch of the East was killed - was played by Meinhardt Raabe.

Raabe's role is just one chapter in a life that has included flying with a Civil Air Patrol during War II and crisscrossing the country with the Oscar Mayer Weinermobile.

The 4-foot-7 Raabe, now 89, has published a memoir about his adventures, including his time on the set of the 1939 film, which he says helped eliminate derogatory terms for little people.

"Since the picture, we've all become munchkins," Raabe (pronounced RAH'-bee) said Tuesday on his way to a book signing in Manhattan. "It's like knighthood."

The book, "Memories of a Munchkin: An Illustrated Walk Down the Yellow Brick Road," describes what it was like to be on the "Oz" set - real trees rooted in the ground, mushroom-shaped Munchkinland houses supplemented with backgrounds painted on muslin and, of course, the yellow brick road.

He recalled dressing for his part, which included wearing a skullcap and being outfitted with dyed yak hair molded into a handlebar mustache and long beard.

Raabe, who walks with a cane and has a hearing aid, still readily repeats his famous lines from the movie - a task he says he's asked to do "every place I go."

Born in Wisconsin in 1915, Raabe was always small for his age because his pituitary gland was underdeveloped. When he was young, he didn't know he was what was then called a midget because doctors couldn't make a diagnosis using the medical technology of the time.

"No one in our area had even seen a midget, much less realized that I was one of them," he says in the book, co-written with Navy Lt. Daniel Kinse.

Raabe first met others like him at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair at an attraction known as Midget Village, an experience he calls "my education in the real world."

He paid his way through college, at first with savings from selling rabbits and ducks in high school and then with

wages from appearances and performances at fairs. At the University of Wisconsin he earned a bachelor of arts degree in accounting, but recruiters brushed him off.

"They said, `You belong in a carnival,'" he said. "Well, that's the last place in the world where I wanted to be."

Raabe's tenacity and ability to speak German - a boon to a company that worked with German-speaking butchers - helped him get a job as an accountant with Oscar Mayer at age 23. He worked there for three decades, eventually traveling across the country with the famed Weinermobile and giving motivational speeches in schools.

He had to beg for a leave of absence when he heard MGM Studios was hiring as many little people as possible for a new film starring Judy Garland.

"I thought, `Well, this might be a unique experience,'" said Raabe, who is the oldest of the nine "Oz" munchkins still living.

Raabe said appearing in the film didn't transform his life, but did increase his confidence and helped him build a career in public speaking.

The accomplishment he is most proud of is his service with the Civil Air Patrol, an organization similar to the National Guard. He worked as a ground instructor during the war and says he flew every kind of single-engine airplane made at the time.

Raabe, who lives in a retirement community in Florida, said he decided to write the book in part to spread the message he's brought to schoolchildren as a public speaker:

"There's a job for everybody. It's just a matter of you working hard enough and watching out for the right spot."

By ELIZABETH LESURE
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