

For someone who wants to work part-time to supplement social security, being an ex-Munchkin has its advantages.

There are only 10 in the world, and only six are healthy enough to travel. One of them, Clarence Swenson, 85, of Austin, Texas, arrived in Portland Friday with his wife, Myrna. The retired Munchkinland soldier has a tall order to fill. He is the main draw for this weekend's 3rd Annual New England Wizard of Oz Festival at the Sheraton Inn in South Portland.

He'll be in his soldier's uniform and goose-stepping around the hotel ballroom, just as he did 65 years ago in the movie as he followed the horse-and-carriage that carried Judy Garland. (Swenson is in the fourth row of soldiers.)

As a promotional vehicle, nothing beats Munchkins. The Portland media on Friday flocked to the Sheraton Friday to get the dirt on the Lullaby League and the Lollipop Guild. And to find out the truth behind those stories of wild mischief at the Culver Hotel. Clarence Swenson, who was 22 when the film was made, set the facts straight. There were 120 munchkins, many of them foreign, Swenson said. The filmmakers wanted a lot more Munchkins but couldn't find enough tiny actors. Ten to 15 children were used to fill up space in the background. Because of their foreign accents, all the Munchkin voices were dubbed.

The film took more than a year to make, and the Munchkinland scenes took eight weeks. Color film was in its infancy, and three rolls of film had to be run through the camera at the same time.

Judy Garland? She was a regular teenager. She was as interested in the Munchkins as the Munchkins were in her.

Munchkin awes 'em

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Writer

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Staff photo by Gregory Rec

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Clarence Swenson, in a handout photo, dresses in a soldier suit like the one used in the 1939 movie, 'The Wizard of Oz.' The former actor was visiting Portland for a media trip.



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Clarence Swenson, one of the Munchkins in the film "The Wizard of Oz," demonstrates his soldier march for WGME-TV cameraman Jeremy Ferris at the Sheraton in South Portland on Friday.

And Toto?

Whoa, sore spot.

"The Munchkins earned \$50" a week, Swenson deadpanned with his flat Texas drawl. "Toto earned \$125. He had a better agent."

Never in his life, he said, had he seen so many little people all together. In the evenings, they hired chauffeured cars and visited the city's night spots. "I enjoyed myself, he said. "Everyone was the same size."

In the 1981 Chevy Chase comedy, "Under the Rainbow," the Munchkin actors were portrayed as lascivious little folk who partied all night at the Culver Hotel and showed up for work hung over and bleary-eyed. Some Munchkins protested the film, saying that reputations were shamelessly sullied.

Clarence Swenson said the Munchkins behaved the same as any group of people at a large gathering.

"You get a group," his wife added, "a few bad apples are always in the mix."

Clarence Swenson acted in two other films. He was in a western, "Terror of Tinytown," and he played a chimpanzee in "Tarzan Finds a Son."

"The Wizard of Oz" he said, didn't seem like anything special at the time, and MGM lost a million dollars when it was released in 1939. It didn't start making a profit until it started playing on television 15 years later. It was television that made the film a permanent part of American culture, he said.

Not long after the making of the "Wizard of Oz," Swenson returned to Austin and married Myrna and had an ordinary career as an electrical technician. The couple raised three daughters.

In the early 1980s, Wizard of Oz festivals began popping up around the country. Ex-Munchkins, who never got any residuals from the film, discovered the festivals were a source of cash. Clarence Swenson said he goes to more than 10 a year and earns from \$500 to \$1,000 a weekend. He also visits sick children in hospitals.

Everywhere he goes, he said, he's mobbed when people find out he was a Munchkin. Cheryl Wallace, 44, of Portland, who has seen the film "500 zillion" times, could hardly contain herself Friday when she met him at the hotel lobby. "My heart pitty-pattered," she said. "A Munchkin!"

Thank you for sharing Halloween 2003 with us and a special thank you to Clarence & Myrna Swenson for making our favorite holiday extra special.