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# **Content Articles in Economics**

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HIRSCHEL KASPER, Section Editor

# The Fable of the Allegory: The Wizard of Oz in Economics

# Bradley A. Hansen

Abstract: L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has become popular as a teaching tool in economics. It has been argued that it was written as an allegory of Populist demands for a bimetallic monetary system in the late 19th century. The author argues that Baum was not sympathetic to Populist views and did not write the story as a monetary allegory.

Key words: economic history, monetary economics, teaching economics, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* 

JEL codes: A2, N1

One method of enhancing student learning in economics courses is to introduce economic concepts through literature (Watts and Smith 1989; Kish-Goodling 1998; Scahill 1998). A well-known example in economics has been the incorporation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* into the teaching of monetary issues. The book is presented as an allegory about Populists' demands for monetary expansion in the late 19th century. The allegory provides an efficient means of introducing students to debates about monetary issues because the elements of the story are so familiar. Students may also be intrigued by the unfamiliar interpretation.

Although using *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a means to discuss monetary issues may have pedagogical merits, economists have gone too far by claiming

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that the book was actually intended to be a monetary allegory. The primary evidence in support of the allegorical interpretation is what appears to be an extraordinary number of similarities between characters and events in the book and the people and events of the 1896 presidential campaign. The most popular version of the allegorical interpretation suggests not only that Baum described the Populist movement but that he was sympathetic to it. Historical research on Baum undermines both these propositions (Hearn 1992, 2000; Parker 1994; Tystad-Koupal 1996). Baum's writings, as well as his life history, provide considerable evidence that he did not have Populist sympathies and did not intend the book to be anything more than a delightful story. Indeed, the true lesson of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* may be that economists have been too willing to accept as a truth an elegant story with little empirical support, much the way the characters in Oz accepted the Wizard's impressive tricks as real magic.

#### THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ AS A MONETARY ALLEGORY

In 1964, Henry Littlefield, a high school history teacher, described what appeared to be numerous coincidences between *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and the Populist movement of the late 19th century. Once viewed through a Populist lens, the symbolism of the book appears incredibly obvious. The Scarecrow represents farmers, the Tin Woodman represents industrial workers, and the Cowardly Lion represents William Jennings Bryan. Dorothy was told to follow a yellow brick road—the gold standard. People in the Emerald City were forced to look at everything through green glasses—greenbacks. The silver shoes—coinage of silver—really had the power to take Dorothy home. Oz itself refers to the abbreviation for an ounce of gold.

Many economists have followed Littlefield's lead. In an article on the use of literature in teaching economics, Watts and Smith (1989, 298) suggested the use of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a tool for enlivening the study of bimetallism, which they observed, "is often considered one of the dullest episodes in money and banking or economic history courses." In the *Journal of Political Economy*, Rockoff (1990, 739) also claimed that the book was "not only a child's tale but also a sophisticated commentary on the political and economic debates of the Populist Era." He extended the allegorical interpretation by examining the story in light of both monetary theory and history and found additional symbols in the book such as the seven passages and three flights of stairs that Dorothy passed through in the palace of Oz (a symbol of the Crime of '73).<sup>2</sup> Like Watts and Smith, Rockoff (1990, 740) suggested that one of the primary benefits of the allegorical interpretation was pedagogical.

Although Rockoff was not the first author to write on the subject, he must be credited with extending the interpretation and bringing it to a wide audience of economists. Rockoff's article quickly became popular among economic historians. Friedman (1990, 1167) cited it approvingly in his 1990 article, "The Crime of 1873." When Whaples and Betts (1995) put together a collection of the most popular articles in American economic history, their survey showed that many economic historians included Rockoff's article in their course reading lists.

The interpretation suggested by Rockoff's article is the most common form of the allegorical interpretation of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. He suggested that Baum was a Populist, or at least a Populist sympathizer, and that he wrote the book as an allegory. But advocates of the allegorical interpretation do not speak with a single voice. They disagree about whether or not Baum was a Populist and whether or not he intentionally wrote the story as an allegory. Clanton (1998, 183), for example, argued that Baum was a conservative Republican who "apparently amused himself by writing a subtle yet ingenious anti-Populist, gold standard tract in the form of a highly suggestive and enormously successful children's story." Ritter (1997b, 173) argued that The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is "a cultural and political satire which was neither simply pro-Populist or pro-capitalist." She suggested that Baum's intentions are not necessarily relevant. In her book Goldbugs and Greenbacks, Ritter (1997a, 21) argued that "motive is not at issue. The argument here is that Baum lived in the midst of a highly charged political environment and that he borrowed from the cultural materials at hand as he wrote." Ranjit Dighe (forthcoming) argued that Baum was probably a progressive Republican, and although he may not have written The Wonderful Wizard of Oz as a monetary allegory, he was probably influenced by the political currents of the time. He also emphasized that the merits of the allegorical interpretation are primarily pedagogical. The common thread is a belief that L. Frank Baum, intentionally or unintentionally, portrayed political actors and events of the 1890s.

The Rockoff interpretation has now spread from money and banking and economic history courses to economic principles courses. In his *Principles of Economics*, Mankiw (2001, 648) claimed that when Baum "sat down to write a story for children, he made the characters represent protagonists in the major political battle of his time. Although modern commentators differ somewhat in the interpretation they assign to each character *there is no doubt* that the story highlights the debate over monetary policy" (emphasis added).

There is doubt. Evidence in support of the allegorical interpretation turns out to be rather meager. Rockoff (1990, 756) conceded that "Baum left no hard evidence that he intended his story to have an allegorical meaning: no diary entry, no letter, not even an offhand remark to a friend." He claimed that the evidence in favor of the allegorical interpretation is that "It has been recognized independently by a number of thoughtful readers," and that, "It is consistent with what we know of Baum's politics" (Rockoff 1990, 756). Rockoff and others have claimed that Baum consistently voted Democrat and marched in torchlight parades for Bryan (Rockoff 1990; Baum and MacFall 1961; Gardner 1957). They also observed that Baum was the editor of a small-town newspaper in South Dakota before moving to Chicago in 1891 and suggested that this probably led to his Populist sympathies (Mankiw 2001; Ziaukas 1998).

On closer examination, the evidence in favor of the allegorical interpretation melts away like the Wicked Witch of the West. In contrast, the evidence against the allegorical interpretation is abundant. It can be grouped into four categories. First, there have not been multiple independent discoveries of the allegorical interpretation. Second, Baum was not reluctant to express his political views, yet he did not express Populist sympathies and did express anti-Populist sympathies.

Third, much of what is written in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and Baum's other children's books is inconsistent with the allegorical interpretation. Fourth, much of what has been interpreted as political or economic symbolism in the book can be traced to other sources.

#### THE CASE AGAINST THE ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

# **Independent Discovery**

Rockoff suggested the independent discovery by many individuals of the allegorical interpretation was evidence in its favor. Although it is true that many people have come to the conclusion that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was an allegory of the Populist movement, no one appears to have come to the conclusion before Littlefield did, 64 years after the book was published. *The New York Times* review of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published September 8, 1900, when people should have been more aware of the supposed political symbolism in the text, treats it only as a fairy tale. Those who have made the argument in favor of an allegorical interpretation in recent years have almost all acknowledged Littlefield's lead (Rockoff 1990; Ritter 1997; Ziaukas 1998; Schweikart 2000; Watts and Smith 1989). Those who did not cite Littlefield cited others who did; Mankiw, for example, cited Rockoff. It is far from evident that many people have come to the conclusion independently.

## **Political Sympathy**

The evidence on Baum's politics is even more problematic than the evidence in favor of multiple independent discoveries of the allegory. Supporters of the allegorical interpretation point out that Baum marched in torchlight parades for Bryan and consistently voted for Democrats. This claim would appear to have great weight because of its appearance in a biography coauthored by Baum's son, Frank Joslyn Baum. There are, however, reasons to be skeptical. *To Please a Child: A Biography of L. Frank Baum* was published in 1961, 40 years after the death of L. Frank Baum and 3 years after the death of Frank Joslyn Baum, at the age of 75. The claim that Baum consistently voted Democrat and marched for Bryan appears to have come from a biographical sketch of Baum by Gardner (1957, 29), published a few years before *To Please a Child*. Gardner provided no references for the claim. In addition, the story is at odds with the available evidence on Baum's politics.<sup>3</sup>

Baum's support of woman suffrage, opposition to monopolies, and apparent sympathy for Asians and Native Americans have also been offered as evidence of Baum's Populist-Democratic sympathies. Some of this evidence presents an accurate view of Baum, but a misleading and somewhat anachronistic view of late 19th century history. Baum's support of woman suffrage and antitrust does not imply that he was a Democrat. His editing of a newspaper in South Dakota does not imply that he was a Populist. Some of these suggestions are simply incorrect: Baum consistently wrote editorials in support of Republican causes and candidates and was not particularly sympathetic to Native Americans.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that Baum was an outspoken advocate of woman suffrage. His moth-

er-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a participant at the Seneca Conference and co-author with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony of *History of Woman Suffrage*. Matilda Gage often stayed with the Baums, and she encouraged L. Frank Baum to write down his children's stories and to seek a wider audience for them. Baum clearly sided with his mother-in-law on the issue of suffrage. He promoted woman suffrage in his newspaper and actively campaigned for it in South Dakota (Tystad-Koupal 1996, 10–12). Baum also seems to have been interested in the problems associated with big business and monopoly. He worked for a time in 1901 on a musical entitled *The Octopus*, or *The Title Trust*. The musical was never completed because Baum turned his attention to a musical version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Baum also has an octopus in *The Sea Fairies* take offense at being compared to the Standard Oil Co. (Gardner 1957, 29).

Many people now may associate women's rights and the regulation of business more closely with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. At the turn of the century neither support for antitrust nor support for woman suffrage was inconsistent with Republican party politics. For example, a Republican Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act, and a Republican President signed it into law. Theodore Roosevelt, the great trust buster, was also a Republican. Although Roosevelt did not take office until 1901, his views on big business were well known from his days as governor of New York (Bittlingmayer 1994, 381). Woman suffrage also was not associated with just one political party. Initially, the woman suffrage movement had strong connections to the Republican Party because of its ties to the abolitionist movement. When Republicans supported voting rights for African Americans but not women, some leaders of the woman suffrage movement began to seek support without regard to party affiliation (Foner 1988, 252 and 313). In the Midwest, one could find advocates of woman suffrage among both Populists and Republicans (Goldberg 1994).

The Populist interpretation of Oz also associates Baum's position as the editor of a midwestern paper with Populism. For example, Tim Ziaukas (1998, 8) explained that in 1887 Baum "moved to an area that would become the state of South Dakota, where he ran a variety store and worked in journalism and witnessed the desperation of the kinds of people who would be instrumental in the Populist movement." However, the Plains States were far from being a solid block in support of Democratic-Populism. Although Independents (the original name used by the Populists in South Dakota) did well in the 1890 elections, their hold in South Dakota was not particularly strong. South Dakota was a clean sweep for the Republican Party in congressional elections in 1892 and 1894 (Hicks 1961, 262 and 333) and went for the Republican presidential candidate Benjamin Harrison in 1892. Bryan won South Dakota in the 1896 presidential contest, but McKinley outpolled him in much of the eastern border of the state, where Baum had lived. In 1900, South Dakota, like most of the other Plains States, returned to the Republicans and voted for McKinley (Faulkner 1959, 134, 207, and 277).

Baum was one of the South Dakotans who never strayed from the Republican Party. Baum's Aberdeen *Saturday Pioneer* was generally regarded as a Republican paper, and he himself referred to it as a Republican paper (Tystad-Koupal 1996, 85). In his editorials, he consistently supported Republican candidates and

Republican issues, such as the tariff.<sup>5</sup> It is not necessary to decipher his views on Populists from his children's books; he stated them quite clearly in his editorials. Although he was not as hostile toward Independents as the other Republican paper in Aberdeen, he could be very critical of particular Independents. After a speech by the Independent candidate for governor, he suggested the man had made "a fool of himself before all intelligent men" (Tystad-Koupal 1996, 90).

Baum continued to support Republican causes after his move to Chicago in 1891. In 1896 he published the following poem in the *Chicago Herald Tribune*:

When McKinley gets the chair, boys, There'll be a jollification Throughout our happy nation And contentment everywhere! Great will be our satisfaction When the "honest money" faction Seats McKinley in the chair! No more the ample crops of grain That in our granaries have lain Will seek a purchaser in vain Or be at mercy of the "bull" or "bear"; Our merchants won't be trembling At the silverites' dissembling When McKinley gets the chair! When McKinley gets the chair, boys, The magic word "protection" Will banish all dejection And free the workingman from every care; We will gain the world's respect When it knows our coin's "correct" And McKinley's in the chair! (Hearn 1992)6

He could hardly have been clearer in his opposition to Populist monetary proposals. Baum clearly believed that the combination of sound money and tariff protection, advocated by the Republican Party, would solve all the problems of merchants, farmers, and workingmen.

Skeptical examination of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, as well as subsequent Oz books (Baum wrote over a dozen more Oz books before his death in 1919), presents even more problems for the allegorical interpretation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. A particular problem is the issue of democracy. The Populist Party was not a single-issue party devoted solely to bimetallism. Populists were almost as concerned with democratic reform as with monetary reform. The Omaha Platform adopted in 1892 stated that "Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the congress and touches even the ermine of the bench." The party's objective was to "restore the government of the Republic to the plain people." Two of the 10 supplementary resolutions put forward by the platform committee directly addressed democratic institutions. Consider resolutions 7 and 8.

- 7. RESOLVED, That we commend to the favorable consideration of the people and the reform press the legislative system known as the initiative and referendum.
- 8. RESOLVED, That we favor a constitutional provision limiting the office of President and Vice-President to one term, and providing for the election of Senators of the United States by a direct vote of the people (Hofstadter 1958, 152–53).

Democratic reform was clearly central to Populist Party politics. The monetary problem was regarded as just one symptom of a broader problem. It would seem odd that someone writing a Populist allegory should completely disregard these other issues, especially someone as concerned with suffrage as Baum.

# **Allegory: Alternate Interpretations**

In contrast to the Populists, the inhabitants of Oz were not democrats. Quite the contrary, they were avowed monarchists. All four of the main characters in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* were elevated to royalty. The Scarecrow became ruler of the Emerald City, the Tin Woodman became emperor of the Winkies, and of course, the Cowardly Lion became king of the forest. Upon her return to Oz in later books, Dorothy became a princess. Beginning with *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, the second book in the series, Oz is ruled by Ozma. The powers of Ozma were extensive. In *The Emerald City of Oz*, the sixth book in the series, Baum explained that, "All the property belonged to the Ruler. The people were her children and she cared for them" (Baum 1991, 30). People in Oz lived where the ruler told them to and worked at the jobs the ruler assigned them (Baum 1995, 185).

Baum's descriptions of the economy of Oz are also problematic for a Populist interpretation. Consider, for example, the dialogue between the shaggy man and the Tin Woodman about the Tin Woodman's castle, from *The Road to Oz* (1991, the fifth book in the series):

"It must have cost a lot of money," remarked the shaggy man. "Money! Money in Oz!" cried the Tin Woodman. "What a queer idea! Did you suppose we are so vulgar as to use money here?" "Why not?" asked the shaggy man. "If we used money to buy things with, instead of love and kindness and the desire to please one another, then we should be no better than the rest of the world," declared the Tin Woodman. "Fortunately money is not known in the Land of Oz at all. We have no rich, and no poor; for what one wishes the others all try to give him, in order to make him happy, and no one in all Oz cares to have more than he can use." (Baum 1991, 164)

Hardly the views of a sophisticated monetary theorist. It seems easier to apply a utopian interpretation to the Oz economy than a Populist one. It sounds more like a household economy, in which the relationship between ruler and ruled is the same as that between parent and child.<sup>8</sup>

If Baum was not a Populist how can all the seeming coincidences be explained? One might simply argue that a better understanding of Baum's politics leads to a better understanding of the symbolism in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Clanton (1998, 183), for example, has argued that Baum was a Republican and that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written as a parody of Populists. Others have suggested that even if Baum was not a Populist and the book was not intended as a full-scale allegory or parody, Baum's writing was shaped by the political events of the time (Ritter 1997a, 21; Dighe forthcoming). Although one can try to reconcile a non-Populist Baum with an allegorical interpretation of Oz, many of the elements of the book that appear most laden with meaning actually have alternative explanations.

Many of the elements of Baum's stories can be traced to his experiences.

Baum was born in Chittenango, New York, in 1856. His father rose from the ranks of the middle class to amass considerable wealth, then lost most of it. By 1898, Baum had written and performed in plays; managed a chain of theaters; been a traveling salesman for axle grease, hardware, and china; edited a small paper and reported for a large one; managed a general store; written a book on raising chickens; and edited a magazine on window decorating. When he was living in Aberdeen, the area was experiencing a drought. Baum wrote a humorous column about a farmer who put green goggles on his horses so that they would think wood chips were grass, just like the Wizard made the inhabitants of Oz wear green glasses to convince them the city was made of emeralds (Baum and MacFall 1961, 74).9 One of Baum's sons described the Tin Woodman as a product of Baum's interest in window displays. According to Harry Baum, his father "wanted to create something eye catching, so he made a torso out of a washboiler; bolted stovepipe arms and legs to it, and used the underside of a saucepan for the face. He topped it with a funnel hat, and what would become the inspiration for the tin woodman was born" (Carpenter and Shirley 1992, 43). Baum once explained that he had been fascinated with scarecrows since he was a child (Hearn 2000, 64). The story about pieces of china that come alive in chapter 20 of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz hardly seems surprising from a man who had been a salesman for a china company.

Much of the allegorical argument is built on the significance of colors: a City of Emeralds, a yellow brick road, silver shoes, and so forth. Although colors are important in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, their significance arises from the collaboration of Baum with the illustrator W. W. Denslow. Many people now read reprints of the Oz books that contain only black and white illustrations, but the original books were unique at the time for their use of color and the integration of text and illustrations (O'Reilly 1997, 42–47). Baum was the story teller, but he worked throughout the creative process with Denslow. Each part of Oz had its own dominant color. Blue was the color of the Munchkins, yellow was the color of the Winkies, and red the color of the Quadlings. The colors in the book changed as the characters moved through Oz. Such extensive use of color illustrations was unusual and expensive, but Baum and Denslow were so committed to their vision that they agreed to pay for the printing plates themselves. Furthermore, whereas many of the colors appear significant in the allegorical interpretation, others are left unexplained. Why, for example, was the color of witches white? Why was Dorothy's bonnet pink?

Economist Rockoff adds a quantitative element to the case for the allegorical interpretation: the seven passages and three flights of steps (the Crime of '73) that Dorothy passes through in the Wizard's palace. Like the colors, however, this example selects one out of many numeric combinations to present as significant. What of the many other numerical combinations? The Emerald City had "nine thousand, six hundred and fifty-four buildings, in which lived fifty-seven thousand three hundred and eighteen people" (Baum 1991, 29). To go home, Dorothy clicked her heels three times and took three steps. The possessor of the Golden Cap was allowed to call the Flying Monkeys three times. What is the significance of these numbers?

## Other Sources of Symbolism

There is an alternative interpretation of Baum's use of colors and numbers. The vivid colors and exact numbers, all expressed in simple language, are part of what Hollister refers to as the "three dimensionality" that made *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* a success among children, if not among literary critics. He describes this quality as "the three dimensional experience of going into another universe where everything is brighter and more fragrant, more dangerous, and more alive" (Hollister 1983, 195). The importance of color is not restricted to Baum's Oz books either. In *Sky Island* (1912), one of Baum's attempts to escape from the Oz series, the story takes place on an island in the sky where pink people live on one-half and blue people on the other. It is difficult, if not impossible, to go more than a couple of pages in one of Baum's books without a reference to a color or a number. These are descriptions that children understand and can readily imagine.

Other historians have suggested additional sources for Oz. Leach (1993, 246–60) argued that the book is largely a product of Baum's interest in theosophy. Parker (1994) argued that Baum was strongly influenced by the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Baum was clearly a man with wide-ranging interests. Hearn's *The Annotated Wizard of Oz* (2000) provides innumerable examples of contemporary events that are likely to have influenced Baum's writing. He was aware of developments in politics, religion, and popular culture. It seems reasonable that many of these developments influenced his writing, but the available evidence strongly suggests that he did not write *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a monetary allegory.

### **CONCLUSION**

Rockoff noted that the empirical evidence that Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as an allegory was slim, but he compared an allegorical interpretation to a model and suggested that "economists should not have any difficulty accepting, at least provisionally, an elegant but controversial model" (Rockoff 1990, 757). He was right—we did not have any difficulty accepting it. Despite Rockoff's warning, we appear to have accepted the story wholeheartedly rather than provisionally, simply because of its elegance.<sup>11</sup>

It is as difficult to prove that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was not a monetary allegory as it is to prove that it was. In the end, we will never know for certain what Baum was thinking when he wrote the book. I suggest that the vast majority of the evidence weighs heavily against the allegorical interpretation. It should be remembered that no record exists that Baum ever acknowledged any political meanings in the story and that no one even suggested such an interpretation until the 1960s. There certainly does not seem to be sufficient evidence to overwhelm Baum's explicit statement in the introduction of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that his sole purpose was to entertain children and not to impress upon them some moral.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is a great story. Telling students that the Populist movement was like The Wonderful Wizard of Oz does seem to catch their atten-

tion. It may be a useful pedagogical tool to illuminate the debate on bimetallism, but we should stop telling our students that it was written for that purpose.

#### NOTES

- Bryan was the presidential candidate representing the fusion of the Democratic and Populist parties in 1896. He lost to the Republican William McKinley.
- 2. The Crime of '73 was used by proponents of bimetallism to refer to the Coinage Act of 1873, which omitted coinage of the silver dollar.
- 3. Gardner almost certainly misinterpreted one aspect of Baum's politics when he suggested that his writings betrayed a distaste for feminism and woman suffrage (Gardner 1957, 21).
- 4. It has also been suggested that the Winged Monkeys represented Plains Indians and the Winkies represented Asians (either Filipinos or Chinese immigrants) and that Baum was "clearly sympathetic to the plight of the Philippines (and to the Plains Indians)" (Rockoff 1990, 751). Baum's editorials in the Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer indicate that his sympathy was limited. He declared that whites had wronged the Native Americans but argued that the only solution to the Indian problem was total extermination of these "untamed and untamable creatures" (Tystad-Koupal 1996, 147).
- 5. It might be suggested that Baum was merely pandering to a Republican audience, but he also used his editorials to discuss issues that do not appear to have been popular in Aberdeen, such as advocating woman suffrage and challenging the teachings of local churches (Hearn 2000, xxiii).
- 6. Chicago Sunday Times Herald, July 12, 1896. Reprinted in Hearn (1992).
- Prior to the 17th Amendment, adopted in 1913, senators were selected by state legislatures rather than by direct election.
- 8. Thanks to Mary Hansen for pointing this out to me.
- 9. Baum does not seem to have been very concerned with being consistent from one book to the next. By the time of *The Emerald City of Oz*, the city is actually emerald encrusted.
- 10. The Books of Wonder reprints of the Oz series contain the original color illustrations by W. W. Denslow and John Neill. Particularly spectacular are the illustrations in *The Emerald City of Oz*, each of which incorporates a special metallic green ink. The annotated centennial edition edited by Michael Patrick Hearn also reproduces the original appearance of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.
- 11. I use the term "we" literally because I told the story to my classes for several years. I did not start to doubt it until I read the Oz series to Ben and Joanna Gregson.

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