

L. Frank Baum in Ottawa

L. Frank Baum, the author of the “Oz” books, was in his youth a playwright and actor who traveled the country in a play he had written called “The Maid of Arran.” It played at the Sheldon Opera House (on the southwest corner of Second and Main, 3rd floor) on December 5, 1882.

The tour stop in Kansas came at a time of intense drought—both literally and figuratively. Kansas had recently become the first state to “go dry” by outlawing the sale of liquor. It was wintertime, and the state was bleak, gray and treeless, as well as suffering from months of lack of rain. Baum’s new wife wrote to her brother in New York State that Kansas was “(n)o good!”

The Ottawa *Republican* newspaper gave the performance rave reviews. “An audience of good numbers, and the best class of our play-going citizens greeted the presentation of the “Maid of Arran” at the New Opera House last night. To say that it was pleased would be to not say enough: it was delighted. The play is a pleasing one of simple plot. . .but it was full of excellent situations, and gave happy opportunity to artistic and sensational scenic effects. The characters were strongly taken without exception. . .All in the company made an impression that will be of value to it should it ever return to Ottawa.”

Alas, the company went broke shortly thereafter, and Baum settled down to a life of manufacturing lubricating oils for the carriage trade. However, later in life when he needed a literary foil for his amazing invention of the glorious Land of Oz, he drew on his troupe’s experience in bleak, gray Kansas, and put Dorothy Gale there before the tornado took her over the rainbow.