

Baum enjoys adding to legend of Oz

By Judyth Rigler

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At the age of 55, Roger S. Baum has definitely achieved greatness. Last month, he was grand marshal of the 12th annual Wizard of Oz Festival, which brought 35,000 people to Chesterton, Ind. — a town of only 12,000!

Imagine this somewhat bizarre scenario, stretching over a week: parades with some of the original Munchkins from the movie (now in their 70s), marching bands, a ruby slipper contest, a character look-alike contest, a Dorothy calling contest (remember Auntie Em?), trivia contest and lots of memorabilia.

"It was dreamed up by Jean Nelson, an Oz buff who owns a children's bookstore in Chesterton called Yellow Brick Road. It's been a big hit, and it drives everybody wonderfully crazy," said

Baum in a telephone interview from his home in Westlake Village, Calif. It also sells tons of books.



BAUM

That's where Baum, great-grandson of Oz creator L. Frank Baum, comes in. In 1989, he began reinventing his great-granddad's brainchild by writing beautifully illustrated new Oz books. First came "Dorothy of Oz," a chapter book published by William Morrow, then a trilogy of picture books featuring his own made-up characters, the Silly OZbuls of Oz, a sort of surreal, pink, spring-footed creature.

"I'm not trying to follow in great-granddad's footsteps —

they're awfully big. I'm just trying to carry on the love of Oz and to add to the legend," Baum said.

Baum's books were an instant success, and they've sold upwards of 100,000 copies, mostly through department store promotions and school appearances. There are more in the works — "The Lion of Oz" is due out in February, and Radio Shack will begin selling a CD version of the Oz books this fall. He may yet equal his great-granddad's total of 14 Oz stories written between 1900 and 1920.

Obviously, from the success of the Wizard of Oz Festival, there are a lot of Oz fans left out there, and Baum sees them as his audience. "They grew up with Oz, and they're making sure their children grow up with Oz."

Baum is pleased that events

such as San Antonio's Book and Author Luncheon allow him to give back something of the gift he inherited. He's now working with one of the Indiana festival sponsors, Biotech, to donate a percentage of his sales to their work on children's artificial limbs.

Baum's great-grandfather died before he was born. But on Baum's first Christmas in 1938, his great-grandmother, Maud Gage Baum, inscribed a first-edition copy of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" with these words: "This book was written by your great-grandfather, L. Frank Baum."

He has kept the book in a cherished spot ever since, and he feels he's fulfilling a lifelong dream, perhaps first imagined when he visited his great-grandma's home and played with a dog named — what else? — Toto.