

Dorothy Louise Gage (June 11, 1898-November 15, 1898)

The life of Dorothy Louise Gage, although brief, was certainly meaningful, leaving an impact that carried on long after her death. Gage was born on Saturday, June 11, 1898 in Bloomington, Illinois to Sophie (Jewell) Gage and Thomas Clarkson Gage. The family lived at 1008 North McLean Street. Just over five months after her birth, she was struck with a sudden illness that lasted 24 hours. She was treated by George B. Kelso, M.D., and diagnosed with “congestion of the brain.”¹ “Congestion of the brain” could have been Meningitis or Equine Encephalitis.² Both of these diseases involve inflammation of the brain and can be deadly even today. Unfortunately, Gage was unable to fight off this illness and passed away on November 15, 1898.

The family was naturally heartbroken. Thomas’s sister, Maud (Gage) Baum, who was devastated at the news, wrote that she “could have taken [Dorothy] for [her] very own and loved her devotedly.”³ Gage was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on November 16, 1898 by Carlton & Beck Undertakers.⁴ Baum came down for the funeral from her home in Chicago. She was so distraught by the death of her niece that she required medical attention when she returned home from the funeral.⁵ Not long after Dorothy’s burial, the Gages moved to Aberdeen, South Dakota where they and their surviving daughter lived for the rest of their lives.⁶

It would seem as though this is where the story of this “perfectly beautiful baby” would end.⁷ But her name was ensured to live on by her uncle, L. Frank Baum (Maud’s husband). Baum was the author of many children’s stories, including *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* published in 1900. He and his wife had always wanted a daughter of their own (they had four sons). And after seeing how upset his wife Maud was by the death of their niece, he decided to immortalize Gage in his story by naming the heroine after her. Although it could be argued that Dorothy was simply a popular name at the time Baum wrote his story, literary scholars reject this coincidence. Given his devotion to his wife and family, along with his tendency to use the names of family members in his stories, they agree that Dorothy Gale was named after Dorothy Gage.⁸ Changing Gage to Gale could have been done for two reasons: one, that it was easier to pronounce; and two, the “l” could stand for Louise, Dorothy’s middle name.⁹

The discovery of Dorothy Gale’s namesake is credited to historian Sally Roesch Wagner. She had been conducting research on Maud’s mother, Matilda Joslyn Gage—a suffragette who worked closely with Susan B. Anthony—when she discovered the location of Dorothy Gage’s grave in Bloomington.¹⁰ Wagner brought the connection to light and sparked public interest in restoring the gravesite of the girl who inspired Dorothy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. As the story of Dorothy’s namesake became more widely known, Mickey Carroll, an actor who played one of the Munchkins in the 1939 film adaptation of the story, became involved and worked with

¹ “Register of Deaths,” *McLean County Death Index*, entry for Dorothy L. Gage, Book 3, p. 80

² Nancy H. Hannan. “What did they Call It When They Died? A Study of the Listed Causes of Death in the Town of Hyde Park, Massachusetts, 1869-1900,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Volume 32, No. 2, 180

³ “Letter from Maud Gage Baum to Helen Leslie Gage,” *Matilda Jewell Gage Collection*, November 27, 1898

⁴ “Register of Deaths”

⁵ Dan Craft. “An Unlikely Celebrity Beyond the Grave,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 30, 1997

⁶ James Keeran. “Dorothy’s Yellow Brick Road Ends in Bloomington,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 29, 1996

⁷ “Letter from Maud Gage Baum to Helen Leslie Gage”

⁸ Keeran, “Dorothy’s Yellow Brick Road Ends in Bloomington”

⁹ Craft, “An Unlikely Celebrity Beyond the Grave”

¹⁰ Sally Roesch Wagner. “Dorothy Gage and Dorothy Gale,” *The Baum Bugle*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Autumn, 1984, 6

Evergreen Memorial Cemetery to create a new headstone. Carroll's family had a tombstone business in St. Louis that he had run for 60 years.¹¹ He carved and donated a new tombstone for Dorothy. It was placed at the foot of the grave, leaving the original marker in place.¹² The original headstone was eroded and almost illegible. On May 31, 1997, the Cemetery held a ceremony to unveil the new marker, as well as kick-off a fundraiser for the new children's section named The Dorothy L. Gage Memorial Garden in her honor.¹³

Recently it was discovered that the date of Gage's death was incorrectly carved on her original tombstone, which led to the wrong date being used on the new marker. The date on the original stone indicated November 11, 1898 as the day Gage passed away. The official record of her death, however, reports that she was five months and four days old, with the day she passed being November 15, 1898. This date is also confirmed by the death announcement for Gage in *The Pantagraph* that signifies her death took place on the day that edition of the newspaper was published, November 15.¹⁴

Though her life was cut short, Dorothy Louise Gage has been immortalized through the tale of a young farm girl who traveled to Oz. L. Frank Baum ensured that her memory lives on by providing a gateway to her life through an extension of the young girl she may have become.

By: Lisa Elleson, 2016

¹¹ Dan Craft. "Mickey Carroll comes to Bloomington to dedicate memorial at cemetery," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 30, 1997

¹² Craft, "An Unlikely Celebrity Beyond the Grave"

¹³ Craft, "An Unlikely Celebrity Beyond the Grave"

¹⁴ "Death of a Child," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 15, 1898