



WIZARD OF OZ



Peter Pan & THE STEPPING STONES

MEMORY LANE



My first brush with a celebrity was learning about Fred Stone. When I was a wee bit of a lass one summer, the only thing happening in my small world was the construction of two new houses behind the Stone house on the corner of Underhill Road and Greenway South. All the neighbors started their weekdays to the sounds of trucks arriving with numerous workers who hammered and dug their way around the premises. These were exciting times. It was the place to be for all us kids whose families didn't belong to a beach club or go away for the summer. At first I thought the house was called the stone house because it was made of stone. I later learned it was the house where a famous Broadway Star once lived. His name was Fred Stone.

Most folks living Forest Hills at that time knew about Fred Stone, even though he was long gone. After all, he was once our very own song and dance man, entertaining neighbors during The Gardens' early years at their Fourth of July celebrations and the opening of the Community House on Borage Place in 1926. Some even remembered him unicycling on Beechnoll Road.

During one of those typical hot, humid and hazy afternoons that summer I remember seeing my younger brother, Guy, and his friend Heidi, crossing Burns Street without adult supervision. "Boy, are they going to get in trouble", I said to myself. Together, they were struggling as they pulled his red wagon. It's no wonder that it took the two of them since the wagon must have been very heavy. It contained what looked like a long and large white rock. The mass of stone turned out to be a statue. It resembled Peter Pan. The figure was of a young person wearing a short leafed tunic. The curls under the elf cap indicated it was a girl. The legs were broken off at the knees.

The Peter Pan statue came from the old Fred Stone house. Guy and Heidi sneaked up there, which was surprising since they were good kids. They could have sneaked back and no one would have been the wiser. My guess is Guy was willing to risk getting caught rather than be haunted by the image of Peter Pan being thrown away. When my Mom learned about the escapade she was surprisingly more interested in the contents of the little red wagon than taking disciplinary actions.

We were all curious about the statue. Could it have been Fred Stone himself? But he was an adult when he lived in the house up the road. We learned he had three daughters, Dorothy, Carol and Paula, but what would any of them have to do with Peter Pan? After doing a little investigative work Mom found an address for

Dorothy Stone and dashed a letter off asking about the statue. The next week we received her reply. Dorothy Stone appeared on Broadway with her parents, in "The Stepping Stones". It was produced specifically to showcase the Stone Family's talents. In one of the numbers, Dorothy played the part of Peter Pan. A statue of her in this role was made and placed in the Stone's backyard where it remained all these years, until the summer it was rescued by my brother.

We were dumbfounded. We had become the proud owners of a statue depicting a genuine Broadway musical performer. Mom took home videos of my Dad making a cement base and digging a hole in our backyard for Peter Pan's new home. When the statue was placed beside our cherry tree in our backyard she looked content in her new home.

Fred Stone wasn't from New York. He was born Fred Andrew Stone in a log cabin in Colorado in 1873. His roots can be traced back to pioneers traveling into the unknown West. His family was no strangers to the theater. His father appeared in The Wild West Show.

At age 10, Fred joined a traveling circus and taught himself how to walk the tightrope. Along with his brother Ed, they performed in medicine and minstrel shows and honky-tonks. Fred eventually worked his way up performing in variety acts and musical comedy. When he met Dave Montgomery they became a team. Shortly after they appeared in the Broadway hit, The Wizard of Oz, which catapulted both their careers. Stone played the role of the Scarecrow while Montgomery played the Tin Man. It was the 'Cats' of its day.

Even though Ray Bolger, who played the famed Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz movie, would have been too young to see Stone's performance, some believe he was inspired by the Broadway star's "rubber-limbed portrayal" of the Scarecrow.

Fred Stone rubbed shoulders with the personalities of his day. He studied boxing with Gentlemen Corbett for one of his Broadway shows and was a dear friend of Annie Oakley, the famed champion marksman. He was a close buddy of Will Rogers, who lived in Kew Gardens. Both shared a love of flying and both had their fair share of accidents. Before the opening of "Three Cheers", in which Fred Stone starred with his daughter Dorothy, he swore he'd give up flying during the run of the show. Yet he'd allow himself just one more jaunt before opening night. The fates saw things differently. Upon take off, a sudden wind rose up causing Stone to seriously injure himself.



"Three Cheers" was to be Dorothy Stone's Broadway premier. Rather than see Dorothy disappointed on her opening night, Rogers stood in for his good buddy. He ad-libbed his way through the entire script. Regardless how doubtful the show's backers and producers were, the show was a hit launching Dorothy Stone's career and saving its investors from losing their shirts. Will Rogers' ad lib style became so popular he not only continued using it in "Three Cheers" until Stone recuperated, but it became a popular acting method. So popular it was taught at several acting schools.

Fred Stone recuperated miraculously from his accident, unlike the fate that met Will Rogers years later, who was killed in his flying accident. Despite the doctor's predictions that Stone would never dance again, he continued to perform on Broadway, but briefly. The accident had taken its toll. It wasn't long until the Stone family moved to California. Stone continued entertaining yet in more dramatic less physical roles.



He appeared in 18 movies, including Alice Adams, which starred Katherine Hepburn, Fred MacMurray and Hattie McDaniel. Back in Forest Hills, the Stone house was used to accommodate the Austrian Tennis Team during The Davis Cup Tennis Championships hosted by The West Side Tennis Club.

Stone retired in 1950. During the last years of his life he suffered from increasing blindness and heart trouble. When his wife died he wasn't told of her death at first, the daughters being concerned the shock could potentially have a long lasting damaging effect. Two years later he died. His gravestone is not typical of Showbiz celebrities. It's a simple marble plaque which reads, "He Was a Wonderful Dad".

Stone's career spanned the gamut of the changing entertainment business. He began performing in circuses and fly-by-night touring companies and ended by appearing in movies.

As for our little Peter Pan statue, years later we took her with us when we moved to Seasongood Road where she remains to this day, although not in the house we lived in. When my family moved away, a neighbor was kind enough to give the statue a new home in their backyard. The last time I saw Peter Pan was twenty years ago. She was starting to show her true age looking more like a mini column from Stonehenge instead of the young girl with curls. I wonder if she's still standing. ■