

Trial Focuses On "Wizard Of Oz" Actor's Finances
News

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CLAYTON, Mo. (AP) - The family of the late "Wizard of Oz" movie actor Mickey Carroll appeared in court Monday to claim he was bilked out of nearly \$500,000 by a caretaker in his last years.



Carroll, a hypopituitary dwarf, played one of the Munchkins in the famous movie. He died in May 2009 at age 89. He had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Carroll was his stage name; his given name was Michael Finocchiaro. He had lived in Bel-Nor.

Carroll's nieces and nephews sued the caretaker, Linda Dodge, in 2011 upon learning that much of his estate had been depleted. This week, a St. Louis County Circuit Court jury is hearing the civil suit, which asks for the money to be restored.

Linda Dodge wormed her way into the life of Mickey Carroll and started to isolate him from other family members, said the family's attorney, Patrick McCarthy, in opening statements.

He said Dodge and perhaps others slowly drained Carroll's assets, once totaling \$500,000.

Lawyers for Dodge disputed the characterization, painting her as someone who was there for Carroll when his family was not. They said she took him to doctor's appointments and the grocery store, later helped with hygiene, and brought him and a disabled nephew into her home.

Ms. Dodge genuinely cared for the decedent, said one of her attorneys, Christopher Blaesing. She treated him like family.

Blaesing offered an explanation for what happened with Carroll's money: He was a small man but he was larger than life when it came to his spending.

He said Carroll went out to eat almost every day, tipping generously, and gave lavish gifts to family and charities.

McCarthy began calling witnesses on Monday, including Carroll's niece, Josephine Romeiser, the personal representative for his estate.

Romeiser talked about how her uncle turned his dwarfism into a positive, making a career out of it in show business. After the stage lights faded, he helped run the family monument business. Carroll would joke, however, that it only took opening the refrigerator door and being bathed in lights to get him going again.

If you look up the word entertainer, that was my Uncle Mickey, she said.

Romeiser said she didn't know then how much her uncle had saved, although she assumed it was significant because he was frugal. She said almost everyone in the family had lost contact with him in his later years. When it came time to manage his estate, Romeiser said, they learned his Bel-Nor house had been emptied and records were scarce.

That's when they hired an attorney and an investigator. In the process, she said, they learned of Dodge and various drained accounts, including a \$100,000 equity loan that had been taken out for structural changes on Carroll's home.

Dodge's attorneys plan to argue that Carroll was competent and in control of his financial decisions. They also plan to call Dodge to testify to the friendship she had with Carroll.