

The Case of the Stolen Ruby Slippers

How a big crime in a small town produced a whodunit as gripping and colorful as “The Wizard of Oz” itself

By Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson



On a rainy afternoon in September 2018, the FBI gathered national media in its Minnesota headquarters for an important announcement. Jill Sanborn, special agent in charge of the Minneapolis division, stood in front of a packed room and said, “We’re here today to share with you the recovery of one of the most significant and cherished pieces of movie memorabilia in American history: Dorothy’s ruby slippers from the 1939 movie ‘The Wizard of Oz.’ ”

When the ruby slippers were stolen in August 2005 from the Judy Garland Museum in Grand Rapids, Minn., it made international news. Someone had broken in, smashed a plexiglass case and escaped with the shoes. David Letterman joked in a monologue that week that “a pair of ruby red slippers worn by Judy Garland in ‘The Wizard of Oz’ have been stolen. The thief is described as being armed and fabulous.” The crime, though, was no joke to this northern timber and mining community of about 10,000 people with a yellow brick sidewalk winding through its historic downtown. Judy Garland was born here in 1922, and “the theft devastated us,” says John Kelsch, senior director of the museum.

Off to the side of the FBI news conference, away from the crush of curious reporters, stood three of the police officers from Grand Rapids who had worked the ruby slippers case: investigator Brian Mattson, patrol Sgt. Andy Morgan and Sgt. of Investigations Bob Stein. Missing from the group was Gene Bennett, the investigator who first handled the case in 2005. Bennett retired in 2009, and today he tells me that he’s tired of talking about the slippers. Over the years, articles sometimes “made him look bad,” according to Stein, “even though he did everything with the resources he had in 2005.”

The shoes, Sanborn explained to the reporters, had been recovered during a sting operation in Minneapolis earlier that summer involving the bureau’s art crime team. Now, in a theatrical twist, the FBI had placed a green velvet throw over a case, with the shoes underneath. The Grand Rapids officers couldn’t see the slippers through the crowd, but they’d already spent a quiet moment alone with them before the media had arrived.

The news conference had been announced only hours before, so in Grand Rapids there had been no time to plan proper viewing parties. At the Itasca County Historical Society downtown, the

small staff huddled around a computer screen and live-streamed it. For years, Lilah Crowe, the executive director, felt she had to answer for the stolen shoes. “I would go to museum conferences and I’d say, ‘Yes, I’m from Grand Rapids, Minnesota, birthplace of Judy Garland, and no, they have not found the slippers yet,’ ” Crowe recalls.

But now they had been found. The staff watched as Sanborn removed the cover to reveal a clear case with the slippers inside. The red shoes were cushioned on a bed of blue velvet with the American flag strategically placed to appear in any photo. Photographers swelled in for their shots, and an FBI press agent could be heard saying, “Folks, this is valuable evidence. If you could keep some distance here.”

Jody Hane, a writer and researcher at the historical society, says her colleagues were impressed — at first. But as the event unfolded, another sentiment soon seeped in. “They didn’t say who took them,” Hane marveled.

Joining Sanford that day was Christopher Myers, a U.S. attorney who was introduced as the federal prosecutor in charge of the case. “This is an ongoing investigation, so we will not talk about the facts,” he told the reporters.

“A press conference without facts,” Hane thought. “Well, that’s odd.” The event ended with the FBI calling upon the public to help identify those involved in the theft. “We were left with a lot of questions,” Hane says. Such as: Where had the shoes been all these years, and who had been caught with them during the FBI sting?

More than the return of the shoes, people in Grand Rapids wanted answers for a crime that had haunted their town for 13 years. In that time, thousands of tips from across the country and Europe had flooded the Grand Rapids Police Department — from psychics claiming the shoes were buried in a house mere blocks from their station, to countless people believing they’d stumbled onto them at a flea market or in the home of a “Wizard of Oz” fan.

But it was the rumor and innuendo swirling through town that garnered the most attention. “Everyone was a suspect,” Stein says. The burglary stirred up accusations among residents and

captivated some to the point of obsession. A few weeks after the theft, Crowe says, one of the board members at the historical society wrote down who he believed had committed the crime, sealed it in an envelope and put it in a safe-deposit box at the bank. He told her that he had left explicit instructions in his will to open the envelope only after the crime had been solved.

“When we didn’t find out the person responsible, well, it’s just hard to believe this is all still a mystery,” Crowe says. But Andy Morgan — who took over the case in 2009 and spent the next seven years chasing leads all over town and the country — was not at all surprised that questions remained even after the shoes’ recovery. “The ruby slippers are an absolute mystery,” he says. “There’s just something mystical about them.”

At least five sets of ruby slippers are known to have survived the original film production, yet instead of detracting from their value, the existence of multiple pairs “only enhances the magic,” says John Fricke, a historian of “The Wizard of Oz” who co-wrote Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s official 50th anniversary history of the film. “For the small handful of people who have the financial wherewithal to own a pair of slippers, there are hundreds of others who are sitting at home with their glue guns and their sequins and their beads creating duplicates of the shoes.” Fricke was not shocked that someone resorted to theft. He chalks it up to “the magic of the ruby slippers and how that manifests itself in wonderful and bizarre and sometimes disturbing ways.”

“The Wizard of Oz” has taken many forms over the years — from its original 1900 book by L. Frank Baum, to a popular vaudeville show, to a silent film where Dorothy was portrayed as a Kansas flapper and lost princess — but it was always about a search: a winding journey toward figuring out something about yourself. Like Dorothy, the investigators — and even the average citizens — of Grand Rapids had been taken down an unlikely, meandering path. After watching the FBI news conference, I couldn’t get the question of what had happened to the ruby slippers out of my mind. Soon, I was pulled into the mystery, too.

When it wrapped in 1939, “The Wizard of Oz” was one of the most expensive movies ever made. Advertisements that year claimed the movie had used 9,200 actors, 30 sound stages on the MGM lot and 65 sets. The production required so much electricity to run the lights for the

Technicolor film that a fire marshal stood by to make sure rising temperatures on set wouldn't spark the thatched roofs of Munchkinland into flames. While the rest of the country crawled its way out of the Great Depression, MGM spent \$3 million on creating the fictional world of Oz. In the 1930s, "the entire nation's attention was on Hollywood because this had become such an American industry," says Ryan Lintelman, entertainment curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. "Hollywood became the narrative-making center for the entire world."

From conception, "The Wizard of Oz" "was planned to feature the fantasy of Oz in color and the reality of Kansas in black and white," Fricke wrote in "The Wizard of Oz: The Official 50th Anniversary Pictorial History." The drabness of real life vs. the sparkle of Oz was highlighted the moment Dorothy landed among the Munchkins. The lyricist for the movie, E.Y. "Yip" Harburg, hit upon this contrast in "Over the Rainbow." His lyrics were "built around his reaction to the 'grayness' of Kansas," according to Fricke, because he "felt the only color in Dorothy's life would have been a rainbow."

"The Wizard of Oz" endures, Fricke says, despite the fact that "it doesn't have car chases or guns or sexual allusion. It doesn't have CGI effects. It is a great story, performed by great people in a state-of-the-art 1939 fashion that is still pretty astounding. Even more so when you consider that there were no computers and everything you're seeing had to be made out of whole cloth." Including the ruby slippers. Initial versions of the script kept Dorothy's slippers the color they had been in Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz": silver. In the spring of 1938 on Page 26, Scene 113, you can see where someone scratched out "silver" and wrote "ruby." The shoes, the script read, "appear on Dorothy's feet, glittering and sparkling in the sun."

On the movie set, multiples of the same costume were made for continuity, and since Garland was wearing through her size 5 sequined shoes while dancing across a wood-painted prop resembling a yellow brick road, numerous pairs were required. (Pairs were also made for Garland's body double, who stood in for marking purposes on set when Garland, age 16, had to leave for activities like tutoring.)

Several pairs of white pumps were bought from the Innes Shoe Co. in Los Angeles and painted or dyed red. Hundreds of small sequins were then hand-sewn with silk thread onto netting that was overlaid onto the shoes. The bows were made of stiff cotton and adorned with three types of red faux gems: thin, tubular bugle beads; rectangular beads; and rhinestones. In real life, the ruby slippers are darker than in the movie, more of a burgundy. (Many of the costumes are also darker than they appear on screen, owing to the Technicolor process.) A few of the shoes also had pieces of felt glued to the bottom to minimize the noise of Garland's dancing.

"The Wizard of Oz" got rave reviews when it premiered in August 1939 (though New Yorker critic Russell Maloney sniffed, "I sat cringing before M-G-M's Technicolor production of 'The Wizard of Oz,' which displays no trace of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity. ... I say it's a stinkeroo.") "Gone With the Wind" won that year's Academy Award for best film, but it would be "The Wizard of Oz" that went on to become one of the most beloved movies of all time. "The ruby slippers are an absolute mystery," says Sgt. Andy Morgan, who spent seven years chasing leads all over town and the country. "There's just something mystical about them."

While "The Wizard of Oz" lives on, the studio system that created it does not. By the mid-1960s the golden era of Hollywood — built by tycoons such as Louis B. Mayer at MGM through stars like Garland — was fading, and a new generation of cutthroat executives were in charge. In 1969, a wealthy businessman with the very cinematic name of Kirk Kerkorian took over at MGM. He was more interested in the land that MGM owned in Culver City, Calif., than the history of Hollywood. Kerkorian put the land up for sale to underwrite his developments in Las Vegas, but first he had to liquidate decades of props, costumes, furniture and sets. A viable market for Hollywood memorabilia "had yet to emerge," wrote Rhys Thomas in his book "The Ruby Slippers of Oz: Thirty Years Later," "and it wasn't a concept about which Kerkorian cared."

The financier sold the contents of MGM for \$1.5 million to an auctioneer named David Weisz, and a young costumer named Kent Warner was one of the people who helped sort the vast ephemera for an auction in 1970. "The past was being totally dismissed by those in charge of Hollywood. The past was worthless," says Fricke. "MGM, being the greatest production studio,

had the most to lose, and they did. Orchestrations for films and production files were dumped into a landfill and had a freeway built over them. The surviving outtakes that didn't go into films, the screen tests and all that original nitrate film were put on a barge and dumped in the Pacific Ocean.”

Still, a black market for memorabilia was already developing. Entertainment items pilfered from studio lots were a well-known secret around Hollywood. In the 1960s, Warner, and others like him, made money finding and selling costumes and props. Yet Warner, who died in 1984, was seen less as a thief than a Robin Hood type, a man salvaging the history of Hollywood from sure destruction. “Kent Warner was not a collector or dealer of Hollywood memorabilia so much as he was a fan of an era, a style of living,” Thomas wrote in his book. “Kent truly loved the movies of old Hollywood” and “quick words could not properly express Kent’s anger when he found Hollywood treasures at the bottoms of trash cans.”

In the run-up to the MGM auction, Warner had one goal: to find anything he could from his favorite film, “The Wizard of Oz.” Costumes were often repurposed for other films, but the uniqueness of the Munchkin attire and the public recognition of the ruby slippers meant the costumes of Oz had been packed away and forgotten. As the legend goes, Warner climbed into the dusty rafters of an out-of-the-way women’s costume warehouse, and there, among the darkness and the dust, a sliver of light through a hole in the ceiling illuminated something. It glittered and sparkled in the sun. He’d found the slippers. Multiple pairs.

The discovery created a problem. Weisz, who died in 1981, was not a Hollywood insider; rather he was an antiques guy who knew furniture. He assumed there would be only one pair of ruby slippers, and he thought “it was more valuable that way,” says Joe Maddalena, owner of the Los Angeles-based auction house Profiles in History. Maddalena knew Warner in the 1970s, and over the years he has sold pairs of original ruby slippers to wealthy collectors. Warner gave just one pair to Weisz and squirreled away the rest, saving the most pristine for his personal collection.

The MGM auction took place over 18 days, and on May 17, 1970, Warner displayed what many believed to be the only pair of ruby slippers on a velvet cushion. Bidding was fast and fierce, and when the gavel came down, the ruby slippers sold for \$15,000, a price so high that it shocked the crowd. (People were also surprised that actress Debbie Reynolds, who was amassing a collection for a proposed museum of Hollywood history, didn't bid on the slippers after spending thousands on other items. Later, when it was understood that there were multiple pairs, rumors circulated that Reynolds never bid on the shoes because Warner had promised her a pair from his stash.) Many now credit the MGM auction of 1970 — and the ruby slippers specifically — with launching the market for movie memorabilia. A pair of shoes that “probably cost \$15 to make in their day,” according to Thomas, has become one of the most coveted and valuable Hollywood artifacts. Maddalena assures me that should the recovered slippers hit the auction block today, they would be valued between \$2 million and \$5 million.

The anonymous bidders at the MGM auction — now known to be three businessmen from Southern California — were chagrined when a woman from Tennessee named Roberta Bauman came forward shortly thereafter to say that she, too, had a pair of ruby slippers. Bauman had won hers in a 1939 MGM promotion. But for years after the auction, “the greatest pinch in Hollywood remained Hollywood's best kept secret,” Thomas wrote, referring to the shoes taken by Warner. It wasn't until Thomas published a story in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988 (which became his book “*The Ruby Slippers of Oz*” in 1989) that the full story of the multiple pairs emerged.

Today, we know the whereabouts of five. One pair has been on near-constant display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History since the men who bought them at the MGM auction donated them in 1979. “It's one of the most requested things at our visitor services desk,” says Lintelman. On the rare occasions that the slippers have been taken off display for conservation, the museum receives angry and desperate calls. “People make pilgrimages to this museum and to Washington, D.C., just to see the slippers, so they're gutted if they aren't here,” Lintelman explains.

Two California collectors bought the Roberta Bauman pair in 2000 for \$666,000 at a Christie's auction. The shoes haven't been seen since and were reportedly locked in a bank safe. Debbie Reynolds came to own the Arabian test slippers — an ornate design that never made it onto the screen — and those last auctioned in 2011 for \$627,300. Kent Warner's pair are known as the Witch's Shoes, because it is believed they were used for the close-up shots of the Wicked Witch of the East's feet after she was crushed by Dorothy's house. Maddalena sold these in 2012 to a group of Hollywood investors including Leonardo DiCaprio, and they will go on display this year when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences opens its museum in Los Angeles.

And then there were the shoes that would eventually be stolen from Grand Rapids. One of the beneficiaries of Warner's side hustle was a Los Angeles-based acting coach and amateur collector named Michael Shaw. Shaw was friends with Warner in the late 1960s; he remembers one day getting a call from him after a studio where Warner worked had instructed him to incinerate old costumes to make room for new ones. "He said, 'Michael, get over here, you can't believe what I've been told to get rid of,' and when I got there Kent told me that 10 minutes earlier someone had pulled a complete Errol Flynn Robin Hood costume out of the trash," Shaw recalls. "Kent started the idea of collecting, and at that time it was fun. But none of us realized that the value of these things would go through the stratosphere."

Shaw bought a pair of ruby slippers along with some other items from Warner for \$2,500. Years later, Shaw began taking his shoes to shopping malls and "Wizard of Oz" festivals across the country for a fee; they became known as the Traveling Shoes.

The Traveling Shoes first came to the Judy Garland Museum in 1989 for the 50th anniversary of the movie. They were put on a wooden pedestal topped by a plexiglass case and placed behind a simple silk-rope barrier. The museum brought the shoes back over the years, and in 2005 it paid Shaw a discounted rate of about \$5,500 to display them for two months, flying him in to deliver the slippers in person. Shaw first stopped in Minneapolis and did an interview and an event at a library with the shoes, thus alerting many in the state that the slippers would be in Grand Rapids. Kelsch reached out to a bank to procure an on-site safe so that the shoes could be locked up each night, but Shaw balked at the idea. He didn't want staff handling the slippers because of their age

and fragility. He also alleges that the museum lied to him. “I thought they had recording cameras and motion sensors and the police were coming by,” Shaw says today. “They had none of it. I never would have left the shoes if I knew there was such a lack of security.” (Kelsch denies the museum misled Shaw, adding that the contract for the shoes coming to the museum makes “no mention of any specific security measures.”)

When Roberta Bauman’s pair went on display at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando in 1989, the shoes warranted a security guard and several cameras. The Smithsonian’s ruby slippers are inside a guarded museum, in a gallery with cameras and behind an alarmed case, among other security measures the museum won’t disclose. Michael Shaw’s shoes coming to a small museum in northern Minnesota with minimal security must have seemed an easy mark.

The afternoon I drove to the Judy Garland Museum, I nearly missed the entrance off Pokegama Avenue, one of the main highways through Grand Rapids. A slate sky was emptying several inches of snow onto the already covered town, and mountainous plowed piles on the side of the road made visibility a challenge. The blanched monotony of deep winter was, in a way, like Kansas before the Technicolor kicks in — only instead of a tornado, Grand Rapids had recently suffered through a polar vortex that swooped in and dropped the wind chill to minus-50. I knew I was in the right place when I saw a wooden cutout of Dorothy signaling to me from a snowdrift.

The museum, founded in 1975, once occupied a single room in a historic building downtown, but it moved out here in 2003 to a purpose-built gallery next to where a Walmart and a Target command vast expanses of asphalt sprawl. These days, it gets about 21,000 visitors annually, according to Kelsch, who became the executive director in 1994. Most come in summer, when the museum hosts its annual Judy Garland Festival and pleasant weather makes the nearby lakes a popular tourist destination.

Frances Ethel Gumm was born here on June 10, 1922, the youngest of three daughters. Her father, Frank Gumm, was a vaudeville performer who met his future wife, Ethel, when she accompanied him on the piano one night. The couple toured the Midwest performing together —

it's possible they even saw the popular and madcap vaudeville stage adaptation of Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" — before they married and moved to Grand Rapids.

The Gumms bought the New Grand motion picture house downtown, where they performed in between movie screenings and later invited their daughters onstage to join in the family act. They lived in a quaint white clapboard house, and legend has it that it was there, at age 2, that Frances Gumm (she took the name Judy Garland in 1934) stood on the stair landing and sang "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" straight through. Her father was amazed. A few months later, Baby Gumm sang "Jingle Bells" to a packed audience at the New Grand, and she kept singing to rapturous applause until her father finally carried her offstage. "The love affair between Mama and her audience started that night," Garland's daughter Lorna Luft wrote in her book, "Me and My Shadows: A Family Memoir."

Frances and her family left for California when she was 4. In Grand Rapids, they had been happy, according to Luft, but in California they were not. "In Grand Rapids, performing was a joy. In California it became a job, one that would consume my mother's entire life," Luft wrote. "Mama used to say she started working at five and never got a chance to quit."

The Judy Garland Museum's main gallery houses a permanent collection of artifacts from that legendary career: Garland's test dress from "The Wizard of Oz"; an original Andy Warhol serigraph of her; the carriage that transported the cast in the Emerald City scene. Some items were donated by Sid Luft, one of Garland's five husbands, and over the years Lorna Luft has come to the festival; so did several of the Munchkins when they were alive. Garland's daughter Liza Minnelli is an honorary member of the museum's board.

The curated tour of Garland's life ends with a panel by the back door about the challenges she faced: the drug addiction and divorces, the suicide attempts, her early death at 47 from what was ruled an accidental overdose of barbiturates. "Visitors are astonished that she was fed all these pills by doctors over the years," Kelsch says.

Some in Grand Rapids are old enough to remember their parents or grandparents talking about seeing the Gumm family perform at the New Grand. Jon Miner, a wealthy businessman who grew up in Grand Rapids and is a member of the museum's board, traces his interest in Garland to his grandmother, who said she once babysat little Frances. In 1991 Miner helped buy the Gumm family home. One morning in 1994 the house floated down Pokegama Avenue on the back of a flatbed truck before being deposited on a hill just above where the museum now sits. The house had been lived in and altered over the years, and the museum restored it to a facsimile of what it might have looked like when Garland lived there.

Kelsch walked me through an enclosed corridor connecting the museum galleries to the historic house, and when we got to the stairwell in the living room he paused. "This is where it all began," he said. We looked at a small landing, large enough for a toddler to use as a stage. At the house, you get to inhabit the quaint family homestead where a 2-year-old sang for the first time to the stunned silence of her family. You get photos of the cherubic little girl with the big brown eyes and the even bigger voice, the kid with her whole life ahead of her. That someone should abscond with the ruby slippers here, of all places, seems tragically poetic. Garland herself was lifted off that step, her childhood stolen by her talent.

John Kelsch, senior director of the Judy Garland Museum, was just out of the shower at home when his phone rang. "All she had to say was, 'They're gone,'" Kelsch recalls, "and I knew exactly what she meant."

On Saturday, Aug. 27, 2005, according to police records, Kathe Johnson staffed the museum alone. It was a normal day, with people mostly interested in seeing Shaw's ruby slippers. She closed up that evening, set the alarm and left. The next morning, she returned a little before 10 a.m. to open again. The first thing amiss was the code on the alarm system. It read "auxiliary," a setting that Johnson told police she'd never seen before. She punched in the security code and turned the system on and off a few times until the screen reset itself.

Johnson didn't think much more about it as she walked through the museum, turning on displays and lights as she went. Then, in the south corridor connecting the galleries, fresh summer air

blew in where it shouldn't have, through the jagged mouth of a shattered emergency-door window. The interior door to the gallery where the slippers were being displayed was only a few feet away. Johnson rushed to the gallery and found the plexiglass cover smashed, the wooden pedestal empty.

Kelsch was just out of the shower at home when his phone rang. "All she had to say was, 'They're gone,' and I knew exactly what she meant," Kelsch recalls. "I drove about 80 miles an hour into town with my heart beating really fast. Sure enough, they were gone." Nothing else had been taken — there were other artifacts worth money inside the gallery — and this told Kelsch that the slippers had been targeted.

Gene Bennett was called to the scene. Bennett was the only investigator for the Grand Rapids police; he tended to spend his days on people passing off bad checks, "an array" of other petty thefts and the rare homicide. "Ninety percent of the time," he remembers, "I worked on my own."

Steve Schaar, now assistant chief of the department, was a patrolman on duty the night of the theft. Because it was a Saturday, most officers were on Safe and Sober detail, keeping an eye out for drunk drivers. "It was just an average, normal evening," Schaar says. "Nothing stood out. We didn't see anyone running down Pokegama in a pair of red heels." Schaar does remember getting reamed by the police chief the next day, a man long since retired. "He was yelling at us about 'How could you let this happen on our watch?'" Schaar recalls.

At the museum, Bennett and other officers took statements and crime scene photos. Bennett had the broken plexiglass dusted for prints, but "we didn't get anything," he says. Kelsch was surprised that the police didn't dust for more prints in the museum, a decision that some would later criticize as sloppy. Schaar has a different take. It's not like it is on TV, he says, where you run a bunch of clean prints through a computer and a name pops up. "Think about the amount of people that were in that museum because of those shoes and how many fingerprints were there," Schaar says. Pulling clean prints is hard enough, he says, let alone getting those prints to pull up a viable suspect.

Most of the police scrutiny that day focused on the emergency door. It was alarmed, but somehow the alarm system had not sent a dispatch to 911 when it was breached. “We had been having a lot of problems with kids opening emergency-exit doors and alarms going off and police coming,” Kelsch says. “So we de-armed the doors during the day. We mistakenly believed that when we armed the building at night that the contacts would all be armed again, but this was not the case. So the bells and whistles were going off at the museum when the door was breached, but the signal was not sent.” Kelsch believes that the alarm wouldn’t have made “any difference at all because they were in and out in less than a minute.”

At the time, a single closed-circuit TV camera had been placed on a bookshelf and trained on the slippers. It fed into a small monitor at the front desk where the staff could keep an eye on things during the day, but after hours the camera was turned off. It also didn’t record, so there was no opportunity to scrutinize visitors from the weeks leading up to the theft. A motion detector above the emergency-exit door also failed to go off that night (there were no motion detectors in the gallery with the slippers), and insurance investigators later determined that it had a blind spot: A person could break into the emergency door, which opened to the outside, and carefully slide along the wall leading to the interior gallery door without engaging the alarm.

Also strange: The inside door to the gallery where the shoes were displayed had been left unlocked. Kelsch has modified his story about this, and he gave me two different answers during our hours of interviews, at first saying he couldn’t understand why the door had been left unlocked, and then later saying that they had left that door open on purpose because problems with the HVAC system had made the gallery too hot.

As the police and museum staff walked around that day, Kelsch says he looked down on the floor, about 10 feet from the now-empty pedestal, and he saw something glitter. A single red sequin. He gave the sequin to Bennett, who put it in an envelope, where it remained, locked in a safe at the Grand Rapids police station, for the better part of 13 years.

At 1:44 p.m., Bennett sent out a BOLO (be on the lookout) alert across the region, asking law enforcement to watch for shoes that are “dark ruby red in color ... and valued at \$1 million.” “Can you imagine getting that BOLO?” says investigator Brian Mattson. He wasn’t working with the department when the slippers were stolen — he would join in 2007 — but he remembers the news coming in over the wire that the slippers had been nabbed. “Usually BOLOs are for stolen cars or suspects, never for a pair of ruby shoes.”

Kelsch was the one to call Michael Shaw at his home in Los Angeles. “I felt I had been kicked in the stomach,” Shaw told me. “My knees literally began to buckle, and I said, ‘You’ve got to get them back.’ ” Kelsch remembers that Shaw told him to “get the press machine going.” Shaw issued his own news release, stating that “to the horror of serious collectors and Hollywood historians” the shoes were gone. “I truly hope that the thief has a change of heart and will simply return them,” Shaw wrote.

Crowe also got a call from Kelsch the day of the theft, asking for help with a media event the next day. Crowe had just directed a local production of “The Wizard of Oz,” and there was a young girl with a set of pipes like Garland. On Monday, Aug. 29, the press gathered in the parking lot outside the museum, and in front of a bank of cameras the girl “sang ‘Over the Rainbow’ a cappella, perfect pitch and everything, and it was unbelievable,” Crowe says. Papers and TV stations reported the theft in breathless headlines, but the story soon slipped from the news as Hurricane Katrina captured the nation’s attention.

Back at the police station, though, it was all anyone could talk about. Someone had doctored an image of the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and Dorothy by splicing in the faces of the police chief and the patrolmen working the night of the theft. Scrawled above it in marker: “G.R.P.D. Working Undercover.”

The first sparks of gossip soon followed and spread quickly through town. No alarm? No cameras? No witnesses or strong evidence? The whole caper reeked of an inside job.

One of the things I learned while in Grand Rapids is that if you want to get rid of something quickly, you have thousands of bodies of water to choose from. Lakes and rivers are two options — the Mississippi River wends through downtown Grand Rapids — but the ideal location to hide incriminating evidence is an abandoned mine pit. Deep gouges in the earth have filled with rain and groundwater over the years, and at 300 feet deep in places, the pit lakes are said to house proof of untold crimes. “There’s rumors that all kinds of things are down there,” Andy Morgan says. Including stolen cars and guns and “even bones,” says Bob Stein. “If they ever drained the pits, I suspect we’d solve some things.”

The rumor that the ruby slippers had been thrown into the water began almost as soon as they were stolen. Word on the street was that “some local dirtbags did it,” says Schaar, and the names being floated by Bennett were well-known troublemakers. The police kept an eye on them, knowing that this crew always “ratted each other out eventually,” Schaar says.

The other prevailing theory after the theft was that misguided teenagers had seen an opportunity and snatched the slippers, never anticipating the attention it would attract. Fear of being cornered with the glittering contraband had, according to this version, caused them to panic and get rid of the evidence. Some kids whispered that the slippers were already gone, burned in a bonfire at a legendary party in the months after the burglary. Others claimed they’d been sealed inside an empty paint can or in a Tupperware container weighted down with rocks and then dropped into the Mississippi. Or maybe it was the Canisteo pit lake. No, wait, come to think of it, it was the Tioga pit.

Gossip in a small town often contains a kernel of truth, Morgan told me, and part of the challenge for an investigator is deciphering what might be real vs. mere rumor. “You don’t have to do this job long to come to recognize that half the time rumors are exactly what kicks an investigation off,” he says. “I have looked into a lot of crazy things that have ended up producing criminal cases.” When someone steals “a piece of American history,” as Morgan calls the ruby slippers, “even rumors were thoroughly chased down.”

Bennett investigated the early rumors and says he arranged for a dive of the Prairie River after a seemingly viable tip, but nothing came of it. He also brought in local suspects for questioning. A few days after the burglary, he'd received a call about a man who had been talking about the slippers for weeks before the theft. The man told a co-worker that if a person needed some fast cash he should forget about lottery tickets and focus on the ruby slippers. He said the museum's security was a joke. Bennett brought the man to the station and asked the state police — the only ones with polygraph technology — to give him a lie-detector test. He passed.

Meanwhile, Bennett gathered the logs at motels and inns to see who had been in the area; he ran license plates and collected phone records from the museum, but nothing added up to a solid lead.

Another prevailing theory in the early days was that someone at the museum had planned the heist. Many thought Kelsch had to be in on it. Back then, "it was hard to believe that somebody from the inside didn't have something to do with it," Schaar recalls. "I mean, if I had a museum in town and I had a pair of ruby slippers worth a lot of money, I'm going to make doggone sure my alarm is working. I might even put a 24-hour guard there, because why not?"

Bennett spent hours interviewing the museum employees, as did an investigator from the Essex Insurance Co., part of the Markel Corp., which had insured the slippers. The company sued the Judy Garland Museum for the theft, saying that its lack of security was a breach of contract, but that suit was eventually dropped. A few months after the theft, Kelsch wrote to Shaw with an update on the investigation and added, "It's water under the bridge now, but I do wish you had allowed me to secure the slippers in an on-site bank safe each evening."

In 2007, the insurance company finally paid Shaw \$800,000 for the shoes. The same year it offered a \$200,000 reward for information about the theft, but nothing came of it. The large payout to Shaw raised another theory: He must have planned the theft as an elaborate insurance fraud. Shaw had required the museum to carry a policy for the shoes as a part of the rental agreement, so he wasn't even out the premium. Why else would he refuse to let the staff put the shoes in a safe at night? Shaw vehemently denied the accusation. "The most hurtful thing over the years was having someone try to implicate me in the robbery," Shaw says. "That hurt me

more than anything else. The insurance company investigated me 10 times till Sunday” before paying out the policy.

In our brief conversation, Gene Bennett raised a question fundamental to this case. Unless you’re a crazed collector hellbent on secretly owning the ruby slippers for your own edification (as some have suggested to me), then whoever nicked them had a serious problem: How do you monetize the most recognizable pair of stolen shoes in the world?

Early on, Bennett had locked in on the theory that someone in town, or someone close to the shoes, must have been involved, and therefore he didn’t cast a wider net or call on federal agencies like the FBI. “I always thought it was someone local,” Bennett told me. “And I thought, what are they going to do with the slippers? They can’t show them off. What good is it to have a pair of red slippers worth a million dollars hidden in a basement?”

I recognized in Bennett’s voice the same weary bafflement that I had heard from others who had been pulled into the mystery of the slippers. Over the months I spent reporting this story, tips started coming my way, solicited and otherwise. People wanted to talk about the shoes. It wasn’t easy to make sense of the myriad theories I was hearing — the dizzying array of schemes and potential suspects. “Now which way do we go?” Dorothy had asked Toto when the Yellow Brick Road forked in different directions, but unlike in Oz, there was no Scarecrow to lend directions.

In 2009, Bennett retired and Andy Morgan inherited the case with help, at times, from Bob Stein. Morgan was left with a slim case file and a list of locals still rumored to have done it. He began by researching the defining characteristics of the original shoes, and most weeks he fielded a few calls or emails related to the theft as he went about the busy job of clearing cases and attending to crime victims. But then a magazine article or a TV show would revisit the story, and the tips would flood in again from as far away as England. Some months he was taking a hundred calls. “It would be nothing to talk to five different people about five different leads in one day,” he says. Other police departments across Minnesota also got anonymous tips over the years, and all of them were funneled to Morgan.

Most said that the shoes had been spotted — in a restaurant down south, or in a dry cleaner’s in Chicago, or hidden in the back of a storage unit. Many of these claims were easy to dismiss with a quick photo. Morgan would get pictures of purple shoes or of high heels painted red. “They didn’t even look like the ruby slippers,” he says.

One day in 2010, Morgan got a call from a man in Chicago. He said a guy he knew had the ruby slippers. He said this person was obsessed with “The Wizard of Oz,” had a collection of stuff from the movie, and had claimed that he’d paid someone to take the slippers from the museum — which were now displayed in his house. Morgan asked him to send a photo next time he was there, and when the photo came in, Morgan felt hopeful for the first time: The shoes looked real. After Morgan got the photo, he showed it to Stein. They had such high hopes for this one that Morgan flew to Chicago to assist in the delivery of the search warrant. They arrived at a suburban home outside the city, and a nervous 20-something answered the door. He quickly copped to the fact that he’d lied to his friends. “He had a very high-quality set of replica slippers that he had misrepresented as the ruby red slippers to impress people,” Morgan says.

There are innumerable copies of Dorothy’s famous shoes — from kids’ Halloween costumes to adult pairs — but globally, about five or six people are able to hand-make copies so exact that they command thousands of dollars and can easily be mistaken for the real shoes. Some have even been passed off to unsuspecting buyers as the originals.

Replica makers go to great lengths to hunt down vintage 1930s pumps in a size 5 and to re-create the Innes Shoe Co. label. Randy Struthers, who works in an Illinois library, re-creates the slippers in his spare time, and he has supplied pairs to the Smithsonian. Struthers has spent years researching the shoes and amassing a vast archive of historical photos and facts to inform his craft. He even sources vintage sequins from France. The shoes take hundreds of hours to make.

Around the time of the Chicago search, the Grand Rapids police received a letter asserting that Shaw had commissioned a high-end pair to look like his real pair. The letter writer claimed to have sequins “identical to those used to make a pair of replica ruby slippers” for Shaw, which he enclosed in the envelope. Perhaps, the letter said, Shaw had never sent the real slippers to the

museum at all. The writer suggested the police’s crime lab compare to see if “these sequins match the sequin found at the crime scene.” But the department didn’t have a crime lab capable of such a forensic test, and the replica sequins joined the real one in the safe. (Shaw says that he does have a pair of replica slippers, but “I would never, ever put them on display as the real McCoy.”)

Years passed, and on the 10th anniversary of the theft in 2015, with no new leads, the Judy Garland Museum decided to make a literal splash by sending divers into the Tioga Mine Pit to determine, once and for all, whether the rumor that the shoes were in a Tupperware container at the bottom was true. The Grand Rapids police didn’t participate because, in their mind, “there was no credible evidence that the shoes were in the Tioga,” Mattson says. It was a publicity stunt, by many accounts — what Miner dubbed a “Promotion Commotion” held during the Judy Garland Festival in June to help drum up interest in the case again. Miner, anonymously at the time, also put up a \$1 million reward for the safe return of the slippers. Nothing came of the dive, and the reward expired before it could be claimed.

That fall, Morgan got a promising lead from a woman in jail. She said that in 2007 she had watched as one of the local men long accused of stealing the slippers had tossed them into the Buckeye Pit. Morgan gave her a map and asked where in the 48-acre lake the slippers had been thrown. She pointed to an old boat dock. Trouble was, “the water in the pit had risen over the years,” says Mattson, who had begun to assist Morgan in the investigation. They had to review historical water levels to determine where the shoreline of the lake had been eight years prior. Divers went in on Halloween 2015. They came up with a lounge chair and tires and what appeared to be a pipe bomb, but no slippers.

In 2016, Morgan was promoted to patrol sergeant, and Mattson “inherited the curse” of the ruby slippers case, as Morgan put it. Mattson later asked for the case file and was handed a cardboard box filled with loose papers and old VHS and Dictaphone tapes. “There were floppy disks” — containing the original crime scene photos — “and I had to hunt down a floppy disk player,” he says.

Mattson set about organizing the papers into a white three-ring binder with a color-coded Post-it system. He transcribed old tapes into the online database. He dug the sequin out of the back of the department safe and went through all the old interview transcripts and rumors one by one. As he pored over the material, something about the case hooked him, something that wouldn't let him go. Mattson went home and told his wife, Stephanie, "I'm going to find the slippers. I'm going to get them back."

Like his predecessors, Mattson spent months chasing dead-end leads. In the summer of 2017, he got a call from patrol officers saying they had a woman who had given a false name during a traffic stop. Mattson went to the scene and discovered the woman had an outstanding warrant. Over the years, Stein says, even routine traffic stops became opportunities, with officers half-jokingly asking: "Is there anything in this car you don't want us to find? Fruits from Canada, al-Qaeda, weapons, the red ruby slippers?" When Mattson mentioned the slippers, the woman perked up. She said they were at the house of a local man who had been long rumored to have stolen the shoes. "I saw them three days ago," she said, noting that they were in a "green shoe box."

"Can you show me where they're at?" Mattson asked.

Mattson got a warrant and, with another officer in tow, he and the woman hiked through the woods to the perimeter of the man's property. They crouched behind shrubs so as not to be seen; the source, who was "scared to death" of being caught, had said the shoes were in a waterproofed wooden shed somewhere in the yard.

"You're sure you saw the shoes out here?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "I'm sure."

The yard was filled with outbuildings — sheds and handmade structures — as well as tents. "It was kind of a shantytown where people crashed," Mattson says. Complicating matters, the

home's generator had broken that day, and the man was out back with friends working on it, not 20 feet from where they were hiding.

After hours of waiting for an opportunity to have the woman lead him to the shed, and with the sun going down, Mattson hiked back out, sent the woman on her way with a patrolman, and decided to take a chance. He knocked on the front door, and when the man answered Mattson asked him outright if he had the ruby slippers.

"Yeah, I've got them," he said, inviting Mattson inside. "They're in a green box." Just as the woman had said. Mattson allowed himself to feel a modicum of hope.

The man, though, couldn't remember where he'd stashed the box. The police searched the grounds — the house was filled with so much stuff it could have been on an episode of "Hoarders" — until finally, standing in a cluttered bedroom closet, the guy sang out, "Ah! Here it is!"

He emerged holding a green shoe box wrapped in ribbon. He untied it, opened the lid, and inside was a pair of modern stilettos caked in cheap red glitter. The bow wasn't even in the right place. The guy beamed.

Mattson turned them over in his hand. "You know these have a Made in China stamp on them?" he said.

The guy's face fell. "I bought those at a garage sale," he said. "I thought I just bought a gold mine!"

Mattson texted Stephanie, explaining why he was late and had missed dinner. He sent her a photo of what they'd found. She texted back: "All that work for a pair of stripper shoes?" The next day, Mattson showed up to the station to find a box of doughnuts covered in red sprinkles.

As the list of dead-end leads got longer, as the police crossed them off one by one, it became evident that the locals didn't know much. If it had been an inside job, if someone in town had gotten paid to make sure the museum's alarm wasn't connecting to dispatch, or to leave that gallery door unlocked, for instance, "everybody would know about it," the historical society's Jody Hane says. "If you got even an extra \$500 in your pocket, everybody knows. It's a small town, and people around here don't keep their mouths shut."

The quiet beneath the chatter was what the police couldn't understand. Twelve years and not a viable lead. As the years ticked by, though, another theory began to surface. Maybe no one was talking about what had really happened to the slippers because whoever was behind the theft was too dangerous to cross.

For decades, a different burglary had stood as the largest cultural theft in Minnesota history. In 1978, a small family-run gallery in a suburb outside Minneapolis pulled off a big coup when it hosted the then-largest private exhibition of Norman Rockwell paintings. Rockwell was 84 at the time and had given the gallery's owners his blessing for a show. Eight paintings by the artist hung alongside signed, limited-edition lithographs. Enhancing the show was a painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, on loan from a Minneapolis man who had recently bought the piece from a dealer in Miami.

On Feb. 16, hundreds of guests arrived at the gallery. The owners had taken measures in the weeks prior to protect the art. They'd hired someone to install a "theft-proof" lock, and they paid a guard to watch the gallery overnight. But after the opening that night, someone punched through the lock, and the guard was temporarily missing as thieves made off with seven of the Rockwell paintings and the Renoir.

For 20 years the case baffled authorities. The owners and their daughter pursued the stolen art across the country, even as perpetrators eluded the police and the FBI. The FBI didn't yet have an official art crime team — that would be formed under the leadership of Robert Wittman in

2004, a year before the ruby slippers were stolen — but Wittman had begun chasing cultural crimes around the globe as an FBI agent in the 1990s. In 2002, he helped recover three of the missing Rockwells from an art collector in Brazil.

The mystery of who took the Rockwell paintings and how they made their way from Minneapolis to places like Brazil intrigued Bruce Rubenstein, a crime reporter in the Twin Cities. Around 2010 he started researching the case for a story. One day he received a call from a retired prosecutor in Minnesota who made him a deal: If Rubenstein could find out anything about the ruby slippers theft, he would return the favor by putting him in touch with someone who knew about the Rockwell crime. The prosecutor “was retired, and my understanding was that it was an avocation, the ruby slippers case,” Rubenstein told me. “I think he was, like most people, just curious about what had happened.”

Rubenstein did find out something about the slippers, he says, from a detective he knew in Los Angeles. The detective told him that a big-time Hollywood producer had made it known he wanted to buy real ruby slippers, and that he’d been contacted by someone claiming to have them. The producer went to a garage in Brentwood and saw slippers he believed were authentic, but when haggling over the exorbitant price went awry, the producer got angry and went to the police instead. The garage was empty by the time the police got there. When Rubenstein relayed what he had learned to the retired prosecutor, the man made good on his promise. Rubenstein soon got a call from a source “with a distinctive gravelly voice, a film noir criminal voice,” and that man told him everything about the Rockwell burglary.

In 2013, Rubenstein published what he learned in his book “[The Rockwell Heist](#).” Four Minnesota-based thieves, three of whom had mob ties, had targeted Elayne Galleries that night. They weren’t after the Rockwells, at least not at first. They needed the Renoir. The painting was a fake, part of a well-oiled art scam run by a ring of mobsters in Miami who were alarmed when the mark they’d sold it to decided to include the painting in a gallery show. If people learned the Renoir wasn’t real, the art scam might be exposed. “They hired the thieves to get the Renoir,” Rubenstein says. “The Rockwells were a bonus.”

As Wittman likes to say, “The real art in an art heist isn’t the stealing, it’s the selling,” and most thieves are caught when they try to unload the artwork. One method is to wait until the statute of limitations has run out on the theft and then attempt to extort the owners or the insurers for the safe return of the property using a middle man, sometimes a lawyer. A top Minneapolis criminal-defense attorney named Joe Friedberg told Rubenstein he was approached about just such a deal regarding the Rockwell paintings a few years after the heist; according to Rubenstein, a man asked Friedberg to help facilitate the paintings’ return. That man wanted Friedberg to negotiate with the insurance company on his behalf for the reward money. “Friedberg asked the State Professional Responsibility Board if it was ethical to do what the caller proposed,” Rubenstein wrote. Friedberg told the board that the art might be destroyed, which is a common threat made in art crime extortion: Give me the money or the painting gets it. Friedberg was counseled that it could be considered a felony to aid in the return of the Rockwell paintings. “I passed,” he told Rubenstein.

The Rockwell thieves were never arrested. Rubenstein says it wouldn’t surprise him to learn that one or more were connected to the slippers theft that occurred 27 years later. “The easy conclusion to draw, at least to me,” he says, “is that the people who stole those ruby slippers stole them for the mob, and that scares people.”

Mattson was at his desk in July 2017 when the officer working reception buzzed him and said, with a touch of irony, that there was a guy on the phone claiming he knew about the ruby slippers. Mattson sighed and picked up. As soon as the guy started talking, some instinct told him to record the call.

The man on the other end of the line got right to the point. He had information on the whereabouts of the slippers. “The way he was talking, something in me knew this could be legit,” Mattson says. The man was calling from “a Southern state,” according to Mattson (the FBI would later say it executed search warrants in Florida as a part of the 2018 sting), and he claimed to be an innocent participant — a middle man — who had been brought in to help get the slippers back to the rightful owners.

The Middle Man said he'd called the Judy Garland Museum and they had blown him off. He said he'd reached out to the insurance company and got nothing. The man asked if the police cared about getting the slippers back. "Yeah, man, we do. Of course we do," Mattson remembers saying.

The Middle Man wanted to know if the case was still open, and if there was a reward. Mattson said that yes, the case was open but he wasn't sure about a reward. "I explained to him that the Grand Rapids police never offered a reward. That was always an outside party. I told him I would look into it."

Mattson called Markel, the insurance company that had settled the claim with Shaw. Markel had become the owner of the shoes when they paid Shaw. (Now that they have been recovered, however, Shaw says he has the right of first refusal to buy back the shoes from Markel and that he is in negotiations with the insurer.) According to Mattson, Markel had heard from the same man, and eventually, through a lawyer representing the company, agreed to pay the remainder of the original policy — \$200,000 — if the police could arrange for the safe return of the shoes.

Over the next few weeks, Mattson worked to determine the validity of the Middle Man's claims. He was able to confirm the man's identity, but did he really know who had the slippers? Or, Mattson wondered, was he talking to the man in possession of the shoes all along? Over the course of several calls, Mattson got the Middle Man to admit that he'd been promised a percentage of any reward money that might come from the slippers' return.

The statute of limitations on the original theft had expired, but authorities could get someone for possession of stolen property. More than anything, though, the police wanted the shoes back. "The scope of this was always a recovery," Mattson says. "Anything beyond recovery was just icing on the cake."

In August 2017, Mattson asked the Middle Man for proof-of-life photos of the slippers. The man replied via email that the people holding the shoes would send him photos and that he would pass them along to Mattson. The photos arrived in Mattson's inbox about a week later. They

were camera-phone images of prints. Mattson figured the Middle Man was smart enough not to leave the GPS coordinates on when he had snapped those images, but Mattson put the photos through specialized software anyway. To Mattson's surprise, all the metadata with the man's location was right there.

Mattson kept these developments to himself. He checked in with Stein, but he didn't put his case notes onto the official digital records management system — which can be viewed by law enforcement countywide — for fear they might get leaked. He plugged away quietly, because in a small town “even a simple conversation could get into the wrong hands.” And because of the secrecy, there were days when others in the department gave him the side eye, wondering what was occupying so much of his attention and keeping him from chipping in on run-of-the-mill work.

Around this time, another complication arose. Producers from the Travel Channel show “Expedition Unknown” reached out to Mattson. The show's host, Josh Gates, traveled the world exploring legendary mysteries, and Gates, along with auction house owner Joe Maddalena, wanted to come to town to film a story about the ruby slippers.

Mattson considered that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to have a major Hollywood production come to Grand Rapids and shine a light on the town, and also on the case. So he said okay, and the show filmed in town that winter. Mattson let Gates and Maddalena see the photos of the shoes sent by the Middle Man, without divulging their origin. On camera, Maddalena, one of the few people who had seen multiple pairs of slippers up close, said the shoes in the picture looked legitimate.

In September 2017, Mattson got another interesting call, this time from a Minnesota-based lawyer. The lawyer said the Middle Man had retained his services because the holders of the shoes didn't like that he was talking to the police. Mattson was told that the Middle Man was traveling to Europe; now he worried that the shoes might be going abroad. Art dealers and collectors that Mattson had talked to over the years said they wouldn't be surprised if the slippers, which had a global appeal, were in Asia or Europe in someone's private collection.

Maybe the Middle Man was testing their market viability overseas. The lawyer assured him the trip was personal.

Because Mattson had ascertained that the Middle Man “lived in a Southern state” — and in early September people were being evacuated in advance of Hurricane Irma, set to make landfall in Florida — Mattson called the lawyer and said he was worried about the shoes. “Don’t worry,” the lawyer told him, “those shoes aren’t getting wet.”

Mattson continued to negotiate a safe return of the shoes with the lawyer, but by October, weeks had gone by without a word. “These people went dark on me,” he says.

Mattson went home and talked to Stephanie. Maybe, he said, he should call in another agency for help, even if it meant losing control of the case.

“You’ve always said your goal was to get them back,” Stephanie said. “So get them back.”

On the rare occasions that the slippers have been taken off display at the National Museum of American History, there are angry and desperate calls.

Mattson called Christopher “Sean” Dudley, a Minnesota-based agent for the FBI he’d met in the past and trusted. “Later, Dudley told me that for the first 20 minutes of our call he thought I was crazy,” Mattson says. “Then he told me he was in, 100 percent.” (The FBI declined to comment for this story because the case is ongoing.)

Nine months later, on July 9, 2018, Mattson prepared to drive south to the Twin Cities. After Mattson’s call to Dudley, the FBI had taken charge of the ruby slippers case. The bureau had reestablished contact with the people who’d reached out to the Grand Rapids police, without alerting them that they were talking to the FBI. The feds arranged a meeting in Minneapolis with the lawyer who had been speaking to Mattson; the lawyer was planning to bring the shoes. When Mattson told Morgan, “I’m going down for the slippers,” Morgan replied, “I sure hope it’s the real thing this time.”

Mattson drove to Minneapolis and spent the night with his father-in-law. He woke early on the morning of July 10 and met FBI agents at their Minneapolis headquarters around 6 for a briefing. The meeting with the lawyer — who was still unaware that he was dealing with law enforcement — was set for 11 a.m. About 100 agents were involved, Mattson estimates. Some were watching the meeting site, and others formed a secondary perimeter outside the meeting zone. And there were agents in Florida ready to serve a search warrant, presumably to the Middle Man.

With several agents, Mattson drove to the city's arts district and set up. He sat in a car and watched as the lawyer arrived early and stopped in a coffee shop near the meeting site. The lawyer ordered, and then he did something Mattson couldn't believe: He left the bag with the slippers sitting on a table while he walked 30 feet down a hall to use the bathroom. "I said, 'Should we go in and just get them now?'" But the FBI held tight and waited for the planned meeting.

In the end, the FBI walked out with the shoes. One of the agents in the car asked Mattson if he was excited. "I told him I'd been here before, and I'd be excited when I actually saw them." They returned to FBI headquarters, and a hush came over the room when agents brought out the slippers. Mattson felt overwhelmed. There was no doubt in his mind that they were real. "You just felt it," he says. Everyone I talked to who has had direct contact with the original ruby slippers says the same thing: They truly emit a special aura.

He called Stein and Morgan. "We got them."

Stein had been waiting "on pins and needles" all morning for that call, he told me, "and when Brian said we recovered the slippers, I thought, 'Oh my God, this is for real now. Finally.'"

Some of the FBI agents went to celebrate after the sting, but Mattson rushed back to Grand Rapids, driving nearly four hours to a party that Stephanie had planned. In a spectacular coincidence, the "Expedition Unknown" episode about the hunt for the ruby slippers was airing that night. Across Grand Rapids, people watched the show — unaware that the ruby slippers had been recovered that very morning.

Mattson got a call from one of the FBI agents. They were all watching back in Minneapolis. “Look at you, Hollywood!” the agent said. Morgan also called Mattson to congratulate him, and to say he was proud of the work that Mattson had done, a sincere sentiment that’s not always expressed amid the gallows humor of policing. Still, Morgan couldn’t relax into the news of the recovery. “I’ll believe it when they get authenticated,” he said.

The day I went to Washington to talk with Dawn Wallace, an objects conservator with the Smithsonian, I got turned around and wound up standing at the back entrance of a loading dock. A museum guard took pity on me and came over to ask if I was lost, and as we chatted I learned that she’d had a busy morning.

“We had a tornado drill this morning,” she said.

“Do tornadoes hit D.C.?”

She shrugged. “Best to be prepared, I guess.”

The universe seemed to have a sense of humor about Oz references. When I finally found Wallace, she had a streak of ruby in her blond hair.

In Oz, the origin story of the slippers is never disclosed; the shoes simply transfer to Dorothy’s feet already imbued with magical powers. In real life, Wallace has become the world’s leading expert on the science and construction of the ruby slippers through spending over 200 hours studying and cleaning the pair at the Smithsonian. And, just as a specialized art expert could tell a clever fake Renoir from a real one, Wallace is the rare person who can peer into a stereo microscope to date and determine the validity of a ruby sequin.

In July 2018, she had been in her office in the lower level of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History when a call came in. The man on the line said he was with the FBI and told

her that they had just recovered what they believed to be the stolen ruby slippers. He wanted to know if the Smithsonian could look at the shoes to help confirm that they were real. Wallace remained professional on the phone even as she stood and frantically waved to get the attention of her boss, Richard Barden, mouthing, “The ruby slippers! It’s the FBI!”

The legitimacy of the ruby slippers stolen from Grand Rapids had always been a question for investigators. When the FBI took the case from the local police in the fall of 2017, Mattson says, the department had handed over the single sequin found at the scene along with the envelope of sequins that had been sent there in 2010 and had reportedly been used in Shaw’s replica pair. Wallace says the FBI had reached out to the Smithsonian back then to ask if its experts could share some of what they had learned about the sequins from their own research.

As it turned out, the Smithsonian had learned a lot. Several years before being contacted by the FBI, conservators had realized with alarm that their ruby slippers were fading in color. The conservation team had conducted several studies, including one to count the number of photographs taken of the slippers on nine days during the busy summer months. “The average was something like 136 flashes an hour,” Barden says.

The conservators wondered if all that light might be damaging the shoes. Or, perhaps, it was oxygen and the slippers needed to be in an airtight case. “What makes them the ruby slippers are those sequins on the exterior,” Wallace says, “but those are also the most sensitive part of the shoes because of how they are constructed.”

To better protect the shoes, the Smithsonian first needed to understand their material composition. Wallace’s graduate research had been in early plastics, and when the Smithsonian determined it was time to study and clean its pair of ruby slippers in 2016, she jumped at the chance. The sequins were made of plastic, and Wallace suspected they would have a fascinating story to tell.

This meant taking the shoes off display for an indefinite amount of time. Because the museum received angry calls and sobbing guests each time the shoes went to storage, the Smithsonian

decided to make their conservation public through a Kickstarter fundraiser. Within days of the #KeepThemRuby campaign going live in 2016, more than 5,300 people from around the world had donated, meeting the museum's \$300,000 goal.

Wallace worked with a team of 12, including scientists at the Smithsonian's Museum Conservation Institute, an off-site lab. In the 1920s, sequins were made of gelatin, and by the 1940s sequins were made of plastic. The sequins used in the ruby slippers "are a transition between the two," she says. "They have a gelatin center, but there is a beautiful lead cellulose nitrate coating on the outside." She learned the shoes got their burgundy hue from a dye called Rhodamine B. It would be nearly impossible to fake the sequins, unless someone reverted to century-old chemical processing to make them.

Wallace also flew to Los Angeles with her forensic conservator and studied the Witch's Shoes that DiCaprio had helped buy. Always in the back of her mind was the stolen pair. "We thought it would be great if we could see them, but I never had a serious thought that they would be recovered during our project," she says.

The morning the FBI arrived with the shoes, Wallace informed the guards at the front desk not to search the white box that they carried in public, to keep the contents secret. The box itself was a marvel, one that had been constructed by the FBI to her specifications to transport the shoes without touching any sequins. Wallace escorted the agents to the conservation lab, and there, in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room, Barden was waiting to assist. Wallace opened the box, and the first thing she thought was, "It's them." She was surprised at how well they had held up. "Whoever had them all these years has taken care of them," she says. (Shaw, who has yet to be reunited with the shoes and has only seen photos, says they don't appear to be as pristine as when he cared for them.)

But she remained professional and calm until she had proof. Wallace knew of several telltale details — details so infinitesimal that a replica maker wouldn't know to include them. For instance, several of the rhinestones on the bows of the shoes had to be replaced during

production with glass ones painted red. Sure enough, Wallace saw the painted rhinestones. She and Barden also found that the shoes had sequins and threading consistent with an original pair.

Having the stolen shoes next to the Smithsonian's pair confirmed another rumor, one that Thomas had noted in his book on the slippers: The Smithsonian's shoes and Michael Shaw's shoes were actually two mismatched pairs. They believe the swap happened back in the production of the movie and Warner never realized it when he found them in MGM storage.

MGM had numbered all of the shoes on the inside heel. "We have one shoe from Number 1 and one shoe from Number 6," Barden explains. Shaw had the other two. (For a brief moment, the shoes were reunited with their respective matches and photos were snapped.) The conservators also noted that the identifying numbers on the inside heel of Shaw's shoes had been scraped clean, perhaps in an attempt by the thieves to obscure provenance.

The numbering of the shoes offer another clue to the history of the ruby slippers. Barden says it's safe to assume that MGM made at least seven pairs for Garland — even though seven pairs haven't been found — because "the Academy Museum has the Number 7 pair," and "we assume MGM wouldn't skip numbers as they numbered the shoes."

In addition to the seven, it's also presumed that pairs were made for Garland's body double, plus there's the Arabian test pair that had been owned by Debbie Reynolds. "We believe there could be as many as 10 pairs total," Wallace says.

Conspiracy theories abound in the world of Oz fans that people are sitting on the other numbered pairs of slippers and waiting for the right time to admit they exist. In Hollywood collecting circles, Joe Maddalena tells me, "there's a well-known person who we all think has a pair, but he won't acknowledge that. There could still be another pair out there sitting in a box that somebody doesn't want us to know about." After a long pause, he adds: "Or two. There could be two more pairs."

One day I sat in Mattson's office as he talked about the ruby slippers case, but I was distracted by the felony's worth of heroin sitting on his desk. It was February 2019, seven months since the slippers had visited the Smithsonian, and five months since the FBI's press announcement. FBI agents keep Mattson and the Grand Rapids police posted, and there are developments that Mattson and Stein know about but can't reveal.

The ruby slippers investigation has been an anomaly for Mattson. Most of what he works on is drug-related. A confidential informant had bought the heroin on his desk to help get probable cause for a bust that would take place later that day at a motel. Many of Mattson's sources are addicted to narcotics, and he gets them to consider working with the police by asking: "Could you imagine how different your life would be if someone had never introduced you to drugs?" By most accounts it was Judy Garland's mother who first introduced her to drugs, as a way to help her young daughter sleep at night after long hours of travel and performing during their vaudeville days. But it was the Hollywood system of the 1930s that made Garland an addict. "MGM wasn't really the lollipop land of the movies," Luft wrote in her memoir.

Garland signed with MGM at age 13, and her life was moved onto the studio lot. She attended an MGM school with other child actors like Mickey Rooney. "The year 'The Wizard of Oz' was made, the year she turned sweet sixteen, my mother was given her first dose of Benzedrine by the studio that had made her a star," Luft wrote.

In the 1930s, amphetamines were the wonder drug, the little pep pills that gave you energy and kept you thin. They became so popular that you could buy inhalers filled with Benzedrine over the counter. Garland was put on a regimen of speed followed by chemically induced sleep. "My mother had what we now call a genetic predisposition to chemical dependency," Luft wrote. "Almost from the beginning she craved more and more of 'her medicine' to help her feel well." Not everyone in Grand Rapids is enamored with the Gumm family history or with staking a claim to Judy Garland. "You're in a little town, and, I mean, they love the Dorothy story," says Lilah Crowe of the historical society. "Everybody loves a Dorothy story, there's no doubt, but when it gets to Garland's personal life people think: 'Well, she was a drug addict.' "

There is also Garland's fraught history with the town. The official story is that the Gumm family took a vacation to California, fell in love with the West Coast and moved when Garland was 4. The whispered story is that Garland's father was a closeted gay man who had propositioned the wrong person. The family hadn't left, according to this version; they'd been driven out. Crowe says that Garland briefly returned to Grand Rapids after the filming of "The Wizard of Oz," and it didn't go well. "She had lots of makeup on, and the guys just loved her because she was beautiful," Crowe explains, "but the girls kind of stayed away from her because she was all dolled up. In this town, back then, you didn't do that."

When Garland left Grand Rapids "she was mad as a hatter," Crowe says, "because that's when she really realized why her family had left this cute little town she liked." Garland never returned to Grand Rapids. Luft acknowledges the rumors about her grandfather in her memoir but says the story that they had left because of his indiscretions is pure bunk and was disproved. Yet in a small town, as I was learning, rumors have their own currency.

It seemed incredible that two of the biggest thefts of Americana — the Rockwell and ruby slippers burglaries — had both taken place in Minnesota. And as it turns out, Bruce Rubenstein told me that, in December 2018, several months after the shoes were recovered, Chris Dudley — the FBI agent in charge of the ruby slippers case — showed up unannounced at his condo building outside Minneapolis wanting to discuss the identity of the thieves behind the Rockwell heist. Rubenstein says that he later continued the conversation at FBI headquarters in Minneapolis.

Rubenstein identified one of the four Rockwell burglars in his book because that man had died: Kent Anderson, brother of comedian Louie Anderson. Rubenstein told me that Anderson had been the lookout on the heist. The other three thieves "are still living," Rubenstein wrote in 2013, and "enjoying quiet retirements." Rubenstein also told me that he knew at least one of the alleged Rockwell burglars from around town. When pressed to describe the nature of that relationship, he said, "I'd rather not go into details."

There was another connection between the Rockwell heist and the ruby slippers case: According to a source close to the investigation, Joe Friedberg was the lawyer who negotiated the return of the slippers and had them in his possession. In addition, Rubenstein told me that the FBI had asked him about Friedberg. My attempts to reach Friedberg for comment were unsuccessful; his wife, who answered the phone twice when I called, told me Friedberg was aware I was trying to reach him, but that he would not discuss either the Rockwell paintings or the ruby slippers.

A prominent Minnesota criminal-defense attorney was the one returning the slippers, and this suggests a whole category of theories about the theft — that it was simply the work of local miscreants — was always going to be a dead end. Mattson says he now understands “that this was not just a stupid prank. The slippers were targeted because of their value and because of their notoriety.” He adds, “I think the people responsible have done other things similar to this in the past.”

Of course, there is still much we don’t know: who took the shoes, or where they were all those years, or how many hands they passed through. Indeed, while the FBI undoubtedly knows more than has been made public, Andy Morgan believes the ruby slippers may not, in the end, surrender all their secrets. “I wouldn’t be surprised,” he told me, “if we never get the full story.” As for the slippers, they aren’t home yet — wherever home winds up being. They remain in evidence with the FBI. For the Grand Rapids police, though, it feels like a conclusion. “Our goal was to get the shoes back,” Mattson says. “And we did that.”

After all these years, Jody Hane told me, it was now time for the town of Grand Rapids to come back to reality. I couldn’t help making the obvious analogy. “You mean like Dorothy waking up back in Kansas?” I asked. Happy to be home, but with the wonder of a vivid dream still lingering? Yes, Hane said, and “it’s bittersweet. We were famous while the slippers were missing, and people came here just to see the town where they were stolen, just to see if they could figure it out for themselves. It’s a little disappointing that, well, people aren’t going to do much speculating here anymore.”

It was quite a journey while it lasted. “There were so many interesting people along the way,” Mattson says. “You’ve got to go where the search takes you. A lot of times, the roads don’t lead to success. It doesn’t mean it’s a failure. You remain diligent. And that’s part of the fun sometimes, the pursuit. The figuring it out.”