

PIONEER OF THE Imagination

Walt Disney pulled magic out of men and machines. He knew he had to keep innovating to survive

BY DAVID HOLZEL

Whatever they were expecting as they followed the searchlights into the opulent Carthay Circle Theater, the Hollywood royalty who attended the film premiere on December 21, 1937, could not have possibly been prepared for what they saw. For 84 minutes they sat transfixed, Chaplin and Barrymore and Shirley Temple and Ginger Rogers, charmed by the songs, moved by the characters. And when the young heroine was thought to have died, there were tears shed in the sold-out, 1,500-seat movie palace. Clark Gable and Carole Lombard blew their noses.

Not a bad reaction to a cartoon.

But that cartoon was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and there had never been anything like it. That's the way its creator, Walt Disney, wanted it. At age 36, Disney, who was already well-known for his short animations with characters like Mickey Mouse, knew he had to keep innovating and

taking risks. To do that he continually adopted new technologies and created new expectations among the viewing public. *Snow White* wasn't the first time Disney had pulled magic from men and machines, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

Snow White was the first full-length animated film. And during the three years that went into creating it, Disney and his 600 employees confronted several questions, the answers to which would determine whether *Snow White* would be a hit or be forever known as Disney's Folly: Would an audience sit and watch a cartoon the length of a full-length motion picture? Most cartoons at the time were only seven or eight minutes long. Would animated drawings tug at the heartstrings? There was even concern that staring at animation that long would tire the eyes.

The all-star audience at the Hollywood premiere dispelled those



worries, and *Snow White* set the new standard for depth and realism in animation. It also put Disney Studios—owned by Walt and his older brother Roy—in the black. They were in debt for



BROTHERS IN BUSINESS

Though Roy Disney rejected the public spotlight that his brother so adored, he played a critical role behind the scenes in creating—and building—the Disney enterprise. He was the company's first CEO and in 1945 became chairman of the board, along with Walt.

Walt Disney is shown on the beach at Waikiki playing a ukulele, while his brother and business manager, Roy, makes him the subject of a movie.

more than \$1 million, but *Snow White* took in \$6.7 million around the world by 1939 (\$505 million today), with at least \$2 million more coming from the sale of *Snow White* toys. This bonanza was all the more remarkable because the world was still gripped by the Depression.

In 1941, Disney acknowledged the payoff from his painstaking approach to creativity in *American Cinematographer*: “The public will pay for quality,” he said. “Our business has grown by and with technological achievements. Should this technological progress ever come to a full stop, prepare the funeral oration for our medium.”

Rise of THE Animator

Walt Disney was one of those plucky Midwestern go-getters who made their fame after the turn of the 20th century, the fourth of five children. His father, Elias—religious, taciturn, and a socialist—put his hand to a number of occupations. When his wife, Flora, gave birth to Walt on December 5, 1901, in Chicago, Elias was working as a building contractor. Walt’s parents were pioneer people of the old century, while their son was going to help define the new one.

In 1906, the Disneys moved to a farm in Marcelene, Missouri. That same year, “Humorous Phases of Funny Faces,” believed to be the first cartoon, was released. It took advantage of stop-action photography to make whimsical drawings on a chalkboard appear to change.

After Walt Disney died of lung cancer in 1966, Roy Disney put off his own retirement so that he could oversee construction of Disney World—which he would later rename Walt Disney World to honor his brother. Roy Disney served as president of Walt Disney Productions from 1966 to 1968. He retired after the opening of Walt Disney World in October 1971, and died just a short time later.

Walt remembered life on the farm with delight, but in 1910, the family was forced to sell it. Elias was ill from the effects of typhoid fever and unable to do the hard work the homestead demanded. Meanwhile the two oldest Disney boys had gone out to make their own lives. That left Walt, 9, and Roy, 17, of the Disney men.

The Disneys landed in Kansas City, where Walt discovered his love for drawing and performing. “I think Walt was an actor all his life,” Disney biographer Bob Thomas said.

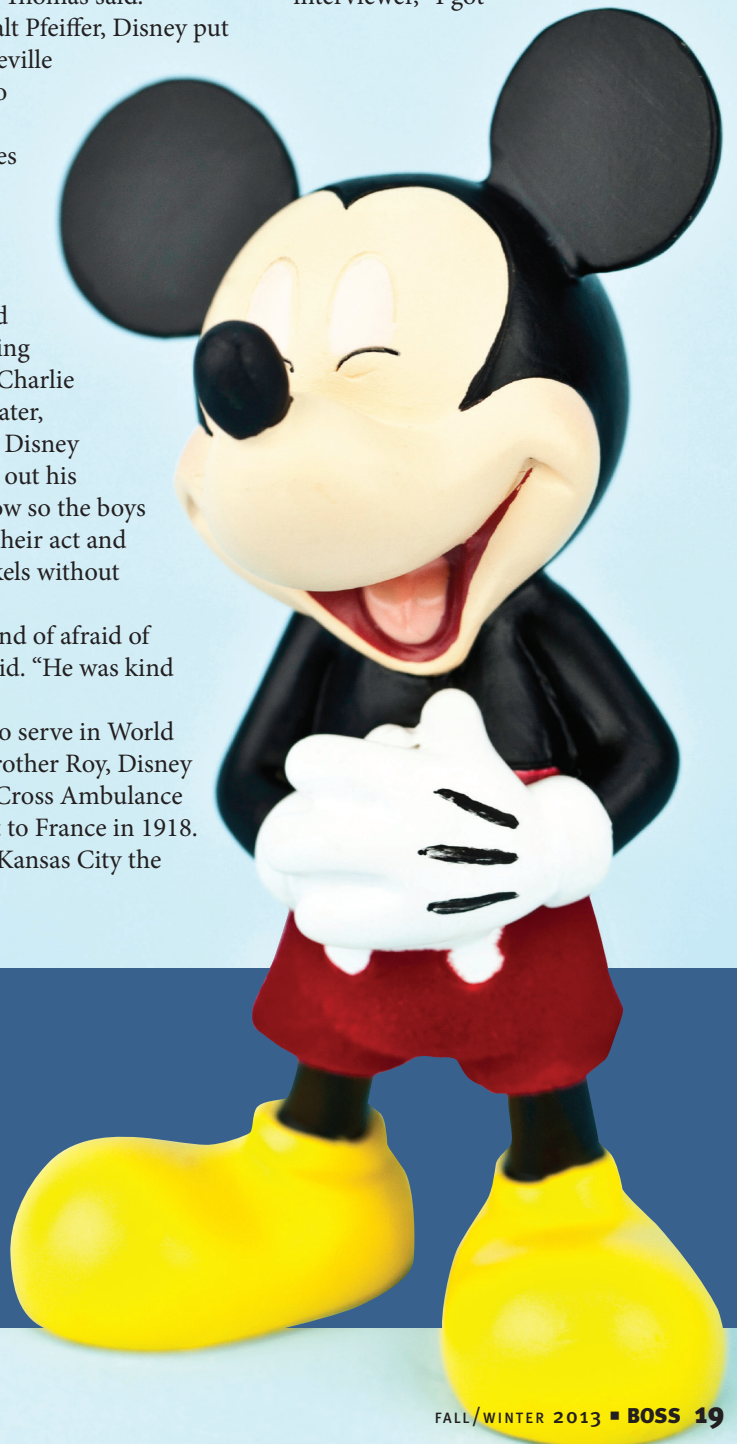
With pal Walt Pfeiffer, Disney put together a vaudeville routine. The two fifth-graders called themselves The Two Walts and went off to compete in amateur shows. The act included Walt Disney doing an imitation of Charlie Chaplin. Years later, Pfeiffer recalled Disney having to sneak out his bedroom window so the boys could perform their act and make a few nickels without Elias knowing.

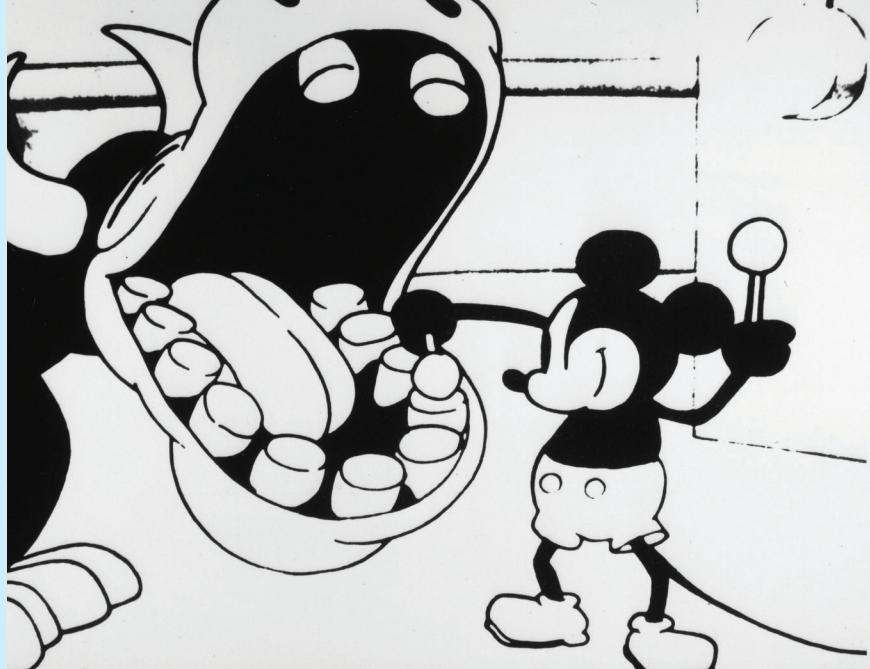
“We were kind of afraid of him,” Pfeiffer said. “He was kind of strict.”

Too young to serve in World War I like his brother Roy, Disney joined the Red Cross Ambulance Corps and went to France in 1918. He returned to Kansas City the

next year and looked for a job as a commercial artist. He wound up working for the Kansas City Film Ad Company, recently renamed when it began experimenting with animation.

Those cartoons were rough even by the standards of the day. They used paper figures with movable joints that were pinned onto a sheet. The result had a pronounced jerking motion. Disney, a born salesman, convinced his boss to let him borrow the camera to experiment. Disney later told an interviewer, “I got





From left to right: Disney's four-layer camera, an invention of the Disney studios, photographs four celluloid drawings together, giving an illusion of depth to cartoon action. *Steamboat Willie* was released in 1928.

intrigued with the mechanics of the whole thing.”

He was soon able to give his animations the feeling of continuous motion and, always ready to take a risk if it would give him the chance to fulfill his vision, decided he was ready to break out on his own. So in 1922, the 21-year-old fledgling animator created Laugh-o-gram Films. The next year, with the company sliding toward bankruptcy, he began work on *Alice's Wonderland*, in which a real-life little girl interacts with animated characters.

“It was the savior of his career, if not Laugh-o-gram Studio,” said Disney historian J.B. Kaufman.

Though Laugh-o-gram went belly-up, Disney was able to use the unfinished *Alice* as his calling card. It won him the backing of Margaret Winkler, a film distributor in New York. Now he had a way to get his creations into wide distribution, so he boarded a train to Los Angeles in July 1923 to start getting serious about cartoons.

‘Every Sprocket’

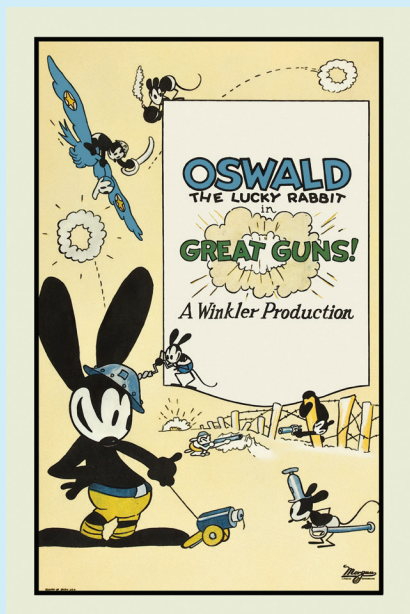
The new Disney Brothers Studio, owned by partners Walt and Roy, started cranking out *Alice* films. That was followed by another popular series, *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*. But in 1927, the Disney brothers learned that Charles Mintz, Winkler's husband, had stolen the rights to *Oswald* and enticed most of Disney's animators away. With an air of conspiracy hanging over the studio, Walt, Roy and their wives (both brothers had married in 1925) along with one loyal animator worked in secret to produce a solid successor to Oswald that Disney would make sure he owned. The new animal was, one historian said, “Oswald with round ears.” Mickey Mouse.

The third Mickey short, *Steamboat Willie*, premiered on November 18, 1928, along with the film *Gang War*, a long-forgotten crime melodrama. What makes *Steamboat Willie* memorable is that it was the first cartoon with synchronized sound.

It was an audacious innovation because no one knew if people would accept voices coming from a drawing.

A talking Mickey was here to stay and each year saw new advances. In 1932, Disney secured the rights to exclusive use of the Technicolor process and produced *Flowers and Trees*, the first color cartoon. It won an Oscar, as did the same year's *Three Little Pigs*, whose characters were not interchangeable props for gags but distinguishable by their personalities and body language.

But Disney was thinking big. He told his staff he wanted to create something with depth. Besides, profits from shorts were small and getting smaller. In 1934, Disney and his employees began envisioning *Snow White*. As the story was embellished and refined, Disney would act it out, his talent as an actor on display.



DISNEY'S innovations

Disney was adamant that the colors in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* be muted and easy on the eyes, rather than bright, like the colors of shorts. So the studio ground its own paint and had 1,200 distinct pigments. To measure colors exactly, Disney installed a spectrophotometer, one of 20 in the world at the time.

Walt Disney continued to innovate throughout his career. Disney's other firsts include:

- **1949:** Diversification into documentaries with the release of *Seal Island*.
- **1959:** America's first daily-operating monorail system, which opened in Disneyland.
- **1961:** The first regular color programming for TV, on NBC's *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Disney used the show to promote Disneyland.
- **1964:** The development of Audio-Animatronics, a form of robotics used at Disneyland.



Customers line up to enter Disneyland in Anaheim, California, as the Disneyland Monorail passes above.

"He would recite the story to anyone who would listen and to many who had already listened," Neal Gabler wrote in *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. "Anything from a short version to the full three-hour performance."

Disney was obsessive about his work and a perfectionist. These traits came out in the making of *Snow White* as he seemed to internalize each second of the film. He was involved "night and day, night and day," animator Frank Thomas said. "Walt lived every sprocket hole of this film."

In a project with a host of tough nuts to crack—more than once it was referred to as "Walt's Folly"—the principal challenge was achieving the aesthetic depth that Disney sought. Until that time, animators suggested three dimensions by shadowing the images. Cartoons rated poorly on

proportions. Move the camera closer to a scene and the whole image gets larger, even though specific elements—the moon and a barn, for instance—are supposed to be at different distances and should change sizes at different rates.

That was no longer good enough for Disney, who wanted to achieve a higher level of realism. He solved the problem with a clunky technology already in existence—the multiplane camera—but he was the first to use it successfully. From 12 feet high, it looked down onto a succession of glass plates onto which images were painted. The image closest to the camera was the foreground; the image farthest, the background.

"The trick of the multiplane camera is movement," Disney explained in a 1957 exhibition film about the camera.

Sliding the glass plates sideways created the illusion of horizontal

movement. Moving them closer or farther from the camera gave a feeling of depth. All this had to be done by hand. It was painstaking work, but Disney was able to achieve the effect he wanted.

To test the system, Disney produced the short "The Old Mill," shot with the multiplane. "As the camera seemed to move through the layers or panned across them, animation gained for the first time a sense of perspective and ... three-dimensionality," Gabler wrote.

But time was running out. Disney was on a Christmas 1937 deadline to premiere *Snow White*. To save time, animators began to cut corners by tracing the live action images they had been using as guides to make the images realistic. The studio stopped working on shorts, which it had been doing along with full-time work on *Snow White*.

All that work paid off when the movie premiered and the audience cried as Snow White ate the poisoned apple. By May 1939, *Snow White* became the highest grossing U.S. film until then. When the Academy Awards were handed out, the film received eight Oscars.

"Disney's inspiration was not in creating Snow White but in creating her world," film critic Roger Ebert wrote. "At a time when animation was a painstaking frame-by-frame activity and every additional moving detail took an artist days or weeks to draw, Disney

NOT-SO-GRIMM NAMES

The Grimm brothers' fairy tale on which Disney based his *Snow White* is silent on the names of the seven dwarfs. What those names should be received the same careful scrutiny as other aspects of the film, according to Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*.

Among the names considered and discarded: Cranky, Dirty, Awful, Flabby, Baldy, Deafy, Sniffy, Wheezy and Tubby.

Disney's final lineup, in case you've forgotten, is Bashful, Doc, Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy and Sneezy.

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imagined a film in which every corner and dimension would contain something that was alive and moving. From the top to the bottom, from the front to the back, he filled the frame."

It led Disney to further experimentation: With the precursor to stereophonic sound in *Fantasia* (1940). With wide-screen technology in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955). With an optical printer that allowed a combination of live-action and animated films, as in *Mary Poppins* (1964).

**WHEN HE DIED IN
DECEMBER 1966 AT
THE AGE OF 65, DISNEY
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EPCOT IN FLORIDA, HIS
"CITY OF TOMORROW."**

Disney saw the coming of television and understood early that he could use the new medium to promote his movies and a new project he was developing. In 1954, he inked a deal with ABC TV to produce a weekly series called *Disneyland*. In return, ABC became part owner in the amusement park of the same name. (Four decades later, Disney would purchase Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion.) After Disneyland opened in 1955, Disney became financially stable for the first time. There are now Disney parks in Los Angeles, Orlando, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong and one planned for Shanghai.

Disney was now realizing his vision free of the limitations of the movie screen. When he died in December 1966 at the age of 65, not long after being diagnosed with lung cancer, Disney was developing EPCOT in Florida, his "city of tomorrow."

Just as he sought to create complete worlds within his most inspired films, Disney's last innovation (EPCOT) was to try to do the same in the real world. ■