

Steamboat Willie

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Walt Disney, who would become the best-known producer in animation history, had very humble beginnings. Starting his fledgling company in Hollywood in 1923, he began by making two uninspired animated series, the "Alice Comedies," and "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit." But it was with his third series, featuring an enduring character, Mickey Mouse, that Walt rose to fame. That series began with the release of "Steamboat Willie" at the Colony Theater in New York on November 18, 1928.

Early in 1928, Walt Disney was disheartened. He had gone to New York to negotiate with his distributor, only to discover that the distributor had taken over the rights to his Oswald cartoons. Walt began thinking of a possible successor to Oswald while riding on the train on his way back to California. There have been many stories of the inception of Mickey Mouse, but on that train ride, Walt may have been recalling a playful little mouse that had made itself at home in Walt's Kansas City Studio, where he had first started to experiment with animation. On returning to California, Walt met with several of his staff members, and they came up with Mickey Mouse. Ub Iwerks, Walt's chief animator, was tasked with actually designing the character, with input from Walt.

Two Mickey Mouse cartoons were made starting that spring, "Plane Crazy" and "The Gallopin' Gaucho." Walt tried desperately to sell a distributor on a series based on those first two silent cartoons, but he was unsuccessful. On the horizon, however, he saw a flicker of hope. Al Jolson's film, "The Jazz Singer," had been released the previous fall, introducing synchronized sound. Audiences loved it. Walt reasoned that if he could produce his Mickey Mouse cartoons with sound, the novelty would help him sell the series. So he began work on a third Mickey cartoon, "Steamboat Willie," this one produced strictly with sound in mind. Walt was determined to make his sound cartoons realistic; each sound would exactly match what one was seeing on the screen. As a subject for the cartoon, he would have Mickey working on a steamboat, a nod to comedian Buster Keaton's recent "Steamboat Bill, Jr."

Since the whole field of synchronized sound on films was so new, Walt and his staff were feeling their way. How can one have a soundtrack correspond directly to the action on the screen? One of his animators, Wilfred Jackson, whose mother taught music, suggested the use of a metronome. He created a chart, later called a bar sheet or exposure sheet, which laid out the sound effects and music to correspond to the animation.

To test their theories, Walt made a test scene, then set up a projector outside a window in his studio. A bed sheet was the screen, and behind the screen were the artists watching the film through the sheet and providing the sim-



This illustration, titled "Mickey Mouse inbetween drawing no. 469 or 479 from Steamboat Willie" appears courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog. Read more about this illustration at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005685943/>

plest of sound effects, synchronized with what they were seeing. Jackson played "Turkey in the Straw" and "Steamboat Bill" (from the Keaton film) on his harmonica. The staff members' wives served as an audience, and the reaction was very positive.

An assured Walt Disney then set out to finish the film in earnest. He and his staff toiled long hours. Ub Iwerks would animate almost the entire cartoon himself. A friend from Kansas City, Carl Stalling, composed the score. Walt found the financing wherever he could, including taking out a new mortgage on the studio, and eventually selling his beloved Moon automobile. His philosophy: Don't pinch pennies when quality is concerned.

By late July, the film was finished. Now it was time for the recording, and to find a distributor. With no sound facilities on the West Coast, Walt had to travel to New York. He was unimpressed with most of what he found, but then he met P. A. Powers, who had a sound process called Cinephone. As Walt wrote home, "Powers is a very much respected personage in the film business; he is very shrewd and capable, he is careful and cautious." Walt liked Powers' ideas and the two men decided to do a recording, the first that had been done for an animated cartoon. Walt wanted a finished film to preview in a

Broadway Theater, so that it would get reviewed (Walt was certain the reviews would be positive) and then be noticed by a distributor. Walt wrote his staff: "Sound effects and talking pictures are more than a mere novelty. They are here to stay and will develop into a wonderful thing. The ones that get in on the ground floor are the ones that will more likely profit by its future development. That is providing they work for quality and not quantity and quick money."

On September 15, the first recording session was held, featuring a 17-piece orchestra along with three seasoned sound effects men. The results were terrible. The orchestra had had a difficult time following the cartoon action, and Walt was very discouraged. But soon a bouncing ball was added to the film print so the conductor could follow it while increasing or decreasing tempo as needed. A second recording session was held two weeks later, and the results were astounding.

Harry Reichenbach, who owned the Colony Theater on Broadway, offered to run "Steamboat Willie" for two weeks. The cartoon opened on November 18, 1928, as the first element on a bill which included the feature Gang War starring Olive Borden, Eddie Gribbon, and Jack Pickford. As Walt had predicted, the cartoon, the very first to feature synchronized sound, thrilled audiences, and glowing accolades were soon appearing in the press.

The success of "Steamboat Willie" was phenomenal. It established Walt Disney as a key player in the animation industry, setting a standard that would encourage all of the other animation pioneers and start The Walt Disney Company on the road to where it is today. In less than a decade, Walt would quickly progress from the crude "Steamboat Willie" to the glories of "Three Little Pigs" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." But, as Walt Disney later said, "I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing—that it was all started by a mouse."

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

In 1970, Dave Smith became the first director of the Walt Disney Archives, and as chief archivist was charged with collecting and preserving all aspects of the company's history and is still considered the ultimate authority on matters of Disney history. A regular contributor to Disney publications, television programs and websites, Dave has also written for publications such as "The American Archivist" and the "California Historical Quarterly." Author of the official encyclopedia "Disney A to Z," he has authored or co-authored several Disney trivia and quotation books. He has written introductions to a number of other Disney books, and often lectures on Disney subjects. His most recent book, "Disney Trivia from the Vault," compiles 29 years of his "Ask Dave" in-house column. Dave retired in 2010 after celebrating his 40th anniversary with The Walt Disney Company, but as a consultant now bears the title Chief Archivist Emeritus.