Walt Disney
The Man Behind the Mouse

BY MELISSA BURDICK HARMON

It was 3:30 in the morning and 8-year-old Walt Disney was doing what he did at that time every morning—hand rolling the hundreds of copies of the Kansas City Morning Times that he would soon place behind the screen doors of subscribers all along his route.

It was hard work for a little kid who also had to go to school, then deliver another round of newspapers in the evening. Sometimes he had to tramp through three feet of snow. Other times he got so tired he'd sneak into an alley for a catnap. But the paper routes beat picking apples for a living. That's what he'd been doing before, on his family's failing farm in Marceline, Missouri. The problems
was that his boss—his stern father Elias—had the nasty habit of delivering daily beatings, both to Walt and his brother Roy, eight years Walt’s senior. After a disgusted Roy left home, as had the two older Disney brothers before him, the brunt of the work, and the beatings, fell on Elias’ youngest son.

Walt Disney, born on December 5, 1901, never had time for a childhood. As a result, he spent all of his adult life attempting to invent one for himself. In the process—almost as if by accident—he created wonderful childhood memories for generation after generation of children from all over the world.

An Airbrushed Boyhood
Later, Walt would paint a nostalgic picture of life in Missouri, carefully airbrushing away the difficult times. He’d talk about loving to sketch the farm animals, which he did when he could find paper and pencil—rare commodities in the dirt-poor Disney home.

Once he chose to draw in the rather novel medium of tar, painting a cartoon on the side of his family’s whitewashed house. Elias Disney was not amused. And as always, it was his teenage brother, Roy, who comforted Walt after he was punished, rocked him to sleep, promising him a better tomorrow.

Yet there were small pleasures. Walt’s mother, Flora, would read him fairy tales, and later he fell in love with Horatio Alger’s novels about boys overcoming adversity to find great success. Once, the local doctor actually paid Walt for one of his drawings. And later, in Kansas City, there were glorious hours spent watching Charlie Chaplin films. Walt, always a talented mimic, could do a flawless imitation of “The Little Tramp.”

When the Disneys moved to Chicago, where Elias started an unsuccessful jelly factory, Walt signed up for after-school cartooning classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, working three part-time jobs to pay for them. The puritanical Elias urged him to stop such frivolous pursuits. It was World War I, however, that finally convinced Walt to abandon his studies. At age 16, he forged his parents’ signatures and became an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in France. A bout of flu kept him stateside until after the armistice—but he was sent to France to do clean-up work. Soon he was painting caricatures on the sides of the ambulances.

Home again, Walt joined Roy in Kansas City and found work as a commercial artist. The job lasted only a month, yet was to have a profound impact on his future, for it was there that Walt met an artist named Ub Iwerks. The two decided to start their own commercial art business, worked feverishly, but landed only one job, and then closed up shop. After that Walt got work creating stick-figure animation and, with typical zeal, learned everything he could about the new art form.

Soon Walt and Ub started another company, Laugh-O-Gram, and developed a series of short films called Alice in Cartoonland,
in which a live Alice interacted with animated figures. When their distributor forced them into bankruptcy, Walt, 22, moved to Los Angeles where Roy was recovering from tuberculosis. Although virtually penniless, he bought a first-class train ticket for the trip west, well aware that image mattered.

In L.A., he threw himself into finding a new distributor for the Alice series. The night that he got a telegram offering him $1,500 apiece for six Alice shorts, the excited Walt raced all the way to the veterans’ hospital where Roy Disney was a patient. He got in, despite the fact that it was long past visiting hours, woke his brother, and eagerly asked, “Can you come out of here and help me get this started?”

The next day, Roy Disney walked out of the hospital. He would devote the rest of his life to helping his baby brother, skillfully handling the business end of the Disney empire. Soon, Walt convinced the talented Ub Iwerks to sign on as chief animator. Ub would come and go, but would work for Walt for most of his career.

Of Mice and Marriage

After Roy Disney married his Missouri sweet-heart, his ex-roommate Walt began to suffer severe loneliness. Though he was 24 and the producer-manager of a rapidly growing studio, he had never had a romantic relationship. Yet, just three months after Roy’s wedding, Walt married one of his employees, Lillian Bounds. It was a union based partly on Walt’s immediate fear of loneliness, but it would last—although not always happily—until his death 41 years later.

Of course, even at 24, Walt Disney was already married to his work, which now involved a cartoon character called Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Oswald was a great success, but the Disney’s lost the rights in a contractual spat with Oswald’s distributor, a slick New Yorker who privately referred to them as “the bumpkins.”

Bumpkin or not, Walt Disney refused to give up. Instead, he turned to mice. Or at least to one mouse, named Mortimer, which—according to Disney legend—he dreamed up on the train back from the disastrous distributor meetings in New York. As Walt explained it, “Mice gathered in my wastebasket when I worked late at night [in Kansas City]. One of them was my particular friend.” Lillian Disney dismissed Mortimer Mouse as “too sissy” a name, however, so Mortimer became Mickey. Surprisingly, it was Ub Iwerks, not Walt, who first drew him. Walt, however, provided Mickey’s voice.

Walt Disney would always be blessed with lucky timing. Mickey Mouse’s birth coincided with the advent of talking films, and Walt quickly decided to make a Mickey “talkie,” Steamboat Willie. It proved so costly that Roy had to sell Walt’s beloved car to make payroll. Even so, Walt insisted that no expense be spared. “I think this is Old Man Opportunity rapping at our door. Let’s don’t let the jingle of a few pennies drown out his knock,” he insisted.

Steamboat Willie premiered on November 18, 1928, to rave reviews, and Mickey Mouse became an overnight sensation. By 1931, the Mickey Mouse Fan Club numbered more than a million members. Even the King of England refused to go to the movies unless Mickey was on the bill.

Dreams and Daughters

As soon as one dream succeeded, Walt Disney was on to the next—a series of musical cartoons, the first color cartoon, then an animated Three Little Pigs, which debuted at the height of the Depression, in 1933. The cartoon’s song “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf” became an international hit among millions of people who were figuratively feeling the wolf at the door.

Still, Walt Disney was troubled. He had suffered a nervous breakdown due to overwork and stress in 1930, soon after Mickey became a star, and when Lillian surprised him with the news that she was pregnant shortly after he’d completed Three Little Pigs, he again became severely distressed. Always a heavy drinker, he began imbibing more, smoking three packs a day, sleeping much less, and washing his hands compulsively. How could a man whose whole life was dedicated to giving himself a childhood take on the burden of becoming a parent? Yet, when Diane Marie Disney arrived, on December 19, 1933, a generous Walt surprised mother and newborn by taking them straight from the hospital to a brand new home.

Next, Walt tackled the first feature-length cartoon, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, which premiered on December 21, 1937. The Herald Tribune called it one of the “few great masterpieces of the screen,” and the Academy seconded that, giving Walt a special Oscar for screen innovation. Around that time, Walt and Lillian also proudly announced the birth of a second daughter,
Sharon, although the reclusive Lillian had not been pregnant (the Disneys kept Sharon’s adoption secret for years). Little Sharon took to crying all night, and Walt, who had wanted a son anyway, took to sleeping at the studio.

Troubled Times
By 1938 the Disneys, who were enjoying ever-increasing financial success, started building a major new studio in Burbank. They brought their elderly parents to California, and Walt handpicked a bungalow for them. Although uninvited, Elias Disney immediately started reporting for work at the studio, hammer in hand. Walt’s mother stayed home, and was found dead, apparently from fumes caused by a defective water boiler, just a month after the move. Walt never stopped blaming himself for her death.

The next few years proved stressful. With the advent of World War II, Disney’s lucrative foreign markets disappeared, and Walt’s beloved Fantasia, which premiered in 1940, failed to find an audience. Then came the animators’ strike.

Walt Disney was a benevolent employer in many ways, yet he had learned the art of managing workers from his angry, violent father. Like Elias, Walt was subject to terrible fits of rage (not even Roy escaped) and offered little praise. Still, perhaps because he liked to idealize reality, he viewed his employees as a family. Thus, he was hostile when his animators decided to join the Screen Cartoonists Guild and felt betrayed when they went on strike in 1941, carrying signs that read “one genius and 700 dwarfs.” He refused to negotiate. It was only when the government sent Walt on a goodwill trip to South America that Roy Disney managed to settle the strike.

Then America entered the war, and, the day after the Pearl Harbor bombing, the military commandeered Disney’s lot and soundstages for vehicles and ammunition storage. Soon one-third of Walt’s animators was drafted. Walt spent the war years making military and government films, devoting any spare time to developing Disney projects.

In 1944, still burning from what he perceived as betrayal by his “family,” Walt became vice-president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an organization that urged the

House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to investigate the “communists and totalitarian-minded groups” in Hollywood. Not only did he finger the man who had led the strike at Disney, he also served as an FBI informer during those years.

The Last, Best Times
Post-war prosperity and millions of new babies promised future profits, and Walt was ready. More full-length animation followed man who had spent his painful childhood in the real-life version of that town now stood in the window of an apartment decorated exactly like his boyhood home, tears streaming down his face, watching other people enjoy the perfect childhood world that he had created.

At the same time, Disney’s television presence grew, and thanks to the huge success of Daisy Crockett and The Mickey Mouse Club, kids all over America started sporting coonskin caps and mouse ears. Through his weekly appearances on Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color, the avuncular Walt became a widely recognized and beloved celebrity. One success followed another. The hit film Mary Poppins made a fortune. Disney’s attractions—including a moving, speaking Abraham Lincoln—grabbed the limelight at the 1964 New York World’s Fair. And Walt, driven harder by each success, demanded that Roy drop retirement plans and help him build on a new Florida theme park.

Walt was working hard on the new park, while still micro-managing every detail of the vast Disney empire, when, in November 1966, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was given six months to two years to live, but ended up in the hospital two weeks later. He spent the evening of December 14 with Roy, mapping out a blueprint for the Florida park. After Roy left, in tears, Walt asked to have his bed raised so he could look out the window toward the Disney Studios nearby. At Roy’s orders, every one of the studio’s lights was left on, to shine through the night for the man who had made it all possible. The next morning, Walt Disney died. He had just turned 65.

Roy, then 75, worked feverishly to bring Walt’s last dream—the Florida park now called Walt Disney World—to reality. When people asked him why he continued to work so hard, Roy would simply reply: “When I see Walt again, I don’t want to have to explain why I failed.”

Walt Disney used to jokingly say, “I hope we never lose sight of one thing...that this was all started by a mouse.” But it wasn’t. In truth, it was started by a desperately unhappily child. It grew into a reality through the irrepressible imagination and drive of a visionary artist and the tireless help of a devoted older brother.

Melissa Burrick Harmon was once the owner of both a coonskin cap and mouse ears.