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### **It Was All Started By A Mouse**

Of all the lovable Disney friends who have ever entered our hearts, no other has a stronger hold, forever inspiring the ideals of laughter, adventure and magic to people everywhere, than Mickey Mouse. But it wasn't always that way. If not for a series of fateful moments and the perseverance and ingenuity of one very imaginative showman named Walt Disney, that swell little fellow named Mickey may have never been born at all.

When Walt Disney first began making cartoons in 1923, he was already pushing the primitive medium toward becoming a bona fide art form. His earliest success in animation had been with the silent Alice Comedies—featuring a live little girl interacting with animated characters, sometimes even funny little mice—and the Oswald the Lucky Rabbit series. While producing the Oswald cartoons, the young producer visited his distributor in New York. This businessman didn't like Walt's ideas for improving the cartoons (and the accompanying costs) and took control of the rights of Oswald. It was the catalyst that sent Walt and his main animator, Ub Iwerks, down a magical but bumpy road that led to the creation of a Mouse named Mickey.

Along the journey a legend emerged around Mickey's birth. Walt remembered how Mickey Mouse “popped out of my mind...on a train ride from Manhattan to Hollywood, at a time when the business and fortunes of my brother Roy and myself were at lowest ebb and disaster seemed right around the corner,” referring to the train trip back from New York after losing Oswald. Walt also said that thoughts of mice had been

scurrying around in his mind for some time. According to this story, he worked in an office in Kansas City, Missouri, where a family of mice had made their home, feeding off lunch scraps tossed in wastebaskets. The tiny animals, which had become like pets, intrigued Walt and he trained these sweet little mice to perform tricks.

In creating his new and soon-to-be legendary character, Walt was also inspired by silent film star Charlie Chaplin, whom he described as, “a little fellow trying to do the best he could.” But Ub Iwerks recalled another popular actor as inspiration: “Mickey was based on the character of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. ...the superhero of his day, always winning, gallant, and swashbuckling...he was an adventurous character.” Their new character possesses all of those traits and more, making a personality who resonates so deeply with people everywhere.

But what name would suit such a fun-loving fellow? Walt had suggested Mortimer, but his wife, Lillian, thought that name was a terrible choice and persuaded him to use something friendlier, like Mickey. There were many other things still to consider, chiefly, the Mouse’s design. Walt relied on the skilled hand of Ub who, stroke after brilliant stroke, came up with the design of the jaunty little guy now known as Mickey Mouse.

A bit brash but cute as can be, Mickey was ready to fly into the hearts of audiences. In his first film *Plane Crazy* (1928), Mickey builds a rickety airship and after a series of unfortunate but hilarious bumbles, the inaugural flight—with sweetheart Minnie by his side—ends in comical chaos. From the start, Walt and Ub ingeniously infused Mickey with something that no other drawn figure had previously possessed: the spark of individuality. “Mickey was the first cartoon character to stress personality,”

Walt explained. "I thought of him from the first as a distinct individual, not just a cartoon type of symbol going through comedy routines."

*Plane Crazy* was previewed on May 15, 1928, and Ub recalled that it "got quite a few laughs." Ub worked feverishly on Mickey's second picture, *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928). Directly inspired by Douglas Fairbanks' silver screen derring-do, this animated spoof features brave Mickey in South America, rescuing Minnie from Pete's evil clutches.

The little star's look was already evolving. Mickey's black oval pupils had lost their large outline and his feet had gained shoes. And though Mickey's personality was still a bit rowdy, his infectious spirit for adventure and relatable emotion was ever present. "When people laugh at Mickey Mouse, it's because he's so human," Walt explained, "and that is the secret of his popularity."

Though lovable Mickey delighted the small audiences that had seen his first two films in previews, no distributors were interested. Walt knew he had to find something to help stir up interest in his would-be star, and he heard the call of destiny in "talkies" or sound film. Though many in the film industry felt threatened by this new technology and others regarded it as a fad, the ever-visionary Walt felt differently. "Sound effects and talking pictures are more than a mere novelty," Walt had told Roy. "They are here to stay and in time will develop into a wonderful thing." Moreover, Walt saw the endless creative opportunities sound offered animation and his new animated character.

Walt and his team moved ahead on Mickey's third short, *Steamboat Willie* (1928), creating the story and animated action with sound as a key element. The sound-centered scenario found riverboat hand Mickey entertaining passenger Minnie by creating an

impromptu orchestra of the boat's livestock. Even Mickey's design, including now his most recognizable features—circle ears, *four*-fingered hands, soft angles, buttoned shorts and ready smile—began to solidify.

With film in hand, Walt headed to New York in search of a recording sound system, and once he had signed on for the Cinephone, he hired an orchestra to provide the music for the short with a score provided by Kansas City pal Carl Stalling, who would go on to create the memorable melodies of the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes cartoons. It seemed a relatively feasible task: sync the music with the action of the film projected in front of them. But the images disoriented the conductor so much that he couldn't set the beat of the music. Ub rushed a new print of *Steamboat Willie* to Walt containing a system he'd created wherein bouncing balls represented beats that the conductor could easily follow. Walt arranged for another recording session with a scaled-down orchestra, and at long last the world's first animated cartoon with fully synchronized sound was ready to dazzle the eyes and tickle the ears of audiences.

*Steamboat Willie* debuted on November 18, 1928, at the Colony Theater in New York City. The picture was an instant, bona fide success. *The New York Times* trumpeted, "...an ingenious piece of work with a good deal of fun." With Mickey an overnight success Walt released *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho* with sound added. "Sound effects won some laughs here on their own.... [but] value in this one comes from the antics Disney makes his figures perform.... good with or without sound," noted *Variety* of *The Gallopin' Gaucho*. Audiences flocked to see—and hear—the newest star in Hollywood.

Mickey's first released film, *Steamboat Willie*, still holds its own as one of the greatest feats in animation history. In honor of Mickey's 50th anniversary, Walt Disney World® Resort hosted a re-premiere of the picture that started it all. Walt Disney himself paid heartfelt tribute to Mickey to an audience of millions during the premiere of his *Disneyland* weekly television series. "Guess you all know this little fellow here," Walt said admiring a portrait of Mickey. "It's an old partnership. He and I started out for the first time many, many years ago. We've had a lot of our dreams come true..."

In many ways, it's difficult to distinguish where the man ends and the Mouse begins. Mickey's continued popularity is the quintessential example of Walt Disney's ability to imagine beyond imagination, popularizing the ideals of laughter, adventure and magic forever more. "I only hope that we don't lose sight of one thing," said Walt, "that it was all started by a mouse."

## **[Sidebars]**

### **Ub Iwerks, The Man Who Drew the Mouse**

Ub Iwerks, an incredibly proficient artist and Walt Disney's first star animator, single-handedly drew Mickey Mouse out of the realm of imagination and into one of the most recognizable figures on the planet. While Walt created the concept of Mickey and imbued the Mouse with personality, Ub's adorable design of Mickey evolved with each film, but the basic element he'd begun with—the circle—gave Mickey his amazing appeal, with the cute character's head and ears becoming one of the most iconic and universally recognized designs ever devised.

Throughout the Mickey Mouse series, particularly the first short, *Plane Crazy*, Ub intentionally used minimal background detail and secondary characters. The focus was always on Mickey and his cute co-star Minnie and their innovative personalities, much of which were also established by Ub. His record of generating over seven hundred drawings a day—finishing *Plane Crazy* in just two weeks—remains untouched. “I really extended myself,” Ub later recalled. The entire picture—backgrounds, extremes, in-betweens, even story drawings and movie posters—was Ub’s work. The man was a veritable animation machine.

The extraordinary efforts of Ub in designing Mickey and almost single-handedly animating his first cartoons, Ub was generously repaid with this opening credit on *Steamboat Willie*: “A Walt Disney Comedy. Drawn by Ub Iwerks.” Sharing top billing with Walt Disney was an incredible honor that no other Disney artist would ever attain.

### **Breaking the Sound Barrier**

By 1928, when *Steamboat Willie* was produced, the arrival of sound in moving pictures had begun to take over Hollywood. No one had yet successfully applied the technology to cartoons, but Walt believed it could be done. Before sound could be put on film, however, Walt conducted an experiment to determine if the illusion of sound emitting from animated figures would actually work.

Walt recalled, “I visited a lot of five-and-dime stores and bought a bunch of gadgets—night-club noise makers, cowbells and tin pans. We had washboards on which we could make scrubbing noises. I bought a couple of ‘plumber’s friends’ and some slide

whistles and ocarinas. We played around with those things for a while to work out sound effects; then we began to lay out the score for our sound synchronization.”

Walt and his team had invited their girlfriends and wives to a preview during which the animators played musical instruments and performed sound effects—Walt provided the squeaks of Mickey himself—while the film was projected on a bed sheet screen. When the ladies seemed more interested in discussing domestic topics, Walt cried out, “You’re out here talking about babies and we’re in here making history.” He later admitted, “It was terrible. But it was wonderful! It was something new!” From this inauspicious beginning, the revolutionary sound cartoon was born and Mickey became a full-fledged star of the new sound era.