"Disney's Folly"

How Walt, taking the biggest chance of his career, made the first feature picture in which no human actors appeared: the classic Snow White.
It almost went, at that, only a wise Bear spotted the hole and went in. He hit Charlie, slowed him. Then the rest of the Bear line-backers converged and pinned him as good as could be. An awful realization came to him: He could not go down; they were supporting him. The ball felt like a baskfull of eels. He was going to lose it. He was coming out. Ward pointed, "That Bush from Rutgers is honest, huh?"

"He'll learn different!" yelled Revere. "Don't know from a lateral!"

Cap gibed. "What a yokel!"

Charlie pulled on his pants. The glow within him had nothing to do with the December sun. He stood up and said carelessly, "Like to give a little party. Alice is going to have a baby."

"Whoopie!!" came from the shower room. "That's the fortibeg among us!"

Cap boomed, "We give the party; you and Alice just be there!"

On his way out they poured him some more. He saw Alice and Dolly Mae waiting, and began to run. Tex following. There were a thousand things he had to say—first of all that she had all along been right. Today was the day.

My Dad, Walt Disney (Continued from Page 24)

an embarkment and half of the car hung over space. This time it was a tow job, and I didn't get back into the saddle again. Dad was very understanding about that mishap. He blows up over little things, but the pressure is off; the heat has cooled. People said to Dad, "Aren't you afraid that eighty minutes of flat, one-dimensional animation might be hard for the public to take. The old camera technique was just plain". Dad said, "It's good for them and it's good for their work here at the studio. Besides, they've all got wives, and I don't think their wives are going to stand for this evenings-away-from-home routine very long." And that's the way it worked out. The Five got tired of the late hours and the extra effort and all the frenzy involved when they were already making good money working for Dad. They still have a ball at noontime, but the pressure is off; the heat has cooled.

Dad knows that people must have a lease like that and a complete change of pace. He tried it himself when he built a workshop at home and started fooling around in it.

"I needed to get away from the things I was doing, I was facing the day that some of my friends of mine had a miniature train. I visited them one Sunday and I thought that all this was going to be the kind of thing that my friends are interested in, I decided to make one. I went to the head of our studio machine shop and I told him what I wanted. Ward Kimball had given him an old-time engine, and I asked, "Do you think we can build a scale model of this?" The shop foreman said, "We can do it."

"But I've never worked on a metal lathe," I told him.

He said, 'Can you give an hour a day or an hour and a half a day?' If you can, I'll teach you.'"

So Dad and the shop foreman began. They got a draftsman to help them. The work was not dangerous and every day Dad took an hour off, or maybe two hours and went to the machine shop. He worked there Saturdays and sometimes he'd go there at night and work. He put himself into the hands of that foreman as an apprentice and together they started to build a model locomotive. They began it in 1949. A year and a half later they'd finished it.

Dad did as much of the work himself as he could. The shop head did the intricate machining of the valves in his spare time, but Dad made the headlights and turned the wheels. Dad made the patterns the patternmaker made the patterns for the wheels, but Dad and the foreman cast them, and Dad filed those wheels. He logged a box of them with him wherever he went. When he took his family to Palm Springs the box of wheels went along, and he set them in the sun, filling away. Dad loves woodwork too. So he served another apprenticeship in the studio carpenter shop—this time with his head carpenter. Then he went home to his own shop and often spent three or four evening hours there all alone, working on boxcars and flatscars and a caboose to go behind his locomotive.

"If I had a headache," Dad says, "and I'd go down to that shop, it would clear up and I'd feel fine. A man needs a set of problems to take his mind off his old ones. Figuring angles and how to make a jello mold different and relaxing tasks."

Dad needed all of the artists and technicians with unusual personalities and talents he could get, as well as freedom from physical headaches, because he could not tolerate the continual underbrush of the work he was doing. Dad was a wonder-ful caricaturist but he learned to play the trombone in his spare time. At Santa Barbara College, which he attended, they advertised for a trombonist to play in the band. Ward went up to the fellow who was organizing the group and asked, "We need a trombonist," he said.

"Which do you play?" the fellow asked.

"I don't play any," Ward said.

"I need a trombone," the band organizer said.

"O.K.," Ward said, "I'll learn to play one," He did and he got into the band.

He has many hobbies and interests. He collects everything. He even bought a full-sized locomotive which had been abandoned as junk. He moved it into his back yard and put it up on rails, and he built a shop in the Sunday paper in bed in a bedroom with no walls. It was open to the world and his half-dressed children were clustered around his bed. You could see his wife combing her hair. When you looked at that painting, you thought, 'What's that man's bedroom on Sunday morning? It's just a Grand Central Station with the whole family trooping through.'"  

In addition to Mr. Kimball, the Fire House Five was manned by Tim Revere, Goodman, Goodman joined them once. Then, to their surprise, they began to make money. For you to give the gifts that bring cheer that lasts all year—gift subscriptions to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, You know the pleasure the POST brings. This year, spread that pleasure among your friends and relatives at money-saving Christmass gifts prices. And POST gifts are so easy to order! There's an order form bound in this issue, Mail it TODAY... and we'll bill you later. Gay cards in your name will tell of the cheer you're giving!
December 22, 1956

vice called the multiplex camera. Instead of photographing a drawing on one sheet of cellophane, Dad's artists began to make them on several planes; then they would overlay the camera drawings, photographing them as the camera advanced. In that way they obtained an illusion of depth. Although The Old Mill was designed to be shot in one take, Dad planned to use in Snow White, it became a classic in its own right. In fact, it won an Academy Award.

"There was nothing but music in it," Dad says. "No dialogue. The story was what happened to that old mill at night; over the years it bears its children and to anchor those personalities down, I used the seven dwarfs of the Rhinegold opera. The character of Snow White was based on the character of the seven-eyed girl. And Dad thought he'd never find another girl like her."

Dad decided to make Snow White. It was a ding-dong, photo-finish race with their budget. He was running out of money, and Aunt had a lot to do when his deadline loomed up in December. He wanted to get the film on the screen in winter, the best season at the box office. And Christmas week is the best of the winter.

"Roy and I were spending a lot more than we had, and we could borrow," Dad told me, "and we needed even more. So Roy said, 'I'm afraid you're going to have to keep Snow White smaller.' Dad had done a lot of work on the picture so far, Walt. I hated to show it. It's dangerous to show anybody anything unfinished. They can't visualize it, and it's too early."

"So I think we were in the dark when it's complete. But Roy set a date for me to meet Joseph Rosenberg, a vice-president of the studio, so he could run off for him the parts of Snow White I had on film.

"Dad remembers every detail of that meeting. He sat with Mr. Rosenberg, whom he didn't know very well, in a big conference room. There were long stretches where Dad had stuck in pencil drawings to represent work still to be done. Dad sat there sweating and making explanations to Mr. Rosenberg when he thought it would help. He'd say, 'You remember that place back there where I had those sketches? When we're through, that scene is going to be beautiful.'"

"Mr. Rosenberg said, 'Yes,' and 'Uh-huh;' and Dad uncorked a little bit of his theory and damper. When it was all over they walked outside. Mr. Rosenberg stretched his jacket and put his hand on a chair. 'You've done everything but the picture, Dad. It's been an unheard-of sum in those days. And Mr. Rosenberg had to decide whether to lend Dad enough money to finish the job."

"I was green in the picture business," he told me, "but I had a lot of ambition, and I remembered my promise to myself if my judgment was sound. So I called some of the people I knew in Hollywood and I asked them, 'What do you think of this feature cartoon Disney's doing?' I got some discouraging replies. One man said, 'I wouldn't put a dime in it if I were you.'"

"But there was one man Mr. Rosenberg called who believed—Walter Wanger. Mr. Wanger said, 'Joe, millions of people are going to like it. If Disney does as well as I know he'll do, they'll go for it.'"

"Mr. Horne spoke up and said, 'We'll sell it for what it's worth.'"

"I've asked Dad what the objection was. 'They wanted to sell Snow White with a lot of romance,' he told me, 'because it had a prince and a princess in it. I said, 'I believe in selling a thing for what it is. This has got dwarfs and a girl named Snow White in it, and the title is going to be Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.' That's what they were billed and that's the way it was sold.'"

"With straight promotion, Snow White broke all records in New York's Radio City Music Hall. It was a tremendous success, and it could have run longer, but Uncle Roy and Dad were afraid it might milk the greater opportunity."

"I know people in pictures," the fellow said. "I make animated cartoons," Dad said. "Oh?" He said it with a downward inflection, as if you couldn't possibly have outstaged the "Disney's Folly," although nobody knew what "Disney's Folly" was. Uncle Roy had left United Artists and gone with R.K.O., but Hal Horne was still their friend. They met occasionally at luncheon, and it was an old gag to say around as the "Disney's Folly" gossip. How could it be combated?

"Mr. Horne told Dad, 'Let them call it that if they want to. The picture itself is going to be the pay-off. Your best policy is to keep everybody wondering. If they keep wondering, they'll keep talking. In that way you have free promotion based on sheer curiosity.'"

"Before Dad and Uncle Roy switched to R.K.O., Mr. Horne was very helpful when some of the men in the U.S.A. distribution department said they couldn't sell Snow White."

"'Why not?' Dad asked. 'I'm making a fairy tale. That's what we've got a million dollars for!'"

"Mr. Horne spoke up and said, 'We'll sell it for what it is.'"
Pinocchio was ready for release, Bambi bank and they had the studio and a lot about in the early 1940's. There was that now in the business—wherever they of pictures in work. "I was loaded with $4,500,000 he and Uncle Roy owed the it, 90 per cent of all the cartoon artists that movie revenues coming from overseas were cut off. Forty-five per cent of their world gross had been earned outside of the United States and Canada. Now English pounds were locked up in the sterling countries; the world movie market collapsed and the banks cut off Uncle Roy and Dad's credit.

Dad and Uncle Roy released Snow White, after having had a hard time getting enough money to finish it. Six months later they had all of their debts paid and a couple of million dollars in the bank. Then, using Snow White profit, they built a modern studio in Burbank at a cost of $3,000,000. A year after that they owed the bank $4,500,000. That was the way things were going.

The new studio was being built when Grandfather and Grandmother Disney moved to California to live. Dad showed Grandfather excavations and foundations, thinking he'd be interested. Grandfather didn't seem very happy about it. One day he asked, "Walter, what can it be used for?"

"Why, it's a studio," Dad said, with surprise. "It's where I work."

"No, Walter, not that," Grandfather said. "I mean what can it be used for?"

Grandfather was thinking of the possibility that his two sons might fail in business. Then when the studio buildings and what purpose would they serve?

Dad thought fast, "It would make a perfect hospital," he said; "operating rooms could be installed above the wide corridors, and bathrooms put between office cubicles." It was just talk, but later, when the war came and hard times put the squeeze on Dad and Uncle Roy, Dad remembered Grandfather's question: "But Walter, what can it be used for?"

The new studio housed 1500 employees, there were 180 artists and the training school alone—a school that had grown from a class of twenty in 1933. In 1940, when the studio was a major part of the cartoon industry; as nearly as Dad can figure it, 90 per cent of all the cartoon artists now in the business—wherever they work—came out of the Disney school.

Dad had more than students to think about in the early 1940's. There was that $4,500,000 he owed the bank and they had the studio and a lot of pictures in work. "I was loaded with product," Dad says, "but the world market had vanished and left us stranded." Pinocchio was ready for release, Bambi was being completed, and a start had been made on Fantasia. "I remember Roy calling me in," Dad says, "and his opening was, "I've got to talk to you, kid. This is serious." I was as worried as he was, but I didn't think I could accomplish anything by brooding, so I was concentrating on trying to get our product wrapped up and ready to go, whether it was going anywhere or not."

"When I went in to see him, your Uncle Roy wore a long face. He talked about our bank difficulties, but when he mentioned the four and a half million bucks we owed, I began to laugh. "What are you laughing at?" Roy asked. I said, 'I was thinking about the time when we the part they had played in Dad and Uncle Roy's enterprises.

Dad says he told Uncle Roy during that period, "I'm always sympathetic with you because you have to sit in with the bankers and the money men, and you have to fight the stockbrokers who come in and harass you and say, 'Do something so I can turn over my Disney stock and make a profit.' I told Roy, 'You've got to get away from those fellows. They'll get you down. Stay as far away from them as you can.'"

Ordinarily Dad doesn't attend directors' meetings. The only time he attends is when Uncle Roy says, "I need a quorum," or "Walt, they're going to try to pull something on us. Better be there."

"Months went by, and I got a telegram from him. The wire said: 'Walt, I need another five hundred dollars. We need air-conditioning in Phoenix.' So I sent him five hundred. More time went by, and word came: Walt, I'm having a little trouble with my partner. I want to buy him out." This time I wrote Jerry and said, 'You'll have to get along with your partner. I can't lend you any more.' But the point is that the sixty dollars' worth of food Jerry let me have on credit cost me fifteen hundred dollars.

As for our stockholders, I'm paying them back by building assets for them. Their stock is worth far more today than it was when we sold our original issue brought for twenty-five dollars per share. Each share of this preferred stock was later converted into two ten-dollar debentures and one share of ten-dollar common stock. The common stock is now worth over forty dollars per share and we've just split it two for one to bring the stock to its original twenty-five dollar investment in our preferred stock is now worth over sixty dollars.

A few months ago Uncle Roy had put out their first stock issue, Dad happened to be coming through Detroit. A friend arranged a luncheon for him with several automobile executives at the Dearborn Inn. Bill Stout, the man who developed the Ford Trimotor plane, was there, and he told Dad that Henry Ford, Sr., ad- mired his work. Mr. Ford didn't come to the luncheon, but he came after the coffee to talk to Dad. It was the first time he'd been in the Dearborn Inn in a year; they'd begun to serve liquor, and he didn't approve of that.

When Uncle Roy told that the Disney studio had just put its first public stock issue on the market, Mr. Ford said, "If you sell any part of an enterprise, you should sell it all." That left Dad wondering whether he and Uncle Roy had been wise. Mr. Ford was suspicious of bankers and brokers whom he suspected of trying to evince him out of control of his own company. If you sell some of your stock to outsiders, he felt, you're likely to find outsiders muscling into the management of your business.

There were plenty of sharp operators who would, in his opinion, muscle in on Dad and Uncle Roy right after World War II. The problem confronting the Disney studio of making money with the market in Europe, Dad and Uncle Roy overseas still frozen would be a crucial one. That was the future. What concerned Dad and Uncle Roy in 1939 was bringing out a completely new kind of feature-length cartoon, a movie called Fantasia.

In spite of the unsettling effect of war in Europe, Dad and Uncle Roy brought out Fantasia. They were confident that it was such an advance in motion-picture presentation that it would pay off.

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*Editor's Note—The seventh in this series of eight articles will appear next week.*