

# History of The Walt Disney Studios

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## Excerpted from *The Walt Disney Company Archives*

Walt Disney arrived in California in the summer of 1923 with dreams and determination, but little else. He had made a short film in Kansas City about a little girl in a cartoon world, called *Alice's Wonderland*, and he planned to use it as his "pilot" film to sell a series of these Alice Comedies to a distributor. On October 16, 1923, a New York distributor, M. J. Winkler, contracted to release the Alice Comedies, and this date became the formal beginning of The Walt Disney Company. Originally known as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, with Walt Disney and his brother Roy as equal partners, the company soon changed its name, at Roy's suggestion, to the Walt Disney Studio, which was initially housed in a succession of storefront buildings in Hollywood before becoming established on Hyperion Avenue.

Walt made his Alice Comedies for four years, constantly pushing the visual bounds as well as the studio's finances with innovative effects. In 1927, he decided to move to an all-cartoon series, and for its star he created a character named Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Within a year, Walt made 26 Oswald cartoons, but when he tried to get some

additional money from Winkler for a second year of the cartoons, he found out that the distributor had gone behind his back and signed up almost all of his animators, hoping to make the Oswald cartoons in his own studio for less money without Walt. Since the distributor owned the rights to Oswald, there was nothing Walt could do. It was a painful lesson for the young cartoon producer. From then on, he saw to it that he owned everything that he made.

Walt now had to come up with a new character. With his chief animator, Ub Iwerks, Walt designed a mouse whom Walt first wanted to name Mortimer, but his wife Lilly preferred Mickey. And so a star was born. Ub animated two Mickey Mouse cartoons. But the first film with synchronized sound *The Jazz Singer* had premiered, and Walt decided that his studio should make the first sound cartoon. So, the studio poured all of its resources into a third Mickey Mouse cartoon before the first two were released, this one with fully synchronized sound. *Steamboat Willie* opened to rave reviews at the Colony Theater in New York November 18, 1928. Mickey Mouse was an immediate sensation around the world, and a series of Mickey Mouse cartoons followed.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Walt Disney soon produced another series, the Silly Symphonies. Each of the films in this series featured different casts of characters, enabling the animators to experiment with stories that relied less on the gags and quick humor of the Mickey cartoons and more on mood, emotion, and musical themes. Eventually the Silly Symphonies turned into the training ground for all Disney artists, as they prepared for the advent of animated feature films. *Flowers and Trees*, a Silly Symphony and the first full-color cartoon, won the Academy Award for Best Cartoon in 1932, the first year that the Academy offered such a category. For the rest of that decade, a Disney cartoon won the Oscar every year. The most sensational one, *Three Little Pigs*, was released in 1933. This was a breakthrough in character animation and provided something of an anthem for fighting the Great Depression "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" The animated short was so popular, it sometimes was listed above the feature film on theater marquees.

One night in 1934, Walt brought his animators together to tell them they were going to make an animated feature film, and proceeded to act out the story of

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. At the time, this was a radical concept. Most people thought that a cartoon couldn't hold an audience's attention beyond the usual eight-minute running time. It took three years and severely taxed the resources of the studio, but in December 1937, the film was finished, and it was a spectacular hit. *Snow White* became the highest grossing film of all time, a record it held until it was surpassed by *Gone With the Wind*. Work immediately began on other feature projects and the company moved to its current site in Burbank, California. But, with the advent of World War II, the company lost access to most of its foreign markets. Consequently, its next two features, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, which were released in 1940, were unable to recoup their production costs. Both were masterpieces that would be phenomenally profitable in subsequent releases in the decades to come, but their immediate effect was to put the studio at some financial risk. Then came *Dumbo* in 1941, which was produced on a very limited budget and was profitable. This was followed by *Bambi*, another expensive film that came in 1942 after the U.S. had entered the war. For the next number of years, Walt would have to restrain his animation ambitions. However, it is remarkable to consider how far he had taken the

art form in little more than a decade. From the "rubber hose" animation of *Steamboat Willie* to the extraordinary imagery and emotional storytelling of the company's first five feature length films, the studio had revolutionized animation forever.

During the war, Walt Disney made two films about South America, *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, at the request of the State Department. His studio also concentrated on producing propaganda and training films for the military. When the war ended, it was difficult for the Disney Studio to regain its pre-war footing. Several years went by during which the studio released "package" feature films, such as *Make Mine Music* and *Melody Time*, containing groups of short cartoons. Walt also moved into live action production, with *Song of the South* and *So Dear to My Heart*, which also included animated segments. Walt further branched out with the award-winning True-Life Adventure series, featuring dramatic nature photography of a style never seen before.

1950 saw three landmark achievements: the studio's first completely live action film, *Treasure Island*, the return to classic animated features with *Cinderella* and the first Disney television show at Christmas time. Unlike the heads of the other Hollywood studios,

Walt saw the potential of television and, after another Christmas special, in 1954 he launched the Disneyland anthology series, famously featuring the first television mini-series *Davy Crockett*.

The studio continued to produce highly popular filmed entertainment, with animated films like *Lady and the Tramp* and *Sleeping Beauty*, live action films *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Shaggy Dog*, and a popular TV series about the legendary hero, Zorro. In the 1960s came more classic films, like *101 Dalmatians* and *Pollyanna*. In 1964 came *Mary Poppins*, Walt Disney's crowning achievement as a filmmaker, combining live action, animation and animatronics to tell a classic story for the entire family. Just two years later came the end of an era, as Walt Disney died on December 15, 1966. It was said at the time that he was probably the best known individual in the world.

Roy Disney, who was older than Walt and had been planning to retire, took over supervision of the company *The Jungle Book* in 1967 and *The Aristocats* in 1970 showed that the company was still the leader in animation, and *The Love Bug* in 1969 was the highest grossing film of the year. Roy Disney died just two months after realizing his brother's final dream in 1971, Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

In an effort to expand its business, Disney initiated the Disney Channel in 1983 and established a new film label, Touchstone Pictures, with the release of *Splash* in 1984. However, because of the widespread perception that Disney stock was undervalued relative to the company's assets, in 1984 there were attempts to stage hostile takeovers of the company. These efforts were rebuffed and, in October, Michael Eisner and Frank Wells became chief executive officer and president, respectively.

The new management team immediately saw ways for Disney to maximize its assets. Films from the Disney library were selected for the television syndication market, and some of the classic animated films were released on video cassette. Eventually, the company pioneered the "sell-through" approach of pricing video releases at lower prices and Disney classics were suddenly setting a whole new kind of box office record as they reached a new generation of kids, who could watch them in the convenience of their home.

Filmmaking hit new heights in 1988 as, for the first time, Disney led all the Hollywood studios in box-office gross, with *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, *Three Men and a Baby* each earning more than \$100 million at the U.S. box office.

Disney animation experienced a renaissance. In 1989, *The Little Mermaid* reminded the world that animation wasn't just for kids. In 1991, *Beauty and the Beast* became the only animated film ever to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. In 1992, *Aladdin* became the first animated film to gross more than \$200 million in the U.S. and, in 1994, *The Lion King* shattered records, grossing \$312 million in the U.S. and \$783 million worldwide.

Meanwhile, Hollywood Records was formed to offer a wider selection of music.

Disney's leadership in animation continued with *Pocahontas* in 1995, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1996, *Hercules* in 1997, *Mulan* in 1998, *Tarzan* in 1999 and *Fantasia/2000* at the turn of the century. In 1995, in partnership with Pixar Animation, the company released the first computer-animated feature film, *Toy Story*. This was followed by a series of highly successful Disney/Pixar collaborations, *a bug's life*, *Toy Story 2*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles*.

In 1994, Disney ventured onto Broadway with the stage production of *Beauty and the Beast*, followed in 1997 by *The Lion King*, which won the Tony Award for best musical. *Aida* was Disney Theatrical's first production not based on an animated film and, in 2006, *Tarzan* opened on The Great White Way. By

restoring the historic New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street, Disney became the catalyst for a successful makeover of the famous Times Square area.

The company's film studio had a particularly banner year in 2003, with *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* and Disney/Pixar's *Finding Nemo* both grossing more than \$300 million at the U.S. box office. That year, Disney became the first studio in history to surpass \$3 billion in global box office.

On October 1, 2005, Robert Iger assumed the position of chief executive officer, becoming only the seventh individual to lead The Walt Disney Company in its entire history. Iger quickly established his intention to take advantage of emerging technologies in order to connect with consumers in new ways. Iger also emphasized his determination to grow the company by building on its legacy of great creativity and his first major initiative, announced in January 2006, was the acquisition of creative powerhouse Pixar Animation.

2007 was a very successful year for the studio segment with films like *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, *Ratatouille*, *Enchanted* and *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* topping the box office.

Disneynature, the first new Disney-

branded film label in over 60 years, was created in April 2008 to produce nature documentaries for the big screen.

In February 2009, Disney made a long-term distribution agreement with Steven Spielberg, Stacey Snider and The Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group to market and distribute live-action films from DreamWorks Studios under the Touchstone Pictures banner. In August, Disney acquired Marvel

Entertainment, a global brand with a world-renowned library of characters including Iron Man, Spider-Man, X-Men, Captain America, Fantastic Four and Thor. And in October, The Walt Disney Company named Rich Ross chairman of The Walt Disney Studios, overseeing the movie, music and theatrical operations of the company.

2010 has been another significant year for the studio's film business.

Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* became The Walt Disney Studios' biggest international success generating more than \$1 billion at the global box office, while Disney/Pixar's *Toy Story 3* became the highest grossing animated film of all time with over \$1 billion in global receipts. As a result of their individual success, Disney became the first studio in history to have two \$1 billion films in one year.