

My Dad, Walt Disney Part Six

By DIANE DISNEY MILLER, as told to Pete Martin

“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.



Snow White coaxes the Seven Dwarfs through a song in the film which probably has been seen by more people than any other ever made.



For the most part, my father’s beliefs are based on experience, instead of schooling. His formal education stopped short at the end of his first year in high school, when he joined the Red Cross Ambulance Corps. He’s read a lot of history since then, but at bottom he’s a country boy who has whittled out his own philosophy.

One of his maxims is, “You don’t know what you can do unless you try.” With this motto of Dad’s in our minds, when my younger sister, Sharon, and I grew old enough to hang onto a steering wheel and shift a gear, we learned to drive—by driving Dad’s car around the studio lot while he was roving inside the buildings. I was practicing backing up in the studio parking lot one day when I backed over a water pipe and a geyser gushed up. The studio police hurried out and turned off the water. When they were gone, I told myself—paraphrasing advice I’d heard from horsemen—*You’ve got to get back in that car right away and drive it or you’ll never drive again.* I got back in and was backing up once more when I backed over

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NEXT WEEK . . .

The Mouse at War

Walt worked for Uncle Sam in World War II, and Mickey went into battle with gallant ships and planes.

Walt, who often pretends he’s overlooked—as the only male in the house—sneaks a snack for Lady, the family’s French poodle, just after getting home from work.

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 linebackers converged and pinched him as in a gigantic vise. An awful realization came to him: He could not go down; they were supporting him. The ball felt like a basketful of eels. He was going to lose it. He was going to fumble.

Caporelli flung himself beneath the heap of Bear tacklers. Two other Stags joined him. Charlie felt himself going into the air, looked frantically about.

"Right here, *amigo*," drawled Tex.

Charlie got rid of the ball as though it were a searing spheroid brand. Tex, slightly bowlegged, ungraceful but sure, began to run.

The Bears pursued. The Stags began gleefully knocking them about.

Charlie recovered and tore downfield. Tex looked at him once, but Charlie shouted, "Run, you cowboy!" and blocked out a man in blue.

Cap got up there somehow. They made an escort. The Bears went down in order, like tumbling tumbleweeds.

Tex stumbled past the thick white chalk mark and it was a tied score and

the Stags lost years and dignity, leaping like kids to the repeated waves of monstrous noise which flowed down from the stands. Charlie raced to join Magruder and the others, lined up to watch Tex try to win the game with the conversion.

Magruder said conversationally, "Had you wrong for a while, Charlie. Thought you didn't care much about playing."

"That was my fault," said Charlie, knowing the truth at last.

"Partly mine." Magruder paused. He plucked a blade of grass and stuck it in his teeth with steady hands.

The sun was still warm. Tex was back; Revere knelt to take the snap. The Bears had every available giant in there to block the attempt.

Magruder asked, "Your wife like California?"

"Loves it." Charlie was choking with suspense, watching the twenty-two men on the field.

"Good. We like to have our regulars live here, if possible. There'll be a job for you."

Not until later was Charlie to understand. The ball was coming back hard and fast. Revere took it, set it delicately

on its blunt end. Tex stepped and swung his leg. The ball arched over reaching blue-clad arms. It went all the way into the arms of a happy small boy in the stands behind the end zone.

An official threw up his hands. The Stags had won another ball game.

They came down out of the tiers, happy, mad people. Charlie felt his breakaway jersey go and was grateful for a sturdy policeman who got him through and into the dressing room. It grew quiet in there; the ceremony of the game ball remained.

The game ball was something to cherish, to letter with the date and score and someday hand down to a son. The captain bestowed it upon the player of the day, and even an old pro coveted the game ball.

Caporelli paused where Charlie and Tex dressed together. The ball was in his great, sinewy paws.

Charlie said, too loudly, "I fumbled on that last one. If Tex hadn't been there, I'd have lost it."

The silence was awful for a moment. Then Cap drawled, "Sure, I know." He handed the ball to Tex, but kept his gaze

on Charlie. "We all know. We know a helluva lot we didn't know yesterday, for instance."

He slapped Charlie so hard on his bare shoulder that it stung for hours, and plodded away. Tex was turning the ball over and over, murmuring, "Now, ain't that somethin'? That's really somethin'!"

Swanski called mockingly, "That bush from Rutgers is honest, huh?"

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

Cap gaped. "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."

"Whoops!" yelled someone from the shower room. "That's the fortieth among us!"

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

On his way out they pounded 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.

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an embankment 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 if there's a crisis, such as an auto accident, he's a girl's best friend. Once I skidded on a rainy street and turned around three times. Then I bounced onto the curb and smacked into a palm tree. My first instinct was to get Dad on the phone.

"It's all right, kid," he said. "We'll come and get the car and take care of everything." He couldn't have been more comforting. "Everything will be all right," he told me. "Don't get upset."

Maybe all fathers are that way, but I doubt it. Not every girl can be this lucky.

One of the things that made it possible for Dad and Uncle Roy to try new things—and try them successfully—was the fact that the Disney studio has always attracted artists and technicians with unusual personalities. The Fire House Five Plus Four, a musical combo which grew, apparently, by spontaneous combustion, was typical. It was a group of Dad's boys who began to get together during the noon hour to play a little barrelhouse Dixieland.

"That band was really Ward Kimball's baby," Dad says. "Ward's the one man who works for me I call a genius. He can do anything he wants to do. Certainly he can do anything around our studio that needs to be done. He's not only a wonderful caricaturist but he learned to play the trombone in his spare time. At Santa Barbara College, which he attended, they advertised for students to play in the band. Ward went up to the fellow who was organizing the group and asked, 'What instruments do you need?'"

"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. 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

which to make the parts he needed to put that locomotive in first-class condition. Before long he had five hundred feet of track in his yard and a couple of day coaches. He'd steam up, run that five hundred feet, then slam on the brakes.

"And he's a better-than-average fine-arts painter. He knows color, his canvases show a lot of feeling. I remember a painting he did of his family called Sunday Morning. It showed Ward reading

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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's seminude back in the picture as she combed her hair. When you looked at that painting, you thought, *Why, that's any 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 Plus Four was manned by some of the top men in Dad's studio. For a while they gave dances during the noon hour in one of the sound stages, and well-known musicians came out and played with them just for the fun of it. Benny Goodman joined them once. Then, to their surprise, they began to make money

and became famous. More for kicks than anything else, they played Monday-night engagements at a little Los Angeles night club on the regular orchestra's night off.

That club was the Beverly Cavern, a famous Dixieland joint. Soon the Fire House Five moved to the Mocambo and filled in on Monday night there. Monday night became known as their night, and before long they were very popular with prep-school groups, and they went off on weekends to play at high-school dances. Their next step was to become a recording ensemble.

People said to Dad, "Aren't you afraid to let those boys do that? They may get so popular you'll lose them."

"I think it's swell," 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 release 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 all day," he said. "Some friends of mine had a miniature train. I visited them one Sunday and I thought that all my life I've wanted a miniature train, and 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 me a blueprint of an old-time engine, and I asked, 'Do you think we can build a scale model of this?' The shop foreman said, 'Sure, why not?'"

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

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

So Dad and the shop foreman began. They got a draftsman to help them make the scale drawings, 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 things like the headlights and the smokestack. A patternmaker made the patterns for the wheels, but Dad and the foreman cast them, and Dad filed those wheels. He lugged 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 sat there in the sun, filing 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 flatcars 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 new set of problems to take his mind off his old ones. Figuring angles and how to make a joint dovetail are 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 was facing the most ambitious undertaking he'd ever tackled, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It was his first full-length feature cartoon and it would mean plenty of financial and production headaches before it was done.

Snow White was far more realistic than anything Dad had ever done before. In 1935, when he began to prepare for it, he felt that it needed an illusion of depth. He was afraid that eighty minutes of flat, one-dimensional animation might be hard for the public to take. The old camera technique had been good enough for The Three Little Pigs because that film ran only eight minutes.

To test the possibility of creating depth, Dad did an experimental film, The Old Mill. For this picture he developed a de-

vice called the multiplane camera. Instead of photographing a drawing on one sheet of cellophane, Dad's artists began to make them on several planes; then they moved the camera through those planes, photographing them as the camera advanced. In that way they obtained an illusion of depth. Although *The Old Mill* was designed to test the techniques 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; nothing more. The first scene was an old mill at sunset. There were cows wandering home. A spider wove her web. Birds nested. Then a storm came up and the old mill went on a rampage. In the morning, the spider's web was shattered and the feathers of the birds were ruffled. 'Poetic,' the critics said, but the important thing to me was the proof that I had new depth I could use."

Dad felt that he was ready to go ahead with *Snow White*. When the multiplane camera moved in on a castle in *Snow White*, he hoped that theater audiences would feel that they were approaching the castle too.

I was about five years old, but I can still remember seeing a preview at the old Disney studio before that film was released. It must have been truly realistic, for when the wicked old witch flashed on the screen, I was so terrified that I hid my face in my hands.

Late in 1935, when Dad began work on *Snow White*, he was backing away from short subjects. They were merely program fillers, so they couldn't be worth all the money they were costing to produce. Costs kept rising. And it was easy to see that if cartoon rentals rose enough to meet production costs, theaters would use fewer and fewer of them. The trend was already visible. Speaking of this period, Dad told me, "Your Uncle Roy was worrying about our getting our money back with a profit, and I was worrying about maintaining our quality and keeping production going. This caused some head-butting between us. To me, the way to get out of the fix we were in was to start competing in the feature-length field and aim for a big profit on a large production instead of a small profit on a short subject."

Uncle Roy figured *Snow White* would cost half a million dollars. "We had a little money coming in," Dad says, "but not enough to finance such a big deal. Our assets were pretty impressive, though—we had our studio and a backlog of marketable pictures—so we could get credit backing. Up to this time, we hadn't been able to borrow very much. We were thought kind of risky, and to get the support we wanted, we had to change banks. So we moved over to the Bank of America because the people there seemed to believe in us."

Dad began work on *Snow White* with a small, hand-picked crew but he kept adding helpers until he had every unit in the studio working on the film. At that time, Dad says, his artists weren't so good as they are now.

"We're working on *Sleeping Beauty* now, for Christmas, 1957, release," he says. "We've come a long way in the quality of our drawings and the personality we're able to give our characters. When we did *Snow White*, we weren't really ready."

"You certainly went to town with the Dwarfs," I reminded him.

"We had trouble with the Dwarfs too," Dad said, "but that was a studio secret. I had to use different artists on various scenes involving the same Dwarfs, so it

was hard to prevent subtle variations in each Dwarf's personality. I'd established a distinct personality for each of them, and to anchor those personalities down, I picked a name to fit each Dwarf. For instance, I called one dwarf 'Dopey,' because he was—well, just dopey."

Of the seven dwarfs, Dopey turned out to be the public's favorite. He was always trailing aimlessly along behind the others, and he couldn't talk. The dwarf named Happy explained Dopey's speechlessness by saying, "He just never tried." But the real reason he couldn't talk was that Dad couldn't find a voice he thought suitable for Dopey. "So we won't give him a voice," he said. "It'll help him be different."

Dad says that while making *Snow White* was fun, it was a ding-dong, photo-finish race with their budget. He was running out of money, and he still 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 the bank said we could borrow," Dad told me, "and we needed even more. So Roy said, 'I'm afraid you're going to have to show the bankers what you've done on the picture so far, Walt.' I hated to show it. It's dangerous to show anybody anything unfinished. They can't visualize it the way you know it'll look when it's complete. But Roy set a date for me to meet Joseph Rosenberg, a vice-president at the Bank of America, and run off for him the parts of *Snow White* I had on film."

Dad remembers every moment of that Saturday. He sat with Mr. Rosenberg, whom he didn't know very well, in a big projection room. The picture that was screened for them was a hodgepodge. 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 sat there getting damper and damper. When it was all over they walked outside. Mr. Rosenberg stretched and looked all around, and talked about everything but the picture. Dad thought, *Boy, this is bad.* Finally Mr. Rosenberg got to his car. He said, "Good-bye. That thing is going to make a hatful of money," and he drove away.

"I had brought in specialists to help with our composition and our use of color," Dad says, "but we still had a fight on our hands for better animation. The kind of animation we were after was entirely new. Before that, it had been done by stunts: limber legs moving in trick runs like egg beaters. But in *Snow White* we wanted our action believable. We were after drama and pathos as well as laughter. You can't pull a tear from an audience with legs whirling like windmills."

His next problem was finding *Snow White's* voice. Dad wanted it to have the sound of a voice from "another world," so he sent one of his men out searching. That voice had to sing, too, because there were songs in *Snow White*. Dad didn't want his thinking influenced by the appearance of the girl whose voice he was testing. He only wanted her voice; so he had a microphone installed on a sound stage and connected to a loud-speaker in his office. When he got a call from his voice scout, telling him that a voice was ready for auditioning, Dad

went into his office, turned on his speaker and listened.

The girl who was auditioning didn't know that Walt Disney was eavesdropping. She was simply told that this was a preliminary test with a microphone. After she'd gone, Dad's voice hunter would pick up the phone and ask, "What do you think?" Two or three voices came through that loud-speaker every day and Dad listened to all of them.

One day his voice scout said, "Today I have a fourteen-year-old girl with a terrific voice." Dad said, "Put her on." Her voice was a beautiful soprano, but she sounded thirty years old. "No," Dad said, "she sounds too mature. I must have a younger quality." The girl he turned down then was Deanna Durbin.

One day a voice came through the loud-speaker that made Dad say, "Perfect!" The girl behind the voice, Adrienne Casilotti, came from an operatic family. She had been trained to do birdlike trills and runs, but she wasn't a skillful enough actress to model motion for Dad's animators as she sang. The search began for a second girl.

The problem of drawing the Girl in *Snow White* was a knotty one. There's no trick to making one good drawing of a girl, but to give her face the various shadings of human expression, and to make her move, and at the same time keep the drawings so simple that she could be duplicated by one artist after another—that took doing. Dad had decided to use a live model for the Girl, so he began his search—this time for a girl who could contribute *Snow White's* gestures and movements. At the end, a small-boned seventeen-year-old girl was found. She came to Dad's studio and did what the animators called "the pantomime." Her father owned a dancing school, where she taught. Her name was Margery Belcher. She is better known today as Marge Champion, of the clever dance team of Marge and Gower Champion.

Then, as I've said, the day came when Dad had his agonizing session looking at the rough cut of *Snow White* with Mr. Rosenberg, the officer in charge of movie loans at the Bank of America. The picture was soaring to a cost of \$1,700,000, which was an unheard-of sum in those days. Mr. Rosenberg had to decide whether to lend Dad and Uncle Roy enough money to finish the job.

"I was green in the picture business," he told Dad afterward, "and I wondered 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."

At that time New York's Radio City Music Hall was managed by a Mr. Van Schmus. He had never run a theater before, but he had operated a department store, and he had a natural bent for merchandising. He made regular trips to Hollywood to look at pictures he was thinking of booking, and he visited Dad regularly.

After *The Three Little Pigs* became a hit, Mr. Van Schmus felt that success might make trouble for Dad. "Walter," he asked, "how big a fence have you built around yourself?" Dad thought he meant around the studio, so he said, "Oh, about six foot high." What Mr. Van Schmus meant was that people were going to barge in and give Dad free advice, and perhaps try to make him believe he should

ignore the public and seek the acclaim of eggheads.

When Dad told him what he was doing, Mr. Van Schmus said, "Walter, I'll book *Snow White* for the Music Hall, sight unseen. When can I have it?" His enthusiasm strengthened Dad's morale.

Snow White was two years in the making. It reached the theaters in December, 1937. Dad premiered it in Hollywood at the Carthay Circle Theater. It had a glittering send-off, which meant something special to Dad. A long, long time before, he had promised himself that someday a cartoon of his would have such an opening. That went back to the time when he'd first headed west and met a supercilious stranger on the back platform of the Santa Fe train which was taking him to California. Dad was wearing a pants and coat that didn't match, but he was making conversation happily when this guy asked, "What business you in?"

"Motion pictures," Dad said proudly. "I know people in pictures," the fellow said. "What do you do?"

"I make animated cartoons," Dad said. "Oh!" He said it with a downward inflection, as if to say, "Oh, so you sweep out stables." So the premiere of *Snow White*, with Hollywood's brass turning out, was a triumph for Dad.

Another man who helped Dad with *Snow White* was Hal Horne, exploitation manager for United Artists. When *Snow White* was still in the works, it was smart in certain circles to call the film, "Disney's Folly," although nobody knew what Dad's "folly" really looked like. Dad and 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 the talk got around as to 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'll 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.A. distribution department said they couldn't sell *Snow White* "as a fairy tale."

"Why not?" Dad asked. "I'm making a fairy tale. That's what we've put a million and a half dollars into."

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

I've asked Dad what the objection was. "They wanted to sell *Snow White* as a 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.' So that's the way it was 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 ran five weeks and could have run longer, but Uncle Roy and Dad were afraid it might milk the greater New York territory, hurting other engagements they'd booked there. So they pulled it. On its first time around the world, the film grossed \$8,000,000. At this writing, its gross has been \$15,000,000, and Dad thinks that it has played to as many people as any other picture ever made, if not more.

The country not only took the dwarfs to its collective heart but the *Snow White* music became part of American life, instead of tinkling their way into oblivion. "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go" was on everybody's lips right through the beginning of the last war. The songs,

Some Day My Prince Will Come, and Whistle While You Work, became classics—the music business calls them “standards” or “evergreens.” The music was written by Frank Churchill, who had composed Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? A youngster named Larry Morey wrote the verses, although he wasn’t a professional lyricist. He’d come into the studio very young to work in the story department, and he’d grown up there.

Snow White meant that Dad and Uncle Roy were in big business. And it proved to them once more that the way to make headway was to do things they’d never done before. Not everybody knew that. The exhibitors clamored for more Dwarfs, just as they had once wanted more Pigs, after The Three Little Pigs. When Dad went ahead and made Pinocchio, a lot of disappointed people bleated, “What? No Dwarfs?” Time has taken care of their complaints. Pinocchio has become a perennial. It set the Disneys back \$2,600,000, but it has been reissued so many times that over the long pull it has made a profit.

Pinocchio was released in 1940, when the world was going into a tailspin. Hitler had gone to war in 1939, and shortly after 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 who would buy 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 100 students in the Disney training school alone—a school that had grown from a class of twenty in 1933. In effect, it trained artists for the entire 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 his training school.

Dad had more than students to think about in the early 1940’s. There was that \$4,500,000 he and Uncle Roy 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.”



couldn’t borrow a thousand bucks,’ Roy laughed, too, and we began to reminisce, but in the end we faced facts. We had to get capital. We’d had no outside stockholders up until then. When venture money was scarce, we had mortgaged our homes and sold our cars. Now Roy said, ‘I guess we’ll have to let some outsiders in, kid.’ So we issued four million dollars’ worth of nonvoting, six per cent preferred stock, and because of the reputation we’d won with Snow White, it was gobbled up at twenty-five dollars a share.”

For five or six years prior to this time, without previous warning, employees would receive substantial bonus checks representing the distribution out of profits for a good year. An employee wouldn’t know that he had anything coming and suddenly he’d get a check for \$5000. Dad thinks that the employees got close to \$500,000 that way, but neither he nor Uncle Roy shared in these distributions. The only thing they got was some back salary that hadn’t been paid to them.

Before selling the new preferred stock to the public, Dad and Uncle Roy set aside about 20 per cent of their own stock for immediate distribution to their employees, according to the length of time they’d been with the Disney studio and

When Uncle Roy says that, Dad puts in an appearance, and when the others make their move he and Uncle Roy vote shoulder to shoulder, although a few hours later they may be arguing over something.

There are two views of Dad’s attitude toward money. The bankers, who should know better, are apt to shake their heads and say, “Walt’s a nice fellow, but he spends money too freely. He doesn’t know the value of a dollar.” The other view is held by people who don’t know Dad at all, but who believe that his primary interest is in making money. I’m his daughter, and I know that profit-and-loss statements are last on his list of things to worry about.

Dad puts it this way: “The only thing I know about money is that I have to have it to do things. I don’t get my fun out of possessing it. I’ve been the brokest guy in Hollywood several times. There have been many ways in which my brother, Roy, and I could have made more money, if we’d wanted to be sharp, but right now I have exactly three thousand dollars in my personal bank account.” He told me that in May, 1956.

“On the other hand,” Dad says, “there’s no truth in the legend that I have no regard for money. I do, but not the way some people mean. I think of money

as a tool. I don’t want to bank dividends from my Disney stock; I’d rather keep the money working. As for our stockholders, I regard it as a moral obligation to pay back borrowed money.

“I’ll show you what I mean. Remember the story of Jerry, the Greek, who let me eat on the cuff years ago in Kansas City? Well, when I’d been in Hollywood long enough to get the Mouse started, in walked Jerry. ‘Walter,’ he said, ‘I got out of the restaurant business and into the automobile business, but now I’m going back into the restaurant business. I’ve met a man in Phoenix, we want to start a restaurant and I need a thousand bucks.’ So I lent Jerry a thousand dollars and he left.

“Months went by, and I got a telegram from him. The wire said: ‘Walter, 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: ‘Walter, 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 our original issue brought 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. An original twenty-five-dollar investment in our preferred stock is now worth over sixty dollars.”

After Dad and 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., admired 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 Dad told him 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 euchre 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 try that “muscling in” on Dad and Uncle Roy right after World War II. The problem confronting the Disney studio of making money with the market in embattled Europe still cut off and the funds owed Dad and Uncle Roy overseas still frozen would be a crucial one then. But that was in 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 anyhow. They were confident that it was such an advance in motion-picture presentation that it would pay off.