

WALT DISNEY

A Biography

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GREENWOOD BIOGRAPHIES

A B C  C L I O

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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Chapter 10

TRAINS

Whatever people thought about Walt Disney's adventure in pursuing communists after the war, they were still being presented with Disney productions that continued to provide entertainment and education through visual innovations and storytelling. The years after the war saw the beginning of Disney live-action films, the introduction of the *True-Life Adventure* nature documentaries, several animated features including a newly dubbed "classic," *Cinderella* (1950), a regular parade of cartoon shorts, and the first steps into television. The package features (combinations of short films and cartoons) the studio was putting together were somewhat successful, and merchandise licensing was expanding so the studio's books didn't look too bad after a while. Walt also began thinking about a new kind of amusement park for families to enjoy themselves.

In August of 1947 (before his HUAC testimony), Walt and his daughter Sharon took a trip to Alaska, which he considered one of the final frontiers. After he came back, he saw a wildlife movie by the husband-and-wife team, Alfred and Elma Milotte. Walt liked what he saw and hired them to shoot more footage in Alaska, where they lived. When he saw scenes from the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea

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containing seal life, he asked them to focus on that. Out of their work came the first *True-Life Adventure*, a series of nature films that developed into a profitable and popular award-winning series for the studio. The Milottes spent another decade shooting films all over the world. The first film in the series, *Seal Island*, was completed in 1948, and Walt wanted RKO to distribute it. When they weren't interested, he created a one-week showing at a friend's theatre so it could qualify for an Academy Award. The film won an Oscar for best short subject and also garnered other important awards. It was released to the public in the spring of 1949.

Contrary to common descriptions of the *True-Life Adventures*, they were not the first ever nature documentaries. The natural world had been a common subject in early cinema, including Edward Muybridge's work with animal locomotion, and time-lapse images of flowers and butterfly metamorphosis by other artists.¹ Nature films showing animal life, landscapes, and natural events were captured on film by other early filmmakers. But what Walt did was "unite the disparate elements of wildlife filmmaking up to that time, consolidated them in a unified but still flexible form, and above all popularized them as never before."² He did this by giving the hours of raw footage he was presented with a narrative form, a story that was as recognizable as the ones from his cartoons. He also made these stories familiar ones of loving family life, persevering in the face of hardships, or basic good versus evil.

The *True-Life Adventures* used music and humorous scenes to give the animals personalities and for this it was both criticized and praised. Seven short and six full-length features were created between 1948 and 1960, and together they earned eight Academy Awards. While Walt claimed the films were representations of the natural world, they were like many later nature films, taking selective scenes and emphasizing the interesting or anthropomorphic action where the animals seemed most human. Walt seemed to favor the natural over the human worlds when he said, "In one way, you know, animals are superior to human beings. People try to change nature to conform to their own queer notions. Animals don't—they adapt themselves to nature. You never saw a wilderness wrecked by animals."³

S__ Walt got interested in nature films and the realistic world of animal
 E__ life when the studio was working with live animals as models when
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animating *Bambi*, but he didn't follow up on the ideas for live-action nature films until after the war. For Walt, the stories constructed in the nature films naturally built on the animations he had been doing for 30 years. He explained in an interview, "You know why the animals dominate animated cartoons? It's because their reaction to any kind of stimulus is expressed physically. Often the entire body comes into play . . . But how does a human being react to a stimulus? He's lost the sense of play he once had, and he inhibits physical expression."⁴ In the early *True-Life Adventures*, all human presence was hidden, but later on they became the subject of the films in a series called *People and Places*.

One *True-Life Adventure* film, *White Wilderness* (1958), may have been less true-to-life than the others. In that film, winner of an Academy Award and shot in the coldest of Arctic habitats by nine photographers for three years, animals are shown migrating and battling for dominance. One scene that became controversial and also the basis of an urban legend was one in which lemmings flung themselves off a cliff in a suicidal drive, providing "an unwitting sacrifice for the few left behind."⁵ The scene was famous and references to lemmings as an example of blindly following the crowd are still common today. But lemmings don't normally exhibit this type of behavior, wildlife experts explained years later, and they did not doubt that the scene was set up by the filmmakers themselves.⁶

The *True-Life Adventure* films resulted in a series of books and comic books, television segments, and a lasting influence on nature documentaries. At its height, the series had 30–40 film crews going at once around the world. The films were shown on television and in schools across the country. Although Walt had decided after the war not to focus on educational or instructional films as he had done during the war, the *True-Life Adventures* certainly ended up being a widespread educational tool. They also were very popular in both their short and long versions. When Disney's distributor, RKO, hesitated to show the first long nature feature, *The Living Desert* in 1953, Roy and Walt developed their own distribution company, Buena Vista, which became known for its family fare and continues to this day as a Disney distributor.

The Living Desert, which is about the harsh but abundant life in desert environments, went on to win the Academy Award for best

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documentary (feature) in the 1954 award ceremony for films of 1953. Walt also won an unprecedented three additional awards the same year: for the best documentary (short subject) for *The Alaskan Eskimo* (a *People and Places* featurette); the best short subject (cartoon) for *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom*, which was about music and was developed by Ward Kimball with an innovative animation style; and the best short subject (two-reel) for *Bear Country*, a *True-Life Adventure* featurette. In addition, two of his other films received nominations. In fact, he received nominations for something that came out of his studio every year except one between 1932 and his death in 1966. Walt is quoted as saying about the *True-Life Adventures*, “Nothing in a lifetime of picture making has been more exciting and personally satisfactory than these delvings in to the wonders, the mysteries, the magnificent common-places of life around us and passing them on via the screen.”⁷ Not only had Walt proven that he had not lost his imagination or his drive, but he was not yet finished with on-screen innovation.

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Part of the difficulty in getting the Disney studio back up and running was the fact that some of its much-needed money was tied up in Europe. European banks blocked the funds that Disney movies had earned. This means that the money, because of regulations put in place to control how money leaves the host country during and after the war, could not be used in the United States. Money that was earned in Great Britain, for example, had to be used there or forfeited or converted at great loss. Walt had thought about opening an animation studio in England as a way to use the funds but opted instead to try his hand at producing live-action films.

The live-action films, along with the *True-Life Adventures*, may have created the impression that the studio was moving away from animations. But instead it could be seen as adding to the repertoire of storytelling techniques and media that was fast becoming the hallmark of the postwar Disney studio. The first story Walt chose for his live-action debut was *Treasure Island* (1950), a classic tale of pirates and treasure based on the book by Robert Louis Stevenson. It was the first of four live-action films made overseas. Walt supervised the postproduction work on the movie, and it was both popular and successful, generating funds for the studio and opening up new creative possibilities. *Treasure Island* was followed by *The Story of Robin Hood and His*

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Merrie Men (1952), *The Sword and the Rose* (1953), and *Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue* (1954). After the four blocked-fund pictures, production returned to the United States, and some Disney features drew on *True-Life Adventures* for inspiration (*Old Yeller* in 1957, for example) as well as animations, with some becoming combined animations and live-action (most notably *Mary Poppins* in 1964) and others using innovative special effects (*The Absent-Minded Professor* in 1961).

The next film in the new enterprise for the Disney studio was a Jules Verne tale called *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. Released in 1954 after live production returned to the United States, it featured some of the most famous stars of the day including Kirk Douglas, James Mason, and Peter Lorre. It became the most expensive film the studio had invested in up to that time, and it paid back handsomely. It also used a



Walt Disney and his family arrive from a three-month trip abroad via TWA Constellation at Los Angeles, California, on August 1949. He is posing with his wife, Lillian, left, and their daughters Diane, 16, and Sharon, 13, right. Disney was supervising filming of the movie *Treasure Island* in London. (AP Photo)

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production tool of the animations that the studio had been producing for years: the storyboard, which was detailed and novel at the time for live-action films. The studio had its own sound stages for production but also built new ones to accommodate the project.

In a lovely irony, Walt hired as his director Richard Fleischer, the son of his long-ago animation rival Max Fleischer whose studio made the *Out of the Inkwell* cartoons. Fleischer checked with his father to make sure it was okay. The film won Academy Awards both for its special effects and its sets and art direction. The film features an exotic Nautilus, Captain Nemo's submarine, as well as a fabulous squid that attacked the ship and real underwater sequences. Other live-action films also used advanced special effects over the years, some of them developed by Ub Iwerks.

The Disney studio and its subsidiaries became known through the subsequent years for live-action films that presented family-appropriate comedies, dramas, and adventure films frequently set in past ages.



Walt Disney, who had won 22 Oscars previously, holds the two he accepted March 30, 1955, at the Annual Academy Awards presentations in Hollywood, California. Disney won for the best special effects and best art direction in *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. (AP Photo)

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These were often considered silly and sentimental by many critics, but they have gained many new fans through the years. Among the most notable that were created before Walt's death were *The Shaggy Dog* (1959), *Kidnapped* (1960), *Pollyanna* (1960), *The Parent Trap* (1961), *In Search of the Castaways* (1962), and *The Moon Spinners* (1964). The last four films starred a young actress, Hayley Mills, who became one of the biggest child stars of the time. Mills remembers Walt as a gentle and shy man who had a goal for all his films: "He always said his films were to remind people of the goodness in human beings," she said.⁸

If Walt really came from frontier stock, then his next steps into uncharted territory would be the test of his resolve. Television was developed in the early part of the 20th century. A television concept was proposed at the World's Fair in Paris in 1900, and by 1939 television sets were being displayed at the New York World's Fair (along with Mickey Mouse watches). After the war, millions of homes acquired televisions, and within a few years there were numerous stations and half the nation was watching TV. Walt had been watching the developments in television and saw an opportunity. In 1950, he created a Christmas special called *One Hour in Wonderland*. The show was basically an advertisement for the upcoming feature animation, *Alice in Wonderland*, which was released the next summer. In 1951, he developed another Christmas special, *Walt Disney Christmas Show*, which was essentially a promotional piece for the next animation, *Peter Pan*, which opened in 1953 but had been in production for several years already.

Walt had hit upon a formula that would develop into one of the longest running shows on television beginning in 1954. He used a combination of sneak previews for his upcoming films and other ventures combined with nature films, travelogues, science segments, cartoons, original programming (like the *Davy Crockett* shows), and movies. The production of *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* was featured on one show. Walt was the host, and he was welcomed into millions of homes Sunday nights, first with a show titled *Disneyland*, then *Walt Disney Presents*, then a show titled *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* to take advantage of color broadcasting in 1961, and finally *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Watching Walt Disney with his gentle demeanor and plain talking was a weekly ritual across the country.

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With all these new ventures underway in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it seems hard to insist that Walt wasn't committed to his work. But if anyone was still thinking that Walt had lost his way, they could find evidence in two of his newly evident hobbies: miniatures and trains. Walt, like thousands of hobbyists in the postwar period, became fascinated with the creation, collection, and display of miniature scenes, furniture, and rooms as well as model train sets. Walt's interest in trains went way back but found new expression in the development of actual train models of different scales.

Critics think this was Walt's attempt to get control of his life. Tracing this to his deepest personality traits, biographer Neal Gabler claimed that Walt was trying to "create an even better fortress for himself," and proving that he had the ability to craft "a better reality," one that would be in his control.⁹ To Gabler, control was the key term to explain Walt during this period. He explained that the miniatures were another way "for Walt to assert his control at the very time he seemed to be losing it."¹⁰ But attempts to control or organize the world in our own image are not a psychological flaw as Gabler seems to suggest. It is instead what all humans do, all the time. Walt, in this sense, is doing the most human of activities: creating a miniature world, only this time not just in his head or on the screen, but right there in front of him. It was, perhaps, a necessary step toward visualizing the new amusement park he had started thinking about.

What is the appeal of "life in a nutshell" or "in the palm of your hands" as many miniature enthusiasts describe their mini-worlds? Miniature enthusiasts display scenes using houses or events that are captured in time and space, but there is more than nostalgia and control going on here. These worlds are not fixed and can be considered a starting point for fantasy, for imagining all sorts of possibilities. As a form of play, which adults as well as children engage in, miniatures are a way of trying out the world, seeing how it can be put together, what aspects of it fit, and what needs to be reworked. This is not therapy, but an everyday process we all engage in by different means, whether it is miniatures or movies, board games or vacations. It is a direct route to a sense of wonder, to the domain of magic where anything is possible, or where we can imagine things we haven't yet seen. Miniature worlds are fantasy made concrete. Walt was not trying to regain the control he lost but was finding ways of sharing his sense of wonder with the rest of us.

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Walt started collecting and creating miniatures; furniture, musical instruments, table settings, tea sets, accessories, and entire scenes. Miniatures were popular displays at that time. He could have seen the famous Thorne collection of miniature rooms (now residing at The Art Institute of Chicago) at the 1939–40 World’s Fair in New York or at the 1939 expo in San Francisco, but they were also displayed at museums throughout the West Coast in the same period. Walt collected and created miniatures for several years and during his travels sought out miniature shows and shops and purchased things through advertisements. One scene he created was called “Granny’s Cabin” and it consisted of a miniature set from the combined live-action/animation film *So Dear to My Heart*, which was released in 1949. Walt displayed the scene at Festival of California Living in Los Angeles, which was held at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium, a huge indoor exhibition space (the famous façade of that now burned-down building provided inspiration for the façade designs at later Disney theme parks). The model recently went on display at Disney World and the tag describing the object states, “Hand-built by Walt Disney himself, this animated diorama was an early attempt at dimensional storytelling, and helped inspire the concept for Disneyland Park four years later.”

Miniatures, in classic Disney style, weren’t just a personal indulgence. Walt had a plan as his collection expanded and “dimensional storytelling” was a good way to describe it. He was going to display the scenes, which depicted moments in the life of America, in an innovative exhibit called “Disneylandia.” Disneylandia was first conceived as taking place in a traveling train. The train would come into a town and the visitors would enter to view the miniature dioramas. Walt put some of his artists to work on the displays, but the logistics of moving the train around the country and getting an audience proved hard to overcome. The ideas behind the displays, however, eventually got translated into bigger things, and the train went with it.

Trains were a long-time interest of Walt’s. From his early days in Marceline when his Uncle Mike engineered on the local rails to his summer work selling refreshments on a train, to the one-way trip to California, and all the trips between the East and West Coasts as he sold his ideas and eventually created Mickey Mouse, trains have always been a favored form of transport for Walt. But trains also held the same fascination that miniatures did, and Walt’s commitment to them was

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even more passionate. Before Christmas in 1947, Walt wrote to his sister Ruth that he had bought himself an electric train, which he set up in a room outside his office. He told Ruth it was something he wanted all his life and added, "It's just wonderful."¹¹

Two of Walt's loyal animators from the Nine Old Men group, Ollie Johnston and Ward Kimball, came over to look at the set, and Walt found in them two men who shared the same passion for trains. Johnston explained, "Out of that we had quite a close relationship."¹² Johnston had built miniature trains and started running them in his yard around 1946. Kimball created and collected scale trains too, and both Johnston and Kimball eventually had life-size trains on their home properties that Walt came over to visit. Kimball also developed one of the best and largest private collections of miniature trains.

Walt invited Ward Kimball to accompany him to visit the Chicago Railroad Fair in the summer of 1948. They took a train from California, and once there they got a chance to ride on vintage trains and view the historic exhibits. Kimball reported that Walt was thrilled by the entire experience, including showing his employee how he used to ride the Chicago elevated trains.¹³ The 50 acres of the fair, which was celebrating 100 years of western railroad history, were like a railroad world's fair with parades, technology displays, and themed activity areas including an Indian village, a frontier mining town, and New Orleans's French Quarter.¹⁴ Walt apparently got talked into appearing in one of the historic reenactments. Walt and Ward also visited Greenfield Village, one of the largest outdoor museums. Located in Dearborn, Michigan, Greenfield Village focused on Americana and contained actual and reproduction historical buildings including Thomas Edison's lab.

When Walt got back, he worked on scale model trains, which he learned how to make himself. He also had plans for a scaled yard train like Johnston's and Kimball's and he hired several skilled workers to help him on that. Walt and Lilly were looking for property to build a new home around this time, and Walt made sure it had enough room for his model train, which circled the property on a half-mile track. Walt called the train *Lilly Belle* after Lilly who was not entirely enthusiastic about the project. He called his backyard one-eighth scale rail line the *Carolwood Pacific* after the street he lived on. He erected a barn, said to be modeled after the one on his family farm in Marceline, to house

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his equipment; the barn was eventually moved to Griffith Park in Los Angeles where it can still be seen.

On the train back from Chicago and Dearborn, Walt did some writing. It seems that Walt was not only enjoying the railroad fair, he was getting ideas from it, ideas on how to put together his next great adventure. Not only was Walt interested in the trains, he also “scanned the flow of people from one exhibit to another,” watched how the food was prepared, and generally surveyed the way to entertain and organize large numbers of people.¹⁵ He sketched out the plans for a fun, clean, and interesting place and he sent these in an internal memo to one of his designers at the end of August 1948. It was the plan for Mickey Mouse Park, which would be located across the street from the studio and would give visitors something to do besides watch the animators.

The memo, however, was describing more than just an extension of a studio tour. It revealed a plan for an entire world devoted to a new form of amusement park. The park would have a village center with a train station and town hall, places to sit and watch the children: “I want it to be very relaxing, cool and inviting” the memo said. The village would have a police and fire station; a candy store, Disney merchandise store, and dollhouse shop; a soda fountain; and places for food. It would feature a wild west and Indian village area, a farm, and a carnival.

So now the trains, and the miniatures, television programs, the family-oriented live-action films, the latest animated myths, all these illusions of, and allusions to, life were all headed for the same place. The fun rides around the backyard on mini-sized trains, the nature films, the return of Ub Iwerks, the Railroad Fair, the visits to World’s Fairs and amusement parks, and the new special effects technologies all seemed to be fulfilling one goal. All tracks, all thoughts, all roads were leading one place: they were going, finally, to Mickey Mouse Park.

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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9. Gabler, Neal. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. New York: Knopf, 2006, pp. 479–81.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 481.
11. Barrier, Michael. *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 209.
12. Canemaker, John. *Walt Disney's Nine Old Men & the Art of Animation*. New York: Disney Editions, 2001, p. 224.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
14. See a program for the second year of the fair, "Chicago Railroad Fair 1949." Available at <http://www.railarchive.net/rffair/index.html>. Accessed April 11, 2010.
15. Greene, Katherine and Richard Greene. *The Man Behind the Magic: The Story of Walt Disney*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1991, p. 110.

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