



Walt Disney: Intriguing Facts About Animation's Biggest Icon

Even the most hardcore Disney-heads won't know all of these facts about Uncle Walt.

by Greg Smith

He acted out the entirety of Snow White himself

Making the first feature-length animated movie was a huge undertaking, and **Walt Disney** knew *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was going to be a tough sell. So, in order to convince his team it was even possible, he gathered everyone around and performed some one-man theatre.

Disney acted out the entire movie by himself, from beginning to end. He fully performed each character, mimicking their physical stature and characteristics, and giving each one a unique voice. True to form, Disney captured everyone's imagination, and convinced them the thing could work.

Art director **Ken Anderson** said, "We were spellbound. He was all by himself and he acted out this fantastic story."

He was a fierce anti-Communist

Disney was completely opposed to the spread of communism, and accused many of his animator colleagues of being secret communists. He was also convinced the Screen Actors Guild was full of commies, and when his workers tried to unionize, he accused the union of being a communist front.

Disney even went so far as to testify in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy's House UnAmerican Activities Committee. The committee was the result of a nationwide scare over the possibility of communist sympathizers living in America, and Disney was happy to help root them out.

He and his brother Roy had a feud that divided the company

After Disney's first studio went bankrupt, he started Disney Brothers Studio with the help of his older brother Roy Disney, a banker. Walt changed the name to the Walt Disney Studio shortly thereafter, and that wasn't the first sign that the brothers didn't exactly see eye-to-eye.

Roy was more level-headed than Walt, and the two clashed frequently. When you worked at Disney, you were either one of Walt's Boys or one of Roy's Boys. Sometimes they argued bitterly in front of employees and didn't speak for months. But things were eventually patched up, and there's now a Roy Disney train and a statue of him with Minnie Mouse at Disney World.

He fudged a birth certificate to join the war

At age 16, Disney dropped out of high school. World War I had broken out, and he was eager to join the fight. But he was too young to enlist, so he forged a birth certificate claiming he was 18 years old.

Disney's artistic talents must've extended to forgery, because the fake certificate worked! Disney joined the Red Cross American Ambulance Corps and got shipped off to France, where he drove ambulances for a wartime hospital.

There's a heart wrenching reason why Bambi's mother dies

From *Bambi* to *Frozen*, mother figures are generally absent in Disney films, or they suffer tragic deaths early on. As it turns out, there's a heartbreaking reason for this – Disney may have felt indirectly responsible for his own mother's death.

Disney bought a house for his folks after he hit it big. He had some of his studio employees go over to fix the furnace, but they did it wrong, and his mom inhaled the poisonous gases and died. Disney never talked about the tragedy publicly.

He stole elements of Disneyland from a Danish attraction

Disney gets a lot of credit for inventing the modern idea of a theme park, and deservedly so. But he was greatly inspired by Tivoli Gardens, a famous European amusement park with roller coasters, musical attractions, and exhibits depicting an idealized version of the world.

Sounds a lot like Disneyland, doesn't it? There are pictures of Disney visiting the park before Disneyland opened, and it's clear he borrowed many of the park's aesthetics and mission statements, including a pirate ship and parades. What's more, It's A Small World is nearly identical to a Tivoli Gardens ride!

He had a work-induced nervous breakdown

Mickey Mouse enjoyed massive popularity and success in the Great Depression, but that success wasn't totally good for Disney. He worked himself to the bone. It got so bad that his doctor told him to go away for awhile, for the sake of his health.

To try and recharge his batteries, Disney traveled all around America, to Kansas City, St. Louis, and Washington DC. He even went to Havana, then took a boat back from Cuba to Los Angeles. Once in LA, Disney went right back to work, and even built himself a new house. The man even vacationed like it was a job.

He loved entertaining from a young age

As a teenager, Disney was all about costumes and performing. He loved wearing uniforms as a cadet in high school, and in various odd jobs. When Roy came back from the Navy, the first comment Walt made was that he "looked swell in that sailor's uniform."

Walt actually wrote his principal a letter to tell him he found high school "disgusting," and dropped out to make movies. He and a friend, Russell Maas, invested in a movie camera, and began making amateur children's movies on their own.

He was friends with the founder of McDonald's

While stationed at a military training base in South Beach, Connecticut, Disney befriended a 15-year-old corpsman named **Ray Kroc**. Kroc would go on to purchase McDonald's from its original founders and turn it into a global empire. Like Walt, Kroc had also lied about his age to enlist.

Kroc nicknamed Disney "Diz," and **called him** a "strange duck...whenever we went into town to chase girls, he stayed in camp drawing pictures." Kroc wrote Disney many years later about building a McDonald's in Disneyland, but the idea never materialized.

He wanted Epcot to be a futuristic utopian society

Nowadays, Epcot is known as the strange part of Disney World, with pavilions representing different countries, and a giant Coca-Cola stand where you can sample flavors from around the world. But Disney originally envisioned it as a utopian community where people would actually live.

The "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow" would've been home to 20,000 people. In Disney's words, "It will be a community of tomorrow that will never be completed but will always be introducing and testing, and demonstrating new materials and new systems." The idea was scrapped after his death in 1966.

He had a strained relationship with his father

Elias Disney, Walt's father, didn't understand Walt's love of silliness and entertaining. Elias was a serious man and a strict disciplinarian. But on the occasions when Walt could make him laugh, "he would laugh until he had tears in his eyes."

When Walt wanted to join the war, Elias refused to sign an official document confirming his age. However, Elias did pay for Walt's cartooning classes, and Walt maintained "a tremendous respect for him, I always did. In spite of his arguments, I worshiped him."

He always put family first

Despite being an incredibly busy pioneer and studio head, Disney was fully devoted to his family. He doted on his wife, inker Lillian Disney, and their two daughters Diane and Sharon. Disney drove his girls to school every day until they could drive themselves.

Sharon later said of her famous dad, "We weren't raised with the idea that this is a great man who is doing things that no one else had ever done. He was Daddy. He was a man who went to work every morning and came home every night."

A character he created was stolen from him

In 1927, Disney signed his up-and-coming studio to a deal to make animations for Universal Studios. The star of these cartoons was Oswald The Lucky Rabbit, an optimistic but bumbling character who instantly became a huge success.

However, when Disney quit Universal, the studio kept his character and continued producing more Oswald cartoons, changing both his look and personality. Disney felt burned by the whole situation and began creating a new character that was just his: Mickey Mouse.

He started in advertising

Before founding his studio, Disney secured a job as an artist for an ad agency, telling his Aunt Margaret, "Auntie, they're paying me to draw!" However, he didn't get to draw for long - young Walt was laid off a month later.

After failing to bring in enough business on his own, Disney eventually wound up reluctantly working for the Kansas City Film Ad Company. It was while working for this ad company that he first learned about a little thing called animation.

His first animation studio failed hard

Disney saw enormous potential in the relatively new field of animation, and formed Laugh-O-gram Films, Inc. in Kansas City at the age of 20. They made several short animated adaptations of fairy tales, and Disney hired lots of early pioneers of animation.

There were plagued with money issues -- at one point, Disney lived in his office, and took baths once a week at Union Station. After a particularly bad business deal, he was forced to file for bankruptcy. Disney later said, "I think it's important to have a good hard failure when you're young."

Everyone thought Snow White was a bad idea

After lots of successes with animated shorts, Disney decided to make the first feature length cartoon. Everyone thought it was a terrible idea. Disney said, "It was prophesied that nobody would sit through a cartoon an hour and a half long. But we decided... to go for broke."

Production issues, delayed release dates, and ballooning costs fueled the fire. But on December 21, 1937, Disney finally released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to huge success. "We realized we were in a new business. We had been heavily in debt and within six months, we had millions in the bank."

He funded Disneyland himself

In the 1950s, people viewed amusement parks as being unsafe and kind of gross. But Disney envisioned a park that could be as exciting and well-constructed as his animated creations. Problem was, nobody wanted to give him the money to build it.

Disney later recalled, "I kept working on it and I worked on it with my own money." True to his word, Disney sold his own life insurance policy, and in 1952, self-funded his own company to work on Disneyland. He called it WED Enterprises, Inc. It's now known as Walt Disney Imagineering.

Fantasia began as a series of experimental shorts

Mickey Mouse was a runaway success, but Disney wasn't satisfied. A self-described experimenter, he wanted to push the envelope and see what animation could do. So, he decided to combine the medium with another of his personal loves - classical music.

The result was *Silly Symphonies*, a series of shorts with no regular characters set to music. Disney experimented with revolutionary animation techniques that are now commonplace, including Technicolor, personality animations, and depth of field illusions. One of these shorts, titled *Flower and Trees*, was the first cartoon to win an Oscar.

The Disney logo is a fake signature

If you showed the Walt Disney logo to anyone in the world, they'd recognize it in an instant. The stylized signature of Disney's name immediately invokes images of countless animated classics. So it must be Walt's genuine signature, right? Wrong.

Disney's real-life signature is similar to the famous logo, but he knew he needed it to really pop for it to become an image people recognized worldwide. So, he trained employees to make their own versions of his signature. The Disney logo is actually based on one of those convincing fakes.

He made the first cartoon with synchronized sound

By 1928, Disney had made two silent Mickey Mouse shorts. For the third, he wanted a new challenge -- adding sound that perfectly matched up with the characters' actions on screen, which had never been done in a cartoon before.

To get the effect right, Disney had the voice actors, the orchestra, and the sound effects all perform their parts live in the studio. He printed a bouncing ball on the animation to keep everyone in synch, and it worked like a charm. The name of the short? *Steamboat Willie*.

Mickey Mouse had a terrible original name

After his frustrating experience with Universal, in which he lost the rights to his character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Disney was determined to invent a new star for his own series of animated shorts. His new creation was a cheerful mouse, but he didn't immediately get the name right.

Disney initially called his most iconic creation "Mortimer Mouse." His wife Lillian, perhaps realizing that nobody would buy t-shirts with a mouse named "Mortimer" on them, gave him some gentle feedback, saying "I don't think that would be good for a mouse's name. Let's call it Mickey." The rest is history.

He invented TV and film storyboards

In film and TV, it's very common to create storyboards - illustrated versions of the shots filmmakers want to get in order to film a scene. They're vitally important in that they show every member of the cast and crew exactly what the finished shot is going to look like. And Walt Disney created them.

Disney first began the storyboarding process in 1938, with the Oscar-winning short film *Ferdinand The Bull*. He and his animators found that planning the short out with storyboards gave them control and creativity early in the process, making sure the final product was as good as possible.

He brought real animals in the studio to make Bambi

We still haven't completely recovered from the death of Bambi's mom. But beyond being the movie that totally messed us up as kids, Bambi is known for the incredibly realistic animation of its animal characters. So how'd they do that?

Disney wanted the animals to look as real as possible, but knew they still had to move like cartoons. To achieve that balance, he brought in real, live deer to the studio, and had his animators observe the animals and draw them under the close supervision of art instructors.

He played with miniatures as a hobby

In 1939, Disney discovered miniatures -- very small renderings depicting real life things. And he immediately fell in love, claiming, "When I work with these small objects, the cares of the studio fade away." Among his collection included tiny alcohol bottles, cigarette cases, and tools.

Disney never stopped thinking about how he could turn his own private interests into entertainment. He came up with an idea to display tons of miniatures, including elaborate ones he had built himself, in a traveling roadshow. He later reworked many of his ideas for a miniature roadshow into Disneyland.

He was friends with Salvador Dali

Salvador Dali is a surreal artist known for his mind-bending works of clocks melting. Seems like a far cry from the family-friendly sweetness of Disney's works, right? And yet, the two became friends in the 30s and 40s, writing each other fan letters until they finally met in person in 1945.

Disney was inspired by Dali's works, and Dali called Disney one of the great American surrealists. The two giants started working together on a project called *Destino*, with Dali coming to Burbank to work on drawings and animations. Ultimately, they scrapped the project due to creative differences, but they remained friends.

Walt borrowed a Christmas present for his wife for Lady And The Tramp

One Christmas, Walt wanted to surprise his wife Lilly with a little Chow puppy. So on Christmas morning, he placed the puppy in a hatbox. Lilly, thinking it was a hat, was at first annoyed, because she preferred to buy her clothes herself.

When she opened the box and saw the puppy, her entire mood changed. Walt said he had "never seen anybody so crazy over an animal." It was obviously one of his favorite memories, because he placed a near-identical scene in his animated classic *Lady And The Tramp*.

The beginning of Disneyland was not so great

Disneyland opened on July 17, 1955. Disney's grand imaginative experiment was finally ready for the public, and it went... badly! The day was so hot that women's high heels were sticking to the asphalt, and none of the park's drinking fountains were working due to a plumber's strike.

Rides were malfunctioning. People forged tickets, resulting in absurdly long lines. Critics called the disastrous opening "Black Sunday." But Disney was determined to learn from the experience, later saying, "You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you."

His Sleeping Beauty castle wasn't meant for Sleeping Beauty

The iconic centerpiece of Disneyland, designed by Disney to be viewable anywhere in the park to keep visitors oriented, is the *Sleeping Beauty* castle. However, there was a fierce debate over which character the castle should be based on.

It was originally designed as simply the Medieval Castle. Subsequent ideas were the Fantasyland Castle, the *Robin Hood* Castle, and the *Snow White* Castle, which was Walt's preferred choice. Disneyland eventually opened with the *Sleeping Beauty* Castle, even though Disney wouldn't release *Sleeping Beauty* until four years later.

He couldn't agree with his animators on Pinocchio

Originally, animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas designed Pinocchio to look like an actual wooden puppet. But Disney hated the design, thinking no one would be able to sympathize with a lead character that was literally made of wood. So he halted production and made them change it.

With the new design approved, Disney stepped in to stop production once again. This time, he felt Pinocchio was too easily tricked by the film's evil characters. So he and his team created Jiminy Cricket to act as Pinocchio's conscience, and made the story about Pinocchio learning to do the right thing.

He used Donald Duck for WWII propaganda

One day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States Army took over half of Disney's Burbank studio to house their troops. But Disney wanted to help even further. His team created tons of military training films and educational shorts, and designed over 1,000 insignias completely free of charge.

In particular, Donald Duck became a public face for American patriotism and duty during the second World War. He starred in a series of shorts depicting him on the front lines of the war in Europe. At home, Donald's image helped sell savings bonds, and make them appealing to children.