

Mickey Mouse over the Years

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DAVID R. SMITH

A Mouse Is Born

The role of the archives in a business firm is illustrated with examples from the work of the Walt Disney Archives. Examples given include establishment of important dates in the firm's history, legal matters, merchandising, training of new employees, and assisting researchers from outside the company.

IT WAS IN 1970 that the Disney family and the management of Walt Disney Productions decided to establish the Walt Disney Archives. I left my job as a reference librarian at UCLA at that time to set up the archives, with the objective of collecting and preserving all of the historical materials relating to Walt Disney and the entire Disney organization and making this material available to scholars, writers, and especially to company staff members.¹

In the past decade a number of companies have decided that it would be to their advantage to begin archival programs. Among them are International Harvester, Anheuser-Busch, the Los Angeles Times, Weyerhaeuser, and Wells Fargo Bank. A company's archive can be of great help to its own firm, but it also fulfills a definite need for scholarship, for businesses are making history today.

One can hardly travel anywhere in the world without seeing a Coca-Cola bottle, a roll of Kodak film, a Parker pen, a

McDonald's hamburger, a Ford automobile, or—Mickey Mouse. The record of the impact of these products on the world must be a function of each individual company. If each company would preserve its own history and make it available for research, it obviously would be not only a public relations tool of the company, but it would also be a great benefit to scholars who hope to tell the history of America and American business during the past half century.

In many firms, corporate archives come into being as a result of special anniversary celebrations. The firm, in celebrating its fiftieth or seventy-fifth or hundredth anniversary, gathers together boxes of historical memorabilia for articles in house organs and perhaps even a definitive book on the company's history. After the celebration is over, it seems a shame to disperse the memorabilia collected with such care, so an archives is formed to administer it.

The opposite happened at Walt Disney Productions—the archives helped to instigate anniversary celebrations. Through research in corporate documents, I ascertained that the company would reach its

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fiftieth anniversary in 1973. But what date should be used? The date Walt Disney moved to Hollywood? The date he received a telegram telling him a New York distributor wanted to contract for a series of cartoons? The date he rented an office for his studio? None of these could be considered the official date. I discovered that first contract in an old file. The date of the contract was important. The company had taken its first legal step. Thus October 16, 1923, was determined to be the date of the founding of Walt Disney Productions. The archives circulated memos to company management and publicity departments. And so, with the slogan "50 Happy Years," the entire company celebrated the anniversary year.

Soon after, it became obvious that another anniversary would be upon us shortly. In 1968 the company had celebrated the fortieth birthday of its most prominent star, Mickey Mouse. Obviously, 1978 would be an even more prestigious birthday—Mickey's fiftieth. Never before had a cartoon character managed to sustain worldwide popularity for such a long period of time. Mickey Mouse's fiftieth birthday celebration would have to be a major one. But, the archives were asked, what date should we use as the correct birthday of the Mouse? Looking back through press releases, books, and previous birthday celebrations, we found that many different dates had been used in the past. All the dates had fallen on a Saturday, a good day to get children into the theaters for special matinees to celebrate Mickey's birthday. Mickey's fifth birthday had been celebrated on September 30, 1933, his seventh on September 28, 1935. By the 1960s, October dates were being used. Newspapers and radio stations called us annually on September and October dates which they had found in their files for a statement on Mickey's birthday.

We decided in the archives that once and for all we should determine the correct birthday. One fact remained constant over the years: Mickey's "birth" was always tied to the opening of *Steamboat Willie*, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon to be shown publicly, at the Colony Theater in New York, where it had its premiere. Research in Walt Disney's correspondence determined early

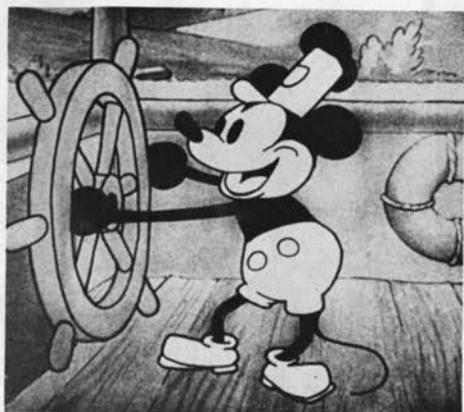
that the film was not even completed on the September and October dates that had been used in the past.

Finally, two pieces of evidence helped us to complete the puzzle. We discovered a printed program for the Colony Theater, dated November 18, 1928. The program announced *Steamboat Willie* as a featured attraction, along with a film called *Gang War* and a stage appearance by Ben Bernie and his orchestra. We were on the right track. Shortly thereafter, a former employee donated a fier to the archives. It was designed to interest theaters in booking a series of Mickey Mouse cartoons, and featured reproductions of reviews of *Steamboat Willie* from the New York daily and trade papers. Reviews dated November 19 spoke of the film's opening the previous night at the Colony. Thus the date of Mickey's birth was established at last. November 18, 1978, would be the fiftieth birthday of Mickey Mouse.

Again, word went out from the archives, and all parts of the company made plans for the yearlong celebration, to culminate on November 18. Of all the dates used for Mickey's birthday, November 18 was one that had never been mentioned before, even though that was the actual date of the opening of *Steamboat Willie*. The publicity departments at the studio, Disneyland, and Walt Disney World sent out press releases, and, slowly, the results of the archives' campaign to establish the correct date became apparent. It still pleases us every time we see the November 18 date in a newspaper or magazine story, for it shows us that our campaign has been successful.

An archive in a corporation can be very useful to the company, not only for public relations functions such as anniversary celebrations but also for legal purposes. Walt Disney Productions is a company that finds many instances of others' trying to infringe, knowingly or unknowingly, on its rights in its copyrighted characters. The legal department frequently calls upon the archives for materials to prove our previous usage of characters and trademarks.

The Disney Archives also help out in marketing. Merchandise licensees come to us to see early merchandise for ideas on new products. This year a publisher desired



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*The Debut of Mickey Mouse
as Steamboat Willie, 1928*

to reprint several Mickey Mouse books it had published in the early 1930s, but checking into its own files, the firm discovered it no longer had copies of the original books. We provided photographic reproductions from our archival copies.²

An important function of the Disney Archives is to aid in the training of new employees. Since the Disney company has strong traditions to uphold, new employees take part in a detailed orientation when they first come to work. One of the first items on their agenda is a visit to the archives, where they are made aware of the

history of the company, and, by holding one of Walt Disney's Oscars in their hands or sitting in his desk chair, gain a greater awareness of the company's accomplishments.

Besides providing help to the various divisions of the company, the archives are also open for research to serious students, magazine writers, book authors, and others outside the company. Prospective researchers contact the archivist first for an appointment. A brochure describing the collections of the archives is available.

The Walt Disney Archives recently celebrated its eighth anniversary by providing materials for another anniversary—Mickey's fiftieth. On the horizon are Disneyland's twenty-fifth birthday in 1980, Walt Disney World's tenth in 1981, and Donald Duck's fiftieth in 1984. These will all serve to keep us busy in the next few years as we strive to preserve the Disney history and traditions.

REFERENCES

1. For additional information, see David R. Smith, "It All Started with a Mouse," *California Librarian* 34:23-28 (Jan. 1972), and "Comics and Cels," *California Historical Quarterly* 56:270-74 (Fall 1977).
2. *Walt Disney's Adventures of Mickey Mouse* (50th birthday ed.; New York: David McKay, 1978).

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