

The Animated Man

A LIFE OF WALT DISNEY



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Frontispiece. Disney draws Mickey Mouse at a reception at the Savoy Hotel in London in 1946. Quigley Photographic Collection, Walt Disney File, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

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CONTENTS

Plates follow pages 140 and 236

PREFACE *ix*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS *xv*

INTRODUCTION: "It's All Me" *1*

- 1 "The Pet in the Family"
On the Farm and in the City, 1901–1923 *9*
- 2 "A Cute Idea"
The Self-Taught Filmmaker, 1923–1928 *39*
- 3 "You've Got to Really Be Minnie"
Building a Better Mouse, 1928–1933 *68*
- 4 "This Character Was a Live Person"
The Leap to Feature Films, 1934–1938 *100*
- 5 "A Drawing Factory"
Ambition's Price, 1938–1941 *134*
- 6 "A Queer, Quick, Delightful Gink"
On a Treadmill, 1941–1947 *168*
- 7 "Caprices and Spurts of Childishness"
Escaping from Animation, 1947–1953 *200*
- 8 "He Was Interested in Something Else"
Escaping from Film, 1953–1959 *235*

9	“Where I Am <i>Happy</i> ” Restless in the Magic Kingdom, 1959–1965	270
10	“He Drove Himself Right Up to the End” Dreaming of a Nightmare City, 1965–1966	301
	AFTERWORD: “Let’s Never Not Be a Silly Company”	319
	NOTES	327
	INDEX	379

CHAPTER I

“The Pet in the Family”

On the Farm and in the City

1901–1923

Marceline, Missouri, was a creature of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company. In 1886, when the railroad planned a direct line between Chicago and Kansas City, it needed a town a hundred miles northeast of Kansas City as a “division point” where its trains could take on fuel, water, and fresh crews. There was no town there—that part of Missouri was sparsely settled prairie—and so the Santa Fe created one. The first town lot was sold on January 28, 1888, and Marceline was incorporated on March 6. It was in its early years a rowdy sort of frontier town, but by the turn of the twentieth century it had become more settled and respectable.¹

When the town was laid out, its broad main street—called Santa Fe Avenue, naturally enough—intersected the railroad tracks alongside the depot. Dozens of trains passed through Marceline every day, and the townspeople, sensible of how those trains would disrupt a commercial street, built their businesses and homes not along Santa Fe Avenue, but along a street called Kansas Avenue. That street ran parallel to the rail line, always a city block or two away, veering north-northeast with the tracks until it ended at Missouri Street. From that intersection, Missouri Street ran due north, quickly turning into a country road.

Less than a quarter-mile north on that road, a mile from the Marceline depot and just outside the town limits, a two-story frame house a few years older than Marceline itself sat at the southeastern corner of a forty-five-acre farm. Early in the last century, that farm was home for a few years to a family named Disney—Elias, the husband; Flora, his wife; four sons, Herbert, Raymond, Roy, and Walter; and a daughter, Ruth.

The Disneys moved to Marceline from Chicago in April 1906, drawn away from the city by Elias's fear that its crime and corruption would taint his children. He had chosen Marceline, readily accessible from Chicago, for its rural setting and because of a family connection. Robert Disney, Elias's younger brother and one of his ten siblings, was co-owner of a farm of 440 acres, less than a mile west of Marceline.² Elias visited Marceline early in February 1906, just before he sold his house in Chicago.³ A month later, on March 5, 1906, he bought a forty-acre farm that had been owned by William E. Crane, a Civil War veteran who had died the previous November.⁴ The price was three thousand dollars, or seventy-five dollars an acre. A month later, on April 3, he paid four hundred fifty dollars for an adjoining tract, a little over five acres, that Crane's widow owned in her own name.⁵

The Disneys lived on Chicago's West Side, at 1249 Tripp Avenue.⁶ Elias and Flora and their first child, Herbert, had moved to Chicago by 1890. They were living then at 3515 South Vernon Avenue in the Fourth Ward, just south of downtown and less than a mile from Lake Michigan. Their second son, Raymond Arnold, was born there on December 30, 1890. Chicago was growing rapidly—an 1889 annexation had added 125 square miles and 225,000 people—and there was plenty of work for carpenters; Elias Disney identified himself as one in the 1891 city directory.⁷

On October 31, 1891, Elias bought a lot at 1249 Tripp. By sometime in 1892 he had built a house on it.⁸ Roy Oliver Disney, the third son, was born there on June 24, 1893, followed by Walter Elias on December 5, 1901, and, on December 6, 1903, the Disneys' youngest child and only daughter, Ruth Flora. The neighborhood, called Hermosa (for reasons that are unclear), was new and raw in the early 1890s, settled only a few years before by Scottish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants. It had been added to the city in the 1889 annexation.⁹

"A neighboring family just like ours was very close to us," Roy Disney told Richard Hubler in 1967. "We woke up one morning and two of their boys were involved in a car barn robbery. . . . Shot it out with the cops, killed a cop. One of them went to Joliet [Prison] for life and the other got twenty years. These kids were just the same age as my older brother and my second brother [that is, in their midteens]. We had a nice neighborhood. A lot of good Irish and Poles and Swedes around there, but it was a rough neighborhood, too, in a way." There were saloons on three corners where the Disneys bought their newspaper.¹⁰

Elias and the two older boys, Herbert and Raymond, escorted "a box car

full of our household furniture and two horses that dad bought in Chicago,” Roy recalled.¹¹ Flora traveled separately with the two younger boys and Ruth, evidently arriving ahead of her husband. Walt Disney was only four years old then, but he wrote more than thirty years later: “I clearly remember the day we arrived there on the train. A Mr. Coffman met us in the wagon and we rode out to our house in the country just outside the city limits. I believe it was called the Crane Farm. My first impression of it was that it had a beautiful front yard with lots of weeping willow trees.”¹²

Roy remembered their new home as “a very cute, sweet little farm, if you can describe a farm that way.” The forty-five acres included orchards of apples, peaches, and plums, as well as fields of grain, and the farm was home to dozens of animals—hogs, chickens, horses, and cows. “Of course,” Roy said, “it was just heaven for city kids.”¹³

Almost fifty years after leaving it, Walt Disney also spoke warmly of the farm. “It had two orchards, one called the old and one called the new. We had every kind of an apple growing in that orchard. We had what we called Wolf River apples. They were that big. . . . People came from miles around to see our orchard. To see these big things.”¹⁴

(Disney’s affectionate memories of his childhood on the farm, like anyone’s childhood memories, may not be entirely trustworthy. On a return visit to Marceline in July 1956, he spoke to a welcoming crowd of his exploits as a “hog rider.”¹⁵ Then, as on other occasions, he said he rode atop sows until they plunged into what he variously called a “pig pond” or mud puddles. Roy Disney dismissed that story as “some of his ebullience. . . . There never were any mud puddles.”)¹⁶

Marceline’s population had risen to more than twenty-five hundred by 1900, and it peaked at around four thousand while the Disneys lived there. Marceline was just large enough—at a time when the majority of Americans lived in even smaller places¹⁷—and just close enough to the Disney farm, to hold a certain urban allure, at least for a boy who was too young to remember much about living in Chicago, as the older Disney brothers did. Walt Disney’s strongest nostalgia in later years was less for farm life than for the busy life of a prosperous small town.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Marceline was not some isolated, impoverished rural outpost. Kansas Avenue was lined with shops, and for most if not all of their Marceline stay, the Disneys had a telephone (their name is in a 1907 directory).¹⁸ It was, however, the trains that kept Marceline in touch constantly with the wider world. In those days—with the au-

tomobile in its infancy and the roads for horse-drawn vehicles mostly poor—trains dominated freight and passenger service to an extent hardly conceivable a century later.

Walt Disney remembered the scarcity of automobiles in the Marceline he knew. In a May 15, 1952, meeting during work on *Lady and the Tramp*, an animated feature set at the turn of the twentieth century, he said: “In this period—I can remember those days, you know—I lived in a little town in Missouri, and there were only two automobiles. It was 1908. They began to come in then.”¹⁹

The trains were, besides, daily reminders that much larger cities were only a few hours away. Combining speed, power, and the romance of faraway places, the railroads had few competitors for the imaginations of millions of people, boys especially. In the decades that followed, even as the railroads slowly gave up their position atop the American economy, model railroads thrived, their elaborate layouts built by middle-aged men who had fallen under trains’ spell when they were children. As a train fancier in later years, Walt Disney would be one among many.

For the Disney children, a family connection enhanced the trains’ appeal: their mother’s older sister Alice (who had died in 1905) was married to Mike Martin, a Santa Fe engineer. The Martins lived a little more than a hundred miles up the line, in Fort Madison, Iowa, near the Mississippi River, and Martin’s work took him through Marceline. As Roy Disney recalled, “We used to ride in the cab with him once in a while.”²⁰

Elias Disney had been modestly successful in Chicago, but he was not a man for whom success of any kind was a natural fit. Before moving to Chicago, he had failed as an orange grower in Florida. For him to return to farming of any kind was tempting fate, however unselfish his motives.

Elias was a Canadian, born in rural Ontario in 1859. He was the eldest of the eleven children of Kepple Disney and his wife, Mary Richardson, both of whom had immigrated to Canada from Ireland as children, with their parents. Kepple and Mary lived after their marriage on a farm about a mile from the village of Bluevale.²¹ Official Disney biographies suggest that the Disney name is a corruption of a French original, and that the first Disneys came to England in the eleventh century with the Norman invaders, but, as traced through census records, the family tree’s roots dwindle to invisibility in eighteenth-century Ireland.

Kepple Disney and his family moved to a farm at Ellis, Kansas, in 1878, and it was from there that Elias moved to Florida and undertook his failed venture as an orange grower. In Florida on January 1, 1888, he married Flora

Call, sixth of eight daughters (there were two sons) in a family he had known in Kansas. Flora, born in 1868, was nine years Elias's junior. Their first child, Herbert Arthur, was born in Florida on December 8, 1888.

After the family moved to Chicago, Elias found work as a carpenter at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.²² The skimpy record of building permits issued around the turn of the twentieth century suggests that he had by then become an active contractor, building houses that he owned for resale.²³ When his father was a Chicago contractor, Roy Disney said, Elias "built the Congregational church in our neighborhood."²⁴ That was Saint Paul Congregational, at the intersection of Keeler and Belden Avenues, two blocks from the Disneys' home. The church was organized in 1898, and its newly constructed building was dedicated on October 14, 1900.²⁵

"We belonged there," Roy said. "Dad used to sub for the preacher when he was away. All us kids went to Sunday school and church."²⁶ Elias was one of the church's trustees, Flora its treasurer. Walter Elias Disney was named for his father and for Walter Robinson Parr, the English-born minister of Saint Paul Congregational from 1900 to 1905. Walt Disney was baptized at the church on June 8, 1902. Parr gave the name Walter Elias to a son of his own in 1904.²⁷

Elias Disney was a highly religious man, "a strict, hard guy with a great sense of honesty and decency," in Roy Disney's words. "He never drank. I rarely ever saw him smoke."²⁸ Elias was not just a Christian of a flinty sort, but also a socialist, a follower of Eugene V. Debs. Walt Disney remembered copying the cartoons by Ryan Walker in the Kansas-based socialist newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*, which came to the Disney household every week: "They always had a front-page cartoon, of capital and labor, and when I was . . . trying to draw . . . I had them all down pat."

In 1894, when the Disneys were living in Chicago and the United States was suffering through a severe depression, capital and labor collided in the most traumatic fashion. The Pullman strike, which began in a company town south of Chicago, spread throughout the country when the American Railway Union, whose president was Debs, declared a boycott of trains that included Pullman sleeping cars. The strike ended only after President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to Chicago and other cities in July; Debs was jailed for disobeying an injunction against the boycott. Elias Disney's socialist beliefs undoubtedly owed something to what he saw of the Pullman strike and its outcome.

Many people have found socialist and Christian beliefs compatible, and that was certainly true at the turn of the last century, but their juxtaposition was particularly unfortunate in Elias's case. His allegiances encouraged him to see his failures as evidence that he was in thrall to grim, implacable forces,

either his own weakness and sin or an increasingly impersonal and machinelike economy. Elias had an entrepreneurial temperament, as evidenced by his repeated attempts to go into business for himself, but all signs are that his beliefs pushed him toward stoic persistence and away from the nimbleness and opportunism that have always marked successful entrepreneurs.

Elias's sons responded in different ways to their father's demands. The two oldest boys, Herbert and Raymond, shared a bedroom on the first floor of the Marceline house. "They didn't like the farm," Roy said, "and after about two years [probably in the fall of 1908] they went out the window one night and went back to Chicago."²⁹ Both soon wound up working in Kansas City as clerks.

The older sons apparently never talked on the record about their father, but Roy Disney did, at one point recalling an episode that would not seem to reflect well on Elias, whatever the transgression that provoked him:

"I remember in Chicago we had an apple tree in the back yard. He'd send me to my room where I could see down over the backyard. And he'd wait a half hour; then he'd casually walk out there and eye the tree and go over to it . . . making an impression on me . . . select a switch and cut it off, feel it, test it out like a little whip. All the time I'm in torture up there thinking about my licking. When he came up there he'd have a little switch and the biggest part of it would [be] no bigger than your finger. And you had to take your pants down and you got a switching. That was Dad."³⁰

Both Walt and Roy Disney remembered their father's quick temper, which found a mirror in their own impatience with him. "He knew what he wanted to do," Walt Disney said, "and he expected you to know just what he wanted to do. . . . I'd say, 'And how can I read your mind? . . . I'd come right back at him. He'd get mad . . . and he'd start after me. And my dad was the kind of guy who'd pick up anything near him'—even a hammer or a saw, although Elias retained enough self-possession that he attacked his sons only with the handle of the hammer or the side of the saw. Walt's defense was to run away until his mother had restored calm.

Elias "had a peculiar way of talking," Walt said. "I could never figure some of the expressions he used. He'd get mad at me and call me a little scud. He says, 'You little scud, I'll take a gad to you,' and I found out later, when I was digging into Irish law and things, that a scud is equivalent to a little squirt . . . and a gad is something they used to sort of flail, you know, they used to beat the grain with it."^{*}

* Disney's "digging" was probably to prepare for his 1959 live-action feature *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*, a film rich in Irish atmosphere but shot entirely in California.

The two younger Disney brothers remembered their father not as the forbidding man such anecdotes suggest, but with obvious fondness and unforced compassion. Elias was, they recognized, a decent man caged by harsh ideas. "A good dad," Roy said. "So I don't like him put in the light of being a brutal or mean dad. That he was not."³¹

Elias had no gift for small talk, even with his sons. He was, after all, past forty when his two youngest children were born. "Yet he was the kindest fellow," Walt said, "and he thought of nothing but his family." Walt spoke of his father "constantly," his daughter Diane said in 1956. "I think Dad had a very strong family feeling. He loved his dad. He thought he was tough. But he did love him. He loved that old man."³² Strip away the crippling dogmas that Elias embraced, and a far more appealing figure emerges, a vigorous risk taker who was not afraid to take chances even when he was well into middle age—a figure with more than a passing resemblance to his youngest son.

Elias "loved to talk to people," Walt Disney said. "He believed people. He thought everybody was as honest as he was. He got taken many times because of that." Elias had a winning streak of eccentricity, as Walt recalled: "Dad was always meeting up with strange characters to talk socialism. . . . He'd bring them home! . . . And anybody who could play an instrument. . . . They were tramps, you know? They weren't even clean. But he'd want to bring them into the dinner table, and my mother would have nothing of it. She'd feed them out on the steps."

In a clear break with his astringent principles, Elias was "an old-time fiddler," as Don Taylor, the Disneys' Marceline neighbor as a teenager, remembered more than sixty-five years later; "and many Sundays he would harness the old buckskin mare to the family buggy, and while Ruth and Walt sat in the back with their feet hanging out, Mr. and Mrs. Disney put the violin in the buggy and drove to my parents' home. Here he was joined by another fiddler [while] my sister . . . would play the piano. . . . I still can see Walt and Ruth sitting in straight-back chairs listening to the music which would generally last about an hour or so. To me, Walt was a very quiet, unassuming lad; and in addressing me, he would always say, 'Hello, Dawn [*sic*].'"³³

Flora Disney also softened the sternness of Elias's rule. "We had a wonderful mother that could kid the life out of my dad when he was in his peevishness," Roy said.³⁴ When the family was scraping by, selling butter and eggs, she put extra butter on the children's bread, turning the slices over so that Elias would not see that she was giving them butter he could have sold. "So," Walt Disney said, "we'd say to Dad, 'Look, there's no butter on the bread.' And it was just loaded underneath, you know?"

Walt escaped the worst of his father's wrath. "He was a pet around the house," Roy said. "Us older kids said that he got off easy with Dad because by the time Dad got around to him he'd worn himself out chasing us, so Walt had an easy time. Walt would get a chair between [himself] and Dad and just argue the dickens out of Dad. Dad couldn't get ahold of him."³⁵ Walt Disney used a phrase like Roy's to describe his role on the farm. "I just played," he said. "I was sort of the pet in the family."

Roy was a benevolent big brother to Walt and Ruth. "Roy was the one who would always see that Ruth and I had a toy," Walt said in 1956. "Roy didn't have much money, but by gosh he always saw we had a toy."

Marceline's new Park School opened in 1908, but Walt's parents did not send him there until the fall of 1909, when he was almost eight years old; he and Ruth, two years younger, started school together. Until then, "I had leisure time," he said. He spent much of it with his "pals" who lived on adjoining properties, the older men he identified as "Doc Sherwood" (Leighton I. Sherwood, who was in his seventies then) and "Grandpa Taylor" (probably E. H. Taylor, who was around seventy). For a time, he also enjoyed the company of his father's widowed mother, Mary Richardson Disney, who was, unlike her straitlaced son, "always into mischief." She aroused Elias's ire, Walt Disney said, by sending her grandson onto a neighbor's property to steal turnips.³⁶

Disney remembered receiving encouragement to draw from some of his adult companions. Sherwood gave him "a nickel or something" to draw a picture of his horse, and his aunt Margaret—Robert Disney's wife—brought him pads of paper and crayons and praised his drawings ("stick things," Disney called them) extravagantly.³⁷ In one oft-repeated family anecdote, the young Walt drew what Roy called "his ideas of animals" on the side of the Disney house with soft tar that Elias had used to seal a barrel that caught rainwater.

The Disneys would need that rainwater if drought dried up their wells, and there are echoes in Walt's and Roy's memories of how hard and practical their farm life really was. The Disneys stored apples after the harvest, Roy said, then sold them "in March and April, when you could get a respectable amount of money for a bucket of apples. We did that two years, and then Dad and I and Walt—he was big enough then to tag along but he wasn't really much help—would go downtown and go door to door and peddle our apples. We really got good money out of it. In those days you could sell a bucket of apples for a quarter."³⁸

Elias induced at least some of his fellow farmers to join a sort of union called the American Society of Equity, founded a few years earlier to con-

solidate farmers' buying power. In Don Taylor's recollection, Elias hosted an oyster supper at the Knights of Pythias Hall, on the second floor above Zurcher's jewelry store on Kansas Avenue. "Farmers came from all over with their families" to eat the soup made from five gallons of raw oysters. Writing in the 1970s, Taylor said that "never have I ever tasted oyster soup quite as good as that served at Elias Disney's in 1907."³⁹

The Disneys lived on their farm for about four and a half years, until Elias sold it on November 28, 1910. "My dad had a sickness," Walt Disney said—Roy identified it as diphtheria, but it was evidently typhoid fever, followed by pneumonia⁴⁰—"and they decided to sell the farm. So my dad . . . he had to auction all the stock and things. And it was in the cold of the winter and I remember Roy and myself . . . going all around to the different little towns and places, tacking up these posters of the auction. And I remember my mother heating these bricks in the oven, we put the bricks in the floor of the buggy and a robe over us and we went around, all around tacking up these posters."

As idyllic as life on the farm had been for the boys, Walt especially, leaving it was correspondingly painful. Roy Disney remembered "distinctly" that when the farm was sold, "we had a little six-month-old colt [that] was sold and tied up to a buggy and taken away, and Walt and I both cried. Later on that day . . . we were down in town and here was this farmer and his rig hitched up to the hitching rack and our little colt tied on behind . . . and the damn little colt saw us when we were across the street and he whinnied and whinnied and reared back on his tie-down, and we went over and hugged him and cried over him. . . . That was the last we saw of him."⁴¹

The Disneys moved into Marceline for the remainder of the 1910–11 school year, most of that time renting a house, probably at 508 North Kansas Avenue.⁴² Then, on May 17, 1911, they left for Kansas City, Missouri, about 120 miles away.⁴³ (Robert Disney lived in Kansas City then and may have encouraged his brother to move there.) They lived first in a rented house at 2706 East Thirty-first Street.⁴⁴ Walt entered the Benton School at 3004 Benton Boulevard, barely two blocks from his new home, in September 1911. Although he had completed the second grade at Marceline, the Kansas City schools required him to take that grade over. In September 1914, the Disneys bought a modest frame house at 3028 Bellefontaine Street, a few steps north of Thirty-first and about four blocks east of their first Kansas City home.⁴⁵

Kansas City was vast compared with Marceline. The Missouri side alone was a city of more than a quarter million people. Add Kansas City, Kansas, and other surrounding towns, and the total was well above a half million. Since the Civil War, Kansas City had grown steadily by serving as a vital hub

for western settlement, for cattle drives, and for barge and rail traffic in agricultural products and manufactured goods from throughout the Midwest. By early in the twentieth century, its remaining frontier rawness was retreating rapidly in the face of such refinements as broad, landscaped boulevards. In 1911, Kansas City was not just bigger than Marceline, it was truly different, a real city.

Marceline and Kansas City were, however, similar in some fundamentals. Disney cheerfully associated outhouses only with Marceline when he spoke to the crowd there in July 1956, but he had remembered differently just a few weeks earlier, when he was interviewed by Pete Martin, a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He said then, no doubt correctly, that the Disney family relied on an outhouse at its Bellefontaine address until he and his carpenter father enlarged the house one summer, adding a kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom.

For the senior Disneys, who had lived in Chicago a few years before, the move to Kansas City may have been disheartening, one more setback to absorb, but the city cannot have been as startling a change for them as it must have been for their nine-year-old son. Yet unlike other children in such situations, Walt Disney seems not to have been thrilled or cowed by the city's crowds and bustle. He rarely if ever spoke of Kansas City with the nostalgic fondness he felt for Marceline. That was surely because—in contrast to his life on the farm—he had so little free time. From the time the Disneys moved to Kansas City, Walt was put to work.

As of July 1, 1911, Elias bought (for twenty-one hundred dollars) a *Kansas City Star* delivery route that extended from Twenty-seventh Street to Thirty-first Street, and from Prospect Avenue to Indiana Avenue, on the city's southeast side. Curiously, the route was in Roy's name, rather than Elias's, evidently because Elias, at fifty-one, was so much older than the typical *Star* route owner. Elias, Roy, and Walt delivered the morning *Times* to almost seven hundred customers and the afternoon and Sunday *Star* to more than six hundred, figures that increased over time.⁴⁶

"It was a big load," Roy said. "And Sunday was a big work day. . . . We got out of the church habit because of that. That'll break your church, you know."⁴⁷ The "church habit" had probably begun to fade even in Marceline, where there was no Congregational church. Like his brother, Walt Disney noticed a falling away in the family's religious observances. The Disneys asked grace over dinner, he said, "but later on that kind of disappeared."

Disney spoke of the newspaper route's demands in 1955: "When I was nine, my brother Roy and I were already businessmen. We had a newspaper route . . . delivering papers in a residence area every morning and evening of

the year, rain, shine, or snow. We got up at 4:30 A.M., worked until the school bell rang and did the same thing again from four o'clock in the afternoon until supper time. Often I dozed at my desk, and my report card told the story."⁴⁸

Forty years afterward, he still dreamed that he had missed customers on his route. "I remember those icy cold days of crawling up these icy steps" to put the newspaper inside a storm door, he said in 1956. Elias insisted that the papers not be thrown on porches or in yards, but carried to the front door. "I was so darn cold I'd slip, and I could cry, so I cried." The Disneys' route encompassed grander homes than their own, and Walt said the "wealthy kids" on his route often left "wonderful toys" outside. He sometimes paused in his deliveries to play "with these electric trains or wind-up trains."

Roy Disney delivered newspapers for his father only until he graduated from Manual Training High School in 1912.⁴⁹ He then worked on an uncle's farm for a summer before taking a job as a clerk at the First National Bank of Kansas City. Walt Disney continued to deliver papers, for a total of more than six years. In the winter when snow was on the ground, said the Disneys' next-door neighbor Meyer Minda, Elias and Walt loaded their newspapers onto bobsleds. On summer mornings, the Mindas were awakened by the clanking iron wheels of the Disneys' delivery cart.⁵⁰

When Elias hired other boys to help with the route he paid them three or four dollars a week, Walt Disney said, but he would not pay his son. "He said that it was part of my job. I was part of the family. He said, 'I clothe and feed you.' . . . So he wouldn't pay me." Walt began to find ways to make—and keep—money behind Elias's back, first by delivering medicine for a drugstore while he was delivering papers, and then by ordering and selling extra papers that Elias did not know about.

Meyer Minda, two years Walt's senior, remembered that the two boys "opened a pop stand together at the corner of Thirty-first Street and Montgall," near the Disneys' first Kansas City home, when Walt was ten, in the summer of 1912. "It ran about three weeks and we drank up all the profits."⁵¹ Walt later drew cartoons for a barber named Bert Hudson, proprietor of the Benton Barber Shop on Thirty-first Street near the Benton School. He caricatured "all the critters that hung out there," Disney said, and got haircuts in return.⁵²

"The upshot of it was," he said in 1956, "I was working all the time."

So was his father. In addition to the *Star* route, Elias imported butter and eggs from a dairy in Marceline—"I think every week or two weeks," Walt said—and sold them to his newspaper customers. Sometimes Elias was ill when it came time to deliver the butter and eggs, and on those days his par-

ents took Walt out of school so that he could help his mother make deliveries. Disney remembered his embarrassment at having to push the delivery cart through the neighborhood where his schoolmates lived.

As Walt grew up and Elias grew older, the weight in their relationship began to shift. Walt Disney recalled an incident when his father, angry because Walt had talked back, ordered him to the basement for a whipping. As Walt started down, Roy told him, "Don't take it." In the basement, when Walt again responded sharply to something his father said, Elias raised a hammer, "and he started to hit me, and I took the hammer out of his hand. He raised his other arm and I held both of his hands. And I just held them there. I was stronger than he was. I just held them. And he cried. He never touched me after that."

Walt and Ruth graduated from the seventh grade at Benton School on June 8, 1917.⁵³ Elias had sold the paper route on March 17, 1917, and it was apparently soon after graduation that he and Flora, and Ruth with them, moved back to Chicago. Elias had been investing in a Chicago jelly concern called the O-Zell Company at least since 1912, and the limited available evidence suggests that he moved in order to take a more active role in the company's management.⁵⁴ Walt stayed behind, continuing to work on the paper route for its new owner while living in the family home with Roy, their older married brother, Herbert, and Herbert's wife and baby daughter.

Roy had worked two summers for the Fred Harvey Company as what was called a news butcher, a vendor of candy, fruit, and soft drinks, on some of the many Santa Fe trains passing through Kansas City.⁵⁵ After graduation, Walt followed Roy into such a job for the Kansas City-based Van Noy Interstate Company, which owned the concessions on much of the country's railroad network (but not the Santa Fe). Walt lied about his age, not for the last time, since he would not turn sixteen until December.

Although Walt had been working almost all the time since his family had moved to Kansas City, he had always been under Elias's thumb; but now his father was in Chicago. As a news butcher Walt Disney was for the first time completely on his own, a fledgling businessman. By his own account, he fared badly at the hands of his customers. He was the repeated victim of cruel jokes that robbed him of empty soda bottles and thus of his profits. His co-workers treated him no better, pretending to help him while stuffing his hamper with rotten fruit—and Disney himself, attracted by the candy bars he was selling, "couldn't resist eating my own stock," in a repetition of what had happened with the pop stand. (He suffered in another way as well: almost forty years later, he vividly remembered being snubbed by a pretty classmate—"I had always had an eye on her at school"—who was a passenger.)

At the end of the summer, when he left to join his parents in Chicago, Disney was in debt to his employer. Roy said many years later that his brother “just wasn’t attending to business. So he’d come in and he couldn’t account for all that merchandise he took out so he’d run into a loss and who do you think paid his losses? . . . He was always that way. He never had any knack for business”—that is, business conceived in terms of the careful, precise accounting that Roy found congenial. “It just annoyed him.”⁵⁶

For all the disappointments associated with it, Disney remembered “this news butchering chore” as a “very exciting thing.” Since he was very small, his life had been confined to Marceline and Kansas City; as a news butcher, he rode different lines’ trains to surrounding states. For him, as for so many of his contemporaries, railroads opened up the world as nothing else could. “I loved them,” he said of the trains he rode.

In Chicago, the Disneys rented a flat in a two-flat building at 1523 Ogden Avenue on the Near West Side, about five miles closer to the downtown Loop than their old Tripp Avenue address.⁵⁷ Walt enrolled in the eighth grade at McKinley High School at 2040 West Adams Street—and, as always, he worked, this time in the jelly factory of which Elias was part owner, in the 1300 block of West Fifteenth Street.⁵⁸ He washed bottles, crushed apples, and once carried a pistol as a very nervous sixteen-year-old night watchman. He also took classes three nights a week at an art school, the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts.⁵⁹ That was his only formal art training of any kind, apart from some children’s classes that he attended “two winters, three nights a week” in Kansas City, sponsored by the school then called the Fine Arts Institute.⁶⁰

At McKinley he was a typical high school cartoonist, displaying in his stiff, awkward drawings such limited artistic ability that most others would have shed any ambitions of that kind in favor of more mundane employment. The characters in Disney’s cartoons for the monthly high school magazine, *The Voice*—pug-nosed and vaguely Irish—owe a great deal to the cast of George McManus’s comic strip *Bringing Up Father*.⁶¹

While he was in school in Kansas City and Chicago, Disney said, “I was quite a ham. . . . I loved this drawing business but everything was a means to an end. When I put on a stage play I would make my own scenery. . . . I was putting on these little plays at school where I was always staging ’em, directing ’em, acting in ’em. . . . I always got something where I could fit the kids, because the kids would always laugh at the other kids.” In Kansas City, he and his neighbor Walt Pfeiffer presented skits on amateur nights at local theaters, with Pfeiffer’s mother accompanying them on the piano.

Disney performed at home, too—“I’d do anything to attract attention”—

with the help of hoary magic tricks like a “plate lifter,” a bladder that he put under a plate or pan and then pumped full of air when he squeezed a rubber bulb attached to a tube running from it. His mother “got a big kick out of it” when he put the bladder under some kitchen pans, he said, and at her urging he put it under his father’s soup plate. “Every time my dad would go down to get a spoonful of soup my mother would rock the plate. . . . My mother was just killing herself laughing,” Elias noticed her laughter, but not the animated plate.

Walt Disney’s capacity for hard work was enormous. From July to September 1918, he went to work at the Chicago post office around seven in the morning as a mail sorter and substitute carrier.⁶² (The post office hired him, Disney said, only because he wore his father’s clothes and lied about his age after he had been turned down as too young.) When he finished with that job in midafternoon, he sought out other work at the post office—carrying special-delivery letters or picking up mail from boxes—for an hour or so, until he rode the elevated line to the South Side to work as a “gate man,” loading the trains during rush hour.

Roy Disney had joined the navy on June 22, 1917, soon after the United States entered the First World War. He was called up in the fall of that year, and after leaving Kansas City he passed through Chicago with other recruits on their way to Great Lakes Naval Training Station.⁶³ Walt met Roy at the rail terminal, where Walt was briefly mistaken for one of the recruits. “It put a bee in my bonnet,” he said. When Roy came down from Great Lakes to visit the family, “he looked swell in that sailor’s uniform,” Disney said. “So I wanted to join him.”

He was too young, but in the summer of 1918, when he was working in the Chicago post office, he signed up with “a private subscription deal forming for the Red Cross,” as a driver in the American Ambulance Corps. “I was still a year too young,” he said, and his father balked at signing the required affidavit, so his mother signed for both of them. Disney then altered his birth date on the affidavit, changing “1901” to “1900,” so that he would appear to be seventeen, rather than sixteen, and thus old enough to get the required passport.

Disney was sick for weeks in the great flu epidemic of 1918, and so his departure for Europe was delayed. The war had ended by the time his Red Cross unit reached France on December 4, but he spent almost a year in a motor pool there before returning to Chicago early in the fall of 1919. His time in France was, in Disney’s account, much like a greatly enlarged version of his summer as a news butcher. (In one echo of that earlier experience, his comrades surprised him immediately after their arrival in France

with a seventeenth-birthday celebration at a French bar—they drank cognac, he drank grenadine—and left him to pick up the tab.) He was grateful, Disney said many years later, that he was so young then, “because I did things that I know when I got up to my twenties that it would be an ordeal for me to do. I’d sleep on the floor of my truck and never thought anything about it. I didn’t need a cushion or a big featherbed. . . . And I didn’t care where I ate. . . . Everything was an experience to me then.”

There is nothing in Disney’s history, or his memories of it, to suggest that he ever resented working so hard, starting so early. Disney himself professed to see continuity between his work for Elias and his work as a news butcher and as a driver in France, when Elias was far away. “I don’t regret having worked like I’ve worked,” he said. “I can’t even remember that it ever bothered me. I mean, I have no recollection of ever being unhappy in my life. I look back and I worked from way back there and I was happy all the time. I was excited. I was doing things.”

That was a remarkable statement, considering what Disney said about the miserable winter mornings when he was delivering newspapers, but it was no doubt how he preferred to remember even that part of his life. Neither did he express regret that his formal education ended after the eighth grade. “I don’t know how kids can stand four years of college,” he said many years later. “I should think they’d get so darn restless and tired, and I don’t know how they can stay in college for four years without wanting to try to apply some of what they’ve learned.”

Despite his enthusiasm for work, Disney wanted a job that would not entail the hard physical labor that had been a constant in his life since his family moved to Kansas City. In France, while his buddies were shooting craps, Disney was usually drawing cartoons that he submitted to humor magazines like *Life* and *Judge*. “I remember those damn rejection slips,” he said. But he picked up money by drawing “special things for the guys”—caricatures and decorations.

By the time Disney returned to Chicago, he had determined on a career as an artist of some kind. Not only did he turn down an offer of twenty-five dollars a week to work at the jelly factory, he turned his back firmly on the kind of physically demanding work Elias had always done—“I didn’t want any part of it”—and headed for Kansas City. “It was a smaller town,” he said. “I sort of felt more at home.” Moreover, Roy had been discharged from the navy in February 1919 and was in Kansas City working as a bank teller. Walt moved into the family home on Bellefontaine, sharing it again with Roy, Herbert, and Herbert’s wife and daughter.⁶⁴

As soon as he returned to Kansas City, Disney applied for a job at the *Star*, the newspaper he had delivered for years. He had hung around the paper's cartoonists when he was a delivery boy—"they'd give me old drawings I could take home"—but now there were no jobs open in the art department. He was "pretty husky" after his year of "manual labor" in France, and when he applied for a job as an office boy the *Star* turned him down again because he seemed too mature.

In October 1919, in Walt Disney's recollection, one of Roy's colleagues at the bank told him about an opening as an apprentice at a shop called the Pesmen-Rubin Commercial Art Studio.⁶⁵ Walt showed Louis A. Pesmen and Bill Rubin samples of his work—"they were all these corny things I'd done in France about the fellows finding cooties"—and he got the job. What he would be paid was left to be decided later.

"I worked at this drawing board and during the day I never left it," he said in 1956. "If I had to go to the toilet I just held it until noon." When Rubin approached him at the end of the first week, Disney was sure he was going to be fired. Instead, Rubin, after some hemming and hawing, offered him fifty dollars a month. "I could have kissed the guy," Disney said. It was not the first time he had been paid for drawings, but, for the first time, he had a real job making them.

Disney's new job did not last long, probably not much more than a month. It ended when Pesmen and Rubin ran short of work after a rush to prepare illustrations for catalogs. But, Disney said, his time at that studio was immensely valuable because he learned so many "tricks of the commercial [art] business." A striving for perfection was an unaffordable luxury in commercial art, he found: "When you get into the commercial art shop you cut things out and paste over and scratch out with razor blades. . . . Cutting corners. Moving. . . . That's what I learned in six weeks."

After he was laid off, in late November or early December 1919, he quickly found work with the post office, carrying mail during the Christmas rush. At home on Bellefontaine, using his newly acquired commercial art skills, he began working up samples with the idea of going into business for himself. Then Ubbe Iwerks (known later as Ub Iwerks; the name is Dutch) called him, probably in early January 1920. A colleague at Pesmen-Rubin, he had been laid off, too. Iwerks, who in Disney's recollection did "mainly lettering" for Pesmen-Rubin, came to see Disney. He was distressed because he had lost the modest salary he was using to support his mother, who had been deserted by Iwerks's father. Disney told him, "'Let's go into business.' And he couldn't quite fathom that." But Iwerks went along, probably because the new busi-

ness's capital would come entirely from Disney's savings, money he had left with his parents in Chicago.

Disney's parents reluctantly sent him only half the five hundred dollars he had left with them, but that was enough for Disney to buy two desks, an airbrush and tank of air, drawing boards, and supplies. The new firm—called Iwerks-Disney because, in Disney's words, Disney-Iwerks "sounded like an optical firm or something"—grossed what Disney remembered as \$135 in its first month, a respectable figure measured against what the two young men had been earning at Pesmen-Rubin.

Disney had clearly inherited his father's entrepreneurial temperament, but as he entered business for himself for the first time, he enjoyed a great advantage: he was free of his father's rigid, debilitating beliefs. He was neither particularly religious nor strongly attached to any political persuasion. As for his field of endeavor, he had become a commercial artist in the first place because that was one area where he had identifiable if modest talents. He lacked education or background for any other pursuit. When he decided to go into business for himself, commercial art was again readiest at hand.

Disney's desire for independence was still half-formed. When the Kansas City Slide Company advertised in the *Times* and *Star* of January 29–31, 1920, for a cartoonist,⁶⁶ Disney tried to recruit the company as a client. Its proprietor, A. Verne Cauger, offered him a job at forty dollars a week instead. After conferring with Iwerks, Disney took the job.

Kansas City Slide made slides for local merchants—advertisements that were shown in movie theaters throughout much of the Midwest. Soon after Disney joined the staff, the company moved from 1015 Central Street to new quarters at 2449–51 Charlotte Street and took a new name, Kansas City Film Ad Company, an acknowledgment that short filmed advertisements—the equivalent of today's television commercials—had displaced slides as its principal product. Disney dated the start of his career in motion pictures to February 1920, the month he became a Film Ad employee.⁶⁷

Iwerks stayed behind at Iwerks-Disney, but he was much quieter than Disney—much less adept at winning and keeping customers—and by March he had joined Disney at Kansas City Film Ad.⁶⁸

As an animator for Film Ad, Disney worked with cutout figures, their movable joints riveted with a device that the brother of another animator called "this little gun."⁶⁹ Those figures could be manipulated under the camera, their position changing each time a frame of film was shot—an arm could be raised frame by frame, say—so that when the film was projected the figure seemed to move. The films were shot as negatives and projected as if they were pos-

itive prints, which meant that everything that was supposed to be black on the screen had to be white when it was photographed, and vice versa. That method saved the expense of making a positive print of a film that would be shown only briefly and then discarded.

Animation itself could not have been new to Disney. Animated cartoons—short films made with drawings, rather than cutout figures—had been commonplace on theater programs since 1915 or so. Those cartoons, made by New York studios, were at a peak of popularity—or at least visibility—in early 1920, to the point that Paramount, the largest distributor, felt obliged to launch a weekly cartoon package of its own after losing the cartoons made by John R. Bray's studio to a rival.⁷⁰ It was not until he went to work for Kansas City Film Ad, though, that Disney saw how such films were made.

Disney was intrigued by animation's possibilities and by what he called "the mechanics of the whole thing." He was essentially self-taught as an animator; he wrote to an admirer many years later, "I gained my first information on animation from a book . . . which I procured from the Kansas City Public Library."⁷¹ That book was *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development* by Edwin G. Lutz. According to its copyright page, Lutz's book was published in New York in February 1920, the same month Disney joined Kansas City Film Ad, so he must have read it very soon after it was added to the library's collection. He said of the book in 1956: "Now, it was not very profound; it was just something the guy had put together to make a buck. But, still, there are ideas in there."

As elementary as the Lutz book was, it still offered a vision of a kind of animation far more advanced than the Film Ad cutouts. Lutz wrote at a time when animators commonly worked entirely on paper. They made a series of drawings, each different from the one before, that were traced in ink and photographed in sequence to produce the same illusion of movement that Film Ad achieved by manipulating cutouts under the camera. Lutz advocated the use of celluloid sheets to cut down on the animator's labor—the parts of a character's body that were not moving could be traced on a single sheet and placed over the paper drawings of the moving parts. Such an expedient (and Lutz recommended others) would have resonated with Disney, who had been so impressed by commercial art's shortcuts when he worked for Pesmen-Rubin.

On a more rarefied level, Disney also learned from one of the books composed of Eadweard Muybridge's nineteenth-century photographs, taken in rapid succession and showing people and animals in motion. He had Photostats made from the pages of the book. The Photostat paper was thin, he

recalled, and so he could put his copies of a series of photographs one on top of another, “and I could get the phases of action.”

Fortified with such knowledge, Disney “worked out tricks that they hadn’t done” at Film Ad, he said. The exact nature of those “tricks” is hard to determine—Disney’s descriptions were cryptic, and the films have long since disappeared—but it seems clear that he wanted to steer Film Ad toward drawn animation and more natural-looking movement.

Disney also found the advertising copy itself “a little stiff.” As he saw orders for ads coming in, he went to the copywriters with catch lines that would be easier to illustrate, so that, for example, a bank’s admonition not to drift through life might be illustrated with “this guy on a boat drifting down river somewhere.” He “doubled in brass,” Disney said, by posing for still pictures and acting in live action when a film ad required an actor. He pressed, with eventual success, to be allowed to shoot his own films “because I would plan things with my drawings and I couldn’t get those guys [the regular camera operators] to do it. . . . The cameramen weren’t doing half of what you prepared.”

Verne Cauger responded favorably to his innovations, Disney said, and there is no reason to doubt that. From all appearances, Disney made incremental improvements—distinct, but not disruptive—of the sort most likely to be accepted by any but the most hidebound management. Even so, he said, his immediate superior, the manager of the art department, found him “a little too inquisitive and maybe a little too curious. . . . He was kind of sore at me, because I think he felt the boss paid me too much”—five dollars a week more than Ub Iwerks, and ten dollars a week more than some of the other artists.

Lower-level supervisors at resolutely mundane places like the Film Ad Company, protective of their own positions, usually regard bright ideas of any kind with suspicion, particularly if they call into question established methods. Disney did not describe his Film Ad experience in somber terms—that would have been inconsistent with his resolutely optimistic temperament—but it sounds in his recollection like one long narrow escape. However pleased Cauger may have been with what Disney did, the shelter of his patronage was not really very large; he balked at going beyond the jointed cutouts. Early in 1921, after about a year on the Film Ad staff, Disney talked Cauger into letting him borrow an old, unused Film Ad camera so that he could experiment at home on Bellefontaine, in the family garage, but even then Cauger was wary: “He kept saying, ‘What are you going to do with it?’”

Elias built that garage after he and Flora returned to Kansas City, proba-

bly in mid-1920. The conventional story is that Elias had failed yet again, this time through the jelly company's bankruptcy, but there is no record at Chicago of O-Zell's bankruptcy, and Elias, by then in his early sixties, may simply have sold his interest and retired (his occupation in Chicago in 1920, according to the federal census, was again "carpenter"). Roy Disney remembered that even though the Disneys didn't own an automobile, Elias built a garage at the Bellefontaine house "for income. He was a carpenter and he wasn't working at the time, kind of retired then. . . . So he gets the garage started and talking about renting it and Walt said, 'You've got a customer. It's rented.' . . . I don't recall him ever paying rent, but he set up a cartoon shop in there. He'd come home long after everyone else was in bed and be out there still puttering away, working, experimenting, trying this and that. That's when he'd borrow Cauger's equipment, bring it out, use it at night."⁷²

Disney said in 1956 that he "wanted to experiment with this other method, which is the method that was then being employed by the theatrical cartoonists," but what has survived of his experimental work differs sharply from the entertainment cartoons of 1921. It is a filmed editorial cartoon, the sort of thing familiar to audiences from newsreels that incorporated drawings by caricaturists like Hy Mayer. The very young Disney himself appears on-screen at the beginning of the film, as a lightning sketch artist. He had made a drawing in blue pencil—which would not photograph—and he then inked a part of the drawing before photographing it, one frame at a time, so that the drawing seems to materialize on the screen, emerging from the pen in Disney's hand (or, more precisely, from a cutout photograph of his hand holding a pen, which he moved under the camera to match up with the inked lines).

In another segment, to evoke the turmoil in the Kansas City police department in February 1921,⁷³ Disney shows policemen being thrown out of a station, as cutouts of the kind he had been using at Kansas City Film Ad. Just before that, he shows the policemen walking into the station in a few repeated drawings representing a step. This may have been his entry into "real" animation.

This sole surviving example of Disney's filmed editorial cartoons has been plausibly identified by Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman, authors of a book on Disney's silent cartoons, as a "sample reel" that he used to sell a series.⁷⁴ But it may have been a sample reel of another kind, one Disney took with him to California as a sample of his work more than two years later; that may be the only reason it survived. It is impossible to be sure; new titles were added by someone at the Disney studio decades ago, and the reel itself may have been reworked.⁷⁵

Disney made his first film, whatever was in it, not just as an experiment in animation but as a speculative business venture. He titled the reel “Newman Laugh-O-grams,” using the name of the Newman Theatre, one of Kansas City’s grandest movie houses, in the hope that he could sell the reel as a regular feature. “So they looked at it,” he said in 1956. “The fellow who was running the theater, Milton Feld . . . was very interested in it and he said, ‘Send that kid up to see me.’ So I was scared to death.” So frightened, he said, that when Feld asked him about the cost of the reel—the cost to the theater, that is—Disney blurted out his own out-of-pocket cost. When Feld agreed to that figure, Disney was stuck with making his films at no profit.

“But I didn’t care,” he said, speaking still as a man who, as Roy Disney said, had no patience with “business.” The money he would get “was paying for my experiment.” In his indifference to money Walt Disney stood in sharp contrast not just to his brother but to his father, whose parsimony was of a piece with his grim persistence. “He was very thrifty,” Walt said of Elias. “He wouldn’t spend anything on himself. . . . I didn’t inherit any of that thrift.”

The first Newman Laugh-O-gram probably debuted at that theater (in the company of a number of newsreel segments) on March 20, 1921, on the bill with a Constance Talmadge feature called *Mamma’s Affair*.⁷⁶ Disney remembered making one Laugh-O-gram a week—highly unlikely but not impossible, considering his work habits—at night while he was still an employee of the Film Ad Company. He enjoyed modest local fame as the films’ creator, and Cauger made a point of exhibiting the young animator to his visitors. Even so, Cauger remained cautious about moving in the direction that Disney wanted to go. He approved buying only a few sheets of celluloid, and those turned out to be scratched discards. “We made a few things for him,” Disney said, “but he never went for it too much. . . . He just didn’t want to do it.”

Disney eventually saved enough money (from his Film Ad job, where his salary had risen to sixty dollars a week) to buy a Universal camera and rent “this little shop” where he worked on his own films at night. “Then I put an ad in the paper, any boys wanting to learn the cartoon business and things, so they came up and they worked with me at night.”

At this point, in the fall of 1921, tracking Disney’s career becomes more difficult and his own memories more questionable. Who those “boys” were—Disney spoke of “two or three”—and how much they contributed to Disney’s film, a version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, is a mystery. It seems unlikely that any of them worked for Disney on any of his later films. He spoke of Rudolph Ising as one of the “boys,” but Ising almost certainly was not one.

It was an unsettled time for Walt Disney. Herbert, a mail carrier, moved

his young family to Oregon in July 1921, and Elias and Flora followed them to Portland, probably in the fall, although once again there is a cloud of uncertainty about just what happened.⁷⁷ There is not even a record that Elias ever sold the Bellefontaine house, although city directories suggest that Walt moved by late in 1921 to the first of a series of rented rooms. He probably rented his “little shop” around the same time, since the family garage was presumably no longer available.

Disney spoke in 1956 of grooming Fred Harman as his replacement before he left the Film Ad Company (“They brought this young fellow in to take my place. . . . I had quite a time with him. He didn’t know proportions and everything”). But in Harman’s recollection, the two young men went into business together, as Disney and Iwerks had earlier, while they were both still working for Verne Cauger. Harman’s younger brother Hugh remembered their collaboration in the same terms. “They were determined they were going to quit as employees and become their own Paul Terrys,” he said.⁷⁸ Terry was an animation pioneer—still a young one, only thirty-four, when his weekly *Aesop’s Fables* cartoons began appearing in theaters in June 1921, just a few months before the ostensible Disney-Harman partnership came into being.

Hugh Harman, a high school student then, spent afternoons and evenings at the new Kaycee Studios. As he remembered it, Fred Harman and Disney set up their first studio—this may have been the shop that Disney spoke of renting—in office space over Kansas City’s streetcar barn. They soon moved to at least two other locations, the last in the 3200 block of Troost Avenue. Hugh remembered Fred and Walt working together on a cartoon, probably never finished, in which an artist’s painting came to life on his easel.⁷⁹

Fred Harman wrote many years later that he and Disney “secretly rented a studio, bought a used Universal movie camera and tripod and a second-hand Model T Ford coupe,” and tried to shoot film for Pathé News of the first American Legion convention, held in Kansas City in October 1921.⁸⁰ In 1932, Harman wrote to Disney himself about that venture: “You can imagine the kick I get from seeing your films and news strip [the *Mickey Mouse* comic strip] and never loose [*sic*] an opportunity to stretch my suspenders when telling some of my friends about you. In fact, I’ve told them all of our ventures and never omitting the air flight with Cauger’s camera.”⁸¹

Disney also remembered the “air flight,” describing it in 1956. He and Harman went up together during the legion convention, he said, Harman holding the tripod while Disney operated the camera. The pilot “had a hell of a time because of the two of us in the back there,” but Disney was sure he had

some wonderful shots. He had taken bad advice, though, and his camera settings were such that none of his film turned out.

Fred Harman, who gained his own measure of fame as the creator of the *Red Ryder* comic strip, wrote in 1968 that he and Disney “quit our jobs at the Film Ad Company. . . . We had been working very hard, traveling all around the neighboring towns in Missouri and Kansas signing up movie theaters for film ads we hoped to make, but we just couldn’t swing it. Our rent was due and finally the Ford was repossessed.” Harman’s account is problematic on several counts—for one thing, Disney probably did not quit his Film Ad job until the spring of 1922—but Roy Disney also spoke about Walt’s efforts to sell his own film ads: “In fact, the old man [Cauger] had a lot of theaters lined up for his slide films and Walt figured, ‘Well, they’re not selling to this theater over here so I can sell ’em over here,’ so he bought a car, hit these little towns, little theaters, and tried to sell stuff he made.” At that point, Roy said, “Cauger sensed he was his competitor” as well as his employee.⁸²

Whatever its exact form, this was another Disney partnership, like the 1920 Iwerks-Disney combination, that was very short-lived, probably lasting no more than a few months in late 1921. By 1956, Disney had long since soured on partnerships of any kind, except for the one with Roy, and that may account for the way he brushed past his collaboration with Harman.

Kaycee Studios’ last location, as Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising remembered it, was on the upper floor of a two-story building at 3239 Troost Avenue, above a restaurant called Peiser’s.⁸³ “For the most part,” Hugh Harman said, “it was just bare floor—just a couple of cubicles partitioned off for their desks.” By the time the eighteen-year-old Ising answered a newspaper ad for work as an artist there, probably in early 1922, Fred Harman was no longer involved. As Ising told J. B. Kaufman in 1988, “Walt had a little art studio He was doing sort of a newsreel insert for Newman theaters. . . . The only guys in the studio were Walt and myself. Red Lyon was probably also there at that time. He was the cameraman at Film Ad. Walt was working at Film Ad too, during the day. . . . I would go to the studio during the day, built some of the equipment or helped Red with the stuff, but mostly it was at night. That went on for three or four months.”⁸⁴ Ising traced Disney’s drawings in ink and operated the camera after Lyon quit. Disney was still shooting film “on spec” for Pathé News.

On May 18, 1922, Disney incorporated Laugh-O-gram Films. He probably left his job at Kansas City Film Ad around the same time. Laugh-O-gram was capitalized at \$15,000, divided into three hundred shares of stock at a

par value of fifty dollars each. At the time of incorporation, 51 percent of the stock issue was subscribed, giving the company assets of \$7,700. Only \$2,700 was in cash, though, with the remaining \$5,000 in physical assets: equipment that Disney had bought—a camera and camera stand, three animating stands, seven chairs, and so on—plus one completed short cartoon and a few even shorter *Lafflets*, animated jokes. Oddly, the completed cartoon—which with the *Lafflets* was valued at \$3,000—was identified in the incorporation papers not as *Little Red Riding Hood*, but as *The Four Musicians*. Disney was the largest stockholder, with seventy shares.⁸⁵

Laugh-O-gram Films moved into the new McConahy Building at 1127 East Thirty-first Street, just one block east of Troost Avenue in the heart of an outlying commercial center a couple of miles south-southeast of downtown Kansas City. Laugh-O-gram occupied a suite on the two-story brick building's upper floor.

Disney was becoming a filmmaker and entrepreneur on the Elias Disney model. That is to say, he had created a business even though he had limited experience and limited capital, trusting to the strength of his desire for independence to make up for those shortcomings. That any investors should have been attracted to the new venture may seem surprising, but Disney had already enjoyed modest success as a filmmaker, thanks to the Newman Laugh-O-grams, and he had shown by making *Little Red Riding Hood* that he could produce a longer film as presentable as many of the short cartoons being made in the East. Add to that record the young Disney's enthusiasm and self-confidence, and investors could reasonably conclude that the risks attending a small investment in Laugh-O-gram Films were acceptable.

The new cartoon producer announced its birth in the trade press in June 1922. Supposedly, six films had already been completed, but that was not true. "They will be released one every two weeks," one article said. "Announcement of a plan of distribution will be made shortly." That plan had still not been announced in August, when Leslie Mace, the sales manager, and J. V. Cowles—a Kansas City physician and "well-known figure in the oil business" who was now Laugh-O-gram's treasurer and had presumably become an investor in the company—were in New York, as another article said, "arranging for distribution of a series of twelve Laugh-O-grams." The idea was still to release a cartoon every two weeks.⁸⁶

Disney, a green animator himself, shepherded his very small, very young, and even greener staff through the production of his first few cartoons, rapidly burning through his capital as he did. He showed himself still hungry for instruction. C. G. "Max" Maxwell recalled that when he went to Kansas City

to attend junior college and wound up taking a job at Laugh-O-gram, “I had a little portfolio of the [W.] L. Evans School of Cartooning on animation that had come with my correspondence course in cartooning, and when Disney saw this little portfolio that Bill Nolan [a leading New York animator] had got out for Evans, he grabbed that thing, and that was the last I ever saw of it.”⁸⁷

Hugh Harman, not long out of high school, became an animator on Disney’s staff. “Our only study was the Lutz book,” he said. “That, plus Paul Terry’s films.”⁸⁸ Terry was Disney’s unmistakable model in one major respect because Disney’s cartoons were modernized fairy tales, just as Terry’s were modernized versions of the ancient fables. But Disney and his artists borrowed from Terry’s cartoons on a more intimate level, too.

Disney knew Nadine Simpson, who worked at a local film exchange, and she let Disney, Ising, and others on the Laugh-O-gram staff borrow Terry’s *Aesop’s Fables* to study “over a light,” Ising said. “A lion or something was always chasing [Farmer Al Falfa, a continuing character in the *Fables*]. We never could figure out how they did that sudden twist-around. Then we found out these were cycles”—short pieces of animation that could be repeated endlessly, seeming to form continuous actions—“and we could cut out a cycle; they never missed it.”⁸⁹ Harman remembered clipping “maybe fifty or seventy-five feet” from the Terry cartoons. “They needed editing, anyway.” Simpson joined the Laugh-O-gram staff in the fall of 1922 as its bookkeeper.

Although Harman and Ising remembered the Laugh-O-grams as being photographed mostly as inked lines on paper, with what Hugh Harman called “just occasional” use of celluloid,⁹⁰ only the first one, *Red Riding Hood*, is unmistakably of that type. The other surviving examples appear to rely heavily on celluloid—the drawings have been traced in ink on the celluloid sheets, painted, and photographed over background drawings. Using *cels* gave an animator much more freedom than working on paper, but it was not a step to be taken lightly in Kansas City. Celluloid had to be bought in large sheets and cut to the right dimensions, then punched with holes for the pegs that assured the proper alignment of the drawings.⁹¹ Disney’s use of cels was probably another sign of Terry’s influence—the *Fables* were made with cels from the start—as well as Disney’s ambition.

Four of the six completed Laugh-O-gram fairy tales have survived, and the cartoons are notable mainly for their strained efforts to be “modern.” Cinderella, a little girl with dark hair fashionably cut, goes to the ball in a big car, with her pet cat as her chauffeur, and Red Riding Hood’s “wolf” is a lupine predator of the human kind. The cartoons make heavy use of animation-saving devices, especially cycles. The drawing is invariably crude, too,

even measured against the heavily formulaic drawing that dominated most cartoons made in the early 1920s. Cartoonists who could draw well while cranking out enough drawings to fill a one-reel cartoon were not plentiful in 1922, and on the evidence of the Laugh-O-gram fairy tales, none of them lived in Kansas City.

However lacking their cartoons, the Laugh-O-gram staff had a good time making them. “Walt was very much one of the boys,” Maxwell wrote in 1973. Disney and his crew “would often get together on Sundays, to pretend we were shooting Hollywood type movies.” Photos survive of such mock shooting on the roof of the McConahy Building. “Hugh Harman and a friend of his, Ray Friedman, had built a tiny log cabin in Swope Park,” south of Kansas City, Maxwell said, “and that was a favorite rendezvous. . . . The movie camera used on these outings was a phony, built by Ub out of a box, a crank, and two film cans on top to represent magazines.”⁹²

It was not until September 16, 1922, that Laugh-O-gram finally signed a contract with a distributor for its cartoons. That company, Pictorial Clubs, distributed films to schools and churches, rather than theaters. Pictorial Clubs obligated itself to make only a hundred-dollar down payment for six cartoons, with a balance of eleven thousand dollars not due until January 1, 1924⁹³—an astonishing arrangement that could not possibly make sense unless Disney had other sources of cash, as he did not. In accepting such a contract, he was amplifying the mistake he had made by selling his original Newman Laugh-O-grams at cost.

By October, Disney was completing *Puss in Boots*, the fifth of the six cartoons covered by the contract, but Laugh-O-gram’s money was gone, and the company was rapidly descending into debt. Red Lyon, Laugh-O-gram’s cameraman (or “technical engineer,” as his business card had it) wrote to his mother in mid-October that the company was “worse than broke” and going into debt “about four hundred more each week.”⁹⁴

The search for additional sources of income began late in October. Laugh-O-gram announced then that the company had, in the words of a *Kansas City Star* report, “added the feature of photographing youngsters to its regular business of making animated cartoons. An admiring parent wishing to preserve the native graces of his progeny’s actions” had only to get in touch with Disney and Lyon. “Then comes the stalking of the baby.” A private screening in the parents’ home was part of the package. Few if any doting parents took the bait.⁹⁵

For reasons never explained, Ub Iwerks left his job at Kansas City Film Ad and came aboard Laugh-O-gram’s sinking ship early in November 1922.

Max Maxwell remembered that after Iwerks came to Laugh-O-gram he invented what came to be called the “biff-sniff,” a device for reducing or enlarging animation drawings: “He put the film in the projector, at the back of the machine, projected it up onto the glass, where the pegs were, and we could make it bigger or smaller.”⁹⁶

By the end of the year, after delivering *Cinderella*, the last of its cartoons for Pictorial Clubs, Laugh-O-gram had stopped paying its employees.

Laugh-O-gram did make a few more films, some for money and some as samples that went unsold. Around the end of 1922, Disney made an educational film on dental care, *Tommy Tucker’s Tooth*, for which a local dentist paid five hundred dollars. In March 1923, Laugh-O-gram tried unsuccessfully to interest Universal in a sample reel of *Lafflets*, the very short comic films; none of them have survived. Around that time, Laugh-O-gram also made a “Song-O-Reel” called *Martha*, a sing-along film in which Ub Iwerks appeared in live action.

Disney was shameless in other efforts to keep Laugh-O-gram afloat. At one point, he offered a mail-order course in animated cartooning, using the letterhead “Animated Cartooning Studios” and listing himself as general manager and Ising as educational director. A promotional piece dangled the lure of “large earnings,” saying: “The remuneration to be derived from taking this training will amaze you.”⁹⁷ That was undoubtedly true.

Throughout the late fall and winter of 1922–23, and on into the spring, Laugh-O-gram survived, barely, on small loans, the first (twenty-five hundred dollars on November 30, 1922) from its treasurer, J. V. Cowles, who was presumably reluctant to see his initial investment turn sour. The next lender, Fred Schmeltz, owner of a hardware store, made loans totaling more than two thousand dollars between February and June 1923. Schmeltz, as a member of Laugh-O-Gram’s board, had good reason to know how desperate the company’s situation was, and he tried to protect himself—his loans were secured by all the company’s equipment. On June 2, 1923, Disney assigned the Pictorial Clubs contract to Schmeltz as security not just for his loans but also Cowles’s, as well as the unpaid salary owed to two employees.⁹⁸

Disney’s personal lifeline was an occasional check from his brother. Roy had been diagnosed with tuberculosis in the fall of 1920, and he moved from one government sanatorium to another—from the first, in New Mexico, to another in Arizona, and finally to one in Sawtelle, California, now a part of the city of Los Angeles abutting Santa Monica. Disney remembered that Roy sent him blank checks with instructions to fill them out for any amount up to thirty dollars, “so I’d always put thirty dollars.” He scraped by on those

small checks and the generosity of the Greek owners of the Forest Inn Café on the first floor of the McConahy Building. He also imposed on Edna Francis, Roy's girlfriend, who remembered that Walt "used to come over to my house and talk and talk till almost midnight. He was having a kind of a struggle and when he'd get hungry he'd come over to our house and we'd feed him a good meal and he'd just talk and talk."⁹⁹

Disney said in 1956: "I was desperately trying to get something that would take hold, catch on. So I thought of a reversal. They had had the cartoons working with the humans, which was originated by Max Fleischer. I said, well, maybe I'll pull a reversal on that, I'll put the human in with the cartoons. . . . The [Fleischer] cartoon would always come off the drawing board and run around in a real room and work with a real person. I took a real person and put 'em into the drawing."

On April 13, 1923, Disney, for Laugh-O-gram, signed a contract with the parents of Virginia Davis, a four-year-old Mary Pickford look-alike with blonde curls who had already performed in at least one Kansas City Film Ad commercial. He hired Virginia to appear in a new film called *Alice's Wonderland*; her payment was to be 5 percent of the film's proceeds.¹⁰⁰ After the live action was shot, Disney and a few other members of his original staff worked on the film in the late spring and early summer of 1923. Hugh Harman, who was on Laugh-O-gram's payroll throughout May and June, claimed to have animated most of it.¹⁰¹

In the midst of production, probably in mid-June, Laugh-O-gram moved from the McConahy Building to less expensive quarters, the same space above Peiser's restaurant that had housed Disney's Kaycee Studios. "The studio was then in financial trouble," Rudy Ising wrote in 1979, "and Walt, Hugh, Maxwell, and I secretly moved all our equipment back to the original building . . . one night, leaving McConahy with some unpaid back rent."¹⁰² Starting in July, Fred Schmeltz paid the monthly rent (seventy-five dollars) for the space above Peiser's. Maxwell remembered "taking turns with Walt on the camera stand for a long session shooting a circus parade"—a cartoon parade welcoming the live-action Alice to cartoonland—after the move.¹⁰³

In May 1923, while *Alice's Wonderland* was still being animated, Disney wrote about it to potential distributors, offering to send them a print when it was finished. But, he said in 1956, "I couldn't get anywhere with it." Actually, his letter of May 14 to Margaret J. Winkler, a New York-based distributor, brought an immediate response. "I shall, indeed, be very pleased to

have you send me a print of the new animated cartoon you are talking about," she wrote to Disney on May 16. "If it is what you say, I shall be interested in contracting for a series of them."¹⁰⁴

Disney wrote to Winkler again more than a month later. "Owing to numerous delays and backsets we have encountered in moving into our new studio," he wrote on June 18, "we will not be able to complete the first picture of our new series by the time we expected." He planned to be in New York around July 1 with a print and "an outline of our future program."¹⁰⁵ Winkler replied that she would be happy to see him.¹⁰⁶ When Disney spoke of "backsets," he may have had in mind what happened after the animation for *Alice's Wonderland* was photographed. When the film was developed, the emulsion on the negative ran in the summer heat; at least part of the animation had to be reshot.¹⁰⁷

In the film, Alice visits the Laugh-O-gram studio to see how cartoons are made, watches an animated cat and dog box on a drawing board, and that night dreams she is in a cartoon herself. The novelty is all in the combination work, which, as Rudy Ising explained, "was bi-packed, that is, the live-action print was run through the camera operation along with the unexposed negative film, thus being superimposed on the film at the same time as the cartoon was being photographed."¹⁰⁸ *Alice's Wonderland* otherwise suffers from some of the same disabilities as the Laugh-O-gram fairy tales, especially their repetitiveness, aggravated in this case by *four* off-screen fights that include three involving Alice and some escaped lions.

Regardless, by midsummer 1923 Disney had a finished film in hand and a New York distributor who was eager to see it. He probably could not afford a trip to New York, but he could have followed through in other ways, and he did not. The fate of the six modernized fairy tales may have had something to do with his failure to act.

In his first letter to Winkler, Disney invited her to get in touch with W. R. Kelley of Pictorial Clubs' New York office, "and he will gladly screen several of our subjects"—the fairy-tale cartoons—"for you."¹⁰⁹ It was around this time that Pictorial Clubs, a Tennessee corporation, went out of business. The films—but not the obligation to pay for them—wound up in the hands of a New York corporation also called Pictorial Clubs. Disney had been swindled, and Laugh-O-gram would not see the eleven thousand dollars it was supposed to receive the following New Year's Day.¹¹⁰ That disagreeable experience with one distributor may have left him less than eager, for a time, to pursue a contract with another. Rudy Ising remembered that in the sum-

mer of 1923, after the move back to the original studio above Peiser's, "Walt was seriously considering going back to New York" to seek work as an animator on the *Felix the Cat* cartoons.¹¹¹

In later years, Disney may not have wanted to remember this episode, perhaps the only time after he left Kansas City Film Ad that he was on the verge of going to work for someone else and giving up the idea of running his own business. Just as the memory of his failed partnerships seemed to annoy him, so the very idea that he might have spent his life working for someone else may have been too unpleasant to contemplate. He was by nature a man who wanted to be in charge, in undisputed control, and so he could tolerate neither sharing power with a partner (other than Roy) nor surrendering it to a boss.

With *Alice's Wonderland* finished and his hopes for a new series in abeyance, Disney returned to the kind of cartoon that had first brought him modest success. "I spent a number of weeks working on a plan to make a weekly newsreel for the *Kansas City Post*," he said in 1935, "but that deal fell through, too. That seemed to wash up all the prospects in Kansas City, so I decided to go to Hollywood."¹¹²

As Disney recalled in his 1941 speech to his employees, he passed through one true starving-artist phase in Kansas City, apparently when the studio was in the McConahy Building (although his reference to an "an old rat-trap of a studio" wouldn't seem to fit that place). His business a shambles, he was living at his studio and bathing once a week at Kansas City's new Union Station. He had nothing to eat but beans from a can and scraps of bread from a picnic. Characteristically, though, Disney refused to take a romantic, languishing view of his predicament when he talked about it again in 1956. Whenever he spoke of his hardships and how he overcame them, his voice was usually that of a rigorously optimistic entrepreneur. He loved beans, he said—"I was actually enjoying this meal."