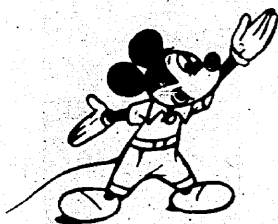


Walt Disney's Gambles

By ADELA ROGERS ST. JOHNS

Disney has won more Oscars than anybody in Hollywood but he almost went bankrupt trying to finish *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



Walt Disney is almost—not quite, but almost—convinced that he is a success. He's never had much time to think about it. He had difficulty arriving at this conclusion. He looked a little puzzled as he told me about it. But he has finally figured out that a man has to be a success to owe the bank \$8,000,000.

Every year he pays everybody off, and every New Year's he makes a resolution that he's going to get and stay even.

But about then he thinks up Disneyland or something and there

he is, owing 'em \$8,000,000 instead of only the \$3,000,000 he did before.

Neither the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo nor the wildest plunger at Las Vegas ever came up with the magnificent gambles that our Walt Disney has taken since he first sold newspapers in the snow, takes today, and obviously will go on taking.

In racing circles there used to be a gent called "Bet-A-Million" Gates who was looked on as quite a boy. He's a piker beside Walt, because the only title that would cover Disney is "I-Bet-You-My-Life." Over and over. My life and all my works.

Nobody has been broke as often, nobody has been really hungry and walking the streets to hock his car as many times as the man who created the best known fiction character of all time—not excluding Sherlock Holmes—and naturally I mean the phenomenal Mickey Mouse.

We were sitting companionably, happily—he likes to talk, he thinks there ought to be more conversation—at a big table at his own studio where he always eats along with everybody else who works on the Disney lot. That's a thing no other top producer in Hollywood does as far as I know and there's none topper than Disney. But of course his stars such as Mr. Beaver and Donald Duck can't come over to his table and squawk about stories. Anyhow, he got a thoughtful look as he said, "I was never afraid of being broke. I always figured to be broke."

But when all his chips, his life's work, his dreams, chances, ambitions, the family house and lot and his wife's wedding ring are down, Walt Disney sweats



'em out, even though he looks as though he had aces back to back.

Take that day a man named Joe Rosenberg came out from the Bank of America. Why, there was as much drama and suspense in that projection room as when Captain Nemo tangled with that octopus 20,000 leagues under the sea. To Walt Disney it was life and death, because everybody who knows Walt agrees his work is his life, no foolin'.

Prior to that tense hour, Walt Disney had discovered he was halfway through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and had run out of money. Not enough in the sock for one more day's shooting. His heart, his dreams, life's labor, career, studio, staff and every nickel of his own were riding on this picture—and he was stopped cold.

Why he didn't know sooner that he was short a million and a half is because he is Walt Disney. Never scrimps, never saves. As long as there is a buck in the kitty he shoots the works. For weeks his older brother Roy, his life-long partner and president of Walt Disney Productions, had been telling him. But Roy has been doing that ever since he and his gangling kid brother Walt borrowed \$500 from an uncle and came to Hollywood to set up their cartoon studio back of a real estate office some 30 years ago.

So now Roy called the bank. He said: Walt needs a million and a half to finish *Snow White*. And the bank said: Well now, Roy, you know we'd have to see some of the picture—that's a lot of money.

Walt tore his hair. No calm and lofty genius, Mr. Disney, and the word genius has been applied to him of late more often than to anyone in or by Hollywood. Disney gets more excited than a man trying to root his horse home when one of his magnificent gambles comes around the stretch turn. *Snow White*, he said, was too rough to show anybody, nobody could tell anything about it at that time.

To which Roy said: Well, Walt, unless they

Walt Disney pictures always seem to make "a potful of money"—but by the time he has a chance to cash in on them, he manages to think of some new way to go into debt, such as his magnificent new Disneyland project in Anaheim, California. Thanks to these lavish undertakings, Walt owed \$8,000,000 to the bank when this was written.

see it, you won't be able to finish it. So Walt ran it for Joe Rosenberg, the man from the bank.

Except for the rough sequences on the screen, the little room was absolutely quiet. A guy who was there told me, the other day, "I could see the sweat standing out on Walt's forehead."

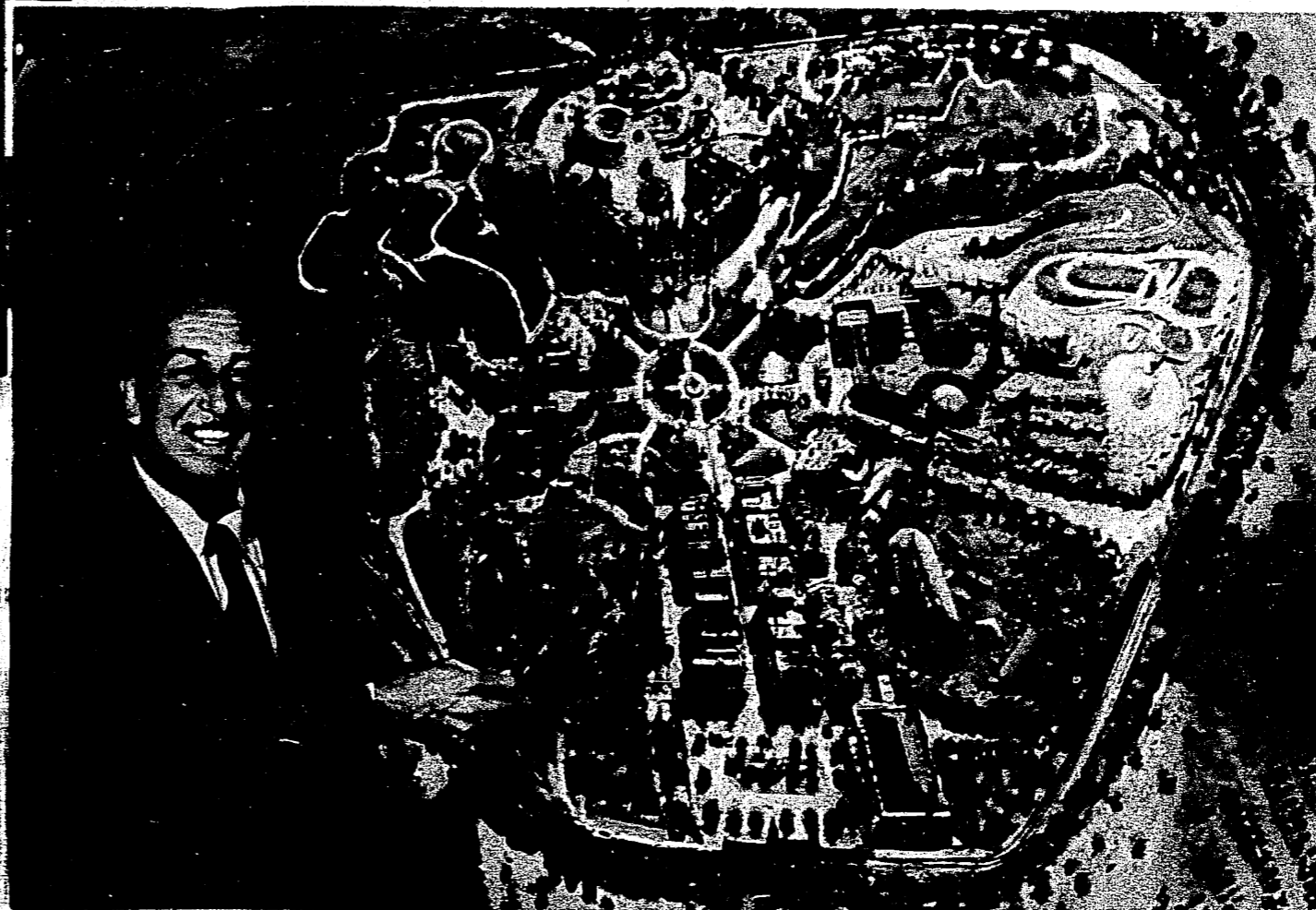
The picture stopped, lights went up, the man from the bank walked out and Walt Disney went with him in silence, his heart knocking hard. One way or the other, this was it.

"Well, Walt," the man from the bank said as he got in his car, "everybody's going to make a pot of money out of that picture." Which everybody connected with this history-making, first full-length animated feature did.

But then Disney has always been King of Hollywood's Wild Frontier as much as his hero, Davy Crockett, was in America's Injun-fighting days. He pioneered the big screen and stereophonic sound in *Fantasia*, which was so far ahead of its time that he nearly went bankrupt with it. He pioneered in color, in music and in techniques that everybody uses today.

All gambles. Frontiers always are. This has all been going on a long time, with Walt Disney one jump ahead like Brer Rabbit ahead of Brer Fox. For years Mickey Mouse—the real Mickey was a mouse who used to walk over Disney's drawing board when he was an artist, before he thought of animated cartoons—was a gamble and nobody would buy the first two pictures at any price.

He goes for broke on every project he undertakes and has risked his career and his future many times to blaze new trails in enchanting entertainment



land plans, and the zoo where animals are kept temporarily, and big warehouses full of props which will some day soon re-create our history and Disney's dreams. Bringing all this together is going to take money. Of course everybody will make a potful, but by that time Disney will have dreamed up something to do, build or photograph—on the Moon, maybe.

From the moment I saw Walt Disney on the TV screen I said to myself, that man has something, he has a secret, I have to know what it is.

I find it hard to figure why, living in Hollywood, I'd never met him before, but I think Bambi and Mickey and Minnie Mouse were more real to everybody than the man who dreamed them up, drew them the first time and animated them. The work is always more real than the artist.

When I finally did meet him, nobody ever has had a more profound effect on me than the creator of Mickey Mouse.

It's easy to meet. The reason more people in Hollywood haven't is because for years he practically lived at his studio. It was almost, people said, as though he never did live in Hollywood but in that land which has now been called after him and is known to millions as Disneyland, a country inhabited by his own creations from dreams, from the past, from secret places like Beaver Valley.

Outside that, he has a lovely wife whom he married when he was paying her \$15 a week as an artist—so you know that was a long time ago—and two beautiful daughters.

The man who created characters we know better than most flesh-and-blood stars, who owns innumerable patents that have advanced camera work in great strides, remained for years the man nobody knew. Then people began to see him on television and at once they wanted to know more. They felt the presence of a secret, a magic secret, in the big, easy-moving, good-looking man.

As I watched him the first time I remembered that I knew something very important about him already. My friend, Oliver Wallace, is his music director and, like 90 per cent of those who work for Disney, has been with him "from the start."

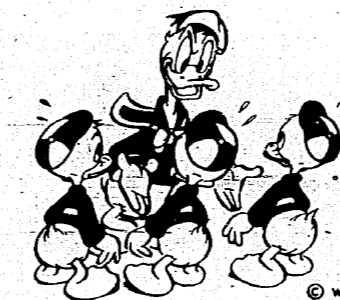
Once we were sitting in a friend's garden, talking, and Ollie said he was exhausted because he had been working day and night on Tinker Bell's voice for *Peter Pan*. He thought he had it now, but Disney would be back from Europe the next day and maybe he would have to start all over.

"You know more about sound and music than he does," I said.

"Nobody does," Ollie said. "Besides, that's not it. It may not sound the way he heard it."

"You mean he hears it first?" I said.

"And sees," Ollie said. "Making a Disney picture is matching up our . . . (Continued on following page)



The odds really got tough. When Disney, determined where Mickey was concerned, was about to start the third one (*Steamboat Willie*) along came Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* and SOUND.

Walt put sound in *Steamboat Willie*. All right, he ended up to his collar button in debt but he hocked his Moon automobile and his wife Lillian's half-carat engagement ring and took the film to New York.

He couldn't get it synchronized. Then one day on Sixth Avenue he ran into a guy named Harry Reichenbach, a press agent, and Harry lent him 500 bucks—just like the uncle who'd helped him to Hollywood. But Walt wasn't satisfied with ordinary gambles like this—he and Lillian decided to distribute Mickey themselves and this, as anybody will tell you, is nuts. Of course they were lucky. The public went mad over Mickey.

About then Walt had to take another big one. Brother Roy called him and Lillian into the office one day. A big company was offering a real fancy price for the Disney company—and Mickey Mouse—out-right. Walt listened and looked at Lillian, and she smiled and Walt said, "Roy, I know things are tight

and we have debts, but—we'll pay 'em and I'd kinda rather not sell out. I might not be independent then. They could tell me what to do and maybe they wouldn't let me do what I have planned—what I been thinking about—"

Well, with *Three Little Pigs*, *Dumbo*, *Peter Pan*, *Cinderella* and *The Living Desert*, to say nothing of

Toot, *Whistle*, *Plunk and Boom*, and his other Academy Award winners (the studio biography has to devote seven pages to his Awards) anybody would think that by this time—

"I don't know how it is," Disney says, looking puzzled. "Everybody gets paid back, makes a potful of money, I make a resolution to stay ahead of the bank this year—and then I owe them \$8,000,000 instead of three.

Seems like with all the things you want to do you don't hardly ever get caught up no more, as Mr. Gobel would say."

Like the fabulous project called Disneyland, which right now is acres of land in one place—Anaheim, California—and maps, models, drawings, experiments in another. It takes all afternoon just to walk through the rooms at the studio devoted to Disney-

WALT DISNEY'S GAMBLER

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work to what he sees and hears in his mind. If there doesn't seem to be a way to do this at the time, why he'll invent something so it can be done. If he's been picturing and wanting to see how a beaver built a dam, ever since he was a kid, or what Indian warfare was like, then he'll find a way so he can get it up there to look at, that's all."

Joe Reddy, who also has been with Walt Disney "from the start," invited me to come and see *The Lady and The Tramp*, the latest Disney, with a story by that great newspaperman, Ward Greene. This is a new—another—Disney classic, so when we got to the commissary for lunch I was still wiping away tears and smothering giggles. Joining Mr. Disney at a table by the window outside of which people were playing ping pong on a terrace was, in a modern way, sort of like having seen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and then sitting at Shakespeare's table at the Mermaid Tavern.

The first part of the talk about his younger days followed the grand tradition. One of four brothers born of poor but honest parents in the Middle West, delivering papers in the snow, getting very little schooling, fighting his way up as a cartoonist and artist, in real garrets, sometimes really hungry.

His father never spared the rod. Little Walt went to Sunday School, sold his papers, did his chores, and used to do acts on amateur hours in the neighborhood movie houses. He wasn't quite sure himself whether he wanted to be an actor or an artist, but when he decided on the latter he was strictly on his own, such a thing never having happened in the Disney family before. But that early ex-

perience, he told me with a twinkle, probably developed the ham in him.

His talk is forthright, unusual, exciting. For instance, he said failure is the other side of success, only people really trying to do something take chances and fail. Sooner or later you win one, he says.

When he was 18, he told me, he made up his mind he wouldn't marry until he was 25 and had \$10,000 in the bank. So when he was 24 and didn't have a dime he fell in love and got married at once.

He sent his two daughters to a school of one church denomination and to the Sunday School of another. Intolerance of any kind is the thing he hates most. He said he wanted them to learn that there are as many ways to God as there are spokes in a wheel, all lead to the Hub and all men have a right to choose their own spoke.

When I asked him point-blank what it felt like to be called a genius, he grinned amiably and said it sounded like they were ribbing him, but of one thing he was sure—if it wasn't successful commercially, it wasn't art. All great art, he said, had been well paid for and supported by the public and by patrons.

As we talked and ate, the good will and good cheer and friendliness of that Disney studio, unlike anything I'd ever known, swept over me.

All of a sudden, I knew Disney's secret. He is the man who makes dreams come true.

He makes us believe we can make ours come true.

A Disney picture is a Disney dream come true. If sometimes it has a bit of nightmare, well, all dreamers have nightmares. Disney shows you that they're unimportant—you wake up from them

and Good has triumphed over Evil.

He's remolded a world not only nearer to his heart's desire, but to yours and mine. Like Einstein, Disney has never been afraid to live with the truth that time and space are relative, that none of us is young or old. There is *timing*; but no time, space but no distance, life is stronger than death and love more powerful than hate.

"You make dreams come true," I said to him. "That's your secret."

He gave me a startled look.

"You dream," I said, "and make your dreams come true. It is what all great philosophers have tried to do."

"Everybody can make their dreams come true," Disney said. "You couldn't have a dream that it wasn't possible to make come true. Where would you get it from? Dreams are the patterns, the blueprints. Inventions are so you can make them happen. The young in heart are the ones who never let go of the hope of making dreams come true."

"I thought it took genius to make dreams come true," I said.

For a moment Walt Disney didn't look like a successful motion picture producer or a genius. He looked exactly like Peter Pan. Exactly!

"No," he said. "It doesn't. It takes faith and work. A dream—faith in it—hard work. And that's not quite true because it's so much fun you hardly realize it's work. If you are making a dream come true it never seems like hard work."

So—that's all there is to it, according to Mr. Disney. And there's one thing about his magnificent gambles—as far as he is concerned, he's always betting on a sure thing.