

The Roots of Animation in Kansas City

By Ron Green

At the turning point of the recent Disney movie “*Saving Mr. Banks*,” Tom Hanks (who plays Walt Disney) recalls Kansas City boyhood memories.

Ever been to Kansas City, Mrs. Travers? Do you know Missouri at all? It’s mighty cold there in the winters. Bitter.

My dad, Elias Disney, he owned a newspaper delivery route in Kansas City. Thousand papers. Twice daily. Morning and evening edition.

Elias, he was a tough businessman. A save-a-penny anywhere you can type of fella so he wouldn’t employ any delivery boys, he just used me and my big brother Roy.

Harsh as this experience was for the young boy, the work ethic it established would serve Walt Disney well when he set out to make his mark in the animation world.

Disney’s illustrious animation career was significantly shaped by his Kansas City experiences and connections he made as he launched his career in animation.

From his early boyhood days in Marceline, Mo., Walt was fascinated with drawing and cartoons. Any print material with cartoons that passed through the Disney home became training templates for young Walt.

His father, Elias, subscribed to the *Appeal to Reason*, a socialist newspaper published in Kansas. Walt would copy Ryan Walker’s cartoons from the newspaper for practice. When he delivered newspapers for the Kansas City



Walt Disney drawing at his Laugh-O-Gram animation studio.

Star, Walt would hang around the staff cartoonists. They would give him old drawings, which he would take home for study and practice.

Disney’s fascination with animation intensified. In 1919, at age 17, he took an art apprentice job at the Pesmen-Rubin Commercial Art Studio, a studio within the Gray Advertising Company at 14th and Oak in Kansas City.

Although this job only lasted for about six weeks, this was Disney’s first pay for cartooning work in a real job. He was thrilled to be offered \$50 a month, twice what he hoped to earn in the job.

There he met Ubbe Iwerks, a year-older than Disney, who would become a lifelong partner in Disney’s animation career. Iwerks was a very talented artist and had a knack for solving technology challenges.

Although Walt’s work at Gray Advertising was short-lived, his relationship with Iwerks paid off in February of 1920 when Disney and Iwerks (also laid off from

Gray) decided to form their own commercial art shop The Iwerks-Disney studio.

This first studio was located in “...an unused bathroom in the headquarters of the National Restaurant Association” located at the southeast corner of 13th and Oak Streets. They later moved their studio to the Railway Exchange Building located at the southeast corner of 7th and Walnut Avenues.

The Iwerks-Disney studio was off to a good start when Disney and Iwerks noticed a help wanted ad in the *Kansas City Star*. This resulted in Disney taking an animation position at the Kansas City Slide Company in February 1920. Iwerks joined him there a month later.

This was a key career move for Disney as the connections he made there would provide the animation leadership needed for many of his future ventures. In fact, Kansas City Film Ad Service, as it was renamed shortly afterwards, became the training ground for many of the founders

of today's leading animation studios.

Here Disney met Fred Harman, Hugh Harman (his young brother), William McAtee (Red) Lyon, Friz Freleng, Carmen Griffin (Max) Maxwell, and George E. "Jimmy" Lowerre. All of these would be influential in Disney's later success.

Disney's time at Kansas City Film Ad was also important because it helped him shift his skills from commercial art and still cartoons to animation. Walt was hired by the Show Card and Title Men group where he learned rudimentary animation skills.

Disney was trained in stop-motion filming there by George E. "Jimmy" Lowerre, who later worked at the Walt Disney Studios for 28 years as a film editor. Disney worked with jointed paper figures that were photographed with successive changes in position to create animations.

Disney described this process in Timothy S. Susanin's book, *Walt Before Mickey: Disney's Early Years, 1919-1928*.

"Of course," said Walt, "they were very crude things then and I used ...oh sort of little puppet things I used to make little cut-away things and joints were pinned and we'd put them under the camera and we'd maneuver them and we'd make him do things."

Walt and Iwerks set out to learn all they could about animation. Disney wanted to learn more about animating drawn illustrations to create a more natural looking movement.

They checked out E.G. Lutz's recently published book *Animated*



Walt Disney's young staff working away in the Laugh-O-Gram studio.

Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development as well as Eadweard Muybridge's book *Animals in Motion* and pored over the pages to absorb as much learning as possible about achieving natural looking movement.

The Kansas City Public Library still has the Muybridge book in its special collection that was most likely checked out by Walt Disney. Iwerks applied his technical prowess to make immediate improvements to Kansas City Film Ad's photographic process.

Disney literally worked day and night to learn his new craft. He impressed Arthur Vern Cauger, the company's owner, with his clever innovations and convinced Cauger to let him borrow a company camera to experiment with illustrated animations in the garage at the Disney home at 3028 Bellefontaine Ave.

After work, Disney would spend hours late into the evening on

animation projects in the family garage. It was here that Walt developed some local notoriety by creating his Newman Laugh-O-Grams. These were filmed editorial cartoons that poked fun at police practices, bumpy roads and other local issues. The latter versions of these were Walt's first efforts in true animation, and they include some of the few examples of animation completed exclusively by Disney.

Disney's local success with the Newman Laugh-O-Grams encouraged him to establish his own studio. In the fall of 1921, he partnered with his Kansas City Film Ad co-worker Fred Harman to start the KayCee Studio.

Both retained their jobs at Film Ad and worked on KayCee film and animation projects nights and weekends. As he had done in the family garage, Disney recruited teens to work with them at no pay in return for learning the cartooning trade. The KayCee Studio moved at least a few times

in its year of existence, from a room above the Kansas City streetcar barn at 30th & Holmes to a second-floor location above the Standard Phonograph Company at 3239 Troost Ave.

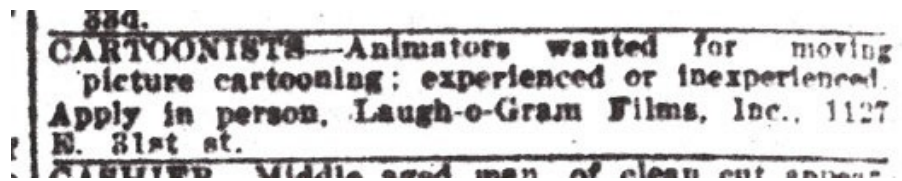
Walt's KayCee Studio experience was noteworthy in that he advanced his animation abilities in his work on the first of his Laugh-O-Grams: Little Red Riding Hood. Walt's Laugh-O-Grams were modern versions of fairy tales loaded with gags and fashioned along the lines of the popular Aesop's Fables animated by Paul Terry, a popular cartoonist in the 1920s.

The KayCee Studio is also where Disney hired Rudy Ising and apprenticed Hugh Harman, Fred Harman's younger brother. These two would later join forces to establish new animation studios that remain major production studios today.

At the KayCee Studio, Walt continued to borrow A.V. Cauger's camera, although by now, Cauger sensed Walt was becoming something of a competitor during his off-the-clock times. Ising recalled that using Cauger's camera wasn't always on the "up and up."

Ising recalled: "Disney used to sneak the camera out at night and we'd shoot at night and then take it back the next morning. The camera was down in the basement; there was a camera room at Film Ad. He (Red Lyon) would hand it out to him (Walt), and he'd put it in the bushes somewhere and then they'd take it, and they'd get it back the next morning."

By early 1922, Disney's local success with the Newman Laugh-



Job ad that ran in March 1922 in the Kansas City Star.

O-Grams and the new Laugh-O-Gram fairy tales convinced him it was time to leave Kansas City Film Ad and work full time establishing a new studio. On May 18, 1922, Disney incorporated Laugh-O-Gram Films, Inc. He raised \$15,000 from local investors and purchased equipment and furnishings for their new studio on the second floor of the new McConahy Building at 1127 East 31st Street.

Meanwhile, Disney worked on building up his own staff for his new Laugh-O-Gram Studio. With the prospect of getting distribution on his new Laugh-O-Gram series, he needed animators. This posed a significant challenge because at this time there was very little going on in animation outside of New York.

Disney quickly pulled in his KayCee Studio colleagues, Rudy Ising and Red Lyon. For additional staff, he ran a want ad for animators in the *Kansas City Star* newspaper that read:

CARTOONISTS—Animators wanted for moving picture cartooning; experienced or inexperienced. Apply in person. Laugh-o-Gram Films, Inc., 1127 E. 31st St.

By today's standards it would seem preposterous to claim that no experience was necessary to fill such a specialized craft. Disney trusted his ability, however, to develop animators as he had

already developed himself, Iwerks, Harmon and Ising.

To fill those openings, he selected an odd lot of young men whose experience included a trolley motorman, a baker, and a draftsman. Three of the five animators he hired had drawn cartoons for their high school yearbooks.

These five new animators, most under 25 years old, were:

Hugh Harmon – (19)

Hugh was Fred Harman's younger brother. He developed an interest in animation due to his brother's work at the Kansas City Film Ad Service. He had done cartooning for his high school yearbook, and he worked after school and weekends with Disney, Ising and Lyon at the KayCee Studios.

Lorey L. Tague – (25)

Tague had been a trolley motorman before being hired as an animator at Laugh-O-Gram.

Carman "Max" Maxwell – (19)

Maxwell had done cartooning for his high school yearbook and had completed some correspondence courses with the W.L. Evans School of Cartooning.

Alexander Wilson Kurfiss – (21)

Kurfiss graduated from Northeast High School and attended the Kansas City Art Institute. He had worked as a draftsman. Previously he had worked as a meter reader

for Kansas City Power & Light.

Otto Louis Walliman – (46)

Walliman was a Swiss citizen and a baker who specialized in drawing backgrounds at Laugh-O-Gram.

In addition to these animators, Disney also hired:

Walt Pfeiffer – (19)

Pfeiffer was Disney's long-time boyhood friend. He had done cartooning for Westport High School's yearbook. He read print materials looking for joke ideas.

Adolph "Jack" Kloepper – (25)

Mr. Mace is arranging for the distribution of a series of twelve Laugh-O-Grams to be released every other week. Laugh-O-Grams are single reel subjects, consisting of stories of modernized fairy tales in Animated Cartoons by Walt Disney. Some of the first releases are "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Four Musicians," "Goldie Locks," "Cinderella," "Jack, the Giant Killer," etc.

Kloepper served as Laugh-O-Gram's business manager.

Disney's plan was to develop a series of Laugh-O-Gram cartoons and win a contract with a New York film distributor.

He took on Leslie Mace as a salesman responsible for winning that distribution contract—a development he announced in a trade publication the summer of 1922.

Mace struggled to win a deal in New York and spent a lot of money in the process. Disney ordered him to return to Kansas



This Laugh-O-Gram cartoon was drawn by Alexander Kurfiss and used to promote the new cartoon series and often used as the opening.

City, but Mace instead struck a deal with Pictorial Clubs, Inc. of Tennessee.

The new distribution deal doomed Laugh-O-Gram Film Studio from the very start. The deal would pay, upon completion, \$11,000 for six Laugh-O-Gram fairy tales.

Pictorial paid \$100 at the signing of the contract, which guaranteed their rights to the six cartoons. They were not required to pay the remaining balance until Jan. 1, 1924 — roughly 15 months later. This created significant cash flow problems.

Though Pictorial was not a mainstream cartoon distributor, the distribution deal created renewed energy and enthusiasm for the new animation studio. By November 1922, Walt added to his staff hiring Iwerks to do lettering titles, Aletha Reynolds to do artwork and Nadine Simpson to serve as a stenographer-keeper.

The studio made great progress on the six new Laugh-O-Grams. During a six-month period in 1922, they completed *The Four Musicians of Bremen*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Jack the Giant Killer*, *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears*, *Puss in Boots* and *Cinderella*, in just six months.

However, by the end of 1922 the studio was struggling to meet expenses. Disney began taking on additional film projects such as the educational film, *Tommy Tucker's Tooth*, local newsreel projects and photographing the babies and youngsters of prominent Kansas City citizens. To help keep the studio afloat, in November 1922, Disney secured a \$2,500 loan from Dr. J.V. Cowles, a local physician and the treasurer of Laugh-O-Gram Studios.

In his effort to find something new to bring in much needed revenue, Disney came up with a unique idea. He created *Alice's Wonderland*, a film in which the

main character, a young girl named Alice, is filmed in live-action, but is inserted into a cartoon world. It was very innovative to mix live-action film with cartoon animation.

Disney knew that he could convince New York investors to distribute a series of these *Alice Comedies* if he could just show them an example of this new technique. By April 1923, work was underway on the project. With a diminishing staff and mounting debt, Walt pushed to get the film produced. A New York distributor, Margaret J. Winkler, was very interested.

By early 1923, Laugh-O-Gram's financial situation was deteriorating. On Jan. 4, 1923, the landlord who owned the McConahy building sued for unpaid rent. Employees began quitting due to unpaid salaries. Disney could no longer afford to pay boarding house rent, so he started sleeping in his studio. He would run up a food tab at the Forest Inn Café on the first floor of the McConahy building. When his credit turned sour there, he would eat beans from a can and leftover bread. Once a week he would pay a dime to take a bath at Union Station. By May, he moved the studio back to 3241 Troost above Peiser's Restaurant where

he had worked in his KayCee Studio.

By June, Margaret Winkler was ready to meet with Disney to see *Alice's Wonderland*, but the film wasn't ready. Disney sent her letters promising she would soon be able to see the film, but with a depleted staff the project remained uncompleted.

By now, Pictorial Clubs was in bankruptcy leaving Disney unpaid for the earlier work. In July, Disney decided to move to California where his brother Roy lived while being treated for tuberculosis. Walt moved in with his Uncle Robert who lived in Hollywood and decided he would try to break into movies as a director.

In October, Laugh-O-Gram filed for bankruptcy. Disney had done everything he could think of to make his Kansas City animation studio succeed. Ultimately, he was not able to generate a steady stream of



Walt Disney created this advertising logo while still experimenting with animation working out of the garage behind the family home at 3028 Bellefontaine Ave. The image is drawn on the corner of an envelope.

revenue until he could find that animation "hit" that would assure sustainable success.

Fortunes changed once he got to California. The *Alice's Wonderland* reel that Disney worked so hard to finish in Kansas City was picked up for distribution by Margaret Winkler soon after Disney arrived in Los Angeles. This assured the success of the new Disney Brother's Studio he formed with his brother Roy in October 1923.

Soon Disney would contact most of his Kansas City animator friends to join him in his new California studio.

Disney spent four years in Kansas City.

Laugh-O-Gram would always be remembered as "the cradle of animation" because of the pioneering work that Disney and his staff performed in Kansas City.

It provided the foundation to create the new animation studios that remain the world's leaders, still today.



A 1920s view of the Conahy Building at 31st and Forest, Kansas City, Mo. The Laugh-O-Gram offices and studios were located on the second floor.