

The African Telatelist

Newsletter 207 of the African Telately Association – September 2015.

Walter Elias "Walt" Disney – Part 1 (*W.Stobrawe*)

Walter Elias "Walt" Disney (/ˈdɪzni/;

December 5, 1901 – December 15, 1966) was an American business magnate, animator, cartoonist, producer, director, screenwriter, philanthropist and voice actor. A major figure within the American animation industry and throughout the world, he is regarded as an international icon, well known for his influence and contributions to the field of entertainment during the 20th century.

As a Hollywood business mogul, he, along with his brother Roy O. Disney, co-founded Walt Disney Productions, which later became one of the best-known motion picture production companies in the world. The corporation is now known as The Walt Disney Company and had an annual revenue of approximately US\$45 billion in the 2013 financial year.

As an animator and entrepreneur, Disney was particularly noted as a film producer and a popular showman, as well as an innovator in animation and theme park design.

He and his staff created some of the world's most well-known fictional characters including Mickey Mouse, for whom Disney himself provided the original voice. During his lifetime he received four honorary Academy Awards and won 22 Academy Awards from a total of 59 nominations, including a record four in one year,^[5] giving him more awards and nominations than any other individual in history.

Disney also won seven Emmy Awards and gave his name to the Disneyland and Walt Disney World Resort theme parks in the U.S., as well as the international resorts like Tokyo Disney Resort, Disneyland Paris, and Hong Kong Disneyland.

He died on December 15, 1966, from lung cancer in Burbank, California. A year later, construction of the Walt Disney World Resort began in Florida. His brother, Roy Disney, inaugurated the Magic Kingdom on October 1, 1971.

1901–1937: Beginnings

Childhood



Walt's parents, Elias and Flora (Call) Disney

Disney was born on December 5, 1901, at 2156 N. Tripp Avenue in Chicago's Hermosa community area to Irish-Canadian father Elias Disney and Flora Call Disney, who was of German and English descent. His great-grandfather, Arundel Elias Disney, had emigrated from Gowran, County Kilkenny, Ireland where he was born in 1801. Arundel

Disney was a descendant of Robert d'Isigny, a Frenchman who had travelled to England with William the Conqueror in 1066. With the d'Isigny name anglicized as "Disney", the family settled in a village now known as Norton Disney, south of the city of Lincoln, in the county of Lincolnshire.

In 1878, Disney's father Elias had moved from Huron County, Ontario, Canada to the United States at first seeking gold in California before finally settling down to farm with his parents near Ellis, Kansas, until 1884.

Elias worked for the Union Pacific Railroad and married Flora Call on January 1, 1888, in Acron, Florida, just 40 miles north of where Walt Disney World would ultimately be developed. The family moved to Chicago, Illinois, in 1890, hometown of Elias' brother Robert who helped Elias financially for most of Walt's early life. In 1906, when Walt was four, Elias and his family moved to a farm in Marceline, Missouri, where his brother Roy had recently purchased farmland.

In Marceline, Disney developed his love for drawing with one of the family's neighbors, a retired doctor named "Doc" Sherwood, paying him to draw pictures of Sherwood's horse, Rupert. His interest in trains also developed in Marceline, a town that owed its existence to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway which ran through it.

Walt would put his ear to the tracks in anticipation of the coming train then try and spot his uncle, engineer Michael Martin, conducting the train.



10-year old Walt Disney (center right) at a gathering of Kansas City newsboys in 1912.

The Disneys remained in Marceline for four years, before moving to Kansas City in 1911 where Walt and his younger sister Ruth attended the Benton Grammar School. At school he met Walter Pfeiffer who came from a family of theatre aficionados, and introduced Walt to the world of vaudeville and motion pictures. Before long Walt was spending more time at the Pfeiffers' than at home. As well as attending Saturday courses at the Kansas City Art Institute, Walt often took Ruth to Electric Park, 15 blocks from their home, which Disney would later acknowledge as a major influence of his design of Disneyland.

Teenage years

In 1917, Elias acquired shares in the O-Zell jelly factory in Chicago and moved his family back to the city, where in the fall Disney began his freshman year at McKinley High School and took night courses at the Chicago Art Institute. He became the cartoonist for the school newspaper, drawing patriotic topics and focusing on World War I. Despite dropping out of high school at the age of sixteen to join the army, Disney was rejected for being underage.

After his rejection by the army, Walt and a friend decided to join the Red Cross. Soon after joining he was sent to France for a year, where he drove an ambulance, but only after the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.



Disney as an ambulance driver immediately after World War I

Hoping to find work outside the Chicago O-Zell factory, in 1919 Walt moved back to Kansas City to begin his artistic career. After considering

whether to become an actor or a newspaper artist, he decided on a career as a newspaper artist, drawing political caricatures or comic strips. But when nobody wanted to hire him as either an artist or even as an ambulance driver, his brother Roy, then working in a local bank, got Walt a temporary job through a bank colleague at the Pesmen-Rubin Art Studio where he created advertisements for newspapers, magazines, and movie theaters. At Pesmen-Rubin he met cartoonist Ubbe Iwerks and when their time at the studio expired, they decided to start their own commercial company together.

In January 1920, Disney and Iwerks formed a short-lived company called, "Iwerks-Disney Commercial Artists". However, following a rough start, Disney left temporarily to earn money at the Kansas City Film Ad Company, and was soon joined by Iwerks who was not able to run their business alone. While working for the Kansas City Film Ad Company, where he made commercials based on cutout animations, Disney became interested in animation, and decided to become an animator. The owner of the Ad Company, A.V. Cauger, allowed him to borrow a camera from work to experiment with at home. After reading the Edwin G. Lutz book *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development*, Disney considered cel animation to be much more promising than the cutout animation he was doing for Cauger. Walt eventually decided to open his own animation business, and recruited a fellow co-worker at the Kansas City Film Ad Company, Fred Harman, as his first employee. Walt and Harman then secured a deal with local theater owner Frank L. Newman, arguably the most popular "showman" in the Kansas City area at the time, to screen their cartoons at his local theater, which they titled *Laugh-O-Grams*.

Laugh-O-Gram Studio

Presented as "Newman Laugh-O-Grams", Disney's cartoons became widely popular in the Kansas City area and through their success, he was able to acquire his own studio, also called Laugh-O-Gram, for which he hired a number of additional animators, including Fred Harman's brother Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising, and his close friend Ubbe Iwerks. Unfortunately, studio profits were insufficient to cover the high salaries paid to employees. Unable to successfully manage money, Disney's studio became loaded with debt and wound up bankrupt whereupon he decided to set up a studio in the movie industry's capital city, Hollywood, California.

Film and business career in Hollywood

As aspiring animators and entrepreneurs, Disney and his brother Roy pooled their money and set up a cartoon studio in Hollywood where they needed to find a distributor for Walt's new Alice Comedies, which he had started making while in Kansas City but never got to distribute. Disney sent an unfinished print to New York distributor Margaret Winkler, who promptly wrote back to him that she was keen on a distribution deal for more live-action/animated shorts based upon *Alice's Wonderland*.

Alice Comedies

Virginia Davis, the live-action star of *Alice's Wonderland* and her family relocated from Kansas City to Hollywood at Disney's request, as did Iwerks and his family. This was the beginning of the Disney Brothers' Studio located on Hyperion Avenue in the Silver Lake district, where it remained until 1939. In 1925, Disney hired a young woman named Lillian Bounds to ink and paint celluloid. After a brief courtship, the pair married that same year.

The new series, *Alice Comedies*, proved reasonably successful, and featured both Dawn O'Day and Margie Gay as Alice with Lois

Hardwick also briefly assuming the role. By the time the series ended in 1927, its focus was more on the animated characters and in particular a cat named Julius who resembled Felix the Cat, rather than the live-action Alice.

Oswald the Lucky Rabbit

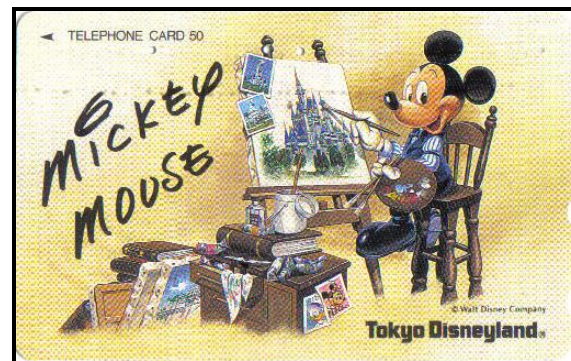
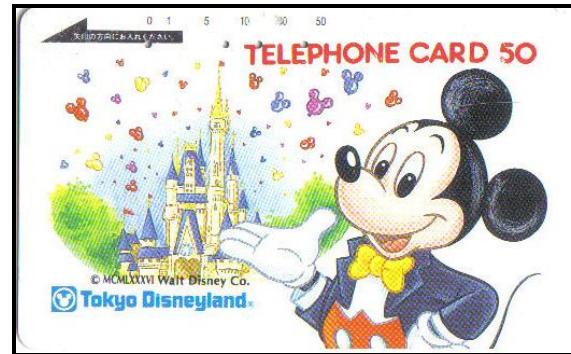
By 1927, Charles Mintz had married Margaret Winkler and assumed control of her business. He then ordered a new, all-animated series to be put into production for distribution through Universal Pictures. The new series, *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, was an almost instant success, and the character, Oswald – drawn and created by Iwerks – became a popular figure. The Disney studio expanded and Walt re-hired Harman, Rudolph Ising, Carman Maxwell, and Friz Freleng from Kansas City.

Disney went to New York in February 1928 to negotiate a higher fee per short and was shocked when Mintz told him that not only did he want to reduce the fee he paid Disney per short but also that he had most of his main animators, including Harman, Ising, Maxwell, and Freleng—but not Iwerks, who refused to leave Disney—under contract and would start his own studio if Disney did not accept the reduced production budgets.

Universal, not Disney, owned the Oswald trademark, and could make the films **without** Walt. Disney declined Mintz's offer and as a result lost most of his animation staff whereupon he found himself on his own again.

It subsequently took his company 78 years to get back the rights to the Oswald character when in 2006 the Walt Disney Company reacquired the rights to Oswald the Lucky Rabbit from NBC Universal, through a trade for longtime ABC sports commentator Al Michaels.

Mickey Mouse



Above: 2 x Mickey Mouse phonecards from Japan

After losing the rights to Oswald, Disney felt the need to develop a new character to replace him, which was based on a mouse he had adopted as a pet while working in his Laugh-O-Gram studio in Kansas City. Ub Iwerks reworked the sketches made by Disney to make the character easier to animate although Mickey's voice and personality were provided by Disney himself until 1947.

In the words of one Disney employee, "Ub designed Mickey's physical appearance, but Walt gave him his soul". Besides Oswald and Mickey, a similar mouse-character is seen in the *Alice Comedies*, which featured "Ike the Mouse". Moreover, the first Flip the Frog cartoon called Fiddlesticks showed a Mickey Mouse look-alike playing fiddle. The initial films were animated by Iwerks with his name prominently featured on the title cards. Originally named "Mortimer", the mouse was later renamed "Mickey" by Lillian Disney, who thought that the name Mortimer did not sound appealing. Mortimer eventually became the name of

Mickey's rival for Minnie – taller than his renowned adversary and speaking with a Brooklyn accent.

The first animated short to feature Mickey, *Plane Crazy* was a silent film like all of Disney's previous works. After failing to find a distributor for the short and its follow-up, *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, Disney created a Mickey cartoon with sound called *Steamboat Willie*. A businessman named Pat Powers provided Disney with both distribution and Cinephone, a sound-synchronization process. *Steamboat Willie* became an instant success, and *Plane Crazy*, *The Galloping Gaucho*, and all subsequent Mickey cartoons were released with soundtracks.

After the release of *Steamboat Willie*, Disney successfully used sound in all of his subsequent cartoons, and Cinephone also became the new distributor for Disney's early sound cartoons. Mickey soon eclipsed Felix the Cat as the world's most popular cartoon character and by 1930, despite their having sound, cartoons featuring Felix had faded from the screen after failing to gain attention. Mickey's popularity would subsequently skyrocket in the early 1930s.

Silly Symphonies

Following in the footsteps of *Mickey Mouse* series, a series of musical shorts titled, *Silly Symphonies* were released in 1929. The first, *The Skeleton Dance* was entirely drawn and animated by Iwerks, who was also responsible for drawing the majority of cartoons released by Disney in 1928 and 1929. Although both series were successful, the Disney studio thought it was not receiving its rightful share of profits from Pat Powers, and in 1930, Disney signed a new distribution deal with Columbia Pictures. The original basis of the cartoons was their musical novelty with the first *Silly Symphony* cartoons featuring scores by Carl Stalling.

Iwerks was soon lured by Powers into opening his own studio with an exclusive contract, while Stalling would also later leave Disney to join Iwerks. Iwerks launched his *Flip the Frog* series with the first voiced color cartoon *Fiddlesticks*, filmed in two-strip Technicolor. Iwerks also created two other cartoon series, *Willie Whopper* and the *Comicolor*. In 1936, Iwerks shut down his studio in order to work on various projects dealing with animation technology. He would return to Disney in 1940 and go on to pioneer a number of film processes and specialized animation technologies in the studio's research and development department.

By 1932, although Mickey Mouse had become a relatively popular cinema character, *Silly Symphonies* was not as successful. The same year also saw competition increase as Max Fleischer's flapper cartoon character, Betty Boop, gained popularity among theater audiences. Fleischer, considered Disney's main rival in the 1930s, was also the father of Richard Fleischer, whom Disney would later hire to direct his 1954 film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Meanwhile, Columbia Pictures dropped the distribution of Disney cartoons to be replaced by United Artists. In late 1932, Herbert Kalmus, who had just completed work on the first three-strip technicolor camera, approached Walt and convinced him to reshoot the black and white *Flowers and Trees* in three-strip Technicolor.

Flowers and Trees would go on to be a phenomenal success and would also win the first Academy Award for Best Short Subject: Cartoons in 1932. After the release of *Flowers and Trees*, all subsequent *Silly Symphony* cartoons were in color while Disney was also able to negotiate a two-year deal with Technicolor, giving him the sole right to use their three-strip process, a period eventually extended to five years.

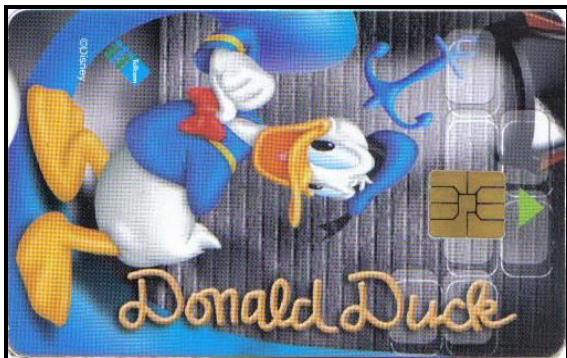
Through *Silly Symphonies*, Disney also created his most successful cartoon short of all time, *The Three Little Pigs* (1933). The cartoon ran in theaters for many months, featuring the hit song that became the anthem of the Great Depression, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf".



One of two stars dedicated to Walt Disney on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

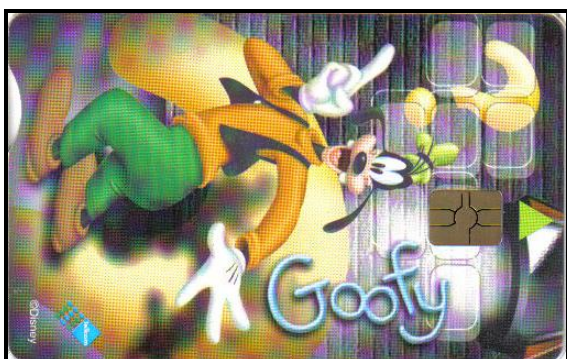
First Academy Award

In 1932, Disney received a special Academy Award for the creation of "Mickey Mouse", a series which switched to color in 1935 and soon launched spin-offs for supporting characters such as Donald Duck,



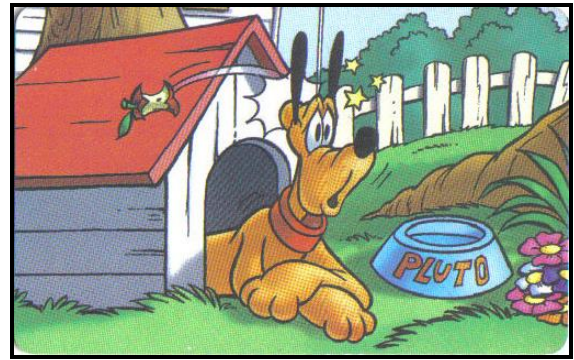
Above: South African Phonecard

Goofy,



Above: South African Phonecard

And Pluto.



Above: Phonecard from Argentina

Pluto and Donald became standalone cartoons in 1937, with Goofy following in 1939. Of all Mickey's partners, Donald Duck, who first teamed up with Mickey in the 1934 cartoon, *Orphan's Benefit*, was arguably the most popular, going on to become Disney's second most successful cartoon character of all time.

Children

The Disneys' first attempt at pregnancy ended in miscarriage. Lillian became pregnant again and gave birth to a daughter, Diane Marie Disney, on December 18, 1933. Later, the Disneys adopted Sharon Mae Disney (December 31, 1936 – February 16, 1993).

Diane married Ron Miller at the age of 20 and is known as Diane Disney Miller. The Millers established a winery called Silverado Vineyards in California. Diane and Ron Miller had seven children: Christopher, Joanna, Tamara, Jennifer, Walter, Ronald and Patrick. Years later, Diane went on to become the cofounder of The Walt Disney Family Museum, with the aid of her children. The museum was created to preserve her father's image and reach out to millions of Disney fans worldwide. The museum displays a chronological view of Walt Disney's life through personal artifacts, interactive kiosks and various animations. Diane died November 19, 2013, of complications from a fall at home.

Sharon Mae Disney was born December 31, 1936, in Los Angeles, California and was later

adopted by the Disneys, due to Lillian's several birth complications. In 1950, Sharon went on to star as herself in the Walt Disney Studios special *One Hour in Wonderland*. Sharon married Robert Brown in 1958, with whom she had one child, and they remained married until his death in 1967. Sharon married William Lund in 1969 and had two children with him, but six years later they divorced.

Sharon was a philanthropist and had contributed to charities such as the Marianne Frostig Center of Educational Therapy and the Curtis School foundation. In 1993 at the age of 57, Sharon died from cancer at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California. After Sharon's death, her estate donated \$11 million to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where she was a member of the board of trustees for almost two decades. Sharon's donation was commemorated by renaming the School of Dance the Sharon D. Lund School of Dance.

1937–1941: Golden age of animation

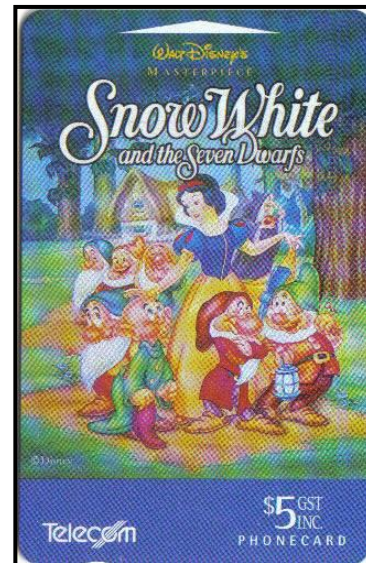
"Disney's Folly": *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*



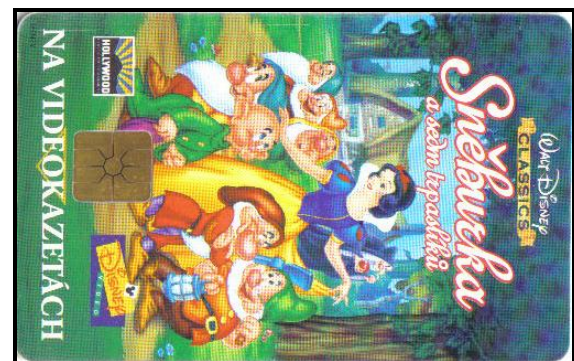
Walt Disney introduces each of the Seven Dwarfs in a scene from the original 1937 *Snow White* theatrical trailer.

Following the creation of two cartoon series, in 1934 Disney began planning a full-length feature. The following year, opinion polls showed that another cartoon series, *Popeye the Sailor*, produced by Max Fleischer, was more popular than Mickey Mouse. Nevertheless, Disney was able to put Mickey back on top as well as increase his popularity by colorizing and partially

redesigning the character to become what was considered his most appealing design to date. When the film industry learned of Disney's plans to produce an *animated* feature-length version of *Snow White*,



Above: New Zealand Phonecard



Above: Phonecard from Czech Republic

they were certain that the endeavor would destroy the Disney Studio and dubbed the project "Disney's Folly". Both Lillian and Roy tried to talk Disney out of the project, but he continued plans for the feature, employing Chouinard Art Institute professor Don Graham to start a training operation for the studio staff.

Disney then used the *Silly Symphonies* as a platform for experiments in realistic human animation, distinctive character animation, special effects, and the use of specialized processes and apparatus such as the multiplane

camera – a new technique first used by Disney in the 1937 *Silly Symphonies* short *The Old Mill*.

All of this development and training was used to increase quality at the studio and to ensure that the feature film would match Disney's quality expectations. Entitled *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the feature went into full production in 1934 and continued until mid-1937, when the studio ran out of money. To obtain the funding to complete *Snow White*, Disney had to show a rough cut of the motion picture to loan officers. The film premiered at the Carthay Circle Theater on December 21, 1937 and at its conclusion the audience gave *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* a standing ovation. *Snow White*, the first animated feature in America made in Technicolor, was released in February 1938 under a new distribution deal with RKO Radio Pictures. RKO had been the distributor for Disney cartoons in 1936, after it closed down the Van Beuren Studios in exchange for distribution. The film became the most successful motion picture of 1938 and earned over \$8 million on its initial release, the equivalent of \$134,033,100 today.

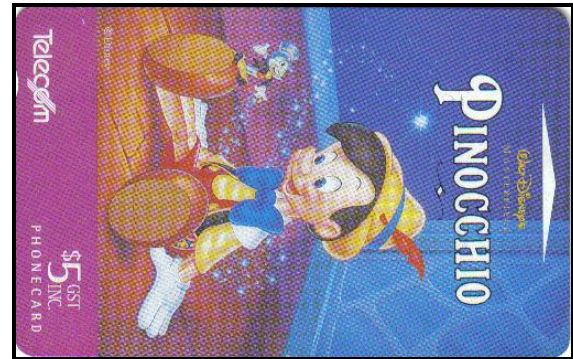
Golden age of animation

Following the success of *Snow White*, for which Disney received one full-size, and seven miniature Oscar statuettes, he was able to build a new campus for the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, which opened for business on December 24, 1939.

Snow White was not only the peak of Disney's success, but also ushered in a period that would later be known as the Golden Age of Animation for the studio. Feature animation staff, having just completed *Pinocchio*, continued work on *Fantasia* and *Bambi* as well as the early production stages of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *Wind in the Willows* while the shorts staff carried on working on the *Mickey Mouse*, *Donald Duck*, *Goofy*, and *Pluto* cartoon

series, ending the *Silly Symphonies* at this time. Animator Fred Moore had redesigned Mickey Mouse in the late 1930s after Donald Duck overtook him in popularity among theater audiences.

Pinocchio and *Fantasia*

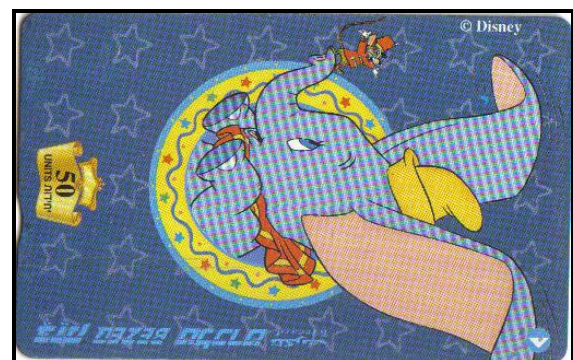


Above: New Zealand Phonecard



Above: United Kingdom Phonecard.

followed *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* into the movie theaters in 1940, but both proved financial disappointments. The inexpensive *Dumbo*



Above: Phonecard from Israel

was then planned as an income generator, but during production most of the animation

staff went on strike, permanently straining relations between Disney and his artists.

1941–1945: World War II era

In 1941, the U.S. State Department sent Disney and a group of animators to South America as part of its Good Neighbor policy, at the same time guaranteeing financing for the resultant movie, *Saludos Amigos*.

Shortly after the release of *Dumbo* in October 1941, the US entered World War II.

The U.S. Army and Navy Bureau of Aeronautics contracted most of the Disney studio's facilities where the staff created training and instruction films for the military, home-front morale-boosting shorts such as *Der Fuehrer's Face* and the 1943 feature film *Victory Through Air Power*. Military films did not generate income, and the feature film *Bambi*



Above: Phonecard from Argentina

underperformed on its release in April 1942. Disney successfully re-issued *Snow White* in 1944, establishing a seven-year re-release tradition for his features. In 1945, *The Three Caballeros* was the last animated feature released by the studio during the war.

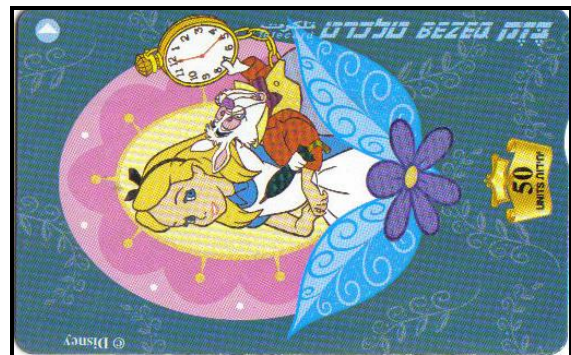
In 1944, Encyclopaedia Britannica publisher William Benton entered into unsuccessful negotiations with Disney to make six to twelve educational films per annum. Disney was asked by the US Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs to make an educational film

about the Amazon Basin, which resulted in the 1944 animated short, *The Amazon Awakens*.

1945–1955: Post-war period

Disney studios also created inexpensive package films, containing collections of cartoon shorts, and issued them to theaters during this period. These included *Make Mine Music* (1946), *Melody Time* (1948), *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947) and *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949). The latter had only two sections, the first based on *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, and the second on *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving. During this period, Disney also ventured into full-length dramatic films that mixed live action and animated scenes, including *Song of the South* and *So Dear to My Heart*. After the war ended, Mickey's popularity would also fade.

By the late 1940s, the studio had recovered enough to continue production on the full-length features *Alice in Wonderland*

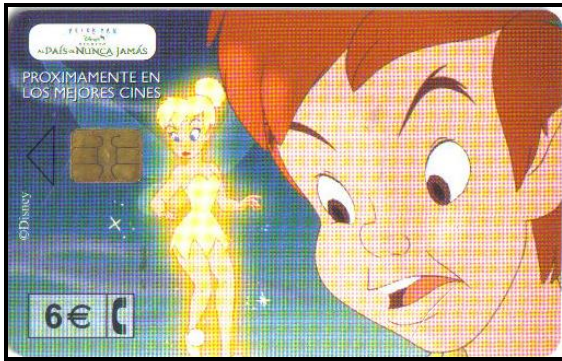


Above: Phonecard from Israel

and *Peter Pan*,

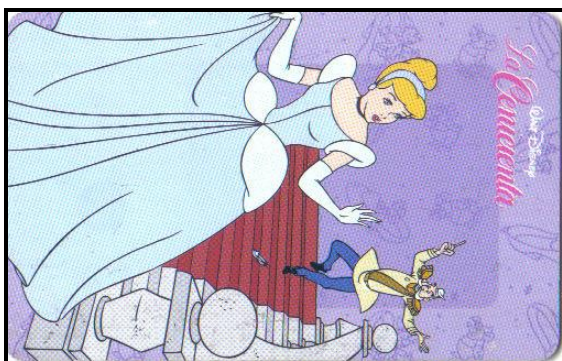
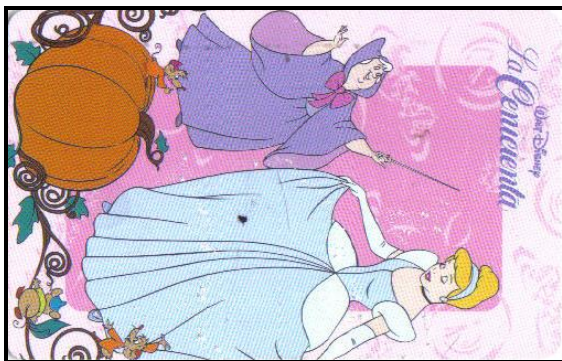


Above: Phonecard from Venezuela



Above: French Phonecard

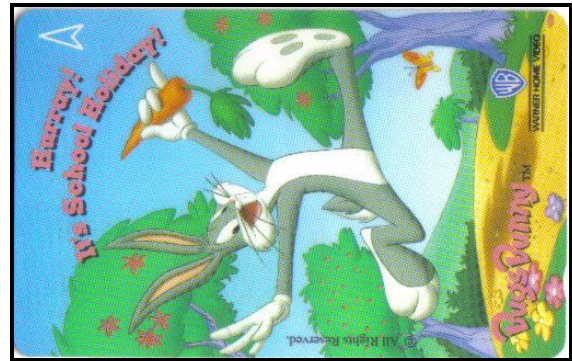
both of which had been shelved during the war years. Work also began on *Cinderella*,



Above: 2 x Phonecards from Argentina

which became Disney's most successful film since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

In 1948 the studio also initiated a series of live-action nature films, titled *True-Life Adventures*, with *On Seal Island* the first. Despite its resounding success with feature films, the studio's animation shorts were no longer as popular as they once were, with people paying more attention to Warner Bros. and their animation star Bugs Bunny.



Above: Phonecard from Singapore (NB: Warner Brothers)

By 1942, Leon Schlesinger Productions, which produced the Warner Bros. cartoons, had become the country's most popular animation studio. However, while Bugs Bunny's popularity rose in the 1940s, so did Donald Duck's, a character who would replace Mickey Mouse as Disney's star character by 1949.

During the mid-1950s, Disney produced educational films on the space program in collaboration with NASA rocket designer Wernher von Braun: *Man in Space* and *Man and the Moon* in 1955, and *Mars and Beyond* in 1957.



Walt Disney meets Wernher von Braun in 1954.