

## HISTORY &amp; CULTURE

## Happy Birthday, Mickey Mouse! A Look at the Mouse That Built an Empire

Today in 1928 Mickey Mouse made his official debut in "Steamboat Willie." To celebrate Mickey's 86th birthday, here's a look at how Walt Disney created America's favorite mouse.

LAURIE ULSTER · NOV 18, 2014

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Walt Disney, with Mickey Mouse, circa 1930. (Photo: United Artists/Photofest)

Two different people have taken credit for giving Mickey Mouse his first name. History has it that [Walt Disney's](#) wife Lillian came up with it because she thought his original name, Mortimer, was too pompous. But child-star-turned-movie-star [Mickey Rooney](#) frequently claimed that it was his meeting with Walt in 1920 that provided the inspiration. Walt, being a very smart man, sided with his wife on that one.

Whether it was Lillian Disney or Mickey Rooney, it doesn't matter: to this day, Mickey Mouse is one of the most well-known characters around the globe, surpassing even Santa Claus in recognizability here in the United States. He's also the most frequently used write-in candidate in American local elections, still topping the list as recently as November of 2014. (Cohort Donald Duck is a close second.) By 1987, the state of Georgia actually had to make it illegal to vote for Mickey, and Wisconsin is apparently considering similar legislation. Good luck! Despite his tiny size and falsetto voice, Mickey Mouse is an unstoppable force.

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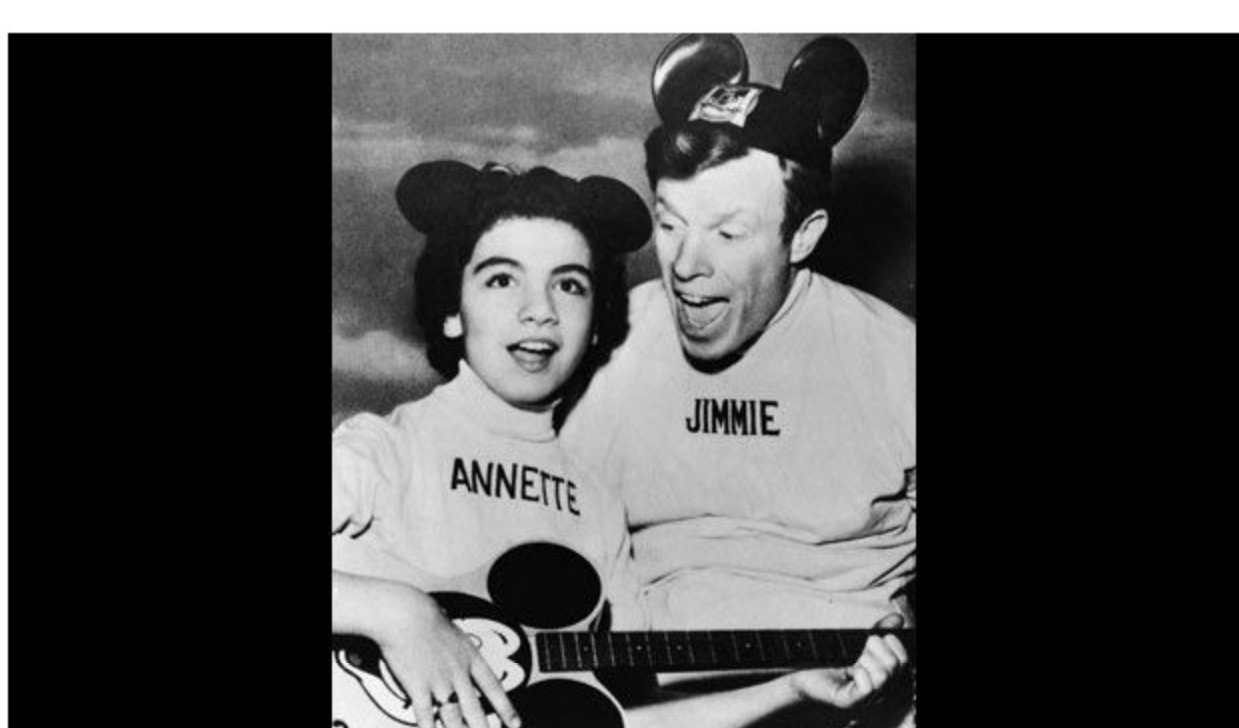
Oh Mickey, You're So Fine...

Before there was Mickey, Walt Disney created another character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, for film producer Charles Mintz. Oswald's ears were longer than Mickey's (as befitting a rabbit), as was his nose, and his feet were black and shoeless, but his face bore an unmistakable resemblance to what would become the Walt Disney Company's most iconic image. While Oswald was Disney's creation, Universal legally owned him. When the Disney Brothers Studio asked for more money, Mintz refused and took ownership of the character, and retained almost all of Disney's employees.

Determined not to make the mistake of giving up the rights to one of his creations again, Walt and his remaining animator, Ub Iwerks, went back to the drawing board, and transformed their rabbit into a mouse. They produced a few shorts that didn't get much attention, but that changed when *Steamboat Willie* premiered in 1928. Named after [Buster Keaton's](#) *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* and inspired by the very first "talkie" *The Jazz Singer*, it was the first cartoon with synchronized sound, and became an instant hit. With Disney's genius for marketing, Mickey became a national fad by the end of the year, with his own line of merchandise. His cartoons ran before the main features in movie theaters and he became so popular that moviegoers would often sit through a movie twice to see him again, or would check before buying their tickets to make sure that "a Mickey" was going to play at the beginning.

Interestingly, Mickey didn't actually speak until 1929's *The Carnival Kid*. His first words were, "Hot dogs! Hot dogs!" and his voice was provided by Carl Stalling, the composer and arranger now known for his work on the legendary Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons. After that, Walt Disney himself provided Mickey's voice, up until 1946 when he could no longer squeeze it into his schedule.

In January of 1930, the now legendary Mickey Mouse Club was created. Within a few months there were 60 theaters hosting clubs across the country, and within two years, there were over a million members enjoying the club song, secret handshakes, a special greeting, and even a code of behavior. The TV series, basically a variety show for kids, didn't launch until the 1950s, but clearly it resonated, returning multiple times across the decades. Famous on-screen members included Dennis Day, [Annette Funicello](#), Don Grady (of *My Three Sons*), [Keri Russell](#), [Christina Aguilera](#), [Ryan Gosling](#), [Britney Spears](#), and [Justin Timberlake](#).



Famous Mouseketeer Annette Funicello sings along with Mickey Mouse Club emcee Jimmie Dodd, who also wrote the show's popular theme song. (Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Hollywood quickly knew it had a star in its midst, and in 1932, awarded Walt Disney an honorary Oscar for creating Mickey. Disney would win three more Disney Awards, plus 22 Competitive "regular" Oscars, one of them posthumous; he still holds the record for the most nominations and wins by an individual, ever.

But Mickey made enemies as well as friends. A Nazi newspaper in Germany printed this in the mid-1930s, which would later be featured on the opening page of author Art Spiegelman's second volume of his graphic novel, "Maus":

"Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed...Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal...Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!"

Being an enemy of the Nazis hardly hurt him. In 1935, popular as ever, Mickey got his first makeover courtesy of animator Fred Moore, who shortened his nose, reshaped his body, added pupils to his eyes, and gave him his white gloves to help distinguish his hands from the rest of his body. These changes were all prominent in 1940's *Fantasia*, in which Mickey, now tail-less, starred as the Sorcerer's Apprentice. A feat of animation genius, the movie featured animation and sound techniques that are still considered artistically unmatched.



Mickey as the Sorcerer's Apprentice in 1940's "Fantasia." (Photo: Walt Disney Productions/Photofest)

Always one of the good guys, Mickey became a patriot during World War II. He appeared on posters advertising war bonds and promoting national security, but according to multiple sources (and frequently denied by others), his biggest contribution came on D-Day itself, when his name was allegedly the password used among the senior officers in the Allied Forces.

Once the war was over, things lightened up, and Mickey was free to focus on his cartoon adventures with Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto. His star has shone brightly ever since. In 1978, in honor of his 50th anniversary, he became the first animated character to get his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

While Disney Studios are now famous for full-length features like *Aladdin*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Frozen*, *The Princess and The Frog*, and dozens more, Mickey is still the image most closely associated with the company and remains the official mascot of all Disney theme parks. The next generation of fans is watching him on TV on *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, and he's appeared in video games, comic books, feature films, endless varieties of merchandise, and has had cameos, either as himself or as a hidden Easter egg, in multiple movies and television shows. The Walt Disney Company has morphed from an animation studio into an unrivaled empire, but the man who started it all never forgot its origins:

"I only hope that we don't lose sight of one thing - that it was all started by a mouse." - Walt Disney

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