

“I’M NOT WALT DISNEY ANYMORE!”

At the end of 1965, Walt celebrated his sixty-fourth birthday, and Roy O. Disney, age seventy-two, began to plan for his own retirement. The presumptive future CEO, Card Walker, called me and the Studio’s graphics leader, Bob Moore, to his office. “We have to let the media, our fans, and the entertainment industry know that as great a talent as Walt is, he’s not the *only* creative person at Disney,” Card told us. “Let’s use the annual report to start the dialogue.”

Bob Moore and I were good soldiers. With Card’s direction, we identified the company’s top creative talent, and developed a plan to photograph them at work on their current projects. Some of the pictures would be with Walt, some without. There was Bill Walsh, Don DaGradi, and Bob Stevenson—the *Mary Poppins* team—in live-action films; Dick and Bob Sherman, the Academy Award-winning

songwriters; the “Nine Old Men” in Disney animation—all were still working, although Marc Davis had moved to Imagineering; and John Hench, Claude Coats, and Davis at Imagineering. The photographs told the story, and soon, with Bob Moore’s page layouts and my captions identifying the talent, we accompanied Card to review the concept with Walt. He listened patiently—and said, “No.”

“Look,” Walt told us, “I don’t want people to say ‘that’s a Bill Walsh production for Disney,’ or ‘that’s a John Hench design for Disneyland.’ I’ve spent my whole life building the image of entertainment and product by Walt Disney. Now Walt Disney is a thing, an image, an expectation by our fans. It’s *all* Walt Disney—we all think alike in the ultimate pattern. *I’m not Walt Disney anymore.*”

In the end, the pictures still told the story in the annual report. Walt okayed the images and caption copy identifying the Disney project only. No names were used; no individuals were identified or credited in the photos. We all got the message.

In thinking about this portion of the book, I realized that few people in the entertainment world have been written about as frequently as Walt Disney. I asked Richard Benefield, then executive director of the extraordinary Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco, and Becky Cline, director of the Walt Disney Archives at The Walt Disney Company, to provide the number of biographies they believe have been written about Walt. Despite his death more than forty years ago, the number seemingly expands like the Flubber in his 1961 film *The Absent-Minded Professor*; they estimate the biographies at fifty-two, ranging from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Diane Disney Miller’s *The Story of Walt Disney* and

Bob Thomas’s *Walt Disney: An American Original*) to the twenty-first century (Harrison Price’s 2003 *Walt’s Revolution! By the Numbers* and Neal Gabler’s 2006 *Walt Disney—the Triumph of the American Imagination*, the latter a “triumph” in 851 pages that was *not* well received by the Walt Disney family).

While everything worth knowing about Walt Disney hasn’t been written, I’m going to tell only personal stories—that is, those experienced directly by me or my peers. Most of these stories have never appeared in print. But I can’t help starting with several of my favorite Walt stories told to me by those who were there, illustrating his multidimensional character:

- One of the first Disney traveling art exhibits, “The Art of Animation,” was about to open in Denver, Colorado. Walt attended the opening, but arrived in Denver the night before for a final check of the exhibit. At breakfast the next morning, he joined the installation team, which had already ordered their food. Walt made his choice; before the waitress could leave the table, all four of the installation team, one by one, changed his order with a “that sounds good, I’ll have that too!” comment. Now there were five identical breakfast orders. “So,” Walt said, “it’s going to be *one of those days!*” And he was gone.
- A Disney Studio television producer was unhappy because Walt did not consider him to be “creative.” Determined to change Walt’s view, and recalling Walt’s own handiwork on his backyard trains and miniatures built in the workshop barn at his Holmby Hills home, the producer spent weeks making a model to show Walt. He arrived early one morning and set up his work in Walt’s outer office, insisting that Walt view his