

The Obscure History of Mickey Mouse

The Man Who First Drew Disney's Iconic Character is Not Exactly a Household Name But Ub Iwerks' Granddaughter Is Out to Change That.

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On a wind-swept morning, Leslie Iwerks drives her white Jeep Cherokee down San Fernando Road on the outskirts of Burbank. She navigates surface streets for a 10-minute trip between Iwerks Entertainment and the Walt Disney Studios. By L.A. standards, it is a commute barely worth mentioning. For Iwerks, the four-mile journey symbolizes a lifetime of work. Make that two lifetimes.

Her grandfather occupies an obscure niche in pop culture history, a position that Iwerks has long wanted to change. The name of his creation--Mickey Mouse--is known and beloved the world over, but the role he played has long faded from public memory. For many decades, only specialist film historians or impassioned students of animation recalled his work.

It's not the same with Walt Disney. But at one time he, too, was a struggling, unknown producer. He relied heavily on the combined efforts of his brother Roy and a taciturn man with whom the bonds of friendship were formed during their apprenticeship days in 1920s Kansas City, Mo. The taciturn man was Ub Iwerks, and it was he who designed Mickey Mouse and drew "Plane Crazy," "The Gallopin' Gaucho" and "Steamboat Willie." The first three Mickey Mouse cartoons were do-or-die efforts by the nascent Disney Studios. The public responded with an outpouring of affection for Disney and his cartoons that can only be compared with Beatlemania. Ub got lost in the shuffle.

"History gets lost awfully quick unless you work to keep it alive in people's memory," says Roy E. Disney, vice chairman of Walt Disney Co. and Walt's only nephew.



Enter Leslie Iwerks. In 1999, she wrote, directed and produced "The Hand Behind the Mouse: The Ub Iwerks Story," a documentary celebrating the life and achievements of her grandfather. In May 2001, she published a biographical companion book to the film, co-written with John Kenworthy. Since then she has tirelessly promoted the film, attending screenings at sites ranging from the Bay Area to the Netherlands. She screened her documentary at last summer's Disneyana convention in Anaheim. In October, she signed copies of her book at Walt Disney's centennial birthday celebration on the Disney cruise ship in the Caribbean. Last fall, the documentary finally aired on national television, with broadcasts on the Bravo network in September and the Independent Film Channel in November.

And still one gets the impression that Leslie Iwerks is not quite finished with her project.

At the Disney Studios gate, Iwerks presents her credentials to the security guard and is waved through. With shoulder-length blond hair, dimpled chin and a chipped front tooth, she retains something of a tomboy's mischievous persona beneath a demeanor of brisk efficiency. Here to return some promotional materials, she strides across the campus-like setting and reflects on her family's history.

Leslie Iwerks is the youngest of four children. Two brothers--Larry, 48, and John, 46--are fine-art landscape painters based in Santa Barbara. Her sister, Tamara, 35, was a newscaster in Memphis, Tenn. Only Leslie, 32, entered the family business of filmmaking and took on the quest of telling her grandfather's story.

"My grandfather passed away in 1971, a year after I was born. I never knew him," Iwerks says. But for as long as she could remember, she asked members of her family to share their memories. "My brothers would say things like, 'He wasn't that warm' or 'He didn't have a lot to say.' For them, maybe knowing him directly was enough. But I got more inspiration out of not knowing him, because what you don't know becomes more interesting. The journey takes place in your imagination."

"I don't recollect if I specifically told Leslie about Ub one way or another," says her father, Don Iwerks. "But all the kids were aware of what he'd done. They must have learned by osmosis that he was a pretty talented person. I mean, the creation of Mickey, we all knew what that was about."

There is more to Ub Iwerks than Mickey Mouse. In 1930, he left Disney to start his own company; after 10 years, with his own animation studio mired in red ink, he returned to Disney in a very different role. Immersing himself in the world of mechanical invention and special effects, Ub became the in-house inventor, the go-to-man for any technical problem.

One by one, he created techniques and equipment (the traveling matte system, the 360-degree motion-picture camera) that laid the groundwork for the digital matte special effects we see in movies today. His inventions made possible the special effects in "The Parent Trap," "Mary Poppins," "The Birds" and a host of other films. But he never did animation again.

As a child, Leslie first discovered her grandfather's story in the memorabilia he left behind. "Ub came alive for me when I stayed over at my grandmother's house in Sherman Oaks. The guest room where I slept was Ub's old office. There were photos of him and Walt from the early days up on the wall. On his desk were canisters of his old paintbrushes and drawing pens. There were shelves with his awards and citations he'd received over the years."

There were early signs of Leslie Iwerks' grand obsession. In 1980, she prepared a report on her grandfather's life for her fourth-grade class. "Naturally the kids were excited because at that age, who doesn't like Mickey? But what impressed me was the reaction of the adults. It was obvious they found my story surprising."

As a high school student, Iwerks started her own business, which hired other students to provide graphic design for a variety of companies. In 1988, when she was a senior, she purchased a professional camera and editing equipment and started Iwerks Video Productions. Five years later, she graduated from USC film school. Although the next few years would see her working as a director's assistant on several Disney and Universal studios projects, she continued researching the life of her grandfather.

"I originally met Iwerks at USC film school," says film historian Leonard Maltin. "She told me in 1991 that she was thinking about making this film. I said, 'You've got to do it.' Clearly she was the right person to take on the job. Doors would open for her that wouldn't for an outsider."

First, Leslie had to convince her family that a documentary was a good idea. "We had an ongoing discussion about making this film," says Don Iwerks. "Films are very expensive, and the family funds weren't such that we were going to be able to offer that. But more important, if you're going to make a film about the early days of the Disney company and show images of Mickey Mouse, then, clearly, you have to work out some means of collaboration with the company. If Disney didn't want to do it, that's probably the end of the story."

Don Iwerks wrote to Roy Disney. Would Walt Disney's nephew consider meeting with Leslie Iwerks? "Then I left it to her to carry the ball." In February 1994, Disney agreed to meet with Leslie for an hour. At the end of the conversation, Disney said yes to a collaboration.

"I saw her passion," Disney says. "That was pretty evident. And I saw a great deal of Ub in Leslie. Like her grandfather, she had a mission. And you've got to believe in people who believe in what they're doing."

Despite Disney's support, it took four more years before the studio green-lighted the project in April 1998. With an initial budget of \$288,000 and set for an hour's length, studio executives expected the project to eventually find its home on television.

At the end of 1998, Iwerks screened her 60-minute version for Disney and other executives. "At that length, it felt sketchy," he says. "It needed to be more emotional. And that was always the hard part. There's very little footage of Ub laughing or smiling. But Leslie had an idea of how to make it a fuller story."

Disney raised the budget to \$600,000 and approved the film's expansion by 30 minutes. In October 1999, the documentary premiered at El Capitan, Disney's flagship movie theater on Hollywood Boulevard, making it eligible for Academy Award consideration. It did not receive a nomination. According to gossip Leslie later heard from a committee insider, "it did not bash Walt strongly enough."

"That is not something I would ever want to do," says Iwerks as she walks across the Disney back lot. She pauses at the doorway of the animation building before entering. "I wanted to tell this story with dignity. Ub and Walt liked each other; when they were young and courting their wives, they socialized together."

Indeed, Leslie Iwerks' documentary is the story of reconciliation and recognition between families, the connections across generations and their storytelling techniques both past and future. "What Leslie has accomplished," says Maltin, "is a film that doesn't tear down Walt in order to build up Ub. You don't have to minimize either of their accomplishments to have a terrific story."

It is almost time for Iwerks to return to Iwerks Entertainment, a film production company founded in 1986 by her father. There are meetings to attend about new movies she's working on: a documentary about the struggle for Guatemalan citizens to keep their Mayan heritage alive. A collaboration with her oldest brother, Larry, to produce an animated tale about Teddy Roosevelt's dog. "All my projects seem to be about underdogs," she says.

Does that mean she's moved on from her grandfather's story? Iwerks lingers in the studio's on-site retail store, noting the display of her video on the shelves. "There's always more to do. I'd still like to get it into video stores. I've got several screenings scheduled. Pixar wants me to show it at their new headquarters. I'm still the caretaker, still trying to push it along."

A poster in the store catches her eye. It commemorates Walt Disney's 100th birthday. Last fall she visited Disney World in Florida, which had just opened a centennial retrospective of Disney's life. It only briefly mentions Ub Iwerks. "And I figure, that's fine. Some people are going to continue to pass on the myth, perhaps forever. But I just have to say to myself, 'I did what I could.'"

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