

## The Influence of Early Life Experiences on Later Life Behaviors: An Examination of the Life of Walt Disney

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In this paper we tell the story of Walt Disney, synthesizing the concepts of critical biography with those of life-span theory (LST) from sociology and psychology literature. In this manner, we can better understand how events in one's life can have a significant impact throughout that person's life. The paper focuses on four themes: (a) work ethic and pursuit of success, (b) perseverance – bounce back from adversity and keep moving forward, (c) alliance with others who complement one's own strengths and offset one's weaknesses, and (d) commitment to excellence. Through these themes, we demonstrate how early life experiences influenced Walt Disney's behavior throughout his life. Table 1 is provided to outline the key events in the life of Walt Disney, cross-referencing the events as reported within the major Walt Disney biographies.

*“Are extraordinary people like Walt Disney born that way, or are they self-made, or perhaps even made that way because of their surroundings? In Disney's case, it was arguably all of the above” (Hahn & Miller-Zarneke, 2015, p. 11).*

Walt Disney was an extraordinary person. Rising from humble beginnings, he became one of America's most well-known personalities. His rise to the top, however, was anything but certain. Many hardships were incurred along the way. Some hardships were of his own making, other hardships came from family relationships, and still others were due to outside influences. These lived experiences resulted in life changes that made him who he was.

In this paper we tell the story of Walt Disney, synthesizing the concepts of critical biography with those of life-span theory (LST) with literature from the fields of sociology and psychology. In this manner, we are able to better understand how events in one's life can have a significant impact throughout that person's life.

### Methodology

Edel (1984) referred to biography as “Writing lives.” Smith (1994) suggested that biographies may take many forms including: “portrayals, portraits, profiles, memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies, journals, diaries, and others” (p. 287). Smith further posited that as a qualitative research method, biography is a “rich and only partially exploited form of inquiry for reaching multiple intellectual goals and purposes” (p. 302). It is this form that existing biographies of Walt Disney take.

Along those lines, critical biography provides a vehicle for advancing management history, while keeping the record straight. Jacobs (2007) defined critical biography

as any biographical approach, from a review of a critical incident experienced by the subject to a comprehensive presentation of the subject's life and important contributions (p. 105). Utilizing critical biography, we are able to see management history through the “diffusion, persistence, and disappearance of ideas and practices in different contexts” (Abraham & Gibson, 2009, p. 9).

Garrity et al. (2018, p. 459) suggested that critical biography cannot determine causality, but it provides us with a qualitative methodology for investigating the how and why. This methodology has been employed in management history literature to compare and contrast the lives and times of Mary Parker Follett and Lillian Gilbreth (Gibson & Deem, 2016); to explain Joan Woodward's contribution to the development of Contingency Theory (Garrity et al., 2018); to study Carolyn R. Dexter's impact on international academic organizations such as the Academy of Management and academic productivity (Monserat & Simmers, 2019) and many others.

In our analysis of Walt Disney in this paper, we synthesize the concepts of critical biography with those of life-span theory (LST). LST has developed over the last 200 years (Baltes et al., 1980) in sociology and psychology literature. In sociology literature, the life course theory (LCT) is closely related to LST, with the difference being that LCT expands beyond the individual to the group in which they are embedded (Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). For the purposes of our analysis, the two terms may be used interchangeably. The theory or “orientation” as posited by Baltes et al. (1980), provides context to changes of behavior when linked to “antecedent and subsequent events” (p. 65). As further posited by de Vries (2013),

“life events research focuses on pivotal incidents and circumstances and their resulting life changes” (p. 31). In short, LST proposes that the consequences of life events are influenced by the timing of events, their perceived relevance, and their subjective experience (Koistinen et al., 2019). LST is the basis for current research in both sociology (Darling et al., 2021), and psychology (Moersdorf et al., 2022). It is appropriate that LST be applied in the management arena as well, in synthesis with critical biography.

Baltes et al. (1980) suggested that human development is mediated by three (3) sets of influences: (a) normative age-graded influences are directly related to chronological age, biological or environmental in nature, and experienced by all individuals in a given culture in similar manners; (b) normative history-graded influences are biological or environmental occurrences not directly related to age (e.g.; wars, societal changes); and (c) non-normative life events that do not happen for most individuals at a specific chronological age or in some specific historical period (e.g.; career changes, medical trauma, divorce, etc.) (p. 76).

Our analysis focuses primarily on the non-normative life events of WD’s life. According to Baltes et al. (1980), the impact of such events on human development is related to “timing, patterning, and duration” (p. 76). Non-normative life events can be experienced at any time in a person’s life.

Mannheim (1952) suggested two approaches to behavioral analysis. The positivist approach takes a quantitative view to generalize the effect of historical events over a cross-section of humanity. The romanticist (or romantic historical) approach takes a qualitative view that focuses more on the individual. As noted above, our approach utilizes the qualitative view of the romanticist (qualitative) approach by synthesizing the two concepts, Critical Biography and LST. This represents a new approach that has not been attempted.

Since qualitative studies focus on an individual person, group, or phenomenon, they rarely reference the concept of generalizability. Due to the specific detailed nature of qualitative research, the concept of transferability is more readily applied (Barnes et al., 2005). The themes of Walt Disney’s life identified through this study may be transferable for a review or self-analysis to all types of leaders.

### Biographical Overview

We use a critical biography approach in this article to gain insight into the life experiences of Walter Disney (WD), an often revered, sometimes reviled figure of American history (Forgacs, 1992). The life story of WD has been well documented throughout the literature, including in books, academic papers, journal articles, and magazines. To offer a perspective of the events that shaped his life and led to his contributions to the entertainment world, business, and society, we first provide a biographical overview in chronological order of the key events in his life below (see Table 1).

### WD’s Childhood and Personal and Professional Adult Life Themes

The focus of this article now shifts to themes identified from an examination of primarily (although not solely) non-normative life events that had a significant influence on WD’s approach to life. Four (4) recurring themes can be extracted from an examination of WD’s childhood and pre-Hollywood lived experiences: (a) work ethic and pursuit of success, (b) perseverance to bounce back from adversity and keep moving forward, (c) alliance with others who complement one’s strengths and offset one’s weaknesses, and (d) commitment to excellence. These themes continuously crossed over into WD’s public life after he moved to Hollywood, which will now be discussed in this article.

#### Work Ethic and Pursuit of Success

WD demonstrated a strong work ethic throughout his life, a work ethic that meant he not only expected a great deal from himself, but also from his employees. WD’s leadership style may have been questionable, but his work ethic played a key role in his perseverance through a number of challenges throughout his career. While there were times throughout his lifetime when WD may have faced internal demons, such as when he experienced a nervous breakdown in 1931 (Harris, 2006), a pursuit of success always spurred a strong work ethic in WD.

WD was introduced to a standard of excellence at an early age on his father’s paper route, where he first developed his work ethic. Elias Disney (ED), WD’s father, moved the family to Kansas City in 1911, when WD was 9 years old. To earn money, ED purchased a paper route with 700 customers on the route. The hours were long and hard, requiring WD and Roy Disney (RD), WD’s older brother, to deliver newspapers both mornings and afternoons 7 days a week. Papers were to be neatly folded and placed under a brick on the porch of each house, instead of being carelessly tossed in the yard or on the porch. In rainy or snowy conditions, the papers had to be placed inside the storm door (Scollon, 2014). ED did not pay WD and RD for their work, so WD found other ways to make money such as buying additional papers and selling them on the street. WD would later say this experience gave him an appreciation of what little free time he had. He would also say he still woke up 40 years later with nightmares about the experience. Despite the long hours and required attention to detail, WD exhibited an incredible work ethic, missing only 5 weeks of work in 6 years (Gabler, 2006). During these early formative years of his life, WD would (perhaps unwillingly and unknowingly) learn the value of hard work, attention to detail, and his dedication to excellence.

Outside of work, there was little in the way of fun and frivolity in WD’s recollection of his homelife. Accordingly, he sought encouragement and praise elsewhere. In Marceline, Aunt Maggie first inspired WD’s love of drawing by regularly buying him drawing tablets and pencils and constantly praising his work. One day, a retired

**Table 1***WD Biographical Timeline of Key Life Events*

Date	Event
1901	Walter Elias Disney born (Chicago, IL – Dec. 5).
1906-1910	(Marceline, MO) ED moves family to farm. • Aunt Maggie encourages WD's drawing through gifts of paper and pencils and her praise. • Doc Sherwood has WD draw picture of his prize stallion. • WD assigned to "second dumbest" seat in class. • WD has first exposure to an amusement park. • ED sells farm in 1910 and moves family into Marceline. • WD always remember life in Marceline fondly.
1911-1917	(Kansas City, MO) ED moves family to Kansas City. • WD & RD begin working on ED's paper route (misses only 5 weeks in 6 years). • WD attends Benton Grammar School and repeats second grade. • Principal Cottingham tells WD he will not amount to anything. • WD befriends Walt Pfeiffer. • Principal Cottingham has WD recite Gettysburg Address to all classrooms on Lincoln's birthday. • Bert Hudson hangs WD's drawings in his barber shop window. • WD joins father on trips to the newspaper office to spend time with the cartoonists and gets father to pay for classes at Kansas City Art Institute. • Miss Beck makes learning fun for first time. • WD graduates from the Benton School in 1917. • WD's parents move to Chicago, but WD stays in KC to work as a "butcher" on a train over the summer. • WD moves from KC to Chicago with parents and enrolls in McKinley High School (also attends classes at the Art Institute of Chicago).
1918	WD joins Red Cross Ambulance Corp and goes to Europe after WWI ends.
1919	WD returns to KC from Europe and gets job as commercial artist with Pesman-Rubin (amicably terminated after Christmas rush).
1920	WD and Ubbe Iwwerks create Iwwerks-Disney. • WD goes to work for KC Slide Co. (becomes infatuated with animation) and Iwwerks-Disney closes.
1921	WD begins producing Newman's Laugh-O-Grams.
1922	WD incorporates Laugh-O-Gram Films, Inc. • Hires Hugh & Fred Harmon, Rudy Ising, "Friz" Freleng, and Ubbe Iwwerks.
1923	First <i>Alice</i> film, <i>Alice's Wonderland</i> , completed. • Laugh-O-Grams goes bankrupt. • WD moves to Hollywood and gets contract with Margaret Winkler for 12 <i>Alice</i> films. • WD & RD start Disney Bros. Studio.
1924	First <i>Alice</i> movie shown in theatres. • Hugh Harman, Rudy Ising, "Friz" Freleng, and Ub Iwerks (had changed his name) move to Hollywood to work for WD.
1925	RD marries Edna Francis, and WD marries Lillian Bounds.
1926	Studio moves to Hyperion location and rename it Walt Disney Studios.
1927	<i>Oswald the Lucky Rabbit</i> , Disney's first major animated character cartoons begin.
1928	Charles Mintz hires away several Disney animators and claims Oswald character. • Mickey Mouse is created with Ub Iwerks as lead artist. • <i>Plane Crazy</i> , first Mickey Mouse animated cartoon released. • <i>Steamboat Willie</i> , first animated cartoon with synchronized soundtrack released.
1930-1932	Ub Iwerks leaves Disney to go work for Pat Powers in 1930. • WD suffers nervous breakdown in 1931. • <i>Flowers and Trees (Silly Symphonies)</i> – first cartoon produced in Technicolor released – later wins the first Academy Award for Best Cartoon Short Subject.
1934-1939	Work begins on <i>Snow White</i> in 1934 – many in Hollywood refer to it as "Disney's Folly". • <i>Snow White</i> is released December 1937 in Hollywood. • <i>Snow White</i> is put into general release February 1938 (the film is a financial success, taking the studio out of debt). • WD moves to parents to California, but Flora Disney dies from faulty furnace in their new home. • <i>Snow White</i> wins Academy Award. • Studio moves into new Burbank location.
1940-1945	Ub Iwerks returns to studio in 1940. • <i>Pinocchio</i> , <i>Fantasia</i> , <i>Dumbo</i> , & <i>Bambi</i> released 1940-1942, but the films are not financially successful, even losing money. • Unionized cartoonists strike in 1941. • Elias Disney dies in 1941 (WD is traveling and does not return home for funeral). • United States enters WWII, and Disney begins making moves for the Defense Department. • WWII ends in 1945.
1947-1952	WD testifies in front of Congress at House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings in Washington, DC in 1947. • WD visits Greenfield Village in 1948. • WD created WED Enterprises in 1952.
1953-1955	WD agrees to TV deal to fund <i>Disneyland</i> in 1953. • Construction begins on <i>Disneyland</i> in 1954. • <i>Disneyland</i> opens in 1955.
1963-1965	Florida chosen as location for second park. • WD presents several exhibits (including animatronics) at the 1964-65 NY World's Fair. • WD receives Presidential Medal of Freedom. • Land acquired in Florida for new park – <i>Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow (EPCOT)</i> .
1966	WD dies from Lung Cancer (December 15).
1971	RD opens <i>Walt Disney World</i> (RD dies 2 months later).

*Note.* Barrier, 2007; Gabler, 2006; Green & Green, 1991; Gitlin, 2010; Hahn & Miller-Zarneke, 2015; Iwerks, 2019; Krasniewicz, 2010; Schickel, 1997; Thomas, 1994

neighbor, Doc Sherwood, asked WD to sketch his prize stallion, Rupert. Depending on WD's version of the story, the doctor gave him a nickel or quarter for the drawing and/or framed the picture and hung it in his house. WD would recount this experience for the rest of his life (Gabler, 2006). According to his brother, RD, this experience "... became the highlight of Walt's life" (Green & Green, 1991, p. 5).

Another fond memory emanating from sources outside the family and stimulating WD's passion for drawing and drive for success, came from the proprietor of a local barbershop on his paper route in Kansas City. Bert Hudson was so impressed with WD's drawings that he offered him free haircuts or payments of 10-15 cents for his drawings. Aside from the extrinsic reward, WD gained an intrinsic motivation from Hudson hanging the drawings in his barber shop window. WD's work was on public display. More than 30 years later, WD wrote to Hudson about how much he looked forward to seeing his new drawings displayed in the window for others to see. ED even took rare pride in his son's work, recalling how the neighbors would head down to the shop to see WD's new drawings (Gabler, 2006).

The work ethic WD developed through the paper route served him well in drawing, illustration, and animation. Shortly after his return from Europe after The Great War, WD took a job with the Kansas City Slide Co., where the owner, A. V. Cauger, let him borrow an old mahogany camera so he could experiment with animation. Animation was in its infancy, but WD poured over the works and techniques of the early animators, trying to learn as much as he could and experiment with animation in his father's garage late hours into the night (Gabler, 2006).

He would later open Laugh-O-Gram Films, Inc. (Thomas, 1994), continuously experimenting with new techniques, trying to improve the process and product. WD worked long hours trying to make the venture work. His fellow employees, all young men themselves who were inspired by the fraternal environment of the workplace, followed suit, and did the same (Gabler, 2006). Unfortunately Laugh-O-Gram would fail, but fortunately for the world, this event served as the catalyst for WD's move to Hollywood, where his brother RD already lived (Thomas, 1994).

RD originally did not want to go into business with his brother, but WD convinced RD to join him, and they opened Disney Bros. Studio. The studio delivered the first short film, Alice's Spooky Adventure, to Margaret Winkler in two months, working primarily with a two-man operation (Thomas, 1994). In the first years of the studio, for better or worse, WD's work ethic and drive for success kept him involved in every aspect of the filmmaking process.

Throughout the rest of his career, WD's attention might wane or shift from one pet project to another. However, his work ethic never faltered, pouring himself into every new passion (Gabler, 2006) including cartoons, animation, live-action, and mixed animation/live-action films;

the creation of Mickey Mouse and his menagerie of supporting characters; the dream and creation of Disneyland; animatronics; and Disney World and EPCOT (even though these last two creations were realized posthumously—first Disney World through his brother RD, and later, EPCOT, in a form different than WD's initial vision).

### **Perseverance to Bounce Back from Adversity and Keep Moving Forward**

Although WD's father, ED, was not a successful businessman, he always bounced back from his setbacks and moved forward. This is evident from his nomadic life, moving from Chicago to a farm in Kansas, to Marceline, to Kansas City, and back to Chicago, all in a space of 10 years. He was always chasing business opportunities which did not pan out in the end. Despite WD's desire to escape his father's world, observing his father's ability to pick himself up after he stumbled may have influenced WD's ability to persevere through adversity and his determination to succeed (Gabler, 2006).

Schoolwork did not come easy to WD. He had been homeschooled by his mother until the age of 7. But that year, he was enrolled in Park Elementary School in Marceline, KS, where his teacher placed WD in the "second dumbest seat" (Korkis, 2022, par. 19). WD was forced to repeat the second grade at Benton Grammar School in Kansas City. Despite being an avid reader of Robert Louis Stevenson, Horatio Alger, Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain, WD was only an average student, his attention span often waning in the classroom (Korkis, 2022). Early in his time at the Benton School, Principal Cottingham caught WD drawing cartoons during a geography lesson and chewed him out in front of the whole class, saying that he would never amount to anything.

WD was well-liked by other students who enjoyed his ability to entertain them. In fifth grade, on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, WD dressed as Lincoln and memorized the Gettysburg Address. Principal Cottingham paraded him around school to recite the address to every class; an experience from which WD received immense gratification through the attention he received. In 1917, WD graduated from Benton Grammar School at the age of 15, and Principal Cottingham gave him a \$7 award for a comic drawing. Nearly 20 years later, WD would tell the Kansas City Journal-Post, "I am still prouder of that money than I have earned since" (Lawrance, 1935, p. 4-B). WD would later say, "I really think that this is what started me as an artist" (Gabler, 2004, p. 20).

When ED moved the family to Chicago in 1917, WD spent the summer as a "butcher" on a train, selling papers, candy, soda, and tobacco to passengers. While his lack of financial management skills forced him to resign after only 2 months, WD still remembered this time favorably, as this experience cemented his lifelong love of trains (Gabler, 2006).

*After returning from WWI, WD knew that he was not going to work in a factory. He had long harbored two alternative am-*

*bitions—to be an actor or an artist .... So, seventeen-year-old Walt Disney, newly armed with confidence and determined to avoid his father's fate, the joylessness and constant disappointment, would do what the Disneys had always done. He would pursue his opportunity. He would escape. (Gabler, 2006, p. 42)*

WD soon entered into his next business venture, Iwerks-Disney, with Ubbe Iwerks. When this venture ultimately failed, Disney moved on, becoming passionate about animation. In May 1922, WD started Laugh-O-Gram Films, Inc. WD hired Fred and Hugh Harman, Walt Pfeiffer, Ubbe Iwerks, and others. Unfortunately, a bad business deal put Laugh-O-Gram in an early hole and by 1923, Laugh-O-Gram went bankrupt. Next, WD would move to Hollywood.

*I packed all of my worldly goods—a pair of trousers, a checkered coat, a lot of drawing materials, and the last of the fairy-tale reels we had made—in a kind of frayed cardboard suitcase. And with that wonderful audacity of youth, I went to Hollywood, arriving there with just forty dollars. It was a big day the day I got on that Santa Fe California Limited. I was just free and happy! ([Plaque with Walt Disney quote on wall behind Storytellers Statue], n.d.)*

Perhaps one of the biggest setbacks confronting WD was the fall of the short-lived Disney Bros. Studio. The Studio evolved after Laugh-O-Gram failed and WD moved to Hollywood. WD soon contracted 12 films through distributor Margaret Winkler. RD joined WD and Disney Bros. Studio was born. However, Winkler became pregnant, and her husband, Charles Mintz, took over the business. Mintz's underhanded business dealings resulted in WD being forced out of the business with Mintz owning the rights to Alice's Wonderland and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit which had recently been developed. At the same time, George Winkler (Margaret Winkler's brother, who worked for Mintz) convinced most of WD's animators to leave Disney, leaving WD with no artists (except for a few loyal artists like Iwerks) and no new ideas. But instead of giving up, WD introduced the world to Mickey Mouse in 1928 (Thomas, 1994).

Issues with another distributor (Pat Powers), along with the defection of Ub Iwerks in 1930 and a nervous breakdown in 1931 created even further setbacks for WD. A lesser man may have given up on his dream. But as he had done throughout his childhood, WD faced adversity head-on and kept moving forward, through the development of Mickey Mouse in 1928 and creating the first full-length animated film, *Snow White*, in 1937 (Gabler, 2006).

The success of *Snow White* allowed WD to build and move the business into a new studio in Burbank in 1940. However, *Snow White* set a high bar for both critical and financial success ('*Snow White*' sets mark, 1939), and none of his animated films released between 1940 – 1942 (*Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*) would meet with the same levels of success, even losing money (Thomas, 1994).

In 1941, WD had to deal with a cartoonists' strike which led to the unionization of the studio, an event about

which WD had said he would quit the business before he would ever allow it to happen (Gabler, 2006). In December 1941, the United States entered WWII (National Archives of the United States, 1941), which cut consumer spending for the next 4 years. WD and RD could have easily given up again, but they kept the studio alive, working with the US government (Thomas, 1994).

While there were more setbacks in between, one last piece of adversity WD endured was the opening day of Disneyland. While opening day was widely reviewed as a success, several issues plagued the event, which was later referred to by some company insiders as "Black Sunday" (KABC Television, LLC, 2021, para. 5). The park had been built on an extremely ambitious schedule, opening 1 year after construction began. Opening day was supposed to welcome 11,000 guests, but due to a large number of counterfeit tickets being printed, there were 28,000 guests on opening day. The weather was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, some water fountains had no water, restaurants did not have enough food, rides broke down, and a gas leak caused half the park to close for a period of time (KABC Television, LLC, 2021). Yet, WD persevered, and the park welcomed its one-millionth guest less than 2 months later.

WD faced adversity throughout his life. However, a continuous pursuit of his passions fueled his will and determination to persevere and move on to the next adventure.

### **Alliance with Others Who Complement One's Strengths and Offset One's Weaknesses**

During WD's childhood, his attitude and demeanor was consistently opposite from that of his father. Perhaps in a form of rebellion to his father's ways, according to RD, WD was always clowning around, lighthearted, and full of fun. He had a sort of enthusiasm about everything. Even ED had to admit that WD seemed to be able to do whatever he seemed to put his mind to doing (Gabler, 2006).

In Kansas City, WD found the things that were missing in his own home just two doors up the street in the home of his good friend, Walt Pfeiffer (Scollon, 2014), whose home WD referred to as his "laughing place" (Walt Disney Archives, n.d.-a, para. 1). In effect, the Pfeiffer family adopted WD. When the young Pfeiffer got the mumps, WD ignored Mrs. Pfeiffer's warnings to stay away and kept Walt company, teaching him to draw (Gabler, 2006).

ED grew violent over the years and would beat WD and the other children. RD, 8 years WD's senior, had taken on a role as WD's protector or even surrogate father (Gabler, 2006, p. 25). In return, WD became RD's alter ego, providing him with a vitality he might not have otherwise experienced. Once, when WD was 14, his father ordered him to the basement for being disobedient. RD pulled WD aside and told him he should resist (Gabler, 2006, p. 24-25). WD headed to the basement, followed by ED, but WD decided to heed his brother's advice and resisted. As

ED went to hit him, WD grabbed his arms. WD was now physically stronger than his father, and ED eventually gave in. From this point forward, ED never raised his hands to WD again (Gabler, 2006, p. 24). Although neither of them could have known it at the time, the relationship and camaraderie between WD and RD would play a huge role in American history.

While WD was not a strong student, his seventh-grade teacher, Miss Daisy Beck, made learning fun for him. WD eventually also earned the respect of his principal. Fondly recalling his time at the Benton School, with Principal Cottingham and Daisy Beck as sources of inspiration, WD would remain in contact with both of them for the rest of his life (Gabler, 2006).

After WD came back from the war in Europe in October 1919, he soon became friends with Ubbe Iwwerks (who later changed his name to Ub Iwerks). Iwwerk's artistic talent for drawing cartoons was even greater than that of WD. Although Iwwerks-Disney would fail, Ubbe later joined WD at Laugh-O-Gram, along with Walt Pfeiffer, Fred and Hugh Harman, and Isador 'Friz' Freleng. Unfortunately, the experiences at Laugh-O-Gram were short-lived, but the camaraderie and fraternal atmosphere inspired by WD created a place where everybody wanted to be (Gabler, 2006).

When Laugh-O-Gram went bankrupt, WD moved to Hollywood in 1923. His youthful exuberance, charisma, and passion made WD a natural salesman. But WD lacked general business acumen, and his dedication to excellence was expensive. If he wanted something, he expected it to be done, regardless of the time or cost (Gabler, 2006; Thomas, 1994).

A major factor in WD's decision to move to Hollywood was that RD was already there (Scollon, 2014). RD had no plans to go into business with his brother, but when WD approached him, RD could not turn him down. Disney Bros. Studio was created along with an essential, albeit sometimes volatile, lifelong partnership between the brothers (Thomas, 1994).

Before long, WD was able to convince some Laugh-O-Gram colleagues (Ub Iwerks, Hugh Harman, Rudy Ising, and 'Friz' Freleng) to come work for him in Hollywood. Sadly, this did not work out so well regarding Harman, Ising, and Freleng. But when they went to work for Charles Mintz (under Winkler), it was Iwerks who tried to warn WD of Mintz and Winkler's treachery. While WD did not listen to Iwerks and most of his animation staff went to work for Winkler and Mintz, Iwerks remained loyal to WD for the time being. Iwerks became the main creative force behind the evolution of Mickey Mouse. Iwerks provided a strong complement to WD's big ideas through his drawing and animation of Mickey Mouse (including Plane Crazy and Steamboat Willie) and the Silly Symphonies. Eventually, the same lack of business acumen and leadership skills that led to the departure of Harman, Ising, Freleng, and most of the animation staff in 1928, led to Iwerks leaving to work for Pat Powers. Iwerks had become unhappy with the way he was treated

by WD, leaving the studio in 1930, not to return until 1940 (Walt Disney Archives, n.d.-b).

WD had one more friend from his childhood who would come to join him in 1935. His best friend from childhood and former colleague at Laugh-O-Gram, Walt Pfeiffer, began to work for WD in 1935, and he stayed a Disney employee until his retirement in 1972 (Walt Disney Archives, n.d.-a).

While many of WD's childhood acquaintances came and went, RD was loyal to his brother from the day they started Disney Bros. Studios in 1923 until WD's death and beyond. WD was the visionary, and RD grew into his role as the business/financial manager, his business acumen becoming the perfect complement for WD's vision. Whenever WD wanted something, be it bigger animation and movie budgets, a new studio, a theme park (Disneyland), or any of his other pet projects, RD found a way to finance it. RD had a hard time turning down WD, but fortunately, when the banks came calling, RD would finally tighten the reins (Gabler, 2006).

Their business relationship was complicated at best. If they had not been brothers, the partnership may have dissolved on many different occasions. They stopped talking to each other for an extended period of time in 1961. To end the rift, WD presented RD with an authentic Native American peace pipe. Despite the more than 8-year age difference between them, the bond the brothers formed growing up when RD became WD's protector helped to forge a business partnership that became legendary. Their partnership lasted for over 40 years, until WD's death in 1966. But even after WD's death, it was RD's dedication to his brother's memory and legacy that led to the opening of Walt Disney World, just two months before RD's own death in 1971. It is safe to say that the world may not long have remembered the name Walt Disney if it had not been for the partnership between Roy and Walt (Gabler, 2006; Thomas, 1994).

### **Commitment to Excellence**

Upon returning from Europe after WWI, WD was first introduced to animation when he was hired as a cartoonist for the Kansas City Slide Co. by A. V. Cauer in February 1920. WD quickly became fascinated with animation. Despite having earlier that winter identified himself to a federal census-taker as a cartoonist, later that spring, WD may have refused an offer to work as a cartoonist for the Kansas City Star or Journal-Post, preferring to stay at the slide company to continue working with animation, where he was writing and shooting his own ads (Gabler, 2006).

WD spent most of his free time experimenting with animation in his new studio, his father's garage. Reviewing the works of Edwin Lutz and Eadweard Muybridge and seeking advice from Scarfoot McCrory, WD experimented endlessly with new techniques (Gabler, 2006; Gitlin, 2010; Scollon, 2014). WD poured himself into animation with a true commitment to excellence. Animation provided a hubristic endeavor of empowerment in creating life, creating his own world as an escape from the

world of his father. "In animation, Walt Disney had a world of his own. In animation Walt Disney could be the power" (Gabler, 2006, p. 55).

Commitment to excellence quickly became a Disney hallmark in Hollywood. While this led to superior innovation from the studio in equipment and production quality, it was expensive. Snow White was an incredible financial success, taking the studio out of debt for the first time, but the ever-increasing budget set a dangerous precedent for later Disney films (Thomas, 1994).

This commitment to excellence, as well as WD's hubris, carried over to all cartoons and films created by the studio. WD would often demand a scene be rewritten or reshot. The constant demand for excellence exacted a toll both financially and on employees. Failing to learn from, but rather repeating the early lessons from his father, WD would openly vent his frustrations on his employees, often in front of other employees. The good feelings of the initial years of the studio were being erased, leaving many employees disgruntled (Gabler, 2006, Schickel, 1997).

WD would later play a lesser role in film production, but the commitment to excellence remained. WD would use television as a means to an end, the creation of Disneyland (Gabler, 2006), letting advertisers pay the way (Thomas, 1998). WD would not compromise on quality, wanting to create an amusement park where kids could escape and parents could feel good about visiting. The plans for the park kept growing, along with the budget, yet the park still opened on July 17, 1955, one year to the day after construction began. An estimated 28,000 people visited the park on opening day, with 70 million more people watching on TV. Fortunately, WD's commitment to excellence paid off this time, as Disneyland was an immediate success (Thomas, 1994). For the first time since Snow White, the Studio was no longer in debt, grossing \$24.5 Million in 1955, versus \$11 Million in 1954 (Gabler, 2006).

### Conclusion

The themes discussed in this article are based primarily on an analysis of non-normative events, along with the times that shaped the lived experiences of WD's life. Using a critical biography design with an LST approach, we were able to demonstrate how the lived experiences of WD's childhood and early adult life carried over to influence his behavior throughout his lifetime, shaping the themes of his Hollywood adult life. Since much of the original documentation from WD's life either no longer exists or is closely guarded by his estate, this paper often, but not always, had to rely on: (a) first- or second-hand accounts recounted by those who either knew or knew those who knew WD, and (b) resources that at one time had access to original documentation.

This study focused primarily on non-normative events and WD's lived experiences from his life and times. For future studies, researchers may want to use a different research design to gain a different perspective into what made Walt Disney "Walt Disney". One qualitative re-

search design that may be considered is narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2000). This would focus on the stories told by and about WD and discussed in terms of temporality (time), sociality (people and social influences), and spatiality (place or space and environment) as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2007). Another design that might have been considered is phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological design would focus on the perceptions and feelings of WD as he lived through the phenomena and lived experiences under study. However, both of these research methodologies would have to be modified, since WD is no longer around to provide a first-hand account of his experiences. While outside the scope of this paper, the authors may later choose to use LST to explore in greater detail the lived experiences of the mostly silent half of the Disney brothers' partnership, Roy Disney, to gain a greater perspective into what started out as a simple Midwestern story but has become a worldwide "Disney" phenomenon.

A number of criteria should be taken into consideration when deciding to employ an LST methodology. The criteria the researchers used for employing the LST methodology in this study included selecting a subject where some or all of the following were met: (a) a sufficient level of notoriety that would likely lead to a rich history in the research, (b) evidence of non-normative life events that could possibly have been an influence on later life, (c) a connection with individuals who and places that could have been influential in the subject's life, and (d) other influential cultural and social events taking place in the subject's lifetime.

A final takeaway from this study is that leaders and managers may want to consider using an LST approach to analyze their own behaviors. Doing so, while they are in management and leadership positions, may allow them to better understand and address personal strengths and weaknesses to become more effective leaders. Researchers or practitioners may also find value in using this approach to better understand current or potential employees.

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