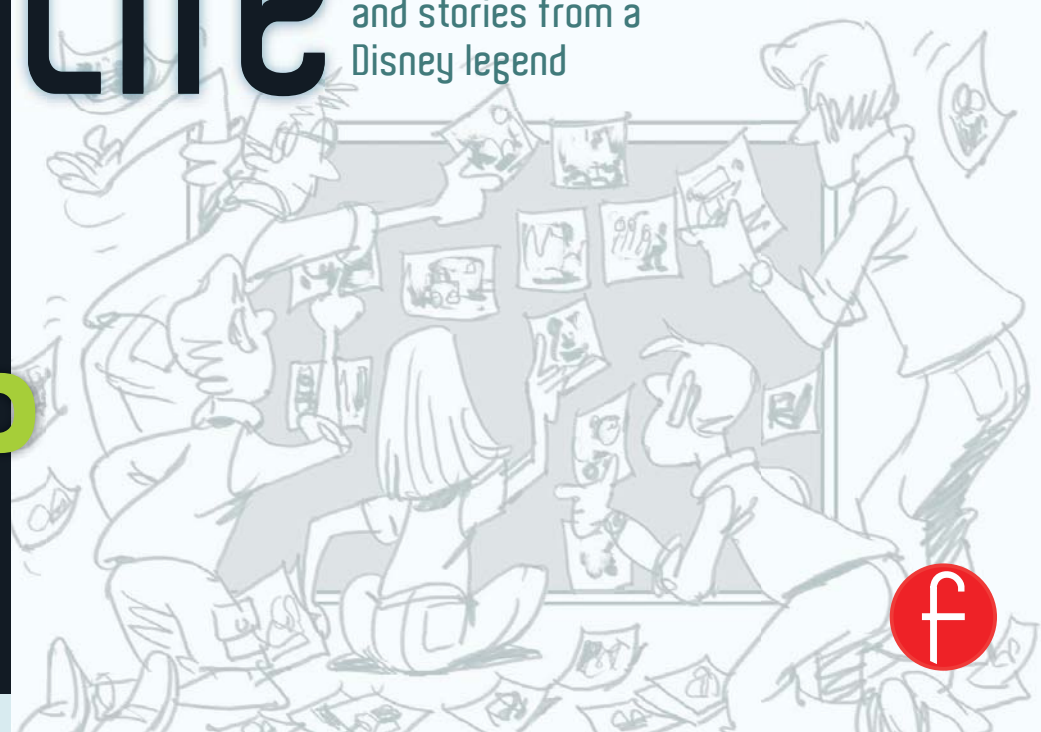
An Animation Masters | Title

Floyd Norman

Animated Life

A lifetime of tips, tricks, and stories from a Disney legend



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Finally, thanks to my editorial director, Katy Spencer, for believing I actually had a book worth publishing. And thanks to my tireless technical editor, Tom Sito, for keeping me on the mark as I made my trip down the animation highway. I'll wrap this up with a big thank you for my lunchtime pals and colleagues who meet at Lancer's Restaurant in Burbank every Friday. Great friendship trumps great food any day.


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WAIT ! WAIT ! I'VE GOT
MORE IDEAS !

Introduction

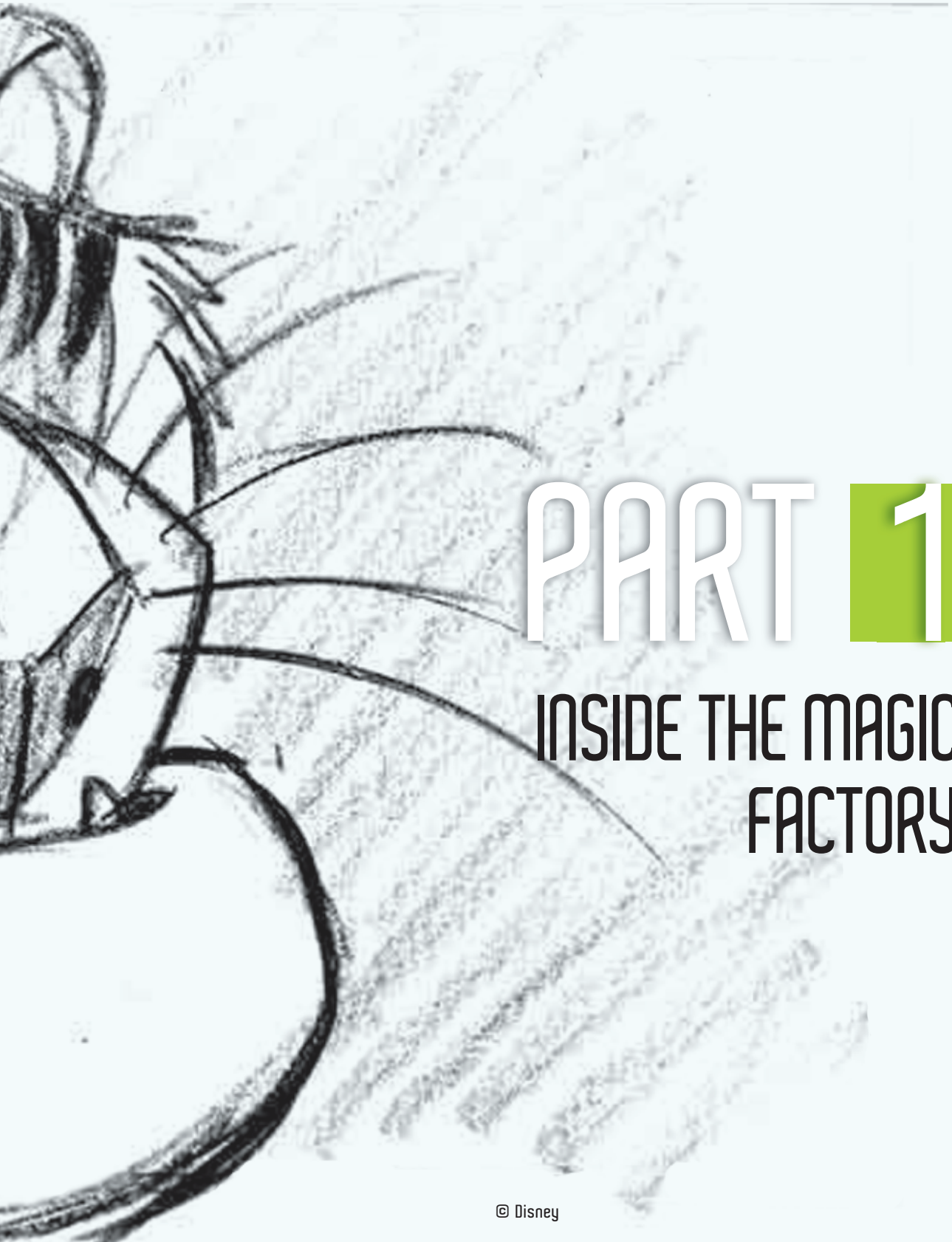
I fell head over heels in love with animation when I was a kid. However, books on the subject of animation remained few and far between, so I made do with Robert Field's *The Art of Walt Disney* (Macmillan, 1942) and Preston Blair's wonderful *How to Draw Animated Cartoons* (Walter Foster, 1994). When I finally became an animation professional, I spoke to a number of animation veterans about writing a book that would catalog their experiences and things they learned while working for Walt. Some expressed interest, but few ever did anything. Even in retirement, authoring a book seemed a daunting task, I suppose. The exceptions were Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston. These two Disney veterans left us with several great books on their years at Disney.

After I "retired" some years later, I decided it was time that I put a few thoughts on paper. What was it like to work at the Walt Disney Studios in the 1950s, apprentice with the Nine Old Men, and even attend story meetings with the Old Maestro himself? There could be a few students and historians who might appreciate such insights on the Walt Disney Studios in the 1950s and 1960s.

This book is a collection of my animated memories and the things I learned while spending nearly 50 years in Walt's magic factory. From February 1956 to August 2000, I managed to survive the animation roller coaster and three

separate managements. Even better, I did all this while working with a host of talented writers, artists, entertainers, and craftsmen helping to create the Disney legacy.

If you've ever wondered what it was like to work on everything from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Toy Story 2*, take a moment to relive some Disney history from a guy who observed it all firsthand.



PART 1

INSIDE THE MAGIC FACTORY

The Walt Disney Studios

An animated wonderland in Southern California.

1 Wonderland

Inside the Real Magic Kingdom

Let's take a trip back in time, to a time when traffic was light on the freeways, Hollywood was clean and tidy, and only the locals knew the location of film studios. Today, the Walt Disney Studios presides over Burbank like the Colossus of Rhodes, but back then the nondescript campus on Alameda Avenue gave not a hint of the activity inside.

In February 1956, nine starry-eyed youngsters reported for work at 500 South Buena Vista Avenue, eager to begin their careers in the cartoon business. Having a great job was only part of the deal, because an added bonus was finally getting inside Walt Disney's magic factory. Unlike today, there were few, if any, books on animation, and only an insider knew what a cartoon studio even looked like. Studio tours were practically nonexistent, and few people ever breached the studio gates. For us, all that had suddenly changed: like Alice, we had entered Wonderland.


RM-1

Most people, if they thought at all about how Disney cartoons are made, assumed that Uncle Walt was drawing it all himself. An animated feature comprises hundreds of thousands of drawings and paintings completed over several years. Most people probably don't give it a second thought. It's all magic. But for an aspiring animation cartoonist, getting a job at Walt Disney was like hitting the major leagues—the Rolls Royce of animation.

Now here we were walking down Dopey Drive and making a right at Mickey Avenue. We were shown our office on the first floor of the animation building. It was a large room with several desks and a view of the studio theater and recording stage. The room number was 1B-1, and it was to be our home for a month as we worked to prove ourselves worthy of a position—even a lowly position—at the Walt Disney Studios. An animated film was the result of an assembly line of artists with very specific job responsibilities. When they start, one artist creates concept designs and another creates the storyboards, which are like the planning of the entire film—many times created without a script and written as they went along. Still another artist did "layout" drawing, the staging of the area the character would be standing in. Someone was recording the soundtrack and "breaking down" the actors' words to single frames for the animator to draw to. Then came the animator, the clean-up crew, inbetweens and a quality control person called a checker. Then the drawings were Xeroxed, painted, and photographed on the painted background. Finally, an editor would take the film footage and cut it into the building work reel of the final movie. All these job classifications had levels of proficiency and years of experience. It was like joining a small army. Gee, I thought I left that stuff in Korea in 1958! Armed with pencil and paper, we sat about learning our animation craft, but break time meant a cup of coffee and a walk around the Walt Disney Studios campus.

Indeed, the Walt Disney Studios was more campus than movie lot. Unlike most tacky Hollywood studios, Disney had well-swept streets and trimmed hedges. Squirrels scampered about manicured lawns, park benches, and shady trees. It was a casual, relaxed atmosphere and one couldn't help but feel at home in this artist's paradise. But our first order of business was getting to know the Animation Building. This wonderful, three-story 1938 Art Deco facility was home to Walt's animation department. Having finally escaped the cramped quarters of the Hyperion bungalows in Silverlake, Disney's staff finally had a wonderful new workplace to call home. Ward Kimball called it "the first place I ever worked in where the furniture all matched!" Disney even secured the services of noted designer Kem Weber to custom-build chairs and furniture in the Arte Moderne style.

(TOP LEFT) STUDYING THE BACKGROUNDS
Rick Gonzales studies the backgrounds of color stylist Eyuind Earle while working on *Sleeping Beauty*.

(BOTTOM LEFT) MOON ROCKET
One of the many scale models in Ward Kimball's unit.


PLAYBOY

We began by touring the hallways of the first floor. Each studio wing had a small lobby with a directory and receptionist's desk. Once inside, we noticed that all but a few animation artists kept their office doors closed, so we felt comfortable entering and checking out the wonderful sketches on their drawing boards. We found the Effects department of C-Wing fascinating, as Disney's effects animators were busily creating wind, rain, and fire. Across the hall in D-Wing, we were advised to keep our voices down and make our visit short. We later learned that this wing was the domain of Disney's "Nine Old Men" and that visiting, though not discouraged, was not necessarily welcome.

As we moved down the hallway of the Animation Building, we noticed steps that led downstairs. Was there a basement floor, we wondered? So our little group decided to venture down into the catacombs of animation. What might be contained in this underground labyrinth? Was it the studio archives, Walt's bunker, or maybe an underground cartoonist or two?

Nope. This underground passageway provided a simple and practical way of moving the precious Disney art from animation to the Ink & Paint and Camera Buildings. Animation art could not be damaged by being exposed to the weather on a rainy California day. Later we would come to learn that these passageways provided another, less official function. Amorous young men and women would use these darkened hallways for many a midday rendezvous.

Emboldened by our tour of the Animation Building's first floor, we decided to explore the second floor of this creative complex. As you might expect, we were stunned by what we saw as we entered B-Wing right off the stairs. The hallway was filled with the beautiful background paintings of color stylist Eyvind Earle as he labored away on the new feature film *Sleeping Beauty*. It's difficult to explain how we felt that day as we stared slack-jawed at the most incredible artwork we had ever seen. One young artist in our group was so inspired that he made becoming a Disney background artist his lifetime goal—a goal, I'm happy to say, that he finally achieved.

Across the hallway in 2-A, the Ham Luske unit was hard at work developing new shows for the TV show *Disneyland*, and a short walk down the hallway took us to 2-D, the home of Ward Kimball's Space unit. Because of his fascination with space travel and extraterrestrial life, Walt Disney saw that Kimball was uniquely qualified to helm this unit, currently producing films that were more science fact than fiction. The hallway was filled with scale models of the moon rocket; futurist illustrator Chesley Bonstell–inspired space station, and the multistage rocket ship that would one day be realized as the Space Shuttle. Storyboards, graphs, and scientific schematics also filled the hallway. The unit had more of an appearance of a top government development facility than a cartoon studio, and even President Dwight Eisenhower requested a viewing of Kimball's films.

(TOP LEFT) ANIMATION RESEARCH
Every good artist should be knowledgeable when it comes to anatomy. Rick and Floyd take their studies seriously.

(BOTTOM LEFT) TAKING A BREAK
Gus Depace, Jim Fletcher, and Gordon Bellamy take a morning break outside the Animation Building.

(TOP RIGHT) ARTIST AT WORK
"Reverend Jack" Foster was a member of the clergy before coming to Disney.

(BOTTOM RIGHT) THE CLASS OF 1956
After a month of training, we were put to work on production, and most of us remained in the business for the rest of our careers.

Venturing into the inner offices of Kimball's unit revealed animator and gagmen Charlie Downs and John Dunn working on a funny sequence in an upcoming film. In another room, master layout artists Ken O'Connor and Tom Yakutis sat at their desks working out a complex scene involving a spaceship orbiting the earth, while background artist Bill Layne painted the Martian landscape. Across the hall, strange Martian creatures were being created by development artist Con Pederson, who would one day work for Stanley Kubrick on *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There was one large office we thought it best not to enter. The slide trombone sitting on the desk was a pretty good indication this was the office of the boss, Ward Kimball. The directing animator was well known for fronting his own Dixieland band, the Firehouse Five plus Two.

A walk down the second-floor hallway took us past 2-C and Jack Kinney's unit, where the Goofy shorts were still being produced. In 2-F, director Bill Justice was still doing Donald Duck cartoons, and directly across the hall, Supervising Director Gerry Geronimi was riding herd on Disney's upcoming animated feature, *Sleeping Beauty*. The last wing at the north end of the building was 2-G. This was the office of animator and director Les Clark, who was hard at work on a featurette on the life of Paul Bunyan. Clark shared the wing with C. August (Nick) Nichols, a former animator now directing the *Mickey Mouse Club* with Donald O'Connor's partner, Sidney Miller.

As we made our way down the hallway, we saw a rather odd-looking old gent sporting a vest and a pork-pie hat. He spoke to us and continued on his way. One guy in our group remarked that the man looked like a walking cartoon character. He wasn't far from the truth: the old gentleman was Cliff Edwards, the voice of Jiminy Cricket. A large room at the end of the hallway revealed a group of artists working on television commercials. This was the 1950s, and color television was still a dream of the future, so the commercials were being painted in black and white, or, more accurately, in shades of gray. Since 1954, Walt had insisted that his TV show *Disneyland* be filmed in full color, because he said someday they'll be watching it that way. But commercials were seen as ephemeral as today's newspaper, so black and white would suffice. A commercial director would occasionally hold up to his eye a little lens he wore on a string around his neck. This lens reduced color artwork to black and white values. He did so to check that the values wouldn't wash out when broadcast. If working in colors, some hues like tan-ochre or fuchsia would just turn white on black and white film. Likewise, violet and ultramarine blue would just turn black.

It had been quite a tour, and our little group wondered whether we should press our luck and take a peek at the third floor of the Animation Building. The third floor was the domain of Disney's top story men, as well as the stomping grounds of Walt Disney himself. What would the Old Maestro think, should he catch us loitering in the hallway? Considering our lowly status as unproven apprentice inbetweeners, we agreed that discretion was the better part of valor and that this might be a tour reserved for a later day.


The Animation Class
This was our first month at Disney, and we were all eager young kids.
Stan Chin
Moved back to New York for a career in advertising.
Jane Shattuck Baer
Cofounded Baer Animation. Produced animation for Disney's "Roger Rabbit."
Tom Dagenais
Left the drawing board to become a television writer.
Dave Michner
Became a Disney animator and director.
Rick Gonzales
Became a top designer at Hanna-Barbera and Ruby-Spears.


© Disney

The Disney Bullpen

2

Basic Training

The Walt Disney Studios

The animation students move into production.

If you were a young animation artist and had just scored your first job at the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank California, it was more than likely you would report to your new workspace in the original Animation Building. It would be a large office known as the "Bullpen."

The Bullpen was the first office you encountered when you entered any wing of the Animation Building. It seated at least seven or eight animation artists, each with their own desk. It was the animation equivalent of the secretarial pool in the modern office environment. It was a training ground for the young artists, as well as a resource for animators needing assistants to complete their scenes.

Inbetweens are the additional drawings created in between the major poses, or keyframes, to fill out a movement. An animated scene is a large stack of drawings that delineate the actions of a character. The animator draws the major landmark poses and leaves notes as to how many additional drawings or "inbetweens" will be required. More inbetweens would slow down a movement; fewer would speed things up, The animator's assistant refines or cleans up the

THE WALT DISNEY STUDIOS BACKLOT
A young Floyd Norman on the backlot *Zorro* set.

animators' key-pose drawings, then assigns the task of doing the remaining drawings to an inbetweener. The assistant was the right arm of the animator and would know how to draw the animator's character better than he did. This assistance gave the animator the freedom to focus on the acting performance of the character, not the details. Often in the Disney system, animation assistants had their work gone over not only by the animator to see if they interpreted his work correctly but also by a lead-key assistant—one for each major character. His or her responsibility was to ensure that the characters' details were drawn consistently throughout the movie so that Princess Aurora's hair or the buttons on Pinocchio's pants would not change from scene to scene. Like in the army, an animation production had a chain of command. The inbetweener reported to the assistant animator or inbetween supervisor, who reported to the animator. The animator reported to the lead animator, who reported to the director, who reported to Walt.

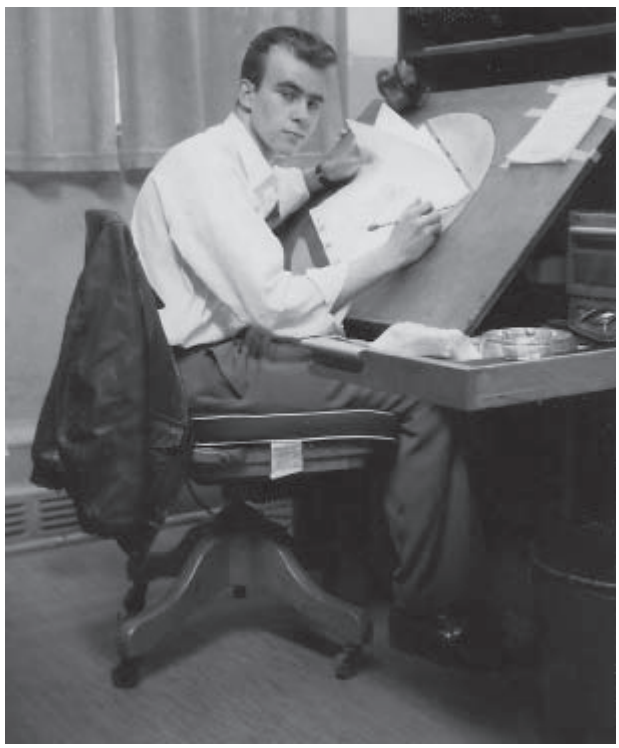
Every young artist dreamed of moving out of the Bullpen and occupying a seat next to a real Disney animator. In time, they might well be the animator in that coveted window seat. The ultimate dream, of course, was to eventually have a private office. Only Milt Kahl, Frank Thomas, and the other animation masters were accorded such special digs. For now, the inbetweener was the bottom rung of a long ladder up.

CARTOON CORRECTIONS
Animation artist Lois Blumquist corrects a drawing by trainee Rick Gonzales.

My first Bullpen was 1F-1 on the first floor of the Animation Building, and although this was fifty years ago, it still seems like yesterday. My officemates were a crazy collection of cartoon types eager to make their way in the animation business. Each had their own quirky story regarding the path that led them to the Walt Disney Studios and ultimately to a lifetime career in the cartoon business.

Let's start with Rick Gonzales, the young artist seated by the door. He had traveled from Texas with his mom to apply for this job and was delighted to be at Disney. After the completion of *Sleeping Beauty* and the subsequent downsizing, Rick moved on to Hanna-Barbera and Ruby-Spears, where he became a top character designer. Sadly, Rick passed away a few years ago, ironically not long after returning to Disney—ending his career where it had begun so many years ago.

My desk was between Rick's and that of a guy next to the window named Jacques Charvet. A talented artist, Charvet had journeyed from France to begin his artistic career at Disney. It was an odd turnabout, as most Americans would consider Paris the ideal place to study art. Passionate and outspoken, Charvet loved to argue about any subject introduced. He was affectionately known as “the Crazy Frenchman.”



John Leslie was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and occupied the next window seat. John bore an uncanny resemblance to the late actor James Dean and was continually kidded about his appearance. He even wore a leather jacket like the troubled Hollywood teen idol. Because this was the un–politically correct 1950s, we all felt free to bag on each other. Leslie, a true Scotsman, was continually accused of being tight with money. He even bought one of the first VW Beetles because he could save on gasoline.

Sam Jaimes was seated at the far window and claims to have gotten his job by simply stopping by the Disney lot one day on his way home. Sam lived in Arizona and was headed for the highway when he spotted the Walt Disney Studios. On a lark, he thought he would stop and see whether artists were being hired. They were, and Sam's career in animation lasted more than 50 years.

Vernon Riek occupied the next desk. Vern was a funny guy with a very dry sense of humor. Though he liked animation, Vern dreamed of a career as a comic strip writer and artist. He had developed a cute family comic strip about a frantic father raising two rambunctious boys. The strip was entitled "Heir Raising." Recently married, who knows what Vern might have accomplished had his career not suddenly and tragically been cut short. Preparing for work one morning, Vern was shaving and fell to the floor, dead of a heart attack. He was only in his early thirties.

Finally, Ruben Apodaca occupied the other corner of the office. A tall, good-looking guy, Ruben had his eye on a young assistant from D-Wing. We told Ruben to get over his shyness and speak to the attractive young woman, even though she was our supervisor. Luckily, Ruben and Doris finally began dating. After his years at Disney, Ruben made a name for himself as an animation instructor, mentoring a new generation of animators. Though both my dear friends are no longer with us, they had an impressive career in the animation business.

As you can imagine, it was often entertaining to share an office with this wacky group. The work of inbetweener did not require a lot of concentration; the animator's job was to do all the thinking on a scene. By the time it got to us, it was just elbow grease and long stretches sitting in your chair and drawing up mountains of paper. A good inbetweener could average about 14 drawings a day. So there was time for small talk as we worked. We discussed everything, including art, women, and politics. Our European colleague Jacques Charvet was not pleased by our visitors. He was referring to the consultants who were the top German rocket scientists from World War II: Dr. Werner Von Braun,

(TOP LEFT) YOUNG ARTISTS IN THE BULLPEN
Sam Jaimes works at his desk while Lois glances back at the camera.

(BOTTOM LEFT) ANOTHER BULLPEN ARTIST
John Leslie traveled all the way from Scotland to work for Walt Disney.

(TOP RIGHT) INSIDE THE BULLPEN
Disney artist Jane Shattuck relaxes during break time.

(BOTTOM RIGHT) ARTIST AT WORK
Chuck Williams at work on *Sleeping Beauty*.

Willy Ley, Heinz Haber, and others who were working on Disney's space films. These men were brought by the military from Europe after the war for work on the government's space program. Charvet had fought in the French resistance against the Germans, so he was not pleased with the warm welcome the scientists were being given at the studio. But, our discussions were not always so weighty. We often discussed the merits of the animation styles of competing studios around town, such as Warner Bros, MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), and UPA (United Productions of America).

My early assignment was on the Mickey Mouse Club doing the Jiminy Cricket "I'm No Fool" series. My boss was a gregarious young assistant animator named Rolly Crump. Rolly had an outrageous sense of humor that was often displayed in funny drawings of the Disney characters doing some unexpected Disney things. Rolly was like a big brother to me and showed great patience as this young newbie struggled to learn the Disney ropes. In time, Rolly Crump was transferred over to what was then known as WED Enterprises, the unit that did theme park design for Disneyland. Crump was discovered by no less than Walt Disney himself, who regularly prowled the hallways at night, curious as to what his staff was up to. Rolly had been building little rotating pinwheels out of colored paper, and his office was filled with these little gadgets driven by the building's air conditioning system. Some might consider such ingenuity a stroke of genius. Walt sure thought so.

Even though 50 years have passed, I can still remember the assignments that came my way in the Bullpen. I was given Donald Duck scenes animated by Volus Jones, Bob Carlson, and Al Coe. I did inbetweens for the talented Cliff Nordberg on "Our Friend the Atom." I helped complete scenes for Jack Parr and Jerry Hathcock on many of the Disney shorts. Another great guy I worked for was John Sibley, an incredible animator who could move anything on paper. These guys were not considered Disney's elite, but all were darn good animators and worthy of more respect than they ever received.

As expected, the artists in 1F-1 moved up the animation ladder to more advanced assignments. We were replaced, of course, by a new group of animation newbies, who—like us—were eager to become Disney animators, story artists, and the like. Leaving the Bullpen was a graduation of sorts. It was a moving up and moving on, as not all in our little group decided to remain with the Walt Disney Studios as a career.