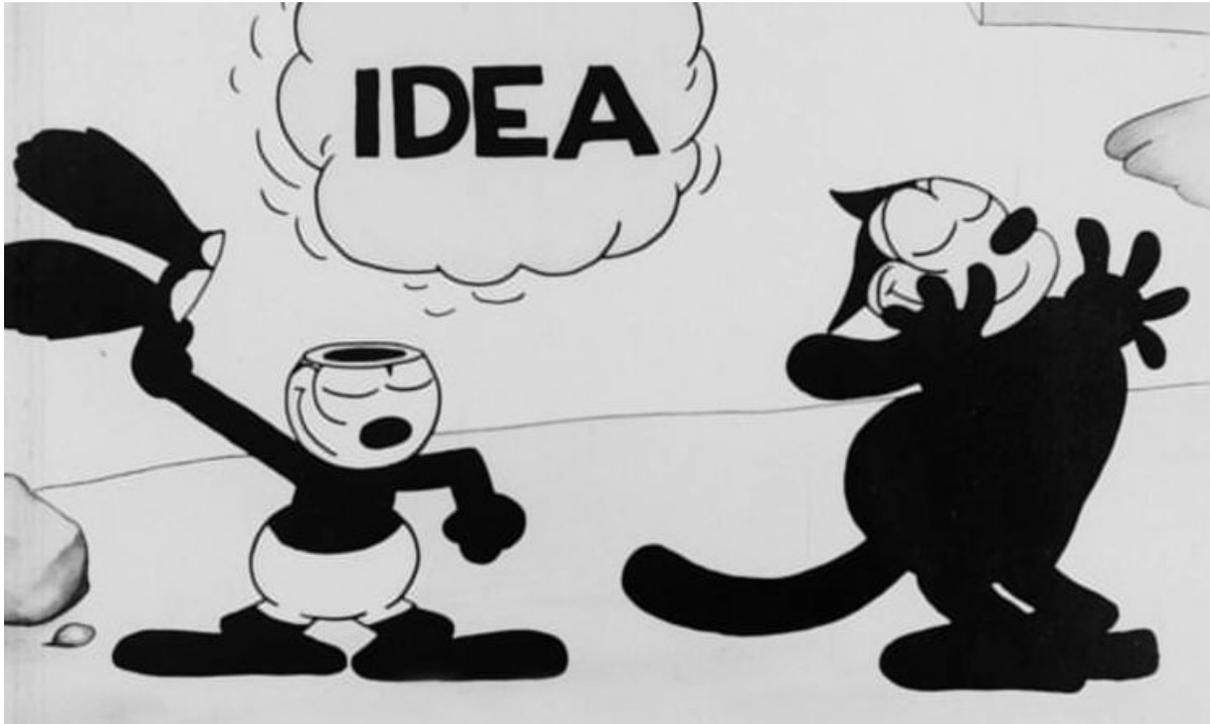


Disney Without Mickey Mouse? It Could Have Happened in 1928

Oswald the Lucky Rabbit was Walt Disney's First Big Success Until He lost the Contract and that Prompted Him to Create Mickey Mouse; the Rest is History!



(Image Caption: A still from the Oswald the Lucky Rabbit short THE OLE SWIMMIN' 'OLE, which was released on February 6, 1928. © Disney)

(By Dave Bossert) Mickey Mouse is a ubiquitous symbol of the global pop culture and is an indelible part The Walt Disney Company, but can you imagine if he was never created? That almost happened in the early days of the company.

In the mid-1920s, the then Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio was a fledgling company that was turning out “one reelers,” short films about ten or twelve minutes long, called the *Alice Comedies* for movie theaters. The premise of these short comedies was that a little girl, Alice, went into an animated world on an adventure in each episode. They were different due to Walt Disney adding Alice into the cartoon world instead of adding an animated character to the live action world, which is what audiences has experienced with Fleischer Bros. Studio’s *Out of the Inkwell* series. The Disney brothers made fifty-seven of the Alice live action and animation combination shorts between 1924 and 1927.

Towards the end of the series, the popularity of those shorts started to wane. Walt himself was beginning to feel that the series was in a creative rut and losing its novelty; it had run its course. The live-action Alice was becoming less important to the story lines, and the series' lead animated character, Julius the cat, had evolved into a derivative of the famous Felix the cat; Walt had resisted the urge to imitate Felix, but his producers, Charles Mintz and Margret Winkler had insisted. The pressure to produce a short every two to two-and-half weeks was taking its toll on Walt and the studio staff.

At the same time, Mintz was already looking for an all-new animation series featuring a new character without a live-action component and was in discussions with Universal to supply it. However, the executives at Universal felt that there were too many cat characters in the marketplace; Felix the Cat, Krazy Kat, and of course Julius in the *Alice Comedies* contributed to the reasons why Universal wanted something new.

Walt and his top animator, Ub Iwerks, created Oswald the Lucky Rabbit at the urging of Mintz in early 1927. Mintz went to Hollywood to sign a contract with Universal to provide twenty-six cartoons featuring the new character. In turn, Walt signed a contract on March 19, 1927, with the Winkler Film Corporation to complete production on "twenty-six (26) one (1) reel motion pictures of animated cartoons, featuring a rabbit character..."

Walt sent over the drawings and sketches of Oswald for approval and started working on the animation, but the enthusiasm was short-lived; for when Walt delivered the first Oswald cartoon, *Poor Papa*, a little over two weeks later, it received a disappointing response. The producers felt that Oswald looked too old, there was too much cycling, or repeating animation, and the cartoon was just a succession of gags.

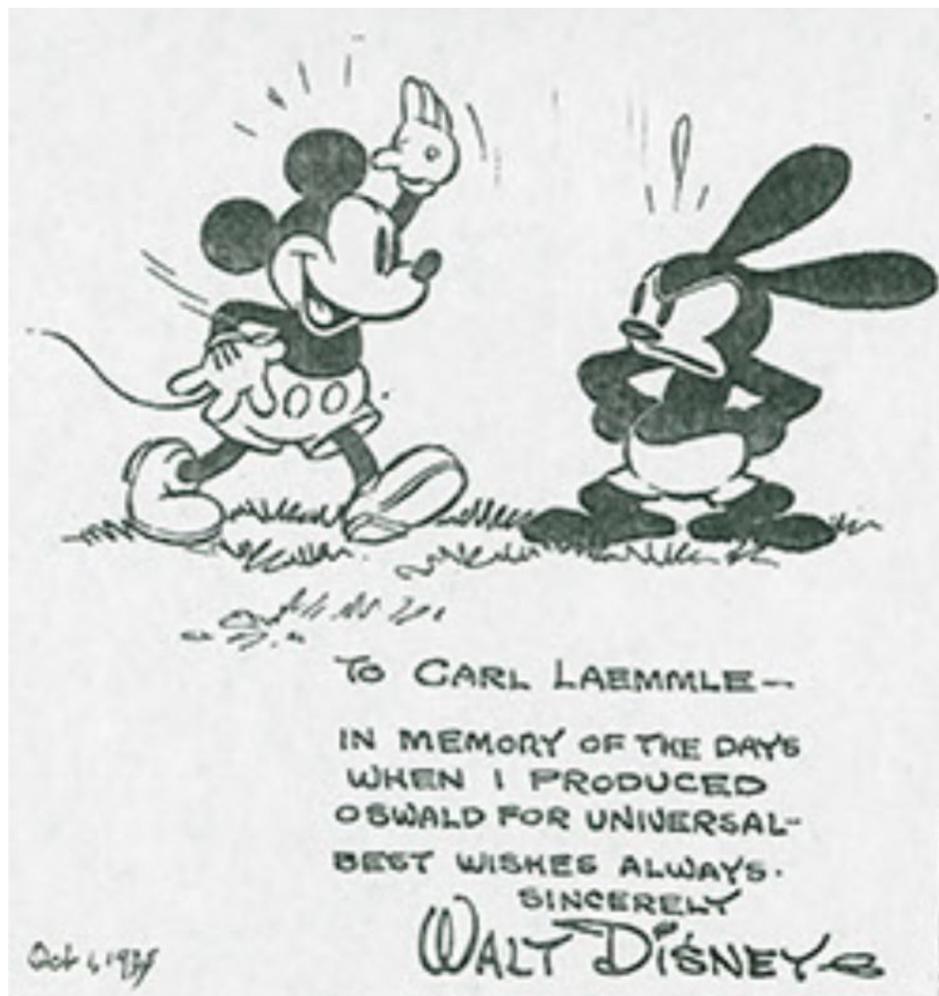
Walt took the criticism in a professional manner, at least in his response to Mintz. But he still must have been frustrated and disappointed. Putting as good a face on the situation as he could, his telegram stated; "I am sorry that the first 'OSWALD' was such a keen disappointment to everyone, but I am not exactly surprised, as I was disappointed in it myself. This was not thru [sic] a result of any indifference or slackness on my part, but seemingly a wrong slant on it."

Several weeks later, the Disney brothers shipped the second Oswald short, *Trolley Troubles*, which became the first Oswald cartoon released to theaters. It was a hit in the theaters and with critics. Chester J. Smith in *Motion Picture News* wrote, "If the first of these new cartoon comedies for Universal is an indication of what is to come, then this series is destined to win much popular favor. They are cleverly drawn, well executed, brimful of action[,] and fairly abounding in humorous situations." Smith ended his piece by saying, "The laughs are spontaneous and there are plenty of them."

Even with that success, Walt and Mintz had a frosty relationship. Mintz frequently criticized the cartoons and admonished Walt on the quality of the films. For his part, Walt was constantly under financial pressure and looking for ways to save on cost as well as pushing Mintz for more money. Ultimately, Mintz thought that Walt was unnecessary and he could set up his own studio of animators for the second order of twenty-six Oswald cartoons.

Not only had Mintz set up his own studio, but he had signed away most of Walt's animation staff. The fine print of the Oswald paperwork gave Walt no ownership rights to Oswald. Mintz had a Universal contract, control over the character lay with Mintz. Walt had nothing. It was a devastating blow to him and he was left with no remedy or alternative.

Although angry at having been "double-crossed" by Mintz and "betrayed" by his staff, Walt wasn't about to give up. He vowed that he would never work for anyone else again; that henceforth, he would be his own boss. While finishing off the Oswald obligation, Walt, Roy, and Ub, who had remained loyal, were working on a new character, named Mickey Mouse, in secret behind locked doors at the Hyperion studio and at Walt's and Roy's homes on Lyric Avenue, in Los Angeles. Walt wrote the story line for the first Mickey short, *Plane Crazy* (1928); it was inspired by Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean from Roosevelt Field on Long Island, New York, to Paris, which was a technical breakthrough and global. This was followed by *Steamboat Willie* (1928) and *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928).



(Caption: "This specialty drawing, produced for Universal mogul Carl Laemmle in 1935, paired an Oswald pose from *Rival Romeos* with a Mickey design newly-penciled by comics artist Floyd Gottfredson." © Disney)

Steamboat Willie was the first Mickey Mouse cartoon released, with sound added, and was an overnight sensation. Mickey Mouse's popularity quickly eclipsed that of the other animation fare of the day including Oswald. Mintz, who had taken Oswald away from Walt, had the character taken from him by Universal, which gave it to their in-house animation director Walter Lantz. Oswald's design, like his studio connections, evolved over the years. By 1938, Oswald was phased out and only occasionally appeared in other cartoons, making his last animated appearance in a Universal cartoon—*The Woody Woodpecker Polka*—in October 1951; his domain was restricted to comics and merchandise after that.

That is how Mickey Mouse launched into the cultural lexicon. But, just imagine if Walt didn't lose the contract to create more Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoons and instead continued as a contractor for Mintz; would Mickey Mouse have ever been created? We'll never know, but one thing is for sure, Walt Disney turned a devastating setback into a triumphant success. With Mickey Mouse, he planted the seeds for what has grown into a global leader in family entertainment, The Walt Disney Company.

About the Author

David A. Bossert is an artist, filmmaker, and author. He is a 32-year veteran of The Walt Disney Company and is an independent producer, creative director, and writer. Bossert is considered an authority and expert on Disney animation and history. He co-authored *Disney Animated*, which was named iPad App of 2013 by Apple and won a prestigious British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award. Bossert is also the author of the several books including his latest; [Oswald the Lucky Rabbit: The Search for the Lost Disney Cartoons](#), which is published by Disney Editions. Learn more at www.davidbossert.com