

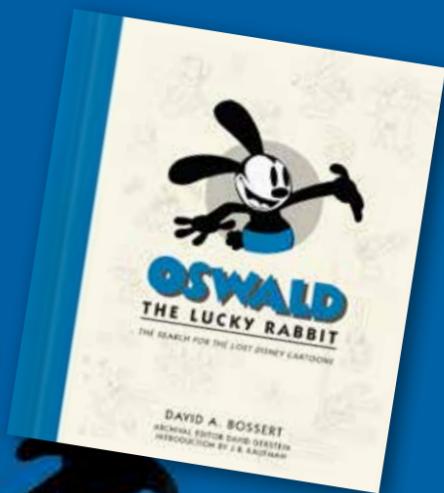
Oswald fans in luck

Definitive new book marks character's 90th anniversary

By Dave Bossert

Like many Disney fans, I was very aware that Oswald the Lucky Rabbit was an early and popular animated character that eventually faded into obscurity. Eclipsed by the popularity of Mickey Mouse, Oswald went through several design changes and by 1938 Universal, stopped making cartoons starring that rambunctious rabbit. Many of the cartoons were forgotten and some even lost to time. Nevertheless, Oswald was an important part of animation and Disney history.

In early December 2011, I was sitting in my office at the Walt Disney Animation Studios. On my computer screen was an article describing a recently found Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoon titled "Hungry Hoboes" that was being auctioned off in Hollywood. It was an interesting piece of history. How wonderful, I thought to myself, that a print of a previously thought-to-be-lost cartoon had surfaced.



Just as I finished reading that article, my e-mail chimed with an incoming message from my then bosses at the studio. They had forwarded an e-mail from someone inquiring about the Disney-created Oswald cartoons. At that serendipitous moment, the planets seemed to have aligned just right for the *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* lost cartoons!

I responded back with an e-mail letting them know that, speaking of Oswald, one of the lost Oswald cartoons, "Hungry Hoboes," had surfaced, that it would be in an animation memorabilia auction in Hollywood on Dec. 14 and that I thought the company should purchase it. They agreed and got the funding allocated so that I could make that purchase on behalf of the company. That began my involvement in a multiyear hunt for the lost Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoons.

I was drawn to Oswald, not just because of the historical nature of the character, but also by his design and animated antics. Oswald has a very simple and appealing design that leaves a lot of room for inventive animation. When I watch the Oswald cartoons, what strikes me most is the unabashed imagination the animators had for dismembering, contorting and shape-shifting the characters. They used the medium in the way that it was meant to be used—they took "cartoon" license with the characters. Thought bubbles become balloons. An animated word comes alive and takes on the attributes of a quadruped animal. It was an "anything goes" approach.

That has been lost in a large part in today's contemporary animated films, heavy on humanoid characters. It would be unsavory to dismember a human character, but seeing Oswald pop off his lower leg and foot, kiss it and rub it on his head as a 'lucky rabbit's foot' before reattaching it is hilarious. Even though the



A multi-time Member Cruise presenter and longtime friend to Disney Vacation Club, David A. Bossert is a celebrated artist, filmmaker and author. The 32-year veteran of The Walt Disney Company is now an independent producer, creative director and writer. Also a noted historian, Bossert is a respected authority and expert on the history of Disney animation. He is a member of the CalArts Board of Trustees and is a visiting scholar at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC) in Pittsburgh. Bossert 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. His new book, *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit: The Search for the Lost Disney Cartoons*, is published by Disney Editions. Learn more about the author online at davidbossert.com.

Oswald cartoons are 90 years old, they have a freshness to them that defies their age because of those inventive animation gags.

The other aspect that I found intriguing about Oswald was the fact that half of the 26 Walt Disney-created cartoons were missing—completely lost with no apparent film prints known. When Oswald was repatriated back to The Walt Disney Company, there were only thirteen titles that had known film prints. The rest were classified as lost, and locating those lost cartoons presented itself as an appealing challenge.

There is a misnomer that Walt Disney lost the rights to Oswald, but that is not true. Walt never owned the rights to Oswald; he was merely a contractor—a pencil for hire. What he lost was the contract to create more Oswald shorts. Oswald was created at the request of his producer, Charles Mintz of the Winkler Film Corporation, and their distributor, Universal. Walt and his top animator, Ub Iwerks, created Oswald. The first theatrical release was Oswald the Lucky Rabbit in "Trolley Troubles," and it was an instant success.

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 costs, often pushing Mintz for more money. Ultimately, Mintz believed Walt to be unnecessary and thought he could set up his own studio of animators for the second order of 26 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 and therefore control of the character. Walt had nothing.

While finishing off the Oswald obligation, Walt, his brother Roy and Iwerks, who had remained loyal, were working on a new character named Mickey Mouse in secret behind



Oswald in "Empty Socks" (1927)

locked doors at the Hyperion studio and at Walt's and Roy's homes on Lyric Avenue in Los Angeles. Walt wrote the storyline for the first Mickey short, "Plane Crazy" (1928). It was inspired by Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean to Paris. This was followed by "Steamboat Willie" (1928) and "The Gallopin' Gaucho" (1928).

"Steamboat Willie" was the first Mickey Mouse cartoon released, with sound added, and was an overnight sensation. Mickey's popularity quickly eclipsed that of the other animation fare of the day, including Oswald. Walt Disney turned a devastating setback into a triumphant success.

There is no question that Oswald the Lucky Rabbit is an important part of the early history and success of The Walt Disney Company. If Walt had not lost the contract for Oswald, he might never have created Mickey Mouse, who has become a ubiquitous symbol of the global pop culture—a cultural lexicon.

The story of Oswald is not over yet. There are still seven missing shorts to be found. In fact, one of those has already been identified. The other surprise was the re-discovery of a 27th Oswald short bearing Walt Disney's name as director on the title card. The complete story, including many never-before-seen images and photographs, are in my latest book from Disney Editions, *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit: The Search for the Lost Disney Cartoons*.