

Celebrating Disney's Silly Symphony, *The Night Before Christmas*

By Dave Bossert 12/10/2017



(After Santa unpacks the toys he takes a moment to enjoy them dancing as he wags his finger to the musical beat in this Silly Symphony short. This scene was animated by Disney legend Dick Huemer who also animated Santa at the piano, and exiting up the chimney towards the end of this short. Huemer went on to be an accomplished story man and director, most notably on *Fantasia*; ©Disney)

In 1823, a poem entitled *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was first published anonymously. Four years later it was attributed to Clement Clarke Moore and is most commonly known as *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. It was one of the first times that impressions and traits of St. Nickolas were written in a way that allowed the reader to visualize what 'Santa Claus' looked like. The poem has become synonymous with the Christmas season and has been immortalized in song, spoken word, comics, literature, and film. In more recent years, the poem has been attributed to Henry Livingston by some scholars. The authorship of this poem continues to be a source of

debate, although a recent analysis is pointing to Livingston as the likely true author. Regardless, I have vivid memories of my father reading the poem on Christmas Eve every year while I was growing up with my siblings in New York.

In December of 1933, The Walt Disney Studios released its own version of the poem with its fortieth animated Silly Symphony cartoon, *The Night Before Christmas*. The short was directed by Wilfred Jackson, who later directed on *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and many others. Jackson was a prolific animator who started at Disney working on the Mickey Mouse short *Steamboat Willie*. He moved up the ranks quickly going on to direct thirty-five shorts including three Academy Award winners—*The Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Country Cousin*, and *The Old Mill*.



(Inanimate toys come to life, including a 'cameo' by a kinetic Mickey Mouse toy animated by Ugo D'Orsi; ©Disney)

The Night Before Christmas was made as a sequel—a continuation, of the previous year’s popular Silly Symphony *Santa’s Workshop* (1932) also directed by Jackson. Both shorts use the same Santa Claus character design. In *The Night Before Christmas*, Santa is delivering the toys that were made by his elves in *Santa’s Workshop*, including a mechanical Mickey Mouse wind-up toy that motors by with other dolls and toys after leaving Santa’s sack for the base of the Christmas tree. An example of a character from another, unrelated property making a “cameo” appearance, which can also be found in many other Disney animated films. The animation of this scene is attributed to Ugo D’Orsi. He was one of the founding artists of the first dedicated special effects department at the Disney Studios.

The Night Before Christmas features animation by many of Disney’s legendary animators including Art Babbit, Les Clark, Hamilton (Ham) Luske, Norm Ferguson, and Fred Moore among others. Babbit helped to develop Goofy; Clark became one of Disney’s legendary Nine Old Men; Luske was a sequence director on *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Cinderella*, *Peter Pan* and many others; Ferguson is noted for helping to create Pluto; and Moore was known for his appealing drawings of woman and for his beautiful redesign of Mickey Mouse in 1938 for *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. All of these animators and directors cut their artistic chops working on the early short films, which were the training grounds leading to the first fully animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Depending on the source referenced, either actor/singer Donald Novis or singer Kenny Baker were cast for the narrator in which part of the Clement Clark Moore poem is sung as a ballad—a spoken word-like singing style set to music. When two or more individuals are referenced on different documents, I want to mention both simply because there is a conflict in

the paperwork. This is similar to my previous article on *The Old Mill*, which had documents showing two different people being credited for directing, Wilfred Jackson and Graham Heid. It was clearer cut since Wilfred Jackson was the named as director for the short on an Academy Award program. In this case it is different because there is no definitive indication that I could find, Novis and Baker are credited in different documentation.

Both Baker and Novis were popular singers during that time period, but Novis is listed in several databases as singing not only on *The Night Before Christmas* but also *Bambi*, and *Lady and the Tramp*. That shows a solid Disney connection. He also returned to Disney in 1955 when he co-created, with Wally Boag, the Golden Horseshoe Revue at Disneyland's Frontierland. He went on to star in that show for nine years before retiring in 1964.

The score for the short was composed by Leigh Harline. He wrote the music to accompany the *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* poem and also uses quotes from "Silent Night" by Franz Gruber and "Jingle Bells" by James Pierpont. Both classic Christmas songs were in the public domain at that time. It was a common practice to use public domain music and songs because it brought a level of familiarity for the audience and it did not cost the studio any royalties or use fees.



(Junior looking up the fireplace chimney after Santa leaves and right before he is hit in the face with a pile of soot, animation by Les Clark; In 2014, the scene was digitally altered removing an offensive blackface created by the chimney soot making the cartoon accessible to all. ©Disney)

This film is not without controversy. Towards the end of the short, after Santa Claus has left going up the chimney, a small boy named Junior runs into the fireplace hearth and looks up. After a beat, he is hit in the face with a pile of soot and then looks at camera with a racially insensitive blackface. In later years, the offending scene was edited out and replaced with footage of Santa flying away. But in 2014, the scene was digitally modified to reflect Junior still being hit with the soot but showing more natural looking dirty blotches on his face. I felt that this was a better solution than editing in footage from another cartoon. It maintained a more original version of the short with only a minor modification, which allowed for the short to be accessible to all, even though the original uncut version is available on YouTube.

As societal norms change, it is appropriate to make these types of adjustments rather than placing such shorts on restricted lists and locking them away. Changing the offensive scene to an acceptable version doesn't distract from but rather adds to the overall joyous tone for the film, which is in keeping with the holiday spirit of inclusion and goodwill to all.

I hope that you will take a moment to watch *The Night Before Christmas* and read the original poem during this holiday season. Both are easily accessible online. When watching this short, it is worth noting that story development took approximately three months and it was animated in about six weeks. It's amazing what you can get done in animation in a streamlined organization. Wishing you all a very happy and healthy Holiday season.