

# Mickey turns 50

*A mouse that's part of American life, for better or worse*

By **DON WOODARD**

*Editors note: Saturday marks the 50th birthday of Mickey Mouse, an institution of American childhood and offers an opportunity for some reflections on the state of such institutions.*

From the same heartstrings that left you breathless at the thought of America's bicentennial, the Walt Disney organization brings you Mickey Mouse's 50th birthday celebration. Sort through your attic—beneath the pile of D.C. comics or stacks of Barbi's clothes—and don your name-embroidered Mouse-K-ears. Then see to it that you don't get ill.

For many of us, the idea of recognizing the reputed rodent's birthday is, at best, ludicrous. We have a hazy, black-and-white recollection of Annette, Doreen and Cubby climbing out of a stagecoach at the opening of television's *Mickey Mouse Club*.

We ate tasteless gum dispensed from Mickey's mouth thanks to the folks at Pez. And if we looked hard enough, there still might be a Mouse-K-teer's soundtrack album (complete with the "Pussycat Polka") tossed in a forgotten record rack beside Alvin and the Chipmuck's Christmas record. But most of those items were best remembered—hence, cherished—by our older brothers and sisters.

So if a good number of us are second—even third—generation graduates of the Mickey Mouse Club, what's all the hubbub about? Because, like it

or not, the folks at Walt Disney Studios are seeing to it that we get nostalgic over the issue. In the following weeks our televisions, cinemas, bookshelves, city streets and wallets will be overrun with everything we did and/or didn't want to know about Mickey.

M.M.'s exact birthdate is somewhat dubious and depends upon how one distinguishes a cartoon character's "birth." Mickey was first dreamed up, so legend has it, on a train ride the young Walt Disney took from New York in March 1928. His film debut, contrary to popular belief, was a lead role in a silent animated short entitled "Plane Crazy," on May 15 that same year. But if we are to take the word of studio executives as gospel, Mickey was born Nov. 18, 1928—the date he premiered in film's first cartoon with sound, "Steamboat Willie."

Mickey has served his public well. While evolving from the skinny little mouse of a mouse one would hardly recognize today into the shape of the superstar as we know him, he launched the career of a man who brought laughter and joy to millions around the world. The genius of Walt Disney will never be equaled.

Unfortunately we have had to put up with a good deal of extraneous paraphernalia. T-shirts, wristwatches, Close-n-play phonographs, sunglasses, tumblers—as long as the item was family material some Joe at the Disney factory could and probably did put a Mickey Mouse likeness on it. But all of this would be fine if there

were an end in sight.

There isn't.

In fact, they've only just begun. You can look for at least two television specials in the immediate future. (One of them, "Mickey's 50," will feature guest tributes from the likes of Ed Asner, Carol Burnett, Gregory Peck, Elton John (?), Billy Graham (?), R2D2 (!!!) and Bette Davis, to name but a few.)

As long as you're looking, glance down the aisles of any retail store. There'll be limited commemorative celluloid paintings (\$1,000), commemorative albums (\$19.95), books, 8mm films (\$69.95) and 65 new miscellaneous products. In short, the Walt Disney Studios is no mickey mouse organization.

It's more than a bit disconcerting. The redeeming item on the list of events is the Mickey Mouse Special, an Amtrack train that will carry (sound familiar, Spirit of '76 fans?) an M.M. museum across the country featuring 57 whistle-stops. (On a sadder footnote, Amy Carter will greet Mickey when he pulls into Washington, D.C. (Fantasy Land?) for a party at the White House.)

So get out your candles, guard your checkbook, and sing along:

"M-I-C . . . see ya real soon . . . K-E-Y . . . why? Because despite your oversell, we like you . . . M-O-U-S-E-EEEEEEEE."

*Don Woodard is associate editor for the Daily Tar Heel.*


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