

Mickey Mouse grows older but retains charm

By DONALD J. FREDERICK
National Geographic
News Service

He's a middle-aged actor with big ears, legs like rubber hose, a wide grin and a heart of gold.

He may be a little thicker around the middle, but he doesn't have a single gray hair to show for his 50 years, and he's still as much at home in Hong Kong and Paris as he is in Hollywood. Who else, but Mickey Mouse?

The wonder mouse made his debut in the autumn of 1928 in "Steamboat Willie," the first synchronized sound cartoon ever released. An instant success, Mickey led his creator, Walt Disney, to the pinnacle of show business, the National Geographic Society recalls.

For years the high-pitched, boyishly breathless voice emerging from the sound track was Disney's own, and of all his cartoon characters, Mickey remained closest to his heart.

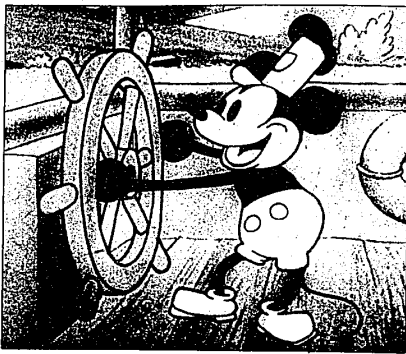
PEOPLE ALL OVER the world took him to their hearts, too. Mickey became an international celebrity almost overnight.

"Special periodicals devoted to the mouse first appeared in Europe," said David R. Smith, archivist of Walt Disney Productions. "In Italy he was printed in 1932 in a tabloid called 'Topino,' and two years later his antics were amusing the French in Le Journal de Mickey. Both publications are still flourishing."

The Mickey mystique swept far beyond Europe. In 1933 a polka in south central India called Mickey the most popular of all American movie stars among his people. Crossing ideological boundaries, the magic mouse received a cut-glass-and-silver pitcher from the Soviet government as a tribute to his appearance at the first Soviet Cinema Festival in 1935.

The mouse's charm cut through social barriers as well.

Franklin Roosevelt demanded Mickey Mouse films in the White House. Dowager Queen Mary of Britain liked to find him on the bill whenever she went to the movies. Charles de Gaulle collected pop-up books featuring Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters.



Mickey Mouse steered course to stardom 50 years ago in "Steamboat Willie."

WHEN KING BHUMPHOL of Thailand presented Walt Disney with a medal, he said in an aside: "This is an honor from my government, but more than that, it comes from me. I grew up on your cartoons."

Germany in the late '30s never got a chance to marvel at the mouse's antics. "He was banned by Adolph Hitler, who thought him undignified," recalled Smith, the Disney archivist. "The dictator was further enraged by an early Mickey cartoon that featured an army of vicious cats wearing what appeared to be German army helmets."

Mickey had the last say, however. The password of the Allied forces on D-day, June 6, 1944, was "Mickey Mouse," and the cartoon character rode into battle as the insignia on many ships and planes.

Although somewhat eclipsed by Donald Duck and other Disney characters in the last 20 years, Mickey is still known and loved throughout the world. He's Mickey-Ma-ua in Japan, Raton Mickey in Mexico, Micky Maus in Germany, Musse Pig in Sweden, and just plain Mickey in scores of other lands.

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