

Profile of a Special Library

The Walt Disney Archives

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Why The Walt Disney Archives?

In December 2010, I joined The Walt Disney Company as a Senior Information Architect. I had left my post at Microsoft, where I had been working for nearly 10 years, in User Experience Design and Design Management. I was thrilled to be at Disney now. As a kid who grew up in Los Angeles County, Disneyland was part of my DNA. But now, in my thirties, I was going from Xbox to Mickey Mouse, and I couldn't have been happier. The move from gloomy Seattle back home to the sunny Southern California San Fernando Valley was welcome. It was hot, and I was wearing cutoff shorts and flip-flops, nostalgically sipping from Slurpee Big Gulp Cups.

Fairly early in my post at Disney, I talked with my new manager, who asked if I had been to the Archives. I had not, and he encouraged me to swing by and take a look. Disney is incredibly proud of its history and encourages employees to experience it through talks, appearances, exhibits, and time at the Archives. I went to the cafeteria frequented by the Imagineers, the elite force behind Disney's most impossible rides for French fries and grilled cheese. I caught an impromptu, intimate concert from Disney Legend Musician Robert Sherman, who told the audience how and why he chose unusual notes for Julie Andrews to sing in "Mary Poppins." I was having trouble getting my actual work done – it was just so much more interesting checking out the environs. And then, one day I finally made it over to the archives.

I was amazed at what I found there. As an employee, I had access to everything from the script to "Steamboat Willie" to Cinderella's actual slipper. I met Disney Legend Kathryn Beaumont, the voice of the original "Alice In Wonderland." I also began to meet people with MLIS degrees. This included Libby, my favorite librarian at the archives, who was so kind as to answer my questions and make the Archives feel like such a special place. Libby would smile and tell me about the reference requests she would get from the animators, like, "I need a few frames of Mickey fishing. Preferably from the forties." She was a magician in how she found that needle in the haystack in what seemed like once an hour. The Walt Disney Archives are the first place I ever thought about a life in MLIS. Fourteen years later, I am finishing my first semester in the MLIS program here at UNCG. Choosing The Walt Disney Archives as my subject for the Special Library Profile assignment was more than fitting. I can't emphasize enough how this Big Bang Perfect Storm style of Disney Archives + Patient Librarian + Discovery of the MLIS Degree changed the entire trajectory of my life.

The Basics

The full name of the special library I have chosen to profile is “The Walt Disney Archives.” The archives are in the Frank G. Wells Building at Walt Disney Studios, 500 S Buena Vista St, Burbank, CA 91521. Online Presence: <https://d23.com/walt-disney-archives/>. The parent organization of the Walt Disney Archives is The Walt Disney Company.

History and Mission

The Walt Disney Archives was established in 1970 as a corporate archive. Its mission was and continues to be to collect, preserve, and make available historical materials related to Walt Disney and the Disney company for research. (*Walt Disney Archives - D23*, 2024c).

In 1970, Walt Disney’s brother (and Chairman of the Board), Roy O. Disney, was in a unique spot. Walt had passed, and some influential Imagineers and animators had started to retire. Roy wanted to ensure that this fantastic Disney history would not be forgotten. (*Preserving the Legacy: The Walt Disney Archives - the Walt Disney Company*, 2015b).

Enter Dave Smith. Dave had a BA in History and an MLIS degree from UC Berkeley. He had done extensive work as a research librarian at the Library of Congress and even some time in the manuscript department at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. He was working at the UCLA library when the idea of working at Disney entered his purview. There are several stories about how Dave was offered the opportunity to start the Archives. None of them sounds too factual, but every piece of Archive History says, “Founded by Dave Smith,” so I guess that’s what matters. (*An Interview With Dave Smith, Lead Archivist of the Walt Disney Archives*, n.d.).

Collection

The Walt Disney Archives collects, preserves, and shares the history of The Walt Disney Company.

The collection is massive in size and scope. The digital collection includes an estimated 4-5 million photographs, including original scripts, corporate history, costumes, Walt Disney’s correspondence and script notes, and 8-9,000 photographs that feature Walt Disney himself. Other common artifacts include photos of theme park construction and behind-the-scenes photographs taken on film sets. The collection features over 10,000 costumes, millions of documents, and 38,000 props and set pieces. (DisneyD23, 2020b)

In most cases, The Walt Disney Archives do not allow external researchers to view the collection. Disney archives are primarily used as a research library for current cast members and employees. Most archival materials are only used in-house only by the studio. (*Inside Disney: The Archives and Animation Research Library*, n.d.-a). In addition, on-site reference interviews

are available (for employees only) to support current company projects that need Disney archival information to move forward.

Some alternative ways those not directly associated with Disney can experience its archives in some capacity include the Archive's robust presence on the web, notably Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, D23, the Official Disney Fanclub, offers a unique inside look of the Archives on their website, magazine, and other content. On the D23 website, you can find a feature called "Ask the Walt Disney Archives." A webform is provided where visitors can ask any question about Disney, and experts from the Walt Disney Archives will answer.

The Walt Disney Archives has an Instagram account, @waltdisneyarchives, where they display archives from the collection to the online public. (*Instagram*, n.d.).

The Walt Disney Archives on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/waltdisneyarchives/?hl=en>

Organization of Materials

The Walt Disney Archives is the first (and largest) studio archive in the film/entertainment industry. The staff of 30 work as teams in multiple areas – Research, Collections, Exhibitions, and Operations with a Photo Library and Digital Lab.

Staff

The staff comprises employees from various backgrounds with diverse experiences – some have traditional library and archival training, museum training, academic and film studies training, and some even have business management training. The archives feature several sub-teams, including the exhibits team, responsible for the concepts, setup, and takedown of items on loan or public display. The archives also maintain a team solely dedicated to research. . (DisneyD23, 2020b).

The two most iconic figures in Disney Archives history are its founder, Dave Smith, and his successor, Becky Cline. Wildly different in background and personality, they both were terrific folks who motivated their staff seamlessly.

Dave's background in Library Science as I've previously touched on, really sticks out. He had put his time in at UCLA, the Huntington Library, UC Berkeley, and the Library of Congress. I can't imagine a more prestigious background! When Dave passed, he was replaced by the current Archives Director, Becky Cline. Becky's pre-Disney education is wild compared to Dave's. She was a theater major and said in an interview that she has no institutional (library/information) training. (*There's an Archivist for That! Interview With Rebecca Cline, the Director of the Walt Disney Archives*, 2020a).

"Oddly enough – I have no institutional library training, but my theatrical background has been of inestimable value in an entertainment archive setting – working with props, costumes, sets,

art, curating exhibitions, budgets, and scheduling, and assisting historical researchers.” (*There’s an Archivist for That! Interview With Rebecca Cline, the Director of the Walt Disney Archives*, 2020a).

It was as if Becky and Dave were two sides of the same coin, making it possible for the Archives to proceed swimmingly.

Changes and Challenges

“We must also create and maintain proper storage facilities for everything from paper to collecting and processing digital history. What used to come through the doors as paper is now digital, requiring a whole new set of skills to find, process, store, and share. In our case, it is massive amounts of digital imagery and audio material.” -Rebecca Cline

The biggest challenge facing the archives must be the processing the amount of information that comes “through that door” and making sure it is not only of the highest quality but that it is scalable to the needs of the future of Disney research. (*There’s an Archivist for That! Interview With Rebecca Cline, the Director of the Walt Disney Archives*, 2020c).

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