A Mickey Mouse index: indexing and cataloguing the Walt Disney Archives

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MICKEY'S APPEARANCE has changed through the years, as can be seen in this progression of Mickey as he was drawn from 1928 to present day.

Many people resort to slang when referring to a haphazard, relatively useless index as a 'Mickey Mouse' index. But over in Burbank, California, the Walt Disney Archives can boast of having the only authentic and authoritative Mickey Mouse index. Of course, Mickey Mouse is not the only element in the vast indexes and catalogues of the Disney Archives, but the name seems appropriate.

The Walt Disney Archives came into being in 1970, when The Walt Disney Company decided to create a department to bring together all of the company's history and to make it available when needed. As it is a company which makes great use of its past, from two-thirds to three-fourths of the work of the Archives is internal. But the Archives are also open, by appointment only, to students, writers and others who are doing serious research on Disney history.

Disney is only one of a growing number of major corporations in the United States which have seen the advantages of starting archival programs within the past two decades. During this period there has been increased interest in business history among scholars, and companies themselves have found that they can cash in on the current nostalgia boom by highlighting elements from their past. It usually takes companies a number of years before they even realize that they have a history. Often it is an impending major anniversary, such as the 50th, which provides the catalyst for the establishment of archives. In 1970, Disney not only was three years from its 50th anniversary, but had recently witnessed the passing of its founder. These factors, combined with the growing need for historical information within the company, led to the creation of the Walt Disney Archives.

The collections of the Disney Archives are perhaps greater and more varied than those of any other corporation in the country. They encompass not only Walt Disney and the Disney motion pictures, but also Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and all of the other Disney ancillary activities. They consist of: (1) business records (correspondence files, financial records, annual reports, etc.); (2) creative records (the materials used in creating the product—scripts, costume sketches, set designs, animation artwork, blueprints, models, etc.); and (3) the product and related material (films, television shows, books, phonograph records, educational materials, video cassettes, photographs, press releases, posters, publicity materials, newspaper and magazine articles, awards, etc.).

When it comes to making such a large and varied collection available for use, one thinks first of an index or catalogue. But how do you do it? Where do you start? The obvious factor readily apparent from the beginning is that everything cannot be combined in a single index. As the saying goes, you cannot combine apples and oranges. Each type of item has its own peculiarities and each lends itself to its own particular type of catalogue. Some materials came to the Archives with an index already prepared; others were arranged in such a way that no index was needed.
Each archive has its own needs when it comes to indexes and catalogues. Many of these indexes and catalogues are obvious choices and are created from the beginnings of an archival program; others become necessary only after the pattern of usage of the collection indicates their value. The variety of indexes and catalogues in the Disney Archives mirrors the variety of material in the collections:

1. **Company-generated lists.** These are ready-made indexes which were originally created prior to the establishment of the Archives and have been kept up to date by the departments concerned and by Archives personnel. These include listings, with production number, date, and synopsis, of each Disney motion picture and television show, and a separate index by production numbers. (The production number is a unique number attached to each film from its beginnings, and many files come to the Archives in production number order.) Archives itself was responsible for the preparation of a catalogue listing special Disney films that were not listed elsewhere—educational films, wartime training films, and films produced for Disneyland, Walt Disney World, home video cassettes, and pay-TV. There was a ready-made catalogue of Disney phonograph records, but it was by record number only, so the Archives prepared an alphabetical title index on cards to make it more useful.

2. **Card catalogues.** Many archivists complain about card catalogues based on library cataloguing rules, but such archivists are shortsighted. Archivists can learn much from librarians (and vice versa, by the way), and there are elements of card catalogues that work well in archives. The Disney Archives adapted library cataloguing rules for several card catalogues. The one which most closely matches library catalogues is that for books. Printed Library of Congress catalogue cards were available for many of the over 1,000 American Disney titles, but there was one major problem: all the cards were under the main entry: Disney (Walt) Productions. It would have been useless to have all the cards under this entry, so the title was made the main entry instead, and added entries were prepared for authors, illustrators, and film titles which may not have rated an added entry at the Library of Congress. Phonograph records and video cassettes were also catalogued using adapted Library of Congress rules.

3. **Special purpose card files.** Some categories of material lent themselves to card catalogues, but they fell outside normal library rules. Since easy access to major magazine articles about Disney was needed, a card catalogue of these articles was prepared. The articles were catalogued as if they were books, and subject headings were assigned from a specially prepared list of Disney subject headings. A similar file was prepared for lectures, interviews, and speeches by Walt Disney and Disney personnel. A card was designed for entering awards (now numbering over 2,000); three copies of each card are made and filed under name of presenting organization, accession number, and physical location. A companion catalogue in 3-ring binders provides access by subject and date. Another file contains a card for each film (and each reissue of each film), and these cards are used for listing publicity materials relating to that release in the collection—domestic and foreign posters, pressbooks, radio commercials, photographic stills, etc.

4. **Reference-type card files.** Some subject index card files have been prepared over the years by different departments or individuals and later inherited by the Archives. In many cases, Archives has taken upon itself the task of keeping these subject indexes current. Among these files are an alphabetical listing of licensed manufacturers of Disney character merchandise (from 1930 to date), a subject index by types of merchandise (i.e. puzzles, umbrellas, toothbrushes, watches, etc.), and a subject index to the Disney cartoon shorts.

5. **Collection inventories.** For a few of the large collections of business records, Archives has prepared inventories. These inventories include biographical information on the compiler of the collection, a summary of the contents, and a box-by-box, or sometimes folder-by-folder, listing.

6. **Filing arrangement.** Some files do not need separate indexes, because items are found simply by use of a readily-apparent filing arrangement. Thus biographies (including press releases, obituaries, newspaper articles) are in a file cabinet in alphabetical order. Files have been set up for each attraction at Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Epcot Center, and these are simply filed according to the layout of the parks. For example, all Fantasyland attractions are together, all Tomorrowland attractions are together, etc. Newspaper clippings are filed by subject under each year. Photographic negatives are filed by negative numbers which include a code date (e.g. 471-20 means the 20th negative numbered in April, 1971).

7. **Lists.** In some cases, Archives has prepared typed lists to serve as collection inventories; for example, lists of foreign Disney books by country and lists of different types of Disney character merchandise—watches, collectable plates, commemorative items for special events, figurines of specific manufacturers, etc.

8. **Computer catalogues.** A computer has been a recent addition at the Disney Archives. Since many of the Archives’ files are temporarily in a remote storage location, it was deemed advantageous to enter the contents lists of the 3,500 boxes into a computer database. Searching by keyword we then discover in which box to look. A separate computer listing of early, collectable character merchandise offers printouts by type of merchandise, accession number, Disney character, and location. A film credits index is in the works. It is expected that additional computer indexes will be
prepared in the future as the need arises and as staff time can be made available for the time-consuming task of inputting the data.

Obviously, when archives have this many indexes and catalogues, there needs to be great reliance by the researcher on the archives' staff. It is necessary for the staff to suggest avenues for the researcher to use in finding information on his topic. This much reliance on staff is not the ideal solution, but it often becomes the only solution when dealing with a huge, greatly varied collection.

With the advent of automated finding aids, more things are possible when it comes to indexing and cataloguing a collection such as that of the Walt Disney Archives. Increased use of the computer for indexing may in the future offer greater and easier access to the collection.

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— from Off-beat biologist, the autobiography of Alan S. Parkes (Cambridge University Press, 1985; quoted by permission). The book, of 473 pages, has three separate 'Indices' to People, Organizations, and Animals.

What an interesting alternative solution to the accruing of information on subjects to that implemented by the Data Protection Act: not registration, but obliteration!