

## MASTER OF IMAGINATION

By Fred Hobbs

An old popular song lyric contains this line: "Imagination is funny; it makes a cloudy day sunny." This is the story of a man who, through his imagination, created a multitude of sunny, funny moments in the lives of millions of people.

Elias was born to a mother of German and English descent and an Irish-Canadian father. He was a descendant of a Frenchman who had traveled to England with William the Conqueror in 1066. His parents were married in Acton, Florida, near a location that would be important to Elias in later years.

Elias's grandfather had moved from Ontario, Canada to the U.S., at first seeking gold before finally settling down on a farm near Ellis, Kansas, until 1884. The family moved to Chicago in 1890. Elias was born there in 1901 and four years later, they moved back to Kansas.

Although it was not his principal interest, young Elias developed a fascination with trains and was known to put his ear to the tracks in anticipation of hearing Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe passenger or freight cars headed his way...and then to try to spot his uncle, engineer Michael Martin conducting the train.

In 1911, the family left the farm and moved to Kansas City where Elias and his younger sister, Ruth attended grammar school. It was there that he and his brother, Roy, became acquainted with a family of theater buffs who introduced them to the world of vaudeville and motion pictures.

During his teenage years, the family moved again, back to Chicago. It was there that Elias first began to exhibit an interest in art, drawing for his high school newspaper. He dropped out of high school at the age of 16 to join the army, but was rejected for being underage. Following a short stint as an ambulance driver in France right after World War I ended, Elias returned to Kansas City.

After pondering whether he wanted to be an actor or an artist, both requiring imagination for success, Elias chose art. While working for an advertising company, he learned to create cut-out animations for filmed commercials. After reading a book on the subject, Elias decided that cel animation was more promising commercially than cut-out figures. He recruited a fellow worker at the ad firm and the two formed their own company. A natural-born entrepreneur, Elias persuaded the owner of the most popular local movie house to screen their cartoons titled *Laugh-O-Grams*.

His cartoons became widely popular in Kansas City and through their success, Elias was able to start a studio. Sadly, profits didn't cover expenses and the venture wound up in bankruptcy. Undaunted, Elias then turned his gaze West, to Hollywood, California. With the help of a talking cartoon mouse, first called Mortimer he had sketched earlier in his Kansas City studio, Elias was able to combine his artistic talent and business skills into a worldwide entertainment conglomerate operating under his last name, Disney.

Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Disneyland, Disneyworld. These characters, these places and many more created thanks to the master of imagination ...Walter Elias "Walt" Disney!