




WALT DISNEY

THE TRIUMPH OF THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

NEAL GABLER

A K N O P F  B O O K

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Once again, for my beloved daughters,

Laurel and Tanne,

who make all things worthwhile,
and for all those who have ever wished upon a star

I must create a system
or be enslaved by another man's;
I will not reason and compare:
my business is to create.

—WILLIAM BLAKE,
“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”

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INTRODUCTION

He was frozen. At least that was the rumor that emerged shortly after his death and quickly became legend: Walt Disney had been cryogenically preserved, hibernating like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, to await the day when science could revive him and cure his disease. Though it is impossible to determine exactly, the source of the rumor may have been a tabloid named *National Spotlite*, whose correspondent claimed to have sneaked into St. Joseph's Hospital where Disney had expired, disguised himself as an orderly, picked the lock on a storage room door, and spotted Disney suspended in a metal cylinder. The story also surfaced in 1969 in a French publication, *Ici Paris*, which said it based its report on individuals close to Disney, and it was repeated in *The National Tattler*, an American scandal sheet, which added that Disney had instructed doctors to thaw him in 1975. Yet another supermarket tabloid, *Midnight*, under the headline "Walt Disney Is Being Kept Alive in Deep Freeze" quoted both a studio librarian who remembered Disney accumulating a vast file of filmed material on cryogenics and an acquaintance of Disney's who said that the producer was "obsessed" with these movies. A writer for *The Mickey Mouse Club* television show, produced under Disney auspices, seemed to corroborate the librarian's recollection by recalling that Disney had once asked him about cryogenics and that the writer had then had the studio library staff research the subject. Ward Kimball, a puckish animator at the studio, took some pride in keeping the rumor afloat. And Disney himself may have lent it credence. According to one account, just weeks after his death studio department heads were invited to a screening room with nameplates on the seats, then watched a film of Disney sitting at his desk and eerily pointing to and addressing each of them on future plans. He concluded by smiling knowingly and saying that he would be seeing them soon.

In truth, Disney's final destination was fire, not ice; he had been cremated and his ashes interred in a mausoleum in a remote corner of the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, not far from his studio. But the persistence of the rumor, however outlandish, testified not only to the identification of Disney with futuristic technology late in his life but to a public unwillingness to let go of him, even to the point of mythologizing him as an immortal who could not be felled by natural forces. Arguably no single figure so bestrode American popular culture as Walt Disney. By one estimate, in 1966 alone—the year of his death, 240 million people saw a Disney movie, a weekly audience of 100 million watched a Disney television show, 80 million read a Disney book, 50 million listened to Disney records, 80 million bought Disney merchandise, 150 million read a Disney comic strip, 80 million saw a Disney educational film, and nearly 7 million visited Disneyland. By another estimate, during his lifetime Disney's live-action films grossed nearly \$300 million and the feature animations just und

\$100 million, when these were astronomical figures, and more than 60 million people had visited Disneyland. *The Saturday Evening Post* once called him the “world’s most celebrated entertainer and possibly its best known non-political public figure,” and *The New York Times* eulogized him “probably the only man to have been praised by both the American Legion and the Soviet Union.”

But Walt Disney’s influence cannot be measured by numbers or encomia. It can only be measured by how thoroughly he reshaped the culture and the American consciousness. Disney was protean. In the late 1920s he began reinventing animation, gradually turning it from a novelty that emphasized movement and elasticity of line into an art form that emphasized character, narrative, and emotion. In doing so, he also helped reinvent graphic design by introducing the soft, round, bold, colorful forms that decades later would be adopted and adapted by a vanguard of fine artists. The critic Robert Hughes credited him with inventing Pop Art itself, not only in the look he bequeathed but also in the convergence of high art and low that he effected. “[I]t happened,” Hughes wrote, “when, in *Fantasia*, Mickey Mouse clambered up to the (real) podium and shook hands with the (real) conductor Leopold Stokowski.”

Beyond his animations, Disney changed the shape of American recreation with his Disneyland park. Obviously there had been amusement parks before Disneyland, but they had been grab-bag collections of various rides, games, and shows. Disney reconceptualized the amusement park as a full imaginative experience, a *theme* park, rather than a series of diversions, and just as his animation revised graphic design, his park eventually revised urban design. Detractors called the effect “Disneyfication,” meaning the substitution of a synthetic world for a real one, but the urban planner James W. Roussell commended Disneyland as the “greatest piece of urban design in the United States” for the way it managed to serve its function and satisfy its guests, and architecture critic Peter Blake wrote, “[I]t seems unlikely that any American school of architecture will ever again graduate a student without first requiring him to take a field trip to Orlando, [Florida],” the site of Walt Disney World Resort, the East Coast sequel to Disneyland. In time Disneyland, with its faux environments and manipulated experiences, would become a metaphor for a whole new consciousness in which, for better or worse, the fabricated was preferred over the authentic and the real could be purged of its threats. As Robert Hughes put it, “[H]is achievement became a large shift in the limits of unreality.”

Disney’s influence also impregnated the American mind in subtler, less widely recognized ways. As he reinvented animation and amusement, he changed Americans’ view of their own history and values. In live-action films like *So Dear to My Heart*, *Old Yeller*, and *Pollyanna*, he refined and exploited a mode of nostalgia that became identifiable enough to be called “Disneyesque,” and in others like *Davy Crockett*, *Westward Ho the Wagons!*, and *Johnny Tremain* he fashioned an American past of rugged heroes and bold accomplishment that for generations turned history into boyhood adventure. By the end of his life it was the saccharine values of the nostalgic films and the sturdy patriotism of the historical ones as much as the cartoons that one associated with Disney and that made him, along with Norman Rockwell, the leading avatar of small-town, flag-waving America. At the same time, however, his forward-looking television programs depicting the future helped shape attitudes about technological change, and NASA acknowledged that Disney’s early drumbeating for its program was instrumental in generating public support for space exploration. It was Disney, too, who created Tomorrowland at his Disneyland theme park and collaborated with Monsanto on a House of the Future attraction there, and Disney who advanced the ideas of monorails, “people movers,” Audi

Animatronic robots, and other marvels, even to the point of designing an entire city that would, had been built, have incorporated the latest in technology and urban planning. It made Disney at once nostalgic and a futurist, a conservative and a visionary.

Then there was his effect on nature and conservation. By anthropomorphizing animals in his cartoons, Disney helped sensitize the public to environmental issues; with *Bambi* alone he triggered a national debate on hunting. Later when, basically for his own curiosity, he commissioned a husband-and-wife filmmaking team to shoot footage of a remote Alaskan island and then in 1948 had the film edited into a story of the seals who lived and bred there, *Seal Island*, he essentially created a new genre, the wildlife documentary, and though he would be sternly criticized in some quarters for imposing narratives on nature and turning animals into characters, his films may nevertheless have played a greater role than anything else in popular culture in educating the public on conservation and building a constituency for it.

Finally, there were Disney's accomplishments as an entrepreneur, albeit a reluctant one. He was the first motion picture mogul to realize the potential of television as an ally rather than an adversary, and his decision to make a series for the American Broadcasting Company opened the way for rapprochement between the large screen and the small one. He was also the first to bundle television programs, feature animation, live-action films, documentaries, theme parks, music, books, comic character merchandise, and educational films under one corporate shingle. In effect, as one observer put it, he created the first "modern multimedia corporation" and showed the way for the media conglomerates that would follow. One critic of Disney's even accused him of having dragged corporatism, in the form of the "precise, clean, insipid, mechanical image," into the daily lives of Americans and advised, "Throw him a kiss every time you get a computer letter."

Whenever someone manages to implant himself in American culture and the American psyche as deeply as Walt Disney did, analysts naturally look for explanations. In Disney's case they have pointed to the seeming innocence of his work, its gentle reassurance, its powerful sentimentality, its populism, its transport to childhood, its naïve faith in perseverance and triumph, even its appeal to atavistic images of survival in which, by one analysis, Mickey Mouse's circular shape subliminally summons breasts, babies, and fruit. One scholar has attributed Disney's popularity to his having traversed the distance between the "sentimental populism" of the Great Depression with its nudging critique of the prevailing social order and the "sentimental libertarianism" of the Cold War era that came to embrace the social order. Taking a different tack, the novelist John Gardner, a Disney advocate, located in Disney's work a lightly secularized Christian theology of hope and beneficence in which "God has things well under control" and life is fundamentally good. Essentially, as Gardner said it, Disney had reinterpreted Christianity for mass culture.

There are certainly elements of all of these appeals in Disney's work, and its enormous popularity is undoubtedly the result of a combination of factors—indeed, of Disney's knack for splicing many disparate and even contradictory strains together. On the one hand, a Disney scholar could impute to Walt Disney a major role in the creation of a white, middle-class, Protestant ideal of childhood that turned American offspring in the 1950s into disciplined, self-sacrificing, thrifty, obedient consumers.

On the other hand, another Disney scholar, citing the questioning of authority, the antagonism toward the moneyed class, the emphasis on personal liberation, the love of nature, and the advocacy of tolerance in his films, could credit him as the “primary creator of the counterculture, which the public imagination views as embracing values that are the antithesis of those that the body of his work supposedly communicated to children.”

But if one source of Disney’s magic was his ability to mediate between past and future, tradition and iconoclasm, the rural and the urban, the individual and the community, even between conservatism and liberalism, the most powerful source of his appeal as well as his greatest legacy may be that Walt Disney, more than any other American artist, defined the terms of wish fulfillment and demonstrated on a grand scale to his fellow Americans, and ultimately to the entire world, how one could be empowered by fantasy—how one could learn, in effect, to live within one’s own illusions and even to transform the world into those illusions. “When You Wish Upon a Star,” the song Disney borrowed from *Pinocchio* for his television theme, was his anthem and guiding principle. The key to his success was, as the journalist Adela Rogers St. John put it, that he “makes dreams come true,” or at least gave the impression he did, and that he had “remolded a world not only nearer to his heart’s desire, but to yours and mine.” In numerous ways Disney struck what may be the very fundamental of entertainment: the promise of a perfect world that conforms to our wishes.

He achieved this in part by managing, almost purely by instinct, to tap into archetypes that resonated with people of various ages, eras, and cultures. One of his greatest gifts was in finding the elemental and the essential of virtually every form in which he worked—its genetic code. Whether it was his fairy tales or his boy’s adventures or his castle or Main Street or the *Mark Twain* Riverboat at Disneyland, each seemed to have been refined into *the* fairy tale, *the* boy’s adventure, *the* castle, *the* Main Street or riverboat of our mind’s eye. In an idealized world where wish fulfillment prevailed, Disney had consistently concretized the ideal and provided the pleasure of things made simple and pure the way one imagined they should be, or at least the way one imagined they should be from childhood. He had Platonic templates in his head.

Others, virtually everyone in entertainment, attempt to tap this same reserve, but Disney understood wish fulfillment from the inside, which may be why his own longings connected so powerfully to his audience’s. During a peripatetic childhood of material and emotional deprivation, at least as he remembered it, he began drawing and retreating into his own imaginative worlds. That set a pattern. His life would become an ongoing effort to devise what psychologists call a “paracosm,” an invented universe, that he could control as he could not control reality. From Mickey Mouse through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* through Disneyland through EPCOT, he kept attempting to remake the world in the image of his own imagination, to certify his place as a force in that world and keep reality from encroaching upon it, to recapture a sense of childhood power that he either had never felt or had lost long ago.

It was this attempt, in fact, as much as the fairy tales he used for inspiration, that forged the bond between Disney and childhood, a bond he frequently disavowed by insisting that his films were not made for children. Whether in his movies or in his theme parks, Disney always promised a fantasy in which one could exercise the privileges of childhood—privileges he never abandoned in his own life. This will to power also explained why animation was his preferred medium. In animation one took the inanimate and brought it to life, or the illusion of life. In animation one could exercise the power of

god.

No doubt because he worked in what was regarded as a juvenile idiom, and because his film seemed naïve, unselfconscious, and unpretentious, the young Walt Disney was regarded in movie circles as a kind of folk artist. In the 1930s, when he became a celebrity virtually overnight, intellectuals frequently compared him to another popular artist, Charlie Chaplin, and several, including Thornton Wilder, went so far as to say that Chaplin and Disney were the only true geniuses that the movies had produced. Still, there was always something in Disney that pegged him not just as a populist but as peculiarly American, and though an early biography of him was subtitled *American Original*, he was less original in many respects than quintessential. He had been born in the Midwest in the very heart of the country at the turn of the century and at the fulcrum of an expiring agricultural nation that looked backward to an idyllic past and an aspiring industrialized one that looked forward to a technological future, and he had a foot in each. His childhood had even been divided between the country and the city. An American Everyman, he lived the American experience and seemed to embody it in his doggedness, his idealism, his informality, and his lack of affectation, perhaps above all in his sudden rise from poverty and anonymity to the summit of success. “[H]e emerged from the very heart of the people,” one admirer rhapsodized. “Only so was it possible for him to respond to our subtlest moods.” Another remarked that “[o]f all the activists of public diversion Uncle Walt was the one most precisely in the American mainstream.” The synchronicity between Disney and America would become his brand. His imagination formed a double helix with the American imagination.

Obviously Disney’s work had universal appeal, but in America, with its almost religious belief in possibilities, his urge to wish fulfillment was especially resonant. In both Disney’s imagination and the American imagination, one could assert one’s will on the world; one could, through one’s own power, or more accurately through the power of one’s innate goodness, achieve success. Indeed, in the typically American formulation, nothing but goodness and will mattered. Disney’s best animations—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, and *Dumbo*—were archetypal expressions of this idea. In large measure, they were about the process of a child making his or her claim upon the world, about the process of overcoming obstacles to become whatever he or she wanted to be. Similarly, in both Disney’s imagination and the American imagination perfection was seen as an attainable goal. In a world that was often confusing, dangerous, and even tragic, a world that seemed beyond any individual’s control, Disney and America both promised not only dominance but also improvement. Disneyland was just a modern variant on the old Puritan ideal of a shining City on a Hill, as Disney’s Audio-Animatronic robots were just a variant on the American dream of making oneself anew.

The helix between America and Disney was especially tight in the anxiety-ridden Depression America of the 1930s, when his films seemed to capture and then soothe the national malaise. Virtually everyone interpreted *Three Little Pigs* as a Depression allegory, and many others saw Mickey Mouse’s pluck as an intrepid American spirit. But among American critics the line between naïve populism and cloying sentimentality proved to be thin. Already by the end of World War I, Disney’s artistic reputation was in decline, and intellectuals who had been swooning just a few years earlier over his innocence and artless artfulness now complained that he had lost his touch and become a mass artist rather than a folk artist. By the end of his life, though his iconic status as American

favorite uncle was probably more unshakable than ever, his artistic status had plummeted. What had once been hailed as an unerring sense of the American temper was now attacked by critics for having transmogrified into aesthetic demagoguery and vulgarization. As one disgruntled animator put it: “Walt Disney had the innate bad taste of the American public.”

In the end he was widely identified with cultural degradation—the “rallying point for the subliterates of our society,” as critic Richard Schickel wrote. Almost no one took him seriously any longer, except for the indiscriminating hordes who loved his work, and one could almost have divided the country between those who subscribed to the Disney vision and those who abhorred it. “A few years ago when you mentioned Walt Disney at a respectable party...the standard response was a head shake and a groan,” John Gardner wrote in 1973. “Intellectuals spoke of how he butchered the classics—from *Pinocchio* to *Winnie the Pooh*—how his wildlife pictures were sadistic and coy, how the World’s Fair sculptures of hippopotamuses, etc., were a national if not international disgrace.” The bill of indictment was, indeed, a long one. He had infantilized the culture and removed the danger from fairy tales in the process of popularizing them for a mass market, providing, in novelist M. Apple’s words, “the illusion of life without any of the mess.” He had promoted treacherous values that seemed anachronistic and even idiotic in a complex, modern, often tragic world and that defined him as a cultural and political troglodyte. He had usurped each person’s individual imagination with a homogenized corporate one and promoted conformity, prompting one critic to declare, “The borders of fantasy are closed now.” Like a capitalist Midas, he had commercialized everything he touched, reducing it all, in another antagonist’s view, “to a sickening blend of cheap formulas packaged to sell...One feels our whole mass culture heading up the dark river to the source—that heart of darkness where Mr. Disney traffics in pastel-trinketed evil for gold and ivory.” And at the same time that he was commercializing his own country, he was regarded by his detractors as perhaps the primary example of America’s cultural imperialism, supplanting the myths of native cultures with his own myths just as he had supplanted the imaginations of his audience.

All of this antagonism was aimed at Disney in his role as studio head, but in his later years, and especially after his death, his personal image, at least among intellectuals, underwent a similar, somewhat more gradual transformation from beloved naïf to avaricious corporate kingpin and general villain. Much of this change was politically inspired. Ever since a cartoonists’ strike in 1941 that wracked the studio and shattered its owner’s utopianism, Disney had grown increasingly conservative, aligning himself with red-baiting anti-Communists and with the most reactionary elements of the Republican Party, thus putting himself in the political crosshairs. Whispered accusations of anti-Semitism and racism clearly eroded his image. But much of the criticism was also culturally inspired. His long identification with small-town, conformist America, which had been one source of his popularity, became a liability in the 1960s, when that America was itself increasingly under attack from intellectuals and political activists and was itself increasingly identified not with America’s sinewy strength but with her prejudices. Disney became a symbol of an America facing backward—politically, culturally, and artistically.

One of the most important flash points in both crystallizing and advancing this revisionist view was Richard Schickel’s 1968 critical study, *The Disney Version*, which portrayed Disney as mercenary and mendacious, his entire life “an illusion created by a vast machinery,” so much so that even his own signature, used as the company’s logo, had to be manufactured for him. (In truth, Disney’s person

signature was far more flamboyantly loopy than the modified corporate version.) “Disney was a callous man, oblivious to patterns inherent in nature, art, literature,” a critic wrote in an approving review of Schickel’s book, delivering what rapidly became the standard intellectual verdict on Hollywood’s chief fantasist. “He had a magic touch, but it turned things into gold, not art. He lacked perception and sensitivity for genuine artistic creativity, and his compulsion to control made him no respecter of the integrity of the works of others.” Another biographer, drawing on the deep hostility that Disney now evoked among intellectuals, accused him of being everything from the illegitimate son of a Spanish dancer to an alcoholic to a bigot to an FBI informant. The book was subtitled *Hollywood’s Dark Prince*.

By the 1950s Disney himself was well aware that as a producer he had headed up the river to the heart of commercial darkness and that as a person he had allowed himself to become lost in the corporate haze. He had created the studio; then the studio, with his complicity, created him, making him, he fully understood, as much a commodity as a man—the very sort of diffident, genial, plainspoken, unprepossessing, and childishly enthusiastic character who would have produced Walt Disney movies. Essentially, he had become his own parcosm. Though he actually possessed all of those qualities, they were now simplified, like his signature, into an image and brand. He told one prospective employee that the studio was in the business of selling the name “Walt Disney.” To another associate he commented, “I’m not Walt Disney anymore. Walt Disney is a thing. It’s grown to become a whole different meaning than just one man.”

Though Disney was anything but a dark prince, neither was he exactly the affable illusion that had subsumed him. For all his outward sociability, associates found him deeply private, complex, often moody, and finally opaque. No one seemed to know him. “He was a difficult man to understand,” said Ben Sharpsteen, who worked for him in various capacities from the late 1920s on. “He never made his motives clear.... When I added up thirty years of employment, I found I understood him less at the end.” Bill Peet, another longtime studio hand, wrote, “I do believe I knew Walt about as well as any employee could know him,” then added, “even though he was never the same two days in a row.” “I’ve always said that if you get forty people in a room together,” Walt’s nephew Roy E. Disney told an interviewer, “and ask each one of them to write down who Walt was, you’d get forty different Walts.”

This book is an attempt to penetrate the image and decipher the mystery of Walt Disney—to understand the psychological, cultural, economic, and social forces that acted upon him and led to his art and his empire. And because Disney was so deeply embedded in the American psyche and scene, understanding him may also enable one to understand the power of popular culture in shaping the national consciousness, the force of possibility and perfectionism as American ideals, the ongoing interplay between commerce and art, and the evolution of the American imagination in the twentieth century. In short, to understand Walt Disney, one of the most emblematic of Americans, is to understand much about the country in which he lived and which he so profoundly affected.

ESCAPE



Elias Disney was a hard man. He worked hard, lived modestly, and worshiped devoutly. His son would say that he believed in “walking a straight and narrow path,” and he did, neither smoking nor drinking nor cursing nor carousing. The only diversion he allowed himself as a young man was playing the fiddle, and even then his upbringing was so strict that as a boy he would have to sneak out into the woods to practice. He spoke deliberately, rationing his words, and generally kept his emotions in check, save for his anger, which could erupt violently. He looked hard too, his body thin and taut, his arms roped, his blue eyes and copper-colored hair offset by his stern visage—long and gaunt, sunken-cheeked and grim-mouthed. It was a pioneer’s weathered face—a no-nonsense face, the face of American Gothic.

But it was also a face etched with years of disappointment—disappointment that would shade and shape the life of his famous son, just as the Disney tenacity, drive, and pride would. The Disney family claimed to trace their lineage to the d’Isignys of Normandy, who had arrived in England with William the Conqueror and fought at the Battle of Hastings. During the English Restoration in the late seventeenth century, a branch of the family, Protestants, moved to Ireland, settling in County Kilkenny, where, Elias Disney would later boast, a Disney was “classed among the intellectual and well-to-do of his time and age.” But the Disneys were also ambitious and opportunistic, always searching for a better life. In July 1834, a full decade before the potato famine that would trigger mass migrations, Arundel Elias Disney, Elias Disney’s grandfather, sold his holdings, took his wife and two young children to Liverpool, and set out for America aboard the *New Jersey* with his older brother Robert and Robert’s wife and their two children.

They had intended to settle in America, but Arundel Elias did not stay there long. The next year he moved to the township of Goderich in the wilderness of southwestern Ontario, Canada, just off Lake Huron, and bought 149 acres along the Maitland River. In time Arundel Elias built the area’s first gristmill and a sawmill, farmed his land, and fathered sixteen children—eight boys and eight girls. In 1835 the eldest of them, twenty-five-year-old Kepple, who had come on the boat with his parents, married

another Irish immigrant named Mary Richardson and moved just north of Goderich to Bluevale Morris Township, where he bought 100 acres of land and built a small pine cabin. There his first son, Elias, was born on February 6, 1859.

Though he cleared the stony land and planted orchards, Kepple Disney was a Disney, with airs and dreams, and not the kind of man inclined to stay on a farm forever. He was tall, nearly six feet, and, in his nephew's words "as handsome a man as you would ever meet." For a religious man he was also vain, sporting long black whiskers, the ends of which he liked to twirl, and jet-black oiled hair, always well coifed. And he was restless—a trait he would bequeath to his most famous descendant as he bequeathed his sense of self-importance. When oil was struck nearby in what came to be known as Cress Springs, Kepple rented out his farm, deposited his family with his wife's sister, and joined a drilling crew. He was gone for two years, during which time the company struck no oil. He returned to Bluevale and his farm, only to be off again, this time to drill salt wells. He returned a year later, again without his fortune, built himself a new frame house on his land, and reluctantly resumed farming.

But that did not last either. Hearing of a gold strike in California, he set out in 1877 with eighteen-year-old Elias and his second-eldest son, Robert. They got only as far as Kansas when Kepple changed plans and purchased just over three hundred acres from the Union Pacific Railroad, which was trying to entice people to settle at division points along the train route it was laying through the state. (Since the Disneys were not American citizens, they could not acquire land under the Homestead Act.) The area in which the family settled, Ellis County in the northwestern quadrant of Kansas about halfway across the state, was frontier and rough. Indian massacres were fresh in memory, and the Disneys themselves waited out one Indian scare by stationing themselves all night at their windows with guns. Crime was rampant too. One visitor called the county seat, Hays, the "Sodom of the Plains."

The climate turned out to be as inhospitable as the inhabitants—dry and bitter cold. At times it was so difficult to farm that the men would join the railroad crews while their wives scavenged for buffalo bones to sell to fertilizer manufacturers. Most of those who stayed on the land turned to livestock since the fields rippled with yellow buffalo grass on which sheep and cows could graze. Farming there either broke men or hardened them, as Elias would be hardened, but being as opportunistic as his Disney forebears, he had no more interest in farming than his father had. He wanted escape.

Father and son now set their sights on Florida. The winter of 1885–86 had been especially brutal in Ellis. Will Disney, Kepple's youngest son, remembered the snow drifting into ten-to-twelve-foot banks, forcing the settlers from the wagon trains heading west to camp in the schoolhouse for several weeks until the weather broke. The snow was so deep that the train tracks were cleared only when steam engines were hitched to a dead locomotive with a snowplow and made run after run at the drift, inching forward and backing up, gradually nudging through. Kepple, tired of the cruel Kansas weather, decided to join a neighbor family on a reconnaissance trip to Lake County, in the middle of Florida where the neighbors had relatives. Elias went with him.

For Elias, Florida held another inducement besides the promise of warm weather and new opportunities. The neighbor family they had accompanied, the Calls, had a sixteen-year-old daughter named Flora. The Calls, like the Disneys, were pioneers who nevertheless disdained the hardscrabble life. Their ancestors had arrived in America from England in 1636, settling first outside Boston and then moving to upstate New York. In 1825 Flora's grandfather, Eber Call, reportedly to escape hostile

Indians and bone-chilling cold, left with his wife and three children for Huron County in Ohio, where he cleared several acres and farmed. But Eber Call, like Kepple Disney, had higher aspirations. Two of his daughters became teachers, and his son, Charles, was graduated from Oberlin College in 1847 with high honors. After heading to California to find gold and then drifting through the West for several years, Charles wound up outside Des Moines, Iowa, where he met Henrietta Gross, a German immigrant. They married on September 9, 1855, and returned to his father's house in Ohio. Charles became a teacher.

Exactly why at the age of fifty-six he decided to leave Ohio in January 1879, after roughly twenty years there and ten children, is a mystery, though a daughter later claimed it was because he was fearful that one of his eight girls might marry into a neighbor family with eight sons, none of whom were sober enough for the devout teacher. Why he chose to become a farmer is equally mysterious, and why he chose Ellis, Kansas, is more mysterious still. The rough-hewn frontier town was nothing like the tranquil Ohio village he had left, and it had little to offer save for cheap land. But Ellis proved no more hospitable to the Calls than it had to the Disneys. Within a year the family had begun to scatter. Flora, scarcely in her teens, was sent to normal school in Ellsworth to be trained as a teacher and apparently roomed with Albertha Disney, Elias's sister, though it is likely he had already taken notice of her since the families' farms were only two miles from each other.

Within a few years the weather caught up to the Calls—probably the legendary storm of January 1886. In all likelihood it was the following autumn that they left for Florida by train with Elias and Kepple Disney as company. Kepple returned to Ellis shortly thereafter. Elias stayed on with the Calls. The area where they settled, in the middle of the state, was by one account “howling wilderness” at the time. Even so, after their Kansas experience the Calls found it “beautiful” and thought their new life there would be “promising.” It was known generally as Pine Island for its piney woods on the western high rolling land and for the rivers that isolated it, but it was dotted with new outposts. Elias settled in Acron, where there were only seven families; the Calls settled in adjoining Kismet. Charles cleared some acreage to raise oranges and took up teaching again in neighboring Norristown, while Flora became the teacher in Acron her first year and Paisley her second. Meanwhile Elias delivered mail from a horse-drawn buckboard and courted Flora.

Their marriage, at the Calls' home in Kismet on New Year's Day 1888, wedded the intrepid determination of the Disneys with the softer, more intellectual temper of the Calls—two strains of earthbound romanticism that would merge in their youngest son. The couple even looked the part: Elias's flinty gauntness contrasting with Flora's amiable roundness, as his age—he was nearly thirty at the time of the wedding—contrasted with the nineteen-year-old bride's youth. Marriage, however, didn't change his fortunes. He had bought an orange grove, but a freeze destroyed most of his crop, forcing him back into delivering the mail. In the meantime Charles Call had an accident while clearing some land of pines, never fully recovered, and died early in 1890. His death loosened the couple's bond to Florida. “Elias was very much like his father; he couldn't be contented very long in any one place,” Elias's cousin, Peter Cantelon, observed. The Disney wanderlust and the need to escape would send Elias back north—this time to a nine-room house in Chicago.

He had been preceded to Chicago by someone who seemed just as blessed as Elias was cursed. Robert Disney, Elias's younger brother by two-and-a-half years, was viewed by the family as the successful one. He was big and handsome—tall, broad, and fleshy where Elias was short, slim, and wiry, and he had an expansive, voluble, glad-handing manner to match his appearance. He was the “real dandy of the family,” his nephew would say. But if Robert Disney looked the very picture of a man of means, the image obscured the fact that he was actually a schemer with talents for convincing and cajoling that Elias could never hope to match. Six months after Elias married Flora, Robert had married a wealthy Boston girl named Margaret Rogers and embarked on his career of speculation in real estate, oil, and even gold mines—anything he could squeeze for a profit. He had come to Chicago in 1889 in anticipation of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, which would celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, and had built a hotel there. Elias had also come for the promise of employment from the fair, but his dreams were humbler. Living in his brother's shadow, he was hoping for work not as a magnate but as a carpenter, a skill he had apparently acquired while laboring on the railroad in his knockabout days.

The Disneys arrived in Chicago late in the spring of 1890, a few months after Charles Call's death, with their infant son, Herbert, and with Flora pregnant again. Elias rented a one-story frame cottage at 3515 South Vernon on the city's south side, an old mid-nineteenth-century farmhouse now isolated amid much more expensive residences; its chief recommendation was that it was only twenty blocks from the site of the exposition. Construction on the fair began early the next year, after Flora had given birth that December to a second son, Ray. The family enjoyed few extravagances. Elias earned only a dollar a day as a carpenter. But he was industrious and frugal, and by the fall he had saved enough to purchase a plot of land for \$700 through his brother's real estate connections. By the next year he had applied for a building permit at 1249 Tripp Avenue* to construct a two-story wooden cottage for his family, which the following June would add another son, Roy O. Disney.

Though it was set within the city, the area to which they moved the spring of 1893, in the northwestern section, was primitive. It had only two paved roads and had just begun to be platted for construction, which made it a propitious place for a carpenter. Elias contracted to help build homes, and one of his sons recalled that Flora too would go out to the sites and “hammer and saw planks with the men.” Still, by his wife's estimate Elias averaged only seven dollars a week. But he was a Disney, and he had not surrendered his dreams. Using Robert's contacts and leveraging his own house through mortgages, he began buying plots in the subdivision, designing residences with Flora's help and then building them—small cottages for workingmen like himself. By the end of the decade he and his contracting associate had built at least two additional homes on the same street on which he lived—one of which he sold for \$2,500 and the other of which he and his partner rented out for income. In effect, under Robert's tutelage, Elias had become a real estate maven, albeit an extremely modest one.

But by this time, already in his forties, he had begun to place his hope less in success, which seemed hard-won and capricious, than in faith. Both the Disneys and the Calls had been deeply religious, and Elias and Flora's social life in Chicago now orbited the nearby Congregational church, of which they were among the most devoted members. When the congregation decided to reorganize and then voted to erect a new building just two blocks from the Disneys' home, Elias was named a trustee as well as a member of the building committee. By the time the new church, St. Paul's, was dedicated in October 1900, the family was attending services not only on Sundays but during the week. Occasionally, when

the minister was absent, Elias would even take the pulpit. “[H]e was a pretty good preacher,” Flora would remember. “[H]e did a lot of that at home, you know.”

It would become embedded in Disney family lore that when Flora had a baby boy in the upper bedroom of their Tripp house on December 5, 1901, the child’s name was part of a pastoral bargain. As the story went, Flora and the wife of the new young minister, Walter Parr, were pregnant at the same time. Elias and Parr agreed that if their wives both had sons, Elias would name his after the minister and the minister would name his after Elias. This was supposedly how Elias and Flora’s new baby came to be named Walter Elias Disney. The story, however, was only partly true. The Disney’s second son, Ray, may have originally been named Walter—that was the name on his birth registration—before the family reconsidered, which suggests that the Disneys had thought of the name previously. (The confusion would spur rumors later on about whether Walt was actually the Disney’s natural-born child, especially since Walt had no birth certificate, only a baptismal certificate.*) In addition, though Mrs. Parr and Flora had indeed been pregnant at the same time, with Flora late in her pregnancy and Mrs. Parr early in hers, the Parrs’ baby boy, born the following July, was named not Elias but Charles Alexander. Not until the birth of another son two and a half years later, in May 1903, did the Parrs seem to keep their part of the bargain, if there was one, naming the child Walter Elias Parr.

Young Walter Elias Disney, fine-featured and golden-haired and favoring the soft calls more than the flinty Disneys, would not remember much about Chicago. He was scarcely four years old in 1901 when Elias decided yet again to move, though the motive this time was less financial or even temperamental than moral. Two neighbor boys the same ages as Herbert and Ray and from an equally devout St. Paul’s family had attempted to rob a car barn and had killed a policeman during a shootout. Terrified that his own boys might be led astray, especially since the neighborhood was growing rougher, Elias began searching for a more salubrious environment, even making a few brief scouting expeditions, before settling on a remote Missouri town where his brother Robert had recently purchased some farmland as an investment. In February Elias sold their house for \$1,800 and another property a month later. He, Herbert, Ray, and two draft horses they had bought in Chicago then went on to Missouri in a boxcar to ready the farm while Flora, Roy, Walt, and their new baby sister, Ruth, followed on the Santa Fe train. “That was a big moment when we were going to go away,” Walter recalled years later. “[I]t sounded wonderful to all of us,” Roy would confirm, “going on a farm.”

II

Walt Disney would remember Marceline, Missouri. He would remember it more vividly than anything else in his childhood, perhaps more vividly than any place in his entire lifetime. “Marceline was the most important part of Walt’s life,” his wife would say. “He didn’t live there very long. He lived in Chicago and Kansas City much longer. But there was something about the farm that was very important to him.” He would remember the family’s arrival—“clearly remember every detail of it,” he later said. He remembered getting off the train and crossing to a grain elevator, where a neighbor named Coffman waited for them, and he remembered clambering onto Coffman’s wagon and driving out to the farm about a mile from the town’s center, north of Julep Road and of the railroad track that

sliced diagonally through the heart of Marceline. And he remembered his first impression of the site—its dazzling wide front yard carpeted green and crowded with weeping willows.

It was a small farm. Uncle Robert's property, a mile west, was nearly five hundred acres, which Elias had purchased only forty acres on March 5, 1906, from the children of a Civil War veteran named Crane who had died recently, and then bought just over five acres more the next month from Crane's widow. Elias's property cost \$3,000, money he did not have just then, but he had made an arrangement to pay in installments as he received the proceeds from the sale of his properties in Chicago. Despite its modest size, Walt would always recall the farm through the prism of a child's wonder and always think of it as a paradise. Game abounded; there were foxes, rabbits, squirrels, opossums, and raccoons. And there were birds. During migration teal and sprig would settle on the pasture pond. Of the forty-five acres, five were planted with orchards, apple, peach, and plum trees with grapevines and berry plants. "We had every kind of apple you ever heard of," Walt recalled, "including one called a Wolf River apple. Wolf River apples were tremendous in size. People came from miles to see ours." And there were a hog pen, chickens, a few milk cows, and four to six horses. "[I]t was just heaven for city kids," said Roy, which is exactly what Elias intended it to be.

And because it was in the country everything *seemed* heavenly, even when it wasn't. The wooden one-story farmhouse in which the Disneys lived was crudely constructed with whitewashed siding and green trim and so cramped that the back parlor had to be converted into a bedroom for Herbert and Ray. But surrounded by the willows, mock orange trees, silver maples, cedars, lilacs, and dogwoods, it was, in the words of Elias's aunt, "a very handsome [*sic*] place" with a front yard "like a park." She was so smitten that she debated whether she could ever return to Ellis.

Walt Disney had the same dreamy vision of the farm as his great-aunt. "Everything connected with Marceline was a thrill to us," he once reminisced. Coming from what he described as "crowded and smoky" Chicago, he was especially fascinated by the livestock and claimed that his time on the farm imbued him with a special feeling toward animals that he would never lose. He often told about herding the pigs by climbing on their backs, riding them into the pond to root, and sometimes getting shrugged off into the mud—a sight so comical that Elias invited guests to watch. Other times he and a few other children would get up on an old horse named Charley who, Walt said, had "his own sense of humor." Charley headed toward the orchard, forcing the children to jump off his back to avoid being hit by the limbs. Everywhere Walt went he was trailed by a little Maltese terrier he had been given, his first pet, that would snap at his heels and tear his socks. He counted it a "big tragedy" when the dog followed Roy into town one day and never returned.

Walt Disney would always speak of these as his halcyon days. He did not start school until he was nearly seven because, he said, there was no one to take him and because his parents decided he could wait another year and accompany his sister, Ruth, when she started school. "It was the most embarrassing thing [that] could happen to a fellow," he would later complain, "that I had to practically start in school with my little sister who was two years younger." But school did not seem to have much appeal anyway except as a stage on which he could perform, and his one memory from his Marceline education was a Tom Sawyerish escapade in which his teacher asked the children to bring in switches to use on misbehaving students and Walt surreptitiously laid a thick barrel stave on his desk. When she queried who had brought it, Walt, knowing he would get a laugh from his classmates, confessed, only to find himself being struck with the stave by the teacher.

When he was not in school or on the farm, he often spent languid afternoons fishing with the neighbor boys for catfish and bowheads in Yellow Creek and skinny-dipping afterward. In the winter they would go sledding or skating on the frozen creek, building a bonfire on the shore to keep warm. Sometimes Walt would tag after Erastus Taylor, a Civil War veteran, who would relive his battle exploits. (“I don’t think he ever was in a battle in the Civil War,” Walt later said, “but he was in all of them.”) Even Sundays were no longer committed exclusively to church and Sunday school since there was no Congregational church in Marceline. Instead, the Disneys often spent the day going to the Taylor house just down the road, where Elias would take out his fiddle and play with his neighbors.

. . . .

The town was no less enchanting than the farm. In seeking to escape the encroachments and dangers of the city, Elias Disney could hardly have found a better place than Marceline. Though it qualified as a frontier, Marceline was sedate, even refined. Located east of the Locust River off State Highway 160, Marceline, like Ellis, Kansas, was a product of the railroad boom, specifically of the desire of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad to establish a “Chicago Extension,” connecting that city to the west via Kansas City, which lay about 125 miles southwest of the town. The plan necessitated what were called “terminal” or “division” points roughly every one hundred miles along the route, where trains could be serviced and workers housed. Marceline, which became one of these division points, was incorporated on March 6, 1888, and named, depending on who told the story, after the wife or the daughter of one of the railroad’s directors, or the daughter of the town’s first resident civil engineer, or a French immigrant who was an early resident. Within six months 2,500 people had settled there, primarily to service the railroad. Within a year a prospector named U. C. Wheelock discovered coal there, eventually leading to the digging of five mines, which would employ five hundred more men. When the Santa Fe was reorganized in 1903 and was divided into an eastern and a western division, Marceline became the seat of the latter.

Young Walt Disney was impressed by the town’s appearance—that it looked exactly the way a small town should look. From what the local newspaper described as a “motley array of tents and shacks” at its founding, Marceline had, by the time the Disneys moved there, become a “dignified and sturdy” town of roughly 4,500 residents, with two hundred houses built in the preceding two years alone. “A stranger coming here is amazed at the number of lovely lawns and elegant homes,” a civic booster beamed a few years after the Disneys settled there. “In this feature she is excelled by no city of equal population on the continent.” Down the main thoroughfare, Kansas Avenue, still unpaved at the time of the Disneys’ arrival, were the Simpson & Miller Dry Goods Store; Hayden & Anderson’s meat market; the Meriden Creamery; the three-story New York Racket Store, where, an advertiser boasted, a bride could order her complete trousseau and then select the furnishings for her new home; Hott’s Tavern, run by Judge Hott, where “you are sure of getting a good bed—provided the house is not full”; R. J. Dall & Sons ice company; the Brown Hardware Company; Sutton’s Tonsorial Parlor; the Allen Implement Company for farm machinery; Zircher’s Jewelry Store with its free-standing clock on the corner; J. E. Eillis Big Department Store; and the two-story gray granite Allen Hotel. Just off Kansas Avenue at the center of town was another quintessential image of quaint small-town life—Ripley Square, a wooded park with a band gazebo, a long pond, and a cannon sitting atop a four-sided plaster base with a mound of cannonballs nearby.

But however much it may have looked the archetype of hidebound agrarian America, Marceline was not especially conservative—with its large workforce, it was a hotbed of support for the Democrat populist William Jennings Bryan—and it prided itself on its progressivism, which allowed young Walt to receive his cultural education there and led him to comment once that “more things of importance happened to me in Marceline than have happened since—or are likely to in the future.” Marceline Walt saw his first circus and attended his first Chautauqua, a traveling tent show that prominently featured the leading orators of the day. In Marceline he broke his piggy bank to get money to watch Maude Adams play Peter Pan in a touring company, inspiring him to reprise the role in a school production. “No actor ever identified himself with the part he was playing more than I,” he said, recalling how the hoist and tackle that brother Roy used to enable Walt to fly gave way and sent Walt “right into the faces of the surprised audience.” In Marceline he was awaiting the parade for Buffalo Bill’s visiting Wild West Show when Buffalo Bill himself stopped his buggy and invited Walt to join him. “I was mighty impressed,” Walt later wrote. And in Marceline, after school one day, Walt coaxed his sister Ruth to see their first motion picture—a life of Christ, as Ruth remembered it. She also remembered her parents’ scolding when the children returned home after dark, “in spite of Walt telling me it was all right to go.”

But it was not just the homely appearance of Marceline or the cultural rites of passage he experienced there that Walt Disney loved and remembered and would burnish for the rest of his life; it was also the spirit of the community. In Marceline people cared for one another and were tolerant of one another; even a black man who had gotten into a scuffle with some white roughs was exonerated by a local judge. “[E]verything was done in a community help,” Walt recalled. “One farmer would help the other, they’d go and help repair fences. They would do different things.” He especially enjoyed the camaraderie of threshing season, when the wagons would be hitched behind a big steam engine and rumble through the fields, and the neighbors would gather to help, sleeping in the Disney front yard, and their wives would arrive too, all joining forces to cook for their men in a scene that Walt would always think back on fondly.

Nor was it only the community of neighbors he recalled. Living in Marceline would be the first and last time in Walt’s life that the extended Disney family would be a presence, and he clearly basked in the attention. His uncle Mike Martin, who was an engineer on the train running between Marceline and Ft. Madison, Iowa, and who was, Walt said, “one of the prides of my life,” would arrive, walking or hitchhiking the mile from the station in town, and come up to the farm carrying a striped bag of candy for the children. Grandma Disney, a mischievous woman who in her old age seemed to relish bedeviling her dour, straitlaced son, would also come from Ellis and stay. During one of their frequent walks she had Walt crawl under a neighbor’s fence to pick some turnips for her. (Elias was mortified by the transgression, but Walt admitted that he enjoyed these subversive adventures, no doubt because they did rile his father.)

The boy was even more enthused over visits from his uncle Edmund Disney, Elias’s younger brother. Edmund was retarded; he was incapable even of signing his name. But he was an amiable man and free spirit who frequently left his sisters, Lizzie and Ethel, with whom he lived in Kansas, and went roaming. Marceline was one of his regular stops, and he would show up unexpectedly at the Disney door announcing, “It’s me!” Walt said Edmund made a wonderful playmate for an eight-year-old boy since that was about Ed’s mental age. Ed had no inhibitions. “Uncle Ed did everything I

wanted to do,” Walt observed. “He wanted to go to town, he would walk over to the railroad track and ~~the train would be comin’ up. And he’d flag it. The train would stop. He’d say, ‘I want a ride.’ He’d get up and go on to town.~~” The two would also venture into the woods, where Ed knew the names of the plants and birds and could identify the latter’s calls. And then, after what was typically a short visit, he would declare that he was going to see another relative and would leave. Walt admired the sense of juvenile freedom—Ed was a real-life Peter Pan—but he also loved his uncle’s joy, and he considered Ed a role model. “To me he represented fun in its simplest and purest form.”

If Edmund’s visits were breezy reminders of the Disney wanderlust, Uncle Robert’s frequent visits to view his property were reminders of their pretensions. Wearing a linen duster and sporting a Vandyke, he would step off the train as if he were a sovereign, which is exactly how he acted toward his older brother. Robert kept a buggy at Elias’s farm, and Elias was expected to surrender it. Whether or not Elias was resentful, at least some of his neighbors were, and they referred to Robert disparagingly as “Gold Bug,” both for his airs and for the gold stock in which he traded. Still, Walt enjoyed these visits because Robert’s wife, Aunt Margaret—the only aunt, Walt said, whom he called “auntie”—would usually bring a gift, a Big Chief drawing tablet and pencils.

For most children these gifts might have seemed perfunctory. For Walt they came to represent something else of importance he took from Marceline: a nascent self-awareness and the first acknowledgment of his talent. Walt enjoyed art and claimed to have become interested in drawing “almost as soon as I could hold a pencil.” But it was not until Aunt Maggie’s visits that he received encouragement. “She used to make me think I was really a boy wonder!” he said, admitting that she had a “flattering tongue in her head.” And Aunt Maggie’s praise was reinforced by another mentor, an elderly neighbor named Doc Sherwood. By the time Walt met him, the doctor had retired from practicing medicine, so he had time on his hands, and he and his wife were childless, so he spent a good deal of that time with Walt, who became a kind of adopted son. Doc Sherwood was an imperious man; he wore a Prince Albert coat and drove a surrey in the summer and a cutter in the winter pulled by a prize stallion named Rupert. Walt often accompanied him, even into the drugstore, where the doctor conducted a “gabfest.” Usually on their trips Walt peppered him with questions, and years later he marveled at the doctor’s knowledge and patience. “Don’t be afraid to admit your ignorance,” Doc Sherwood told him, a philosophy that Walt, who was always inquisitive, said “lasted me a lifetime.” But what Walt remembered most about Doc Sherwood—what he would recount throughout the rest of his life—was the time the doctor asked him to fetch his crayons and tablet and sketch Rupert. The horse was skittish that day. Doc Sherwood had to hold the reins, and Walt had difficulty capturing him. “The result was pretty terrible,” he recalled, “but both the doctor and his wife praised the drawing highly, to my great delight.” In one version of the story Doc Sherwood gave Walt a nickel for the drawing, which one neighbor called highly uncharacteristic of the tight-fisted Sherwood, and in another version the drawing was framed and hung in the doctor’s house. Whatever was true, the drawing became, in his brother Roy’s hyperbolic words, “the highlight of Walt’s life.”

Years later the Disneys would also frequently recall another episode in Walt’s budding artistic career that they believed testified to his obsession. One summer’s day Flora and Elias had gone to town, leaving Walt and Ruth at the farm. As Ruth told it, they began investigating the rain barrels around the house and discovered the barrels’ tar lining. Walt announced that the soft tar could be used as paint, and when Ruth out of caution asked whether it would come off, he assured her that it could.

So the two found big sticks, dipped them into the tar, and began drawing designs on the side of the Disneys' whitewashed house. "And I can remember an awful feeling," Ruth would say, "when I realized just a little bit later that it wouldn't budge—the tar." Their parents were not amused. ("I was old enough to know better," Flora snipped thirty years later.) The tar still adorned the side of the house when the Disneys moved away—the first memorial to Walt Disney's art.

. . . .

The bliss of Marceline was undermined by only one thing: Elias Disney had absolutely no aptitude for farming. He told one neighbor that he did not believe in fertilizing his fields because doing so was like "giving whiskey to a man—he felt better for a little while, but then he was worse off than before." The crops suffered until Elias finally relented. Another neighbor remembered Elias ordering his sons to water the horses in mid-morning and then questioning why no one else seemed to be watering the horses then, not realizing that what was required was to water them in the morning, at noon, and at night. Despite his shortcomings, he persevered and experimented. One year he planted an acre of popping corn. Another year, when the market was depressed, he had each member of the family go door to door with a basket selling their apples rather than take them to a wholesaler. And yet another time he collected apples from his neighbors and eliminated the middleman by taking them to the market in Kansas himself and splitting the proceeds. One fall after the harvest, when times were very hard, he resorted to carpentry again and remodeled a neighbor's house. Still, money was always tight and Elias always frugal. The Disney children recalled that Flora had to butter the bottom of their bread so that their father would not see her depleting one of the family's sources of income.

If it was money that battered Elias, it was money too that sundered the Disney family. In 1900 Herbert and Ray had arranged with Uncle Robert to grow some wheat on his land, which they then had their neighbors harvest that fall. When Elias asked his sons what they intended to do with their money, and one of them said he was going to buy himself a pocket watch, Elias erupted at the indulgence. He insisted that *he* would take the money and help pay off the farm. "That was the straw that broke the camel's back," one neighbor said. That same day Herbert and Ray withdrew their money from the bank, and that night they crawled out a window of the house and hopped a train for Chicago. The wound of their departure was so deep that nearly one hundred years later, family members were still reluctant to discuss the incident. By the spring they had moved to Kansas City, where Uncle Robert got them jobs as bank clerks, and in the summer of 1909 Herbert became a mail carrier for the post office service. They would occasionally visit their parents in Marceline, but the rift never healed entirely. When Herbert and Ray would send back their old clothes for Flora to alter for Roy and Walt, they sometimes stuck a plug of tobacco in a pocket, knowing it would provoke their moralistic father.

Without Herbert and Ray's assistance, the farm became even more burdensome. Elias, who was nothing if not hardworking, blamed his travails on the system that forced farmers to market their crops through middlemen and trusts, taking the profits he believed the farmers themselves deserved. Within a month after his sons' departure, Elias and M. A. Coffman, the neighbor who had picked up the family upon their arrival in Marceline, formed a chapter of the American Society of Equity, which they described as a farmer's union. The society, headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, hoped eventually to provide granaries, elevators, warehouses, and cold storage throughout the country so that farmers could control their own crops, regulate their own supply, and set their own prices. Farmers were receptive—there were twenty-nine members at the chapter's inception—but even in pro-labor and

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