

Walt Disney's First Star

It is easy to understand what Walt Disney saw in Virginia Davis. With her ready smile, animated personality and sparkling blue eyes, Virginia exudes enthusiasm. And as a young Kansas City filmmaker eager to expand his enterprise, Walt had just those qualities in mind when he cast her in "Alice's Wonderland," his first "Alice in Cartoonland" short, in the spring of 1923.

Now known as Virginia "Gini" McGhee, Disney's first star went on to appear in 13 more "Alice" shorts, a series that blended live action with animation, and featured little Virginia in roles ranging from cowgirl to big game hunter.

Today, with absolutely no intention of slowing down, McGhee is a very successful real estate broker in Orange County, California, where she lives with her husband, Bob, and near her two daughters and new granddaughter.

Walt spotted little Virginia Davis in a billboard advertisement for Warner's bread, and in no time, she says, "Walt was in my mother's house in Kansas City, filming the first 'Alice' short."

So enchanting was the four-and-a-half-year-old Gini in this comedy that when Walt moved to Los Angeles in July and set up a studio with his brother Roy, the distributor of the "Alice" series, Margaret Winkler, insisted that she continue in the title role. Thus, the Davis family packed up and followed Walt to California.

"Walt was a close family friend," she says. "He would borrow my mother's car—a Tin Lizzie—to court his girlfriend, Lillian Bounds, whom he later married."

With remarkable recollection, McGhee recalls that the studio was near the corner of Vermont and Hollywood Boulevard. "We'd film in a vacant lot. Walt would drape a white tarpaulin over the back of a billboard and along the ground, and I'd have to work in pantomime. They would add the animation around me later.

"It was such fun. Kids in the neighborhood would act as extras, and Walt paid them fifty cents apiece.

Sometimes Walt would direct, and other times he would work the camera while Roy directed. They were the whole crew back then.

"Well," she adds with a wink, "my dad was there to see that I behaved."

McGhee remembers fondly how Walt continued to keep in touch with her, long after the "Alice in Cartoonland" series gave way to the international successes of Mickey Mouse and the full-length animated features.

"He always thought of me," she says proudly. Walt considered her for the voice and live-action modeling of Snow White, but it wasn't until "Pinocchio" that she did any Disney characters, voicing some of those wayward boys on Pleasure Island.

As an adult, McGhee went on to appear in "The Harvey Girls," "Three on a Match" and other films for other studios. Then, after marrying and leaving show business, she went to New

York, graduated from the New York School of Interior Design, and became a decorating editor for the popular post-war magazine, *Living for Young Homemakers*.

She still holds a warm place in her heart for the man who gave her her start.

"Walt made me very welcome at his studio, and he'd usually have some special gift for me—a Mickey Mouse watch, or a silver Three Little Pigs bracelet. Even years later, Walt never treated me like past history; that really impressed me.

"I think we admired one another. One thing we had in common was a young-at-heart spirit." She pauses, then, "I always loved Walt."

by Mark Hawthorne



Virginia Davis (circa 1924) reeled in waves as "Alice," the little girl who had wild adventures in an animated world. (far right): Gini (Davis) McGhee, out of Cartoonland and into real estate.

