

by Jamie Hecker



Jamie Hecker has been a lifelong fan of Disney, and is passing on his love to his sons. He and his family visit Orlando annually and always look forward to their next trip. When not in Orlando, he resides in northern Virginia with his beautiful wife Suzanne, two boys and four cats. You can read more about his "hidden Disney" musings at [myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/](http://myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/)

## Ward Kimball

Walt Disney changed the field of film animation, gradually elevating it to an elegant art form. He provided the vision and direction, but countless animators, story supervisors, and technicians, to name a few groups, brought the shorts and feature films to life. Walt even had his fabled Nine Old Men, a core group of animators who were the backbone of the company. Ward Kimball, an esteemed member of this group, often cut against the grain of animation conventions, but his style and contributions to Disney animation are legendary, ranging from subtle grace to outlandish caricatures.

Kimball, born in 1914 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, developed an early fascination with animation, notably the Sunday newspaper color comics, as well as performance art, especially the slapstick style of vaudeville. For a period of time he lived with his grandparents, who encouraged his budding interest in art and animation. His family, which relocated often during his youth, eventually moved to California and, following high school, Kimball received a scholarship to the Santa Barbara School of Arts. Upon graduation, he found suitable employment as a graphic artist, but a viewing of the Disney *Silly Symphony* classic *Three Little Pigs* on the big screen proved to be a turning point in his life. He was awestruck at what Disney was creating and wanted to be a part of it. He collected his best work samples and applied at the Walt Disney Company, and was immediately hired in April 1934.

New hires at the company were given "in-between" assignments, fleshing out the animation lines that senior animators had already completed, and Kimball began his Disney work in this manner. His talents were soon noted by the more established senior animator Ham Luske, who took in Kimball as his protégé. Recalled Kimball, "Ham gave me a lot of responsibility and that's the way you learn... He told me you couldn't caricature until you can analyze, draw, and shot the real object, the real character."

Disney was working on its ambitious *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and Kimball diligently animated several scenes that were ultimately cut out of the final film. Dejected, he nearly left Disney until he was presented with a new challenge: create and animate a new character that would serve as the conscience to a wooden marionette boy who comes to life. Kimball created the timeless Jiminy Cricket for *Pinocchio* and served as the directing animator for him. Creating the appearance of Jiminy was no small task. Recalled Kimball, "I did twelve or fourteen versions and gradually cut off all the appendages. I ended up with a little man...wearing spats and a tail coat that suggested folded wings...the audience accepts him as a cricket because the other characters say he is."

Kimball also contributed to *Fantasia*, notably the character Bacchus from the pastoral symphony sequence. His next animation challenge was a relatively minor character in the Disney universe: the poetry-loving dragon that serves as the centerpiece for the 1941 live-action and animation mix *The Reluctant Dragon*. Over half of the movie is a scripted tour of the Disney studios in Burbank, and Kimball makes a cameo during a sequence set in the animation department. He continued his artistic prowess on *Dumbo*, animating the scene in which the crows find Dumbo and Timothy Q. Mouse up in a tree.

Disney created two "goodwill" films following Disney's Department of State-spon-

sored visit to Latin America, and Kimball created what is considered his finest animation work, the outrageous, chaotic, and high-energy musical sequence featuring Donald Duck, Jose Carioca, and Panchito Pistoles in *The Three Caballeros*. It's a brilliantly choreographed sequence that flies in all directions at once. Kimball fondly recalled, "That's the only animation I ever did that I'm uncritical of. I look at the damn song I did and I laugh and I grin as hard as the day I did it."

Kimball next turned his animation pencil to the American folklore character of Pecos Bill for the 1948 release of *Melody Time*, creating a lovable caricature of the Western hero. Disney's next re-

lease was a return to the fairy tale genre, with the sweeping *Cinderella* and a return to animation realism, or the 'illusion of life.' The animals, however, had less restrictions and Kimball animated Lucifer the cat and the mice Gus and Jaq as charming caricatures of evil and good. Kimball's next animation highlight was the wild and wooly Un-birthday party scene from *Alice in Wonderland*, released in 1951,

bringing to life the outlandish Mad Hatter and the March Hare in the party scene that practically defines absurd.

The Walt Disney Company was continually evolving, from shorts to feature length films and into the new medium of television. Kimball, too, was expanding his contributions, now serving as a director. He helmed the Academy Award-winning short subject film *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom*. The story outlined the four fundamental musical instrument groups and how they evolved, from cavemen to the present day. Kimball utilized a more modern, limited animation style that featured flat dimensions and asymmetrical design and a uniquely un-Disney look. He found the opportunity to direct liberating: "I was so relieved to get away from animation. I knew how to do it. I wanted to have some say about the content."



Kimball's next directorial contribution was grander in scale; the three part science series he created for the Disneyland television program. Frontierland had *Davy Crockett*, Adventureland had the *True-Life Adventures*, but Tomorrowland needed forward-looking content. Kimball recalled the scientific article he read in *Collier's* magazine about space exploration, penned by Dr. Wernher Von Braun, the former German-turned-American scientist who eventually became NASA's space exploration architect, and proposed that Disney collaborate with him on a television series. Kimball worked closely with Von Braun on the scripts for the three-part series, and the results were *Man In Space*, *Man and the*

*Moon*, and *Mars and Beyond*. *Man In Space* succinctly tapped into the country's fascination with space exploration. It was so successful that President Eisenhower requested a copy of it for a private screening at the Pentagon, no doubt helping to accelerate the country's budding space program. *Man in Space* aired in 1955; NASA's first space exploration program, Mercury, was established

three years later, leading to sub-orbital and then orbital manned space flight in 1961 and 1962, respectively.

Kimball wasn't just a prolific animator and director. Like Walt, he was also a railroad enthusiast and had his own backyard train dubbed Grizzly Flats. In his honor, the Disneyland Railroad named engine No. 5 the Ward Kimball.

He was also an accomplished trombonist and helped form the Firehouse Five Plus Two, a dixieland jazz band of fellow Disney artists.

Ward's personal credo perhaps best sums up his life's work: "Develop an all-consuming curiosity for things both exotic and living. Read, observe, analyze, and above all be flexible...keep an open mind and have fun. Take it from me, it's worth it!" For his contributions to the Walt Disney Company, Ward Kimball was named a Disney Legend in 1989, along with his fellow Nine Old Men.