

Local 839 has sketched out more than a half-century of representation for Hollywood's best animation artists, writers and technicians, helping their ranks to "turn the page" through each new wave of innovation and change.

# Drawn to It

Former Local 839  
President Morris  
"Moe" Gollub drawn  
by Dave Tendlar

Tom Sito, the former three-term president of Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Local 839, (renamed The Animation Guild in 2001) paints a portrait in his book, *Drawing the Line*, a history of animation unionism, of the stark divide Hollywood animators felt between the magical worlds created on their drawing tables, and the pay scales and working conditions they once toiled under.

As Sito (only slightly tongue-in-cheek) writes in his introductory chapter about why there is even a need for a book about animation unionism:

"In 20,000 B.C. Stone Age man attempted to draw movement on cave walls by drawing mammoths with multiple legs. The artists worked until their eyes went bad, they got no pay, they got no credit, and they were eventually eaten by wild animals.

Animation was born."

Sito, whose long career as storyboard artist, animator, and director, includes films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Shrek* makes no minor point: the large influence and (generation of income) movie and television animation artists have produced relative to their small size (less than 6,000 across the U.S.) has been under-recognized for too long. Sito's book makes clear that precious few Americans know the names Ub Iwerks, Grim Natwick, and Glen Keane, even though they designed Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop, and Ariel, *The Little Mermaid*. It's an even safer bet that the names of animation union champions down through the years, like Dave Hilberman, Moe Gollub, and Sadie Bodin, are less known, even within their own industry! But since an animator's number one job is to make people smile, some fun trivia to bounce around at our child's next birthday party should go something like this: What do Bugs Bunny, Snow White, Daffy Duck, Donald Duck, Goofy, Tweety, Mr. Magoo, Fred and Wilma Flintstone, Simba, and *Shrek* all have in common besides living in the collective consciousness of children and adults for most of the 20th Century and beyond?

That's right.

They were all drawn and created by union men and women, a legacy Local 839 members take pride in passing

down to each new generation. That club, as *Drawing the Line* makes so elegantly clear, is unique, even within the rarefied air of the entertainment business. "What other industrialized art form can you name," Sito writes, "that requires hundreds of skilled support staff (working for years in close proximity) to create an entirely imagined product that looks like it was drawn by a single hand?" Or as the acknowledged father of early animation, Winsor McCay, once said: "Any nut that wants to spend hundreds of hours and thousands of drawings to make a few feet of film is welcome to join the club!"

## A GUILD IS BORN

IATSE Local 839 was chartered in 1952 but its roots, and the art form it protects, dates back decades before. Animated films dawned with the 20th Century as "advertising" for the era's most popular comic strips; the first animators, like Winsor McCay, were newspapermen who singlehandedly (or with an assistant) would create some 25,000 drawings, background and characters on the same page. That changed in 1914 with John Randolph Bray, who after securing a contract to create animated short films for Pathé movie theaters, devised an assembly line approach modeled after Henry Ford's success in the auto industry. Bray's system broke cartoon production down into separate jobs: story creation, character design, animator, clean-up artist, in-betweeners, ink and painters, background artists, and finally someone to photograph the drawings onto film. By the 1920s, as Tom Sito writes, "the jobs of animation checker (QC and numbering), storyboard artist, and layout artist (to stage the sketches created by the storyboard artist) had been added..." to the assembly line. Bray's system proved so time-tested, it's still the model for animation production today!

So it went that out of an industrialized art form a labor force in need of a protective union was born. On January 18, 1952, Local 839 was born, and as longtime 839 business representative Steve Hulett points out, "the new Guild was able to organize 99 percent of all the animation in town. This [Local 839's charter] occurred about 10 years after the Disney strike, which even to this day is considered a land-

mark in the history of our industry." In fact, as Hulett notes, 1941 was a pivotal year for this slightly oddball labor force. Pro-union animators like Bill Littlejohn and Chuck Jones had successfully organized artists at MGM and Warner Bros., the latter after enduring a six-day lockout of the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodie staffs, where animation pioneers like Friz Freleng and Tex Avery worked. On the heels of those successes, union organizers set their sights on the Walt Disney Studios, where more than 800 artists were employed and enjoyed the best working conditions (and most capricious pay scales) in the industry. Led by the man who had created Goofy, top-paid animator Art Babbitt, Disney artists hit the picket lines for a sixty-day strike that still reverberates six decades later.

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Mark Kirkland, director, *The Simpsons*, at his sketch pad in Burbank prod. offices



Tom Sito and sketch pad, Walt Disney Feature Animation Studios circa 1990



Above: Mickey Mouse with Picket Sign drawn by Reg Massie for 1941 SCG strike at Disney. Courtesy of the Animation Guild Collection, Urban Archives Center, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck © Walt Disney Productions.

Below: Animation camera stand at Walt Disney Studio, circa 1936 (Photo courtesy of Tom Sito)



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"I came to know a lot of artists on both sides of the strike when I worked at Disney," Tom Sito describes, "and I found it surprising that so many gifted animators maintained this life-long animus because of a single summer in 1941. For example, Maurice Noble, who created the beautiful layouts for the Road Runner cartoons, refused to come have lunch with me on the Disney lot because he was worried he would run into Frank Thomas, who had been on the opposite side during the strike." Local 839 recording secretary Jeffrey Massie concurs, noting that his father, a one-time shop steward for George Pal, left the animation business in 1948, and forever after refused to let his son read Dennis the Menace! "My dad said Hank Ketcham [creator of Dennis the Menace] had been a sewer rat during the Disney strike and he never forgave him."

Hard feelings aside Hulett says IATSE had tried to organize Disney in 1941 but was unsuccessful. "Ten years later, after the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) had collapsed, the Screen Cartoonists Guild was an orphan union," Hulett continues. "There was an election to determine who would represent the large animation studios, and with the help of stalwart unionists like Les Clark and Ken Anderson, and Walt Disney himself, the IA triumphed. Walt had come to recognize that trade unionism was Hollywood's destiny and IATSE, with its pension and large membership across many crafts, was the most stable option for his studio. As for the SCG, they never did recover from the dissolution of the CSU. With their membership dwindling down through the years, they affiliated with the Teamsters before closing up shop in the late 1970s."

### GROWING PAINS

The year Local 839 was chartered its membership stood at 1,000 members, the bulk of which worked at Disney, where layoffs were unheard of and the quality of animation was second to none. Sister IA animation locals later grew in New York

City (Local 841), Chicago (Local 732) and Orlando (Local 843), but by 1958, just six years after Local 839's formation, the industry had changed dramatically, and not for the better. Cartoon shorts that ran before movies became too expensive to produce; MGM closed down its animation department, while Warner Bros. also shredded its staff. Following the weak box office of Sleeping Beauty, Disney's longtime animation rolls went from 500 to 75 employees, essentially reducing Local 839's membership by almost 50 percent. The light at the end of the tunnel came from two laid-off MGM animators, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, who set up shop near Universal Studios to usher in a new age of "limited animation," to accommodate the growing popularity of Saturday morning TV. Hanna-Barbera grew to become the General Motors of Hollywood animation. Although many longtime Disney veterans pooh-pooed the quality of its product, H-B was the largest animation employer in Hollywood in the 1960s and helped Local 839 rebound its rolls to 1,100 active members by decade's end.

TV animation provided steady work, but as Tom Sito points out, "it was seasonal, which left half the membership unemployed four months out of the year." There was also another problem: at its peak in 1978 Hanna-Barbera churned out some 10,000 feet of film a week, and employed more than 2,000 in its Los Angeles headquarters - yet the studio still had to farm out 75 percent of its work to meet demand. By 1979, studios in Taipei, Poland, South Korea, Japan, and Spain were all pumping work into the HB pipeline. Although Local 839 rolls were at their peaks, so was runaway animation production. Local 839 president Morris "Moe" Gollub, who had helped lead the 1941 Disney strike, and business representative Harry "Bud" Hester, saw the writing on the wall; they pushed for contractual clauses to keep work in Hollywood. In a surprise August 1979 action, the local struck several of the key major cartoon producers, earning a swift and stunning capitulation to their runaway production demands. "It was a great victory," Hulett recalls, "but it was short-lived. Almost immediately the TV producers began planning for 1982, when the new contract ran out, vowing never to be caught with their pants down again."

The West Coast animation industry's next major work action was given the okay by Local 839's membership by a two-thirds margin in August of 1982. But instead of picketing just a few TV producers, pressure was applied across the board. Unlike the one-week slam-dunk of 1979, the strike in the anti-union Reagan Era dragged on for more than two months, resulting in a negative outcome. As Sito writes, "[After 1982] the active roster dropped from a high of 2,079 to 715 members in 1987. Hollywood producers used the strike as a pretext to ship as much work out of town as pos-



Top - Story meeting for "Mother Goose Goes to Hollywood" cartoon short at at Walt Disney Studios, circa 1936. Joe Grant, pointing with pencil, right (photo courtesy of Tom Sito)

Middle - Donald Rumors cartoon drawn by Walt Kelly for 1941 strike at Disney Studios. Courtesy of the Animation Guild Collection, Urban Archives Center, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck © Walt Disney Productions.

Bottom - Local 839 Recording Secretary Jeff Massie and Business Representative Steve Hulett, picketing Nickelodeon in 1998. Photo by Enrique May

sible. The impact [of the strike] on our membership didn't really end until 1988, when the industry experienced a renaissance of traditional hand-drawn animation...the public's love affair with pencil-drawn stories peaked in a way not seen since the 1940s."

### THE HOUSE THAT WALT BUILT

To call The Walt Disney Company the "gold standard" in the animation business is a bit of an understatement. You'd be hard pressed to even find an animation veteran in Hollywood who wasn't trained in the Disney style. Even men like John Lasseter and Brad Bird, who have spearheaded the age of "paperless" animation, where artists render characters on digital Cintiq writing tablets, went through an internal Disney training program in the early 1970s, led by one of Disney's Nine Old Men, one-time strike sympathizer and Guild president Eric Larson. The nation's most famous school for animation - California Institute of the Arts - was created by the Walt Disney Company in 1969, and virtually all of its early graduates went straight to the company's Burbank lot, assuming there was a job available. Some, like layout master Ed Ghertner, were still studying at Cal Arts while working on their first industry assignment.

By the early 1984 the company was drowning in red ink. After Roy E. Disney and Frank Wells seized control from Walt's son-in-law, Ron Miller in a well-chronicled boardroom

battle, they brought in Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, who immediately set about reinvigorating the company's feature and television animation units. The Fox and the Hound, released in 1981 before the new regime arrived, was the last film any of the Nine Old Men worked on, and it was the first Disney animated film that bore none of its founder's imprint. "It was a turning point," Sito describes, "because it marked the passing of the torch from the animators who worked on Bambi and Pinocchio to the baby boom generation, which is now a virtual who's who of today's animation stars." Those names included Glen Keane, Tim Burton, John Musker, Ron Clements, John Lasseter (current head of Disney Animation) Henry Selick, Andy Gaskill, and Brad Bird among many others. Future Local 839 officers Steve Hulett and Earl Kress were writers on the film.

Few can argue that Jeffrey Katzenberg's energetic leadership put Disney back in the vanguard of feature animation. Who Framed Roger Rabbit? earned four Oscars and more than \$150 million at the North American box office. The Little Mermaid, released the following year, in 1989, had an even more lasting impact, garnering multiple Oscars and more than \$220 million in worldwide grosses. Mermaid's formula - gorgeous traditional hand-drawn animation coupled with Broadway musical show tunes and an ageless fairy tale story - proved wildly successful throughout the 1990s. The Disney films it spawned - Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin,



Left - Walt Disney Feature Animation Studios: Robert Nauman, Adolph Lusinsky, Mike King



Right - Adolph Lusinsky, Director of Look and Lighting - "Bolt"

## The biggest advantages to working in 3D are found in CG (computer graphic) animation



3D Animation feature "Bolt" Courtesy of The Walt Disney Studios

The Lion King, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Pocahontas - earned billions at the box office, and more importantly restored the chip to Hollywood's animation shoulder that had once been the envy of the world.

That pride is still evident to this day. Meeting with a new generation of Local 839 artists at the Walt Disney Feature Animation Studios, aka "Mickey's Hat building," in Burbank just before the release of the company's newest 3D feature, Bolt, is a crash course in the future of the art form. "The biggest advantages to working in 3D are found in CG (computer graphic) animation," explains stereoscopic supervisor Robert Nauman. "Most of the problems [in 3D] come from bilateral asymmetries - anything being different between the left and right eye. But in our world we don't have any problems with registration and can get any type of intraocular distance we want, because unlike 3D live-action films, we're using a virtual camera."

Nauman, who started at Disney in 1997 as a layout artist on the computer-modeled Dinosaur, says that one of the challenges of creating animation stereoscopic release (yes, audiences will still be wearing glasses for many years to come due to the loss of resolution with auto-stereoscopic presentations) is that the format reveals even the slightest bit of cheating. "Bolt is a travel film and has many one-off painting shots - locations or landscapes that we only see one time," Nauman outlines. "For a stereo release, we have to build in geometry to project those paintings onto so they don't appear flat. Quick paint fixes take on their own dimension in stereo, because if you do something for one eye, it has to be done for the other; everything must be set with the proper parallax so it puts it in space at the correct depth."

Adolph Lusinsky, director of look and lighting, says one of the unique things about Bolt's workflow was that as scenes were laid out for the mono version, the 3D camera was set up and shooting concurrently. "In fact, the stereo version of the film finished rendering just a few days after the mono version," he notes. "We set up depth of field in our compositing package, instead of rendering it into the image, which allowed Robert to go in and tweak the depth of field for stereo."

Lusinsky, who studied illustration at Cal State Fullerton and started at Disney Interactive cleaning up backgrounds for a 3D-modeled gargoyle game, is typical of the modern animation artist, whose background is multi-disciplinary. "After the games, I went to Disney Imagineering to work on pre-visualization for theme park rides, and then visual effects on the live action side," he says. "Traditionally in CG you'll paint a brick building and you'll see an infinite amount of bricks receding into infinity and they all look the same. Here the level of detail in the textures was more like a painting. Bolt's look was influenced by Edward Hopper, so most of the buildings have a sense of a brushstroke around the edge."

The converse was true for the naturalistic quality of Bolt's lighting, derived from Lusinsky and his colleagues travelling to the locations the characters visit in the film. "Kentucky and Ohio had much more humidity in the air so the sky was this turquoise color," the artist continues. "For New York City, we went to these old buildings in the garment district, where the textures are all de-saturated. In some ways, we're using digital animation to return full circle to the warm, painterly feeling of hand-drawn animation. It takes work to take the CG out of CG animation," Lusinsky





Left - Mark Kirkland, director, *The Simpsons*,  
Right - Ed Ghertner, Character Layout Artist,  
*The Simpsons*

mation, literally. "I was with Atlantis when we prepared that film for a 70mm wide-screen release in the theaters," Ghertner explains. "The Simpsons is now being done wide-screen, high-definition, which means there is more room for the characters to move around, fewer cuts and fewer camera moves. It's an interesting challenge because [television animators] are going to have to start thinking more cinematically instead of just head shots and limited depth of field."

Ed Ghertner's specialized role has included a crash course in layout for new hires during production of *The Simpson Movie*, as well as incorporating computer graphics like those in the feature. "I see this show as a modern-day Warner Bros.," Ghertner reflects. "Disney was about using the in-betweens to soften things up, while Warners would snap from pose-to-pose. The Simpsons is more about creating those strong character statement poses, and letting the in-betweens carry that." "When Ed and I got out of CalArts," Mark Kirkland concludes, "the options were so limited. Now there's animation everywhere, in every single medium and that's exciting. I did my first storyboard on a Cintiq recently and it was like having a word processor for drawing, which is pretty cool. At the very least [digital] will save more trees!"

### TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

As Tom Sito points out in *Drawing the Line*, the most recent "golden age" of animation, what Jeffrey Katzenberg called "Camelot", peaked around 1994, when Local 839's membership reached an all-time high of 3,000. The "Camelot" era also saw a reverse of runaway production, with the finest animation talent in the world flocking to Hollywood. But, like so many mountains in animation before, the valley was not far away. The dissolution of Saturday morning children's program-

ming, speeded in part by the federally imposed Childrens Television Act of 1996, created a broad non-union playing field of cable, foreign, and low-budget independent production. When the major studios all dropped their hand-drawn animation departments, beginning in 2003, many long-time veterans were plunged into a professional abyss. The last decade has seen audiences embracing digitally animated films from upstarts like Pixar, and DreamWorks, whose *Shrek* won the first-ever Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2001. Local 839's current president, Kevin Koch, whose credits as a digital animator include *Shrek 2*, *Over the Hedge*, and *Madagascar*, has worked for the all-union DreamWorks for more than a decade.

So, where is animation headed? "Our membership was depleted by nearly 50 percent after the last big technological shift," Steve Hulett says. "But now we're back up to 2,400 members because we also represent CGI artists in live-action. Eighty percent of the industry is digital, so that transition is pretty much complete. And yet John Lasseter, at Disney, recently began *The Princess and the Frog*, the first all hand-drawn feature since 2002. So we may see some sort of combination of traditional and paperless animation for many years to come."

Ed Ghertner says animation is in a "muddy" place, because big-budget CG features, like *Harry Potter*, *Spiderman*, are basically live-action cartoons. "The popularity of those films has forced animators to become more exaggerated in their approach," Ghertner bristles, "when what's needed, in my opinion, is for studios to let animation to be animation again. That can be traditionally hand-drawn or modeled in 3D on a computer, it doesn't matter, as long as the emphasis is on story and character development, and not on trying to be like live-action."

Jeff Massie believes his Guild has stayed ahead of the technological curve in many respects. "Storyboard artists were the last job category to go digital," Massie picks up, "and that's only taken hold in the last two years. Local 839 had training classes in digital storyboarding back when the studios were still insisting on having a hard copy storyboard. We began training traditional artist in computer graphics with just a few classes in 1998 and it exploded into an ongoing program that's retrained more than 1000 of our members. Training has always been a part of our contribution to the craft, going back to the 1930s, when you'd show up at the

Guild headquarters to take a class from [legendary art instructor] Don Graham just to improve your drawing skills."

Tom Sito adds that the skies are still the limit for animation, despite fears that a new era of runaway production will send Hollywood jobs to India and China. "The only mega-hits on the feature animation side have all been made in California," Sito insists. "All the overseas stuff hasn't made an impression with audiences. And there are new areas like 3D video game creation and Flash animation that will impact our industry. My last job was directing *Click & Clack's As The Wrench Turns*, which was all done with Flash 2D software."

To a pencil (or should that be light-pen?), Local 839 veterans all say the biggest challenge remains educating each new generation on the importance of being part of a union. Ever since the dawn of the art form animators have bought in to the notion of a large paternal company, run by fellow artists like Walt Disney, Max Fleischer, Paul Terry, Walter Lantz, Chuck Jones, Don Bluth, John Lasseter, and others who, because of their love for the medium would place quality above industry and simply leave workers alone to draw. That fanciful notion of the animator as an independent artist, rather than a part in a commercial machine has left a legacy of tension between art and commerce in the cartoon world that continues to this day. "Animation workers are simply not a captive audience like other film crafts have been," Jeff Massie concludes. "You have to keep reminding artists that we live in a corporate age where job stability is not a given."

Maybe Tom Sito sums it up best in *Drawing the Line*. Speaking to the first generation of CGI animators in 1993 as Local 839 President, Sito recalls asking, "What are your issues?" "They replied, 'We want to be able to multitask and not be pigeonholed into archaic traditional job classifications that are not relevant.' A year later, I asked again," Sito writes, "'What are your issues?' In the main, they replied, 'We want the right to patent and own anything we create.' Still later, I asked again, 'What are your issues?' This time, the artists were over thirty years old. They complained, 'We want a life. We want to go home on weekends and see our families!'"

Funny how that works, even in a funny business: those same families a new generation of artists were craving to spend more time with are the audiences and viewers union animators have created magic for, more than five decades and counting.



Mark Kirkland at his drawing table rear,  
Cintiq digital drawing tablet foreground,  
The Simpsons production offices, Burbank, CA

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