



How a strange rumor of Walt Disney's death became legend

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When you hear “Disney on Ice,” you may think of the wildly popular ice shows featuring Mickey and Minnie Mouse and others skating in hockey arenas across the nation. But there’s also the disturbing urban legend that Walt Disney’s corpse was frozen in a cryonic chamber containing liquid nitrogen to be revived at a later date.

This week 52 years ago, television and radio broadcasts shared the news that Walter Elias Disney had died. The cartoon mogul who created Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck had produced some of Hollywood’s greatest hits, dreamed up Disneyland and Disney World, and was one of world’s most beloved storytellers. He was 65.

It is hard to pin down exactly when the rumors began. In early 1967, a few weeks after Disney’s death on Dec. 15, 1966, a reporter for a tabloid newspaper called *The National Spotlite* claimed he had snuck into St. Joseph’s Hospital in Burbank, directly across the street from the Disney studios and where he was treated during his final illness. As the story went, the reporter disguised himself as an orderly, broke into a storage room, and saw the deceased Disney suspended in a cryogenic metal cylinder!

In 1969, the French magazine *Ici Paris* and, later still, *The National Tattler* in the U.S. advanced the rumors by predicting Disney would be thawed out in 1975. Some went as far as to claim that his burial spot was a freezer stored underneath the “Pirates of the Caribbean” ride at Disneyland. (It’s not!)

And then there were several former Disney employees who continued to spread false stories about Disney’s supposed “big freeze.” During the 1990s, these now discredited legends were codified as “expert quotes” in a couple of less than reliable Disney biographies.

To be sure, Disney was a science fiction fan who looked forward to future advances in science, technology and medicine. His creation of EPCOT, “Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow,” (which his brother Roy later slashed into a quasi world’s fair), was originally designed to demonstrate how Americans would live, work and survive in the future.

And Disney couldn’t help but raise some eyebrows with the last film he produced. Sensing his impending demise, he ordered the cameras to roll as he addressed his department heads one last time. Seated at his famous desk, just like he did during his television show that aired each Sunday evening, a smiling Walt appeared to make laser-beam eye contact with each colleague as he told them what he expected of their performance in the future and that he hoped to see them soon.

Some have speculated that he had read, or heard of, Robert C.W. Ettinger’s 1964 book, “*The Prospect of Immortality*,” which synthesized both believable and less likely ideas about cryonics.

That book, and many others like it that appeared long after Disney’s death, predicted a day when medical science advanced enough to repair the damage to the once disease-riddled person who was frozen, allowing cryonics experts to thaw them out and bring them back to life.

For the record, there is no solid evidence to suggest that Disney was frozen. The website **Snoopes.com** has produced a superb point-by-point analysis refuting virtually every aspect of the cryogenics and Walt Disney legend. Perhaps the most convincing conclusion comes from Disney’s daughter Diane, who wrote in 1972, “There is absolutely no truth that my father, Walt Disney, wished to be frozen. I doubt that my father had ever heard of cryonics.”

In truth, Walt Disney was cremated two days after his death and an urn containing his ashes were interred at the family mausoleum in the Forrest Lawn Cemetery of Glendale, California. It was a small, private service attended only by his wife, Lillian, his daughters and their husbands and children.

A chronic smoker, Disney's staff always knew when he was coming down the hall because of his hacking, dry cough. He had been in declining health for much of the last year of his life. Fans of the NBC television show "Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color" began to notice how haggard and exhausted he looked on the air and wrote concerned letters to him about how raspy his voice had become. He was a long-time sufferer of chronic-obstructive pulmonary disease and emphysema, as well as severe damage to his cervical spine from falling off a horse while playing in a Hollywood polo tournament in the 1930s.

In early November of 1966, Disney began to complain of severe neck and leg pain that interfered with his legendary ability to work and create. A chest X-ray uncovered a tumor the size of a walnut in his left lung and oncological surgeons recommended the immediate removal of a large portion of his left lung.

He cleared the most pressing things on his desk and returned to St. Joseph's for surgery on Nov. 6. The surgeons found the tumor to be consistent with bronchogenic cancer. Disney's concern about this extensive surgery was how short of breath he was, but the real problem was that the lung cancer had already spread widely to his lymph nodes and elsewhere in his body.

The always energetic man struggled to go back to the Disney studios after the operation, but the chemotherapy and cobalt X-ray treatments drained him of both his creative and physical powers. He was rushed back to St. Joseph's Hospital two weeks later and died of "circulatory collapse" on the morning of Dec. 15.

When contemplating his near-Himalayan shadow over popular culture, it's not hard to imagine why a "Disney on Ice" legend is so appealing. Americans never stopped loving good old Uncle Walt and all those wonderful stories, songs, and characters he introduced to the world. Our children and their children continue to thrill to the always familiar yet constantly expanding magical oeuvre that is Disney. Who among us wouldn't want to fantasize about the day he magically came back to life?

Alas, that's the most unlikely event ever to be dreamed up at the Disney dream factories.

Editor's Note: *St. Joseph's Hospital was incorrectly listed as being located in Anaheim, California; it is located in Burbank.*

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