



**Editor's note:** Marcy Carriker Smothers is the Disney fans' gift that keeps on giving. The Member Cruise veteran and longtime friend to Disney Vacation Club is dedicated to keeping the "Walt" in "Disney," filling our home libraries with insightful books like *Walt's Disneyland: A Walk in the Park with Walt Disney* and *Eat Like Walt: The Wonderful World of Disney Food*. She's an avid traveler with a keen eye for must-do Disney experiences on and off the beaten path, sharing volumes of both in the National Geographic book *100 Disney Adventures of a Lifetime*. She's even built a house in Walt's boyhood home in Marceline, Mo., allowing her to write from the place where Walt's own seeds of storytelling were sewn. And, to me, she's become a very dear friend. So, when I learned as we set out to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Lady and the Tramp* in this edition of *Disney Files Magazine*, I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that Marcy has a fascinating connection to the film. And yet I was. I'll let her tell the story as you open and enjoy the latest gift that comes from knowing Marcy.



## Of Dogs, Dears and Darlings

**How my Great Aunt – and an animated cast of dogs – helped shape the most-human story Walt Disney ever told**

By Marcy Carriker Smothers

### My Great Aunt Piggy (or Peggy)

My biggest flex is that I am related to Miss Piggy. Allow me to elaborate: Miss Piggy was named for Peggy Lee, the singer and songwriter famous for hits such as "Fever," "Is That All There Is" and "It's a Good Day." When the diva Muppet debuted in 1974, she was known as Miss Piggy Lee; the surname was quickly dropped. Disney Legend Frank Oz—one of the character's original puppeteers, and eventual long-time featured performer—confirmed that he was happy to see [Lee] removed because he was a fan of the superstar. He need not worry, Peggy was flattered to be portrayed as the zaftig prima donna.

So how am I related? My great uncle, Dave Barbour, was the guitar player for Benny Goodman and His Orchestra while Peggy was the lead vocalist. He was later let go for "consorting with the girl singer." Madly in love with Dave, Peggy quit the band, and they were married in 1943. Thus, Peggy—and, in a roundabout way, her inspired puppet persona—are my great aunt. Now back to the matter at hand, er, paw.

### Midcentury Magic

1954 was a busy year for Walt Disney. Not only was he finishing *Lady and the Tramp*, he was building Disneyland, and his oldest daughter Diane got married. When the film ultimately debuted in June 1955 (meaning it joins Disneyland Resort in marking its milestone 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary this summer), it was Walt's first (mostly) original movie, first animated feature not based on a fairytale and first animated feature filmed in CinemaScope. It would go on to be among the studio's biggest hits of the 1950s, which is remarkable when you consider *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* were among the decade's notable animation releases.

The spark of an idea for the canine love story came to Walt before the premiere of his first full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). It was earlier in that year that he visited one of his key character artists and writers, Disney Legend Joe Grant, and his wife, Jennie. Jennie had been gifted a Springer Spaniel at Christmas by her husband—they named her Lady.

Walt was smitten with the way the dog's coat resembled a flouncy skirt, saying, "Joe, why don't you work up a story about Lady?"

Disney registered the title "Lady" for short cartoon development in November 1937. Soon thereafter, Joe began his story and sketches, but with World War II, and so much on the docket for The Walt Disney Studios – including *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* –attention to the "pet" project waned. Fast forward to 1943, when Roy O. Disney received several stories that Ward Greene (the general manager for King Features Syndicate) wanted to pitch for cartoons. Roy passed them along to Walt, including "Happy Dan, the Whistling Dog." By then, Walt already had the basic idea for his story. "I had the lady dog and a lot of situations about her," Walt said. Ward's "Happy Dan" character intrigued Walt. "He didn't believe in tying himself up to any one master," Walt noted. "He would wear no man's collar. He was the kind of character that I thought Lady ought to meet. So, I actually took my story to Ward, and I said, 'Ward, your dog and my dog have got to get together.'"

Homer, Rags and Bozo were names considered for the other marquee character, but Walt chose Tramp, dismissing any concerns regarding the connotation. By the spring of 1952, *Lady and the Tramp* had formally begun production.

### Peggy glee

About that same time, Peggy received a call from Sonny Burke, a musician regarded for his arrangements with top shelf talent such as Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, and the Artists and Repertoire (A&R) representative at Decca Records. "He asked if I'd like to write a score with him for Walt Disney," Peggy recalled in *Miss Peggy Lee: An Autobiography* (Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1989). "Well, of course, a Disney credit was something that was to be devoutly sought after, and with this I didn't even have to seek it. I didn't mind surprises like that at all!"

And, with that, the collaboration between Walt and Peggy began. "First, he introduced us to the entire staff—the artists, the animators, the sound engineers—and showed us around with the enthusiasm of a young boy. Enthusiasm seems to be one of the keys to great achievement, and Walt Disney *had* it," she enthused back. "He also brought out the story boards, the preliminary drawings from which the animators would work. Walt began to tell the story as he moved along the board, and at the same time asked Sonny and me to be thinking of spots where songs would work."

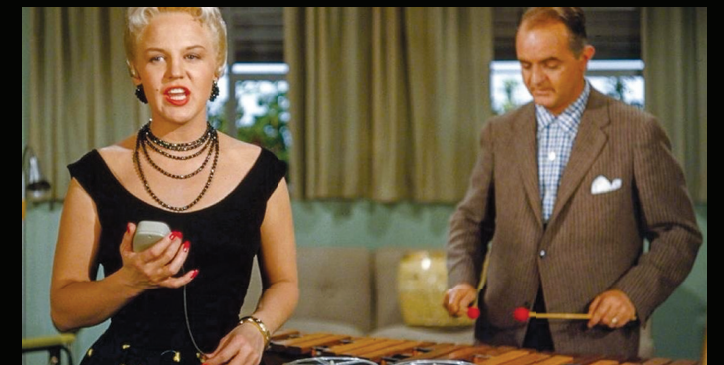
Those songs would go on to include "He's a Tramp," "La La Lu," "Bella Notte" and more.

One notable song that didn't make the final cut was "Old Trusty," a tribute to the film's beloved Bloodhound. Speaking of Old Trusty, Peggy had an affinity for him and couldn't bear to see him die underneath the wagon, as planned in the original script. She pleaded, "That's too sad, Walt. *Please* let him live, please don't let him die ..."

Walt emphasized, "You need the drama. If everything goes along too evenly, you don't have a story." Undeterred, Peggy kept pushing, "Yes, but it's just *too* sad." Walt assured her, "Well, I'll see what we can do."



Peggy Lee is seen here with her namesake, Peg, in the recording studio.



Musician Sonny Burke, right, said of Peggy Lee, left, as a collaborator, "She is the greatest. A couple more like Peg, and all the other movie songwriters could pack up and go home."



In the end, Peggy prevailed. After the pursuit with Jock to save Tramp from the dog catcher, Trusty survives the accident, save a banged-up leg.

Peggy had the opportunity to return the favor when Walt asked to speak with her privately. “You know, we have a delicate problem, and I wonder if you’d help us with the solution,” Walt said. After Peggy offered to do anything, Walt replied, “It isn’t what you can *do* . . . it’s really your permission I’d like.”

Walt’s conundrum was finding a suitable name for the sultry Pekingese that would play a key role in the film’s story. Having already considered, and rejected, the names “Lil” (which Walt deemed too similar to the name of his wife, Lilly) and “Mamie” (a name already taken by President Eisenhower’s wife), Walt sought Peggy’s approval of naming the Pekingese after her.

“I was thrilled to have him name that dog ‘Peg,’” Peggy recalled later.

Peggy would go on to voice, not only her namesake dog, but also Lady’s human mother and Aunt Sarah’s antagonistic cats. So to recap, that’s four voice roles, six songs written and used, three more songs written and not used (search “Peggy Lee: Decca Rarities” on your favorite music-streaming platform to hear those “lost songs”), and a scene-stealing character borrowing her name. That’s quite an impact.

#### Walt’s dog days

Even before *Lady and the Tramp*, Walt had a special connection to dogs. As a young boy in Marceline, Mo., Walt had a pet Maltese terrier who was always on his heels, nipping away. So much so, that his mother, Flora, was constantly mending his stockings. Strays figured in Walt’s life, too. While a paper boy in Kansas City, he once recalled having “a whole army of them” on his route. Generous even when funds were slim, Walt also remembered buying a nickel’s worth of bologna to share with his famished friends. As a teenager volunteering for the American Red Cross at the end of World War I, he reminisced about “adopting” a German Shepherd police dog, carrying his companion on his back in a knapsack of sorts.

After he and Lilly moved into their first home, Walt was eager to get a dog, but Lilly wanted nothing to do with them. Undeterred, Walt kept reading about different dogs and their traits. “Finally, I had a story on the Chow,” he delighted. “The Chow did not shed hair, the Chow does not have fleas. And I read this story to her about the Chow. Lilly responded, ‘Well if I had to have a dog, that’s the kind of dog I would want.’”

Walt went on, “That’s all I wanted. The next day, I went out and bought a Chow. Six, eight weeks old. I kept it under wraps until Christmas. I had a big hat box with the little puppy in the hatbox. Tied it up with a ribbon, and put it by the tree, and it said, ‘To Lilly, from Santa Claus.’”

They named her Sunnee. Famously, Walt invoked that 1930s memory in the opening scene of *Lady and the Tramp*, when Darling opens her Christmas gift from Jim Dear. That tender scene is nothing short of *iconic*.



Walt with his last pet, Lady, a miniature French Poodle picked out by Lilly. She appeared with Walt on an episode of his “Disneyland” TV series in November 1957.



From left, Sonny Burke, Peggy Lee and Walt Disney pose on the set of the “Disneyland” TV series in 1955.

But another similar moment was almost deleted—by Walt himself. It was the romantic spaghetti scene at Tony’s Restaurant. While it was important to Walt for the dogs to have human emotions, he couldn’t wrap his head around the idea of dogs slurping a strand of shared spaghetti.

Disney Legend Frank Thomas disagreed, animating a rough version of the scene himself, which won over Walt. *Whew!*

Like these always-present memories of cinema history, Lady, Tramp and their puppies lived happily ever after, too, as did another major player in the film. Actual dogs served as live-action reference models for the film’s animators, including, for Lady, a pair of cocker spaniels – one owned by actress Verna Felton, who voiced Aunt Sarah in the film, and another owned by Disney Legend Ham Luske, a sequence director on the film. Finding a reference for Tramp was tougher. That is until story man Erdman “Ed” Penner (who sometimes side-hustled as saxophone and tuba player for the now legendary Disneyland band, the Firehouse Five Plus Two) happened upon an elusive stray on the streets. Rescuing the dog in the nick of time (the dog was reportedly scheduled to be euthanized that day), Ed brought him to the studio. Sorry, “her.” It turns out the dog animators eventually named “Mitzie” was female. Still, Mitzie was the perfect reference model for Tramp. After completing her assignment, Mitzie went on to live in a “pawsh” boarding facility, all at the studio’s expense.



Walt poses with a canine pal who looks an awful lot like the film’s “Trusty.”

As we celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Lady and the Tramp*, I quote Mike Gabriel, whose directorial credits include *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990) and *Pocahontas* (1995), as I think he best expresses the magic of the movie: “It may be about dogs, told from the dog’s perspective, but it’s the most human story Walt’s ever told.”



Walt commissioned two sets of custom-made felt dogs modeled after the film’s characters: one for himself (which remains on display in his studio office), and the other as a gift to Peggy.

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