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Part 2: Hank recalls several of the actors he worked with on Disney films....

I fondly remember character actress Elsa Lanchester, who played Emily Stowcroft in *Blackbeard's Ghost*. Elsa was a real piece of work. The former Mrs. Charles Laughton had been in many classic films, including *David Copperfield*, *Lassie Come Home*, *Witness For The Prosecution*, and *Mary Poppins*, but was probably best remembered for her shrieking portrayal of *The Bride Of Frankenstein* in that beloved Universal horror sensation. Elsa had her beginnings  in the English music halls in the '20s (as did my friend Stan Laurel) and never lost her ribald sense of humor. Her dry asides between takes continually broke all of us up and made it difficult to settle down with a straight face when it came time to shoot our own scenes.

But Elsa's finest hour was on even a grander scale. The Disney artists had spent months painting a huge backdrop the length of the entire soundstage for the big track race sequence near the end of the movie. On the backdrop were literally hundreds of portraits of individuals seated in the grandstand watching the race. "Real" actors and extras were then strategically placed in front of the "fake" ones on the backdrop to make it look like a crowd of thousands were cheering me on to win the big relay. True to Disney quality, each figure on the painted backdrop had a very real and distinctive look to him or her. One day on lunch break, Elsa walked the entire cast down the whole length of the backdrop and made up risqué (all right - downright *dirty*)

comments about each painted figure. We laughed so hard at her raunchy descriptions that the tears just streamed down our faces. We all had to go back and have our make-up redone to continue shooting the picture.



I played the town delivery boy in *The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band*. Much of my part remained on the cutting-room floor, but it was a happy shoot. Walter Brennan was the star of the film, but he certainly didn't act like one. He didn't eat lunch in the special commissary dining room reserved for the "names" -- instead, each morning his wife made him his midday meal and put it in his lunch-pail, complete with thermos bottle, which he took to the studio almost like he was going to work in a factory. I had worked with Walter earlier on his short-lived

TV series "Tycoon." We had some scenes together on that previous show where it was just the two of us in the shot. As we started filming, I could see Walter kind of evaluate me and get a read on what I was doing. He smiled, said "pretty good," then quietly took me aside and started giving me a class in "Film Acting 101." He patiently demonstrated, for instance, how (by looking with my right eye into his left eye) more of my face could be seen by the audience in our scenes together - a little Hollywood trick that, along with his massive talent, garnered him three Academy Awards. All Walter cared about was making *me* look good. I've never forgotten his generosity and kindness, and I was able to use his tricks of the trade on camera for years.



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Family Band was about two years later, and I could see age creeping up on Walter Brennan. He had bad emphysema by then and was so short of breath that he required an oxygen tank to be hidden by his side as we filmed. On his longer speeches, Walter would say a sentence or two, the camera would keep rolling while he took a hit of oxygen, and then he would continue on with the rest of his lines; the pause for air would then be cut out of the film in editing. But somehow, that old trooper pumped himself up and was able to bring forth the dynamic energy needed for the scene each and every time. It was really quite remarkable and a testament to his dedication and fortitude.



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Walter was a character actor *and*, I must say, quite a character himself. It was never dull. His politics have been described by some as being "a little to the right of Hitler." Walter's specialty was to wait until the other actors were being made-up, bleary-eyed and out of it at 6 A.M., and then pouncing on them to discuss politics. You couldn't win. All you could do was nod and listen - there was no escape because you were imprisoned in the make-up chair! Oh well, I had literature from the John Birch Society to take home after work. Oh, and he did the *best* Walter Brennan impression I've ever seen!



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Buddy Ebsen probably was the most laid-back actor I've ever encountered. In between takes, Buddy would take LONG naps, completely oblivious to all the hubbub going on around him. One time when he was snoring away, the still-photographer got the entire cast and crew - probably one hundred people - to pose around his chair for a group shot and even then he didn't wake up. Buddy had started out as a hooper in a vaudeville act with his sister Velma. He made lots of movies in the '30s, some with Shirley Temple, and for a while was going to be the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* until he almost died from a bad reaction to the metallic paint on his costume. *Family Band* gave Buddy

a chance to dance again. He just glided over the floor with his smooth yet eccentric moves, and I never tired of watching the man in our song and dance scenes together.

The studio wanted all the featured actors in *Family Band* to sing and dance in the big musical numbers. So prior to filming, for two weeks Wally Cox, Richard Deacon and I went through basic training as dancers under the personal direction of choreographer Hugh Lambert. I gained great appreciation for the gypsy dance community after that crash course in pain as my poor tired legs and shaky knees will attest. I'm proud to say that when you see the three of us in the film we look damn good, like we actually *belonged* in the dance ensemble with the more seasoned pros.

I got to know Wally Cox and Richard Deacon well during shooting - we ate lunch together most every day. Wally had gained fame as "Mr. Peepers" in the early days of television. He was indeed mild-mannered and quiet just like his character, but that belied another side of him that wasn't what you'd expect. In his 20s, he was Marlon Brando's roommate when they were both starving actors in New York. You'd think that in their single days between the two of them it would be Brando who would attract all the women. Wrong! Wally was irresistible to the fair sex. He even dated Marilyn Monroe, for God's sake!



I remember being with him one day when a zoftig starlet sashayed by. Wally showed his quiet appreciation for her by saying under his breath, "Mmmm - solid comfort!" He was super-bright and, unlike most actors, had no illusions about the trappings of stardom. Once when the crowd surrounding him seemed to be overreacting to his every word and laughing at everything he said, I heard Wally mutter to himself, "Why are they laughing? It's not funny." Wally actually spent much of his off-camera time as a gold and silversmith and used much of his largesse from show business to finance the precious metals he needed for his work. After *Family Band*, Wally went on to great success

as a regular on the TV game show "Hollywood Squares." This special man died much too young, unfortunately under rather mysterious circumstances. Marlon Brando was so grief-stricken at his friend's passing that he had Wally's ashes placed in an urn on the mantel of the fireplace at his home in Tahiti where they remained until Brando's death.

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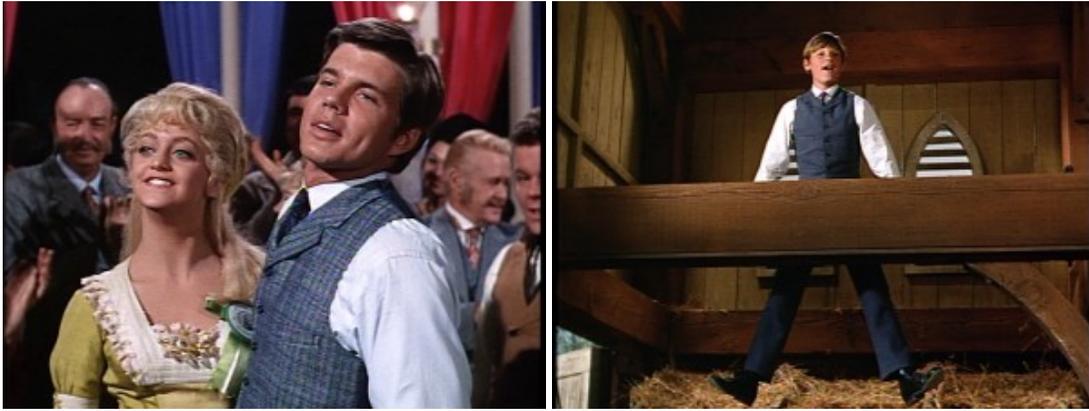
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Big, bald Richard Deacon was like a character out of Dickens. "Deac," as he was called, was jovial and so much fun to be around - a genuinely good guy. His portrayal of slow-burning Mel Cooley, the putupon assistant of Carl Reiner on the old "Dick Van Dyke Show," still breaks me up whenever I see it. Deac worked so hard sweating to master those song and dance numbers in *Family Band* that sometimes I thought he was going to drop dead right there in front of us. It was Deac who introduced me to Dick Van Dyke on the lot and made me feel like I belonged in their company (Dick was also a friend of Stan Laurel, as was I, so we had lots to talk about). I would see

Deac every so often after *Family Band* was released, and we'd always laugh and make the claim that, between the two of us in that picture, we almost sunk Disney Studios (*Family Band* not being the mega-hit that was expected).



During the two-week dance rehearsals prior to filming, my eye was caught by one of the girls in the chorus who'd just arrived in Hollywood after appearing as a go-go dancer in Las Vegas. She shone like a diamond among the lesser jewels, with her sexy figure, winning smile, and contagious giggle. She was CUTE in capital letters. Her name was Goldie Jeanne Hawn, and *Family Band* was her first movie. Other guys on the set were attracted to Goldie also, one of whom was a sixteen year old kid who'd starred in several Disney films already. His name was Kurt Russell. Who'd-have believed that all these many years later they'd be a couple, one of Hollywood's most successful, with a great relationship and a bunch of kids to boot. And it all started singing and dancing "West Of The Wide Missouri" together in *The One And Only Genuine Original Family Band*.

I made eight films in total for Walt Disney Studios. After *Blackbeard's Ghost* and *Family Band*, the next movie I did was *Herbie Rides Again*, again produced by Bill Walsh and directed by Robert Stevenson. It starred Helen Hayes and Ken Berry, both of whom I had worked with before on TV. I played "Sir Lancelot," a wimpy drag-race driver who, as would be expected, chickens out at the final moments of the event. The movie was filled with familiar faces from the Disney stock company, and I took special pleasure in noting that the fellow who waved the flag to start my race was Huntz Hall, the elastic-faced comic from all the Dead End Kids films.



After completing that role, I got a call from the studio saying that Walsh and Stevenson wanted me back for yet another part in the same movie. They darkened my skin with full body make-up, gave me new eyebrows and a hippy-dippy brown wig, and son of a gun - I was the surfer dude riding the big waves in Hawaii along with Herbie the Love Bug by my side. I was hidden under so much weird make-up that when I arrived at the soundstage to shoot in front of the blue screen most of my old Disney pals didn't even recognize me. Jan Williams, who had been Ustinov's double and stand-in in *Blackbeard*, did a triple take when he finally realized that that gnarly surfer dude was yours truly.

The Shaggy D.A. was next, again a Walsh and Stevenson vehicle. My old "Blackbeard" cohort Dean Jones starred again and once more Suzanne Pleshette was his leading lady. More Disney regulars were in the cast including Keenan Wynn, Dick Van Patten, Jo Anne Worley, Vic Tayback, Hans Conried, Benny Rubin, and my fellow-soldier from Universal's "Young Warriors, Jonathan Daly. I played a frustrated cop trying to corral Dean who had turned into a huge sheepdog - just like real life, right? When I showed up to film a scene with Suzanne, she greeted me with "Where's your track suit?" Once "a Gudger" - always "a Gudger," I guess. A major challenge in this movie was trying not to break up at the antics of Tim Conway, whom I was attempting to arrest in one of the closing scenes. Tim can be a bit nuts and his off-the-wall comic riffs make it near impossible to keep a straight face and stick to the script. Somehow I did, but it was tough.



My last Disney film was *The Cat From Outer Space*. It had a good cast including Sandy Duncan, Ken Berry, Hans Conried, James Hampton, and Alan Young. The "M.A.S.H." contingent was represented by Harry Morgan and McLean Stevenson. Harry, who was so wonderful as Col. Sherman Potter on that TV classic, at first thought he would be working with veteran character actor Henry Jones (so good in *Vertigo* and *The Bad Seed*). When I showed up and was introduced to him, Harry confided, "Oh I'm so glad it's *you*, Hank. Henry's a bit mad, you know." Amusingly enough, after years of getting the other Henry Jones's residual checks by mistake and vice versa, I finally ran into him at the Mormon Genealogical Library in Westwood of all places, where he too was climbing his family tree.

McLean was a nice guy, easy to be around. We had several good scenes together, and he loved to spin yarns between takes about some of his show business pals. Ronnie Schell was in the cast too. We go way back to my San Francisco TV days, and he still takes pleasure in being billed as "The World's Slowest Rising Comedian." And thanks to cast-mate Roddy McDowall - what a prince of a fellow he was - I am only one degree of separation from Kevin Bacon!



I played completely against my usual Disney type in *Cat From Outer Space*. Instead of being a nebbish or a wimp, I was a pushy and loud army officer whose only mission in life was to make things miserable for Ken Berry and his cat. I screamed and yelled at my troops until I was finally "frozen" in my tracks via the magic of the cat's supernatural powers. Ah, another slice of Disney reality. By the way, eleven cats, all dyed to look the same, played the title role.

To learn *much* more about Hank's "Disney Daze," his experiences on some of the classic sitcoms of the '60s and '70s, and his friendships and experiences working with legends like Elvis Presley, Stan Laurel, Ringo Starr, Henry Fonda, Patsy Cline, Minnie Pearl, Bob Hope, and Robin Williams, check out his brand new book "Memories - The 'Show-Biz' Part Of My Life" - now available via his website, www.hankjones.com.

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