

THE TRAIL OF BAMBI

Deep in Maine's Katahdin forests, Disney's men found the fawn that became Bambi and brought him, with his background, to the drawing boards in Hollywood



By Richard Hallet

WALT DISNEY'S Bambi had its first public showing in Portland, Maine. It was fitting that Maine should see it first, because in a real sense its origin was in Maine.

The original Bambi was an Austrian deer. What should Disney's Bambi be? Nearer home, of course. He fixed on a mule deer from Arrowhead, California. But a Maine man, Jake Day of Damariscotta, objected. Day was with the Disney artist force but he was also a good Maine wilderness man. He said flatly that California's mule deer was not Austria's white-flagged deer of Felix Salten's great story. To get the right deer, and no less to get the right background for the deer, Disney would have to go to Maine.

"Prove your point," said Disney.

To prove his point, Jake Day went back to his native heath and took a camera up into the Katahdin country. Thereafter he spent a total of seven months—including all the seasons, since Bambi runs the full circle of the seasons—getting close photographic shots of Bambi's country. He got the trees in all their dazzle after ice storms; he got beaver dams mounded with snow; and since Bambi was to end with a great forest fire, he turned his lens on the black satin corrugations of fire-bitten trees.

He overlooked no time of day, no mood of nature. With the first light of spring dawn, as early as 4 A. M., Jake Day would be lying on his stomach, waiting to catch the right morning blaze on grass cobwebs, or spiderwebs glorified by dew. It was just this grass-roots knowledge of detail that he was after; and the camera knows how to show the cartoon artist the root of the matter.

Day trained his lens on rotting logs, lichens, pools, leaves, ferns—all the strange medley of the forest floor. With his color camera he caught the gorgeous mahogany-red of pitcher plants; a thousand autumn reds and yellows; the blue of mountain lakes; the dark chimneys of Katahdin; and the mottled russet of peat swamps, where he followed Bambi's trail over land that trembled but never yielded entirely to his weight.

At night in his tent, Day and his friend Lester Hall studied the Bambi script. What should be the background for Bambi's first walk? Where should he meet the quail? What sort of pool should slake his thirst? Where should he first encounter "mouse-trouble?" What would be the natural habitat of Thumper the Rabbit? And what sort of log would be the right log for Bambi to stumble over in this first baby walk of his?

Jake Day's pictures convinced Dis-

OldMagazineArticles.com

BAMBI

Hungry Bambi watches his mother pull the bark off a tree. You can be sure every corrugation in the bark is authentic. Jake Day saw to that

ney that this and no other was the Bambi country. Here were the pools and glades and ferns and flowers and blowdowns and mountain chimneys that would make the only likely neighborhood for Bambi's life and adventures.

Such was the search for Bambi's background, tenacious and exhaustive, up there in Maine's roadless area, the wildest in the United States.

Meanwhile, our cartoon pioneers back-packed a forty-pound pack, watched out for bear tracks, ate oatmeal and blueberries, and photographed every last thing that Bambi's eye might rest on, right down to a bear cub's pad marks in forest mold. They had to combine the eye power of woodsman and artist, and those are different eye powers.

Reward or Penalty

Jake Day photographed the very atmosphere. He would climb a fifteen-hundred-foot wall of rolling, round rocks the size of tennis balls, and his reward might be a magnificent color shot of some deep valley lying under an ocean of blue haze. Or his penalty might be a pair of burned feet and a day wasted, because in a twinkling, all that glory of color might be blotted out by the shadow of a storm cloud.

Subjects for his camera swarmed under his heels. He had a long list of things that Walt Disney wanted photographed—hazel nuts, marsh grass, oak leaves, pine cones, close-ups of birch, beech, moosewood and squawwood; blueberries (low-bush and high-bush), red maple, sugar maple, hemlock, speckled alder.

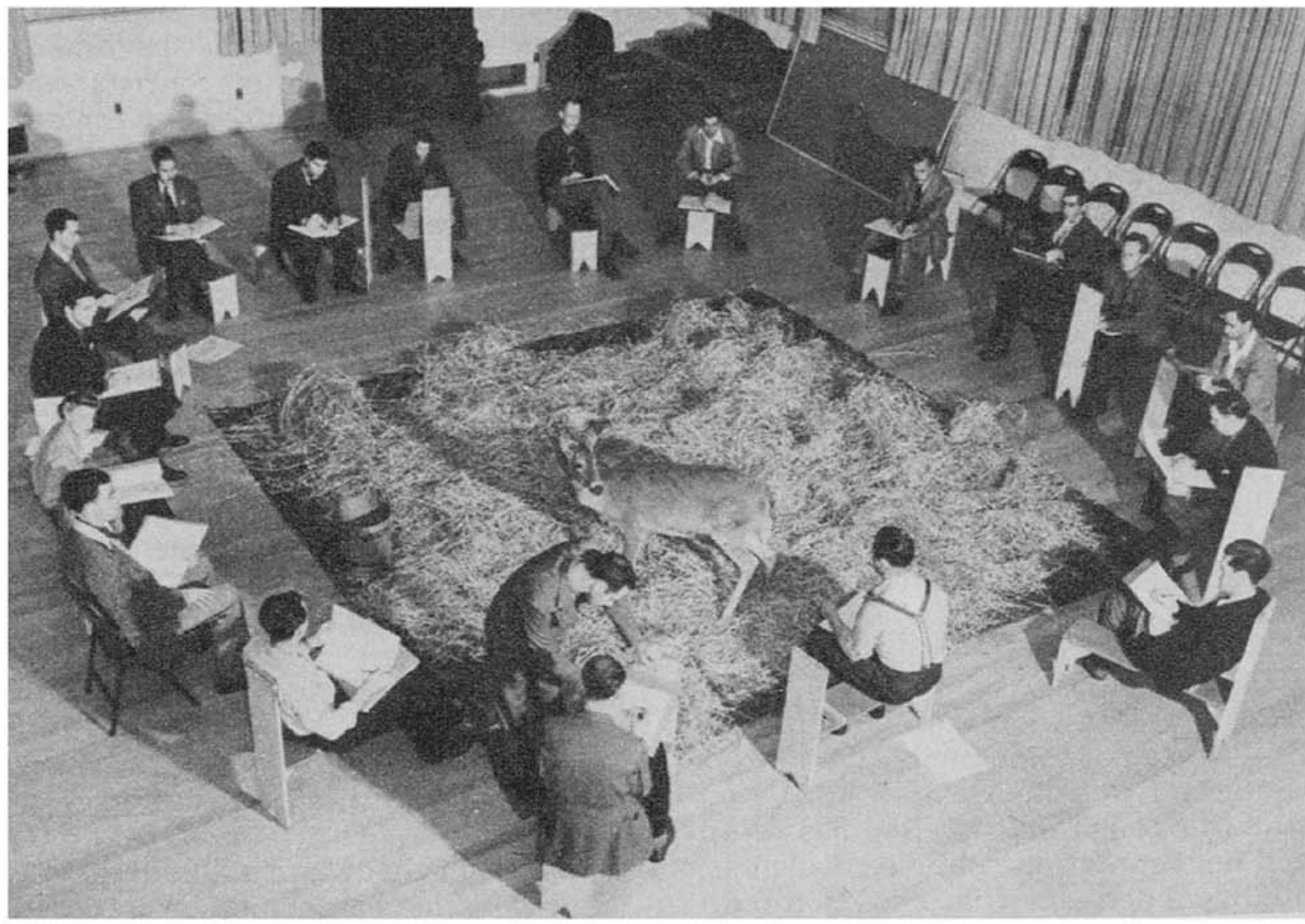
"We had to remember," says Day, "that Disney has a ruthless fidelity to the physical scene, to the truth of nature, even when he may seem to be distorting nature. Once when he was making a corn picture, he held us spellbound for an hour. He had studied cornfields in all their moods; he talked corn with farmers, slept corn, dreamed corn—the rustle of it, the shine of it, all its speech and habits.

"When corn gets into a Disney picture, then make no mistake about it, corn must be an actor. And so up there in the Katahdin wild, when I took a shot—well, if it was only a shot of a burnt tree, or some great webby root grasping at rocky soil, or a lichen like a colored shell wedged into rough bark—I had to consider that Disney might say to me, 'What does that say to you? What do you feel? What does it do to you? Put it down on paper!'"

Well, they put it down for him all right. Those artists of his made over two million drawings for him, and Bambi in its finished form makes use of more than 400,000.

Jake Day himself took more than a

BAMBI



Sticklers for accuracy, Disney artists study and sketch a live deer under the expert eye of Rico Le Brun, famous animal painter



Walt Disney sketching



Frank Thomas distracted

thousand photographs of Bambi detail, surprising the Katahdin woods in all their moods, dark and bright. He took morning and evening shots of brightening or dying shafts of light through deep woods with their cathedral aisles: shots of mist, of morning dew; of the effect on foliage of that first puff of wind in the vanguard of a thunderstorm; shots of black creeks and icy fields; of dimpled snow crust under the shine of a winter sun; shots of frost-rimmed leaves, and dead pokeweed, and the March pussywillow, and the wild red raspberry of midsummer, and the fall sumac whose narrow leaves look like guilty fingers dipped in blood. These would all be part of Bambi's mystery of life.

Meanwhile, Disney's forces in Hollywood were waiting for the camera's story. They were not woodsmen, and it took one research lady, who knew her Maine, three years to get them to take their chipmunk out of a tree and bring him down to his proper niche in a stone wall. They were not woodsmen but they were artists in line and mass; they could prop up these photographs in front of them and go to work.

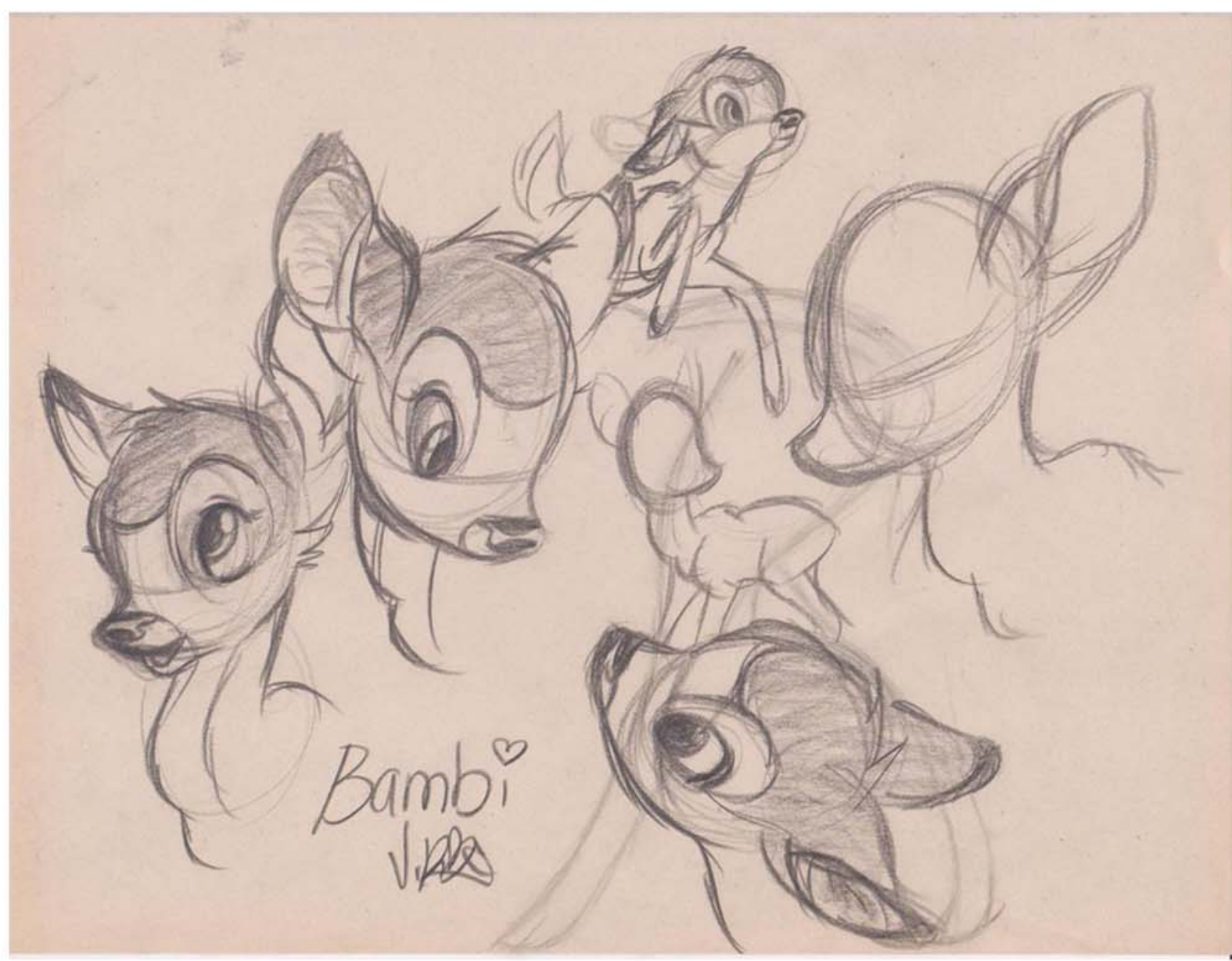
There was only lacking Bambi himself and soon Bambi was supplied to them—both Bambi and his sweetheart Faline. They too came from Maine, whose wardens, at the request of the Maine Development Commission, provided two four-months fawns, a male and a female, as models. These two little deer set out for Hollywood, to make their unwitting plea for a better understanding of their native haunts by man the hunter.

They were delicate missionaries. They lived on a milk formula, with plenty of lime juice for their bones, on that four-day train journey to Hollywood; and the express company had a very special job on its hands. Attendants had to be trained in the mixing of the formula, and there were special cans of Maine spring water.

The Starlets Arrive

Bambi and his consort got to their destination none the worse for wear; and to begin with, as Hollywood starlets, they found themselves eating hay in the middle of a circle of artists, who fixed them with lightning strokes in the midst of their antics. But Disney's artists, skilled though they were, lacked training for this job. There followed nine months of special art classes, and with the help of a world-famous animal anatomist, Disney's force studied the anatomy of the deer. They made drawings *ad infinitum*. Drawings were so

BAMBI



thick around Bambi and Faline that one day they even ate a few for lunch. They lost their fawn spots, grew from four months to thirteen months, and Disney's artists drew them all the way up from fawnhood to doehood and buckhood.

In the end, five hundred of Disney's people were concentrated on these deer. In the cartoon they would have to have voices, of course; and almost any morning in the casting room you might see a flock of hopeful mothers with their children, anxious to play the part of the Skunk, or the Rabbit, or Bambi himself. A boy was chosen for Bambi's voice but the picture dragged on so long that right in the middle of it the boy's voice changed to a squawk, and then of course they had to go back to the beginning of the sound sequence and find another voice.

Stuart Erwin played the squirrel's voice, and the animators clustered round him and watched the expressions on his face, so that they could put—heaven knows how—those same expressions on the squirrel's face.

Disney himself played no part. As is well known, Disney is the voice of Mickey Mouse and will let no other play that part, but he plays no other voices. Nevertheless, he was on the ground, early and late, looking in at the conferences, leaning over the story boards, deleting a line, changing an expression, but managing to save something by the way. He is never satisfied. He retouches and reforms, tears down, throws out, destroys ends, and begins again with his beginnings.

Disney conferences over story-board sequences, by the way, show the same catch-as-catch-can wrestling with the wilderness of detail which Jake Day with his camera had begun on the slopes of Mount Katahdin. First the scene designers sketched the action for a sequence. These planners worked out the entire forest setting for Bambi, every last pool, brook, glade, trail, gorge, and covert; and then every Bambi artist had to learn the location of every important landmark by heart, as if this were an actual forest and they themselves the wardens of it.

For example, in the elaborate plan for Bambi's first walk through the forest you will find marked the precise spot where Bambi encounters the frogs under the waterfall; next the possum ground; then the mole runs, and the reeds where "mouse trouble" occurs; and finally the position and character of the log over which the infant Bambi is predestined by his creators to stumble.

Nothing comes easy along this thorny pathway of two million drawings; but all is evolved by a clash of wits, a stretch of imaginations, a throwing out of dramatic absurdities—all under the lash of Disney's "Out! Out! Out!" For Disney knows first of all what he doesn't want, and often comes to what he wants by successive eliminations of what he doesn't want.

BAMBI

"If I like it, maybe the public will," Walt says.

Today, Jake Day is back in his whittle shop in Damariscotta, Maine, carving wooden sea gulls, or else he is loafing through Katahdin trails. Who knows what the story boards will want next? Too much Hollywood might make a man carry his brain in splints, Jake thinks. He must spend six months out of the year with Hollywood, but he insists on spending the other six in Maine. His two sons are in the Army and no longer lodge porcupines and skunks behind the kitchen stove; but Jake's interest in the wild is still as keen as ever. It is through him that Bambi, the greatest force for natural conservation ever on the screen, draws the breath of its life from Maine woods. THE END



Collier's

October 3, 1942 • p. 64 •