

royalties

Rudolph the
Red-Nosed Reindeer

Gene Autry

hero

Robert May

Christmas 1947

Maxton Publishers

Technicolor

2,400,000

Montgomery
Ward



Barbara May

50 years ago

Ringling Brothers
Barnum and Bailey
Circus

THE STORY BEHIND RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER

You've no doubt read the book, seen the movie—and there's no way you can help having heard the song. But do you know how Rudolph came to be part of our Christmas fun? Here's the touching—and triumphant—story. By Stanley A. Frankel



Illustrated by Werner Kappes



"Once upon a time, there was a reindeer named Rudolph—the only reindeer in the whole world that had a big, red, shining nose. Naturally, people called him Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

So begins the classic Christmas story of hope, of an outcast who became a hero. It's a story that has delighted several generations of children—and their parents—as they cheered on the once-scorned little deer.

What isn't so well-known, however, is how Rudolph came to be part of our Christmas fun. It also is a tale of triumph. It began some 50 years ago, on a cold December night in Chicago as a young father struggled to answer his daughter's unanswerable question. . . .

"Daddy," four-year-old Barbara May asked as she climbed onto her father's lap, "why isn't my mommy like everyone else's mommy?"

Robert May was shaken. How, he wondered, could he explain the tragedy that had befallen their family? He glanced across

the living room of their small apartment, to where his young wife, Evelyn, lay on the sofa, desperately ill. The ordeal had already shattered two adult lives; now, he realized, his small daughter was also suffering.

Bob knew only too well what it meant to be "different." As a child, he had been taunted mercilessly by playmates because he had been weak and delicate. Later, when he was a student at Dartmouth College, Bob was so small he was always being mistaken for someone's "little brother."

Nor had his adult life brought much more happiness. Unlike many of his classmates who floated from college into plush jobs, Bob became a low-paid copywriter for a New York department store. Later, in 1935, he went to work writing copy for Montgomery Ward, the large Chicago mail-order house. Now, at 33, Bob was deep in debt from his wife's illness—and deeply depressed.

Cradling his little girl's head against his shoulder, Bob tried to answer her question by making

up a story that would be both understandable and uplifting. "Rudolph," Bob explained, "was terribly embarrassed by his unique nose. Other reindeer laughed at him; even his mother and father and sisters and brothers were mortified because he wasn't like other reindeer. Rudolph himself wallowed in self-pity. 'Why was I born with such a terrible nose?' he cried."

As Bob went on to tell about Rudolph, he tried to help Barbara understand that even though some of God's creatures are strange or "different," they often have a special ability to make others happy.

"Well, one Christmas Eve," continued Bob, "Santa Claus got his team of reindeer ready for their yearly round-the-world trip. The entire reindeer community assembled to cheer these great heroes on their way. But a terrible fog engulfed the earth that evening, the mist so thick Santa knew he wouldn't be able to find any chimneys.

"Suddenly Rudolph appeared—his red nose glowing brighter
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THE STORY BEHIND RUDOLPH

continued

than ever—and Santa knew that here was the answer to his problem. He led shiny-nosed Rudolph to the front of the sleigh, fastened the harness, and climbed in. They were off! Rudolph guided Santa safely to every chimney that night. Rain and fog—snow and sleet—nothing bothered Rudolph, for his bright nose pierced the mist like a beacon.

"And so it was," Bob finished, "that Rudolph became the most famous and beloved of all reindeer. The huge red nose he once hid in shame was now the envy of every buck and doe in the reindeer world. Santa Claus told everyone that Rudolph had saved the day—and from that Christmas Eve onward, Rudolph has been living serenely and happily."

Little Barbara laughed with delight when her father finished. Every night she begged him to repeat the tale—until finally Bob could rattle it off in his sleep. Then, as Christmas neared, he decided to turn the story into a poem, illustrate it, and make it into a little booklet for Barbara's Christmas gift.

Night after night, Bob worked on the verses after Barbara had gone to bed.

Then, as he was about to put the finishing touches on *Rudolph*, Evelyn died. Grief-stricken, Bob now had only his daughter, and finishing the book became even more important—he was determined she would have her Christmas present.

Bob's work paid off when, on Christmas morning, he saw Barbara's delight at the special book. But little did Bob suspect that soon *Rudolph* would gain a much wider audience.

Shortly after Christmas, Bob, at his associates' insistence, attended the annual Montgomery Ward employees' holiday party. He brought the poem with him and began reading it to the crowd. At first the laughing and talking continued, but soon the group listened quietly and at the end broke into applause. Several Ward executives asked Bob for copies. Then someone suggested: Why not put the poem into booklet form as a free gift for Ward customers the following Christmas? The next year—a year in which Bob labored to pay his debts and keep Barbara fed and clothed—2,400,000 copies of the book were printed and given to youngsters at the hundreds of Montgomery Ward stores all over the country.

The story of the reindeer caught on immediately. Parents, teachers, and psychologists hailed *Rudolph* as a perfect gift for children. Newspapers and magazines printed stories about the

new hero. The following year Ward's stores and catalog offices upped the order to 3,000,000 copies.

Meanwhile, Bob May won acclaim—but little else. *Rudolph* had been copyrighted by Montgomery Ward to use as a Christmas promotion; he had received no money for it. Yet Bob was happy that his child—and millions of other children—loved his red-nosed reindeer. And in other ways, Bob's life began to brighten. In 1941, he married Virginia Newton, a secretary at the company, and in time, three new Rudolph fans—Joanna, Christopher, and Ginger—were born.

During World War II, the giveaway project was shelved, but afterwards, Ward executives planned a new Rudolph book. Even better news: Sewell Avery, president of Ward's, ordered the copyright turned over to Bob. From then on, he would receive any royalties *Rudolph* earned.

In 1946, 3,600,000 *Rudolph* booklets were distributed by Ward's. Immediately there was a deluge of demands from businessmen eager to manufacture Rudolph products: toys, puzzles, slippers, skirts, jewelry, and lamps.

A special recording of the poem was made. Maxton Publishers bought the rights to produce a bookstore edition in 1947. Parker Brothers brought out a Rudolph game. Even Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus got into the act: They had a pony, equipped with antlers and an electrically lighted red nose, called "Rudolph the Reindeer." From all these Rudolph ventures, Bob did receive royalties.

Christmas of 1947 was the brightest ever for Bob May, his family, and Rudolph. Some 6,000,000 copies of the booklet were given away or sold—making *Rudolph* one of the most widely distributed books in the world.

In the years since, there has been a Rudolph Technicolor cartoon—directed by Max Fleischer and narrated by Paul Wing—which ran many Christmas seasons in thousands of movie theaters. Manufacturers have poured out literally dozens of millions of Rudolph items—hats, socks, false faces, pajamas, T-shirts, sneakers, crayons, dolls, tree ornaments, buttons, even underwear. And with the immensely popular Gene Autry recording of Rudolph, the deer's place in Christmas lore seemed assured.

When Bob May died several years ago, he was an extremely wealthy man, thanks to Rudolph. But, as Bob himself and his daughter, Barbara, would agree, more important was the satisfaction Bob achieved with his red-nosed deer. The trip Rudolph had made from laughing stock to hero rivaled Bob May's own rise from humiliation to acclaim—and was a message of hope to countless others. ★