

FURTHER REVIEW

HO, HO, GLOW!

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Dec. 6, 1964 — 60 years ago — the stop-motion animated Christmas TV special "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" debuted on NBC.

It aired annually on NBC for seven years and then moved to CBS, which showed the special for 51 consecutive seasons. It'll celebrate its 60th birthday this year by moving back to NBC.

'DIDN'T I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT BUMBLES? BUMBLES *BOUNCE*!'

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was created in 1939 by Robert May, a copywriter for Montgomery Ward's mail order catalog division. Montgomery Ward gave out 2.4 million copies of the resulting booklet that year. May talked his famous songwriting brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, into turning the story into a song. Cowboy actor and singer Gene Autry made the song famous in 1947.





Each puppet used in the special was built over an articulated iron armatures — essentially the same technology used in the 1933 film "King Kong." The Santa puppet was eight inches tall. Rudolph was four inches tall and his nose really lit up. Several copies were made of each puppet, because the animators, working in Japan, found they didn't hold up well under hot studio lights.

The songs and narration of the 1964 special were originally meant for the character of Yukon Cornelius. Well into production, however, NBC and its corporate parent at the time, General Electric, asked for a "big name" to be added to the cast. Burl Ives was brought in to play Sam the Snowman and to provide narration and a handful of songs throughout the special.





The original closing credits named Billy Richards as the voice of Rudolph. The real name, however, was Billie Mae Richards — in the mid 1960s, it wasn't uncommon for animation producers to hide the fact that women sometimes voiced male characters. Present day examples: Nancy Cartwright plays the voice of Bart Simpson and Tara Strong plays the voice of Timmy on "The Fairly OddParents."

In the original 1964 version, Rudolph and his friends visited the Island of Misfit Toys but then those lonesome toys are never seen again. NBC was swamped with letters from children asking what happened to them. NBC had the producers add sequences at the end in which Santa drops by the island, collects the misfit toys and then, during the closing credits, delivers them to children.





Hermey is the only male elf in the special without pointed ears and with hair on top of his head. The Canadian actor who voiced Hermey, Paul Soles, would go on to provide the voice for the animated TV version of "Spider-Man" from 1967 to 1970 and, in the early 2000s, would live in the same retirement community as Richards: The Performing Arts Lodge in Toronto, Canada

In order to make room for this added footage, scenes had to be cut. The most notable was a subplot where Yukon Cornelius is searching for underground peppermint deposits. That's why he keeps throwing and licking his pickaxe and muttering, "*Nuthin'*." Finally, in the original version, he finds peppermint near Santa's workshop and gleefully begins mining operations.





The special was filmed at 24 frames per second, for a total of 67,680 frames over the (original) 44-minute special. It was "shot on the 2s," meaning that two frames of film were exposed before puppeteers moved the puppet for the next shot. This saved time and money, but created a bit of a "jerky" look that became part of the Rankin-Bass style.

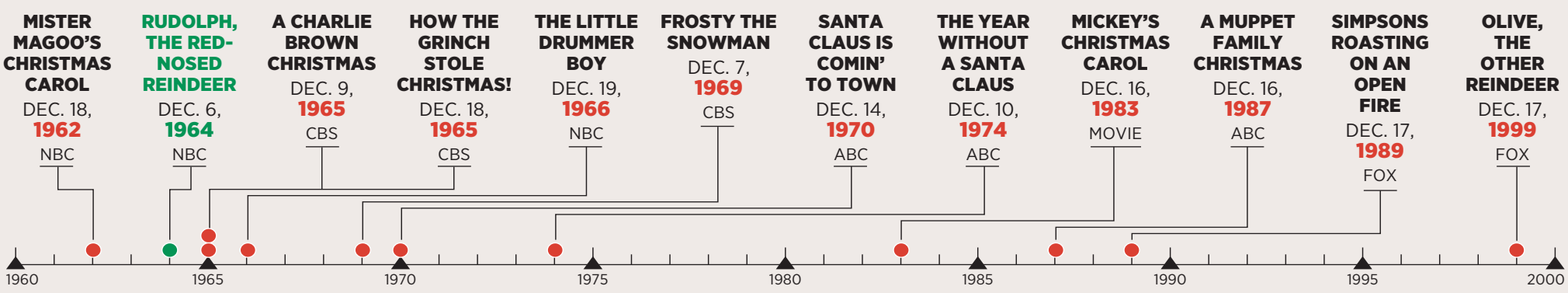
Have you looked closely at the dogs Yukon Cornelius uses to pull his sled? Instead of the standard breeds — huskies, malamutes, chinook — Yukon uses a cocker spaniel, a poodle, a Saint Bernard, a collie, and a dachshund. Yukon then has troubles getting his dogs to run when he wants them to and, on one occasion, yells: "Whoa. Whooooooooa! *Unmush*, will ya?"





Notice in one of the last shots in the special, Rudolph leads a team of six reindeer, rather than the eight you might expect. This, too, saved money. Deleted scenes were reinserted and the entire special remastered in 2005. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" has been broadcast every year since 1964, making it the longest continuously-running Christmas special in the U.S.

THE DEBUT OF A DOZEN BELOVED HOLIDAY SPECIALS



Sources: Internet Movie Database, Smithsonian magazine, Time magazine, the New York Times, TV Guide, Mental Floss, MeTV, Yardbarker

SOURCES: ALL PHOTOS FROM VIDEOCRAFT INTERNATIONAL AND RANKIN/BASS PRODUCTIONS