

History

In 1938, as the Great Depression ground on Bob May was looking forward to another bleak Christmas. His wife Evelyn was in the last stages of fighting a losing battle with cancer. What savings the family had as well as their possessions of any value had gone in fighting the disease. The couple, with their four-year-old daughter were living in a drafty, two room Chicago apartment in a slum.



Bob May
Image from
news.dartmouth.edu

Bob's daughter climbed into his lap on a cold December night and asked, "Why isn't my mommy just like everybody else's mommy?" The question reminded Bob of the pain of his own youth; growing up as small and slight lad, picked on by others because he appeared to be different than them.

Bob wanted his daughter to somehow understand that there was hope, even faced as they were with a mother and wife that was dying, bankruptcy and homelessness. Most of all he wanted her to know she was loved. Drawing from his own life experiences, the copywriter made up stories about a reindeer with a large bright red nose. As Barbara listened, May described in story form not only the pain felt by those who were different but also the joy that can be found when someone discovers their special place in the world. It was a hit with Barbara.

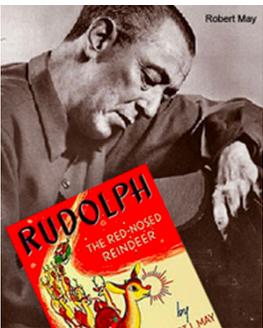
Unable to afford to buy a gift for his daughter, May crafted a homemade book with the story of Rudolph, using his own artistic abilities to draw the illustrations. Barbara found the completed copy of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* waiting for her on Christmas morning.

Bob was asked to read his book to his fellow workers at the Montgomery Wards Christmas party where he received thunderous applause.

Stewell Avery, the chairman of Wards board bought the rights to the book from May to use as a company promotional item. Avery had 10,000 copies of the book printed and shipped to all of the Ward stores for Christmas 1939. By 1946, Wards had given away six million copies.



Stewell Lee Avery (1873 - 1960),
Entrepreneur and Humanitarian
Image from www.geni.com/



Jonny Marks
Image from
www.geni.com/

Stewell was besieged by offers from major publishing houses wanting to print a new version.

In one of the most generous decisions ever made by the head of a large corporation, the then CEO gave all rights back to Bob May. A year later the mass-market release of the book made Bob a rich man. The wealth continued to build through the production of toys, television shows, movies, and other Rudolph items.

Johnny Marks, May's brother-in-law wrote the lyrics and melody for the Rudolph song that was recorded by Gene Autry in 1949. It shot to #1 on the charts selling two million copies that year; second only to "White Christmas" for total sales.

From "Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas" by Andrew Collins, 2001