



The Creation of Disneyland © 2004, Reece Fischer

Walt Disney: The Early Years

Walter Elias Disney was born on December 5, 1901. He was the fourth of five children born to Elias and Flora Disney. Elias was a fairly unsuccessful businessman, who moved the family from city to city in search of financial success. When Walt was four, they moved from

their home in Chicago to a farm in Marceline, Missouri. Walt's time in Marceline provided him with the vision for Main Street USA (Francavigilia, 1981). His frequent associations with animals would also become evident in his later cartoons (Bryman, 4). In 1910, the family left Marceline and moved to Kansas City. Elias was a strict taskmaster who often beat his children. This led to Walt's two oldest brothers deserting the family. Another brother, Roy, left to go help an uncle on a farm. Although they were no longer living together, Roy and Walt remained close.

In 1919, Walt got a job as a cartoonist at a commercial art studio in Kansas City. That job did not last long, and following a failed attempt at starting his own business, Walt began to work for the Kansas City Film Ad Company. During this time, he seriously explored the world of animation. Success, however, did not come easily to Walt, and he soon decided that he had to leave Kansas City. In 1923, he carried just \$40 in his pocket and left for Hollywood.

Walt's brother Roy, who was already living in Los Angeles, provided Walt with some financial backing and contacted a distributor about Walt's first animation *Alice's Wonderland*. Working together with Roy, the brothers opened "Disney Bros. Studio" (It would later be known as Walt Disney Studio). Roy handled the business operations and Walt specialized in the animated productions. Although production costs limited their profits, Walt still felt the enterprise was making progress. They continued to create a series of Alice productions and began exploring other ideas as well. When the time came for the brothers to negotiate a new contract with their distributor, business began to turn ugly. Finally, they decided not to continue once their contract ran out.

The two brothers and Ub Iwerks, a partner of Walt's from Kansas City, secretly began develop a cartoon mouse named Mickey. It is believed by many that Iwerks drew the first image of Mickey Mouse (Bryman, 7). Walt signed on with three different distributors, each time buying out the previous distributor. Roy did not always agree with these decisions, but Walt felt he was headed in the right direction. By 1943, Walt had a deal with United Artists. He also had a production staff of 187 employees, up from six in 1928.

By the late 1940s, Disney Studios had created Donald Duck, Pluto, and Goofy. It had also produced several films including the hit *Snow White*. The World War II years hurt the company financially, but it recovered shortly thereafter. Roy created his own distribution company known as *Buena Vista*, which from then on would distribute all Disney films. With the company finally achieving a long period of stability, Walt became interested in the concept of a Disney Amusement Park.

The Vision



Walt envisioned an amusement park in which his cartoon characters could come to life and interact with the visitors. He also wanted a park that catered to the entire family. The stereotypical American amusement park was not what Walt Disney had in mind. Walt was turned off by the vulgarity and grime that he found when he went to other amusement parks.

Disney's goal was to create a park where parents and children could have fun together. A typical amusement park in the early half of the twentieth century was a random assortment of roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, and Ferris wheels. Hot dog vendors littered the streets. Beer was sold and consumed in large quantities. Sanitation was never a priority at these parks. In short, they did not offer the best setting for a family outing. Disneyland was created with the intention of having no roller coasters. Main Street, USA, the hub of Disneyland was bordered not by hot dog stands, but by souvenir shops. Alcohol was not sold on the premises. Walt wanted his park to be different in that it would lack the dirtiness and deterioration that was typically present at amusement parks. This concept would be critical in attracting large numbers of visitors.

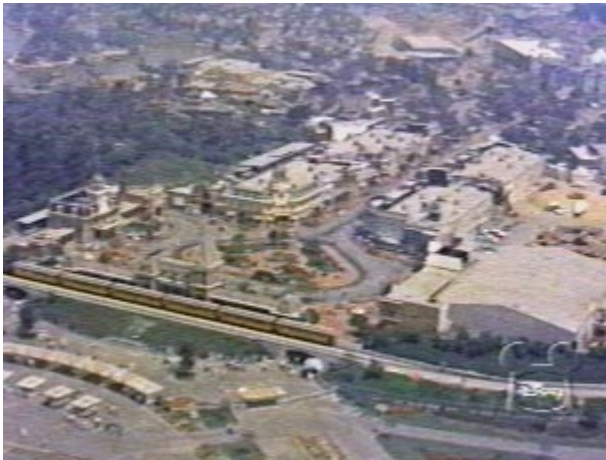
The uniqueness of this concept was part of the reason that it was initially difficult for Walt to get support. He struggled to find a location and sufficient funding. His brother Roy had no interest in the park which led to an ugly split between the brothers. Disney once said, "I could never convince the financiers that Disneyland was feasible, because dreams offer too little collateral" (justdisney.com). With limited finances, Walt had to find affordable land. It was also important that his park be located near a major highway. In August of 1953, Disney and his partners selected a 160-acre orange grove in Anaheim, California to be the site of Disneyland. The construction of Disneyland began during the summer of 1954.

It was a new prototype of an amusement park. One in which Walt envisioned visitors traveling down a reproduction of a typical old-fashioned version of Main Street USA on their way towards four distinct dreamlands. In each of his dreamlands guests were given the opportunity to temporarily

escape the realities of daily life. In addition to building a family atmosphere, he created a sense of American euphoria. Disneyland grew to be extremely successful. It was unique. And in some ways it felt special to the American people. Walt Disney once said, "The one thing for me... the important thing... is the family, and keeping the family together with things. That's been the backbone of our whole business, catering to families" (Bryman, 87). He created an atmosphere that catered to the entire family.

"The park means a lot to me. It's something that will never be finished, something I can keep developing." With this motto in mind, Disney created the most significant amusement park in American history. On July 17, 1955, a 17 million dollar project called Disneyland was opened to the public. The park opened with 26 attractions. 12 more were added soon thereafter. Although Disney passed away over 30 years ago, his vision of a euphoric amusement park still lives on today.

Disneyland's Opening Week



By no means did Disneyland get off to a smooth start. Thousands of people forged tickets and their presence made the park feel overly crowded. Due to a plumbers' strike, the water fountains did not work. Some thought it was a ploy to get visitors to purchase drinks in the blistering heat. There were complaints about the lack of friendliness among the security personnel. The harsh

treatment from park employees prevented the guests from feeling the true Disney experience. Crowd control was another one of the initial problems. Guests at the most popular rides were subject to long lines, while less appealing attractions remained empty. Visitors had to pay for each ride individually, which further slowed the lines at the popular rides. Other opening week disasters included, Davy Crockett being soaked by sprinklers during his grand entrance, a gas leak in Fantasyland, and the near capsizing of the overloaded Mark Twain boat. Worse still, all of the struggles of opening day were broadcast on national television. In the next two weeks, local temperatures exceeded 100 degrees and crowds decreased drastically. The initially slow cash flow threatened to put the park out of business. One journalist published his opinion that "Walt's dream is a nightmare... I attended the so-called press premier of Disneyland, a fiasco the like of which I cannot recall in thirty years of show life. To me it felt like a giant cash register, clicking and clanging, as creatures of Disney magic came tumbling down from their lofty places in my daydreams to peddle and perish their charms with the aggressiveness of so many curbside barkers" (Adams, 95).



Walt, however, learned from the disastrous first couple of weeks. He ensured that there would never again be a shortage of water fountains. He in fact made a special effort to incorporate all water fountains, restrooms, and waste containers into the theme of each land in the park. In response to the complaints about security personnel, Walt replaced all park staff with employees who had been properly taught the Disney etiquette at "Disneyland University." As for the problems with money and tickets, Walt decided to sell tickets by a classified letter system. Different tickets entitled the guests to different levels of attractions. This helped to spread the crowds across the entire park. It also eliminated the problem of carrying money to each ride. Following a shaky start, Walt and his dream park were quickly gaining stability.

Within the first six months of operations, Disneyland welcomed over one million visitors. From there the attendance figures kept climbing. Four million people passed through the turnstiles in 1956. In July of 1965, 10 years after opening, Disneyland hosted its 50 millionth guest. The ten year visitor total was equal to one quarter of the United States population. Americans were embracing the idea of an idealized amusement park, and they were embracing it in masses (Adams, 96).

Advertising

Walt Disney is often acknowledged as a genius for designing such a revolutionary theme park. His theme park, however, would not have succeeded on word of mouth alone. He used some very successful advertising campaigns to promote Disneyland. Walt understood that televisions were becoming more popular in family homes, and he thought it would be his best medium for advertising. The Mickey Mouse Club TV show was designed to promote and raise funding for Disneyland. The show premiered shortly after the park opened, on October 5, 1955. The show aired weekday afternoons for four years until it was discontinued in 1959. With over 360 episodes, Walt used television to make a lasting impression on the American population.

The stars of the *Mickey Mouse Club* were the Mouseketeers. They were not professional actors, but ordinary children. They went to school during the day, but they also performed on the show. There were 39 young Mouseketeers who were accompanied by two adult leaders. The two older stars were Jimmy Dodd and Roy Williams. Disney cartoons and guest stars were also featured on the show. Walt certainly knew how to take advantage of America's new obsession with television. He specifically aired the show during weekday afternoons once young children had returned home from school. The Mickey Mouse Club got youngsters excited about this new park called Disneyland. Many of these children eventually convinced their parents to take them to Disney's magical park.

Walt also aired another show called *Disneyland*. In October of 1954, Walt began this weekly series on ABC. Each Sunday night, the show previewed one of the four main lands to the audience. During the first half of each

show the audience was given a glimpse of a Disneyland theme park. The later segment was always a tribute to Mickey Mouse. The show continued to evolve, and the audience became more familiar with each theme park. Other Disney characters were added to the cast including the very popular Davy Crockett. Like the *Mickey Mouse Club*, *Disneyland* advertised the park to the public and increased their desire to experience Disneyland. As the attendance records show, Walt's methods of advertising proved to be very successful.

The Park



Walt Disney once said, "For those of us who remember the carefree time it recreates, Main Street will bring back happy memories. For younger visitors, it is an adventure in turning back the calendar to the days of grandfather's youth." Main Street USA is the heart and soul of Walt Disney's creation. It is the first area which greets visitors as they enter the park. Before guests head to the other areas of the park, they can travel

back to the turn of the century. Steam-powered locomotives, 1900s-style fire trucks, and horse-drawn trolleys transport visitors back and forth along Main Street, as well as to each of the different "lands". Main Street USA was designed with the intention of inviting visitors further into the park. While it represents the stereotypical American main street, it is in fact a euphoric recreation. At the turn of the century, the Main Street in many American towns was a dingy dirt road in economically depressed areas. It was a central location where design clearly favored utility over beauty. In Disneyland however, Main Street is an idealized caricature. The restaurants and shops lining both sides of the street are much more appealing than the older versions of Main Street (Adams, 98). To the American visitor, it is better than the Main Street their parents grew up with. While it is not true to reality, it is created with a surreal feeling of optimism that makes Disneyland so special.

In addition to Main Street, USA, the park includes Adventureland, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, and Frontierland. Disneyland's first visitors were attracted to the mysterious realms that each individual land represented. All four of the lands were designed so that the visitors could completely immerse themselves in the distinct theme. There were minimal distractions from this central theme, such that landscaping, costumes, live entertainment, merchandise, and food were all related to the theme. Adventureland focused on the urge to discover the unknown and the constant human urge to explore new worlds. It was designed to evoke exciting settings from around the globe. Walt had a dream of far-off, exotic, tropical places. He tried to make this dream a reality through the attractions

in Adventureland. The jungle cruise is an original ride that is still popular today. In Fantasyland, many of the animated characters that Walt created were brought to life. Disney once asked, "What youngster has not dreamed of flying with Peter Pan over moonlit London, or tumbling into Alice's nonsensical wonderland? In Fantasyland, these classic stories of everyone's youth have become realities for youngsters of all ages to participate in." Frontierland focuses on the desire for freedom, and represents the era of the American pioneer. Walt felt that "All of us have a cause to be proud of our country's history, shaped by the pioneering spirit of our forefathers. Our adventures are designed to give you the feeling of having lived, even for a short while, during our country's pioneer days." The Mark Twain steamboat ride epitomizes what this land signifies. Tomorrowland displays man's achievements and showcases our technological sophistication. Disney felt that "Tomorrow can be a wonderful age. Our scientists today are opening the doors of the Space Age to achievements that will benefit our children and generations to come. The Tomorrowland attractions have been designed to give you an opportunity to participate in adventures that are a living blueprint of our future." In this land, many of the attractions are based on space exploration (justdisney.com). These different realms combined to create an environment in which the troubles and responsibilities of daily life cease to exist. Perhaps the apparent absence of reality made Disneyland so popular.

Architecture

Many people view Disneyland as an American icon, a place which many have visited and almost all are somewhat familiar with. Americans can identify it on a map as if it were the White House or the Statue of Liberty. But unlike most of these well-known buildings, Disneyland was built in recent history. The creativity of the architecture on Main Street USA might very well be the reason that it has grown to be so popular.

There are two distinct aspects of the buildings in Disneyland. On the outside they appear to be convenience stores from the turn-of-the century, or trading posts on the American frontier. On the inside, however, they resemble a 1950s-style shopping mall. This creative concept offers the visitors the best-of both worlds. On the outside of Main Street, the Disney atmosphere can take them back to the turn-of-the-century. Yet once inside, they can still enjoy the modern luxuries which all tourists are seeking. Another great idea was to construct the buildings along Main Street intentionally disproportionate. The ground floor is built to seventh-eighths scale and the first floor is built to five eighths scale (Bryman, 65). The Disney Imagineers have always been very proud of this design. This was done to attract the visitors to the main castle. It also makes the building seem less intimidating and more inviting, therefore encouraging guests to see what is inside. The healthy mix of the old and the new makes Main Street all the more attractive.

The park was designed so that all guests had to enter and exit through Main Street USA. From Main Street, they could access any other area of the park. Walt felt that Main Street served as an entrance to a "weenie." "What you need is a weenie, which says to people 'come this way.' People won't go

down a long corridor unless there's something promising at the end. You have to have something that beckons them to 'walk this way.'" The park was designed in such a way that Main Street was a very inviting corridor which then allowed the crowds to disperse to the other areas of the park.

Criticism

Most of those who criticized Disneyland during its opening week soon realized that it was going to be a huge success. Some, however, continued to criticize the concept of Walt Disney's idealized theme park. The underlying concept present throughout the park is the glorification of Anglo-American society. Disney fails to acknowledge any ethnic and immigrant influences. Main Street USA signifies the typical Anglo-Saxon version of the turn of the century Midwestern town. There is no representation of other European immigrants filling cities along the east coast or African Americans emerging from slavery in the south. While the park praises the lifestyle and achievements of white America, recognition of minority achievement is noticeably missing. Critics also point out that all 39 of the original Mousketeers were Caucasian. Plenty of minority families visit Disneyland and some find it disappointing that the themes are so focused on Anglo-American history.

Another area of controversy involves the creation of a euphoric atmosphere. The Main Street in Disneyland is similar in design only to the Main Streets in the early 1900s. Disney's Main Street shows the unity of a town, but fails to acknowledge the economic depression that was present in most of these towns. Some critics also point out that Main Street does not have any signs of academia, such as a school or a religious building. They feel that Walt put too high an emphasis on America's financial progress and failed to recognize its educational values as well. "The values depicted are those of civic rule and commercialism, not spiritual aspiration, mental enrichment, or personal growth" (Adams 98). While there certainly are arguments that the park only recognizes the financial achievements of white America, this criticism has not hindered Disneyland's success.

Walt's Vision Lives On



When Walt Disney borrowed money against his life insurance policy to buy an orange grove outside of Anaheim, even he could not have imagined the affect his park would have. Almost fifty years after Disneyland opened, the influence of the Disney theme parks is as strong as ever. In 1971, Walt Disney World was opened outside of Orlando, Florida. It attracted a different type of visitor for two reasons. Disney World became much more popular for tourists who lived in the eastern United States. Secondly, Disney World was much larger than Disneyland. Most families will spend a week at Disney World, whereas they would only spend a day or two at Disneyland (Bryman 67). Disney World is currently comprised of three main theme parks, two water parks, and two minor theme parks. 1992 marked the opening of Euro-Disneyland,

of which the Disney Company owns a significant portion. Tokyo Disneyland opened in 1983. Although it is not owned by Disney, it was modeled after the American Disney parks. While the Disney Company and the concept of a Disney theme park have certainly been very successful, Walt has always kept one thing in perspective. "I only hope that we don't lose sight of one thing -- that it was all started by a mouse."

In addition to the Disney theme parks, the Disney Company is as strong as ever. It has produced many movies, television shows, Broadway musicals, and soundtracks. Disney has its own cruise line as well as its own television channel. When Walt left for California with only \$40 in his pocket, nobody could have predicted the success that would be attached to his name today.

Walt Disney's ideas can be found in areas other than theme parks. The architectural design of the original Main Street has been very inspirational in other projects. James Rouse, an accomplished architect has credited Walt Disney for providing much of his inspiration. In addition to suburban malls, Rouse has created Baltimore's Harborplace and Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace (Hine, 152). Although Walt Disney died in 1966, his ideas can still be found across the globe.

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