

## A Brief History of the Disney Parks

Disneyland opened to a star-studded fanfare on July 17th, 1955. The opening of "the Happiest Place on Earth" was a media event that, even as late as the 1990's, has rarely been exceeded for glitz, glamour, excitement, and drama. Walt Elias Disney himself dedicated the park and each of the individual "lands" within its bermed boundaries. Main Street USA, Adventureland, Frontierland, Fantasyland, and Tomorrowland made up the lineup at that time. New Orleans Square, Critter Country (formerly Bear Country), and Toontown have since been added. Each of the original lands has been altered -- and had new attractions added -- over the years.

Disneyland was Walt's dream. For years he dreamed and hoped of building a "little family park" where parents could take their children for a day of fun -- for both kids and adults. The amusement parks of the 1920's and 30's were tawdry, dirty, sleazy places. The short-lived turn-of-the-century family ambience of Coney Island had turned into a hard-boiled rough and tumble atmosphere. Other parks across the country were no better. By the early 1950's, Cedarpoint, in Ohio, had begun to pass its apex and began a steady decline as did Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Kennywood Park (both of which have experienced tremendous improvements in the 1980's and '90's). Still, Walt felt that it was possible to build a different kind of park...a "themed" park that had fun attractions and a beautiful atmosphere...a park that wouldn't decline into an ugly, gaudy, cheap place...a park that "would never be completed -- as long as there is imagination in the world."

The first incarnation of what eventually became Disneyland was planned to be built at the Disney Studio lot on Hyperion Avenue in Burbank. Walt's grandiose plans for attractions soon made it clear that the small lot wouldn't be anywhere near large enough. With no money, and many other projects underway already, Walt shelved his ideas for the time being.

The second world war had a devastating effect on the Disney Studios. The facility was taken over by the military. The studio spent the duration producing military training films and war bonds sales pitches and designing unit insignia and emblems. Many of the studio animators were inducted into the military. It took years for the company to recover from the war's consequences.

Finally, with the studio back in good running order, Walt's attention returned to his theme park. A breakthrough occurred in 1953 and 1954 when Walt figured out how to finance his park. Television, which was sweeping the country at the time, needed good, family-oriented programming. One of the major networks, NBC wasn't interested. Ironically ABC -- the same network that The Walt Disney Company now owns, was. The deal included a year-long television show that would provide frequent updates on the construction of the new park. The rest of the show was filled with Disney's signature material. True Life Adventure films, Disney's precious stock of animated shorts, and several live action serials, enjoyed a new popularity in 1954 due mostly to the television show "Disneyland".

Construction of "The Happiest Place on Earth" was completed in one year, a tremendous engineering and planning success that is still to be admired. Joe Fowler (incidentally the namesake of "Fowler's Harbor" where Columbia is berthed on the Rivers of America), hired by the Disney Company to manage the construction effort, did a tremendous job. Even though plagued by strikes, shortages, and a lack of freeway transportation to the area (The Santa Anna freeway wasn't yet complete as far as Anaheim during most of the construction). Admiral Joe kept things on track.

During its original construction and during the first decade of operation, Walt kept his own hand on the design of Disneyland. The first actual rendering of the park, drawn by Herb Ryman, was personally directed by Walt. The drawing was instrumental in securing the balance of the financial backing Walt needed. The design of Sleeping Beauty's castle, so named because the movie by that name was soon to be released, the concepts of many of the attractions, the high standards for the landscaping -- Bill Evan's domain, and much else is directly attributed to Walt. Furthermore, the Jungle Cruise, the Tiki Room, Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, Rivers of America, the Fantasyland dark rides, Storybookland and many other attractions...all were conceived or developed or somehow improved by Walt's personal involvement.

The one thing that Walt couldn't control, though, was what happened just outside of the border of the Anaheim, California property. As it turned out, the effects were staggering. As expected, subdivisions sprang up all around -- Walt had intentionally located Disneyland smack dab in the center of the projected population center of the Los Angeles area. What wasn't expected was the high-rise hotels, restaurants, tourist traps, and such...Walt was able to keep the bawdy carnival atmosphere out of Disneyland, but he couldn't keep it out of Anaheim. Furthermore, the Disney financial experts soon realized the incredible boon

that hotel resort income would have been. The Disneyland Hotel, always the flagship hotel in Anaheim, wasn't owned by the Walt Disney Company until the Michael Eisner era almost forty years after Disneyland's gates opened.

Walt always said there would never be another Disneyland. And, of course, relocating the park to get away from the Anaheim area was out of the question. Besides, Disneyland was a tremendous success. The problem wasn't Disneyland...the problem was the financial constraint that dictated the original, small size of Disneyland. A seed was germinated in Walt Disney's fertile mind. The idea for another park located far enough from Disneyland so that it wouldn't compete with the older sibling, but large enough to have room for hundreds of new ideas, was born.

The concept was tested in 1964. Disney's Imagineering department built four attractions for the New York World's Fair. There were two main reasons for Disney's heavy involvement. First, Walt planned to move the attractions to Disneyland at the conclusion of the fair. This would provide additional attractions at the park with most of the cost borne by the sponsors of the fair exhibits. Second, the 1964 fair was a test...to see if the East coast populace would respond to Disneyland-like entertainment.

The fair was a tremendous success. The four attractions, It's a Small World, Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln, Primeval World (portions of this fair exhibit were added to the Grand Canyon diorama on the Disneyland Railroad route), and Progressland (later called the Carousel of Progress when moved to Disneyland) were among the most popular of the fair. Disney learned a great deal about new ride and attraction technology. The boats of It's a Small World proved to be a very efficient way of moving a huge number of people through the attraction and the audio-animatronics of Mr. Lincoln and Progressland astounded fair visitors. Most important, Disney learned that the East coast could easily support a Disney park on an even greater scale than Southern California.

Planning for Walt Disney World (WDW) began in earnest even before the '64 fair. At the conclusion of the fair Disney secretly began buying up property in central Florida. The box office success of Mary Poppins provided support to the company coffers right when the land purchases and attraction development began. In fact, a separate company that Walt founded, called Mapo (since the movie's success financed the moonlighting outfit), was the focus of the Florida project for several years. Mapo was eventually merged into the Imagineering department several years later.

Walt Elias Disney died on December 15th, 1966. Walt's brother Roy postponed his planned retirement to take the reins of the company and start construction in Florida on another Magic Kingdom. Plans included several of Disneyland's excellent attractions. Some, like the Hall of Presidents, were expanded from their California counterparts. Others, like Pirates of the Caribbean, were cut back leaving just a flavor of their west coast cousins. Also, several new attractions, like the Country Bear Jamboree and Space Mountain were included...and eventually versions were built in Disneyland as well.

The Magic Kingdom is very similar, but is not an exact duplicate of the park in California. For one thing, many of Walt's personal touches aren't in Florida. On the other hand, the Magic Kingdom is physically larger and therefore better able to handle large crowds than is Disneyland. Disneyland has more attractions than the Magic Kingdom. Although most of Disneyland's attractions are in Walt Disney World (perhaps with minor changes), not all of them are in the Magic Kingdom. Star Tours, for example, is located at the Disney-MGM Studios and not the Magic Kingdom.

A major innovation for the Florida complex, compared to Disneyland, was the addition of Disney-owned and operated resort hotels. Three resorts were included in the first phase of construction, the Contemporary, the Polynesian, and the Golf Resort (now known as "Shades of Green", and available only to Department of Defense and Military employees.) A Disney-owned and operated campground, Fort Wilderness, also was included. Even with the four resorts, the Disney Company was concerned about the lack of hotel rooms in the Orlando area in the early 1970's. To avoid having an empty Magic Kingdom just because of a lack of rooms, the hotel plaza was built. Seven hotels were built and are operated outside of the Disney Company, even though the hotels are actually located on Walt Disney World property.

Soon after the opening of WDW, Roy Disney retired and the Disney Company was taken over by Card Walker. Walker ran the company until 1984. The company languished during those years. Almost no new attractions were added to the parks and the animation studios fell into a doldrums of epic proportion. Disneyland and Walt Disney World became museums that displayed the history of Walt Disney.

As the Disney Company wilted during the Card Walker years, takeover rumors became the rule of the day. Finally, in 1984, Walker stepped down and, for a very brief time, Walt Disney's son-in-law, Ron Miller, was made chairman. Miller would probably have proven to be well able to bring the company back to its former glory, but before Miller could take action, an investor take over coup (which included Roy's Son, Roy Disney, now the Vice-Chairman of the Walt Disney Company) installed Michael Eisner in the Chairman's seat. Under Eisner's direction, the company (and the theme parks) began a strong rise to their current pre-eminence in the entertainment industry.

One pot of gold that Eisner soon decided to mine was the themed resort business. Walt Disney World was originally built with several themed resorts. The Contemporary, Polynesian, and Fort Wilderness campground were all very unique in their day....and remain so today. However, in the early 1980's, as EPCOT moved from plans to construction, the Disney Company struck a deal with a developer to build additional hotels on WDW property. In fact, the developer was granted rights to all future resort hotel construction at WDW. The Walt Disney World Swan and Walt Disney World Dolphin hotels are the result of that deal...hotels that are smack in the middle of WDW property but are not operated by the Disney Company. When the new management team took over that decision was quickly overturned and the Disney Company began to develop and built and operate its own themed resort hotels.

The number of Disney-owned and operated resort hotels has grown considerably since that time. Now it is also possible to stay at the Grand Floridian, Yacht and Beach Club resorts, Boardwalk Inn and Suites resorts, Caribbean Beach, Dixie Landings, Port Orleans, Old Key West, and the All Star Sports and Music Resorts.

Each of these resorts is themed, much like the various areas within the theme parks. When you walk into Dixie Landings, for example, you feel like you're in the old ante-bellum South. The Caribbean Beach Resort's atmosphere reeks of steel drum music, Spanish-influence architecture, and the white sand beaches of Trinidad and Tobago. At night time, the torch-lite walkways of the Polynesian resort highlight the south seas feel of that wonderful resort.

The Disneyland Hotel was purchased outright by the Disney Company in the early years of the Eisner era. Although not themed, as its Florida counterparts are, the Disneyland Hotel remains the company's West coast flagship resort, and boasts direct monorail transportation to Disneyland.

Walt Disney World was always intended to be different from Disneyland. EPCOT, the "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow", was a cornerstone of the planning from the very beginning. EPCOT, a planned community with real-life inhabitants, never turned out to be an actual town. Even so, EPCOT Center -- a kind of permanent world's fair -- is one of Walt Disney World's jewels...a place to have fun and learn about all of those issues that communities deal with every day. Land usage, the ocean environment, transportation, health services, energy management, technology, and the sharing of culture are all highlighted in this unique place. Walt was personally involved in the early plans for EPCOT, but was not involved in the final incarnation -- or the construction. The park was completed in 1981.

In 1989, the Disney/MGM Studios Theme Park opened its gates at the WDW complex. The Studios includes a recreation of the golden Hollywood era of the 30's. Art deco buildings, a gas station with red-colored gasoline in glass-tank pumps, and the Chinese Theatre highlight the Hollywood and Vine and Sunset areas of Downtown Hollywood. An example of "California Crazy" architecture, a giant dinosaur, is the location of a fast food stand along a small lake. The Studio's attractions include a stunt show, a sound effects demonstration, television show, rides based on famous films, a backlot movie-making tour, and a very unique animation studio tour is available. Several attractions are based on the movie industry and are just plain fun. Star Tours, based on the George Lucas Star Wars trilogy, and The Great Movie Ride, are examples. The Great Movie Ride takes you on an audio-animatronic tour of many of the most famous movies of all times. Star Tours is a flight simulator attraction that features a successful attack on the Death Star trench ala Luke Skywalker. It's no secret that the Disney/MGM Studios Theme Park was built in response to the success of Universal Studios in California...and the announcement that Universal intended to build a theme park in the Orlando area. The park has some similarities to the two Universal parks, but certainly has a unique Disney atmosphere. Over the years since this park opened, it has been expanded a few times, albeit slowly and modestly. The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror was added in 1994, and the most recent addition is a 10,000 person amphitheater in which the spectacular night time show Fantasmic! is held.

Disney's Animal Kingdom, a themed zoological park with all of the magic that the Walt Disney Company can muster, opened in 1998. The park includes several spectacular shows, an African safari (which features real animals in their "natural" habitats),

and Countdown to Extinction (which takes you back to the cretaceous period for a visit with our dinosaur friends. A whole new section of the park, Asia, is slated to open in the late Winter of 1999.

Of course, in addition to the Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, the Studios, and the resorts, Walt Disney World also includes three water parks (Typhoon Lagoon, River Country, Blizzard Beach), a zoological park (Discovery Island), a nightclub complex (Pleasure Island), and a Disneyfied (to coin a term) shopping center (Village Marketplace).

Disneyland has always made use of various modes of transportation -- both for the purpose of moving people, as well as the fun of using unique or unusual means of conveyance. The Disneyland railroad, the people mover, the monorail, the main street carriages and vehicles, and the boats form a large transportation system. Another innovation at WDW versus Disneyland is the incredible transportation system. Buses, boats of several sizes and shapes, trams, trains, and monorails are designed into the greatest non-public transportation system in the world. If you stay at a Disney resort on the property of WDW, you will be able to take full advantage of the ability to move from place to place...without needing your own vehicle.

Disneyland has a lot of wonderful things to see and do, but WDW has a huge number of wonderful things to see and do. The two places are almost incomparable. If I had a single day to spend at a Disney theme park I would choose Disneyland without a passing thought. If I have a week, though, I'll go to WDW. In fact, in one full week it's not possible to see everything at the Florida complex. I know, I've tried.