

## Walt Disney World: From Florida Swampland to Magic Kingdom

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On Sunday afternoons, after going to church, a father would take his two daughters to the local amusement parks for some family time. While the two girls rode the carousel, their father noticed how bored the other parents seemed, the littered grounds of the park, the poor upkeep of the rides, and the unfriendly nature of the employees. The man longed for a place where he could take his children and they could have fun together. This man was Walt Disney, and it was here, at these dingy, run-down amusement parks, that the idea for Disney's theme parks was born.

Disneyland celebrated its grand opening in Anaheim, California on July 17, 1955. The park had been promoted by Disney as "a new experience in entertainment."<sup>1</sup> He mandated the daily upkeep of the rides, continual cleaning of the grounds, and development of attractions that would entertain the whole family. He also began calling his employees "Cast Members," wanting his guests to feel like they were experiencing a show from the moment they stepped on the property. While the area inside Disneyland's gates had been meticulously planned by Disney and his Imagineers, as his imaginative engineers were known, the area just outside the gates was quickly turned into a "second-rate Las Vegas,"<sup>2</sup> brimming with cheap motels, restaurants, and strip malls. Within just a few years of Disneyland's opening day, Disney began to consider a second park, one where he could have better control over his guests' complete experience.

In the early 1960s, Walt Disney and his team of Imagineers began scouting sites for a new park. It had already been decided that the new park should be located east of the Mississippi River, to tap a different segment of

the population than Disneyland. A site with a pleasant climate was also necessary, to allow the park to remain open throughout the year. Florida was ultimately determined as the ideal location, given its tropical climate. Once this decision was made, many areas of the state were considered. Palm Beach was looked at, but quickly eliminated because of its proximity to the ocean, which would cause high humidity and hurricane risk. The northern portion of the state was also eliminated from consideration because of its cold winters. During a fly-over of the state in 1963, Disney and his staff decided on central Florida as the locale that would best serve their needs, where they would be insulated from the ocean storms while having the tropical climate of the south.

In the early 1960s, central Florida was a land of limitless swamps and forests and the city of Orlando was a sleepy community. These two factors enabled Disney to do what he was unable to do in Anaheim, buy enough land not only to build a second theme park, but also "clusters of hotels and resorts and recreational facilities."<sup>3</sup> Disney began purchasing land in small parcels under various names in early 1964. By the fall of 1965, 27,000 acres, twice the size of the island of Manhattan, had been purchased on the Orange-Osceola County line near Orlando for the price of only \$183 per acre.<sup>4</sup> With this immense amount of land changing hands, the local newspapers began to become suspicious. The *Orlando Sentinel* reported the transactions in May, 1965 and had deduced it was Disney by October of that year.<sup>5</sup> The secret was out; it was time for Disney to inform the world of his plans.

After the story ran, a hastily arranged press conference was called by Governor Haydon

Burns to announce Disney's plans. Burns introduced Disney as "the man of the decade, who will bring a new world of entertainment, pleasure and economic development to the State of Florida."<sup>6</sup> Burns also announced during the press conference that the state would give Disney any cooperation necessary to make this venture successful. Over the next two years, the Florida legislature passed bills in Disney's favor, including tax incentives, establishment of a municipality, and control over zoning and environmental affairs. Disney and his team began work on the site later that month. Unfortunately, Disney would not live to see the completion of his dream.

On December 15, 1966, Walt Disney died of lung cancer.<sup>7</sup> The completion of the new park was left to Disney's brother Roy, the financial genius behind all of Disney's ventures. Roy oversaw the completion of the park and titled the park Walt Disney World. He stated, "It's going to be *Walt Disney World*, so people will

always know that this was Walt's dream."<sup>8</sup>

When Roy Disney dedicated Walt Disney World on October 23, 1971, he did so in the memory of his brother. He said, "Walt Disney World is a tribute to the philosophy and life of Walter Elias Disney... May Walt Disney World bring Joy and Inspiration and New Knowledge to all who come to this happy place... a Magic Kingdom where the young at heart of all ages can laugh, and play, and learn... together."<sup>9</sup>

Walt Disney's dream for a self-contained theme park had come true. Through his imagination and ingenuity, a place was established where parents and children could have fun together. Walt Disney World quickly became the standard to which developers looked when designing a theme park. Walt Disney World continues to be the most visited vacation spot in the world, proving that like its creator, Walt Disney World is truly an American original.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 247.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 423.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Kurtti, *Since the World Began: Walt Disney World The First 25 Years*, (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, *Disney: American Original*, 337.

<sup>7</sup> Kurtti, *Since the World Began*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, *Disney: American Original*, 357.

<sup>9</sup> Kurtti, *Since the World Began*, 39.

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## Contributors

### **Jamie Chope**

Jamie Chope is a senior history major at Wittenberg University. He has completed his degree requirements, but will return to campus on May 12, 2001 to graduate with his classmates. He is currently travelling the country, seeing all the historical sites that the United States has to offer.

### **Luke Clarkson**

Luke Clarkson is a junior history major at Wittenberg University. Luke is involved in many campus activities, including the History Journal. He is also a member of the men's track program.

### **Stephen Scott Doucher**

Stephen Scott Doucher was born in Dayton and graduated from Olentangy High School, in Lewis Center, Ohio. He is a senior class student of history at Wittenberg and while interested in numerous historical and historiographical periods, topics, and issues, focuses mostly on European history. His parents, younger brother, cat, and dog all currently reside in the town of Powell, a few minutes north of Columbus.

### **Amanda Kutz**

Amanda L. Kutz is a junior Political Science and History double major. Currently, Amanda is interning in Washington D.C. with the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute. After graduation, she plans to study law and public policy. Eventually she hopes to work in politics, as a political strategist or run for office.

### **Nick Long**

Nick Long is a senior history major at Wittenberg University. He is also a member of the four-time North Coast Athletic Conference champion football program at Wittenberg University. He will complete his degree this spring, but will student teach in the fall to obtain a teaching certificate. Nick plans to teach middle or high school history after graduation.

### **Mandy Oleson**

After transferring from Indiana University two years ago, Mandy Oleson is currently in her junior year at Wittenberg. She spent last season as a member of the Tiger women's basketball team. This semester, she is enhancing her History major and improving her German by studying in Salzburg, Austria.

### **Adam Ruschau**

Adam Ruschau is a senior history major. He is especially interested in nineteenth century military history, but does not plan on making history his career. After graduation, he is planning on attending a Lutheran seminary and becoming a Lutheran pastor in a small town or rural congregation.

### **Melinda Scott**

Melinda Scott is a senior at Wittenberg University, double majoring in elementary education and history. She is active in the Gamma Zeta chapter of the Phi Alpha Theta History Honorary, the Wittenberg Education Department Honorary, the History Journal, and the Student Democrats. Melinda is the winner of this year's Margret Ermarth History Department Award. She is currently the Interim Sports Information Director and is a member of the statistical crew for football and men's and women's basketball. Melinda is originally from London, Ohio and is searching for a teaching job, as graduation is fast approaching.