On a sunny day in July 1955, the gates opened for the first time to the most magical place on earth, Disneyland. Representing years of hard work, Walt Disney’s Disneyland was not the first theme park, but it was the first of its kind in many other ways. Millions of people would visit Disneyland in just its first year and many more would continue to come. With the opening of Disney World, millions more had another magical place to visit. The parks serve as an important part of cultural memory for both Americans and the rest of the world. The parks also have a significant impact on the historical memory of visitors. To fully understand how the parks Disneyland and Disney World shapes the historical collective memory of its visitors, it is important to understand six key parts of the park: Main Street USA, Frontierland, Splash Mountain, Carousel of Progress, Hall of Presidents, and American Adventure.

Disneyland and Disney World are based on Walt Disney’s version of history, a history that is rooted in his personal background. Disney was never one to publicly claim to care for politics or run for an office, but that does not mean that politics did not exist in his work. Many of his political values were influenced by the turbulent events of the 1930s to 1960s. According to author Steven Watts, Disney’s politics are best called

“sentimental populism.” The core of his politics comes from growing up in the mid-west, but is also blended with “democratic sympathies and cultural conservatism.” The nineteenth-century Populist movement that championed the ideas of the Protestant work ethic and civic obligation also influenced him. These core values would remain with Disney throughout his life, although experience with real world realities would continuously modify his values.

During the Great Depression, Disney’s emphasis was about making movies and cartoons that illustrated the little man getting ahead. This theme is clearly seen in *Silly Symphonies*, *Three Little Pigs* (1933), and *Moving Day* (1936) all of these movies share a populist theme that depicts how the common man, through hard work, can pull through any hardship such as the Great Depression. Disney’s overall optimism in the United States and faith in the common man disappeared during World War II. In 1941, a labor strike caused him to believe that the American government he supported had given way to “pressure group agitation”. By the Cold War, Disney had become very defensive and suspicious of big national government. His politics, especially his version of populism, now centered around what he believed to be the “American Way of Life.” First seen in a variety of Disney movies, such as *Pollyanna* (1960) and *So Dear to My Heart* (1949), this political stance would become the basis for Disneyland and Disney World.

Disney built the theme parks as a place not only for families to spend time together, but also to emphasize national values. In 1957, Disney gave an interview where

---

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 103.
5 Ibid., 105.
he stated, “There’s an American theme behind the whole park.” He then went on to say, “I believe in emphasizing the story of what made America great and what will keep it great.”6 His choice of themes for the areas of the park illustrates how he envisioned his story. First is Main Street USA, which evokes turn-of-the-century small town life. Visitors then can chose to go to: Frontierland, which illustrates the “heroic conquest of the west,” Adventureland, the “pacification of the Third World,” and Tomorrowland, the promise of what is to come.7 Through the years, technology has enhanced Disney’s ability to further portray national values. The best example of this is the Hall of Presidents with Abraham Lincoln. A robotic version of President Lincoln, in one of the first uses of what would become known as audio-animatronics, stands before the audience and “pays homage to the tradition of democratic constitutionalism.”8 During the period of Cold War tensions, Disney becomes a major leader of popular culture and generational memory as he sought to protect what he viewed as American values.

Park visitors ride a vintage train that time warps them to Main Street USA, Disney’s nostalgic version of small town American at the turn-of-the-century. The purpose of Main Street was to give visitors the experience of living in a mid-western town. His goal was to recreate his hometown of Marceline, Missouri during the time period 1905-1915, a period that Disney felt was very important to national tradition. Main Street USA is very different; however, from Disney’s hometown. The buildings

7 Ibid., 392
8 Ibid., 393.
and street look more “eastern” and very Victorian looking. \(^9\) The buildings are also built at 7/8 of true size with the top of the building smaller than the top. The scale of the buildings is designed to help further illustrate the nostalgia of what it would be like to return to a childhood home after we are grown and find the buildings of childhood are no longer as big and towering as they once were. Main Street takes the past, subtracts the bad parts, and creates “golden memory” of the period. Guides at the park would tell visitors that Main Street represented “a period in America...when progress was a good word and ...there was an intense optimism about what we were doing with our lives.”\(^{10}\) This sentiment is very much a reflection of Disney’s populist sentimentality.

Although Disney may not have been completely successful in recreating his hometown, the choice of businesses represented in the town square is clearly illustrative of Disney’s pushing the “American way of life.” Walking down Main Street, visitors have the option of entering a variety of businesses: a railroad station, bank, city hall, fire station, and “emporium.” Most of the businesses include the names of Disney’s father and friends. Noticeably absent are businesses such as salons or pool halls, which were also popular during the turn of the century.\(^{11}\) Main Street is a land of dreams that is permanently suspended in time with buildings that are kept new with frequent painting and repair.

---


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
The choice of this period of American history is important. The turn-of-the-century was a period that Disney felt would touch a “deep chord” with all Americans. Yet the pristine Main Street does not match the reality of this period where Main Street, would have been unpaved, extremely dusty, and a mass of tangled wires on telephone poles. Disney’s version “is what Main Street should have been like.” Disney also felt that he captured the essence of a small town feel that all Americans would understand when they visited his park. Extending beyond the park, Disney’s Main Street U.S.A. design has gone on to influence the design and restoration of actual main streets across the United States. Disney created the prototypical small town. This influence has gone so far that these restored Main Streets are more like the one at Disneyland than they actually were at the turn-of-the-century. Many architects and planners call this process “disneyfication.” Main Street has also gone on to influence other “historic theme parks” like Knotts Berry Farm, Bush Gardens, and Six Flags Over Texas.

Another attraction that illustrates Disney’s use of history, which has impacted the public’s collective memory, is the Carousel of Progress. This ride takes visitors on a journey through time to see the influences of technology on the American family. The attraction starts at the turn of the century and progresses through time to 1960. Like the Hall of Presidents, Carousel of Progress uses “audio-animatronic robots” to show the

changes of technology. The show, according to Disney, has entertained more people than any other theatre performance. In her article “‘There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow’: Historic Memory and Gender in Walt Disney’s ‘Carousel of Progress,’” Lynn Y. Weiner looks at how the show has evolved especially in terms of the history of women through the last thirty years. Throughout the shows run, beginning in 1967 until 1995, history has been “interpreted and reinterpreted” by the creators for tens of millions of people. These changes form the collective memory of the changing history and views of women.

There have been four versions of the show with the family consisting of John (Father), Sarah (Mother), James (son), and Jane/Patricia (daughter). The first version of the show designed in the 1960s, presents a typical story of mother taking care of all her families needs. Two key scenes of this version of the show are the 1920s where mother, because of all her technology, has free time to get father’s collar perfectly smooth. The next scene now in the 1940s, has mother “cleverly” figuring out how to use her mixer to stir paint while she remodels the basement. The creators who did not want mother to appear too able have her fall off the ladder. In 1975, the show was retooled for its move to Disney World.

The new version takes in to account some of the feminist rhetoric and the expanding role of women. During the 1920s scene, mother still irons father’s shirts, but now also has time for her own hobby of embroidery. Their daughter in this scene argues with her father about getting a job. The scene of mother remodeling the basement has

16 Lynn Y. Weiner, “‘There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow’: Historic Memory and Gender in Walt Disney’s “Carousel of Progress”,” Journal of American Culture 20 (Spring 1997).
mother arguing with father that if she was a man she would be getting paid for her labor. Mother is still involved in her clubs, but they now take a more activist slant.\textsuperscript{17} The next change to the Carousel of Progress in 1995 illustrates the backlash against the feminist movement and the growth of the conservative movement.

The gains made by women during the seventies and eighties are completely ignored in the new version of the show. During the 1920s scene, the daughter no longer wants a job but just talks about boys. The remodeling scene has been transformed to the father chastising mother for asking for help. Father is also now the one that figures out how to use the mixer to stir paint. Mother also is no longer involved in clubs, but just sits in her kitchen working on a new appliance. The show is a powerful tool in the formation of collective memory of women’s history, but it presents the story of a “history that forgets its own past.”\textsuperscript{18}

After visitors have entered the park through Main Street U.S.A, they reach a hub that makes them choose what their next destination in the park will be. If they choose to head west then they will end up in Frontierland, Disney’s own version of the Wild West. In “Walt Disney’s Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West,” Richard Francaviglia illustrates how Frontierland is shaped to resemble a map of the west. Its design was specifically chosen to reinforce the public popular conceptions of what the period was like. Frontierland also happens to be the largest part of the park. Disney designed this area of the park to resemble what he thought the West was like during the

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
time period just before his birth in 1901. For visitors, Frontierland represented “living history” based on actual events.\textsuperscript{19}

Frontierland was based on the time period in America’s history from about 1790 to 1890. Disney was able to create a “microcosms” of the American West in his attraction.\textsuperscript{20} His attraction provides visitors with a history of the West that is very much tailored to Disney’s view. Anglo-Americans play the majority of the “frontiersmen” roles.\textsuperscript{21} Disney did include some Hispanics and Native Americans, but they are placed on the edges of the attraction. Disney also perpetuated the myth of good versus bad Indian. Part of the train ride that visitors took included a stop a burning cabin, they were given the explanation that “some Indians are hostile and across the river is proof...a settler’s cabin a fire. The pioneer lies in his yard...victim of an Indian arrow.”\textsuperscript{22} The train would then continue on to show the home of the good Indians who were busy with their daily chores. This image of good versus bad Indian has now been taken completely out of the show. The explanation for the burning cabin is that the cabin was hit by lighting.

The Hispanics, the other non Anglo-American group, are also cast in a romanticized view that Disney had because of his love of Zorro novels. In his version of the West, Hispanics were cast as being “innocuous, even passive.” This casting helped to continue and further the “mainstream myths” about Spanish California.\textsuperscript{23} Frontierland also mixes the primitive with the modern. Native Americans and their canoes are integrated with the stream train and steamboats. Frontierland is so successful in

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Richard Francaviglia, “Walt Disney’s Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West,” 174.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.,
furthering the popular image of the West because of Disney’s design, but also because the title of many of the attractions use the names of popular culture icons such as Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer.

One of the most visited attractions at Disney World sitting innocuously in an area of the park called Critter Country, Splash Mountain is largely based on a movie that most people do not even know existed. *Song of the South* (1946), censored in the United States, is a movie based on Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus tales about an ex-slave who tells fables to children about “fictional animals in the nearby woods.”

The movie takes place in the 1880s. Johnny comes to live with his mother and grandmother on a rural plantation where he meets his Uncle Remus. Upset and confused over his parents’ divorce, Johnny runs away only to be stopped by Remus who tells Johnny a story about the three animals Brer Bear, Brer Fox, and Brer Rabbit. All the animals in the story had tried to run away but realized in the end that “you can’t run away from trouble; there ain’t no place that far!”

The movie follows the pattern of Uncle Remus telling his parables to a group of children. The stories come to life in the movies through the use of animation. While the movie was not intended to be racist, there are scenes that carry overt racial connotations especially the scene with Tar Baby. The movie first premiered in 1946 and has been reissued several times until 1986. After the final release, the movie was taken off the market, and Disney officials have stated that it will not be released

24 Jason Sperb, ““Take a Frown, Turn it Upside Down”: Splash Mountain, Walt Disney World, and the Cultural Dr- rac(e)-ination of Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946),” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no.5 (2005), 929.
25 Ibid., 930.
again. While the movie may have been shelved, it provided the “imagineers” with the basis for a new ride at Disney World.

In the late eighties, Splash Mountain became the most expensive ride built at the park to date. The ride, while based on *Song of the South*, has had all references to the live action portion removed. Only the animation portions about Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, Brer Fox remain. Visitors after weaving through the maze of log fence post and climbing the stairs are seated in a cut out log. As they journey in their log throughout the ride, the parables are recounted to them. Not all the animated scenes were included in the ride such as Tar Baby who has been replaced with a “beehive full of honey.”

For the millions of visitors to Splash Mountain, they do not realize or remember the basis for the ride. Splash Mountain allowed Disney to keep Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, and Brer Fox in popular memory, but it also allowed them to erase the movie and its history.

Two attractions at Disneyland and Disney World that deal specifically with American history are the Hall of Presidents and the American Adventure. Located at Liberty Square, the Hall of Presidents is set in a replicated 18th century Philadelphia mansion. The rotunda, a cleverly disguised waiting area, has a painting of each of the founding fathers. After “patiently” waiting, visitors are then seated in the theatre. The feature film tells the story about the creation of the Constitution and how in the years following it was “challenged” by events such as the Whiskey Rebellion, slaveholders, and the Civil War. At the conclusion of the film, the screen lifts revealing a stage full of audio-animatronic robots representing the Presidents from George Washington to

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 935.
Ronald Reagan. Each robot has been replicated to very precise details. Clothes and hair are all done to faithfully represent each president. Washington is even in a copy of the chair that he sat in during the Constitutional Convention.²⁹

Each president, considered a defender of the Constitution, is called out by name. The more recent presidents receive some criticism from the audience such as Richard Nixon, because like many of the more modern presidents are still very much a part of the collective memory. The audience has a hard time buying a Nixon as part of the nationalistic approach to history the show is trying to achieve. Many critics of the show call it out dated and no longer portraying the correct historical image to its audience.³⁰

While the Hall of Presidents has not received an update, the American Adventure attraction attempts to portray a more contemporary approach to history.

The American Adventure located at EPCOT has a much different approach to history than the Hall of Presidents. This difference stems from the attraction being built after Disney’s death; therefore, not being impacted by his only version of history. Like the Hall of Presidents, American Adventure is also located in a reproduction Georgian mansion. Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain give the twenty-nine minute presentation over United States history. While the show may seem to be an updated version of the Hall of Presidents, it is actually very different. The history presented to the audience is no longer the “great-man” approach. The show now focuses on African-Americans, women, and many other minority groups. The creators of the show drew influence from the new social historians and the movements of the seventies. Although the show does

---

²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid., 140.
include a broader look at history, it is still very much a “Disney history.”\(^{31}\) The history presented had to be “upbeat” and still be a “saga of progress.”\(^{32}\) This meant that certain aspects of American history had to be left out of the show or portrayed in a different manner. The labor movement, Vietnam War, and the feminist movement are just some of the more recent items that receive no mention in the presentation.

One of the most popular themed attractions, Disneyland and Disney World also serve as a place to evoke the past and teach history to its millions of visitors. The past and history at the parks are very much influenced by the original designer, Walt Disney. Disney was not an overt political man but was very influenced by his own version of Populism. He believed that his parks could help further his goal of teaching national values especially during the Cold War. Certain attractions such as Main Street USA, Frontierland, Carousel of Progress, Splash Mountain, Hall of Presidents, and American Adventure all illustrates important aspects of history for Disney. While many critics of Disney argue that the history of the parks has had a bad influence, the parks also introduce very valuable concepts that visitors may not receive any other way. Also in recent years, the “imagineers” have enlisted the help of social historians in the designing or redesigning of park attractions.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 152
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Work Cited


