

Sunday, July 17, 2005

## Disney vision

Walt Disney defied his movie-world colleagues by making a deal with network TV in 1954. His new program was a marketing revolution.

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The Orange County Register

On April 2, 1954, Walt Disney committed an act that his film-world colleagues thought was pure folly: He cut a deal with a television network. To Hollywood moguls, TV was the enemy - a fuzzy, inferior upstart that threatened to drain revenue and interest from America's movie houses.

"The studios were like ostriches," said Dave Smith, a 35-year Disney employee and the director of archives for Disneyland and Walt Disney World. "They felt if they ignored TV long enough, it would just go away. They thought Walt was cutting his own throat."

Of course, Disney was used to doom-and-gloom assessments. The best minds in the financial world had been telling him for years that his dream of building a massive theme park in the orange groves of Anaheim was certain to bring him disaster.

It was partly Disney's need for more money to underwrite his increasingly lavish construction plans that led to the creation of "Disneyland," which saw its first broadcast on the fledgling ABC network on Oct. 27, 1954.

Disney had wanted his show to be carried on CBS or NBC, the two most established networks of the era, but neither was interested in becoming a major park investor in exchange for a weekly anthology of kids' programming and nature shows. "The DuMont Network wanted to get in on it, but that company was ailing," said Bill Cotter, author of "The Wonderful World of Disney Television." "Walt and his brother Roy (the company's business manager at the time) wanted to avoid them." It was a smart move - DuMont died in 1956.

Disney settled on ABC, a newly formed network that was struggling in the early '50s to equal the national presence of CBS and NBC. The company paid a then-exorbitant price of \$500,000 for the rights to the show, plus \$50,000 per program. ABC also became an investment partner in the park. Its half-million dollars represented a 34.48 percent stake. The network also guaranteed a loan of \$4.5 million.

It was the smartest move ABC could have made. By the time Disney bought back the network's share in 1960, its initial investment was worth \$7.5 million.

"Disneyland" was ABC's first hit series. Under various names, it has been among the most enduring programs in the history of television - ranking No. 6 on a list of the 100 most popular shows of all time compiled by TV historians Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh. During its long run on network TV it has migrated between ABC and NBC, excluding a two-year stint on CBS from 1981-83.

From the beginning, one of Disney's intentions was to use his weekly show as a means to get his Disneyland plans in front of a national audience. The program was also a useful platform to showcase other Disney products, from movies to park rides to personalities. Even its documentary segments could be self-serving: how cartoons are made, for example. Many influential entertainers were introduced to the world on the program. A 1962 on-location variety episode called "Disneyland After Dark" featured the network debut of the Osmond Brothers, who were then performing at the park.

"The rest of the (film) industry saw TV as a way to take people away from the theater," Cotter said. "Walt saw it as a selling tool."

"It was quite innovative for its time," said Disneyland spokesman Tim O'Day. "Today we talk about things like embedded programming. That show was embedded programming 101. Walt did it first."

### Jungle Cruise by car

In the nine months between the anthology's premiere and the opening of Disneyland on July 17, 1955, three episodes were devoted largely to the project's development.

The debut show, titled "The Disneyland Story," started in the Disneyland Plans Room. Disney described his grand vision while viewers saw Peter Ellenshaw's impressively detailed, bird's-eye view renderings of the park and a miniature model of Main Street. (Since construction had just begun, not much footage was shown of the actual park site.)

On Feb. 9, 1955, "A Progress Report" featured an extended helicopter shot of Disneyland, then in a busy midconstruction phase. Walt gave a tour of the dry river bed that was to become the Jungle Cruise, driving a Nash Rambler; the now-defunct automaker was one of the show's many corporate sponsors.

The last park-related show, "The Pre-Opening Report from Disneyland," was broadcast July 13, 1955, just four days before Walt's ambitious creation was scheduled to open. After airing footage of a frenetic army of workers constructing railroad coaches, animatronic creatures and park rides in Disney's Burbank facilities, the episode traveled south to Anaheim, revealing how some of the larger attractions such as the coaches and the Mark Twain riverboat were transported and assembled on site.

Throughout the initial season, even the shows that didn't focus on the park's progress cleverly tied that evening's program into a different Disneyland neighborhood. When each of the three original episodes of "Davy Crockett" was shown, it "originated" from Frontierland. Fantasyland was connected to animated films, Adventureland to exotic adventures, and Tomorrowland to programs about space and space travel. In an opening sequence, Tinker Bell introduced each land with a slightly different aerial ballet.

Disney's formerly scornful Hollywood colleagues rushed to coattail the success of "Disneyland."

"Within a year they, were all trying to imitate him with their own anthology shows to promote their product," Cotter said. "The next season, Warner Brothers and MGM rushed out their versions of what Disney was doing. But they didn't catch on."

### **A whackadoodle thing**

The success of the show was a surprise to everyone, including Disney and the unknown young actor he had hired, for \$350 per week (residual rights included), to play Davy Crockett.

"I don't think any of us realized what would happen," Fess Parker said. "It just sort of overwhelmed us." He, veteran actor Buddy Ebsen and many supporting players had spent several weeks on a North Carolina Indian reservation in mid-1954 shooting the three episodes that chronicled the life of the 19th-century American hero and his death at the Alamo.

Though filming on location in color was considered an extravagance for a TV show of that era, Disney thought so little of the episodes' commercial potential that he agreed to Parker's request for 10 percent of the Crockett merchandising revenue - a rider that quickly made the actor rich. By mid-1955, every child in America either owned a Davy Crockett coonskin cap or wanted to. Other Crockett items, such as a replica of his trusty rifle, Old Betsy, were hot sellers, too.

By the opening of Disneyland the following summer, Parker's Crockett was the newest Disney icon. As such, he was a big part of the inaugural ceremonies.

Author Malcolm MacPherson, 60, was also at Disneyland on ribbon-cutting day; he remembers the place as a kid's dream come true. MacPherson grew up in Garden Grove, spending his summers in its seemingly endless orange groves, and his novel, "In Cahoots," is an affectionate look at bucolic '50s Orange County and how it was transformed by the arrival of Walt's park.

MacPherson said "Disneyland" was required viewing for his family on Sunday nights. "We'd gather around that tiny box with its grainy black-and-white picture. I don't remember much (information) about the park, but the nature stuff was great. We were quite religious about watching it."

Tom Daly, an Anaheim native who served as the city's mayor from 1992 to 2002, says it was Disney's weekly program that turned Anaheim into a household name during the 1950s and early '60s, when the park was new and unprecedented.

The world's attention "changed the chemistry of the town," said Daly, now Orange County's clerk-recorder. "It gave the city leaders ... the confidence and experience and sophistication to turn Anaheim into a major player." The transition happened almost overnight, Daly said. When Disneyland was announced, "some (council members) were supposedly saying, 'Hey, maybe someone should open up a coffee shop across the street.' Then all of a sudden the world showed up."

Disney's TV show made the park a temptation for kids all over the country - a problem for parents from distant towns, in an era when air travel was expensive. "I'm from back East," Cotter said. "I and all my friends were just dying to go to Disneyland. My dad was good at taking us to amusement parks. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't take us to California. There was just nothing to compare to (Disneyland) in my part of the country."

To MacPherson, Walt's addictive program and fantastical park were the embodiment of the California spirit - a free-wheeling, anything's-possible attitude that seemed at its strongest back then.

"The state was a magnet and a haven for eccentrics and people from back East who wanted a completely new kind of life. When you came to California you could take off your tie ... and let your eccentricity flower. And (Disneyland) was the affirmation of that - this wonderful, whackadoodle thing right in our back yard."