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# FRONTIERLAND as Tomorrowland

Walt Disney and the Architectural  
Packaging of the Mythic West

by Michael Steiner

When Disneyland opened on July 17, 1955, in Anaheim, California, Frontierland (below, 1955) welcomed tourists to Disney's version of the historic Wild West.

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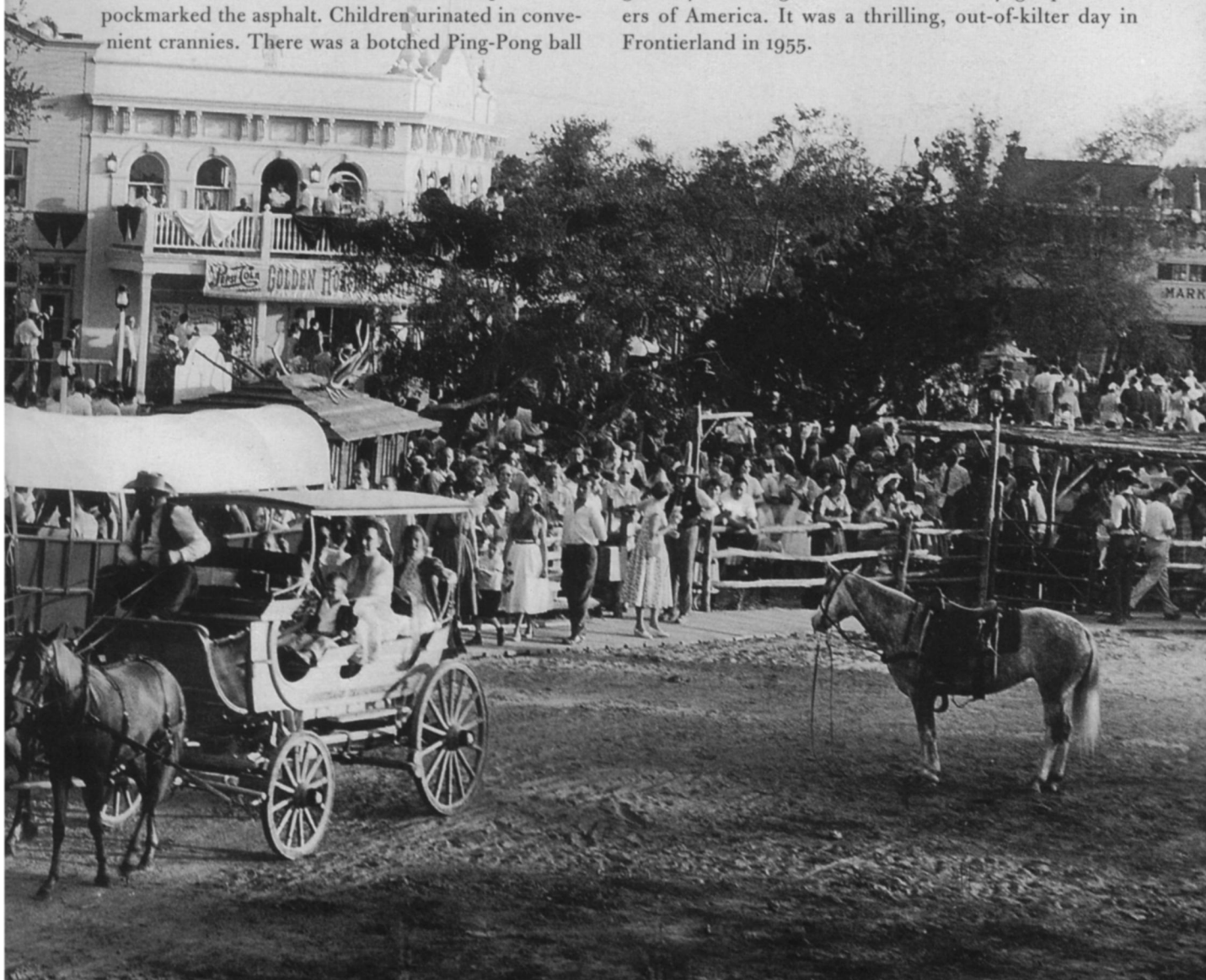


Sunday, July 17, 1955, was a messy day for Walt Disney. After nearly a decade of obsessive planning, eleven months of frenzied construction, and nine months of televised progress reports, Disney's mental map of the world was ready to be born in Anaheim. Walt's soothing fireside chats had involved millions of TV tray-clutching families in the building process, and now this shared vision of paradise regained was about to be realized. In an act of Promethean audacity, Disney's imaginary world had been etched upon the land and embedded in the public mind. It was a dream come true: a fabricated land of neatly packaged regions that would become the key symbolic landscape of modern America and the best known and most copied place on earth. Although Disney's rage for order and reassuring architecture would resonate throughout America and much of the world, Disneyland itself had a difficult and untidy birth.<sup>1</sup>

Narrated by the robust triumvirate of Art Linkletter, Bob Cummings, and Ronald Reagan, ABC's televised coverage of the sweltering first day featured a ragged, almost carnivalesque parade down Main Street U.S.A. with barbershop quartets, mariachis, Native American dancers, and people in space suits and scuba gear, all colliding and vying for attention. Excited crowds skirted snowdrifts of trash. Women's spike heels pockmarked the asphalt. Children urinated in convenient crannies. There was a botched Ping-Pong ball

and mousetrap demonstration of a friendly atomic reaction in Tomorrowland. A gas main exploded in Fantasyland.

The excitement crescendoed, however, in Frontierland. In a dress rehearsal for things to come in the White House, "Ronnie Reagan," as he was introduced, stood before the rustic stockade and welcomed Americans to the Wild West. He beckoned the television audience to reclaim frontier glories and be "the first to enter the gates of time into our historic past." The logged gates swung open, the throng pushed into the fort, and the cameras focused on a group of agitated kids in coonskin caps demanding to see their new frontier hero. "Where's Davy Crockett?" they asked a worried Art Linkletter, who was mightily relieved when Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen galloped upon the scene still dripping from an unplanned battle with a quirky lawn sprinkler. "We took a short cut through the Painted Desert and got sidetracked by a pack of pesky redskins," Davy and his sidekick told the widemouthed youngsters. "It took us a while to polish them off." From this brush with frontier bravado and brutality, the scene shifted to the overloaded and listing deck of the *Mark Twain*, where a visibly distressed Irene Dunne smashed a bottle to launch the dangerously careening vessel on its maiden voyage up the Rivers of America. It was a thrilling, out-of-kilter day in Frontierland in 1955.





The western frontier was equally appealing twenty-eight years later in Japan and thirty-seven years later in France. Opening on a blustery day in April 1983, Tokyo Disneyland was an immediate success. Of those present, the largest crush of people—many wearing ten gallon hats and cowboy boots—patiently waited for the Western Rivers Railroad, the *Mark Twain* riverboat ride, or the southern fried chicken served at the Lucky Nugget Cafe in Westernland.<sup>2</sup> On that rain-soaked opening day, an Australian journalist was moved by Japanese devotion to the Old West, especially the sight of “iron-willed Japanese Crocketts in dripping coonskins” canoeing furiously to Tom Sawyer’s Island, “huddling under umbrellas, paddling with their free hands, and each paying 300 yen for the fun.”<sup>3</sup> Larger and more spacious than its Anaheim parent, the Tokyo park, with its Westernland, was designed to provide a crowded island-bound people—especially Japanese men—with the illusion of open space and plenty of swagger-room where good always defeats evil.<sup>4</sup>

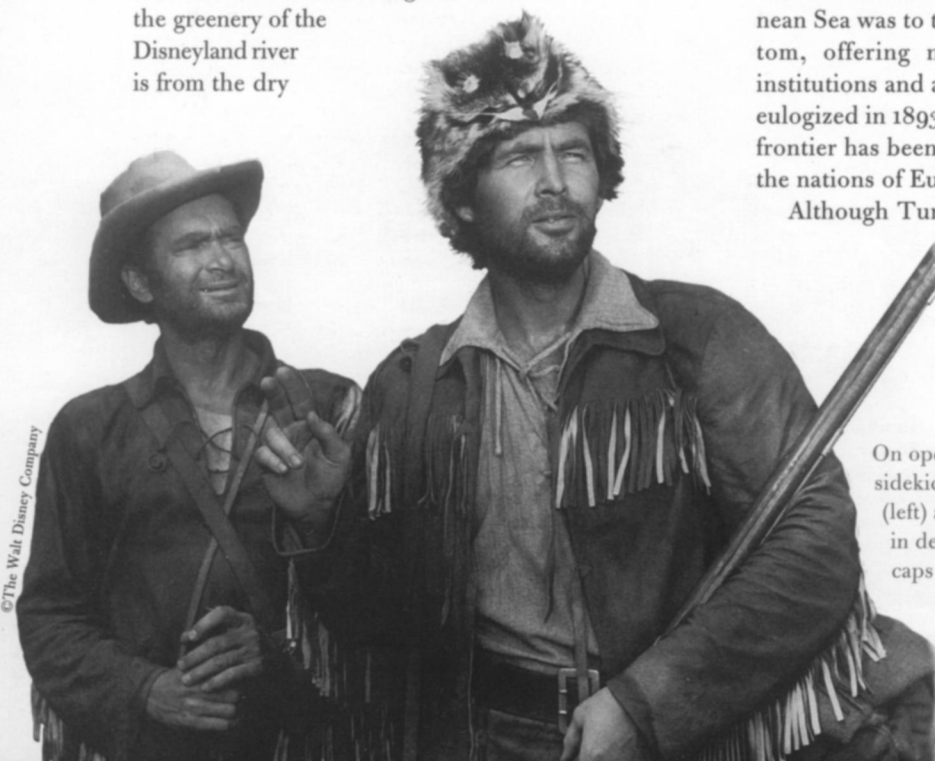
If Japanese men seem drawn to the vigorous, samurai-like morality of the American West, Europeans seem entranced by its sun-bleached immensity. When it opened in April 1992, Euro Disney was indicted as “a cultural Chernobyl” that “is going to wipe out millions of children,” as a gaudy pastiche of “solidified chewing gum and idiotic folk stories taken straight out of comic books for fat Americans.”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, visitors to Euro Disney seemed most willingly captivated by the park’s rendition of the West, by its transformation of a lush Marne valley beet field into dry, desolate Marlboro Man country. Condensing the diversity of the American West into a dusty red environment as different from its verdant French surroundings as the greenery of the Disneyland river is from the dry

Southern California landscape, the Disney people had deliberately evoked a startling contrast with everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

From Big Thunder Mountain, the Grand Canyon Diorama, the steamboat ride around Monument Valley, and the forests of saguaro cacti inside the park to the flashy necklace of postmodern western-themed hotels flanking it, Euro Disney reeks of the imagined West, particularly the Southwest. “It’s truly the legends of cowboys and Indians that rule this land,” concluded one opening-day observer. “It’s just the kind of place where John Wayne-loving Europeans can get a dose of what they must think is America.”<sup>7</sup> The power of this creative geography is underscored by the thousands of Europeans who wave cowboy hats and yeehaw lustily at Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show every night. The transnational lure of the mythic West is embodied in the multitudes who forsake French cuisine to chow down on barbecue ribs, chili, and grits at the antler-festooned Chuckwagon Cafe or who eagerly stay at Antoine Predock’s pseudo sunbaked Santa Fe Hotel, where French staff members outfitted as cowpunchers say “howdy” at the drop of a hat.<sup>8</sup>

It is a long way from Crockett’s rustic stockade in Anaheim to Predock’s enigmatic pueblo in Marne-la-Vallée, yet both places indicate that the frontier is America’s most potent myth and Disney its most effective merchandiser. The mythic power of the frontier is well known. It is a compelling story of heroic people encountering a rugged land, of intrepid pioneers fulfilling their destiny in an untrod wilderness. It is a multileveled narrative fraught with triumph and tragedy that, for better or worse, unites Americans and exerts a tremendous global pull. “What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities,” Frederick Jackson Turner eulogized in 1893, “that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Turner urged us to find better myths to replace the dead frontier, people



On opening day, Davy Crockett and his sidekick George Russell, played by Fess Parker (left) and Buddy Ebsen (far left), were much in demand by youngsters wearing coonskin caps in imitation of their hero.

everywhere cling to frontier dreams and the belief that "America is West and the wind blowing."<sup>10</sup> "If there is one fact about the United States that can be stated without fear of successful contradiction," James Thurber asserted, "it is that Americans, or the vast majority of Americans, are in love with the Far West, the Old Frontier."<sup>11</sup> Often a bitter experience for pioneers themselves and a genocidal nightmare for indigenous people who stood in their way, these grim realities were rapidly recast into a triumphant morality play replete with spectacular landscapes and a pantheon of heroic figures as soon as the real frontier had faded.

Endlessly malleable for every need, the frontier has far more power as an ongoing story than it did as an actual experience. It is a story streaked with nostalgia, anxiety, and hope. Frontier nostalgia, which peaked in Disneyland in the 1950s, has a long and venerable history. Easterners were wistful about log cabin days as early as the 1840s as they promoted political candidates with symbolic cabin raisings. Currier and Ives lithographs idealizing frontier life bedecked Victorian parlors by the 1850s, and frontier homage plates titled "Western Ho!" and "Oh! Pioneers" were popular souvenirs at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition Exposition. Colorado ranchers were boarding urbanites hankering for the genuine frontier by the 1870s, and dude ranching became a national institution by the

1890s. Frontier nostalgia reached the Great Plains almost the moment the westward movement ended there with William F. Cody's first Wild West show—"The Old Glory Blow Out" in North Platte, Nebraska, on July 4, 1882—complete with a mock stampede of ragged, remnant buffalo, the species a younger Cody and others had blasted nearly to extinction. By the end of the century, more than seventy Wild West troupes were touring the United States and Europe, staging mock battles between white "Rough Riders of the World" and former Indian enemies who, like the buffalo, survived as picturesque reminders of glory days.<sup>12</sup>

Frontier nostalgia is often mixed with anxiety. People yearn for the things they annihilate. Ever since Euramericans subdued the continent, an aching sense of loss has counterbalanced the hope for a fresh start. A creeping anxiety that we have obliterated the very source of our uniqueness has offset an expansive faith in new frontiers. Although we may all have the lurking fear that the conquest of the continent was our greatest tragedy, we usually remember it as our greatest epic. More than a century after Turner announced the death of the frontier and Cody tried to revive it, the frontier myth remains our most deeply rooted folktale. It flourishes in our minds as what has been described as an all-purpose "metaphor for promise, progress, and ingenuity" and as a "zone of open opportunity."<sup>13</sup>

Despite all that we know about the profane underbelly of the historical frontier, people prefer its sacred

1. On the park's chaotic opening see "The Walt Disney Story," a film running continuously in the Opera House on Disneyland's Main Street. Published accounts include John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley, 1992), 52-64; and George Lipsitz, "The Making of Disneyland," in *True Stories from the American Past*, ed. William Graebner (New York, 1993), 179-96.

2. Los Angeles Times, July 17, 1983, sec. 7, p. 3. On the new name, a Japanese spokesperson stressed that "We could identify with the Old West, but not with the idea of the frontier." Mary Yoko Brannen, "'Bwana Mickey': Constructing Cultural Consumption at Tokyo Disneyland," in *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*, ed. Joseph Tobin (New Haven, 1992), 225.

3. Murray Sayles, "Of Mice and Yen," *Harper's*, 266 (August 1983), 44.

4. On the deliberately "scaled up" dimensions of the Tokyo park and the scaled down designs at Anaheim and Orlando see Karal Ann Marling, "Letter from Japan: Kenbei vs. All-American Kawaii at Tokyo Disneyland," *American Art*, 6 (Spring 1992), 105-6. On Japanese males, western imagery, and samurai values see Brannen, "'Bwana Mickey,'" 225.

5. Ariane Mnouchkine and Jean Cau in Jenny Rees, "The Mouse That Ate France," *National Review*, May 11, 1992. See also New York Times, April 13, 1992, sec. A, p. 13.

6. Tony Baxter, senior vice president of Walt Disney Imagineering and responsible for the creative aspects of Euro Disney, argues that the appeal of the arid Southwest is rooted in its exoticism and utter contrast to French geography, "a stunning red environment, that is as much in contrast with the Marne valley here as the greenery of our Disneyland River is with the dry Southern California climate. Our aim is to give people a fresh, startling impression." Tony Baxter, interview in "Euro Disneyland," *Connaissance des arts* [English edition], (Paris, 1992), 59-79.

7. Los Angeles Times, May 3, 1992, sec. L, p. 2.

8. Orange County Register, April 13, 1992, sec. A, p. 22; Richard Corliss, "Voila! Disney Invades Europe. Will the French Resist?" *Time*, April 20, 1992, pp. 82-84. On Euro Disney's postmodern American regional architecture see Ross Miller, "Euro Disneyland and the Image of America," *Progressive Architecture*, 71 (October 1990), 92-95; and Suzanne Stephens, "That's Entertainment," *Architectural Record*, 128 (August 1990), 72-79, 121.

9. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 38.

10. Archibald MacLeish, "American Letter," in his *Collected Poems, 1917-1982* (Boston, 1985), 163. On Turner's search for a better myth, see Michael Steiner, "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 10 (October 1979), 437-88; and Michael Steiner, "From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History," *Pacific Historical Review*, 64 (November 1995), 479-501.

11. James Thurber, "How to Tell Government from Show Business" [1961], in *Collecting Himself: James Thurber on Writing and Writers*, ed. Michael J. Rosen (New York, 1989), 232.

12. On log cabin nostalgia see Edward Pessen, *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents* (New Haven, Conn., 1984). On early dude ranching see Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (New York, 1957), 167-72. On William F. Cody and Wild West shows see Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, 1994), 7-65; and Sarah J. Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (Westport, Conn., 1987), 1-9. I am indebted to James Nottage of the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum for information about frontier homage plates.

surface. If the frontier is, in Ray Billington's words, a land of savagery, it is also a land of promise, and like many myths, that of the frontier embraces contradictions and embodies the best and worst aspects of our national experience. The pyramids of buffalo skulls and rusted automobiles; the corpses stacked like cordwood at Block Island and Wounded Knee; the dust bowl and the mushroom cloud—such painful features quickly dissolve in favor of the ever-compelling vision of America as “a geography of hope” and place of fulfillment that continues to grip immigrants from Asia and Latin America as powerfully as it held pioneers from New England and the Midwest.<sup>14</sup>

**T**he sight of Korean-born fathers buying K-Mart Indian princess costumes for their American-born daughters underscores the myth's appeal. And even victims of the frontier find purpose in its popular meaning. “When African Americans turn comfortably to the image of the pioneer,” Patricia Limerick writes, “then the idea of the frontier and the pioneer have clearly become a kind of multicultural common property, a joint-stock company of the imagination.” When Spike Lee ends his 1995 film, *Clockers*, by sending his inner city protagonist off for redemption in the open spaces of the West, it is clear that the frontier can serve as a geography of hope for African Americans as well as Euramericans and that this tenacious ideal has become, in Limerick's words, “the flypaper of our mental world” and a “cultural glue—a mental and emotional fastener that in some very curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together.”<sup>15</sup>

No one has sold the all-purpose frontier more effectively than Walt Disney, and architecture has been one of his most persuasive packages. The most powerful mythmaker of our time, Disney merged his childhood memories with a long tradition of frontier nostalgia to build comforting versions of the western frontier that mirror many of the hopes and anxieties of the last half of the twentieth century. A host of entrepreneurs has worked the western market. Albert Bierstadt, William F. Cody, Annie Oakley, John Ford, Louis L'Amour, Ralph Lauren, Philip Morris, and others have manu-

factured western art, pageantry, films, novels, perfume, fashions, and cigarettes, but none has employed the ubiquitous power of the built environment as well as Walt Disney.<sup>16</sup> Describing the Old West as the “the definitive American space” and our most exportable commodity, folklorist John Dorst has argued that Disney-spawned theme parks have replaced television and film as the primary vehicles for conveying the spectacle and immensity of that imagined place.<sup>17</sup>

Disney realized that the lure of refabricated frontiers rested in their ability to transform abstract concepts and flat images into lived experience. He sensed that architecture, more than any other medium, sharpens vague feelings into concrete form. Cartoons and movies project two-dimensional abstractions, while people *participate* in architecture. Combining architecture with theater, Disney's lands are meticulously planned environments where people briefly escape the contradictions of daily life and act out their dreams. “It's not that we're trying to re-create architecture,” Disney executive Tony Baxter recently argued, “so much as create an absolutely disarming backdrop where people's guard is let down and they actually live these experiences.”<sup>18</sup>

Transforming the frontier into a place where people might reenact the past became a passion for Walt Disney. Remodeling what was often a dirty, brutal, chaotic experience into the cleanest, happiest, most predictable place on earth became a mission. There is a paradox in this compulsion to turn unruly nature into an ordered artifact that strikes to the heart of Disney's life in particular and the frontier myth in general. At mid-life, Disney seized upon architecture as the force that would most fully satisfy his obsessive rage for order and need to recreate a childhood he never had. Through an ever-aggressive control of nature he created ever-convincing versions of nature; it was through tightly scripted, ingeniously faked landscapes that he enshrined the frontier myth of fulfillment in the wilderness.

The urge to carve nature into a monument of his imagination came naturally to Disney. Conditioned by a harsh and abusive childhood on a hardscrabble Missouri farm in the first decade of this century, young Walt acquired, according to Richard Schickel, a typical rural “hatred of dirt and of the land that needs cleansing and taming and ordering and even paving over before it can be said to be in useful working order.”<sup>19</sup>

13. David Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, Kans., 1993), 145; Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” in Grossman, *Frontier in American Culture*, 68.

14. Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981). For Wallace Stegner's description of the West as a “geography of hope” see his “Wilderness Letter” [1960] in Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York, 1969), 153.

15. Limerick, “Adventures of the Frontier,” 94. I am indebted to Martin Ridge of the Huntington Library for the image of Korean-born fathers buying frontier outfits for their children.

16. Elliott West, “Selling the Dream: Western Images in Advertising,” in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila (Champaign, Ill., 1996), 269-92.



No one has sold the all-purpose frontier more effectively than Walt Disney, and the false-front architecture of Frontierland (above, circa 1975) has been one of his best-packaged creations.

“When I started on Disneyland,” Walt once recalled, “my wife used to say, ‘But why do you want to build an amusement park? They’re so dirty.’ I told her that was just the point—mine wouldn’t be.” And when New Orleans Square was unveiled at the park in 1966, Walt was miffed by a compliment from the visiting mayor of New Orleans that it looked “just like home.” “Well,” Walt sniffed, “it’s a lot cleaner.”<sup>20</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the bare earth is a common American complaint, but coupled with this suspicion of raw nature was Disney’s inordinate urge to bend it and the entire world to his will. An insatiable perfectionist, perpetually fussing and fretting and never pleased with a finished product, Walt whipped himself and his employees into a frenzy. Interviewing Disney in 1963, Anglo-Indian novelist Aubrey Mennen was surprised to meet “a tall, somber man who appeared to be under the lash of some private demon” and who spoke candidly of suffering nervous breakdowns. “Things had gone wrong,” he told Mennen. “I had trouble with a picture. I had a nervous breakdown. I kept crying.” A midwestern river journey and a Carib-

bean voyage restored some balance in 1931, just as a railroad trip to Chicago pulled Walt out of another collapse in 1948. These restorative water and rail journeys through nature may have inspired him to create something bigger and more perfectible than cartoons or films.<sup>21</sup>

Building Disneyland seemed to satisfy Walt’s rage for order and perfection. “For twenty years I wanted something of my own,” he told Mennen. “I worry about pictures. But if anything goes wrong in the park, I just tear it down and put it right.” “It’s something that will never be finished,” he told an earlier reporter, “something I can keep developing, keep ‘plussing’ and adding to. It’s alive. It will be a live, breathing thing that will need changes. When you wrap up a picture . . . you’re through. . . . [I]t’s gone, I can’t touch it. There are things in it I don’t like, but I can’t do anything about it. I want something alive, something that would grow. The park is that. . . . The thing will get more beautiful year after year. And it will get better as I find out what

17. John Dorst, “Miniaturizing Monumentality: Theme Park Images of the American West and Confusions of Cultural Influence,” in *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, ed. R. Kroes, et al. (Amsterdam, 1993), 253-70, quotation, 256.

18. Baxter, “Euro Disneyland,” 68-70. See also Michael Sorkin, “See You in Disneyland,” in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New*

*American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York, 1992), 205-32.

19. Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version* (New York, 1968), 53.

20. Walt Disney in *Walt Disney: Famous Quotes*, ed. Dave Smith (Lake Buena Vista, Fla., 1994), 29; Walt Disney in David Lowenthal, “The American Scene,” *Geographical Review*, 58 (January 1968), 78.

21. Aubrey Mennen, “Dazzled in Disneyland,” *Holiday*, 34 (July 1963), 75-76. On Walt Disney’s mental crisis prior to his 1948 train trip see Leonard Mosley, *Disney’s World* (New York, 1985), 214-18.

the public likes. I can't do that with a picture." In building his Magic Kingdom, Disney had realized, in Mennen's words, the "strongest desire an artist can know": the urge "to create a world of his own where everything is just as he imagines it."<sup>22</sup>

**B**eginning in 1948 with his simple model of Granny Kincaid's cabin—a miniature frontier log cabin filled with ingenious mechanisms—and ending with his sweeping community plans for EPCOT at his death in 1966, Walt Disney became a master of architectural control.<sup>23</sup> Broadly construed as built environment—as the human imprint upon space—architecture affects every moment of our lives. Beyond the simple fact that most Americans spend more than 90 percent of their time indoors, the very land they inhabit is an artifact—a built environment. This is as true for rural landscapes as it is for city streets. Architecture as built environment is the ever-present stage and all-pervasive condition of our lives. Everything *takes place*, and almost all of it happens in constructed settings that are taken for granted like the circumambient air we breathe. Built environments do not determine every aspect of our lives, but they do establish boundaries and supply possibilities. Other expressive forms influence our lives, but none matches the impact of architecture. "When you get into architecture," art critic Peter Plagens writes, "it's big casino, real people's real lives." "As engineer and architect once drew," comment two other observers, "people have to walk and live."<sup>24</sup>

Disney's architecture truly *is* the big casino; how he and his people drew, many of us have to walk and live. After its difficult birth, Disneyland flourished to become the best-known place on earth, reinforcing, in the words of a recent critic, Disney's role as "the most influential American of the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup> Whether we see Disneyland as the great spore bed of tastelessness and corporate control or as a seedbed of flamboyance and folk creativity, it has reshaped American and global landscapes in the form of theme parks, shopping malls, fast food places, sports centers, museums, resorts, and planned communities. Even Disney's most ardent detractors admit that he possessed an al-

most mystical rapport with the American psyche. A host of planners and architects have been awestruck by his untutored populist designs, believing, in postmodernist Robert Venturi's words, that Walt's whimsical places are "nearer to what people really want than anything architects have ever given them." As early as 1963, the noted planner James Rouse told a shocked Harvard School of Design audience that "the greatest piece of urban design in the United States today is Disneyland" and admonished them to realize that "in its respect for people, in its functioning for people" Disneyland contains more positive planning lessons "than in any other single piece of physical development in the country."<sup>26</sup>

Surveying the stark grids of glowering glass boxes, spiritless mass housing, and cookie cutter suburbs many of them helped create, architects and planners may be paying penance by idolizing Disney's confections as warm havens from puritanical modernism. Disneyland has allowed them to smash the glass box and replace straight-jacket modernism with more playful forms of control. This seemingly untutored, populist design has been extolled by planner Bob Hart as "the best example of an urban environment where people are treated in a humane way." Architect Charles Moore described Disneyland as a joyful public oasis in the "featureless, private, floating world of Southern California."<sup>27</sup> As if fulfilling science fiction writer Ray Bradbury's early hype of Disney as "a better architect of world's fairs and future metropoli than anyone living," critic Paul Goldberger noted that trips to Disney's "Lands" have become "the sort of obligatory pilgrimages for young architects that visits to the great monuments of Europe were for earlier generations."<sup>28</sup>

With all of these architectural paeans and pilgrimages, it is small wonder that Disney has shaped so much of the modern world. Daniel Burnham, Gutzon Borglom, R. G. Le Tourneau, Henry Ford, Robert Moses, William Levitt, and other master builders have etched deep signatures upon the landscape, but no one seems to have refurbished nature as successfully as Disney or sold such an alluring architectural version of America to the rest of the world. The western frontier has been America's most beguiling icon and exportable commodity, and Frontierland as it emerged

22. Disney in Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York, 1976), 244; Mennen, "Dazzled in Disneyland," 75.

23. On Walt Disney's ever-widening rage for order see Michael Harrington, "To the Disney Station: Corporate Socialism in the Magic Kingdom," *Harper's*, 58 (January 1979), 35-44; Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Blackwell, Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 160-90; and Stephen M. Fjelman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, Colo., 1992).

24. Peter Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil," *Artforum*, 11 (December 1972), 76; Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (New York, 1947), 3.

25. Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *Journal of American History*, 82 (June 1995), 84.

26. *New York Times*, October 22, 1972, sec. 6, p. 41; James Rouse in Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, 358-59.

27. Bob Hart in Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," 40; Charles Moore, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life," in Charles Moore and Gerald Allen, *Dimensions: Space, Shape, and Scale in Architecture* (New York, 1976), 116-17.



in 1955 remains the brainchild and prototype for the architectural merchandising of the frontier myth.

The frontier was at the heart of Disneyland's design from the beginning. One could argue, in fact, that the park started with Disney's urge to re-create a pleasing version of the midwestern frontier he thought he had glimpsed as a child. Carl Jung's belief that "the little world of childhood with its familiar surroundings is a model of the greater world" helps explain the world that Disney created in Anaheim, and *So Dear to My Heart*, an achingly sweet movie that Walt made in 1948, was an important catalyst.<sup>29</sup>

A sentimental coming-of-age movie, *So Dear to My Heart* could reduce Disney to tears. Its opening lines—"Sometimes from a small beginning come the forces that shape an entire life"—suggest its deeper, personal meaning. Set in bucolic turn-of-the-century Kansas with images of a dying frontier and a nascent Main Street, the film paralleled Walt's early life and represented a mid-life effort to cast a golden glow around his harsh childhood. Just as Ronald Reagan scripted Andy Hardy images from his miserable beginnings in western Illinois, Walt Disney invented a Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher idyll from his work-worn boyhood in eastern Missouri. Recalling steamboat rides during his formative years in Marceline, "only sixty miles from Hannibal, Mark Twain's home town," Disney concluded toward the end of his life: "These boyhood memories are the reason for my fondness for Frontierland. . . . It was a thrill for a boy to grow up in rural Missouri after the turn of the century when elements of the frontier were still visible."<sup>30</sup>

*So Dear to My Heart* allowed Disney to recast these frontier elements in a redeeming form. The movie touched an emotional wellspring, compelling him to transform it into three-dimensional models that became

the basis for Disneyland. After being away from his studio workbench for decades, Walt began building small-scale models of scenes from the movie. He poured most of his energy into an intricately furnished miniature of Granny Kincaid's cabin complete with a tiny dummy of Granny in her rocker reminiscing about frontier days via the dubbed voice of actress Buellah Bondi. Ultimately dissatisfied with the constraints of these miniature worlds, Walt moved from automating toys to controlling people, from mechanized puppetry to the life-sized realm of architecture where people would live momentarily in his mental map of the world. Walking through the Magic Kingdom, Anthony Haden-Guest

aptly observed, is "like a stroll through somebody's head. Walt Disney's head," and Frontierland along with Main Street U.S.A. is where we encounter most of Walt Disney's scrubbed up boyhood memories and sense of America's past.<sup>31</sup>

Disney's earliest thoughts about the park are contained in an August 1948 in-house memo that describes three general areas: a carnival section with "typical midway stuff"; a "Main Village, which includes the Railroad Station"; and a "Western Village" with a general store, pack mules, and stage coaches that

would pass by an Indian encampment, a farm, and an old mill.<sup>32</sup> These amorphous ideas coalesced into a full-blown blueprint when, in September 1953, Disney and artist Herb Ryman created a detailed aerial-view painting of the park. During a characteristically frenzied and sleepless weekend work session, Ryman and his boss developed a masterful cross axial design with a turn-of-the-century American Main Street as the only entrance and exit and with a fairy tale castle near the central hub with four lands radiating around it. A twenty-foot earthen berm carrying a steam driven railroad surrounded the entire park, separating it from the messy distractions of the outside world. In this inge-



In *So Dear to My Heart*, Walt Disney recast the frontier of his boyhood Missouri into a sentimental, coming-of-age story. In the movie still above, Uncle Hiram (Burl Ives) spins a tale for young buddies Jeremiah Kincaid (Bobby Driscoll) and Tildy (Luana Patten).

28. Ray Bradbury, "Los Angeles is the Best Place in America," *Esquire*, 83 (October 1972); Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," 41.

29. Carl Jung in John A. Jakle, "Childhood on the Middle Border: Remembered Small Town America," *Journal of Geography*, 85 (July/August 1985), 159.

30. Walt Disney, "Frontierland," *True West*, 5 (June 1958), 10-11. On Ronald Reagan's efforts to glorify a grim midwestern child-

hood see Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987), 7-52, and Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), 1-43.

31. Anthony Haden-Guest, *The Paradise Program* (New York, 1973), 227.

32. For Walt Disney's early memo see Karal Ann Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," *American Art*, 5 (Spring 1991), 169-207, esp. 162-207.

Eleven thousand orange, walnut, and eucalyptus trees fell to the bulldozer in 1954 to make way for Disneyland. Said one eyewitness: "The neighborhood was obliterated."

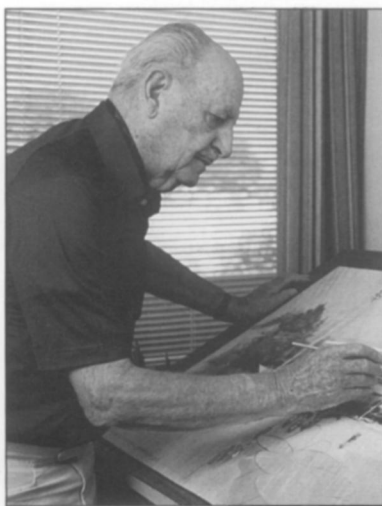


nious plan, a series of bipolar ideals counterbalance each other: New World and the Old World fantasylands in the southern and northern quadrants; past and future frontierlands in the western and eastern regions. Main Street America is juxtaposed to Fairy Tale Europe, while yesterday's frontier of open land is balanced by tomorrow's frontier of adventure in outer space.<sup>33</sup>

To realize this scheme, Disney needed land and an architect. He chose the Anaheim site for a number of reasons: it seemed free from Los Angeles's urban sprawl; it abutted the nearly completed Santa Ana Freeway; and it "had certain things that I felt I needed, such as flat land because I wanted to make my own hills."<sup>34</sup> One hundred sixty acres of orange, walnut, and eucalyptus groves were bought, and by September 1954 eleven thousand trees and all but two farmhouses had been

bulldozed and burned. "No distinguishable landmark remained, the neighborhood was obliterated," lamented an eyewitness. "Those of us working on the Disneyland project felt we were bringing 'progress' to a farming community," recalled a prominent Disney employee in 1991. "In the name of progress we replaced the fragrance of orange groves with the smell of smog . . . comfortable homes with motels, shopping centers, and fast food restaurants."<sup>35</sup> In the mid-1950s, the citrus landscape was erased so that Disney could make his own hills and rewrite nature according to a movie script that included plastic trees and robot animals.

Finding an architect to follow this script proved difficult. Dissatisfied with preliminary sketches by architects William Pereira and Charles Luckman, Disney decided to heed the advice of his close friend, architect Welton Beckett. "No one can design Disneyland for you," Beckett told him, "you'll have to do it for yourself."<sup>36</sup> Disdaining trained architects, Disney assembled a dedicated cadre of young animators and artists who would respect his every whim. Like Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin, Disney surrounded himself with talented acolytes in his Burbank compound. And like Wright's prairie house, which was an effort to plant the imagined warmth of the rural Midwest amid the cold anonymity of Chicago in the 1890s, Disney's Magic Kingdom was designed as a small-town refuge from burgeoning Los Angeles in the 1950s. In the same manner that Louis XIV designed Versailles



With no architectural training but highly skilled in imagining places that would work as Hollywood sets, Disney Imagineers John Hench (upper left), Sam McKim (lower left), and others helped shape Frontierland from Walt Disney's raw conceptions.



Sam McKim's visualizations for Frontierland, such as Fort Wilderness (above), drawn for Tom Sawyer Island in 1956, grew out of his memories of pulp westerns, cowboy movies, and his experience as a bit actor on western sets in the 1930s.

and Marly, Walt would throw out ideas for his devoted disciples to render into sketches, paintings, and scale models that would eventually meet with their master's approval.<sup>37</sup> Herb Ryman, Harper Goff, Marvin Davis, John Hench, Sam McKim, and others had little or no architectural training. They were highly skilled, however, in imagining places that would work like film scripts where people could participate in an orderly sequence of planned events.

The largest and most lavish region of the park, Frontierland was carefully choreographed so that guests could feel they were actors in a movie. "Walt had rough ideas about Frontierland in his head," Sam McKim recalled. "The West is so vast and immense. Walt had raw ideas and materials and we helped shape them." The frontier "visualizations" of Indian tepees, stockaded forts, and false front saloons that McKim worked up for his boss grew out of McKim's memories of pulp westerns, cowboy movies, and McKim's experience as a bit actor hanging around Hollywood western movie lots in the late 1930s.<sup>38</sup> Based largely on a multitude of western film images—including his own *The Living Desert* (1954), *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954), and *Davy Crockett* (1955)—as well as Walt's midwestern memories and stories gathered from his father-in-law, who had been a sheriff in Idaho Territory, Frontierland was

an amalgam of many mythic Wests constructed to unfold like a movie.

Throughout the park, Hench recalled, "visitors would move from scene to scene, and everything in each scene—all the sights, the sounds, the smells, the workers' uniforms, even the trash cans—was carefully designed to fit each theme." In Frontierland, Hench added, "You get some of the story by walking into a fort, and it's made of logs and there's banjo-playing and you hear shots from the shooting gallery. So, gradually, the story unfolds—Scene 1, Scene 2, Scene 3."<sup>39</sup> As in the other lands, the visitor is involved in a crafted sequence of camera shots: long, establishing views; medium shots; and close-ups. From Crockett's Cumberland stockade at the head of the Ohio a carefully planned vista stretches westward to a Mississippi riverboat ready to take you on a regenerative journey into the wilderness and back to civilization again. Replicas of nature meant to be more satisfying than the real thing, such perfectly predictable adventures supply a sense of mastery and reassurance. "What we're selling throughout the Park is reassurance," Hench explained. "We offer adventures in which you survive a kind of personal challenge. . . . We let your survival instincts triumph over adversity. A trip to Disneyland is an ex-

36. Welton Beckett in Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, 243. On Disneyland's construction, see Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 52-116.

37. For a comparison between the Sun King and Disney see Yi-Fu Tuan with Steven Hoelscher, "Disneyland: Its Place in World Culture," in *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, ed. Karal Ann Marling (New York, 1997), 191-98.

38. Sam McKim to Michael Steiner, September 9, 1995; "Visualizing Disneyland with Sam McKim," *E Ticket*, 18 (Spring 1994), 8-21. See also Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York, 1978).

39. John Hench in Peter Carlson, "More Real Than Reality," *Washington Post Magazine*, May 15, 1994, p. 13.

33. See Louis Marin, "Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia," *Glyph*, 1 (1977), 50-66. I am indebted to my research assistant Paul Stewart and my teacher Yi-Fu Tuan for their insights regarding Disneyland's spatial dynamics.

34. Walt Disney in Smith, ed., *Walt Disney: Famous Quotes*, 41.

35. Earnest W. Moeller, "An Historical Sketch," July 14, 1980, Anaheim History Room, Anaheim Public Library, Anaheim, California (hereafter APL). Van Arsdale France, *Window on Main Street: Thirty-five Years of Creating Happiness at Disneyland Park*, ed. Steve Fiott (Nashua, N.H., 1991), 19.



Disneyland's initial embrace of diverse if stereotypical ethnicity, illustrated by the African American-staffed Aunt Jemima kitchen (left) created in the 1950s, succumbed in the 1960s and after to considerations involving people of color. Rather than grapple with questions concerning race and the frontier, Disneyland simply erased its presence, as it did in 1966 by replacing Aunt Jemima's kitchen with an all-white New Orleans Square (below).

ercise in reassurance about oneself and one's ability to . . . handle the real challenges of life."<sup>40</sup>

To make people feel like heroic figures in the Wild West, and thus embolden them for the vicissitudes of daily life, required more than careful choreography. It also meant eliminating messy contradictions that would confuse the situation and spoil the show. Confusion and ambiguity were all-too-much a part of the world beyond the berm, and Walt believed that Disneyland offered escape to an enriched level of experience, to a purified reality that would liberate people to their better selves. While sitting in the park with Billy Graham once, Walt admonished the evangelist for calling Disneyland "a nice fantasy." "You know the fantasy isn't here. This is very real," Walt insisted. "The park is reality. The people are natural here; they're having a good time; they're communicating. This is what people really are. The fantasy is—out there, outside the gates of Disneyland, where people have hatreds and prejudices. It's not really real!"<sup>41</sup> Although Walt might agree with T. S. Eliot that "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality," he would add that they crave better forms of it. A devoted utopist, Disney was convinced that people yearned for a clearer, more predictable reality than the unnecessary chaos of every day life. He would applaud John Wayne's famous quip: "They tell me everything isn't black and white. I say, Why not?"<sup>42</sup>

Eliminating contradictions and providing programmed adventures were Frontierland's guiding prin-



ciples, and these imperatives were reflected in the toned-down architecture of the place and the color of the people who worked there. Bothered by the chaotic scruffiness of western vernacular architecture—Gretel Ehrlich, for example, describes Wyoming as the "the doing of a mad architect"—Disney turned to more standardized forms.<sup>43</sup> Disdaining the raucous wigwam motels, dinosaur parks, corn palaces, reptile gardens, snake pits, honkey tonks, hitching post saloons, and other western roadside wonders, and displeased with the ramshackle layout of neighboring Knott's Berry Farm, Disney built a cleaner, simpler movie set alternative. Frontierland's two generic stockaded forts, cookie-cutter adobe and plantation-style restaurants, silhouetted ghost town, and false-fronted Main Street with a board-and-batten general store and filigreed saloon—all came straight from Hollywood rather than from the messy West.<sup>44</sup>

Frontierland's "inhabitants" were at first more distinctive than its architecture, although they, too, would be affected by the urge to eliminate contradictions that would make the place a completely whitewashed

40. John Hench in Randy Bright, *Disneyland: Inside Story* (New York, 1987), 237.

41. Walt Disney in John Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 70.

42. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York, 1943), 15; John Wayne's remarks may be apocryphal.

43. Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York, 1986), 3.

44. On western vernacular architecture see Elliott West, *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier* (Lincoln, 1979); Richard V. Francaviglia, *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's*

*Historic Mining Districts* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1992); and Jane and Michael Stern, "Roadside Wonders of the West," in *Way Out West* (New York, 1992), especially 224-39.

45. On early Frontierland see Bruce Gordon and David Mumford, *Disneyland, The Nickel Tour: A Postcard Journey through the Happiest Place on Earth* (Santa Clarita, Calif., 1995); Jon Wiener, "Tall Tales and True," *Nation*, January 31, 1994, pp. 133-35; "Frontierland's First Frontier," *E" Ticket*, 16 (Summer 1993), 30-33; and Disneyland ephemera and press releases preserved at APL.

potemkin village by the early 1970s. While enthusiastically endorsing the Anglo-American conquest of nature, with Davy Crockett, Andrew Jackson, Mike Fink, Texas John Slaughter, Black Bart, and Sheriff Lucky as the major protagonists, 1950s Frontierland had a small but significant non-Anglo contingent. Disney's Hispanic television heroes, Zoro and El Fuego Baca, made frequent appearances into the 1960s. Mariachis performed in a central space called "El Zocalo," which contained a bandstand, a Mexican imports store, and the Casa de Frito Mexican restaurant. A "Salute to Mexico" production ran briefly in 1963, and an African American employee dressed as Aunt Jemima signed autographs outside "her" kitchen, which was staffed with black chefs, until it was shoved aside by an all-white New Orleans Square in 1966. A series of Indian villages with dancers, artisans, and canoe paddlers from seventeen tribes entertained visitors along the Rivers of America until the Indians were replaced in 1972 by "Bear Country," with its race-neutral, paw-stomping mechanical critters.<sup>45</sup>

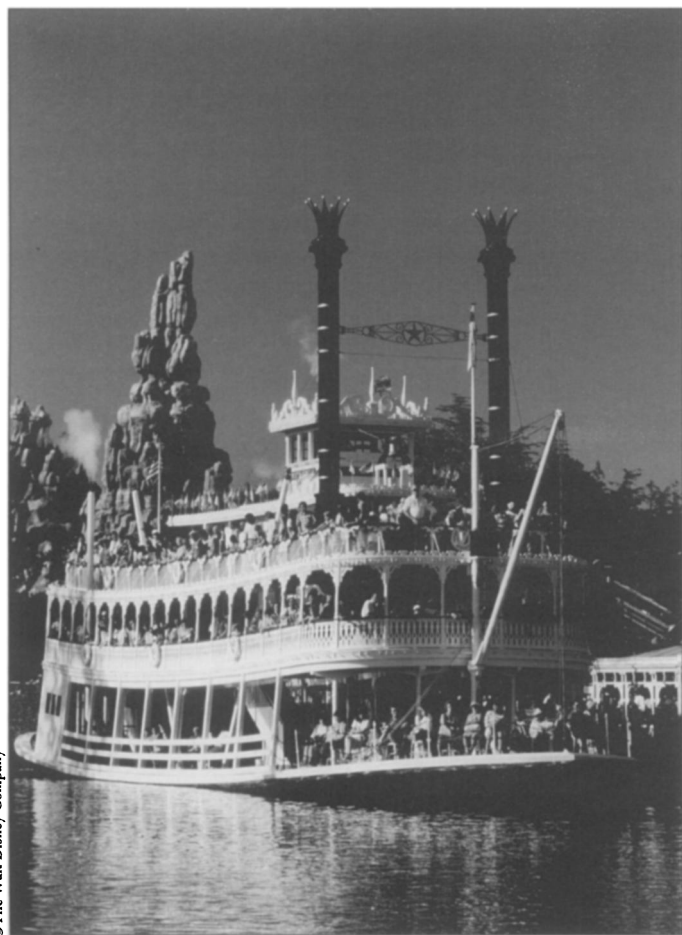
Frontierland was far more diverse in the 1950s than it is in the 1990s. Friendly Indian robots are the only nonwhite presence today. There is no inkling of black culture nor slavery in adjoining New Orleans Square, which was touted as the gleaming "Paris of the Ameri-

can frontier." Nor are racial subjects broached in neighboring "Splash Mountain" erected in 1989, a theme ride derived from the Uncle Remus-based film, *The Song of the South* (1946). Although it largely depicted humbling stereotypes, Frontierland's original piebald cast of Anglos, Mexicans, Indians, and African Americans resembled the real frontier much more than the bland place we visit today. During the race-sensitive 1960s, however, the subservient roles and mere presence of people of color in Frontierland sparked troubling questions. Rather than confront these painful impediments to the wonders of westward movement, it was much easier, more pleasing, and consistent with Disney's utopianism simply to erase them from the script.

This ethnic erasing illustrates Walt's need to eliminate contradictions as well as his desire to create a contrast with the outside world. Frontierland's early variety was a relief from the sea of sameness outside the park in the 1950s, whereas today's monotone enclave is a shelter from the multicultural world swirling around it. Once an island of diversity surrounded by insipid suburbs, the place is now a calm refuge amid a cultural maelstrom. And while the park once teemed largely with white suburbanites seeking some variety, it now serves a more polyglot, cosmopolitan clientele that may be curious about this white world so different from the

one they have left behind. A soothing realm of safe adventures, Frontierland offers sanctuary from the *true* frontier of ethnic interaction and raucous uncertainty that roars beyond the berm in the streets of Anaheim and throughout Southern California. The jostling hubbub of nearby Katella Avenue, Beach Boulevard, Little Saigon, or East Los Angeles is much closer to the substance and spirit of the frontier than Disney's creation. Yet it was his genius to know that people yearn to *escape* such challenges. He realized that people prefer tidy replicas to the real thing. The park's attraction, therefore, would be its vivid contrast to the outside world.

The dialectic between the Magic Kingdom and the messy world mirrors dynamic contrasts within the park itself. As previously mentioned, Disneyland's blueprint is powered by a lively



Guided by an underwater rail, the *Mark Twain* (left, circa 1963) takes tourists on a programmed adventure through a fabricated landscape that retells the hopeful side of the frontier myth.



dialectic of counterbalancing ideals that surge throughout the park and within Frontierland. Entering this land, visitors pass from the bumptious Central Plaza to a simpler, earth-toned world, from the uncertain present to the reassuring past. From the vantage point of Crockett's sheltering stockade, a rustic Main Street stretches down to a river where a steamboat beckons with whistles blowing and paddles churning. Immediately immersing people in the past, this frontier vista then pulls them forward in time and westward in space, from a fort at the head of the Ohio in 1800 to a Mississippi steamboat at the end of that century.

Walking down Main Street toward the river wharf and the end of the frontier, one passes a westering progression of landscapes and buildings that evoke two parts of this evolutionary process: the adventure of opening the wilderness; and the security of settling it. On the right-hand side are the rough-hewn landscapes of the open frontier—a shooting gallery, a southwestern ghost town, and the wild expanses of "Nature's Wonderland" (replaced by the mine-blasted flanks of "Big Thunder Mountain" in 1977). On the left is the architecture of settled regions: a midwestern general store, the far western Golden Horse Shoe Saloon, and a southern plantation house in the distance.

The Main Street dialectic between frontier and region, nature and civilization, is repeated on the Rivers of America where, unerringly guided by an underwater rail, the *Mark Twain* takes tourists around Tom Sawyer's island and past a crazy quilt of many Wests. As a folksy rendition of Twain's voice narrates the journey into wilderness and back, we see the Haunted Mansion and Splash Mountain in the South give way to Critter Country in the Northwest; we watch the dark woods of the Upper Mississippi merge with the dusty buttes of the Southwest. Hardly a trip to the heart of darkness, this programmed adventure through

a fabricated landscape crawling with automated creatures and cigar store Indians safely recapitulates the frontier myth of forging a new life in the wilderness. This ever-repeating circuit into nature and back allows us to reenact the hopeful side of this myth, but it also hints at darker possibilities, especially as we churn pass the devastated slopes of Big Thunder Mountain or listen as our pilot, Mark Twain, laments: "You know, with all the traffic on the river these days, it's a wonder there's any wilderness left."

The tension between nature and civilization within Frontierland is, finally, a microcosm of the park's master plan and key to further cultural patterns. A bird's-eye view above the Central Plaza shows an east-west arrangement of two frontiers attracting and repelling each other like twin stars: Frontierland in the west balancing Tomorrowland in the east, the rough-hewn past contrasted with the gleaming future, nostalgia versus progress, nature versus civilization. The spatial arrangement and changing relationship between these two lands embodies myriad American hopes and fears. If Disneyland is, in cultural critic Michael Real's words, "a trip deep inside the American psyche," then our collective sense of the past, present, and future is found in these two frontiers.<sup>46</sup>

With their log and concrete portals facing each other across the Plaza and with the *Mark Twain* and the *Moonliner* pulling people toward each gate, Frontierland and Tomorrowland represented a tug of war between the glorious past and the promising

future. Just as the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition offered a choice between a clangorous Machinery Hall teeming with technology and the secluded Wooded Island—complete with the Hunter's Cabin honoring Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett—Disneyland celebrated future and past frontiers. As Thomas Hine has argued, these two realms seemed perfectly compatible in the 1950s and early 1960s, the golden era of TV westerns and science fiction, when John Kennedy touted "a New Frontier" and Americans "embraced the



Gordon and Mumford, *The Nickel Tour* 90

Fashioned in a time when America confidently celebrated progress, Tomorrowland, with its hopeful future embodied by "Space Man" and "Space Girl" (above), contrasted well with Frontierland's nostalgia for the nation's golden past.

46. Michael Real, *Mass Mediated Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977), 52-53.

47. Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York, 1986), 8.

48. Michael Eisner's words were recalled by Tony Baxter in personal conversations with author, September 9 and October 20, 1995.

49. On the "New West" see Michael L. Johnson, *New Wests: The West in Contemporary American Culture* (Lawrence, Kans., 1996); Richard Rodriguez, "Ralph Lauren's Teepee," in Sandra S. Phillips, et al., *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing*

rocket and the covered wagon with equal fervor.”<sup>47</sup> Being in Disneyland’s hub was like standing in the vestibule of either a 1950s ranch or Cape Cod house—each with its futuristic kitchen on one side and rustic living rooming on the other. Comfortable as Jetsons in the kitchen and early Americans in the living room, visitors were equally attracted to Tomorrowland and Frontierland as retreats from the uncertain present.

Eager for the future, nostalgic for the past, and anxious about the present, Disneyland’s early visitors could relish the plastic wonders of Monsanto’s House of the Future as well as the rugged simplicity of Fort Wilderness. They could take a rocket to the moon or ride pack mules across the Painted Desert, visit the Bathroom of Tomorrow or explore Tom Sawyer’s Cave, bask in the heroic presence of “Space Man” and “Space Girl” in the promised future or Zoro and Sheriff Lucky in the golden past. Progress and nostalgia reinforced each other nicely in the 1950s and 1960s.

This dynamic relationship has sagged ever since. In a curious reversal of fates, Frontierland flourishes while Tomorrowland fades. Predictably enough, Tomorrowland proved difficult to sustain. Not only do images of the future age at a terrifying pace, but people have become increasingly skeptical of the urban future and wary of space-age wonders. In an ironic flip-flop, Tomorrowland, with its naive emblems of progress and cheesy remnants of more hopeful times, has become a locus of nostalgia and a monument of the past. Asking themselves “Wasn’t the future wonderful?” people are wistful about the antiquated Submarine Ride and the Adventure through Inner Space, while they remain awed by the *Mark Twain* and the Big Thunder Railroad.

The Disney people know that the western frontier may be a model for the future: urban visions of a “Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow” seem increasingly archaic, while the Old West appears ever more viable. One day in 1989, while chief designer Tony Baxter was finishing plans for Tomorrowland 2055, Disney CEO Michael Eisner stopped by to check up on the project, and he was dismayed by the plan’s images of a gleaming megalopolis. “This isn’t the future people want,” he told Baxter. “People no longer believe in dazzling

visions of monorails and everyone wearing gold lame jumpsuits with zippers down the front,” Eisner continued. “It’s impossible to see anything but the ‘Blade Runner’ in these urban visions of the future. What can you tell people about the future when Montana is the future? Put a PC in the log cabin. Montana, Wyoming—they’re the places that represent a wonderful vision of tomorrow.” “You could put the sign ‘Tomorrowland’ in front of ‘Frontierland,’” Disney’s heir concluded, “And people would be happy.”<sup>48</sup>

After Eisner’s lecture, images of “The Montana Future” with a computer in the cabin became guiding principles for the Disney people. The allure of the frontier in the Japanese and French parks indicates a deeper hunger for the open

West among urban, mostly upscale Americans that Disney’s Imagineers have learned to capture and perpetuate. Aware of the much discussed “New West” of Ted Turner and Jane Fonda, Robert Redford and Ralph Lauren, the Disney Corporation packages the dreams of frazzled baby boomers yearning for a simpler future out west.<sup>49</sup> In *Toy Story* (1995), Disney’s immensely popular animated fable of two frontiers, the Old West outduels the Space Age as ever-dependable Sheriff Woody proves more than a match for klutzy astronaut



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The dynamic tension between future and past, inaugurated in Disneyland’s Tomorrowland and Frontierland, continued in the Disney imagination with the popular 1995 animated movie, *Toy Story*, in which the Old West overcomes the Space Age as Sheriff Woody (left) outdoes astronaut Buzz Lightyear (right).

*West, 1849 to the Present* (San Francisco, 1996), 51-53; Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Shadows of Heaven Itself,” in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York, 1997), 151-78.

50. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York, 1957), 33, 77-78, 309.

51. *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1995, sec. A, p. 21.

52. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), 182; Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York, 1956), 216.

Buzz Lightyear. The West flourishes at the Anaheim park where a new frontier historyland called California Adventure, the largest addition to Disneyland since 1955, will open in 2001. While Frontierland is expanding, Tomorrowland is being recast as a self-consciously nostalgic place featuring Jules Verne and Buck Rogers versions of a long lost future. Just as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) ends with Harrison Ford and his android girlfriend escaping the grimy city for a lush big sky place in the West, Disney's Imagineers truly believe that the western frontier rather than the space age city is the great big beautiful tomorrow.

**I**n 1947, while Frontierland was gestating in Walt Disney's mind, Jack Kerouac's hero, Sal Paradise, lit out from New Jersey for the freedom and exhilaration of the West. Drawn by the promise of "all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it," Sal's first encounter with the West, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, hardly matched his dreams. "Hell's bells, it's Wild West Week," he was told, as he elbowed through "crowds of fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives

in cowgirl attire" who fired off blanks and "bustled and whooped on the wooden sidewalks of Old Cheyenne." "In my first shot at the West," Sal concluded, "I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition." And weeks later, at the end of the road, facing west from San Francisco's shores, Kerouac's hero realized "How disastrous all this was compared to what I'd written . . . from Paterson. . . . Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back."<sup>50</sup>

Forty-eight years later, while vacationing in the upscale, Ralph Lauren-styled environs of Wyoming's Grand Tetons, another western pilgrim echoed Kerouac's regrets. After rafting down the crowded Snake River and camping overnight in the Tetons with laptop computer at hand and gourmet chefs in tow, after golfing and spending several days in Jay Rockefeller's mountainside ranch, Bill Clinton mused that he wished he had been part of the opening of the West. "I was channel surfing the other night," he told reporters, "and stumbled upon a movie about the Lewis and Clark Expedition. I've always been fascinated by it. That was some trip. I wish I'd been on it."<sup>51</sup>

"That was some trip. I wish I'd been on it." "No more land" and "Nowhere to go but back." These words have been the nagging subtext of the frontier myth since Europeans began conquering the Ameri-

Euro Disney outside Paris has captivated tourists with the park's rendition of the imagined, wide-open American West, especially the cowboys and Indians of its mythic past. Below visitors paddle Indian canoes in France's Marne-la-Valle.



can wilderness. Like the disillusioned novelist and the nostalgic president, people everywhere have had a bittersweet romance with the frontier West, and for nearly half a century, the Disney people have manufactured lands that nurture the sunny side of this affair showing us how the West was fun. Beginning forty-three years ago amid the bulldozed orange groves of Anaheim, Disney built a magic realm with a seductive version of Kerouac's Wild West Week that helped us forget about the death of the frontier and our complicity in the process. Disney's Frontierlands allow us to safely reenact the myth of redemption in the wilderness, airbrushing powerful ambiguities that haunt this gripping story. Valorizing the European conquest of America, they muffle memories of plundering the land and killing its inhabitants, and they postpone the realization that the frontier is dead, that the real trip is over and there's "nowhere to go but back."

Just as Disney obliterated nature in order to celebrate it, so too have westward-yearning Americans ravaged the very thing they most cherish, cutting down the wilderness as if it were a hateful presence. Forever escaping to some Wild West, we busily transform it into a replica of the civilization we have just fled. F. Scott Fitzgerald's vision of the "fresh green breast of the new world" that "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes" would become Jay Gatsby's garbage heap. This trou-

bling paradox, this lurking suspicion that the frontier is a self-destroying process and a bitter mess of potage to boot, nags at us like a guilty conscience. This smarting sense of complicity, this dread that our machines are destroying the garden, that, in historian Perry Miller's words, "we are being carried along on some massive conveyor belt such as Cole's 'Course of Empire'" into a Blade Runner world, is a deep-seated fear that even Disney cannot smother. All the architectural reassurance in the world—from ever-slicker Frontierlands to the high-tech Montana Future—will never disguise the troubling meanings of westward conquest. Riddled with paradox, rife with tragedy, the frontier myth remains our most compelling and our most tragic story.<sup>52</sup> *M*

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Walt Disney, conferring below with Native American entertainers in 1957, built a paradox—obliterating nature in order to celebrate it and whitewashing history to reenact a sanitized, mythical version of redemption in the wilderness.



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