

---

## **“Disney-fying” Mother Nature in the Atomic Era: How Disneyland’s Portrayals of Nature Reflected Post-War Ideals of Family, Child-Rearing, and the Home, 1955-1966**

*Angela Hawk*

### **Abstract**

*From Tom Sawyer’s Island to the world-famous Jungle Cruise, attractions at the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California have long used idealized images of nature to delight visitors. My research explores how these images reflected popular ideals of family at the height of Cold War politics and culture in America. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, including archived Disney films, newsreel footage, magazine and journal articles, park brochures, employee manuals, and photographs, I have studied Disneyland from its disastrous grand opening in 1955 up to the death of its namesake in 1966. I have discovered that nature was indeed a vital part of the Disneyland presentation and was, moreover, essential to its popularity among American families. Every natural element, from the park’s all-encompassing earthen berm to the impeccably manicured trees of Main Street U.S.A., served to promote a sense of fantasy and safety that was both psychologically comforting to parents with “atomic anxiety” and appropriately stimulating for children raised on the principles of Dr. Benjamin Spock. So potent was this “Disney version” of nature, in fact, that most contemporaries, rather than criticizing Walt Disney for his dramatic, anthropomorphic treatments, lauded him for his conservationist attitude. Examining the appeal of the theme park from this perspective provides insight into precisely how and why Disneyland became one of the foremost cultural influences of the twentieth century.*

### **Disney and the Family: Nature as an Antidote to Atomic Anxiety**

When Disneyland opened on July 7, 1955, nearly a decade had passed since the attacks on Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. Yet the implications and consequences of nuclear power were still very much at the forefront of the American psyche. With two bombs having already wreaked devastation on the world, profound and disturbing questions, both tacit and explicit, occupied the American mind: When and where would the next one hit? Would the “American way of life” survive a Soviet display of nuclear force? Could nuclear radiation permanently damage the health of American children? Would America be the lone bastion of freedom in a world given over to Communist forces?

From day one, Disneyland was a means of providing reassurance to Americans troubled by such concerns. No mere diversion from worldly cares, this sparkling new theme park reached out ideologically to middle-class America by promoting a past, present, and future vision of American superiority. More specifically, Disneyland depicted the nuclear family as being the backbone of American power at a time when millions of young couples were turning to home and hearth for refuge. It venerated all the same values that post-war families supposedly held so dear while simultaneously promoting an atmosphere of worry-free whimsy. The park’s representations of nature were key to striking precisely the right balance. From the jungles of Adventureland to the wooden gates of Frontierland, the park’s natural elements served a dual purpose: to help patrons escape, if only briefly, their atomic anxieties and to reaffirm post-war family ideals in the wake of unsettling world events.

The saga of the Cold War era family is well known and oft repeated: thousands of G.I.s returned from World War II ready to marry, procreate, and settle down in suburban houses filled with the latest consumer goods. The government aided veterans in their transition back to civilian life in a variety of ways, most notably by enacting the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (more commonly known as the G.I. Bill). In addition to giving veterans access to low-interest home mortgages and medical benefits, the G.I. Bill covered tuition and living expenses for veterans attending universities or vocational schools. This made family life an economically feasible, and thus more attractive, option for men returning from war. American men and women subsequently raced to the altar in the late 1940s and early 1950s, marrying at much younger ages than their parents. The ensuing baby boom signaled the ascendancy of the family as a symbol of America’s prosperity and productivity.

Historians Stephanie Coontz and Elaine Tyler May rightly problematize this picture-perfect portrait. “The reality of [1950s] families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest,” writes Coontz, indicating that a full 25% of Americans were poor in the mid-1950s and that most minority families, facing widespread racism and poverty, were excluded from the white, middle-class ideal.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, May argues that even those Americans who were fortunate enough to enjoy unprecedented affluence in the post-war era still wrestled with issues of identity and purpose. As women struggled to reconcile their war-fostered independence with their return to the home, men wondered whether they would be able to find work in the post-war economy. Both sexes feared the socio-political implications of nuclear power.<sup>2</sup> It may be shortsighted, then, to view the domestic ideology of the post-war era as a mere byproduct of perceived prosperity and opportunity. In fact, the trend toward earlier marriage may have been more “a flight from the negative [than a] solidly based healthy progression into the positive.”<sup>3</sup> Adults unable to find personal satisfaction elsewhere could take pride in their ability to foster a happy family life.<sup>4</sup>

A happy family life could, in turn, be “a source of meaning and security in a world run amok.”<sup>5</sup> At the time of Disneyland’s ascendance, America was in the midst of “a full-blown fallout scare.”<sup>6</sup> Experts and casual observers alike were alarmed by the possibility that radioactive ash spread during peacetime nuclear testing could still have damaging or deadly effects. This reality hit home in 1954, when ash from a U.S. test in the Pacific killed several Japanese fishermen, and again in 1955, when radioactive rain fell in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> Matters came to a head when Strontium-90, a deadly isotope produced in nuclear explosions, began showing up in milk.<sup>8</sup> The frightening implications of such events made the domestic ideal all that

much more attractive to young Americans. "In secure post-war homes with plenty of children," men and women could look past their own mortality and toward the future of their families.<sup>9</sup>

Yet even as it was prompting young adults to take refuge in domesticity, the fallout threat was also casting the vulnerability of the home into sharp relief. "How concerned should we be . . . about the amounts of radioactivity in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the milk we give our growing children?" queried a *Saturday Evening Post* reporter in 1959.<sup>10</sup> Americans were quickly realizing that fallout was not the unfortunate affliction of some far-flung locale, but rather a serious, immediate threat to the health of American families. The very weapon meant to protect the American way of life against foreign enemies was now, in fact, an enemy itself. Furthermore, the fallout threat forced Americans to think for the first time about human complicity in the *global* environment. Direct nuclear blasts wreaked immediate devastation on the target area, of course, but radioactive fallout affected the global community by lingering in the earth's atmosphere for decades or more. Thus the fallout scare prompted not only a reaffirmation of the domestic ideal, but also a newfound concern for the challenge posed to that ideal, and to the world at large, by nuclear technology.

Americans tend to seek refuge in nature when they feel uneasy with the pace of human progress. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, for instance, many eastern upper-class men and women became so flustered with the stifling atmosphere of urban society that they suffered from a largely psychosomatic condition known as neurasthenia.<sup>11</sup> The remedy, particularly for men, was a literal or figurative escape into the West, where the "untamed wilderness" would foster a sense of rugged individualism and independence wholly lost to easterners.

Americans today exhibit a similar uneasiness with "civilization." Consider the fate of the shopping mall. As Jennifer Price explains, until recently malls were "targets of derision, or at least ambivalence," because they were decidedly soulless and drab.<sup>12</sup> The trend in recent years, however, has been to market a themed shopping experience based on common perceptions of nature; many malls now integrate natural elements, such as exotic plants and open-air frameworks, into their architectural design. Americans can now feel connected to nature even as they engage in modern, often environmentally compromising, patterns of consumption.

A similar reasoning can be used to explicate Disneyland's success in the Cold War era. Disneyland opened its gates precisely when middle-class families were beset by fears of nuclear annihilation and radioactive fallout. Walt Disney was nothing if not an uncanny reader of the *zeitgeist*, and, sure enough, Disneyland's idealized depictions of nature functioned as an antidote to fears of nuclear America. Disney thus shrewdly linked his product with the most comforting psychological aspects of the domestic ideal; just like the suburban home, Disneyland could offer comfort and leisure in perilous times. This association was important, for prevailing cultural ideas suggested that suburban homes, with their "swing sets, playrooms, and backyards with barbecues" already catered to all the recreational needs of the post-war family.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, these recreational activities were often gender segregated; men tended the barbecue whilst women prepared the meal. By marketing Disneyland as a surrogate home, Disney was able to convince post-war families to come to Disneyland for their amusement needs and to subsume segregated ideas of recreation in the interest of family togetherness.

Disney's "nature" antidote was marketed on several levels, but let us begin here with the most obvious. What better way to provide comfort than to distract from the source of worry? From the moment patrons laid eyes on the huge floral mosaic of Mickey Mouse just inside the gates of the park, they could expect a day full of fun, fantasy, and carefree leisure:

[T]he visitor becomes an active participant—boarding an imaginary "time machine" to leave the cares of everyday outside Disneyland's gates: to become a big game hunter in the jungles of Adventureland, or the wilds of primeval American West; a submarine crewman sailing beneath the

Polar Ice Cap; a passenger on the “first trip to the moon,” or a “main streeter” of yesteryear.<sup>14</sup>

Jungles. Wilds. Primeval. As this 1961 news article makes clear, the total Disney experience could not be complete without patrons becoming active agents of adventure in “dangerous” natural settings. Nature therefore became a means to support Disneyland’s immersive style of entertainment, an effect reinforced by the construction of a high earthen berm surrounding the park. Intended to obscure from sight Anaheim’s growing mélange of strip malls and cheap motels, this embankment literally and psychologically protected patrons from the outside world.

This protective element was key, for Disneyland would hardly have survived through its first year if patrons had perceived any real danger or threat from its escapist pleasures. Walt Disney used the illusion of danger solely for entertainment purposes, and only in situations where patrons could feel they had conquered the hazard. In Nature’s Wonderland, for instance, riders in the mine train were reminded to “sit real still” as they crossed an old, rickety trestle into Bear Country, “‘cause there’s no tellin’ how long she’s gonna last.”<sup>15</sup> She lasted, of course, and riders emerged safe, sound, and triumphant from the plight every single time. Disney simply had no use for thrilling, sensual, or boisterous amusements that challenged the status quo. Forgetting, perhaps, that it was his predecessors’ critiques of the “institutions and values of the genteel culture” that paved the way for places like Disneyland, Disney marketed his new park as a well-ordered, sanitary, and safe alternative to places like Coney Island, where degrading delights deliberately threatened ideas of social order.<sup>16</sup> His strategy worked; post-war families, consisting of small children and their worldly parents, were primed to embrace Disneyland’s anodyne amusements.

Because they created a visual aesthetic that lent order and continuity to the park’s disparate “lands,” natural elements were vital to the park’s overall sense of security. Landscaping was a vital component of this aesthetic. Disney employed a host of gardeners to plant a variety of native and exotic trees, shrubs, and flowers, remove old or out-of-season plantings, and ensure that nary a flower or twig strayed out of its allotted space. These workers came in after the park closed in the evening and usually left before it opened the next day, ensuring that the Disney fantasy was upheld during regular operating hours. Their efforts did not go unnoticed. “A gardening enthusiast will find the landscaping at Disneyland almost as appealing as the rides and exhibits the place is famous for,” wrote a reporter for *Sunset* magazine in 1961, adding that “This landscaping has not been a hit or miss proposition, but well planned and organized—a complex project that’s constantly being altered and expanded as Disneyland itself grows.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that a popular gardening magazine, read by thousands of young wives and mothers, would feature an article on Disneyland’s landscaping suggests a connection between post-war values of the home and Disney’s representations of nature. By extension, since “the home” during this era became roughly synonymous with “refuge,” Disney’s perfectly maintained botanical utopia may have evoked feelings of safety and security during difficult times.<sup>18</sup>

Disneyland’s themed nature attractions had a similar effect. As mentioned previously, Walt Disney marketed danger only insofar as it added kitschy drama to an attraction’s storyline. Thus most of Disneyland’s early nature attractions—Rivers of America, Jungle Cruise, Nature’s Wonderland, Swiss Family Robinson, and Tom Sawyer’s Island—lacked heart-stopping thrills. Instead they encouraged patrons to observe their surroundings and to behold the wonders of the “natural” world. Consider *American Forests* writer Weldon D. Woodson’s description of his Jungle Cruise expedition in 1956:

At the beginning of our voyage, we glimpse river banks dotted with lofty, statuesque Kentia palms transported from Lord Howe Island in the South Pacific. Then the Congo Queen negotiates a stretch flanked with a dark and shady forest populated with such plants as the staghorn ferns—so titled because they look like antlers. The plants which require

no soil and draw their sustenance from the air intertwine high in the trees above the boat. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Woodson clearly took pleasure from the attraction's leisurely pace; it allowed him and other patrons to sufficiently appreciate the seemingly authentic tropical atmosphere. Mike Fink's Keel Boats, an attraction based on the Davy Crockett films, offered similar opportunities for stimulating interactions with nature. "In today's world of high-speed, computer controlled attractions," wrote a reporter for *The E-Ticket* in 2000, "the experience aboard these rustic Keel Boats on their water-level excursion across the dark green surface of the Rivers of America was still very satisfying."<sup>20</sup> Often the Keel Boats were required to pull off into a cove as the *Mark Twain* or the *Columbia* passed by, bringing patrons even closer to "the cattails and lush growth along the river banks, the many ducks and water birds, and the noise and cool mist from the rapids and waterfalls."<sup>21</sup> For patrons escaping, if only for a day, the worries of an unsettling world, such low-key attractions provided security in the form of comforting views of nature, blissfully devoid of any of the real dangers or threats such natural scenes might harbor in reality.

Disneyland's attractions were also a means to reassure patrons of America's ultimate superiority at a time when "the American nation was forced not only to discredit their enemy, the "other," but also to seek to define a nationhood, a self."<sup>22</sup> Walt Disney embraced and promulgated the popular if highly idealized view that "American-ness" lay in the nation's historical connection with nature. Nowhere is this more evident than in Frontierland. Here trains, steamboats, and other symbols of American technological ingenuity coexisted harmoniously with spectacular natural vistas. "One of the biggest joys of my life," Disney wrote in 1958, "is sitting on the levee in Frontierland . . . [watching] the smokestacks of the steamer *Mark Twain* belching smoke and skirting along toward the tip of Tom Sawyer Island." Frontierland was also home to Nature's Wonderland, an attraction which "graphically [told] the story of the West before civilization by filling the area with life-like animated animals, birds and reptiles of all specie and description."<sup>23</sup> From the primeval West to the bustling frontier of the Nineteenth Century, Frontierland used nature to quite literally map out the course of American expansion. It reflected Disney's belief that, as historian Richard Francaviglia aptly put it, "the frontier defined the American experience and synergistically shaped the American character and spirit."<sup>24</sup> In other words, Americans were better people for their frontier past and, indeed, better suited than others for leadership in a post-war world.

Another area of Disneyland that invoked nature and history as a means to assert America's pre-eminence was Main Street U.S.A. Modeled after Walt Disney's boyhood home of Marceline, Missouri (where, incidentally, his family only resided for four years before moving to Kansas City), Main Street U.S.A. was the nexus of Disneyland. No matter where one roamed, all roads led back to the quaint, turn-of-the-century souvenir shops at the entrance to the park. The landscaping in this area was reassuringly park-like: shade trees lined the sidewalks, bright flowers surrounded the flagpole in Town Square, and various potted plants ornamented the store windows. The overall effect was one of a snapshot in time; here was a picturesque small town considerably more "civilized" than the outposts of Frontierland, but nevertheless representative of a simpler, quieter, and vanishing way of life.

Modern observers might take in such a scene and recall Jennifer Price's critique of themed shopping malls in the postmodern era; Main Street U.S.A. was and is, as Karal Ann Marling put it, essentially "a strip mall all dressed up in a scintillating Victorian costume."<sup>25</sup> Yet post-war visitors to Disneyland, particularly young families, may have seen it differently. Consumerism was an important facet of the post-war American domestic experience, and, indeed, of the image America presented to the world. Modern conveniences like dishwashers and televisions became symbols of the American way of life, standing in for the broader ideal of capitalism in political forums; Khrushchev and Nixon's famous "Kitchen Debate" is just one well-known example.<sup>26</sup> Thus, post-war visitors to the park were not likely to see the Victorian facades and the commercial enterprises they disguised as a contradiction in terms. Rather the shops of

Main Street represented a continuity of the American experience; capitalism, and the ideals of responsibility, entrepreneurialism, and self-reliance with which it was associated, had enabled America, in true Turnerian fashion, to move forward in each stage of its historical development.<sup>27</sup> Main Street, then, with its charming architecture and idyllic landscaping, represented a way to cling to nostalgic notions of the past while simultaneously exalting the values that had fostered national advancement.

Yet Walt Disney's highly politicized depictions of nature were not limited to the Anaheim park alone. In fact, the park's success hinged on Disney's ability to market his product via the new medium of television: "I saw that if I was ever going to have my park, here . . . was a way to tell millions of people about it—with TV."<sup>28</sup> *Disneyland*, a nationwide television program broadcast by the ABC network, premiered in October 1954. The show's cross-promotional format was immediately evident. Disney periodically devoted long segments to progress reports from Disneyland's construction site; each week's episode corresponded thematically to one of the park's four "lands" and each episode's programming invariably advertised some upcoming Disney film project. In a 1956 episode titled "Adventureland," for example, actor Fess Parker took viewers behind the scenes of Disney's latest live-action film, *The Great Locomotive Chase*.<sup>29</sup> Disney's brazen commercialism apparently worked. By December 1954, *Disneyland* not only occupied "a select position among the nation's ten most popular programs," but had also convinced legions of TV-watching Americans that Disney's proposed theme park "was just as safe, wholesome, and predictable as the living room setting in which the family gathered to watch Walt talk about it."<sup>30</sup>

Just like the park it was intended to promote, *Disneyland* reached out to American families using idealized depictions of nature. Consider the aforementioned episode on *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1956). Viewers learn right away that the story is about a ragtag team of Union soldiers, led by James J. Andrews, that successfully destroys a Confederate railroad during the American Civil War. Fess Parker, of *Davy Crockett* fame, then guides viewers through the film's production process, from the technicalities of set construction to the intricacies of wardrobe selection. As evidenced by the episode's idyllic representations of the rural South, however, viewers are treated to much more than just filmmaking factoids. In a brief vignette meant to illustrate the film's setting, viewers see a series of rustic images set to the tune of "Dixie," including shots of Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountains and a raccoon scurrying through the forest. Disney thus uses nature to evoke in the viewer a sense of nostalgia for a certain time and place in American history—specifically, the antebellum South. The heroes of the film may be Northerners, but the "moonlight and magnolias" myth is nevertheless on full display here. Perhaps the quietude, grace, and pastoral beauty that define the myth were characteristics that Americans felt were sorely lacking in modern society, and Disney used these characteristics to entice viewers to see the film. The interconnectedness of Disney media thus allowed for a continuity of depictions of nature—a constant feed of ideas about nature that played themselves out through films, television, and Disney's new theme park.

These ideas, beyond just reassuring and entertaining post-war family audiences, reaffirmed the importance of family in forming a uniquely "American" identity in the Cold War era. We have already seen, for instance, how Disney used nature to promote "domestic capitalism" within the park, and elsewhere we see nature becoming the proving grounds for the sanctity and resiliency of the family unit. *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960), for instance, shows a family drawn into immediate peril when their ship (bound for America) wrecks far from the comforts of hearth and home.<sup>31</sup> Left to combat unpredictable forces of nature on a deserted island, the Robinsons immediately demonstrate ingenuity and survival skills of the highest order. In no time at all, they have created a kind of domestic utopia out of the natural resources available to them (memorialized, of course, in the Swiss Family Robinson Tree House in Disneyland), and are enjoying the splendors of life in their very own Garden of Eden. Nature therefore becomes a means for this ideal immigrant family (white, Teutonic) to reaffirm the domestic ideal in even the most threatening of circumstances. Another Disney film from the same year, *The Parent Trap*, also uses natural

settings to facilitate a sense of familial harmony. The popularity of these films attests to the appeal of such portrayals. Nature that was safe and family-friendly was infinitely preferable to a savage wilderness hostile to man, for where else, if not to nature, could one turn for comfort in an era of technological threats to civilization? Furthermore, by establishing an intimate connection between nature and the home, Disney allowed family audiences to feel like they were in touch with nature even as their daily interactions with the natural world became increasingly removed.

This leads us, finally, to a discussion of Disney's wildly popular *True Life Adventure* films. These feature length nature documentaries, including *Seal Island* (1948), *The Living Desert* (1953), and *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954), earned the Disney Studio accolades and profit at a time when its animated features were breaking even at best. Taken together, they form the basis for most scholarly discussions on Disney's representations of nature. Steven Watts perhaps best explains the films' popularity among family audiences specifically, noting that these films "depicted a taming of natural forces that appealed to an American audience becoming increasingly suburbanized and family-oriented."<sup>32</sup> This "domestication of nature" took shape in the form of humorous and poignant parallels between human and animal families. Note Walt Disney's description of a bear family that they observed while photographing in Montana:

I think that bears are the best mothers. Photographing in the wilds of Montana and Wyoming, we spied on Mrs. Black Bear, handsome in her fine fur coat, for the better part of two seasons. We saw her come out of her winter cave with two fat little cubs to begin their education. Father bear had nothing to do with the rearing of his youngsters—in fact, he'd been chased off the premises by Mamma before they were born.<sup>33</sup>

In his humorous and anecdotal way, then, Disney defined a "family experience" common to all living beings. Although many reject this patently anthropomorphic way of thinking today, in the 1950s it was widely accepted. By tapping into "our human tendency to look on animals as extensions of ourselves," Disney brought reassuring and entertaining views of the animal world to the masses.<sup>34</sup>

Scenes in the *True Life Adventure* films sometimes seemed to directly mirror the concerns of the archetypal post-war family. In *The Vanishing Prairie*, for instance, viewers are introduced to members of an upstanding prairie dog family who diligently maintain their burrow. This "home and haven," however, is frequently subject to external threats, the worst of which is a devastating wildfire.<sup>35</sup> The prairie dogs are able to wait out the worst of the danger by hiding underground, but the floods that follow irreparably damage their burrow. As the prairie dogs scurry off in search of a new home, the narrator quips: "It's a hard decision to make, leaving the old homestead."<sup>36</sup>

The saga of prairie dog family, as told here, could almost be an account of a family's experience after nuclear war: just as the prairie dogs go underground to avoid the fire, so might the besieged human family seek refuge in a bomb shelter, and just as our animal friends must abandon their former haven, so might a family find their home devastated in the wake of a nuclear attack. Yet the overriding theme in the prairie dog saga is one of hope, not sorrow; the prairie dogs may have to seek shelter elsewhere, but they ultimately survived the fire's devastation. This plot sent a message to post-war families: a nuclear attack may wreak havoc on life and society, but, if proper precautions are taken, the family unit will remain intact. It is difficult to say whether family audiences consciously recognized this message, or even that Disney purposely conveyed it, but at the very least the *True Life Adventure* films appealed to families on the basis of situations and hopes that would have felt familiar, conveyed by the humanized portrayals of animals and unthreatening interpretations of nature.

From Disneyland to *Disneyland* and beyond, nature became a way for the Disney Company to tap into the innermost fears and desires of the post-war American family. Never mind that Disney's anodyne vision of nature obscured the true dynamism of the environment, or that it sometimes perpetuated

historical myths and half-truths; for families grappling with the repercussions of nuclear power and Cold War political culture, safe, static, and reassuring depictions of nature were immediately appealing. Furthermore, Disney's nature was 100% guilt-free. From the wilds of Adventureland to the prairie dog holes of *The Vanishing Prairie*, Disney consumers were made to feel as if they were in sync with the natural world but not responsible for it. Disney's world was unlike the real world in that one did not have to think about the consequences of fallout to the environment or one's health; Disney's nature would always be perfect, no matter what. Finally, Disney created a vision of nature that was indelibly linked to middle-class family values. All the Cold War ideals that families superficially or genuinely paid homage to—responsibility, order, duty, ingenuity, resiliency, self-reliance, unity, free enterprise—were somehow incorporated into storylines or attractions that also implicated nature. Nature therefore played a crucial role in attracting and sustaining a family demographic during Disneyland's first decade, and is no doubt a major factor in the park's continued success.

### **Nature as Edutainment: The Baby Boomer Generation Does Disneyland**

Walt Disney always insisted that Disneyland cater to adults as well as to children, and, indeed, the park's attractions appealed to an older audience in a variety of conscious and subconscious ways. Yet there is simply no denying Disneyland's child-centric focus, particularly during the Cold War era. Years before Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and Space Mountain made the park more accessible to single adults and teenagers, kid-friendly attractions like the Casey Jr. Circus Train and Tom Sawyer's Island created a haven for families with young children. Such attractions were laden with idealized depictions of the natural world, most of which promoted nature as a source of both education and entertainment. Primary source accounts reveal that such depictions were not at all lost on contemporary observers; newspaper columnists, schoolteachers, and conservationists alike lauded Disney for his unique brand of edutainment. This enthusiastic response indicates, perhaps, that Disney had opportunely tapped into prevailing cultural ideas about modes of child-rearing and child socialization in the post-war era. Although traditional attitudes toward parenting that advocated strict discipline were still widespread, new theories about democratizing childhood, fostering individualism and emphasizing education were coming to the fore. By giving children a safe yet relatively free-form "natural" environment in which to play and learn, Walt Disney endorsed these ideas and subsequently reaped the benefits.

In the years before World War II, ideas about childrearing centered on the concept that motherhood was a vocation, and that the competent mother would rely more on acquired expertise than instinct while raising her children.<sup>37</sup> The role of the father, meanwhile, significantly declined. Although these developments generally allowed for "more relaxed authority bonds and an increased capacity for empathetic relations" between parent and child, stringent discipline was still very much seen as a vital aspect of the socializing process.<sup>38</sup> In *Infant Care*, the best-selling child-care manual first published in 1914, author Mary Mills West advocated "strict scheduling" and advised against "rocking, tickling, or playing with infants."<sup>39</sup> Such advice was intended not only to encourage proper socialization of the child, but also to protect the mother's mental and physical wellbeing.<sup>40</sup> Thus, although children were now seen primarily as products of the domestic sphere rather than contributors to the workforce, they were still subject to what Glenn Davis terms "vigorous guidance."<sup>41</sup> To unduly indulge one's child or to eschew professional advice was to ill equip one's child for the adult world.

As previously noted, the end of World War II prompted a renewed emphasis on the family in America. As part of that focus, procreation took on "almost mythic proportions," in terms both of its place in the cultural and political rhetoric of the period and of the sheer numbers of people choosing to have children.<sup>42</sup> Thus millions of young men and women chose to formulate a home life based on the ideal of raising a brood of upstanding, well-adjusted children. This ideal prompted a transition away from the more



stringent methods of discipline advocated in the pre-war years and toward more democratic, instinctual approaches to childrearing. Nowhere is this better encapsulated than in the work of Dr. Benjamin Spock. Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* has achieved a kind of revered cultural status unusual for a book, having sold more than 30 million copies since its original publication in 1946.<sup>43</sup> First and foremost, Spock encouraged the post-war mother to rely on her own instincts. "You know more than you think you do," he writes, so "don't be afraid to trust your own common sense."<sup>44</sup> Rather than the rigid modes of discipline advocated by early child-rearing manuals, what children really needed was "spontaneous love, spontaneous discipline, an unanalyzed spur-of-the-moment spank followed by an unanalyzed spur-of-the-moment kiss."<sup>45</sup> Although many mothers of the post-war era undoubtedly still based their child-rearing tactics primarily on their own childhood experience, the influence of Spock's ideas in the post-war era cannot be denied.

The post-war era was also marked by a renewed concern for primary and secondary education, particularly after the Russians launched the Sputnik satellite on October 4, 1957. Had America fallen behind the Russians because its schools did not effectively teach the rudiments of science, mathematics, and engineering? In the wake of Sputnik, the formerly ambivalent Congress scrambled to enact the National Defense Education Act. In addition to providing funding for school construction and equipment, the NDEA set up fellowships, grants, and loans for students interested in science.<sup>46</sup> Yet the critique went far beyond the lack of schools or school resources; many saw a need for a reformed curriculum that stressed "discovery" over memorization.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, reformers "hoped to end the traditional reliance on a single textbook by creating attractive multimedia packages that included films, "hands-on" activities, and readings."<sup>48</sup> Dr. Spock echoed this sentiment in *Baby and Child Care*: "You can only go so far with books and talk," he cautions. "You learn better from actually living the things you are studying."<sup>49</sup> Thus the threat of Russia's technological prowess prompted not only a renewed emphasis on a science-enriched curriculum, but also a search for more effective, dynamic modes of learning.

Disneyland opened just as these new ideas about childrearing were percolating in the American consciousness, and Walt Disney immediately embraced his role as the benevolent foster uncle of millions of American children. Much like Spock, Disney believed that children should be allowed to explore their own individuality, to have fun, and to learn by personal experience. Though always careful in interviews to reaffirm his primary role as an entertainer, not an educator, Disney displayed a vested interest in the educational experience of America's children. Like other commentators on the "crisis in the schools," he believed America's continued preeminence in the era of Cold War politics depended upon rejuvenating the nation's educational system:

We must stimulate high school science and make it fascinating for the children. . . . As long as we're on our toes it won't be like 1940. You hear the talk—"We're behind the Russians!" or "We're way ahead of the Russians!" But there is a war going on that we are not conscious of.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, Disney believed in the ability of his products to augment national efforts to uplift and enlighten America's youth. He described Disneyland in 1954 as a "combination of a world's fair, a playground, a community center, a museum of living facts, and a show place of beauty and magic," thus underscoring the park's quasi-educational format.<sup>51</sup> Thus, despite his declarations to the contrary, Disney clearly envisioned Disneyland not only as a forum for amusement, but also as an exemplar of America's educational ideals.

Disneyland's representations of nature played a key role in promoting these ideals. The Grand Canyon Diorama on the Santa Fe/Disneyland Railroad, for instance, was more of a museum exhibit than a typical amusement park attraction; patrons simply gazed through a glass window at models of the Arizona landmark's beautiful vistas and diverse array of wildlife. Similarly, Frontierland was not only a playground

for the aspiring cowboy, but also an allegorical lesson in American history: The Burning Settler's Cabin one encountered on the trip down Rivers of America was a testimony to the dangers the pioneers faced in the western wilderness. The Indian Village provided a fleeting glimpse of the cultures that dotted the North American landscape prior to European expansion. The Frontierland shooting gallery gave children a chance to emulate famous historical hunter/trapper figures like Daniel Boone. Nature's Wonderland allowed "people [to] enjoy nature as it is . . . or as it was . . . with accuracy and fidelity."<sup>52</sup> Thus each attraction in Frontierland was a means to convey some important message about the history of the American frontier (as Cold War Americans understood it) in a fun and accessible way.

As any '50s child with access to a television set would know, Disney's lessons in frontier history were not limited to the Anaheim park. Indeed, Disney's idealized, almost mythic portrayals of the American frontier gained their cultural foothold not through Frontierland, but through a series of *Disneyland* episodes chronicling the adventures of frontier figure Davy Crockett. First aired in 1954, and later recycled into two enormously popular feature films, these episodes prompted a bona-fide marketing craze perhaps rivaled only by the Pokemon fad of the late 1990s. Coonskin caps, Indian peace pipes, frontier board games, and Davy Crockett playsuits became the must-have items of the young baby boomer generation, and Fess Parker as Crockett became an overnight hero.<sup>53</sup> An anonymous news segment from 1955 shows young children sleeping, bathing, and even toilet training with their beloved Davy Crockett items.<sup>54</sup> The sheer intensity of the craze alarmed even those who stood to profit from it; as historian J. G. Boyle has noted, "no one had anticipated that children were a consumer power, not even Disney."<sup>55</sup> If anyone had the inside track on the phenomenon, it was probably the pocketbook-wielding parents of these pint-sized pioneers. As one bewildered film critic/father noted,

According to the 9-year old frontiersman who shacks at our house when he isn't in school or out on some other important business in the line of duty of a young pioneer, the greatest—but definitely THE greatest—cultural experience he has had since "Destination Moon" was watching the three-part TV showings of Walt Disney's "Davy Crockett" films.<sup>56</sup>

Why the reverence on the part of American children for the Davy Crockett story? What was it about this historical figure that, when set into the Disney mold, inspired such ubiquitous fervor? And why, when prompted on the subject years later, does Fess Parker say "it would almost be a public service" to make early Disney westerns like *Davy Crockett* widely available to children today?<sup>57</sup>

The answer lies, again, in the way Disney marketed frontier nature as a kind of unconventional classroom for learning about American history and American values. Taking considerable liberties with the actual events of his life, Disney portrayed Davy Crockett as both a brazen pioneer unafraid to face the dangers of the wilderness (he "killed him a b'ar when he was only three," after all) and a rugged individualist unable to fully adapt to civilized society. The ideology that emerges from such a characterization has decidedly Cold War overtones; Crockett was the embodiment of the "homespun folk hero," the "self-sacrificing volunteer," the "virtuous common man" that Cold War politicians so often referenced in their rhetoric.<sup>58</sup> Yet it was not the politicians that were wearing their coonskin caps to school or lugging their rifles into the bathtub. Children enjoyed the Davy Crockett story and the merchandising that followed because it allowed, nay *encouraged* them to reenact the frontier narrative on their very own turf. Rifle in hand, coonskin cap tilted rakishly to one side, a young boy could almost imagine that the willow tree in his backyard was a dense patch of forest hiding untold dangers. Thus the patterns of play that *Davy Crockett* encouraged became a means for children not only to flex their consumer muscles but also to engage with history, and nature, in a dynamic, "hands-on" way.

Tom Sawyer's Island was Disneyland's answer to the Davy Crockett craze. Introduced in 1956, it encouraged young children to emulate their onscreen hero on an elaborate playground disguised as a

frontier outpost. "You'll explore Injun Joe's Cave, watch 'wild animals' from Fort Wilderness, climb to Lookout Peak, and cross the Suspension Bridge," reported a Disneyland publication in 1956. "You'll even fish from piers, where bait and tackle are available."<sup>59</sup> Tom Sawyer's Island had an air of authenticity about it that no suburban backyard could match. In a 1958 article for *True West*, Disney touted the attraction as a veritable journey into history, where the stockades of Fort Wilderness resembled "the regimental headquarters where Davy Crockett and George Russell reported to Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson in the Cherokee Indian campaign of 1813" and Injun Joe's Cave harkened "back to the caves I used to explore in Hannibal [Missouri]."<sup>60</sup> Disney's attempts to legitimize Tom Sawyer's Island for a young readership suggest that, for him, the attraction was as much an educational tool as it was a freeform playground. Here children could expend their energies engaging in the idealized pastimes of their forebears, interacting with and exerting dominance over the natural world, and learning about the great American West.

Elsewhere Disney displayed an avid interest in promoting the natural sciences. Disney's popular *True Life Adventure* nature films, for example, introduced young American audiences to wildlife biology in its crudest form. Replete with kitschy commentary from a voice-over narrator, these films centered on dramatic or funny occurrences in the animal world, such as a standoff between a raptor and a rattlesnake or the mating antics of a Sandhill crane. In this way, they represented the beginning of the kind of dramatized but informative documentary style that would later become the norm for wildlife programs. Their influence was such that many schoolteachers began using them in their regular curriculum. By February 1956, *Nature's Half-Acre* had already been made available to schools, and, in a speech to the Probationary and Substitute Teacher's Organization, studio executive Larry Wagner estimated that some "fifty percent of Walt Disney's forthcoming productions will have educational implications."<sup>61</sup> Explaining the studio's new focus, Wagner noted, "Walt Disney is imbued with a deep responsibility to the millions of youngsters who see his movies."<sup>62</sup> The idea, perpetuated by Disney, that the *True Life Adventure* films were virtually a public service (a South Pasadena library held a free screening of *Beaver Valley* and *Seal Island* in 1955) perhaps obscures the fact that they were enormously profitable for the Walt Disney Company. Still, their unparalleled popularity in both commercial and educational forums suggests that safe, even humorous, portrayals of nature were widely embraced as being authentic and instructive, and, indeed, that Disney had effectively become part entertainment mogul, part civic benefactor.

So completely had Disney assumed the latter role that some schools paid homage to him with naming rights. One such institution, the Walt Disney School in Tullytown, Pennsylvania, opened in 1955 with a ceremony fit for a governor.<sup>63</sup> Residents gathered en masse at the local train station to greet Disney, where some held up welcome signs and others wore coonskin caps or Pinocchio masks. After his arrival, Disney headed to the onsite dedication ceremony. There he received a painting of the new school and a few oft-rehearsed sentiments from a young boy: "One reason [we named the school after you] is because we love you, as do all the children throughout the world."<sup>64</sup> At the conclusion of the ceremony, Disney posed for a photo with several students, presided over the sealing of a time capsule, and was then invited on a tour around the Disney-themed buildings. "Never Never Land," "Tinkerbell," and "Pleasure Island," (the detention hall, phone booth, and gymnasium, respectively) are perhaps the ultimate testaments to the enthusiasm with which Tullytown embraced Walt Disney, and the entire scenario an indicator that Americans had readily accepted Disney's unique brand of edutainment.

Disneyland provided a forum for children to assert some measure of independence in a carefully controlled play setting. They could choose where they wanted to go and what they wanted to see, within reason, and those attractions they did visit were not only entertaining but also educational. This was particularly true of Disney's nature attractions, which often taught children more about the Disney version of American history than about the natural world. Similarly, Disney films and television programs conveyed to a nationwide audience of children ideas about nature that were engaging, non-threatening,

and instructive. In the case of *Davy Crockett*, these ideas reflected the same values of individualism and democracy that politicians and child-rearing experts so strongly emphasized in the post-war era and also the sense of adventure that appealed to young children. Meanwhile, the *True Life Adventure* series gave Walt Disney a kind of legitimacy in educational circles. Disney therefore emerged on the winning side of the educational debate that had raged even before the launch of Sputnik; when the prevailing winds of change favored more dynamic modes of learning, Disney's sparkling new playground in Anaheim looked all the more inviting.

### **What is "Real," Anyway?: Marketing an Audio-Animatronic Paradise**

Walt Disney went to great lengths to ensure that Disneyland's approximations of nature appeared as realistic as possible without being boring or threatening, and, for reasons already explored, post-war, middle-class families generously rewarded his efforts. Yet, in the eyes of elite critics, such "tawdry substitutes" were not to be borne; nature was too sacred an entity to be cheapened for the purposes of mass consumption. This fundamental difference in opinion between critics and the masses reveals a great deal not only about the role of class in defining ideas about nature, but also about the great "authentic vs. inauthentic" debate still raging in environmental scholarship. Disneyland's various nature attractions touted images of "wild" nature that *seemed* real but that were actually the product of human ingenuity and state-of-the-art technology. Although it disgusted critics, this incongruity did little to deter middle-class patrons; if anything, it made the park all that much more appealing. At a time when suburban growth and increased consumerism combined to make Americans feel much more isolated from the environment, Disney's approximations of nature were imbued with just the right balance of realism and anthropomorphism to "remind" patrons of their intimate connection with the natural world. Thus Disney was able to market Disneyland as a kind of natural development in itself, ensuring its success by obscuring its synthetic origins.

During an hour-long television special commemorating Disneyland's tenth anniversary in 1965, Walt Disney gave viewers a retrospective glimpse into the park's construction process. He recalled his original visits to the proposed site, which then consisted of only "an orange grove and some farm houses," and remembered personally pacing off the outlines of the 200-acre park.<sup>65</sup> These memories are reinforced with video footage of Disney, decked out in a cowboy hat and jeans, traipsing purposefully through the fields of Anaheim and showing a boyish enthusiasm for his pet project. "If you want anything done right," he says, "you've gotta do it yourself."<sup>66</sup> Although short and seemingly trivial, this small segment speaks volumes about how Disney wanted to market Disneyland to the American public. Aided by a lively folk music soundtrack, it perpetuated the idea that from the very beginning, Disneyland was more a western homesteading venture spearheaded and held aloft by one man than a complex corporate endeavor requiring the services and resources of thousands of individuals. As such, the modifications to the land Disney's vision required, such as the carving out of hills and riverbeds and the clearing of orange trees to make way "for more exotic foliage and plants," took on an air of cultivation rather than destruction.<sup>67</sup>

Equating Disneyland with the homestead ideal may have been a way for Disney to downplay the impact of Disneyland on the Anaheim landscape. With the opening of the park in 1955, the former farming community became the locus of a booming tourist industry. New motels and businesses, of varying size and quality, seemed to appear overnight, their proprietors eager to serve the thousands of out-of-towners descending daily upon the area. The new Santa Ana Freeway, completed just prior to the park's opening, became so congested within the first few months that the Automobile Club of Southern California released a map designating alternate routes from the freeway to the park.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, sparkling new suburban housing developments advertised their proximity to the park as a lure to potential residents.<sup>69</sup>

To be sure, many Anaheim residents embraced Disneyland as an invaluable source of revenue and

publicity for the community. In an editorial for the *Anaheim Bulletin* in 1955, resident Howard Loudin made the optimistic, if dubious, claim that "any business established to bring happiness cannot develop into a detriment to the community in which it is situated."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Walt Disney fully realized the importance of Disneyland to Anaheim's bottom line and frequently used that knowledge in his favor in local politics. Yet, as historian John Findlay has noted, some felt a profound ambivalence toward the park. These individuals blamed Disneyland for a variety of problems stemming from the town's sudden growth spurt, most notably the unattractive commercial strip along Harbor Boulevard.<sup>71</sup> Even Disney himself displayed a growing unease with Anaheim's urban sprawl, although he seemed unable to acknowledge fully his own complicity in it. It was, in fact, his frustration with the "cheap and tawdry" establishments that "detracted from Disneyland's atmosphere while cashing in on its crowds of visitors" that led him to try again with Disney World in Florida.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, Walt Disney extolled the virtues of homespun values and simple living even as he perpetuated Anaheim's ascent (or descent?) into urbanity. He invited patrons to forge connections with a geographically and topographically diverse natural world that did not exist before 1954. He held up Disneyland as a harbinger of wealth and prosperity to Anaheim even as he denigrated the more unseemly aspects of the town's new urban character. How does one explicate these seeming contradictions? William Cronon's controversial essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," might provide a good starting point:

To the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves—what we imagine to be the most precious part—aloof from its entanglements.<sup>73</sup>

Although he would never phrase it as Cronon did, perhaps Disney envisioned Disneyland as the "real" in an increasingly "surreal" urban landscape. Perhaps Disneyland was Disney's tacit permission to the American public to pretend, if only for a day or a week, that man-made rivers and audio-animatronic animals were the real thing and that the only thing standing in the way of getting back to nature was a small admission fee.

That Disney may have felt this way is perhaps evidenced by his bitter battles to keep the Anaheim skyline clear of hotel high-rises. The issue came to a head in 1963, when the Sheraton Hotel Company announced its intentions to build a twenty-two story hotel near the park.<sup>74</sup> Disney complained to the Anaheim city council that visitors would be able to see the proposed building from within the park's protective berm, and that such a blight would ruin Disneyland's sense of fantasy. Anaheim ultimately sided with Disney, and, for a time, the only high-rise in the area was Disney's own Matterhorn. Yet, one must wonder: was it fantasy that Disney sought to protect, or a kind of altered reality? After all, "even before its completion, the Matterhorn was the tallest mountain in Orange County."<sup>75</sup> It "helped bring visual order" to an area at a loss for real topographical landmarks, and thus became, for better or worse, an enduring fixture of the Southern California landscape.<sup>76</sup>

Whatever the true nature of Disney's motivations, contemporary critics argued that Disney was simply trying to pull one over on the American public; by enticing patrons with machines disguised as animals, fake mountains, and cheesy river rides, Disneyland was the epitome of the modern capitalist cash cow that was being milked for all it was worth. "As in the Disney movies, the whole world, the universe, and all man's striving for dominion over self and nature, have been reduced to a sickening blend of cheap formulas packaged to sell," wrote novelist Julian Halevy for *The Nation* in 1958.<sup>77</sup> "To me [the park] felt like a giant cash register," commented another observer, "clicking and clanging, as creatures

of Disney magic came tumbling down from their lofty places in my daydreams.”<sup>78</sup> Richard Schickel, the well-known film critic and author of the controversial book *The Disney Version*, called audio-animatronics a “grotesquery.”<sup>79</sup>

The American public, by and large, did not echo these sentiments. Patrons knew that Disneyland was a commercial venture from the outset and were willing to pay the price as long as they received a good value in return:

Disney had expected that \$2 would see a child through enough of his \$17 million wonderland, but mothers said twice that was needed to keep any enterprising small boy pacified. They added, as they emerged spent and spinning, that it was probably well worth it.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, few middle-class patrons took offense at Disney’s simulations of the natural world. If anything, they enjoyed Disney’s technologically informed attempts to approximate reality. In her Disneyland travelogue for the *Los Angeles Times*, reporter Lynn Rogers admired the seeming authenticity of the Jungle Cruise experience: “Deadly Mau Mau natives lurked in the bushes, rhinos and hippos leered at us, elephants trumpeted and lions roared. It’s pretty realistic.”<sup>81</sup> Some observers even went so far as to claim that Disney’s depictions of nature preserved for posterity the wonders of an already disappearing natural world. In his speech commemorating Disney’s “distinguished service to conservation,” Ludlow Griscom of the National Audubon Society said that Disney’s *True Life Adventure* films “aroused [viewers’] desire to conserve priceless natural assets forever.”<sup>82</sup> *American Forests* writer Weldon Woodson called the Jungle Cruise “a portrayal of the earth’s fast vanishing wilderness” that “refreshes the spirit as it brings the voyagers close to nature in the raw.”<sup>83</sup> Although few patrons were quite so deferential as Woodson and Griscom, it is clear that still fewer shared the highbrow critics’ disdain for Disney’s synthetic portrayals of nature.

How does one account for this dichotomy between popular and critical opinion? One certainly might look to the class distinctions evident in such a division; most Disneyland patrons were middle-class workers, while generally the park’s most vociferous critics were highbrow literary types. Elites have a long history in America of seeking to capture nature in its wild, untamed, and “authentic” form and reserving it as domain for the privileged. This was particularly true of many Nineteenth Century urban elites who, freed of having to labor upon the land for their livelihoods, were at liberty to sanctify nature and set it aside as a place of recreation.<sup>84</sup> Ever since, “celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for the well-to-do city folks.”<sup>85</sup> Perhaps, then, Disneyland’s portrayals of nature represented a threat to entrenched, elitist ideals of the wilderness. Not only did the park bring nature conveniently to the masses, prompting a kind of democratization of wilderness recreation, but it also challenged the idea that nature had to be “real” in order to be appreciated. Not unlike the housing developers who marketed their suburban neighborhoods as pastoral havens, Disneyland invited patrons to accept the manufactured as natural.

America’s middle class could now enjoy an ostensibly realistic vision of nature that was fun and family-friendly. Better yet, families could prepare themselves for Disneyland’s simulated wilderness experience by traveling to the park via automobile:

The car allowed the family to escape the pressures of modern times: out there, on the freeway, it was still possible to play the part of the pioneer, headed bravely off into that unknown America of the presuburban past, in search of adventure and self-exploration.<sup>86</sup>

Disneyland’s success rested largely on the fact that the park was easily accessible via the new Santa Ana Freeway and that it was extremely automobile-friendly. The Richfield Oil Company, for example, sponsored an official Disney road map to help visitors find their way to a gargantuan parking lot that

could accommodate up to 12,000 cars.<sup>87</sup> To further ensure that drivers made it to the park safe and sound, Disney released *Freeway Phobia, or the Art of Driving the Superhighway* in 1964. This promotional film, intended to educate viewers in proper freeway etiquette, stars Goofy as each of three archetypal bad drivers (*Neglecterus maximus*, for instance, fails to take his driving responsibility seriously by reading, drinking coffee, and even shaving on the road).<sup>88</sup> While the film is humorous, its message underscores the importance of the freeway to Disney's success. In short, Disney did well to cater to yet another hallmark of the Cold War era: the family road trip.

In an interesting twist on the formula, then, Disneyland provided for middle-class families the same kind of natural ideal that elites had so jealously guarded in the past. Although the audio-animatronic elephants of Jungle Cruise could hardly compare to those the affluent could encounter on a real safari, middle-class suburbanites could embrace Disneyland's idealized, pristine images of nature with a similar feeling of privilege and escape. Furthermore, the palpable sense, perpetuated by Walt Disney himself, that Disneyland was somehow more real than the urban-industrial society lying outside its doorstep paralleled elitist ideas about returning to nature to discover one's "true self." Such a "homecoming" was achieved through the requisite journey, or trek, to the wilderness, and nearly all the possible modes of transportation—train, mule, steamboat, stagecoach, and automobile—are integrated into Disneyland's format. Thus, even though critics in the 1950s lambasted Disneyland for its fundamental fakeness, many of the attractions they criticized perpetuated the same ideas about nature that they themselves held so dear. Their protests were perhaps the most revealing sign that nature as refuge was no longer constricted by traditional notions of authenticity.

## Conclusion

Coming to terms with Disneyland's success in the post-war era requires understanding the political, cultural, and social factors that influenced the lives of its patrons. Young families enjoyed Disneyland because it was tailored specifically to them; every aspect of the park's construction, from the landscaping to the attractions, catered to prevailing cultural ideas about childhood and the home. This is not to presume, however, that all post-war families uniformly endorsed or observed such ideas. Cold War propaganda may have portrayed the average nuclear family as the picture of homogenization and felicity, but the reality was much more complicated. Home meant different things to different people, and certainly no two families shared identical opinions about the related issues of commercialism, child-rearing, and Cold War politics. Still, Disneyland's success was nothing if not proof that most middle-class families at least paid lip service to the highly politicized ideal of domesticity and saw Disneyland as a representative of the most reassuring and enjoyable aspects of that ideal.

In using nature as a framework through which to examine this historical issue, I have sought not only to clarify the reasons for the park's popularity in the decade prior to Walt Disney's death, but also to illuminate middle-class perceptions of the natural world in a specifically Cold War context. Disneyland's nature attractions, in tandem with Disney's feature films and television programs, were key to promoting the park for its safe, family-friendly atmosphere devoid of the usual foibles and uncertainties of an urban-industrial, post-nuclear society. Furthermore, they represented a means to inculcate in the Baby Boomer generation an appreciation for the American wilderness and a sense of national pride. Finally, they encouraged patrons to think anthropomorphically about nature and to draw comfort from perceived similarities between the human and animal worlds. Disney's natural treatments were, therefore, much more influential than one might originally suppose, and, indeed, a major factor in Disneyland's success.

## Notes

1. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 29-30.
2. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xxii.
3. Mildred Gilman, "Why They Can't Wait to Wed," *Parents Magazine and Family Home Guide*, November 1958, 46.
4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. May, 18.
6. Boyer, 353.
7. *Ibid.*, 352.
8. Louis S. Warren, ed., *American Environmental History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 257.
9. May, 17.
10. "Fallout: The Silent Killer," *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 August 1959.
11. T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 50.
12. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 183.
13. May, 153.
14. "Disneyland Given Label of 'Dream Come True,'" *Anaheim Bulletin*, 1 May 1961.
15. Werner W. Weiss, "Mine Train Through Nature's Wonderland," *Yesterland*, 5 April 2004 <[www.yesterland.com/minetrain.html](http://www.yesterland.com/minetrain.html)>. This well-written, nicely formatted website provides a wealth of information about discontinued Disneyland rides.
16. John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 8.
17. "A gardener's visit to Disneyland," *Sunset*, March 1961, 100.
18. May, 17.
19. Weldon D. Woodson, "Through the Jungles of Disneyland," *American Forests* 73 (January 1956): 22.
20. "Frontierland's Keel Boat Ride," *E-Ticket*, Spring 2000, 26.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Emma Lambert, "Don't fight it. You can't whip Mickey Mouse," *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in 50's America*, ed. Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2000), 30.
23. "Disneyland Recreates Primeval West in New Nature's Wonderland Adventure," *News from Disneyland*, (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), 1960.
24. Richard Francaviglia, "Walt Disney's Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1999):167.
25. Karal Ann Marling, "Imagineering the Disney Theme Parks," *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, Karal Ann Marling, ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 79.
26. May, 10.
27. "Turnerian" is a reference to the Nineteenth Century historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In his highly influential essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he argued that America's national development was dependent on the discrete stages of frontier settlement associated with westward expansion.
28. Quoted in Karal Ann Marling, "Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream," *American Art* 5 (1991): 203.
29. "Adventureland: Behind the Scenes with Fess Parker," Disneyland, ABC Network, 30 May 1956, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive).
30. Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 204.
31. *Swiss Family Robinson*, dir. Ken Annakin, Videocassette/DVD, 126 min., Walt Disney Productions, 1960.
32. Watts, 305.
33. Walt Disney, "What I've Learned from the Animals," *American Magazine* (Jan-Jun 1953), 107.
34. Margaret J. King, "The Audience in the Wilderness: The Disney Nature Films," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (Summer 1996): 68.
35. *The Vanishing Prairie*, dir. James Algar, 35 mm, Walt Disney Productions, 1954.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 301.
38. Glenn Davis, *Childhood and History in America* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1976), 128.
39. Nancy Pottishman Weiss, "Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock's Baby and Child Care," *American Quarterly* 29:5 (Winter 1977): 524.



40. Ibid.
41. Davis, 125.
42. May, 120.
43. John Cleverly and D.C. Phillips, *Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 95.
44. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pearce, 1957), 3.
45. As qtd. in Marcia Winn, "A Spank and a Kiss," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 1953, H32.
46. Diane Ravitch, "Education in the Post-Sputnik Era," *Childhood in America*, ed. Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason (New York: New York University, 2000), 322.
47. Ravitch, 324.
48. Ibid.
49. Spock, 399.
50. Hedda Hopper, "Walt Disney Called All-Year Santa Claus," *The Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 1956, C10.
51. Pryor, 86.
52. *Nature's Wonderland*, Employee Handbook, (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), 1960.
53. "Collector's Corner," *The E-Ticket*, Spring 2000, 5.
54. *Davy Crockett*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive: Hearst Vault Material, 1955).
55. J.G. Boyle, " 'Be Sure You're Right, Then Go Ahead.' The Early Disney Westerns," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (Summer 1996): 73.
56. Bosley Crowther, "Screen: Disney and the Coonskin Set," *New York Times*, May 26, 1955, 36.
57. "Disney, Disneyland and Davy Crockett . . . A talk with Fess Parker," *E-Ticket*, Spring 2000, 17.
58. Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 317.
59. *News from Disneyland* (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), 1956.
60. Walt Disney, "Frontierland," *True West*, May-June 1958, 13.
61. "Disney Role in Schools Outlined for Teachers," *The Los Angeles Times*, 19 Feb. 1956, 12.
62. Ibid.
63. *Davy Crockett*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive: Hearst Vault Material), 1955.
64. Ibid.
65. "Disneyland 10th Anniversary," *Walt Disney Treasures: Disneyland USA*, Special Historical Broadcasts, DVD, Walt Disney Productions, 2001.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. "Disneyland Routes," map, *Anaheim Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1955.
69. "Glen Dell Park," advertisement, (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), c. 1955.
70. Howard Loudon, "Disneyland . . . Friend or Foe," *Anaheim Bulletin*, 8 July 1953, 7.
71. Findlay, 103.
72. Watts, 423.
73. William Cronon, ed. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 81.
74. Findlay, 104.
75. Cynthia Lindsay, *The Natives are Restless* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960), 160.
76. Findlay, 104.
77. As quoted in Schickel, 327.
78. As quoted in Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 172.
79. Schickel, 332.
80. "Disneyland," *Life*, 15 Aug. 1955, 35.
81. Lynn Rogers, "Disney Ideal for Holiday Tour," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Dec. 1956, A21.
82. "Walt Disney Receives Audubon Medal," *Audubon* 58 (Jan.-Feb. 1956): 25.
83. Weldon D. Woodson, "Through the Jungles of Disneyland," *American Forests* 73 (Jan. 1956): 22.
84. Cronon, 223 and Williams, 81.
85. Cronon, 223.
86. Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 176.

87. Gladwin Hill, "A World Walt Disney Created," *New York Times*, July 31, 1955, X17 and "Official Disney Road Map," brochure, (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), c. 1960.
88. *Freeway Phobia, or the Art of Driving the Superhighway*, 35mm, Les Clark, dir. (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1964).

## Bibliography

### PRIMARY SOURCE LITERATURE

#### Popular Magazine, Newspaper, and Journal Articles

- "500 Local Sunday School Children to Play Role in Disneyland Opening." *Anaheim Bulletin*, 14 July 1955, 4.
- "A gardener's visit to Disneyland." *Sunset*, March 1961, 100-101.
- Barclay, Dorothy. "Parents Look to Their Rights." *New York Times*, 22 May 1955, 267.
- Barclay, Dorothy. "Specialists Urge Fun for Parents." *New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1955, 32.
- Buchmueller, Alfred D. "Parental Challenge: the 7-to-12'er." *New York Times*, 18 Sep. 1960, SM92.
- "California Spectacular Plus." *Newsweek*, 25 July 1955, 32.
- "Children's Purple Phrases Defended." *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Nov. 1949, A8.
- Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: Disney and the Coonskin Set." *New York Times*, 26 May 1955, 36.
- "Disney Role in Schools Outlined for Teachers." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Feb. 1956, 12.
- Disney, Walt. "Frontierland." *True West*, May-June 1958, 10-13.
- Disney, Walt. "The Lurking Camera." *Atlantic Monthly* 194 (Aug. 1954): 23-27.
- Disney, Walt. "What I've Learned from the Animals." *American Magazine*, Jan-June 1953, 23 & 106-109.
- "Disneyland." *Life*, 15 Aug. 1955, 35-38.
- "Disneyland Adds New Wonderland" *Anaheim Bulletin*, 25 March 1960.
- "Disneyland Dedication from Coast." *New York Times*, 18 July 1955, 41.
- "Disneyland Given Label of 'Dream Come True.'" *Anaheim Bulletin*, 1 May 1961, C8.
- "Disneyland History." *News From Disneyland*, 4 July 1967.
- "Disneyland Recreates Primeval West in New Nature's Wonderland Adventure." *News From Disneyland*, 1960.
- "Disneyland Routes." Map. *Anaheim Gazette*. 15 Sept. 1955.
- Gilman, Mildred. "Why They Can't Wait to Wed." *Parents Magazine and Family Home Guide*. Nov. 1958, 46, 86-87.
- "Glen Dell Park." Advertisement. c. 1955.
- Grossmam, Jean Schick. "The Place of Fun in Family Life." *New York Times*, 1 Jan 1961, SM22.
- "Fallout, the Silent Killer." *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 Aug. 1959.
- "Here's Your First View of Disneyland." *Look* 18, 2 Nov. 1954, 82-86

- Hill, Gladwin. "California Season Launched in Death Valley." *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1955, XX29.
- Hill, Gladwin. "Hollywood is Shifting Her Civic Scenery." *New York Times*, 8 May 1955, XX37.
- Hill, Gladwin. "A World Walt Disney Created." *New York Times*, 31 July 1955, X17.
- Hopper, Hedda. "Walt Disney Called All-Year Santa Claus." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 1956, C10.
- "Initial Families Move Into New Anaheim Residences." *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Feb. 1956, E12.
- Lee, Annie. "Mickey Mouse Star Collects as Hobby." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Feb. 1956, B6.
- Lee, Annie. "Junior Press Club: Shooter of Wildlife (With Film) Tells of Ants." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Oct. 1956, A1.
- Lee, Annie. "Young Actors Find Pioneer 'Life' Exciting in Film Work." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Apr. 1956, B1.
- Loudon, Howard. "Disneyland . . . Friend or Foe?" *Anaheim Bulletin*, 8 July 1955, 7.
- Rogers, Lynn. "Disneyland Ideal for Holiday Tour." *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Dec. 1956, A21.
- Rogers, Lynn. "Suburban Tour High in Interest." *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Feb. 1956, A23.
- Pryor, Thomas M. "Land of Fantasia is Rising on Coast," *New York Times*, 2 May 1954, 86.
- "S. Pasadena Library to Show Disney Films." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Jan. 1955, M2.
- Shanley, J.P. "King of 'Disneyland'" *New York Times*, 5 Dec. 1954, X17.
- "Southland's Tree Loss Stirs Group." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Jan. 1956, 8.
- Stendler, Celia B. "Changing Styles, Unchanged Youngsters." *New York Times*, 23 July 1950, SM14.
- "Walt Disney Appointed Honorary Fire Chief." *Los Angeles Times*, 15 Oct. 1956, C8.
- "Walt Disney Receives Audubon Medal." *Audubon* 58 (Jan.-Feb. 1956): 25, 45.
- "Walt Disney Wins U.S. Conservation Award." *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Feb. 1956, 14.
- Winn, Marcia. "A Spank and a Kiss." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 1953, H32.
- Woodson, Weldon D. "Through the Jungles of Disneyland." *American Forests* 73 (Jan. 1956): 20-22.
- "The World Beneath Us: The Richfield Show in Disneyland." Advertisement. *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Jan 1956, D134.

### Books

- Lindsay, Cynthia. *The Natives are Restless*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960.
- Spock, Benjamin. *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pearce, 1957.
- Spock, Benjamin. *Problems of Parents*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.

### Park Literature/Brochures (all obtained through the Anaheim Central Library)

- "Disneyland Recreates Primeval West in New Nature's Wonderland Adventure." *News from Disneyland*. 1960.
- "Nature's Wonderland." Employee Handbook. 1960.
- "Nature's Wonderland." Park Poster. 1960.

*News From Disneyland*. 1956.

“Official Disney Road Map.” Brochure. Date Unknown.

### **Films/Television Episodes**

Algar, James, dir. *The Living Desert*, Videocassette, 69 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1953).

Algar, James, dir. *The Vanishing Prairie*, 35 mm, (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1954).

Annakin, Ken, dir. *Swiss Family Robinson*, Videocassette/DVD, 126 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1960).

Clark, Les, dir. *Freeway Phobia, or the Art of Driving the Superhighway*, 35mm, (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1964).

*Davy Crockett*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive: Hearst Vault Material, 1955).

*Disneyland: Adventureland, Behind the Scenes with Fess Parker*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 30 May 1956).

*Disneyland: Operation Undersea*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 29 June 1956).

*Disneyland: Tomorrowland, Magic Highway U.S.A.*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 30 July 1958).

Fleischer, Richard, dir. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Videocassette/DVD, 127 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1954).

*Foreign Children Visit Disneyland, Anaheim, CA*, Videocassette, (UCLA Film and Television Archive: Hearst Vault Material, 15 Nov.1956).

Foster, Norman, dir. *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, Videocassette, 93 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1954).

Geronimi, Clyde, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, dir. *Alice in Wonderland*, Videocassette/DVD, 75 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1951).

Stevenson, Robert, dir. *Old Yeller*, Videocassette/DVD, 83 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1957).

Swift, David, dir. *The Parent Trap*, Videocassette/DVD, 129 min., (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 1961).

*Walt Disney Treasures: Disneyland USA, Special Historical Broadcasts*, DVD, (Buena Vista: Walt Disney Productions, 2001).

### **SECONDARY SOURCE LITERATURE**

#### **Journal/Magazine Articles**

Boyle, J.G. “‘Be Sure You’re Right, Then Go Ahead:’ The Early Disney Westerns.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (Summer 1996): 69-81.

“Collector’s Corner,” *E-Ticket*, Spring 2000.

“Disney, Disneyland and Davy Crockett . . . A talk with Fess Parker,” *E-Ticket*, Spring 2000.

- Francaviglia, Richard. "Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West." *Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1999): 155-182.
- "Frontierland's Keel Boat Ride." *E-Ticket*. Spring 2000.
- Hastings, A. Walter. "Bambi and the Hunting Ethos." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (Summer 1996): 53-59.
- King, Margaret J. "The Audience in the Wilderness: The Disney Nature Films." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (Summer 1996): 60-68.
- Marling, Karal Ann. "Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream." *American Art* 5 (1991): 169-207.
- Watts, Steven. "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century." *The Journal of American History* 82:1 (June 1995): 84-110.
- Weiss, Nancy Pottishman. "Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock's Baby and Child Care." *American Quarterly* 29:5 (Winter 1977): 519-546.

### Books

- Abrams, Nathan and Julie Hughes., ed. *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in '50's America*. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2000.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1994.
- Boyer, Paul. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Cleverly, John and D.C. Phillips. *Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1986.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996.
- Davis, Glenn. *Childhood and History in America*. New York: Psychohistory Press, 1976.
- Davis, Susan. *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997.
- Fass, Paula S. and Mary Ann Mason, ed. *Childhood in America*. New York: New York University, 2000.
- Findlay, John. *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Lears, T.J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*. New York: Pantheon, 1981.
- Leebron, Elizabeth and Lynn Gartley. *Walt Disney: A Guide to References and Resources*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979.
- Maier, Thomas. *Dr. Spock: An American Life*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

- Marling, Karal Ann, ed. *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*. Paris: Flammarion, 1997.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Norton, Mary Beth and Ruth M. Alexander. *Major Problems in American Women's History*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1996.
- Price, Jennifer. *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Schickel, Richard. *The Disney Version*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1997.
- Warren, Louis S., ed. *American Environmental History*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.
- Wasko, Janet. *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001.
- Watts, Steven. *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Williams, Raymond. "Ideas of Nature" in *Problems of Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso, 1980.
- Wilson, Alexander. *The Culture of Nature: The North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992.
- Woloch, Nancy. *Women and the American Experience*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000.

**Websites**

- Weiss, Werner. *Yesterland*. <[www.yesterland.com](http://www.yesterland.com)>.

How fair her conversation A summer afternoon, Her household her assembly; And when the sun go down, Her voice among the aisles  
Incite the timid prayer Of the minutest cricket, The most unworthy flower. When all the children sleep, She turns as long away As will  
suffice to light her lamps, Then bending from the sky. With infinite affection An infinite care, Her golden finger on her lip, Will silence  
everywhere. Emily Dickinson. Topic(s) of this poem: mother. Poems by Emily Dickinson : 651 / 1232. [« prev. poem.](#) [next poem »](#).  
Comments about Nature The Gentlest Mother Is by Emily Dickinson. Rushi