



TRAVEL & EXPERIENCES

Humble Barn Bore Dreams

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APRIL 17, 2003 12 AM PT

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It's only a barn. But what a place the saggy-roofed, red-sided structure is.

Few who pass by the farm building at the edge of Griffith Park realize that it is the birthplace of Disneyland. And that, like the amusement park, the old shack is meticulously designed, maintained -- and revered.

It's Walt Disney's barn, the backyard shed that for half a century was tucked away behind the animator-turned-impresario's house on Carolwood Drive in Holmby Hills.

Disney was 65 when he died in 1966. After his wife, Lillian, died at the age of 98 in 1997, the barn was dismantled. It was moved two years later to a portion of Zoo Drive parkland used by the Los Angeles Live Steamers -- a group of train hobbyists that Disney helped form.

In Holmby Hills during the early 1950s, the barn was the workshop for Disney's own tiny railroad. There, he tinkered with the scale-model, steam-powered locomotives that he stoked with tiny pellets of coal and steered over tracks meandering through his five-acre estate.

Disney's friends gathered at the barn on weekends to work on the 1/8-scale cars and take rides on the Carolwood Pacific Railroad, named after the street out front.

When they finished laying tracks and building mock trestle bridges and digging the 90-foot tunnel that was the centerpiece for the miniature rail line, Disney and his buddies would meet in the barn to brainstorm a bigger railroad -- a full-sized one.

On a barn workbench, Disney sketched out a plan for a long, looping track that would encircle an amusement park to showcase his studio's growing roster of cartoon and feature-film characters.

The plan was to operate it next to the Burbank studios as an auxiliary attraction so visitors touring the studio would have something to do on days when there was no filming.

"Disneyland started right here where we're standing," said Michael Broggie, a Disney historian and author who is co-founder with his wife, Sharon, of the Carolwood Pacific Historical Society -- a group that turned the barn into a mini-Disney museum. "The beginnings of a lot started in this little space."

Disney modeled his backyard barn after a barn he remembered from his boyhood on his family's 40-acre farm in Marceline, Mo. He realized that a conventional barn would overwhelm his tiny railroad cars. So Disney used a technique called forced perspective to design a 19-foot by 21-foot barn that looked small.

He also built it to look old. Realistic sags were engineered into its roof and front doors by studio carpenters. Broggie's late father, Roger, headed the studio machine shop and was recruited to help build the steam locomotive that his boss used on the backyard railroad.

Michael Broggie and his older brother, Roger Jr., traveled with their father from their Sylmar home to work on the railroad. Michael was 6 at the time.

The boys would retrieve train cars from their storage space inside the tunnel and roll them down the track to Yensid Valley -- “Yensid” is Disney spelled backward. “We’d hook them up while Walt and my dad steamed up the engine,” said Broggie, 60, of Thousand Oaks.

“Walt had special anthracite coal ground to 1/8 scale back in Scranton, Pa., and shipped out in 100-pound bags. He had a little 1/8-scale shovel he used to load the coal in the firebox.”

By 1953 Disney, Roger Broggie and other studio workers were excited about building a larger railroad. They envisioned a 16-acre Disneyland park on a spot at the edge of the Burbank studios.

These days, the site is used for ABC offices and the new Disney animation building.

“Walt went over to the Burbank City Council and presented the amusement park idea. He thought that, in the grand plan, maybe the railroad could connect with the Griffith Park railroad and you could have an extended rail run,” Michael Broggie said this week.

“But one of the council members, so the story goes, stood up after Walt was done with the presentation and said, ‘We don’t want any squawking carousels in our city limits.’ So with that comment, Walt, who was accompanied by illustrator Harper Goff, who did the original concept drawings for the little park, said: ‘Let’s get out of here.’ ”

After that, Disney hired urban planning expert Buzz Price to pinpoint the best place for an amusement park and Anaheim was selected, said Broggie -- whose books include “Walt Disney’s Railroading Story.”

“Disneyland enabled Walt to build a full-size train, even though it was a scaled-down version of a real train.” The C.K. Holliday and the E.P. Ripley, the two steam engines

built by Roger Broggie and his co-workers that circled Disneyland in 1955, are still in use.

For years, Disney occasionally slipped into a railroader's costume and took the controls of the Disneyland train engines. Passengers were oblivious to the identity of the engineer, Broggie said.

Craftsmen such as Roger Broggie, background artist John Hench, illustrator Herb Ryman and others who gathered at the Carolwood Drive barn formed the nucleus of what later became known as Walt Disney Imagineering, designers of rides and attractions for Disneyland and other parks. As a 12-year-old, Michael Broggie helped test prototype cars for the Autopia ride to make certain they were sturdy enough to stand up to the wear and tear of rambunctious children.

These days, Imagineering designers are headquartered in Glendale, a half-mile east of the barn. Disney Studios is a half-mile west.

According to Broggie, Disney's daughter Diane Disney Miller stepped in at the last minute to prevent the barn from being bulldozed after the Carolwood Drive home was sold to pay Lillian Disney's estate taxes. Pieces of the dismantled building, along with artifacts saved from inside, were stored until land at the Griffith Park site was secured from the city. The barn is on permanent loan from the Disney family.

The barn is open to the public the third Sunday of each month -- including this Easter Sunday -- from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Its entry gate is next to a free parking lot at the eastern edge of the Live Steamers site, where free miniature train rides are offered. Carolwood Historical Society members such as Terry and Robbin Lynn of Carlsbad will be there to explain its history and its status as the only Disney attraction in the world that is open without an admission charge.

Disney family members say they are pleased that volunteers teamed up with Los Angeles city officials to preserve the place.

“It’s a perfect setting. Everything’s landscaped just like it was at Carolwood -- even the tangerine tree is in the same spot,” said Disney’s grandson Walter Elias Disney Miller, a Calabasas resident who fondly remembers playing in the barn as a youngster.

“Trains meant so much to my grandpa. Trains represented the future to him. What lay at the end of the track always fascinated him.”

No wonder Disney fans are pleased that the barn hasn’t come to the end of its line.



Bob Pool

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