

# Nature as “Edutainment”: The Baby-Boomer Generation Does Disneyland

*Angela Hawk*

*Wrtier's comment:* In the earliest stages of my research for my senior honors thesis, entitled “‘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,” I was struck by the number of articles in which Walt Disney’s contemporaries lauded him for his quasi-educational brand of entertainment. Conservationists and educators alike were particularly impressed by Disney’s *True-Life Adventure* films, which documented events in the natural world in a humorous and dramatic fashion. I began to wonder whether this overwhelmingly positive reaction to Disney’s unique brand of “edutainment” was related not only to prevailing ideas about education and childrearing in the Cold War era, but also to common perceptions about nature. Disney, despite his declarations to the contrary, embraced his role as an educator and role model to America’s youth and used nature in his Anaheim park and in his films to promote a hands-on educational experience that was undeniably popular with post-war American families. Along the way I explore the lure of treasured Disneyland attractions, such as Tom Sawyer’s Island, and take a deeper look into the origins of the Davy Crockett craze that swept the nation in the mid-1950s.

– *Angela Hawk*

*Instructor's comment:* Angela Hawk’s “Nature as ‘Edutainment’” is a tightly-written, provocative exploration of how Walt Disney used and manipulated popular ideas of nature to lure middle-class vacationers to his new theme park after 1955. Hawk does more than lay out the weird borderland between nature and culture in peculiar neighborhood of 1950s Anaheim. She shows us how the park that has become synonymous with fakery and illusion comforted visitors with impressions of the natural and the authentic, and how important that project was to Disneyland’s success. Her essay is an excellent example of historical detective work, historical writing, and environmental history.

– Louis S. Warren, *History Department*

I'm not trying to preach or teach. I'm not presuming to be an educator. I'm trying to do things that are interesting.  
– Walt Disney, *Los Angeles Times*, 1954 (quoted in Pryor 86)

[The True Life Adventure films] always present some phase of nature as living drama. The emphasis is on dramatic coherence and progression so that they can be readily comprehended by theater audiences, for they are made primarily for mass entertainment—although they are also automatically informative.

– Walt Disney, “The Lurking Camera,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 1954

Walt Disney always insisted that Disneyland catered 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 towards parenting advocating strict disciplinary measures 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.

The post-war era signaled a remarkable shift in the way Americans thought about children. One way to understand this shift is to examine the virtual disappearance of the working child. Throughout the nineteenth century, child labor was seen not only as “economically indispensable” to the household, but also as a “legitimate social practice” (Zelizer 261). Children who contributed to the family income presumably developed a strong work ethic and a keen sense of duty. By

the turn of the twentieth century, a large minority of American children still served as family wage earners; according to the 1900 U.S. Census "one child out of every six between the ages of ten and fifteen was gainfully employed" (Zelizer 260). Attitudes towards child labor began to shift in the early twentieth century, as the labor reform movement, closely linked to the feminist movement, gained momentum. Enlisting the support of the National Child Labor Committee, Florence Kelley and Lillian Wald lobbied Congress throughout the first decade of the twentieth century to create a federal children's bureau (Muncy 270). The purpose of this proposed agency, finally realized in 1912, was to conduct "comprehensive and continuous studies" on issues related to child welfare, including the exploitation of child laborers (Muncy 268). Two very different views of childhood existed; in essence, "the price of a useful wage-earning child was directly counterposed to the moral value of an economically useless but emotionally priceless child" (Zelizer 260). The latter prevailed, and by 1930, U.S. Census figures reported fewer than 700,000 laborers under than fifteen years of age (Zelizer 260).

The decline of the child laborer brought new ideas about childrearing, motherhood, and the home. In the years before World War II, these ideas 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 (Woloch 301). 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 (Davis 128). 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" (Weiss 524). Such advice was not only intended to encourage proper socialization of the child, but also to protect the mother's mental and physical wellbeing (Weiss 524). 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" (Davis 125). To unduly indulge one's child or to eschew professional advice was to ill equip her/ him for the adult world.

The end of World War II prompted a renewed emphasis on the family in America. As such, procreation took on "almost mythic proportions," both in terms of the sheer numbers of people choosing to have children and also in regards to its place in the cultural and political rhetoric of the period (May 120). 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 prompted a transition away from the more stringent methods of discipline advocated in the pre-war years and towards 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 (Cleverly and Phillips 95). The height of Spock's fame came in the 1950s, when even Lucy from *I Love Lucy* turned to *Baby and Child Care* for help (Maier 200). In the episode from December 1955 Lucy pulls out her dog-eared copy of *Baby and Child Care* in order to prove a point to Ricky about nursery school. When, in typical *I Love Lucy* fashion, Ricky points out the Lucy hasn't given him the true gist of Spock's words, Lucy says, "What does he know? He was never a mother!"

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" (3). 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" (qtd. in Winn H32). 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 (Ravitch 322). 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 (Ravitch 324). 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" (Ravitch 324). 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" (399). Thus the threat of Russia's technological prowess prompted not only a renewed

emphasis on a science-enriched curriculum, but it also encouraged the 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, have fun, and 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 perceived 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. (Hopper C10)

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 (Pryor 86). He even went so far as to argue that Disneyland's dramatized treatment of the "hard facts that have created America" could act as a source of "courage and inspiration to all the world" (Pryor 86). Thus, despite his declarations to the contrary, Disney clearly envisioned Disneyland not only as a forum for amusement, but also 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 animals. 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" (*Nature's Wonderland*). 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, board games, and playsuits became the must-have items of the young baby boomer generation, and Fess Parker as Crockett became an overnight hero ("Collector's Corner" 5). An anonymous news segment from 1955 shows young children sleeping, bathing, and even toilet training with their beloved Davy Crockett items (*Davy Crockett*). In the same segment, Davy Crockett's great grandson good-naturedly sports a coonskin cap and signs autographs for the children. The producers then urge the decidedly tone-deaf and self-conscious older gentlemen to sing the Davy Crockett Ballad for the cameras, with embarrassing results. 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" (Boyle 73). 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. (Crowther 36)

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 ("Disney, Disneyland")?

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 from 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 (Watts 317). 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 *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.

The suburban home was perhaps the ideal setting for children to emulate Davy Crockett, for suburbia itself was a new frontier. Blissfully removed from urban blight but reassuringly endowed of modern conveniences, suburban homes signaled a means for families to follow in the footsteps of their settler forebears. In fact, the ideals of self-reliance and connectedness with nature that many associated with the traditional frontier narrative were major justifications for homeownership in the 1950s. Even today most people believe that the suburban boom “occurred because families scraped together down payments, paid their mortgages promptly, raised their children to respect private property, and always ‘stood on their own two feet’” (Coontz 76). Furthermore, the average ranch-style suburban home, “surrounded by a tame and controlled natural world,” embodied the pastoral ideal to which former city-dwellers aspired and was seen as an ideal environment for raising children (May 154). Thus the Davy Crockett craze can perhaps be viewed not only as indicative of the extent to which middle-class Americans considered their new lifestyle a continuation of the traditional frontier narrative, but also as a statement of suburbanites’ inherent and virtuous connection to the natural environment in a world run technologically amok.

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” (*News from Disneyland*). 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]” (Walt Disney, “Frontierland”). 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.

Disney’s educational bent revealed itself in other ways as well, particularly in the realm of science. Tomorrowland, for instance, was a forward-looking tribute to technology, where trips to the moon and adventures through inner space promoted physics, mathematics, and engineering—the same subjects that post-Sputnik educational critics held so dear. In fact, Disney’s vision of the future was so thoroughly in line with prevailing political ideals that Tomorrowland managed to stay on the cutting edge for a time by patterning its robotics technology after the government’s space and missile programs (Findlay 93). Such an alliance, Disney believed, had obvious benefits to young visitors; “As the story of science made visible and understandable to children from 10 to 15,” he remarked in 1956, “[Tomorrowland is] indicative of what their future is going to be” (Hopper). Although Disney’s interpretation of the future did not directly reference the natural world, its emphasis on exploring new worlds (space) and manipulating new technologies echoed themes from the park’s frontier-oriented attractions.

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. As such, 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" ("Disney Role"). 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" ("Disney Role"). 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 (*Davy Crockett*). 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, and as a token of our love and appreciation, the children of Walt Disney School asked me to present this gift to you" (*Davy Crockett*). 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.

### **Works Cited**

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.

Cleverly, John and D.C. Phillips. *Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1986.

"Collector's Corner." *The E-Ticket*. Spring 2000.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: Disney and the Coonskin Set." *New York Times*, 26 May 1955, 36.

Davis, Glenn. *Childhood and History in America*. New York: Psychohistory Press, 1976.

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

Disney, Disneyland and Davy Crockett . . . A Talk with Fess Parker." *E-Ticket*. Spring 2000.

"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.

Findlay, John. *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

Hopper, Hedda. "Walt Disney Called All-Year Santa Claus." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 1956, C10.

Maier, Thomas. *Dr. Spock: An American Life*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.

Muncy, Robyn. "Female Reformer's Create the U.S. Children's Bureau." Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander. *Major Problems in American Women's History*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1996.

"Nature's Wonderland." Employee Handbook, (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), 1960.

*News From Disneyland* (Anaheim Central Library, Elizabeth J. Schultz Anaheim History Room), 1956.

Pryor, Thomas M. "Land of Fantasia is Rising on Coast," *New York Times*, 2 May 1954, 86.