

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Disneyland Hotel has roots in Palm Springs

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As had happened many times before, his imagination had greatly exceeded his pocketbook. And as before, that didn't stop Walt Disney.

He'd recently tapped out his credit, sold his home in the desert at Smoke Tree Ranch, and, together with his brother Roy, cajoled corporate sponsors into financing his dream of Disneylandia (shortened to Disneyland before it opened) amid miles of orange groves in an unknown Southern California town called Anaheim.

But his lack of finances didn't lessen the need for a hotel adjacent to his dream park to accommodate visiting families. In fact, it was crucial. People would need more than an afternoon to visit, and that would be good for business. Leaders in the hotel industry were understandably skeptical. They'd never even heard of Anaheim. If Disneyland failed, Walt's Folly, as it was nicknamed, would produce a building out in the middle of nowhere for no good reason.

The home Walt sold at Smoke Tree Ranch to help finance Disneyland had been designed by architect Bill Cody. Cody was extremely talented and well-known in elite social circles in the desert. Among his other prominent clients were Jack Wrather and his movie-star wife, Bonita Granville. Cody designed a fabulous modern compound for Wrather's family in 1952. Splashed around a central pool, the retreat would host their numerous Hollywood friends and was just west of Smoke Tree Ranch, down the road about a mile.

Wrather made several fortunes during his career, starting in his family's oil business. He served in combat during World War II. "I got out of the service, a man of 29, with money to invest. I investigated thoroughly and decided the motion picture business was a good place to invest it," he told the Los Angeles Times just after the war.

He made many movies and then astutely acquired the television rights to "The Lone Ranger" and "Lassie," making



Jack Wrather, left, and his wife Bonita Granville Wrather with Ray Ryan, far right. Ryan was an owner of the El Mirador Hotel after the government used it as an Italian POW camp during World War II.

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them even more popular and profitable. He dabbled in real estate with his L'Horizon development in Palm Springs, along with the Twin Lakes Lodge in Las Vegas (he was also president of the Balboa Bay Club.)

Disney and Wrather were about a mile apart from each other in the desert, and in Los Angeles, they were both affiliated with ABC Television. Both had more than enough imagination and gumption to take a chance in Anaheim.

Wrather explained to the Orange County Register in 1978: "It was 1954 when I got a call that Walt was putting in something very special out there in Anaheim and I was asked if I would be interested in building a hotel next to it. I had heard a little bit about the Disneyland plan but when they told me where it was going to be built, all I could exclaim was

'Anaheim! Oh, God! Anaheim!' Then I asked them why they didn't call Hilton or Sheraton, since I wasn't in the hotel business. They said they had called them but Hilton or Sheraton never heard of Anaheim and weren't interested."

Wrather threw himself into the massive new project, turning to Los Angeles modernist architects Pereira & Luckman. Wrather's ideas were rivaled only by those of Walt, and the costs were astronomical by either's standards. Announced in January 1955, the hotel would require some \$10 million.

Promotional materials for the complex said: "California's most distinctive Hotel and Motor-Hotel will offer the ultimate in convenience and enjoyment to visitors of Disneyland Park. Situated opposite the main exit of Disneyland on a beautiful 30-acre orange tree-covered

site, Disneyland Hotel will contain 650 hotel motor-hotel rooms, suites and garden apartments. Dormitory accommodations for organized youth groups, clubs and children's organizations will be available. Three gourmet restaurants, a coffee shop and cocktail lounges will have a combined capacity of 1,250 persons. To open about August 15th are the first 104 units with the completed structure planned for late November. Disneyland Hotel was designed by the architectural and engineering firm of Pereira and Luckman and Harold Hodges-Byron Vandergriff, the builders."

Like Disneyland itself, there was a frantic rush to finish building for the announced opening only a few months hence. The "about August 15th" date was purposely vague. The first seven rooms actually opened in October 1955, still an impressive feat, and an eighth room served as the hotel's office and lobby. The rest of the rooms would be finished over the ensuing months.

But like Disneyland's attractions, the project was really never considered finished. For almost 30 years, until his death in 1984, Wrather continued to enlarge and improve the resort. According to Werner Weiss, the curator of Yesterland.com, a website devoted to the history of Disney theme parks, Wrather's son Christopher reported: "Jack had more fun with the Disneyland Hotel than with any other investment. The Disneyland Hotel presaged many future developments in the way Americans entertain themselves. My Dad understood that the landscape of entertainment was changing, calling his era the 'age of frantic relaxation.'"

Wrather would further invest in "leisure-minded America" with another Palm Springs resident and hotelier, Gene Autry. In 1963, Autry owned the 152-room Ocotillo Lodge, across the road from Wrather's L'Horizon, and down the way from Smoke Tree Ranch, where Disney, after his success in Anaheim, bought another lot and built a second home to replace the one he sold to help finance his imagination.

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