

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

Pirated Ideas

Wouldn't it be a great idea if someone put together an amusement park attraction with a New Orleans theme. In it they would endeavor to replicate the charm of the French Quarter, the jazz music of the city and its haunted history. Throw in a band of bad boys with some of the most socially unacceptable behavior, and the people will love it! Oh yes, there must be a catchy tune thrown into the mix. A brilliant brainstorm like that should be worth billions!

Well, it's already been done ... and it has made billions. But it didn't happen in New Orleans.

The Vieux Carré, the historic name for the New Orleans French Quarter, means "Old Square" in French. On July 24, 1966, "New Orleans Square" opened to the public at Disneyland in Anaheim California. It is a themed land found only at the original Disneyland and nowhere else, although Japan has a New Orleans themed area within Disney's Tokyo Adventureland.

"New Orleans Square" is home to two of Disney's most popular attractions: the "Haunted Mansion" (Anne Rice would be proud) and the incredibly successful "Pirates of the Caribbean". Having Jean Lafitte and his banditti from Barataria as vivid images of New Orleans' exciting past, it was only natural to have a pirate themed attraction. For a long time "Pirates of the Caribbean" was envisioned as a simple wax museum with famous real-life pirates, but Disney Imagineers decided to liven things up.

"Animatronics" was another portmanteau word like "Imagineering", and it would prove to be an important innovation in the success of the project. The Disney Imagineers put to good use the technological achievements utilized in the company's pavilions at the 1964-65 World's Fair to create (instead of static wax figures) a lively and adventurous journey through a treasure rich island stronghold. The fictional audio-animatronic buccaneers come to life as they plunder, pillage and sack a Caribbean port city. And while they are exhibiting the worst possible criminal tendencies, families find it difficult to leave without humming and singing along to "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life for Me)".

"Pirates of the Caribbean" was the last theme park attraction designed with direct input from Walt Disney himself. The panoramic boat ride has been such a sensation that it can also be found in Orlando, Tokyo and Paris. Walt also saw to it that then-mayor of New Orleans, Victor H. Schiro, was made mayor of "New Orleans Square" in Disneyland. Mayor Schiro in turn made Walt an honorary citizen of the real New Orleans. This was totally appropriate since Vic had spent his young adulthood in California working as a movie extra. He even worked as an assistant cameraman for Frank Capra (director of great films like "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" and "It's A Wonderful Life"). Vic summarized his political philosophy with the words "If it's good for New Orleans, I'm for it." But who can forget his "That's the way the cookie bounces."?

With the talents of Johnny Depp (as Captain Jack Sparrow) and other talented actors, the three "Pirates of the Caribbean" films ("The Curse of the Black Pearl", "Dead Man's Chest" and "At World's End"), along with the theme park rides, video games, merchandising and spin-off novels, have earned the Walt Disney Company (as of August 2006) over 2.7 billion dollars!

Also in 2006, another form of piracy was going on. New Orleans mayoral candidate Kimberly Williamson Butler was creating a national stir with her webpage. It pictured her standing in front of what appeared to be the unobservant as the French Quarter. But since when did the Quarter have curved streets? And how did those distinctive Disney trash receptacles get there? The photograph was, of course, "New Orleans Square". Locals, bloggers and the cable news networks caught on quickly ... and so did the Disney legal department. The photo in question had someone digitally placing Ms. Butler in the forefront and airbrushing out the sign for the "Blue Bayou Restaurant". Wouldn't it have been easier to pose on Bourbon or Royal?

"Yo Ho, Yo Ho!" Bet you'll be humming it for the next few days.

NED HÉMARD

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