

Working at the Disney Studio During the Hectic 50s -Part I

Interview with the first woman Imagineer

Harriet Burns is often referred to as the first female Imagineer. She was involved in major Disney projects starting with the 1955 Mickey Mouse Club before switching over to the new company that was designing and building Disneyland, then called WED Enterprises. She remained with Disney for her remaining working career and was involved with new attractions and theme parks as they developed. Tomart reporter Joshua Benesh was in California recently and interviewed this Disney Legend.

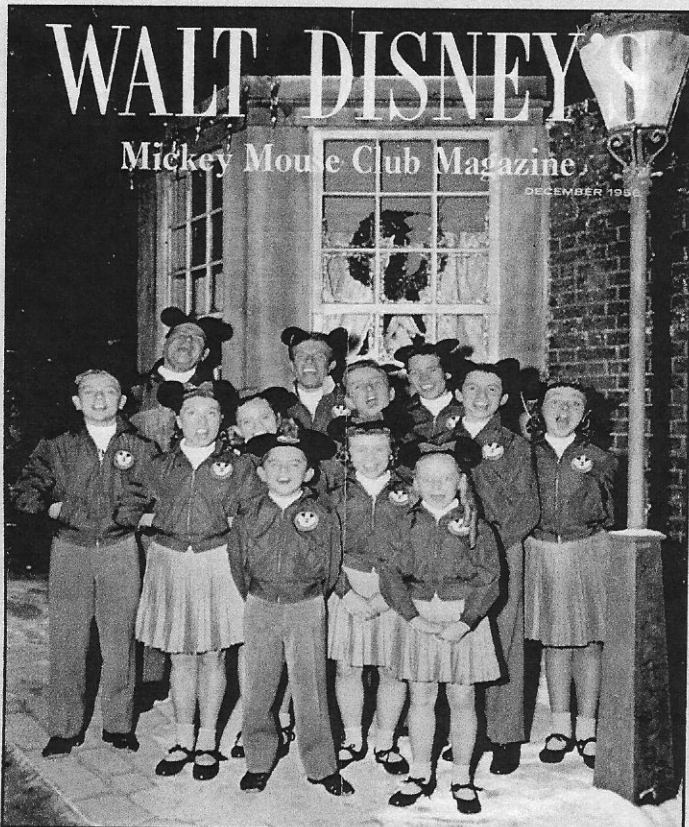
JB: Can you tell us a little more about your education and how it prepared you for work at Disney and WED?

HB: Art was my major in college and I did graduate work at the University of New Mexico. There I did everything from weaving to using all the saws and lathes for wood-working and furniture design. My first job was at Dice Display in Hollywood, which did television props for the "Colgate Comedy Hour," the sets for the play "Rebecca," and a Santa's Village in the mountains. They had hired a fellow to help me do Santa's Village who had come from

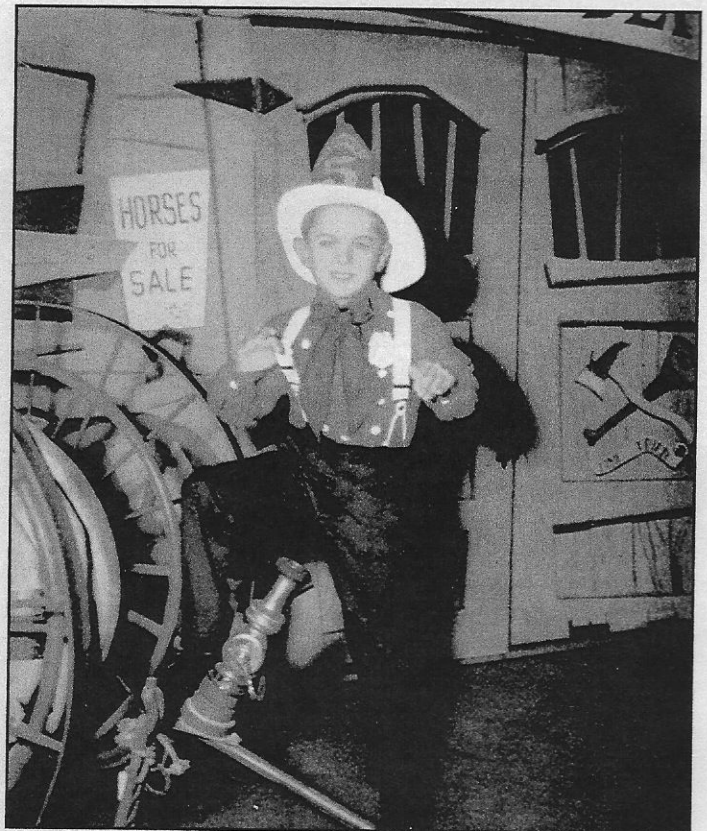
Disney. Jim worked in the animation department and had been laid off at the end of every picture he worked on. This time he came to Dice Display.

The work at Dice Display was always interesting; a lot of variety. Somehow we ended up with the contract to do the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas. We designed everything, the exterior, interior, and the shows. In the end, Don Grier, the owner of Dice Display, called us in and said, "Well, I wish I could give you all raises, because you deserve it, but sadly we're going bankrupt. The reason is, the Dunes won't pay us and it's going to be a three-year lawsuit, because nobody is paying anybody. It's one of those things, you have to back up all the lawsuits, it will take at least three years and we can't hang on that long because it was a tremendous job." So, he said, "we'll just have to go under. We'll give you good references and that's it."

Jim, having come from Disney, kept up with his Disney buddies. He said, "Well Harriet they're starting to hire again at Disney. My friends tell me they're going to do this children's television show and he said it's going to be called Mouseketeers, like the musketeers. They're going to have this big Mouseketeer", of course it was Jimmy Dodd, and this big Mooseketeer (famed Disney gag man, Roy



Examples of the sets required each day for the Mickey Mouse Club TV Show.



Williams). It all sounded pretty corny, but I needed a job and went with him to apply. They hired him back in the animation department and they hired me for the sets and props to work with Bruce Bushman to work on the Mickey Mouse Club. Bruce was in charge of the television show and he was a great guy to work with; very talented. What I didn't know was that the whole studio had applied for the job. Ken Petersen showed me slides from a gal from San Francisco who had applied. The work she did was excellent and I wondered why they weren't hiring her? Somehow I got the job and I was grateful.

JB: You've been called the first female Imagineer.

HB: Well, the experience I had at Dice Display all came in very handy. My knowledge of working with the big band saws and table saws, plus the fact I had sculpted, painted, and cast things and worked with fiberglass we used at Disney. We needed to build new sets and props for an hour TV show that aired five days a week.

JB: An unusual skill set for women at that time.

HB: Well, it fit me and I loved the work. But not too many women were employed at this type of job, they were mainly nurses or teachers. I really enjoyed it and I certainly was inspired by what Walt was doing.

JB: Did it give a greater balance to the department?

HB: We did have a good balance throughout the staff. I could sew, where the guys couldn't. Not that I did it that much. But all of us had different talents. Wathel Rogers could do electrical, which Fred Joerger wasn't too good at. Between the three of us, we got an awful lot done. Walt recognized our contribution and seemed to really appreciate it. I had experience in areas where most women didn't, certainly work with all the power tools, sandblasting, and welding. Our work area on the backlot was connected with the carpenter shop, electrical, machinist; pretty soon they became our buddies and they'd do things for us. The studio was under pressure to turn out a tremendous amount of work and the cooperation was incredible.

JB: And none of that environment seemed to be very intimidating for you?

HB: Well, nobody could do it, so we did it. I blew glass, this



Harriet Burns at her California home.

is not an everyday thing, but just once. But when nobody could do it, you just tried it. Even if it hadn't been done, somebody had to do it. The variety of challenges made the job all the more delightful.

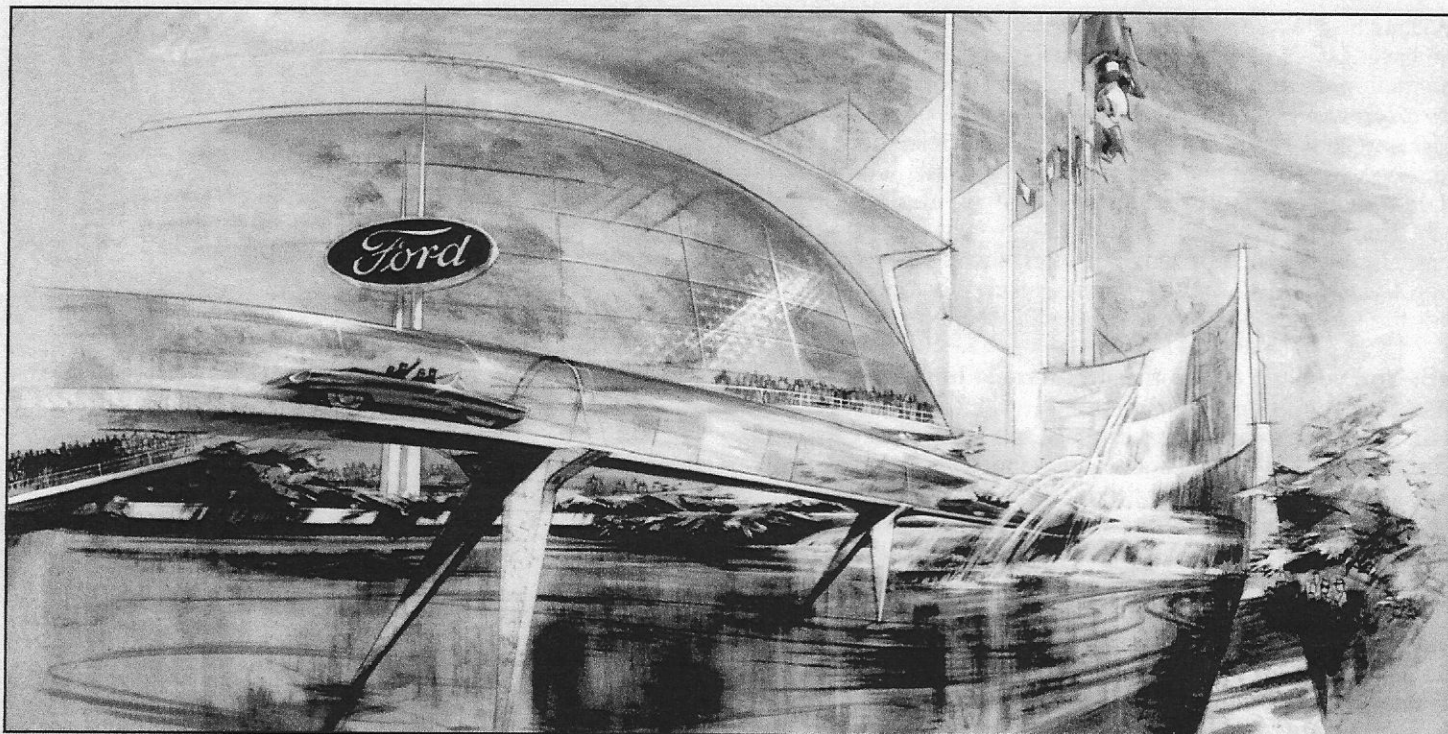
JB: Always something different.

HB: Oh, you never had it the same. No, we weren't putting radio parts in the same line.

JB: When did you finally make the transition over to WED?

HB: We weren't very far into production of the *Mickey Mouse Club* and Walt said, "You won't be shooting all the time." He said, "When you're not shooting, you can work with the art directors on this park that I'm going to be opening." There were rumors in the animation building about this park. Someone had said, "Who is going to drive that far for a play park?" Some didn't have any faith in it. Others thought it was a great idea. They had seen sketches Ken Anderson was doing and they really looked exciting and felt their kids would love it. Others felt the studio was going to spend too much money to convert a bunch of orange groves down there and olive trees into some kind of park. They were very discouraged about what Walt was doing. I didn't know Anaheim and hadn't been with the studio all that long. We kept saying what's the name of that place, Ana-what? People really didn't know the town. So, when Walt said I could work on it, I thought, that's great to work on it, but I really didn't know what was going to happen. Part of the time I would be working on *Mickey Mouse Club*, part of the time I would be working with Fred Joerger or Wathel Rogers on Disneyland. They helped me when I was in a bind and I helped them when they were in a bind. That's how it happened, right away I was working on Disneyland projects at the same time I was working on *Mickey Mouse Club*.

Old Hag as she appeared the original *Snow White Dark Ride*.
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Artist concept drawing for the exterior for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair Pavilion.

JB: What early Disneyland projects did you work on?

HB: It was Main Street, then a lot on Fantasyland with Ken Anderson; all of the black light rides. Ken had to set up those attractions on the soundstages at the studio; Stage 1 and Stage 2. Walt would walk through and approve them. Then workers would take them down and install them at Disneyland.

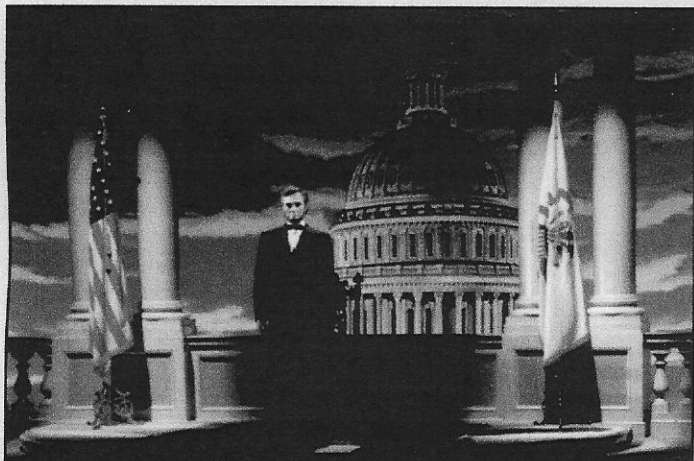
JB: Were you doing the model building at that point or the actual set work for Disneyland?

HB: Just the sets at that time. Later, I would help Fred Joerger with the models. It depended on what was needed at the time. Like when I was painting for the *Mickey Mouse Club* and I'd be in a bind because it would be shooting the next day. Then Wathel Rogers and Fred Joerger would help me. I worked many Saturdays because things would change, "Well we'll shoot Tuesday's, or we'll shoot Thursday's stuff tomorrow." At that point we hadn't even started on Thursday's stuff, so we'd have to switch it all around. That's how quick we could get into a bind

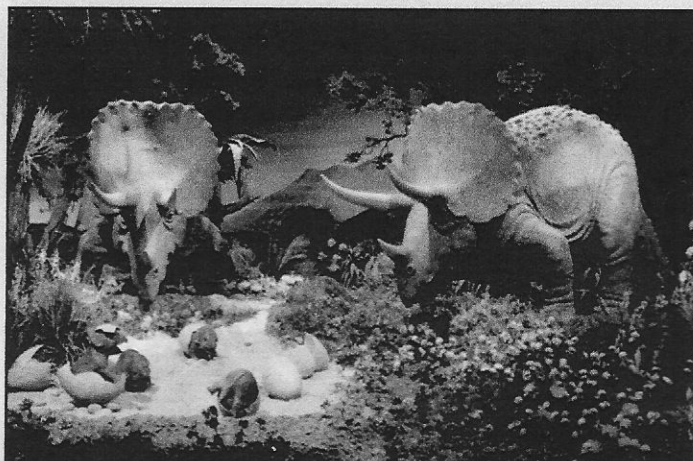
and they would help me. But they did not do spontaneous Steinberg type artwork, but they would help. Fred Joerger was a classical artist, he didn't like doing quick sets, but he managed. He was a dude. They were just great people to work with. It worked out for all of us. It really was a very cooperative bunch.

JB: Disneyland opened in 1955, were you still at the Studios? When did the transition to WED in Glendale begin?

HB: We didn't go to Glendale until about 1961, when we did the New York World's Fair projects. Those were huge and required extra space. The Ford contract alone was gigantic. The Ford pavilion was the biggest at the Fair, plus there were shows inside with all these life-size dinosaurs, jungles and forests of prehistoric plants, and giant murals. With Ford we had to design everything, from little rooms on the side, to the building itself, plus some special VIP rooms. Then there was the GE pavilion with all the human audio-animatronics and revolving theater. The State of Illinois sponsored Great Moments With Mr. Lincoln. That



Mr. Lincoln sponsored by The State of Illinois.



One of the dinosaurs scene from the Ford Pavilion now relocated to a Diorama at Disneyland.

All characters & graphics © The Walt Disney Company

was the only project that was already in the works when I first heard about doing anything for the World's Fair. The real kicker was Pepsi Cola coming to Disney at the last minute with what turned out to be *It's a Small World*.

JB: Where was WED before then?

HB: It was on the studio lot, but the name and what it stood for was not widely known. Others just knew there was a bunch of people down on the back lot, sometimes they didn't even know what was happening back there.

We didn't have enough room when we started the models for Ford. We knew it was going to be a big project and we needed to show the Ford executives the progress we were making on their project. We finally got a big two-story warehouse at the studio, but we just had walls up to one story. There was a concern people would peek over, get a ladder and take pictures or something. Every precaution was taken to make sure nobody else who might be working on the World's Fair could find out about the exhibit we were building.

There were strict orders not to tell anyone what we were working on, but it was pretty big darn model. The firemen had to come in, but nobody else was allowed. If we had somebody coming to repair one of our saws, we would allow them in, but that was it. The firemen had to come in to be sure we weren't doing anything wrong that would cause a fire. One, Wayne the fireman, would say, "What are you working on?" We would say, "Can't tell." Finally he said, "You can tell me, what are you working on?" Well, it was a big building, you know, and I said, "This is another Disneyland Hotel and I am going to be the madam." So we would tease him about that, but it did look like a hotel.

Great Moments With Mr. Lincoln we did at our warehouse area, I call it warehouse to identify it versus the studio nice rooms. We had crude corrugated metal walls, we could drop stuff on the concrete floor, paint or clay. We did a lot of clay and fiberglass. It didn't hurt anything. It was the perfect place for us, but it was not an uptown looking place. You had to walk way back on the back lot, the Zorro set, to find us and most people didn't go back there. When we got heavy into the New York World's Fair, that was when Walt said, "Now we've got to have dinosaurs and cavemen and everything else." So they looked all around the studio property near there to try to find something, and everything was bought up. They finally went to Glendale and the old airport was available, they could only lease it, but they couldn't buy it. So they leased the first building, which Walt said was huge. He said "Well, we don't have to use it all, we can rent out part of it or use it for storage." Of course, in no time, we had it full, and then they kept buying more buildings along the way. When I left, there were 31 buildings. Since then they bought a winery, a plastics factory, everything to the end of the road. Now they say there are 51 buildings. We called them the Lockheed buildings, all the area over there. Then animation came across the street before I left in 1986, well, part of animation. We bought the bowling alley, everything they could buy at that time. That was a big thing, for years the bowling alley was an identifiable landmark.

Once, when they were doing Tinker Bell, they thought they could get an artificial Tinker Bell instead of a 72 year old aerialist that came down the wire. Tiny was her name and she was 72 years old. Every night she'd slide down the wire to the castle and they'd catch her in mattresses.

Part of the evening ritual was to compliment her, "Oh, you did a great job, Walt just thinks you're marvelous." They'd have to say nice things to her, and then they'd put her on the bus, because she couldn't drive, and she went home. Every night they had to brag on her to keep doing her appearances. They thought, someday Tiny isn't going to be around, so we'll have to do something. Remote control had just come out, MAPO rigged up a remote control device to test with a Tinker Bell mannequin. It didn't kick its legs or anything, but they wanted to see if they could get it up in the air like a Tinker Bell. We went on the back lot of WED after work and they finally got it up, we were so excited, here was this gal dressed like a Tinker Bell, not a good model or anything, but they got her up there. They did the remote and she would do figure eights and fly. We were so excited something could actually do that. The people coming out of the bowling alley bar looked up there and must have thought, "Ah, I had too much Jack Daniels," seeing this vision in the sky.

JB: During the early years when the Matterhorn was being built, were you primarily a model builder then?

HB: There is no clear cut division of who did what when. There was always a mix. Eventually I became a model-maker by name, but it was a gradual transition. My brother built models and I liked doing miniatures. I could solder, and Fred Joerger couldn't solder, I had done that in Advanced Design. They broke it up into jewelry, furniture, house design and so forth, and so I learned soldering. I could do that, that made it a valuable trait for the many things we had to do. Like I said, I worked with Fred Joerger and he would help me with so many things. We sometimes had individual assignments, they had me do the horse hats for the first Easter parade down at Disneyland, they were going to have the horses do the parade and I had big hats on them some with fruits and vegetables, some with big ostrich plumes, and all sorts of different things; and all the ear holes had to be lined in leather. They had to not do it again, because they were afraid the SPCA would get on them too hard, so we didn't do that again. I had individual projects like that, Emile Kuri had me do 72 big butterflies and dragonflies for the Jungle Cruise, with big silk wings. I even did windows down at Disneyland for awhile, some windows, if they didn't have sponsors. I was just the odd ball, we were all odd balls, we did anything you couldn't rent or buy, they'd just throw it to us, and say, "Well, we need so-and-so for the show on Friday or next month."

JB: After that you moved it over to Glendale.



Dressing the Tiki Birds with feathers.

HB: Then when we were in Glendale, we had to hire additional people. At one time, I had 17 people that I had to train. That was a lot! Work had started on the Enchanted Tiki Room birds at the studio. Work on the patterns was completed, as were all the difficulties of the Tiki bird figures. Then, when we went over to Glendale, they said we'll get you three gals on Memorial Day, so they got me three gals that I had to train. We didn't know what to cover the birds with when I was at the studio and I tried every kind of elastic type thing to glue feathers on for the breast plate. We went to Hollywood Fancy Feathers, I sent the messenger boys down there to get right feathers, left feathers, straight features, little fluffy feathers, and all sorts of wing and tail feathers. All of those were different colors and different weights. We didn't know exactly what we would need so I would order four ounces of this and eight ounces of that. The guys would love to go there because the strippers bought their costume feathers there. All of that had to be worked out and experimented with. I was gluing feathers on elastic girdle material and old swimming suit fabric, and everything else latex, thinking when it breathed out it had to stretch. Walt said, "All the birds will breath." I thought, "That'll be the day," until I did it. So, working on that breast plate was not an easy project because we had to divide the birds a certain way so that the machinists could get their mechanism in and we still had to make the feathers look good when it covered the works inside. We not only had to do the job, but we had to record how to do it properly so newer people would know exactly how to do it the subsequent years when the attraction was rehabbed. At that point we still hadn't figured out how to do the job right the first time.

Walt had a blue sweater he wore so often. The sleeve was baggy. One day when he was telling me about it, I kept looking at his elbow. He would wiggle his sleeve and it all looked good when it came back. That was the inspiration for the bird breastplate I needed. When I glued the feathers on other base materials it would look good going out, but when it came back it looked like the bird had mange. Finally, I looked at his brushed wool and I went to Frank Millington in the drapery department and I got brushed wool. I tried it for my base material and it worked, without any feathers glued on at all. First, I was cutting little points, and I didn't even need to do that, it just grouped itself,

because it was short there anyway, so it worked out very well. This was the work we got out of the way at the studio. Then we moved to Glendale and I trained the gals, three and then twelve and then more because the job is very time consuming. The upside proved to be very little maintenance on the birds.

JB: They really changed the one in Walt Disney World.

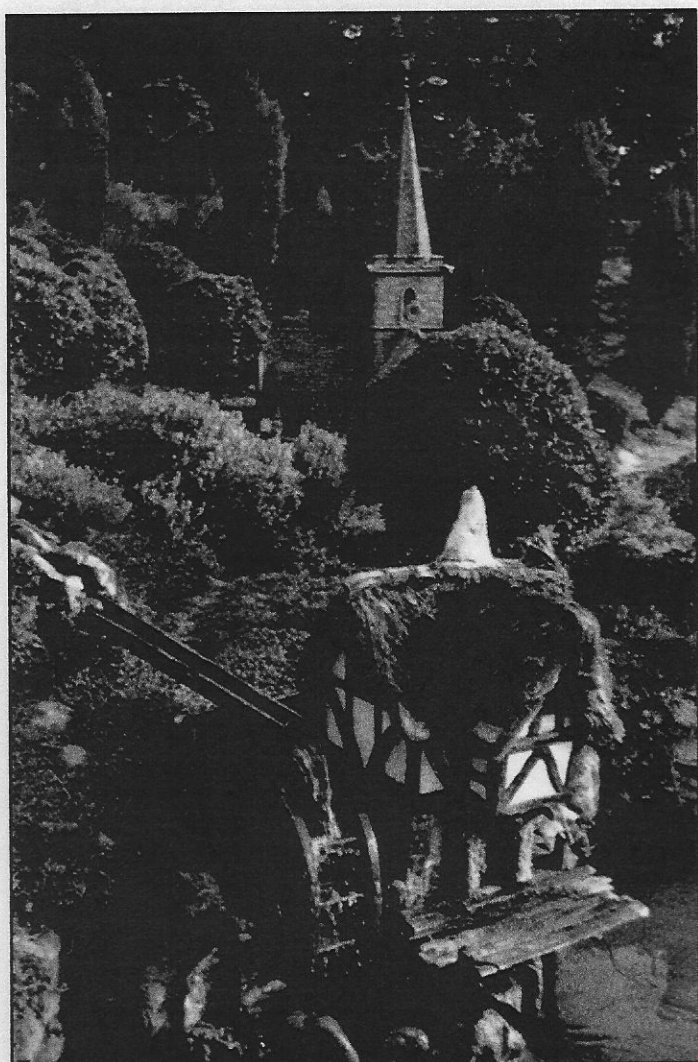
HB: I thought it was awful. They shouldn't have done what they did. Well, I don't know any of the people who were behind that project and they obviously have no idea what was important to Walt. It was really lousy. Oh, it's embarrassing.

JB: Quite the bird specialist.

HB: A variety of things all the time, and of course the little robin after the Tiki birds. Walt said, "Now we've mastered the Tikis, you can do a robin for Mary Poppins, one that she sings a duet with." I didn't give the idea a second thought. It would be just like a tiny Tiki, although it had to be really good quality, because it would be magnified on the screen and still had to look very good. But, we had to get real robin feathers for the tail and wings, because it would be conspicuous, if not done right. The robin is a federally protected bird, so you couldn't just go get some robin feathers. So, they wrote Washington DC and asked permission



Building Storybookland village, Harriet Burns seen at far right.



Storybookland Church with stained glass windows in background.

to get a robin, and they never got an answer. Three months went by, and Walt said, "What have they said? Well, look, we've got the film half shot, we've got to get a robin skin." They wrote again, no answer. So, we're desperate, we've got to get a robin skin. One of our fellows had worked at the Natural History Museum. He said they have drawers of skins of all these pheasants and South American birds, we should be able to make a deal with them, so we did. And I had this old 1893 robin skin from way back; it was packed in arsenic, so I had to use these old arsenic feathers to do the robin, the first one. The little legs were so tiny, we had four wires that ran up each leg, so we couldn't even put them on a leg, we had just a pin. Ordinarily I'd cover it with a tube, but they were so teeny, I just took a toothpick with body putty and just put body putty on all these wires to make it look like a leg because it would make it look like the bird had elephantitis if it had a tube on each leg. Walt got such a kick out of it because it was a toy at the time for him. He would walk through and he would bring the president of Bank of America or whoever was sponsoring something or Sophia Loren or whatever celebrity and he would say, "Harriet, is the robin here?" We had it on a ring, it was a brace of the ring so you could put the ring on and the brace actually held like the bird had perched on the finger. He would put it on and I had a box that was the brain, because then we didn't have fancy remotes or anything, he would have me do all the buttons and he would talk to the bird just like Julie Andrews did and he'd say, "Have you met Mr. Big Shot over here," and I'd have him tweet and do his feathers and tail and whatnot. I would do all the buttons and Walt would do this whole show for them, it was very impressive with Walt doing it, it made it all the more fun.

JB: Did Walt ever come in and play with a model or toy and break it?

HB: He was always so hands-on, he would've loved to have done everything that we did, he really loved to do things like that. So, he would come in the day before we would have a meeting and we would have it all

stacked up and ready to go but we hadn't glued it yet, we had all the components done. Walt would come in and pick it up and all the components would go all over the place. Finally we learned, the chimney is going to fall off and the windows are going to fall out if we don't have it glued when Walt comes in the day before. We finally realized he was smart enough to do a dress rehearsal for himself the day before, so that then he would be able to tell them exactly what was what at the meeting. That was very clever of him; we weren't clever enough to figure that out for us. Then we started gluing stuff, because Wathel Rogers was always horrified. Once, I had all these little stained glass window parts laid out for the church in Geppetto's village for the Storybook Land Canal and Walt came in. I had all the lead beveled and ready to go, three hundred and sixty pieces, and Walt came in and picked it up and it went everywhere. Oh boy!

JB: So you built the Storybook Canal ride features too?

HB: Yes, we built them. There was no outsourcing to a construction company back then. We did it all right in our little shop.

JB: What was Walt's reaction when he'd pick up and break something?

HB: He was embarrassed, he would say, "Oh jeez, I'm sorry." We would say, "Think nothing of it, no big deal."

JB: Then he would leave the room and...

HB: Then we would go, "Ahh, how am I ever going to get this done by..." All these tiny little pieces, all beveled, I simply couldn't put it together again. I thought I could, it was just impossible. All these things, the life of experiences, the deadlines were tough, we always had rugged deadlines and it had to be, we had to shoot either for television or it

had to be opened at the park, we got it done but it was sometimes a hassle.



Imagineering Model for
It's A Small World
as it appeared at the
1964-65 World's Fair.

Next Issue:
The concluding segment of
the Harriet Burns
interview.