

Imagineering During the '60's -Part 2

An Interview with Harriet Burns

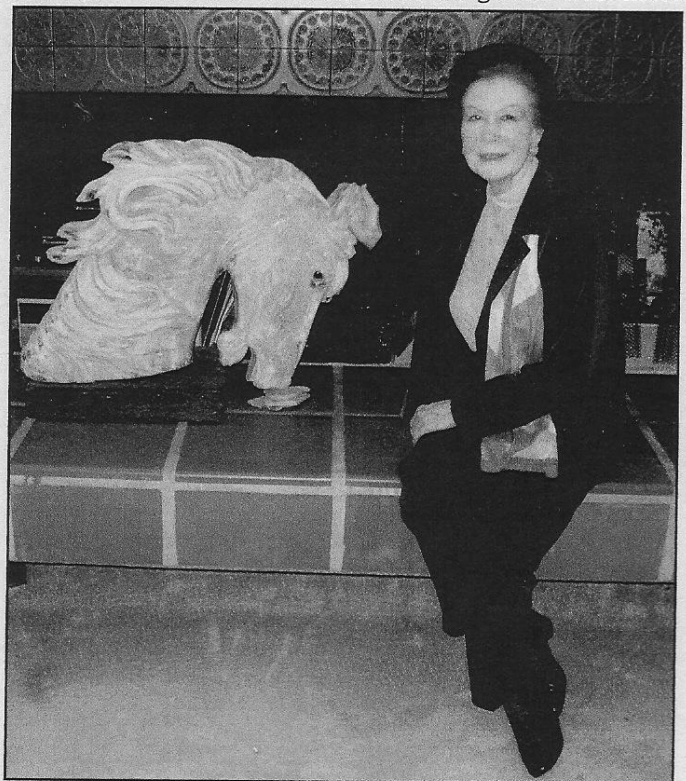
Last issue readers met Harriet Burns, often referred to as the first female Imagineer. She was involved in major Disney projects starting with the 1955 Mickey Mouse Club. Then she switched to WED Enterprises, the new company created to design and build Disneyland. She stayed with Disney for her remaining working career and was involved with new attractions and theme parks as they developed. Tomart reporter, Joshua Benesh, recently interviewed this Disney Legend. The interview continues this month at the time WED Enterprises branched out from the Disney Studio grounds to its home in Glendale to build the exhibits for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.

JB: What World's Fair exhibits did you work on?

HB: We did four exhibits and I worked on them all, the models at first, then the full-scale attractions. GE first approached Walt in 1958 to create and build what turned out to be the Carousel of Progress. Work on Ford came first and It's a Small World was almost an afterthought and it took a real rush to get it completed. The State of Illinois Lincoln project got worked in between all the others. It was tough to get a day off during the push to finish the Fair exhibits on time. We worked all the time, and John Hench worked right with us, side-by-side, he would cut the model parts, paint them, and do whatever needed to be done. We needed some thread for these little German model people that were in a tiny 1/8th inch scale and we had a bunch of those that we were going to set up. There were also little chicks all over the place and so I was going to dress them like they needed to be. Nothing was open on a Sunday, except Thrifty Drug Store at that time. I needed thread, so I went to Thrifty and got one of those packets with like eight different thread colors. The thread came in a vacuum formed plastic package. When I came back we found out we needed something at the entrance of the Ford pavilion as an awning and we were really stretched for time. I said, "John, suppose we take these thread vacuum-formed lumps and cut them in the shape of an awning." And he said, "Well, that's not..." I said, "Look, you know they'll change it anyway, we're not doing this as a permanent thing, but we've got to send this model to Detroit Monday morning so let's just cut this thing and do it, and have something to show." So, that's what we did. All of those things were spontaneous, nothing planned, and we knew that Ford would change it anyway, which they did. They changed a lot of it.

We added more chicks, some cute girls, plus little Ford cars and Lincoln Continentals. I sanded the bottoms flat, the wheels and everything were sanded, then glued, and

pinned. So we had three things to hold them in place all the way up these ramps in the show exhibit. The carpenters had made custom boxes for it with handles like suitcases. It was all carefully packed, but was still supposed to be very gently treated because of all the delicate work. We did the best we could, but poor John when he opened the box in Detroit he found somebody dropped the box because every car was off the ramps. He had to show the model to the Ford executives first thing in the morning, so he got a crew from the hotel, some busboys, to help glue and get the model back into presentable shape. We always sent a care package of our glues and paints for touch up work, but this required a major rework and John worked all night long with his Disney on the spot crew to put that thing back together. But all those things you just had to accept and solve as problems presented themselves. Poor John, up all night, and then having to do the presentation meeting with Henry or Edsel; I don't remember which Ford. Then he had to fly to New York for a meeting with the head of the World's Fair, Robert Moses. He flew back to California with Walt and Robert Moses. They took a helicopter to WED in Glendale and landed in the plowed field next to our building. It was a crude building. We called it the pancake house because it was orange and blue. Later



Harriet Burns at her California home.

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we moved to the Studio Girl Makeup factory building, which was bigger. But that's the kind of schedule everybody was dealing with back then.

JB: And was Pirates shortly after the World's Fair then?

HB: Yes, we were working on it during the Fair, too. The Pirates models were done in sections. There were all those turns in the attraction each with a different part of the story. As I recall each section of the model was about four feet long. After they were all built, we set them up on saw-horses and you could walk through the whole model and get a good feel for the pirate ride. Claude Coates had laid it out. Claude was a wonderful architect and he could get the most ride in a small area. Claude had a beautiful design where you couldn't see the back end of things, everything would be blocked. Marc (Davis) did all of the figures and Blaine (Gibson) sculpted them. Marc set the style of every character, but he was not a three-dimensional artist. Blaine captured his style with the same character and the same humor found in Marc's drawings.

First we set up the action like dunking in the well and the rest of that scene, then we would push Walt through at eye level, the models were up on the saw horses, so that he could see the whole forty feet of the model. Evie Coates said she thought that was a better ride than the real attraction. She thought that the miniature was a charming thing. The Pirates model filled a whole room. It was forty feet and a neat model. Then from the model we did sets individually in the life-size. Blaine would sculpt the heads and I would paint every one of them; do the hair, apply the bandannas, masks, eye patches, and work out the other details. The auctioneer, I did three, they cast him in plaster so I would have three to play with, we did brunette, blonde, and red

head, and I did three horrible looking auctioneers and Walt picked the one that you see, the brunette, where he wasn't so dramatic. The whole thing was always fun, doing different hair styles and different things. Some of the pirates are repeated, and I did different colors on their wigs. We didn't repeat too many, but we did some, so we wouldn't have to sculpt too many faces.

JB: How did the creative process work at that time? Was it you and Blaine Gibson going back and forth to collaborate?

HB: Yes, Blaine and I worked like that on Pirates. On It's a Small World we worked with Mary Blair. Mary Blair was not a dimensional person, she did all the artwork and we turned it into three-dimensional scenes just like we did for Pirates with Marc Davis. Blaine interpreted her work very well. You've seen the characters and how cute they are. Mary did all of the sketches and all of the colors, which were wonderful. Her fabric combinations and her imagination were ideal for It's a Small World. Walt had a way for picking the right people for the job and it worked just great. Blaine sculpted three heads, of the children. We were going to have one head that was to be used for the boy and girl, neutered gender. Then we planned to use different colored pigments for the various nationalities. Walt picked the head that we all thought was best, the one that's used. Once we had the head, Blaine made a little body to match. Then I dressed a girl and a boy, using the same basic figure. I used my daughter's little baby dress on the girl with a tiny little red pleated skirt, suspenders, and a little blouse and dressed the little boy with lederhosen, a little alpine hat, and so forth. Then we took them to the machine shop and had the machinist put them on mechanisms that rocked the figures back and forth. Then we took



Walt Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean



Distinctive Mary Blair art for *It's a Small World*

them over to the studio to show our first working model to Walt. Walt came down from his office for his first look. We didn't have any music at that time. We all knew we needed a song, but he came down and he saw them doing their little thing. It was a meeting that lasted like two minutes. He said, "That's just what I want, do the rest." So then we went back to Imagineering and went to work on all the other children. It was a really fun time. It was only Blaine and I until we were ready to train others. Alice (Davis) came in somewhere along the line to do the research and the costumes for all the different nationalities.

JB: The projects were visited and revisited.

HB: We had designed the Haunted Mansion and we had it all ready to go. The Haunted Mansion exterior was built at Disneyland. We had the sets setup on the stages, at that time. Originally, we had a sea captain costumed in a yellow slicker. First you saw his wet footprints, then a dagger got thrown and killed something. That was a good effect. Yale Gracey did so many great effects we couldn't use them all in the final Mansion. We had none of the other special effects at that time, no holograms or anything. That turned out to be a neat thing. Because of the World's Fair, Walt said, "We'll just shelve this until we get the fair done."

JB: And it sat empty for a long time?

HB: Eight years, before we could bring it back. First it was the Fair and then all four attractions had to be moved to Disneyland. Many things had to be reworked and a lot of changes were involved in making those transitions.

JB: What did you work on in the Haunted Mansion?

HB: Everything...both times! Before the fair there was this small group that worked with Walt. We would work with whoever was nominated as art director. Normally, it was Claude Coates or Ken Anderson. Ken worked with us the first time around; it was all Ken's. Marc (Davis) wasn't in on that at all, but when we brought it back eight years later, Ken was tied up on Pete's Dragon. So we had a lull, and he (Walt) said, "We can bring back Haunted Mansion, I'll bring Marc Davis over to work on it." He could pick whoever he knew was available for a project or could wait for so-and-so to finish another project. Walt knew



Two units of the *It's a Small World* model constructed on moveable tables so Walt could visualize the entire attraction at eye level.



Painting of Disneyland's Haunted Mansion exterior which sat vacant from 1963 until the attraction opened in 1969.

the strengths of his animators and other key people. He knew who was a trainman or a boatman; like Rolly Crump and Jack Fergus. We were in such a bind to finish up the work on the Fair, especially Ford. One day Walt says, "Well, there's a fellow up there that does whirly-gigs, we can bring him down," and that was Crump. Then he said, "Fergus I think he puts his little hands on after I leave." Fergus was this 6' 8" monster guy, wonderful. Fergus had these big hands, but he did tiny, tiny model work, beautiful work. So he brought Fergus down and Crump. They pitched in and really help do whatever was needed to get the job done. Crump did Tower of the Four Winds with all his whirly-gig stuff for It's a Small World. He also did a lot of Ford cars, the room with musical instruments made out of Ford cars. When things had to get done, Walt could bring in just the right people...and all four Disney attractions opened on time.

JB: Can you talk about some ideas that didn't make it off the drawing board?

HB: There was Candy Mountain. After we did the Matterhorn, Walt said, "Now that we've done a mountain we know how to do the structure, we can have another mountain over here. Every kid dreams of a mountain of candy, I did when I was a kid, we can have a candy mountain, nothing but candy." When we built our models, one-inch scale, or 1/100th of the real thing, they'd be on a platform that would have roller skate wheels. We were on a concrete floor and they had the big truck delivery openings. You could put the door up and the trucks could drive

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in, load up, and take our props down to Disneyland. We had all these platforms where we started to build Candy Mountain. Fred just put chunks of clay on an armature and we had this great mound, the whole thing looked like ten feet high when it was on this platform. He said, "This is the right scale, so we can use real candy on it." So he ordered all this candy from all these factories in San Francisco and a lot of stuff from Disneyland. Claude Coates, who was head art director on that project, went to Toluca Mart. It was just down the street from Disney at the time and he got every kind of candy they had. He got bridge mints, licorice sticks, candy canes, lollipops, Hershey bars and all sorts of fudges. He had this basket full of candy. Claude was 6' 6". He got up to the counter, the girl looked up and she said, "So that's what makes you so tall," because he had all this candy. He brought it all back, it was just amazing, even popcorn balls they sent from Disneyland, popcorn rabbits, and all that stuff. Then we would just put it in, sort of design as we went. Someone said, "We need a cave over here, that would be interesting, we would have a forest or something over here, and a lollipop entrance." We would work out all these different paths. And Walt would come in and he'd say, "I know we'll have a waterfall here, we can have raspberry falls, and then we can sell raspberry popsicles or raspberry juice at the bottom, we can have lemonade falls on the other side and do the same." So, then we would do that. Then he would come in and look again, the next weekend, and he would have other ideas. So, we kept working on it and kept working on it. As we worked with the candy, Fred would say, "One for you, and one for me." I thought Fred would get diabetes; I really was

worried about him. And we had rock candy, we had a cave with rock candy stalactites, we had every kind of candy, it was candy heaven. So finally he (Walt) said, "Let's call John Hench down, see what he thinks." John was Walt's right-hand man then and he really respected his opinion. So, John came down and he took one look at it, walked around it all, and said, "Well Walt, when you have a meal of meat and potatoes, you really enjoy dessert of candy, but when you just see piles, and piles, and piles of it, it kind of turns you off. And Walt thought a minute and said, "You know, you're right, just forget the whole thing." So we opened the truck door and pushed the entire candy mountain platform outside. The blue jays came down and ate the peanuts out of the peanut brittle and the pecans out of the fudge, and that was the end of Candy Mountain. We just trashed it.

JB: So it was meant to be a roller coaster?

HB: We were going to have stuff inside it, but we didn't have any big plans for a snowman or anything.

JB: In that case, it started with a model rather than concept drawings and renderings.

HB: Actually, we started with Rock Candy Mountain; you know the song "Rock Candy Mountain." Walt had Herb Ryman draw up Rock Candy Mountain, and Herb did a beautiful job, it looked like a crystal mountain. Then he said, "With all the smog down there in Anaheim we'll never be able to keep that thing clean, we can't do that, we'll just make it all different candies." We were going to have the different candies inside Rock Candy Mountain, this time he said to have it on the outside. Actually, when you think about it in large scale, it wouldn't have looked too good. The taffies, the ribbon hard candy, and all those things, they wouldn't have been very good in large scale. It would've looked like plaster or something. Anyway, Walt said to just forget it. Whenever he said, "forget something," he meant don't give another thought to it. We were doing Chinatown, and when he said, "Forget it," he dismissed it.

JB: Chinatown, was it to be a land for Disneyland?

HB: Yes, we were going to do Chinatown. He had that idea pretty near the end. We were going to do an International Street. There was going to be a Chinese restaurant, a Confucius audio-animatronics figure that told fortunes, and

some shops.

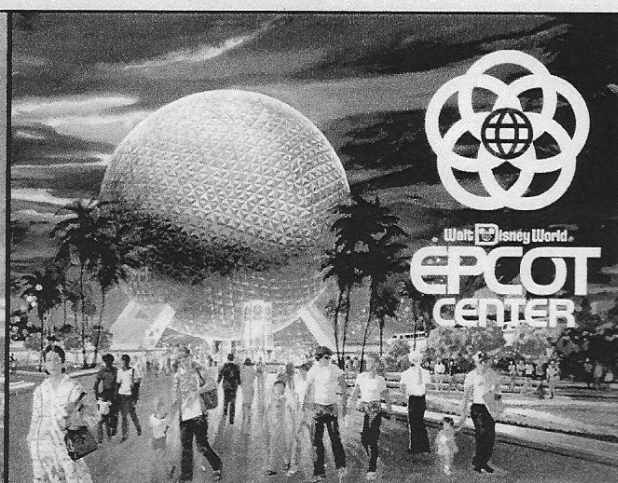
We had a little bitty boxcar that was originally located at the studio. It got moved to WED because that was the only place they put oddballs. It sat at the end of the machine shop. Then Walt got us this big warehouse, he said, "It's hot and it's going to be rough, but you'll have all the room in the world." That's when we had plenty of room for all these other projects came up. It was two-story in the center, so we could do big projects, and sets, and everything else. That really worked out well to do the final product in the big area. We had all of our tools and equipment in the small boxed-off area, and we could lock everything off. It was really a neat set-up, when I say "Neat" it wasn't very neat, but it was a great set-up under the circumstances.

JB: Pirates of the Caribbean was in progress when Walt passed away.

HB: We had Pirates well along and it was not far from opening. We had the back area in our building at Imagineering, warehouse two, and we set up the bridge and the pirates, life-sized, the whole thing. Walt saw the partially animated version with the guy with his leg over the bridge. He got to see all of that. And he was down at Disneyland seeing the huge background sets as they were being built. He followed everything. He was really on the ball, when it came to the details. That's where he was so hands-on. It all intrigued him so. He wanted to see and to know exactly how far everything was coming along.

JB: EPCOT, you worked on the first EPCOT, the City of the Future, and you were around when it changed to what it is now.

HB: It was way back in 1960 or something like that when I first heard Walt talk about his center for the future. He didn't call it EPCOT, he just said, "Someday," and talked about things he would envision. He had a lot of ideas that didn't come to fruition. He would just talk futuristically. One time when he was thinking about the Florida Project he said, "There should be some center, we might have a center down there, like a health center, among all these different centers. For instance, if somebody got bit by a brown recluse spider they would know to call in there and then the South American doctors we would have contact with, we would ask them what antidote." I thought that was very neat, but I also wondered, who was going to know to call



Harriet worked on both EPCOT models – Walt's City of the Future (currently found along the PeopleMover track at Walt Disney World) and the revised EPCOT Center model.

Florida? Walt did a lot more EPCOT planning before he died and I know Roy wanted to build it, but the company was committed to construction plans up through 1973 and both of them had passed on by then. A lot of the guys went to Florida to study the project. They were the ones that decided it couldn't be exactly like Walt wanted. At that point everything switched to the planning for EPCOT Center, as it was when it opened in 1982.

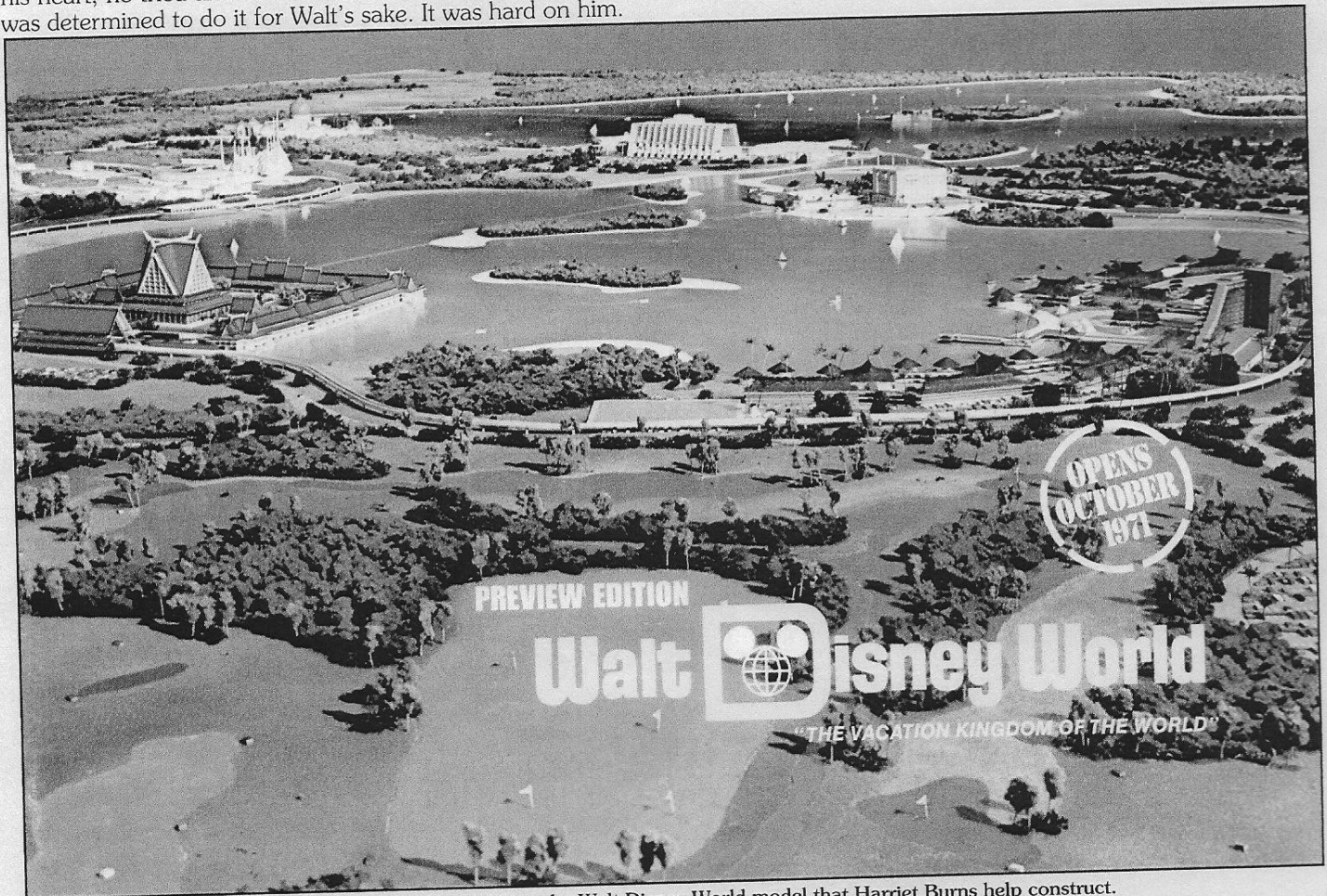
JB: Right after Walt's death, what was happening at WED?

HB: Of course we were finishing Pirates, that was to be opened. Then, Epcot was all designed. You've probably seen in Marvin Davis's office, there was this two-story high conference room and the big map of Epcot where Walt points, "This is where we will have this, and this." Walt was not in good health then, but he looked good in the pointing. He was pretty gray, but you can't tell it from the film. Epcot was well along in the plan. We had twenty years of plans. And poor dear Roy, Roy tried so hard. Of course he had to drive over from the studio, so he didn't do that all the time, very seldom, whereas Walt would come whenever he could. It wasn't like we were on the back lot where Walt could just walk down if he got a break. Roy would come over and have a meeting or something upstairs and then he'd try to come, he didn't know what we were doing because he wasn't that type of person, but he'd say "It's coming along, it's coming along." He tried to encourage us and he didn't know what we were doing, the poor dear, bless his heart, he tried and he was so nice about everything. He was determined to do it for Walt's sake. It was hard on him.

JB: The Florida Project and construction of the Magic Kingdom was underway.

HB: But our morale was low, very low, Walt was gone, we were lost. It was tough, very tough. And things were going to heck at the studio business-wise, things were not working out with the movies or anything else and then finally Eisner and Wells came along, and it was a boost at the moment, because we thought that they couldn't get a handle on this. Then they did and business improved, and from thereon it went. Then Iger became the man in charge. We had a meeting with Iger, Marty (Sklar) set that up, we had a two-hour lunch meeting with him, and that's a lot of time for somebody like him, and we really enjoyed it. Up in whatever that restaurant is at the studio. He asked a lot of questions, he had really done his homework, he knew each of our biographies, he knew what he had done, he was amazing I thought, and I was very impressed, because Eisner would not have done that, but Iger did. He told me, you did *Mickey Mouse Club* show, and I watched it when I was a kid. I could hardly wait for Fridays when Spin and Marty came on, now I'm watching it with my son. He would discuss all sorts of things, and he wanted to know things. You could tell he was genuine about it. And I have heard that he walks around the Park early, like Walt used to do. He'll talk to the people working on things, like Walt used to do. I thought it was very encouraging. We all enjoyed meeting Iger. We're excited to think that he wants to do things more like Walt, or to go back to those years and renew the memories of Walt. I wish him the best.

– Joshua Benesh



Preview Center Booklet showing the Walt Disney World model that Harriet Burns help construct.