

On the road: Missouri

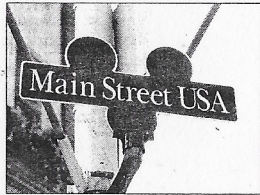
Walt Disney fans can trace his early life in Marceline and Kansas City

Some Disney sites, however, are privately owned or aren't well preserved.

By MIKE TSICHLIS
Special to the Post-Dispatch

The name Disney conjures up a menagerie of images in the minds of children and adults — Mickey and friends, the Magic Kingdom, Epcot and umpteen characters from scores of films. To imagine American pop culture without Walt Disney and his creations would be like imagining the automobile without Henry Ford. Yet the origins of Disney's creative genius can't be found in Los Angeles or Orlando — they're here in Missouri.

Although not widely known, Disney spent a large share of his youth in this state. But despite the significance of his cultural influence, there are no designated historic sites affiliated with Disney's life in Missouri that are open to the public. Some people are beginning to think there should be.



Marceline: Main Street, USA

Born in Chicago on Dec. 5, 1901, Disney moved with his family at age 5 to a farm in Marceline, a small town founded in the 1880s along the Santa Fe Railroad in north central Missouri, about 200 miles from St. Louis. Life on the farm wasn't easy, and Disney's father frequently struggled to stay solvent.

But it was during these difficult times that young Walt found a passion for drawing, often sketching the farm animals for whom he had developed a childhood admiration. The view of simple rural life that Disney later expressed in his cartoons and films found its source in Marceline.



MIKE TSICHLIS

Walt Disney's boyhood home sits on Highway 5, the main road leading into Marceline, Mo.

The farm house he lived in still stands on the west side of Highway 5, the main road into town just a few miles south of U.S. Route 36. The simple red frame home possesses a quaintness one would expect to find on the set of an old Disney movie. Although the home is privately owned and not open to the public, just a glance from the road shows how a young boy with an imagination could find serenity there.

Another connection to the Disney mythos is Kansas Avenue, the main street running through Marceline's central business district, said to have been a model for the Main Street section of Disney's theme parks in Anaheim, Calif., and Orlando, Fla. Special markers topped with round, black mouse ears identifying Main Street USA are proudly attached to street signs along Marceline's business district.

While a public park, elementary school and sports complex bear Disney's name, perhaps the greatest tribute this community of

2,650 people pays him is in retaining its quintessential small-town character.

Plans are unfolding for new tributes to Disney in Marceline. One of the goals of a group of local citizens is to develop a working farm, open to the public, that depicts agricultural life at the turn of the century, something Disney himself envisioned for the town when he made a return visit in the 1950s.

Also in the works is a plan to convert the railroad depot into a state-of-the-art Disney museum, as well as the complete restoration of historic Main Street. Organizers hope that enough work will be completed in time to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Disney's birth in 2001.

Kansas City: growth of an artist

If Disney's artistic interests were sparked in Marceline, they were more fully developed during his years in Kansas City, to which his family moved in 1910 after his father gave up farming. Despite school requirements and working two shifts on his father's newspa-

per delivery business, the boy's interest in cartooning continued, and he even managed to enroll in classes for children at the Kansas City Art Institute.

After an adventurous stint driving a Red Cross truck in Europe at the close of World War I, Disney returned to Kansas City to make a living as a cartoonist. After failing to get on as an artist with the Kansas City Star, he first obtained a job as an apprentice commercial artist and later landed a \$40-a-week position at Kansas City Film Ad Company, where he helped produce promotional fillers for local theaters. It was during this time that Disney began experimenting with animation, briefly collaborating with friend and fellow animator Ub Iwerks, who years later helped flesh out the features of Mickey Mouse.

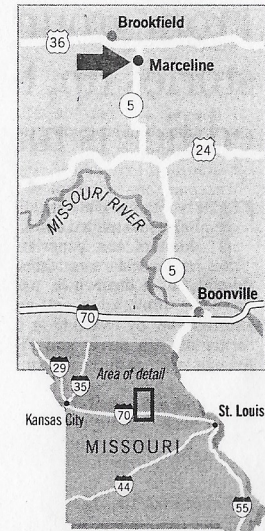
In May 1922, Disney took the bold step of starting his own film production studio. Dubbing his new venture Laugh-O-Gram films, he hired a group of eager young animators, including his friend Iwerks. The young entrepreneur and his crew worked around the clock, producing a series of short animation pieces for

the owner of a local theater chain, including crude but creative mixed medium productions that combined live-action characters with animated counterparts, a type of cinematic forerunner to Disney's later work, such as "The Song of the South" and "Mary Poppins."

After little more than a year in business, Disney dissolved Laugh-O-Gram studios in July 1923 because of a series of financial troubles. But what might have been the end of a career was merely the prelude to a new beginning. With only \$40 to his name, he bought a first-class train ticket to Los Angeles to meet up with his brother and future business partner, Roy. As the legend goes, when a man on the train asked him what he intended to do once he arrived in California, the young Disney simply responded, "I want to make great motion pictures."

Remnants of a fledgling animator

Vestiges of Disney's days in Kansas City remain — for now. Disney's home on Bellefontaine



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Street is privately owned by an elderly couple but still looks much as it did in Walt's day. A few miles away, the two-story brick building that once housed Laugh-O-Gram studios stands on 31st Street between Troost Avenue and The Paseo.

In a story told years later, Disney traced the inspiration for his most famous character back to his days at Laugh-O-Gram, where he took a liking to the mice living in his office and even kept one as a pet. Now completely boarded up and dilapidated, the building has the haunting appearance of a structure awaiting either a wrecking ball or a total gut rehab.

A bill proposing that the Laugh-O-Gram building be purchased and renovated into a historic site honoring the work of Disney and other Missouri animators was introduced in the Missouri Senate in December. If passed, it would move on to the general assembly for a final vote before the Legislature adjourns May 12.

As the centennial of Disney's birth approaches, how fitting it would be if the site where this extraordinary creator launched his first commercial enterprise were ready to welcome animation fans from around the world. Perhaps all that's needed to make it happen is a little magic.