

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.

CLIP: TV ANNOUNCER

It's July 1955 -- the opening of Disneyland. There's a 90-minute live broadcast that has all the pomp and circumstance of an inauguration. Even the governor of California, Goodwin Knight, spoke to the crowd.

CLIPS

But there was still a lot of celebrating. There was a singing Davey Crockett.

CLIP

There was a giant float parade, with Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

CLIP

But the star of the show was Walt Disney -- who put everything he had including selling his own house to pay for this nostalgic slice of Americana full of ice cream parlors, and trolley cars.

CLIP: WALT

I never get tired of hearing Walt Disney's voice. I know all the bad stories about him, from the strike at his studio to his cooperation with the FBI during the Red Scare. But then I hear to that voice and it feels so calming to me -- so paternal, and reassuring I just fall under his spell.

CLIP: WALT ENDS

A lot of people felt that way about "Uncle Walt" back then. That's why so many super talented artists dedicated their careers to following his vision of a perfect world.

So a lot of them were surprised to learn that Walt felt something was really missing from Disneyland: a haunted house.

A Haunted House? In the middle of Davey Crockett and old timey Steam Boats? How would that even work?

Jeff Baham (BAY-um) wrote a book about the making of the Haunted Mansion. He says as far as Walt was concerned, every kid fantasied

about haunted houses as much as they imagined being a pirate in the Caribbean.

JB: When he was a young teenager in Kansas City. I know there was kind of a house there that was rumored to be haunted that he probably was aware of. So I think his experience just was always you know small town America you know has the drugstore the convenience store you know has the lingerie store and it has the haunted house on the side of the corner. You know what I mean up the hill.

Throughout the '50s, Walt had been assembling a team of designers for a new company that would design his theme park: Walt Disney Enterprises or WED. Remember there is no such thing as a theme park designer in the '50s. He's inventing that career, as we know it today.

JB: You know the animation department in fact started calling Walter's other company cannibal island because he would cannibalize his own animation department to build up his theme park.

Two years after Disneyland opened, the first "Imagineer" as Walt called them that he assigned to the Haunted Mansion was Ken Anderson. Of course, Ken Anderson came from animation, where storytelling was king, he the first thing he did was figure out the backstory for the Haunted Mansion.

DM: The original story for the Haunted Mansion was that a pirate named Captain Gore retired and he went off to live a happy ideologue's existence, he found a young bride named Priscilla and he was not that specific about his backstory just that he was independently wealthy and he could provide for her.

This is David Mumpower. He's written about the origins of the Haunted Mansion for his site Theme Park Tourist.

DM: So Priscilla the bride is told never go into the attic. Of course it's a Pandora's Box situation where she eventually goes into the attic she finds vestiges of this old pirate life puts two and two together. He grows enraged. He kills her. She in turn haunts him until he kills himself. And so Captain Gore is the narrator, the ghost host of the ride. So that's a lot of things at once here. But what you could really get from it is that it's super dark for Disney.

That's when Walt realized he had a problem. If the ride was too scary, kids wouldn't go on it. He was already having that problem with his Snow White ride.

But if the ride was too silly, teenagers and adults would think it was a pathetic Haunted House. David Mumpower says that question –

funny vs. scary – is actually an age-old debate.

DM: Think about your favorite horror movies your favorite hard television shows your favorite her books. Do you like the ones that are scary? Do you like the ones that are funny? Or do you like the ones that are a merger of the two? And this was the debate that drove Disney for the body of a decade. Internally Imagineer would take sides over and over again should this be scary Should this be fun. And Walt Disney kind of flip sides a few times. And when the boss is ambivalent that spills down to the bottom too.

So the next Imagineers Walt assigned to the project were two young guys – Yale Gracey and Rolly Crump. They were given no strict deadlines.

RC: We had a whole room to ourselves to over a year to do nothing but develop ghost illusions and special effects.

That is Rolly Crump from a 2012 interview that the Walt Disney Museum posted to YouTube. That's a pretty good gig -- he spent an entire year on Disney's dime coming up with haunted house effects. They were having a blast but after a while, the janitorial staff was getting creeped out.

RC: We got a call from personal one day the janitors request you leave the lights on when leave at night, what we did set up ghost, monsters, put infra red beam, let lights on low so when they broke the beam the stuff would go off. Sur enough we came in the next day, the ghosts going the whole night long and right in the middle of the room was a broom and we got a call from personal saying, they're never going back!

Jeff Baham says one of the tricks that Rolly Crump was developing was a very old trick that dates back to Victorian theater: Pepper's Ghost.

JB: You know you're looking through a piece of glass has a reflection of a ghost in it. So all you have to do is turn off the light and the ghost disappears.

WD: We're also collecting ghosts, you believe in ghosts, don't you Julie?

JULIE: No really?

WD: You don't? Well I'll take you over here to show you they do exist.

This is Walt from a 1965 TV special. He's showing a woman named Julie – who was crowned Miss Ten Year-aversary of Disneyland -- how Pepper's Ghost works.

WD: Now you peak in there and what do you see?

JULIE: And organ

WD: What's going on?

JULIE: A ghost!

WD: Sure a ghost is playing! Sure! What kind of ghost is playing?

JULIE: A skeleton ghost!

WD: Well they have all kinds of ghosts, you know.

Behind the scenes, things were not going as smoothly.

They had a lot of great tricks but they still needed an organizing principle to the Haunted Mansion. So the Imagineers pitched Walt a story about a vicious family called the Bloods – who were haunting a house of disrepair that Walt had supposedly transported to Disneyland....

DM: Walt Disney basically didn't hear anything after disrepair.

Again, David Mumpower.

DM: He kind of looks at him he goes You want to bring a blight into my beautiful part that I sold my dream home to build? That's never going to happen. And then he does this quote that you'll hear from time to time will take care of the outside and let the ghost take care of the inside. And basically that was him saying oh no, no, we're not going to put an ugly building in Disneyland.

The last artists that Walt assigned to take the lead were Marc Davis and Claude Coats. They were both legends that worked on Snow White, Sleepy Beauty and many classics.

But remember the question whether The Haunted Mansion should be scary or funny? Well, Davis and Coats split exactly along on those lines. Davis wanted it to be funny. Coats wanted it to be scary.

But Jeff Baham thinks their differences had more to do with their backgrounds in animation.

JB: I think it was more characters, is it going to be more based on characters or more based on the setting because they just that's what they both handled. You know Claude Coats took his experience with layouts and background and took that into attraction so he would create the atmospheres and the settings for all these attractions to exist in and Mark Davis when he came from animation to Disney Land Walt Disney tasked him to be more of a humorist you know bring some humor to our characters and so he would create characters for the parks.

Here's Marc Davis and Walt Disney from that TV special.

WD: Tell her about this thing here, Marc.

MD: This is the elongated rooms and we have stretching portraits.

JULIE: Oh dear.

WD: Heh-heh, this is my favorite here!

JULIE: Oooh.

So the artists were coming up with bits that Walt liked. He thought maybe they're close. Maybe the Haunted Mansion can open soon.

And then two events changed everything.

First, Disney got a contract designing rides for the World's Fair in New York. Now if WED Enterprises was nicknamed Cannibal Island, the World's Fair was cannibalizing Cannibal Island.

But Jeff says some of the technology they developed, like the Omni Mover, became important to making the Haunted Mansion as we know it today.

JB: So in fact the idea of creating a chain, which is, what the haunted mansion uses a big chain of carriages so that none of them are separate. They all are connected and moved together. Bob Gerr is the designer of that he got that idea by watching Ford's Magic Skyway at the World's Fair.

CLIP OF DISNEY IN 1964

Then something cataclysmic happened. Walt Disney died.

His death came out of nowhere. The cancer diagnosis was sudden. He didn't tell his employees that he was sick. They just showed up to work in December of 1966, and heard the news.

JB: Most of the people I've spoken to that were working when Walt passed away said they literally had physical reactions. You know most of them some of them just drove around. Oh what do we how do we even keep this company -- what do we do where do we go where do we work? Yeah, Walt Disney was a guiding force.

And he left no heir apparent -- on purpose.

JB: Walt put together people that he thought might fight with each other but they didn't have to because he would take their ideas and say well I prefer this and they would go that way.

Without Walt there to break the tie, many of the artists felt lost. And of all the projects in development, the Haunted Mansion was the

~~most in need of Walt's guidance.~~

How they found their way out of the dark is just after the break.

BREAK

By 1967, there had been a lot of advertising for the Haunted Mansion ride because it wasn't supposed to take this long. And so rumors were spreading.

JB: The Haunted Mansion was starting to get a reputation as a true haunted house. You know people someone died in the construction and so they stopped working on it because it's haunted or someone went through it when they first built the house and they had a heart attack and because it was so scary so they didn't know what to do so they stopped making it, you know different stories like that kind of started to pop up and they got bigger and bigger as the house sat there for years and years.

And so was it actually sitting there fully build the outside?

JB: Yeah from 1963. So a good five six years it was just there with us.

Oh you're kidding, I didn't realize that. I thought it was just like an empty lot or something.

JB: No it looked like the Haunted Mansion just with gates that were locked in the side. So that's kind of why this mythology built up around it because people were like what's the deal here? It's obviously done. So why don't you just let us in?

Remember Walt said he'll take care of the outside; you take care of the ghosts. Well, he took care of the outside.

Behind the scenes, Claude Coats and Marc Davis were both flaunting their status as leaders at the company with proven track records so everyone should listen to them.

JB: I've had conversations with Alice Davis Mark's widow and you know just based on the idea of their personalities I would think there were probably some disagreements that got heated from time to time but how could you expect that not to be the case for everything they did it at WED enterprises.

DM: The best way I can describe that is that's like if you're an Apple and Wozniack and Jobs are fighting over something and you have to pick a side. It's that type of schism.

David Mumpower thinks the unsung heroes in this fight were Rolly Crump and Yale Gracey. Remember they were the young guys that Walt Disney assigned a decade earlier to come up with tricks like Pepper's Ghost. Actually a lot that stuff was supposed to end up in a Museum of the Weird, which never came to fruition. So they're still

working on the Haunted Mansion, just lower in the pecking order. But that lack of status actually worked in their favor.

DM: They're kind of they're kind of in the situation where mom and dad are fighting and they're left to clear up is the best. And describe that. And so what they wound up doing was they didn't pick. I mean just like many children in split families they're like I love both my parents. We can make this work. Wait wait wait. And that actually explains the genius of the Haunted Mansion is their refusal to pick. That's why it is what it is. They thought let's do both. That is a marriage of two seemingly diametrically opposed ideas into one ride and that's why it works so well it's not too intense for children and it's not too silly for adults.

I should mention another Imagineer who was advocated for the combined approach -- Xavier Atencio. He went by the nickname X. And X wrote the script for the ride narration, and the lyrics to song Grim Grinning Ghosts, which was composed by Buddy Baker

Interestingly, they never settled on a backstory for the ride. The Imagineers threw in a lot of clues, but the fans are still debating who these ghost characters are supposed to be. Personally, I think that's what makes the ride feel so spooky -- there's so much mystery to it.

Now, Rolly Crump may have been one of the people advocating for the combined approach, but he had his own opinions. The ride opened in 1969, but when he was interviewed in 2012, he was still thinking it could've gone in another direction.

RC: Walt wanted as a walk through, after Walt passed, operations panicked and made it a ride but I personally feel that it should've been a walk through.

Also his Museum of the Weird would've been part of that walkthrough and the Doom Buggies killed that idea.

But David Mumpower thinks the Doom Buggies actually did justice to Rolly Crump's other big contribution -- the optical illusions.

DM: Because they could control line of vision for people going through the ride. They could set up certain special effects knowing people would never look in a place that would destroy the illusion. It was important for a second reason as well something we really haven't spoken about yet is the ghost host. You know that's audio narration. It is recorded. It cannot be adjusted so if you're in the wrong place. Narration doesn't match you know the ride's going to fall apart completely.

But I wanted to know when David goes through the ride, where does he see the influence of Claude Coats versus Marc Davis?

The first place we see March Davis's work is in stretching room. It's very character-focused, and each death that's revealed in the portraits is a gag.

But what impresses him the most about the stretching room is that it solves a practical problem. Walt couldn't buy as much land as he wanted in Anaheim, so many of the rides are underground. It makes sense if you're on Pirate of the Caribbean, you suddenly drop down and it's the thrill of the ride – but how do you get a crowd of people under a Haunted Mansion quickly?

DM: And that's the genius of the stretching room is it solves the problem by creating something nobody had ever done before where you're standing there and you're looking at something and it's just a slight of hand distraction while an elevator takes you down a floor.

By the way, Walt Disney World in Orlando is much bigger. They didn't need to bring you underground. But they simulated the stretching room anyway.

DM: I mean it's not actually anything where you have an elevator ride up or down the road just literally lifts. But people want the stretching room experience. So even though it serves no functional utility it still exists.

So next we get to the Doom Buggies, and ride through the haunted house itself.

That's where Jeff Baham sees Claude Coats's influence, from the ballroom to the attic to the rattling doors.

JB: A candelabra floating in you know and that seems like the hallway goes on forever. That to me looks like a classic instance of Claude Coats.

My favorite part of the ride happens in the middle when you see a live human face in a crystal ball. Fans of the ride know that is Madame Leota.

CLIP

To me, Madame Leota is the spookiest part of the ride because the woman you're looking at – Leota Toombs – has become a ghost. She passed away in 1991 but thanks to modern technology she's still there.

But here's what really interesting about Madame Leota. Her voice was dubbed over by an actress, Eleanor Audley who played

Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty. But the face is Leota Toombs, who is not an actress. Leota Toombs was one of the first few women to work at Walt Disney Imagineering.

Here's the really cool part. In 2001, they needed Madame Leota to say new dialogue for the Holiday version of the Haunted Mansion – which is Nightmare Before Christmas themed. So they filmed Leota Toombs's daughter Kim Irvine acting the part. Kim Irvine works at Walt Disney Imagineering – just like her mother did.

JB: They found out that the original Madame Leota film of Leota Toombs matches the bone structure of the new mold well enough that they don't have to ever change it out. So now Madame Leota that you see off the holiday times is actually a combination of both Kim Irvine and Leota Toombs together.

Because she is probably about the same age that her mother was and her mother did that.

JB: Yeah they're pretty close.

In the final section, we go into the graveyard and the tone shifts again from spooky to silly.

JB: And once you get out into the graveyard and everyone's having a great time and you see jokes you know someone's drinking out of someone else's shoe or someone is you know there's a mummy and a guy standing next to him that can't hear anything he's saying and you know it doesn't matter if he hears what he's saying because the mummy is just mumbling anyways. You know those kinds of gags and jokes those are the things that are very obvious Mark Davis.

This is why I love the Haunted Mansion – because it is more than the sum of its parts.

So often, we think successful works of art have to be the vision of a single genius. But a lot of works of art that stand the test of time are created groups of people who fought with each other.

Even when The Haunted Mansion opened to the public, the designers didn't think it was perfect. They just thought it was the best of all possible solutions. And they kept tinkering with it for years afterward.

But there's one thing they all felt satisfied with. Walt wanted there to be a Haunted House at Disneyland. And they finally gave him one.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to David Mumpower of Theme Park Tourist and Jeff Baham, whose site is DoomBugies dot com. He also wrote a book called The Unauthorized Story of the Haunted Mansion.

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