

The Walt Disney Family Museum: San Francisco, California

by *Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor*

The Presidio of San Francisco is a popular tourist spot in San Francisco.

□ Located at the northern tip of the city just before reaching the Golden Gate Bridge, it offers spectacular views of the bridge and the bay. The word "presidio" refers to the fortified military base originally established by the Spanish in North America and eventually used by the U.S. Army. Today the Presidio of San Francisco is a park within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and is a great place to visit. Of course, as most Disney fans know, the Presidio is also home to the Walt Disney Family Museum!

The Walt Disney Family Museum features the professional and personal life of Walt Disney, including his lasting legacy. The museum is located within three existing, but heavily renovated, historic buildings on the Presidio's Main Post. It is not formally associated with the Walt Disney Company, but instead is owned and operated by the Walt Disney Family Foundation, a non-profit organization established by the Disney family. The stated mission of the museum is to present, "...the life and achievements of the man who raised animation to an art, transformed the film industry, tirelessly pursued innovation, and created a global and distinctively American legacy." It opened to the public on October 1, 2009.

□ On the surface, the museum appears to be small and perhaps something that would only occupy an hour or two of your time. That's only partially true! The museum is relatively small, but one could easily spend hours and even days there absorbed in the many exhibits, especially the more interactive ones. Unfortunately, photography and video recording is not allowed in the museum; you can only take pictures in the "pre-show" area outside the formal galleries (otherwise, I'd have more photos to show you). The museum is basically laid out in chronological order, starting before Walt Disney was even born, with the permanent collection arranged into 10 distinct galleries. Besides just looking at various artifacts, there are also listening stations and more than 200 video screens. The first level of the museum covers his childhood and early adulthood and the beginnings of his animation career, including Laugh-O-Grams Films, and his time as an ambulance driver at the end of World War I. The second floor of the building covers his move to Hollywood, success with Mickey Mouse, early cartoon shorts, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and other early feature films,

the building of the studios in Burbank, World War II and the early post-war films, and nature documentary films. The third level, which is really back on the 1st floor of the museum, covers the 1950s and 1960s, especially television, Disneyland, the 1964 World Fair, Mary Poppins, and the beginning of what was to become Walt Disney World.

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□ Any Disney Parks fan will find the scale model of Disneyland absolutely incredible. It is not a model depicting Disneyland Park as it is, or was during some time in the past. Instead, it is a model developed together with Walt Disney Imagineering depicting the ideas Walt Disney had in his head for the park before his untimely death. The model is referred to as the "Disneyland of Walt's Imagination." For example, the Space Mountain model (my favorite attraction at Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Disneyland Paris) is not a model of any Space Mountain actually built; instead it's a model showing Walt Disney's original idea for the attraction. The entire model is stunning and one can easily spend over 30 minutes looking at all of the details! I so desperately wanted to take a picture of it!

Another artifact that took me by surprise was Walt Disney's original 1/8 scale Lilly Belle. The Lilly Belle was a miniature steam-powered train that he operated in his backyard. It was built by Walt and future Imagineer Roger Broggie for what Walt Disney called the Carolwood Pacific Railroad. He named the steam engine in honor of his wife Lilly. Walt Disney used the train to entertain guests and neighbors, and the train could carry adults as well as children. The backyard railroad is believed to be part of the inspiration for the creation of Disneyland, so it was great to see the train in the museum. The Lilly Belle can be found just before the model of Disneyland.

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□ I also enjoyed examining the multiplane camera in the museum. The multiplane camera is a special camera used in the traditional animation process that moves different pieces of artwork past the camera at various speeds and distances to produce the illusion of three dimensions. The first multiplane camera, allowing four layers of artwork, was invented by Walt Disney Studios animator Ub Iwerks. The most famous multiplane camera, allowing seven layers of artwork, was built for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and was first tested in the production of a Silly Symphony short called The Old Mill, which won an Academy Award in 1937. The multiplane camera at the museum is one of the last three surviving Disney multiplane cameras; it's enormous and it was great to see it in its fully glory.

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□ The most moving gallery, in my opinion, is in the last room before exiting the permanent exhibits. There, guests can read about, and listen to, actual newscasts about Walt Disney's death and the worldwide

response to the news. I have been lucky to have had the chance to visit the museum three times since its opening, and I've never been able to get out of that room without a few tears. From being in that room, I get the sense of what it must have been like on December 15, 1966 for true Disney fans.

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□ There is also a gift shop, and a small cafe operated by Wolfgang Puck Catering, inside the museum building. In the basement, there is also a 114-seat theater for screenings and special events. In fact, there are a lot of special events scheduled at the museum, including discussions, classes, and special activities. For example, at the end of July there is a discussion titled, "Walt's Fascination with Outer Space," where Disney historian and author Jim Korkis will discuss Walt Disney's scientific and cultural contributions to building support for the U.S. Space Program. As a NASA engineer and a Disney fan, I really wish I could be there for that! Be sure to examine the calendar of events on the museum's website while planning your visit.

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□ The Walt Disney Family Museum is an incredible museum. It will be interesting to anybody touched by Walt Disney or his legacy, and an absolute "must do" for any Disney fan. The museum covers Walt Disney's incredible successes, disappointments, and never-ending optimism. However, I don't think it is a great museum for very young guests. Unfortunately, many young guests will want to quickly bypass many exhibits and artifacts that would hold their parents spellbound. A Disney fan could easily spend an entire day, not including any special events. In fact, I think a Disney fan would want to make a special trip to San Francisco and reserve a whole day just to see this museum. However, if making a special trip is out of the question and you just happen to find yourself in the San Francisco area, then go even if only for just a few hours! You won't regret it!

About The Author: Bernie Edwards lives in Maryland with his wife and two children. He is an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel. He enjoys visiting both Walt Disney World and Disneyland, and sailing on the Disney Cruise Line.

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