

The Walt Disney Family Museum: A Disney Attraction Review

by Eric Johnson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Earlier this year, I spent five days in San Francisco for business.

Since we had never been to the City by the Bay before, my wife Jean decided to accompany me and take in some of the famous sites the beautiful city has to offer. I didn't have a lot of free time, but decided I absolutely had to ride a cable car, see the Golden Gate Bridge, and visit the Walt Disney Family Museum at The Presidio.

Before I knew about the trip to San Francisco, I had already placed the museum on my Disney "bucket list." I consider myself a huge Disney fan. I love visiting the theme parks and taking Disney cruises. More than that, I admire Walt Disney for the characteristics that helped him to accomplish so much during his 65 years of life. When we are at Disney's Hollywood Studios in Florida, I enjoy spending time looking around in Walt Disney: One Man's Dream. One Man's Dream tells of Walt's life and accomplishments from the perspective of The Walt Disney Company. At the Walt Disney Family Museum, I was intrigued by the way Walt's personal life is presented from the perspective of his family.

During his lifetime, Walt Disney was known as an animator, producer, entertainer, storyteller, and visionary. An entire generation across the United States knew him as "Uncle Walt," as he was broadcast into their living rooms every Sunday night. Today, most Americans were born after his death and know of Walt primarily because of The Walt Disney Company. Like other luminaries from the early 20th century, his name has come to represent an entire global brand. Retail stores, merchandise, theme parks, cruise ships, movies, and television channels all bear his name. Lost in all of this fame and accomplishment is the man, Walter Elias Disney, who was also a brother, husband, and father. The appropriately-named Walt Disney Family Museum in The Presidio of San Francisco sets out to create a balance between the public Walt and Walt the family man.

Inside the museum, the balance between private and public is achieved right from the beginning. In the lobby outside the main part of the museum, guests see many professional awards, including Walt's Oscars, side by side with personal effects such as the artwork that adorned the walls of the Disney home. I enjoyed meandering between the oil painting "Davy Crockett's Cabin in Winter," which hung in Walt

and Lillian's living room, and the Academy Award statues Walt was given for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Especially interesting to me, and a nice personal touch, is a small sample of the furnishings found inside Walt and Lillian's personal apartment above the Firehouse in Disneyland. The Disneys loved the Victorian era and Lillian collected cranberry glass. These tastes influenced the decor of the apartment, which is demonstrated in the display.

A location of significance to Walt both personally and professionally was Griffith Park in Los Angeles. It was here he would frequently bring his daughters, Diane and Sharon. He would sit on a bench while they rode the park's carousel. On this bench, waiting for his daughters, the seeds of Disneyland were sown in his mind. It is fitting that a bench from Griffith Park is in the museum, giving visitors the chance to sit on one of the very benches where Disneyland was born. Further into the museum, are more fascinating exhibits that serve to tell the story of the man Walt. The largest room in the museum holds some of the most amazing treasures; Lilly Belle, Walt's miniature steam train from his backyard Carolwood Pacific Railroad, is one of the first things to greet visitors in this room. The original concept model for Sleeping Beauty Castle, an original model from Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress, and original artwork from Disney legends Mary Blair and Eyvind Earle are among the memorabilia that are beautifully displayed. Near the end of this room is my favorite part of the museum, a 12-foot model of Disneyland. The model does not represent Disneyland in any stage of its actual existence. Rather, this model represents the Disneyland of Walt's imagination.

□ The mixture of personal and professional continued as we delved deeper into the exhibits. We got a special treat when a small group entered, led by Walt Disney's daughter Diane. She was very quietly leading the group, as if not wanting to attract attention to herself. If I had not recognized her, I would have had no idea she was connected with the museum in any way. I didn't want to be obtrusive, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to listen in on a little of her descriptions of the various displays. She obviously took great joy in sharing memories and memorabilia from her father's life. Her presence in the museum made the tour more enjoyable and added significantly to the experience for both my wife and me. There is no more personal perspective on Walt than that of his daughter.

□ Some of the most impacting mementos of Walt are not the large items like steam trains and park models. There are many personal gifts from Walt to Lillian and their daughters, which shine a spotlight on the kind of man he truly was. He was keenly interested in people. In large gold letters filling the wall above the model of Walt's Disneyland is a quote

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that speaks volumes. Of all the hundreds of Walt Disney quotes, it is interesting that his family chose this one to occupy such a significant place in the museum; "You can dream, create, design, and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it requires people to make the dream a reality."

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□As the end of the museum nears, the exhibits turn toward the end of his life, chronicling his final projects, time spent with family, and his death on December 15, 1966. The last room is a tribute to his life, frequently in the words of the people who worked with him and helped him to continually do the impossible. Among the tributes here is a quote from Disney legend and early Imagineer, Alice Davis who said, "It was more than a Disney family. He cared about the people that worked for him." The lesson of the Walt Disney Family Museum is that there is so much more to Walt Disney than theme parks and entertainment. Walt Disney was able to create the animation, movies, and parks because he was a loving father who took his daughters to the park and a visionary leader who instilled vision into the people around him. It is impossible to truly appreciate Walt Disney the entertainer without also understanding Walt Disney the man.

*About The Author: Eric M. Johnson is the author of *You Build a Business with People*. He and his wife Jean and their two sons enjoy writing about all things Disney at their family blog 365daysofmagic.com.*

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