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THE DISNEY INFLUENCE--40 YEARS LATER

BY

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ABSTRACT

The author is Chairman of Pittsburgh-based Kennywood Entertainment Company. Past president of the IAAPA, he also was the first living member to be voted into the Amusement Industry Hall of Fame.

Nothing illustrates the change in the amusement park industry better than the make-up of the Board of Directors for its premier trade association, as compared to 40 years ago. That was 1955, the year Disneyland opened.

Of the 1955 Board members' parks, 75% are no longer in existence. Practically every one of those parks was a family owned operation. All were in the United States.

Now many members of the Board are from major multi-park operations. In fact, the current President is from the Disney organization and the Third Vice President from Six Flags.

And not only are 11 members from outside the U.S., but the association's First Vice President operates three parks in England and the Treasurer is General Manager of one in Germany.

So what happened in 40 years that changed the industry. Obviously Disneyland was a major influence. But so were such factors as the end of segregation, the exodus to the suburbs and drastic changes in real estate values.

And internationally, the export of American culture and entertainment via television created a demand for fun.

Of all those reasons for change in the amusement industry, nothing matched the magic of Walt Disney. His genius made the American public dissatisfied with the old ways.

It didn't take existing amusement parks long to realize that they must improve or die. Many died, including some of the largest in the country.

Yes, the other reasons contributed to their demise in one way or another. Operating seasonally on property more valuable for other purposes gave some a push into oblivion. Certainly the end of segregation was an excuse for some. And urban parks were no match for competitors built at exits on the Interstate.

Not only did Disney create a new standard, but a whole new industry--theme parks.

There were almost immediate copies of the Disneyland concept. That meant not only "themeing" rides and attractions in an almost fairyland atmosphere, but also dividing the park into major themed areas--Frontierland, Tomorrowland, etc.

Some of the first copies failed, partly under the burden of heavy investments that couldn't be re-couped on a seasonal basis. Freedomland in New York City was one example but far from being the only one.

It was the first Six Flags park--Six Flags over Texas in Dallas--that was the initial clone of Disneyland to prosper. Once that formula was established, the numbers grew annually.

Most large American markets were covered by 10 years ago, and now theme park growth is outside the U.S. There are few areas in the World that have not been exploited, with Eastern Europe being among those not yet having their own theme parks. But that is sure to change fast.

Meanwhile, the occasional traditional park that resisted themeing, but upgraded, and continues to improve can be found. They are survivors, and their numbers are few but hardy.

(Note--The trade association was called the National Association of Amusement Parks, Pools and Beaches in 1955. It now is the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions.)