

Dreams and Nightmares: Central Florida and the Opening of Walt Disney World

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Once upon a time, Mickey Mouse was not a Florida resident. Less than fifty years ago, Florida was famous for her beaches and her orange groves. Silver Springs, Cypress Gardens, and the mermaids of Weeki Wachee were the state's premiere tourist attractions (Mormino 2002, 9). Today, the Walt Disney Company is a dominant force in entertainment, its success ensured not only by a legacy of classic animated films, but also by its ownership of superheroes and Jedi knights. Every year, millions of tourists flock to 'experience the magic' at the place 'Where Dreams Come True.' But when the Walt Disney World Resort (WDW) first opened its doors on October 1, 1971, the company's future in Florida was uncertain. Would Mickey find a comfortable home in the Sunshine State—or had Disney been trapped?

On November 22, 1963, a private plane flew slowly over Central Florida, carrying a party of businessmen travelling under assumed names. The executives surveyed the network of roads and the vast swaths of empty land below them. The region had made the short list as a possible site for the Walt Disney Company's newest enterprise, a bold "Project X" that would include not only an amusement park but a futuristic city. Walter Elias ("Walt") Disney, the great purveyor of dreams, had learned his lesson from building Disneyland in Anaheim, California, where building codes thwarted imaginative projects and a gauntlet of unsavory enterprises ranging from cheap hotels to tacky souvenir stands quickly ringed the park. For his Project X, Disney needed someplace with cheap land, reliable weather, decent roads, and subservient politicians. As he gazed down at Central Florida, Walt Disney liked what he saw, an undeveloped pocket in a state that already served as a vacation center for the eastern half of America. Later that day, as they travelled westward, Disney and his companions learned of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Before his plane touched down in California, Disney made his decision. There should be no more delay; Central Florida

was his choice. Soon dummy corporations began scooping up land along the Orange-Osceola County line with a stealth that would have made James Bond proud. By June 1965, the Disney Company had bought or optioned 27,258 acres in the two counties, creating a 42 mile square mile tract twice the size of Manhattan. Whatever Walt Disney planned to build on his property, he would have plenty of room for it, and he would never have to worry about a hot dog stand or a cheap motel ruining his view (Foglesong 2001, 14-17, 40-51; Koenig 2007, 19-20, 28-29; Fjellman 1992, 110-111).

Disney did not invent Florida tourism, but the arrival of WDW would certainly reshape Florida's tourism industry. Florida had a reputation as a place of rest and recovery dating back to the 1820s, when individuals suffering from tuberculosis and other respiratory complaints arrived in St. Augustine, Key West, and Pensacola, seeking relief in the "salubrious air." State promoters lured Victorian sportsmen to Florida's wilds after the Civil War; railroad and hotel magnates Henry Flagler and Henry Plant created multiple resorts that catered to the Gilded Age elite, and the 1920s saw 'tin can tourism' popularized by hardy travelers in primitive recreational vehicles. World War II veterans who trained on Florida's beaches returned with their young families in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s Florida was beginning to break the stranglehold of Jim Crow laws that had forced African Americans to enter attractions via back doors, or not be served at all. Florida was in the south, yet not especially 'Southern' in its outlook, and its growing dependence on tourism made its leaders especially receptive to anything that promised more visitors and their dollars (Revels 2011, 101-199).

By 1965, Orlando area residents knew that something was afoot, although the local rumor mill tossed out various industrial scenarios to explain the property purchases, with McDonald Aircraft, Ford Motor Company, and Hercules Powder being mentioned as possible developers. While on a press junket to Disneyland that fall, *Orlando Sentinel* report Emily Bavar put Walt Disney on the spot, asking if he was "buying all that land in Florida." His awkward reply, a denial/non-denial, triggered her journalistic instincts, and soon the Sentinel was reporting that Disney was the most likely suspect. Cover blown, Walt Disney arranged an official announcement on November 15, a somewhat anticlimactic event when Florida Governor Haydon Burns upstaged the great entertainer on October 25, informing

the Florida League of Municipalities convention in Miami that Disney was planning to bring in “the greatest attraction yet known in the history of Florida.” The official announcement from Walt Disney was similarly vague, revealing only that Disney’s new enterprise would cost \$100 million, employ about 4,000 people, and include a “City of Tomorrow” within its borders (Foglesong 2001, 44-51; Korkis 2019 39; Koenig 2007, 27-29).

Walt Disney had become obsessed with city planning and imagined a vibrant community rising from the Central Florida landscape. Already in poor health, however, Disney would not be able to achieve his final dream. Walt Disney died from lung cancer on December 15, 1966, and his brother, Roy Disney, decided to stick with what the company knew best: an amusement park. However, Roy Disney sold “Disneyland East” to Florida on the basis of his late brother’s vision, claiming that the company was also focused on building Epcot—the Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow—a model city for some 20,000 residents. To make this dream a reality, the company would need exceptional legal perks. On February 2, 1967, Walt Disney seemed to speak from the grave as his company premiered the ‘Epcot Film’ to a select group of Florida businessmen and civic leaders. In the short movie Walt Disney outlined his plans, devoting most of the film to displaying his conceptional art for a futuristic city. The promise of 50,000 new jobs and a revenue stream of 6 billion over the next decade encouraged Governor Claude Kirk, a pro-business Republican, to eagerly back Disney’s 481 pages of proposals, which the Florida legislature obediently passed. Carl Hiaasen, the legendary Florida journalist and novelist, noted that “Never before or since has such outlandish dominion been given to a private corporation.” The Reedy Creek Improvement District, as the massive property was official titled, included two incorporated towns and was virtually a sovereign province within the state. A “Vatican with Mouse Ears” had been born (Foglesong 2001, 5, 59, 64-70; Koenig 2007, 13-16; Hiaasen 1998, 27; Korkis 2019, 76).

Despite having sold the state on urban planning, the Disney Company’s immediate goal was to make a bigger and better Disneyland. With enough land to protect its interests and prevent competition from springing up at its

gates, the company now began the Herculean task of transforming swamp and farmland into a fantasy kingdom. But along with moving earth and creating a man-made lagoon, Disney also had to sell the people of Florida on its new project. This was a challenge.

Objections from other attractions were not, initially, a problem. Most Florida tourism impresarios welcomed Disney to the neighborhood. Dick Pope, the genius behind Cypress Gardens, said “Anyone who is going to spend \$100 million near me is good, and a good thing” (*Orlando Sentinel* October 29, 1965). But average Floridians were mystified; what exactly was the Disney Company building? Most Floridians had never been to Disneyland, and could only imagine this new project as a glorified roadside attraction or boardwalk, maybe with a zoo attached. Sandy Quinn, Disney’s director of marketing, made a speaking tour of Florida’s Chambers of Commerce, urging business leaders to begin to think about how they might surf the incoming waves of tourism that WDW would surely create. A group of Miami Beach hotel managers pointedly rebuffed Quinn, telling him that people came to Florida to enjoy its beaches, not its amusement parks. Other Floridians dismissed WDW as yet another scam reminiscent of the land boom of the 1920s (Koenig 2007, 50-53). Even Debbie Dane, a young woman from Forest City who became WDW’s first official ‘ambassador’ and toured the nation promoting the resort, struggled with imagining what it would become, stating that she originally “thought it was going to be something like a large state fair” (Korkis 2019, 143).

To help promote its coming attraction and counter erroneous information flowing from other local businesses, on January 10, 1970 the Disney Preview Center opened on the shoreline of Lake Buena Vista. Staffed by a bevy of attractive young women, the Center featured a model of the park, as well as films and conceptual art. Souvenirs, tickets, and hotel reservations were also available. Employees recorded the license plates of visitors to gain insight into WDW’s potential guests. The short-lived Preview Center, which closed the day before WDW opened, pre-sold nearly \$11 million in tickets — an omen of what was to come (Korkis 2019, 97-99; Koenig 2007, 54-56).

By 1971, Floridians were talking about WDW, and not everyone was happy to see the attraction rising. Many residents of the Orlando area foresaw traffic jams and higher taxes as the price to be paid for a hotel building boom and a plummeting unemployment rate. As Martin Anderson had reminded his readers in an *Orlando Sentinel* editorial just after Disney's official announcement, "You cannot dump 40,000 tourists a day into this community along with 50,000 new jobs and build 40,000 new homes without putting somebody out of joint" (Fjellman 1992, 120-121). Likewise, tourism competitors had begun to realize that this project was far more than a Six Gun Territory or a Monkey Jungle. The same Miami hoteliers who had mocked Disney at the start now feared that a "Mouse Curtain" would descend in Central Florida since many tourists would lack the time and money to travel on to South Florida's fabled shores. Other tourist attraction owners were starting to wonder if their businesses would be able to compete at the Disney level. Florida officials continued to be reassuring; "Walt Disney World is great for the entire state" was a common talking point. But of course all of this depended on whether WDW would be ready to welcome its guests on opening day (*St. Petersburg Independent*, July 30, 1971; *Miami News*, August 26, 1971; *Florida Times Union* September 5, 1971).

"Can they get it ready on schedule?" was a question virtually every reporter asked. Following a series of labor disputes in 1968, major construction on the park had begun in the spring of 1969. Over 10,000 workers representing 87 different subcontractors built the resort under the direction of retired Admiral Joe Fowler, the naval veteran credited with getting Disneyland open on time (Koenig 2007, 47-49). Winter weather had stalled operations in 1970-71, but by May the *Tampa Tribune* was reporting that an 8,000 man force was working feverishly in drought conditions to put the finishing touches on what was still widely billed as the "Vacation Kingdom." The *St. Petersburg Times* gave its readers a preview of the "cutting and polishing of a crown jewel" on August 9, revealing that the park would be almost ten times the size of Disneyland in California and was costing the company \$300 million, which was nearly 60 times what Disney had paid for the property back in 1965. The *Orlando Sentinel* reported that Disney's payroll was already \$1.6 million weekly, and that the company had received more than 100,000 applications to join its first "cast" of employees. All Disney employees had to be attractive and wholesome, with good personal hygiene

and the ability “to make people happy.” Even the “bug brigade”—experts who worked to determine the best methods of pesticide spraying to ensure that guests enjoyed a mosquito-free visit—drew attention in the feverish lead-up to opening day (*Tampa Tribune* and the *Tampa Times* May 16, 1971; *Orlando Sentinel* February 21, March 7, 1971; *St. Petersburg Times* July 28, August 9, 1971; Zehnder 1975, 215).

Perhaps the greatest alarm came from local officials who imagined the mother of all traffic jams. In sleepy Central Florida, it was difficult to comprehend what a possible 95,000 cars a day—the amount of traffic Disneyland averaged—would look like. In July, Jack Martin, a freshman Orange County Commissioner, was calling for better co-ordination between county law enforcement agencies before “hordes of people” descended in October. Florida Highway Patrol troopers in Central Florida had all leaves for October cancelled. FHP Director Col. Reid Clifton complained that there was not enough funding to keep extra troopers on the job after the first four days in October (Koenig 2007, 53; *Orlando Sentinel* July 30, August 17, 1971; *St. Petersburg Times* August 10, 1971). Perhaps a bit smugly, the *Tallahassee Democrat* opined that WDW would open to fanfare and frustration, and that the residents of Orlando would endure “a noisy end to their quiet way of life” (*Tallahassee Democrat*, September 26, 1971).

Along with increased traffic, other problems were on the minds of Central Florida planners and promoters. Would there be enough hotel space, restaurants, and emergency responders? In August, the *Miami Herald* predicted glumly that the 27,000 tourists expected to pass through Disney’s gates on a daily basis would face trouble getting around Orlando and finding lodgings, warning that many families would be forced to bunk down in Tampa or Daytona. Despite the happy face put on by Disney officials, who assured the newspaper that they could handle the crowds, Charlie Richards, news director of the Greater Orlando Chamber of Commerce, worried that visitors would leave with a “bad taste” if they were forced to sleep more than an hour away from the park and navigate heavy traffic (*Miami Herald*, August 11, 1971). An unpleasant experience at WDW might sour future tourists on Florida, or send them packing without sampling the state’s more traditional attractions.

Reporters who were allowed to tour WDW in August had generally kind—if sometimes patronizing—things to say about the park. Most were impressed that the man in charge of construction was 76 years old, a far cry from the image of a resort being run by teenagers (*Tampa Tribune* and the *Tampa Times* May 16, 1971). A *St. Petersburg Times* correspondent described the Magic Kingdom (the theme park section of the property, separate from hotels and other resort activities) as a “total fantasy” that was carefully orchestrated, with all aspects of the park sanitized and benevolent. Like hippie cast members, controversy was not allowed through the gates. “Including Richard Nixon in the Hall of Presidents is probably the most controversial thing Disney has ever done,” the writer mused. “But after all he is president.” Perhaps hearing a bit of condescension in the reporter’s tone, one Disney official remarked, “Sure it’s fantasy. But what’s wrong with that? We’re here to entertain and we do a damned good job.” The reporter was forced to agree that “At its best, it takes you beyond a willing suspension of disbelief and evokes a kind of self-hypnosis. Illusion becomes reality, fantasy becomes fact” (*St. Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1971).

The information that perhaps mattered most to families planning a trip to WDW was also outlined in Florida newspapers. Disney had 12,000 parking spaces, and it would cost fifty cents to use one. Admission prices to the Magic Kingdom, depending on the guest’s age, were \$2, \$1 and 50 cents, but most guests would want to purchase ticket books that covered admission, transportation to the park, and seven rides: these went for \$4.75, \$4.25, and \$3.75. Hotel rates inside the resort would start at \$22 a night. A family of four was advised to budget a minimum of \$30 a day to cover admission, tickets for rides, and food. It would be easy to spend more, but difficult, a *Miami Herald* writer warned, to spend less. The gates would open at 10 am on October 1, though no special ceremonies or celebrations were planned. The hoopla would wait until the official park opening on the weekend of October 23-25, when a 90 minute television special would be filmed. Admiral Fowler freely admitted that the park required a shakedown cruise: “We are going to need a couple of weeks to iron out the kinks before we begin playing to capacity crowds” (*Miami Herald*, August 8, 1971; *Tampa Tribune* and the *Tampa Times*, May 16, 1971; *Orlando Sentinel*, March 9, 1971).

The day before the park opened, a memo was sent out to all employees: “IT WILL BE A GREAT AND MEMORABLE DAY,” the note announced, while conceding that it would also be hectic and confusing one—“but that’s show business”(Zehnder 1975, 212). On October 1, the *Orlando Sentinel* contained a lengthy article on WDW’s immediate and predicted impact, noting that major changes had already disrupted the area’s economy and lifestyle. The paper freely admitted that the aspect of a projected \$600 million in tourism revenue and the distinction of being the greatest tourism magnet in the world by 1975 was not pleasing to all citizens. But, since “Walt Disney World is the most important economic happening in Orlando’s history and—it’s going to change the lives of everybody even remotely nearby—why not relax and enjoy it?” (*Orlando Sentinel* 1 October, 1971).

Walt Disney World’s debut put everyone working in the park on edge. Disney officials were all too familiar with the chaos that plagued the opening of Disneyland. Known as “Black Sunday,” July 17, 1955 was broiling hot in Anaheim, and the new park, designed to hold about 15,000 visitors, was crammed with nearly 28,000 people, many of whom had snuck inside or used fake tickets. Women’s high heels sank into freshly poured asphalt, rides broke down, vendors ran out of food, animals misbehaved, and all of the embarrassment was viewed by a national audience, as future President Ronald Reagan and TV personality Art Linkletter tried to make the most of an ABC broadcast stymied by balky cameras (Grant 2019, 37-38).

To avoid a repeat of Black Sunday, WDW workers labored around the clock, completing last minute tasks, including vital landscaping. Over 150 watercraft were moved into position overnight. The computer programming was still being loaded in the Hall of Presidents, forcing one “imagineer” to sleep on the stage while waiting for his robot chief executives to come to life. Some staffers bunked down on the benches of the Country Bear Jamboree, fearful of getting caught in the massive traffic jam the morning was sure to bring (Korkis 2019, 139-143).

Yet no great traffic jam snarled I-4; early reports of massive amounts of vehicles proved merely to be employees heading to work. At 9:30 am, director of marketing Jack Lindquist selected a “first family” (Lakeland

residents William Windsor Jr., his wife Marty, and their two young sons, Jay and Lee) out of the crowd for a private tour. A trio of University of Florida students, who had slept in their car the night before, laid claim to being the first paying guests through the turnstiles. Only 10,000 people bought tickets the first day, compared to the 100,000 that had been predicted. While the Magic Kingdom was not an exact replica of Disneyland, a number of the familiar aspects, including the hub-wheel design, the central castle, and an idealized Main Street, were in place. Unfortunately, many of the attractions either were not operational or quickly broke down. No Hollywood celebrities attended. Based on opening day, it looked like the Mouse had laid an egg. Pundits gleefully called it a \$400 million failure (Korkis 2019, 140-141, 147-149; *Variety* October 6, 1971; Kurti 1996, 38-39). In August, a Miami reporter had opined that perhaps the life of any major tourist attraction was “fleetingly transient,” like the career of a movie star (*Miami News* August 26, 1971). If so, Disney had known its hour upon the stage—and the curtain would quickly ring down on a major flop.

What the soothsayers had not counted on was Disney’s skill at planning. The park was never expected to be on a full schedule until after the official late-October fanfare. Disney Executive Vice-President E. Cardon Walker noted in September that the “October opening time was set more in a traditionally light tourism period to give the new vacation kingdom time to reach maximum efficiency before the winter tourism season” (*Florida Times-Union*, September 8, 1981). The selection of October 1 was highly strategic: it was a Friday, the slowest day of the week in the slowest month of the year for Orlando tourism. While the media estimate of 100,000 people on opening day proved off-base, the “preview month” of October would give the company time to finish construction of facilities as well as begin building a good reputation through word-of-mouth. Low attendance (most likely a result of people avoiding the first day due to distorted predictions about overcrowding, as well as the time of year) was a gift to Disney management. Operations executive Dick Nunis recalled wild and unnerving newspaper predictions: the park would soon close if it didn’t get between 500,000 to a million guests a day. Despite glum-faced newscasters and a bobble in Disney stock, Disney officials remained confident. According to Nunis, opening day “worked out just about how we wanted it to” (Anderson 2019, 64; Korkis 2019, 145).

Everette Williard, writing for Jacksonville's *Florida Times-Union*, reported his observation of the park's first days. Heat, rather than traffic or parking, was the problem. Williard had no difficulty securing a hotel. He was pleasantly surprised to find the park prices more modest than he'd expected, advising his readers that a day at WDW was less expensive than an afternoon spent at a college football game. Courtesy was "almost a fetish" and Williard appreciated the lack of hippies. "If the Hall of Presidents, with its show recounting some of the nation's tribulations, doesn't move you, my sympathies," he wrote, noting that the youngsters he saw in the park "also act like they enjoy themselves" (*Florida Times-Union* October 5, 1971). Designed as a time for Florida residents to enjoy their new kingdom, the preview month was a modest success. After 11 days of operation, the resort was averaging 15,000 guests per day, despite having spent little to no money on advertising. Best of all, these guests were shedding dollars. WDW shop supervisors reported that 80% of visitors were spending at least \$5 on souvenirs before departing. Gate proceeds for just over a week of operation topped \$1.5 million (*Variety* October 13, 1971).

Life magazine featured WDW's opening as its October 15, 1971 cover story, with a now-iconic picture of over a thousand costumed cast members standing before Cinderella's castle. Dubbing the park an "intricate, hokey, hugely expensive assembly of lives and places that never were," *Life* noted how the Disney Company had learned its lesson from its Anaheim experience. Most of the Florida attractions were twice as large as their Disneyland originals, and great care was taken to avoid losing control of the environment and the millions of dollars in revenue that were siphoned away in California. The magazine warned of potential pollution and water issues and noted that the residents of Orlando, while grateful for the economic boost that WDW was bringing to the area, also worried about "rising prices, traffic jams and 'relatives coming in out of nowhere to visit'" ("Disney Moves East," 45, 47).

Walt Disney World's "Grand Opening" was staged on the weekend of October 23-25. Featured performers included Julie Andrews, Bob Hope, Glen Campbell, Buddy Hackett, and a World Symphony conducted by Arthur Fiedler. Filmed for television, the ceremonies and performances aired as an NBC special on October 29. *Variety* panned the show as a "generally

bland concoction” that neither entertained nor gave significant insight into the wonders of the new resort. Despite this “uninspiring” showcase, however, the trade paper predicted that WDW would flourish “as well or better than its California counterpart” due to Disney’s reputation (*Variety* October 27; November 3, 1971).

And then the deluge hit. Thanksgiving weekend of 1971 saw the interstate jammed in one of the worst traffic snarls ever reported in Florida. Traffic backed up for 10 miles as some 56,000 guests stampeded into WDW, forcing the park to shutter its ticket windows in early afternoon. By the end of its first year WDW could boast 10,712,991 visitors and \$139 million in gross revenues. Tourism into the Orlando area skyrocketed, and virtually all of Disney’s neighbors benefitted from proximity. Cypress Gardens saw attendance leap by 38 percent, while the Kennedy Space Center’s attendance rose by 27 percent and Silver Springs’ attendance climbed by 28 percent. Even St. Augustine’s historic Castillo de San Marcos saw its attendance rise by 29 percent. Dick Pope’s prediction seemed to be coming true---Disney was a good thing for Florida (Kurtti 1996, 38-39; Fjellman 1992, 129; Zehnder 1975, 242; Revels 2011, 126).

Or was it? Certainly the reviews from the residents of Central Florida were—and remain—very mixed. In 1971, the Metro Orlando area (Orange, Seminole, Osceola, and Lake counties) had a combined population of 522,575. By 2000, it had grown to 1.6 million residents, and by 2018 it had 2.13 million (Mormino 2002, 17; *World Population Review* 2019). Orlando boomed with hotel rooms and restaurants, but also with a much higher cost of living, increased traffic, and a rising crime rate. From the beginning, many blamed WDW for attracting the wrong crowd, causing a visible growth in drug use and prostitution. Speaking to a *National Geographic* reporter in 1973, the Chairman of the Orange County Board of Commissioners put it bluntly: “I wish the mouse had stayed in California” (Judge 1973, 596). The ‘magic’ that tourists experience inside WDW hides the ugly reality: much of Central Florida has become an unsightly collection of strip malls, fast food joints, and cut-rate hotels (Drew 1993, 21-23). Twenty years after WDW’s opening, a cover story in *Time* magazine criticized Orlando for being a town without a true soul, overcrowded, transient, and tacky. “It’s ugly, it’s awful, it’s

appalling,” *Orlando Sentinel* columnist Morris was quoted in the article. “You live here every day as a Floridian with a tremendous sense of loss”(Painton 1991).

Since WDW’s opening in 1971, the Central Florida region has become a magnet for more theme parks and businesses catering primarily to middle-class family amusement. In 1973, Sea World of Florida, the third in the Sea World chain of aquatic parks, opened just ten miles from WDW. Epcot, which was reimagined from a futuristic city to more of a permanent world’s fair, was introduced as WDW’s ‘second gate’ in 1982. Competition between Disney and Universal led to both companies premiering movie-themed parks within a year of each other: Disney-MGM Studios in 1989 and Universal Studios, Florida in 1990. Part of a massive ‘Disney Decade’ that saw tremendous growth across WDW, including new hotels and entertainment areas, a ‘fourth gate,’ Disney’s Animal Kingdom, opened in 1998. Universal needed only one more year to construct its second gate, Islands of Adventure, and in 2017 it added a massive water park, Volcano Bay. With such fierce competition between entertainment titans, it was no surprise that smaller parks like Boardwalk and Baseball and Splendid China, which opened in the wake of WDW, were unable to compete (Revels 2011, 127-135, 146; *Orlando Sentinel*, May 25, 2017). As of the writing of this essay, WDW is scheduled to open “Galaxy’s Edge,” a Star Wars themed land inside Disney’s Hollywood Studios (the former Disney-MGM Studios), an attraction that will surely provoke more competition from Universal and increase, by unknown thousands, the number of people who choose to vacation in the Orlando area (*Orlando Sentinel*, April 24, 2019).

Carl Langford, Orlando’s mayor in 1971, remained optimistic when asked to recall Disney’s opening days for a tenth anniversary commemoration in 1981: “Show me a mayor in the United States who wouldn’t just love to have Walt Disney sitting on his doorstep as a neighbor.” In 2002, Florida historian Gary Mormino described the opening of WDW as “a seminal event in the history of popular culture” which “transformed American tourism and turned Orlando into one of America’s most intriguing cities of the late twentieth century.” Transformative did not always translate into beneficial, however. By 1990, Langford retreated to the North Carolina mountains to enjoy his retirement and escape the traffic of Central Florida. The former

mayor's actions serve, perhaps, as a metaphor for the Walt Disney World Resort's arrival and effect on Florida. The "gimmick" that civic boosters had longed for in the early 1960s, something that would snare tourists on their way to Miami, had ultimately trapped the residents of what had once been a bucolic small town. Walt Disney World succeeded beyond any 1971 resident's wildest dreams, only to become a current resident's worst nightmare (Foglesong 1996, 3; Mormino 2002, 13).

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Yes, Walt Disney World has caused this part of Central Florida to grow by a factor of nearly 25! As a final treat, you can watch the video below. It shows the televised opening of Walt Disney World. You'll see that Disney learned from their 1955 mistake. It was NOT a live broadcast. When David's not at Walt Disney World, he's writing about movies and box office analysis, economics, streaming media, technology, travel, and parks and recreation. He's the author of the Disney Demystified and Behind the Ride book series. Add new comment. Your name. In 1964, Walt Disney began secretly buying millions of dollars worth of Central Florida farmland. As vast areas of land were purchased in lots of 5,000 acres here, 20,000 there -- at remarkably high prices -- rumors flew as to who needed so much land and had the money to acquire it. Some thought it was Howard Hughes; others, the space program. Only two resorts, Disney's Art of Animation Resort and the Drury Inn & Suites (on Sand Lake Road), are slated to open this year. The Four Seasons at the Walt Disney World Resort, originally set to open in 2012, remains on the books, but with an opening date "TBD." With 2011 came signs of a slight upswing in the economy, tourism exhibiting the most visible signs of life. The Walt Disney World Resort, also called Walt Disney World and Disney World, is an entertainment complex in Bay Lake and Lake Buena Vista, Florida, in the United States, near the cities Orlando and Kissimmee. Opened on October 1, 1971, the resort is owned and operated by Disney Parks, Experiences and Products, a division of The Walt Disney Company. It was first operated by Walt Disney World Company. The property covers nearly 25,000 acres (39 sq mi; 101 km²), of which only half has been used. The