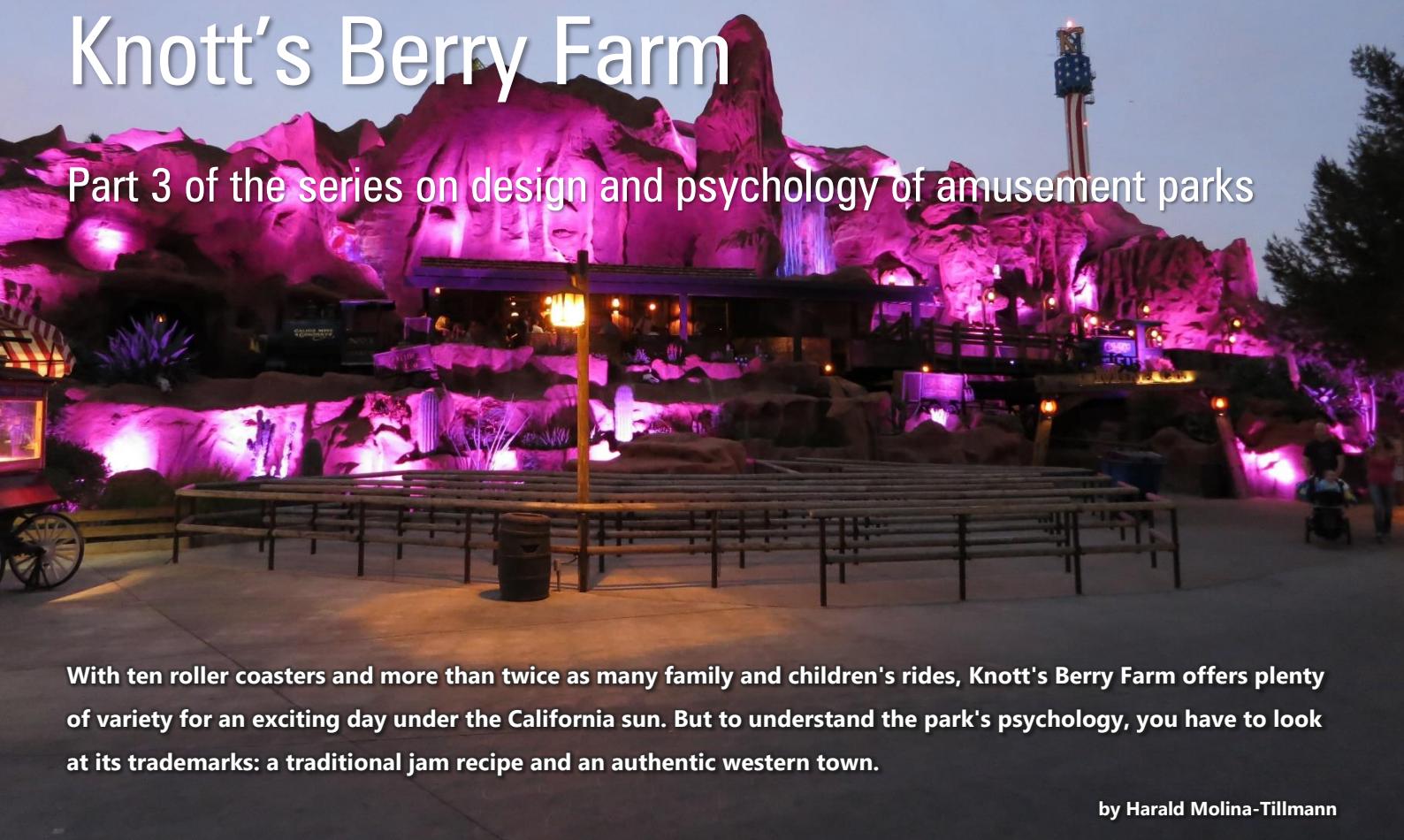


Insight and inside into

Knott's Berry Farm

Part 3 of the series on design and psychology of amusement parks



With ten roller coasters and more than twice as many family and children's rides, Knott's Berry Farm offers plenty of variety for an exciting day under the California sun. But to understand the park's psychology, you have to look at its trademarks: a traditional jam recipe and an authentic western town.

by Harald Molina-Tillmann

The amusement park Knott's Berry Farm is only 6 miles from the world-famous Disneyland. Despite the massive competition, the park manages an impressive 3.6 million visitors a year. The significantly lower admission price and the verve of the roller coasters may contribute to this success, but that alone does not explain the continual popularity of the park. In order to lure so many people away from the giant of entertainment and to retain them, an amusement park needs not only something good, but something incomparable.

Snoopy and more

If Knott's Berry Farm in its "Camp Snoopy" with the characters revolving around Charlie Brown would like to score points with the visitor, this is good but not sufficient. It is good, because the characters are very different in style and content from Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and the usual Hollywood pro-

ductions from the Disney corporation. But it is not enough, because it remains in the same topic, namely that of comics and stories. It also stays in the same category, namely in that of experienced feelings such as fun, excitement, comfort or emotion. If the concept and design of Knott's Berry Farm was exclusively based on these topics and categories, it would be very difficult or even impossible to compete with Disneyland, which in addition to size and fame also has an almost unbeatable offer in terms of emotions. But Knott's Berry Farm overcomes this in a radical and ingenious way. It relies on an emotional concept that Disney's culture of fantasy cannot and will never be able to offer because it runs counter to it. This concept is even so different that it seems to run counter to the basic idea of all leisure parks.

A first indication of the unique selling point of Knott's Berry Farm can even be seen before entering the park.

On the sign above the entrance gate, in letters larger than the actual name, we find the subtitle of the park: "America's First Theme Park". One can rightly ask why Knott's Berry Farm uses a dry historical fact of all things as its central advertising slogan, while amusement parks typically market illusion and cutting-edge technology. The answer lies in the fact that "America's first theme park" is not to be understood as a description of the park, but that the slogan announces the inner quality and essence of the park: History.

The real wild west

Cowboys, Indians and gunslingers not only fascinate Americans, but even people on the other side of the Atlantic. Germans, for instance, see them in carnival, in Elspe (open-air theater), in "Fort Fun" (amusement park) or in "Winnetou" (wild west movie). But in Knott's Berry Farm with its centerpiece, the western town "Ghost Town",



American history is elevated to a culture and guiding principle. Fortunately, this does not call for memories of dry history lessons. The park visitor does not study the western town, but experiences it. He does not look at it from the outside like in a movie, but he is inside it as if it were the objective truth. One could argue that the above also applies to western towns in European amusement parks or to other historical themes from the Middle Ages or antiquity, for example. But there are several key differences, all of which have something to do with authenticity.

First, the Ghost Town itself is very real. It is not a pure product of the imagination. Walter Knott, the founder of Knott's Berry Farm, traveled the country almost eighty years ago and not only collected authentic furnishings, but also entire houses. These were mostly

dismantled in their original sites and rebuilt in the Ghost Town. The blacksmith's shop was even transported completely in one piece. It still stands in the park today. The school, which one could call authentic in two senses, should also be emphasized. It was used by farmers in Kansas at the time of the Wild West, and California children went to school in its new location in the Ghost Town in the 1950s. When a building falls victim to the ravages of time, an attempt is always made to maintain the idea of authenticity. Buildings are demolished and completely rebuilt in precisely planned actions in just two days so that as few people as possible find out about the replacement.

Another form of authenticity arises from the life story of Knott and from the brevity of the history of America, at least

from the point of view of European immigrants. When we talk about the "Wild West", we mean the western part of today's USA in the 19th century. With a little good will, Walter Knott, born in 1889, can still be described as a child of the Wild West. In any case, he is likely to be influenced by the authentic stories of his grandmother Rosamond. In 1868 she and her family carried out the clichéd journey in a covered wagon to the American West: from Virginia via Texas to California. The reason for this trip was not a thirst for adventure, but because of poverty and depression. But even if we romanticize the trip, it remains something true. Not only is it a real historical time span, but it is still connected to us through Rosamond, Walter and their children. This combination of truth, romance and connectedness is what makes the Ghost Town so special.

An example of this is the possibility of sifting for gold. This is offered in many western towns. But in the middle of the Ghost Town, this is experienced consciously and unconsciously on a different level. You are surrounded by real buildings from the Wild West. And you sift for gold in California, where there actually was a gold rush not so long ago and only a few years before Rosamond's trip. This automatically makes it look more authentically true and exciting.

Jam tradition

With the park's trademark, the boysenberry cultivated by the Knotts almost 100 years ago, the concept of "history" is expanded to include "tradition" and "family".

You can still buy and enjoy boysenberry jam in the park today. According



to the text on the website, the jam is "homemade", based on "Cordelia's original recipe", and consists exclusively of "completely natural" ingredients. Jay Jennings' book "The Early Years of Knott's Berry Farm" tells how the girls of the Knott family helped their mother in the tearoom and the boys helped their father in the fields. The parents, on the other hand, only used the money they had earned "when it was necessary". Regardless of how trite you might think these texts are, and regardless of likely disputes beyond the vaunted family idyll, the fact remains that Knott's Berry Farm only became successful through a high level of team spirit within a large family. This is another form of authenticity that can never be achieved by the usual mottos in the sense of "fun for the whole family".

The spirit of tradition and family symbolized by the jam jars seems to be carried over to employees and park visitors. Jeff Tucker, for example, Creative Manager at Knott's Berry Farm for 21 years, already appears to be part of the park. In the interview for this article, his eyes and voice cannot hide the enthusiasm when he talks about the history of the park. Among other things, he proudly tells of an organized demonstration by the park visitors when a rather ugly wooden figure was supposed to be removed from the Ghost Town. But this work of art had already become part of the history of the park and a member of the family. For many it was impossible to imagine their beloved park without the "Wood Animal", so that they even sacrificed their free time to preserve it. The value of such a com-

munity also seems to be clear to those responsible for the park. For generations, they have been inviting children from the surrounding areas to the Ghost Town, free of charge, so that they can experience history. On top of all that, free tickets are offered for a visit to the roller coasters.

The outsiders and rebels that are found in every real family are not hidden either. We find the Indian statues classified as politically incorrect in the USA as well as a tempting brothel in the middle of the city. The rule for users of the stagecoach shows a heart for drinkers: "Abstinence from liquor is requested, but if you must drink, share the bottle."

Demon fight

Knott's Berry Farm is not a museum but an amusement park. Authenticity and history add excitement and depth. They are also unique selling points compared to the competition, but with them alone, an amusement park will not arouse enthusiasm. The trick is to combine these features with their opposites. These are the fundamental aspects of any theme park namely illusion and the possibility for adrenaline to run.

Around the Ghost Town we therefore find several rides and other attractions that are thematically related to the Wild West. It almost seems as if a transition or even a protective wall is to be built between the inner traditional and the outer modern part of the park. Examples are the themed ride "Calico Mine Ride", the horse-drawn carriage ride "Butterfield Stagecoach Ride" or the small but fine roller coaster "Pony



Silver Bullet: Inverted Coaster in a berry design

"Express", the unusual seat design of which conveys a great feeling of freedom.

Perhaps the most beautiful roller coaster at Knott's Berry Farm is the inverted coaster "Silver Bullet". With its Cobra-Roll it rises in a red-orange design above the entrance gate of the park. But in addition to a rapid driving experience and great looks, Silver Bullet also offers the following interesting theming:

"The good settlers and Indians were haunted by devil demons. These could only be driven out of the silver mine with magic silver bullets. A mine train hanging on a track was built to be able to transport the silver and at the same time to be able to defend oneself against the attacking demons."

This horror story is deliberately told on a wooden panel in the entrance area as if it were a historical fact. The text begins with a modified form of the first words known from fairy tales "Once upon a time", but immediately a "Not so long ago" is added. ("There once was a time, not that long ago.") This is the leap from myth to historicity. At the end of the text, the alleged authenticity is made official with an "Established 1868". For the insider, the year is also a tongue-in-cheek reference to the aforementioned covered wagon ride by Knott's grandparents. The other themes of Knott's Berry Farm are also integrated in the short text on the wooden panel in an exaggerated but also impressive way. The idea of the family is carried over to friendship between "redskins" and "palefaces". The idea of outside and

inside is found in outer and inner demons. The latter are introduced at the end of the text with the following sentence:

"Nowadays Silver Bullet is calling you to face your own demons."

With this sentence in the style of modern psychology, several bridges are built: from past to present, from outside to inside, and from the historic western town to a modern amusement park.

The signs of the times

Like all amusement parks, Knott's Berry Farm, relying on history, is forced to present spectacular innovations at short intervals. Recently, this happened with "Voyage to the Iron Reef", a modern interactive ride with computer-generated animations. Its theme, an underwater fight against the kraken, is a far cry from western heroes and berry jam. Perhaps the designers even made a conscious decision in favor of this clear thematic separation between new and old rides. It needs a future-oriented contrast to history, which can otherwise look very dusty. The "Calico Mine Ride", for example, impresses with its atmosphere and beautiful purple scenery at sunset. But in terms of creativity and effort in designing figures and mine scenes, I felt more a curiosity and museum feeling during the train ride.

Also in regard to other topics, time does not stand still. The "Wild West" is likely to lose its character as a young tangible history by the next generation at the latest. The brand "America's first theme park" should turn from a good marketing argument into a possible disadvantage in the foreseeable future. Still, I would say that the traditional western town is indispensable for Knott's Berry Farm. The combination is crucial. Many park visitors have fun with the modern rides for several hours, but at the end of the day they gather in the quiet Ghost Town to process the impressions of the day and to take in traditional surroundings. It will be exciting to see if and how Knott's Berry Farm will master the double challenge of tradition and innovation in the coming decades.