

Interview With Imagineer Tom K. Morris

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by [Jim Korkis](#), contributing writer ✉ February 7, 2018

After 42 years with Disney, Imagineer Tom K. Morris recently took advantage of an early retirement.

Morris started at Disneyland in 1973 as a teenager selling balloons for Nat Lewis Balloons, a lessee, because he was underage at the time and couldn't be hired by Disneyland. One of the customers on his paper route, Jack C. Sayers, who was vice president in charge of the Disneyland Lessee Relations at the time, was extremely helpful in him getting that job.

Morris was fascinated by Disney animation and wanted to be an animator or layout artist, but the work he did in high school on architectural and mechanical drafting got him an entry into another division at Disney. By 1979, he had moved into Imagineering, where he was hired as an apprentice show draftsman. His first real assignment was the original Journey into Imagination attraction for EPCOT Center.

Later, Morris was put in charge of all of Fantasyland for Euro Disneyland (now Disneyland Paris), and was the leader of the team responsible for Le Chateau de la Belle au Bois Dormant (Sleeping Beauty Castle) after several others had tried to come up with an acceptable design.

From working on Cars Land in Disney California Adventure Park to serving as executive producer for Hong Kong Disneyland, Morris was involved in dozens of both big and small projects throughout his career. However, I was interested in his earliest Disney experiences and talked with him in December 2017.

Jim Korkis: It is always good to start at the beginning and your first experience with anything Disney.

Tom K. Morris: I was hatched on February 4, 1959, at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, which is in an area sometimes called East Hollywood, near the intersection of Sunset and Hollywood boulevards. I would later find out it was just a stone's throw from Kingswell Avenue (home of Walt's first Hollywood studio), Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House, and the site of D.W. Griffith's famous *Intolerance* sets. Just a bit further away was the Hyperion Studio and Prospect Studios. The hospital is now the L Ron Hubbard Scientology Headquarters. Only in L.A.!

My first memory of Disney is hard to say, but Disneyland memories start for me around 1961 or 1962 when I was 2 or 3. I remember being pushed around in a stroller and also watching the fireworks from the plaza. I vividly recall the Snow White ride, which gave me nightmares that evening...yet I wanted to go on it again! Go figure.

For my first job at Disneyland, I was fortunate to have Jack Sayers (among other "Disney celebrities" including Thurl Ravenscroft) on my paper route. I think I jokingly asked him if there were any openings at the park and he said "why yes!"

I was only 14 and just entering high school. It was a weekend/holiday job. My starting pay was \$1.45/hour which was enough for me. I took the advice of Mr. Dawes Sr. (the elder banker in *Mary Poppins*) and began investing my tuppence wisely in the bank. I continued to do it when my salary was raised to around \$2.50/hour.

JK: What was Nat Lewis like?

TM: Nat was usually in Florida. I believe he had a home in Windermere. I had no interaction with him but occasionally saw him in the office or overheard him. My memory of him was that he reminded me of Edward G Robinson in his mannerisms and voice, and usually had a cigar. Now that I think of it he looked a little like the maquette of Imagineer Marc Davis that the Imagineers made for him upon his retirement.

Sometimes Nat's wife, or who I believed to be his wife, was with him. She seemed to be involved in the operation and had a beehive hairdo and was like your quintessential aunt, if I recall correctly. I do remember one Christmastime coming into the office, and there were boxes and cases of whisky bottles and one of the senior balloon boys was wrapping them—not the

bottles individually but the entire cases. They were being prepped to be delivered to all the important Disneyland executives who Nat must have had to deal with. I couldn't believe it! It seemed so extravagant!

The manager of Nat Lewis Balloons was Don MacDougall, who may still be in the business. Last I heard he was running a local balloon and party place in Anaheim. He was a very soft-spoken and patient guy. I think he must have thought I was a bit looney, spending a lot of my off-time in the park and not cashing in my checks right away. There were at least two senior "assistant managers," Paul Fick and Wayne Anderson were two names I can remember.

JK: What was it like being a balloon boy?

TM: Initially, you are trained only to sell the balloons, later you learn to inflate and deliver them. But the selling part was tricky and there was definitely both an "art" and a skill to it, if you will. Mainly you had to keep the strings from tangling, so you constantly had to groom them, like moving your fingers through a ponytail. And then you had to arrange and display the balloons properly so that they were like a giant umbrella. This made them more attractive and also prevented them from getting tangled.

A typical day was very tiring in that you had to stand all day; you weren't permitted to sit down. My lower back had never experienced such soreness before—or since. A typical day would be generally slow most of the time until parades and then closing, when there was a mad rush.



Imagineer Tom K. Morris decided he would go to the opening day of Walt Disney World, two years before he would begin selling balloons at Disneyland.

Until I could drive I would take an OCTD bus from Fashion Island to Costa Mesa where the bus would traverse up Harbor Boulevard and go through what I thought at the time were some pretty rough areas, for sheltered me.

The shifts would vary, but were usually around 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Then once I was 16 I think I could work the "party nights," which lasted until around midnight and, by then, I had access to a car and was driving.

JK: What was your work area like?

TM: The balloon room was in a tall, odd-shaped area that was once part of the old 20,000 Leagues exhibit. It was a portion of one of the circular north and south "drums" that you see in aerial photos of Tomorrowland and the space we were in was immediately on the other side of a tall concrete block wall, which divided it from Adventure Through Inner Space. You could still see the dark blue painted rafters of what was once the 20K exhibit. I think in fact it may have been the squid scene, if my "archeology" is correct!

There were five very specific selling locations and the names were obviously handed down through time; let's see if I can remember them: "Good Gate" (Town Square-City Hall area); "Bad Gate" (Town Square-Opera House area); "Sub-Land" (Matterhorn Road); "Castle Courtyard" (can't remember if it had a nickname); and "Small World."

JK: How did you spend your day at the park when you were working?

TM: Sometimes, usually in the middle of the day, sales would be very slow, so in order to preserve my sanity I'd observe the operation of the attractions, take note of dispatch intervals and things like that. When off-duty, I liked experiencing the attractions and getting to know all the guest spaces inside the park.

Like most cast members, I'd eat at the Inn Between most of the time. That was the cast cafeteria behind the Plaza Inn. Sometimes, if I had extra time, I'd go to the Pit, below New Orleans Square, just so I could try and figure out the layout of that Pirate building; I never could quite figure it out at the time.

After my shift, I usually went home, as the shifts I worked went until closing (when most of the money was made); it was also exhausting, standing all day. If I wanted to go out into the park, I'd do it before my shift. I'd explore the park much more than I probably should have. Or maybe it wasn't enough.

JK: What was your costume like?

TM: I wasn't particularly fond of wearing the costume, but it was effective: red pants, yellow long-sleeve shirt, multicolor striped vest, straw hat. I remember the hat gave you terrible, boxy "hat hair," which took awhile to settle back down to normal!

JK: What were the balloons like at that time?

TM: At the time there were only the Mickey-ears balloons. They had stopped selling the Mickey-inside-a-clear balloon at that point. The balloons were always latex. The most popular color was red followed closely by dark blue. Then about equal seemed to be green, yellow, and pink.

I think green was the most expensive to make, or the dye was rare, because often there would be spells with no green! Same, but to a lesser extent, for orange. You had to avoid the sun and heat as best you could because helium escapes slowly through the latex and the heat accelerates that process. Coupled with the sun, the clearness of the balloon would turn opaque, lessening their appeal.

JK: What were some of your impressions of Disneyland?

TM: Very positive both of the place and of the management, although there were notable exceptions (which I probably don't need to get into).

I was there during what was perhaps the most inert, "unchanging" period they ever had. Any new development, even the change from Flight to the Moon into Mission to Mars was like water in a desert. The announcement of Space Mountain was monumental. And the prospect of Discovery Bay was too good to be true, literally since it never came to fruition.

JK: Were you trained any differently because you worked for a lessee? Did you receive the same perks?

TM: We were not required to go through the Disneyland University, which was a disappointment for me. The "entry level" balloon training took maybe an hour. Mostly focused on how to arrange the balloons and keep the strings from tangling. And that took a couple weeks to master. Then when I moved into the "balloon room," it was all about inflating, bunching and delivering the balloons.

Otherwise I think we lessees received most of the same "perks" as most other cast members, and I would guess that many cast members did not necessarily know that the balloons were a lessee.

JK: What did your friends think about you working at Disneyland?

TM: Close friends thought it was kind of cool, but, in general, at the time, most of my classmates thought it was kind of geeky, mostly because of the hair grooming policy, which was very much against the norm for teenagers in a beach community during that period. As I became a senior in high school, though, working there started to look more aspirational to others, because, by then, I was making pretty good pay for my age, plus the main gate privileges.

I didn't take a date to Disneyland until I think my senior year in high school as I was somewhat shy in my earlier days, self conscious about the short hair I had to wear as a Disneyland cast member. The date was fun. Back then there was still Adventure Through Inner Space.

JK: How did you move into being hired by Disneyland?

TM: Well, all during the balloon days I wanted to be a ride operator; any attraction or area would do. In my senior year of high school, I was briefly in Outdoor Foods, after Disneyland took over the balloon concession. From there I quickly transferred into Disneyland Operations,

in Tomorrowland. Leon Duty was a Disneyland HR supervisor who called me into his office one day and told me that, because I was now a member of the Teamsters Union, Disney would be upping my rate to \$6.88/hour and furthermore backdating my hire date to 1973. When I asked him why that mattered he said something like "well, if you decide to stay with the company, it will benefit your pension and other benefits when you retire." I remember thinking, "Right, like that's going to happen!"

JK: How did you move into WED?

TM: I was drafted by Disney headhunters who were selecting interested CMs to come work for the Studio or WED, this was that time period in the late 1970s when they were ramping up movie, animation, and theme park production in anticipation of Epcot Center and Tokyo Disneyland. Some called it "cradle robbing" because many of the folks, like me, were still in the middle of college and hadn't gotten their degrees yet.

JK: You got the chance to actually be there on opening day at Walt Disney World.

TM: Yes, I made a pact with myself that I would just do it. This was 1971 so this was even before I started working at Disneyland. I saved up all my paper route money and bought the plane tickets! It was a somewhat half-baked idea until I got some assistance from Jack Sayers.

My recollection of flying into Orlando was that it was barely an airport, more like a stucco low-rise building that almost looked like a tract home. And when I stepped off the plane I don't think I had ever seen so much open space before!

JK: What was Jack Sayers like?

TM: Unfortunately, I was only 12 years old and didn't talk with him about Walt, who had already passed, but he was very kind and sociable. He invited me up to his office in the Administration building a couple times and he gave me that beautiful Club 33 brochure, which I still have.

JK: Didn't Sayers arrange for a special perk?

TM: Jack Sayers arranged for me to have a VIP Guest Relations hostess. The VIP hostess was only for the first half of the day, I believe she left at some point after another woman, Joanne Modica, who was Jack Lindquist's secretary, took "custody" of me after I was in the Magic Kingdom. After showing a picture of her to some folks, we think the VIP hostess was a girl by the name of Gayle Beine.

At any rate, between the two of them it felt like I had "extra" privileges although there really were no lines to take advantage of. They fed me at King Stefan's [Banquet Hall] and let me take flash pictures in the [Haunted} Mansion, since I was the only guest in there!

JK: What were some of your impressions of the Magic Kingdom? Did you see the first family?

TM: I didn't see the first family and didn't get into the Magic Kingdom until I think around 10

a.m. because I spent much of the morning at the Polynesian Hotel waiting around and talking to press. But I was very impressed by the park, and certain things like, of course, [Cinderella] Castle, and Country Bear Jamboree.

Any little thing that was different was very exciting, like the water jet pillars at the entrance to Tomorrowland. Even the two birds in the pre-show of Tiki Room. I loved Country Bear Jamboree and the additional talking heads that greeted you when you exited into the Mile Long Bar. Things that I had mixed but generally positive impressions of were the Hall of Presidents and Mickey Mouse Revue.

Well, to someone who was used to Disneyland, Magic Kingdom felt *huge* and brand new, I remember even the smell of fresh paint and varnish throughout the place, and also at the Polynesian Hotel. There was still a lot of barren space. The standouts for me were the new rides. Teacups were still uncovered.

After having been familiar with Disneyland, it all seemed entirely different, but eerily the same. Most things I had a very positive impression of. I remember Mickey Mouse Revue in need of better audio and pacing, yet I still loved it. I really liked the preshow film in there, it made me perhaps more excited than the actual show did. I remember sitting in Hall of Presidents wondering, during that verrry looong pre-show film, whether they actually built the Audio-Animatronic presidents or was the show just going to be a film? When the screens finally retracted, which I'd describe as a "goosebump moment," I was pleasantly surprised.

JK: Did you take any photos?

TM: I have lots of photos that I took, though they are somewhat banal, and the people looked average, definitely not dressed up unless maybe they were supervision. They seemed to avoid the "interior attractions," like Haunted Mansion in favor of "obvious" attractions like Skyway, [Cinderella's Golden] Carousel, and even the [Swiss Family] Treehouse. There was little media that I could see except at the Polynesian which was the meeting location for them. There was an end-of-day update for them upstairs in the lobby.

Unfortunately I was only at Magic Kingdom for what I would estimate to be 12 hours. I wanted like crazy to see the Contemporary Hotel, but they said it wasn't ready yet. I did have dinner with some of the VIPs at the Papeete Bay Verandah, a moment that I wish I could recall more of. I was introduced to a number of people, none of whom I had heard of at the time. I wanted to meet Roy O. Disney, but they said he went home sick with a cold.

One outstanding mystery to this day is that I recall meeting and sitting adjacent to a John B. Allen, who I understood to be the head of the construction firm. He said he was also from Newport Beach. But I later read that he was fired from the job in 1969 so why would he be at that dinner? Maybe it was Bob Allen...? A wrinkle in my memory!

JK: Looking back on the experience, do you have any regrets?

TM: I regret not staying overnight after the option was offered to me. I couldn't because my aunt and uncle were expecting me in Atlanta and it was too complicated back then to change itineraries at the last minute. I also wish I had taken the Monorail full circle around the resort even if the Contemporary still wasn't open.

JK: How did you explain Walt Disney World to your friends?

TM: It was very difficult to explain to friends and classmates because of the sheer scale, and also there was very little coverage or knowledge about WDW on the West Coast. There was a rumor a few years earlier that the project had been scrapped. Then all of a sudden it was open.

Most people thought it was just another Disneyland and wondered why I had gone all the way out there to see it; conversely a few others wondered how I saw it all if it was supposedly the size of New York City. To this day, I still think there is a fundamental misunderstanding on the West Coast as to what Walt Disney World is.

JK: Tom, thank you so much for sharing your memories with us!