

Knott's Berry Farm

Walter Knott, to me, is a fascinating guy. I'm still trying to understand how you go from being a farmer, to running an amusement park. One thing is clear, though. Walter Knott was a promoter right from the start.

Walter Knott was born in 1889, and grew up in Pomona. In 1911, he married Cordelia Hornaday.

As I said, Walter Knott was a farmer. He and Cordelia homesteaded out on the Mojave Desert, but were eventually lured to Buena Park by his cousin, Jim Preston, a successful berry grower. That was in 1920. Together, they built a roadside berry stand, and grew all sorts of berries.

Preston & Knott dissolved their partnership in 1927 and Walter bought his first ten acres of farmland here. He clearly had his eye on the future. In 1928, he built a new building that included a berry market, a plant nursery, and a tearoom where Knott's wife Cordelia, sold coffee and pies. He called it Knott's Berry *Place*. The entire Knott family grew up working there – Walter, Cordelia, their son Russell, and their three daughters.

To capitalize on his success, Walter started publishing little booklets in 1930 to encourage other people to get into the berry business – *Berries and How to Grow Them*, and then *Berries and Rhubarb for Profit*. He gave the booklets away free of charge to anyone that asked.

But it was in 1932 that he discovered the berry that he would make famous – the boysenberry.

Of course, Walter Knott didn't create the boysenberry. It was Rudolph Boysen – who was later park superintendent in Anaheim for many years – who first “propagated” the new variety in the 1920s. It's a cross between a blackberry, a raspberry and a loganberry that gave a superior size and flavor. By the mid-1930s, the boysenberry had become Knott's signature berry.

Then in 1934, Cordelia got into the act, serving chicken dinners on her wedding china to customers at the berry stand. This proved so successful that in 1937, Walter built a 300-seat restaurant and kept it open year-round. Two years later, they doubled it to 600 seats.

But even that couldn't keep up with the crowds. So in 1940, Walter started building his own ghost town, so that people had someplace to wander around while they waited for a chicken dinner.

Walter Knott came from pioneer stock. In 1868, his grandparents came to California in a covered wagon. His uncle was the San Bernardino County Sheriff during the boom days at Calico. Like a lot of people back then, Walter Knott believed that those frontier, pioneer experiences were instrumental in making America what it was. He wanted to celebrate those pioneer experiences – and made sure people remembered.

It worked. People started coming from all over just to visit Ghost Town and to have themselves a chicken dinner. The berry farm became a theme park. It was Orange County's first big regional tourist attraction, and even today it's second only to Disneyland.

In 1947, they changed the name to “Knott’s Berry Farm”. This was the same year that gold panning was added. Walter kept adding more buildings. Some buildings were moved in from other areas, others were built out of old materials, while other new buildings were built to look old.

As the ghost town grew, Walter started looking for other attractions to add. In 1952, the Ghost Town & Calico Railroad began running, using real, historic steam locomotives. In 1954, the Haunted Shack went in. When I was a kid that was always one of my favorites. Remember? The one with all those crazy tilts and angles?

Then in the 1960s, you can start to see Disneyland’s influence on Knott’s Berry Farm. In fact, it was in 1960 that their first real adventure ride opened, where they created an entire world around you – the Calico Mine Ride. And by 1969, Knott’s Berry Farm got its first thrill ride – the Calico Log Co. flume ride.

The other big thing that changed in the 1960s is that Knott’s Berry Farm started charging admission. Up to that time, you could just walk on in to Ghost Town, and then if you wanted to ride the train or something like that, you bought a ticket. But in 1968, they finally put up a gate and started charging to get in – \$1 for adults, and 25¢ for children.

One of the things that make Knott’s Berry Farm unique was Independence Hall, which opened in 1966. This is a brick by brick replica of the original in Philadelphia, complete with its own liberty bell, although I hear they had a tough time trying to figure out how to get it to crack just right.

Independence Hall reflects Walter Knott’s political beliefs. He was a firm believer in the American way of life, and the strength of democracy. This was during the Cold War, remember. Just like the Old West, for Walter Knott, our history as a democracy was part of what made America great, and he wanted to celebrate that.

Knott’s Berry Farm continued to be a family-owned operation long after Walter Knott died in 1981. The park was finally sold in 1997 to Cedar Fair, from Sandusky, Ohio. They own eight major amusement parks and several water parks – mostly in the central part of the United States.

Cedar Fair started adding more thrill rides, such as GhostRider, Supreme Scream, and the Silver Bullet. The company also opened Knott’s Soak City adjoining the park in 2000.

One wonders what Walter would have thought of thrill rides, but I think he’d be happy to find that Ghost Town is still there, and still full of people. I’m happy to report that kids still like to pan for gold, and visit boot hill, and even talk to Sad Eye Joe in the jail.

Knott’s ghost town was built to celebrate American history. Now it’s become a part of that history itself.