

Paris Disneyland, Its Origin Story

A chance meeting in Montmartre leads to a revelation of a brand emergency . . .



We made our first visit to Paris in the early 1990's, and like typical Americans we were hungry at 7:00 p.m. So my wife and I climbed Montmartre and stumbled into a huge but – at that unfashionable hour – nearly empty restaurant. In fact, there was only one other couple dining there besides ourselves.

It turns out they were hungry Americans, too. And architects from San Francisco. Paris Disneyland was about to open, they confided, and the two of them had been flown over for an “emergency.” “What?” we inquired.

The entrance to Disneyland, everyone knows, looks like the Golden Age of America filtered through Walt Disney's childhood. A Midwestern American town, say, in the 1890's. The era and Indiana atmosphere of the Broadway hit “The Music Man.” Ice cream socials and buggy rides.

But, alas, that part of *Paris* Disneyland had been given over to Italian subcontractors, and the feeling was that instead of turn-of-the-century Indiana, the Italians had done their own thing. They had created their own version of the Golden Age of America: something more like Chicago in the 1930's, Al Capone and the Untouchables.

"Zut alors!" Here was a brand emergency!