

## Travel



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Huckleberry Hound hugs youngster at Kings Island, Ohio.



Muppet characters provide the fun at Sesame Place, Pennsylvania.



A smurf greets visitors to Kings Island.

## Smurfin' USA

## Comic characters have taken over our theme parks

**Y**OU PROBABLY think those characters aren't real, just because they dress up in funny costumes and live in theme parks all over America, welcoming kids at the gate, kissing unsuspecting visitors on the head and posing for Grampa's camera.

You may also think that we've only been invaded by a few comic book aliens, with names like Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse and maybe Sylvester the Cat. Don't look now, but they've already overrun the country, and someday soon they'll be agitating for the vote.

Let me introduce a few of these wacky people. If I can get them to stand still long enough. As Minnie Mouse always says, this new generation is so wild, you can't do a thing with them.

**YOU'VE MET** the Walt Disney characters, born in a film can and raised in the Magic Kingdom. There's Mickey and Minnie, of course, and Donald Duck and the Seven Dwarfs. All the storybook characters are there, from Alice in Wonderland to the Three Little Pigs, Cinderella and Pinocchio to Robin Hood and Mary Poppins. Excuse me Pluto, I missed you and Goofy and Chip and Dale.

Oh, Oh! There they go! When that troupe starts dancing, there's no way to stop them.

The Disney family members are so popular that they're all over Disneyland in California, and Disney World in Florida, and there were enough left over to do a tour this spring to cities all over the country.

Disney has the most famous family, but there are a lot more established names out there. They may not have come over on the Mayflower, but they've been around long enough. On this side of the nearest roller coaster are the Warner Brother characters: Sylvester the Cat, Daffy Duck, Wile E. Coyote, Foghorn Leghorn, Yosemite Sam, Porky Pig and the host of all these high-faluting characters, Bugs Bunny.

**IF YOU DON'T** know how to say "Wh-wh-whats up Doc!" it's time you adopted a kid and improved your education.

Six Flags Over Texas, in Arlington between Dallas and Fort Worth, was the second major theme park to open after Disney. It hoisted its six flags — one each for Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy and the United States — in 1960, five years after Disneyland, and called it the first regional theme park in America.

Bugs Bunny wasn't on staff then. He was hired by Great America when it opened in Gurnee, Ill., in 1976, and kept his job as top bunny when Great America joined the Six Flags family in 1984. Now you'll find Bugs and his gang at Six Flags parks everywhere. Even at Astroworld in Houston, where Marvel McFey has been running the resort since 1971, along with Samantha Skunk, Beethoven Bears and the rest. Some people would call it a population explosion, but companies like Warner Brothers and Hanna-Barbera call it licensing. If you think this is a Mickey Mouse business, think again.

Iris Jones  
contributing  
travel editor

HANNA-BARBERA was purchased by Taft Broadcasting Co. in 1987, with founders William Hanna and Joseph Barbera staying on as president and senior vice president. It takes 800 employees — animators, layout men, painters, inkers, directors, designers, writers, cameramen and voice actors — to keep the Flintstones, Yogi Bear and all their pals on the television screen and in the movies.

Taft is involved in entertainment parks, so you'll find all of Hanna-Barbera's kids at King's Island, King's Dominion, Carowinds, Marineland and Canada's Wonderland. As soon as you go through the gate at King's Island near Cincinnati, Ohio, for example, you'll find them all waiting: Huckleberry Hound, Quick Draw McGraw, Scooby Doo and of course the Smurfs.

If there's anybody here who hasn't heard of the Smurfs, keep it to yourself. Every kid and every grandmother in the country knows about the Smurfs.

**YOU MAY** be convinced by now that only the big families inhabit the earth of theme parks nationwide, but you would be wrong. Every kid in Omaha, Neb., knows Peony Skunk and Fawn from Peony Park. Every two-legged critter in Des Moines, Iowa, has met Bernie Bernard and Leo the Lion from Adventureland.

If you go to Kansas City, Mo., don't tell anybody under four feet high that you don't know the characters from Worlds of Fun. They still miss the Shirt Tales characters, who left the park last year, but they're ready to meet Rainbow Brita, the Hallmark character who moved into the park this season. And they've been having fun with Dan'l Coone, Sam Panda and Gratitude (a/c) Gorilla for years.

How did we get into this predicament, with all these comic, furry comic book characters running around our amusement parks?

**WHATEVER** Mickey Mouse tells you, amusement parks didn't start in California, they started in Russia in the seventeenth century with the giant Russian Ice Slide of St. Petersburg.

In 1870 a coal company in Pennsylvania converted a mining train into a thrill ride, and 101 years ago, in 1884, a plump gentleman in Coney Island, New York, invented the roller coaster to divert young people from spending too much money in beer gardens.

He called it Thompson's Switchback Gravity Pleasure Railway and over the years Coney Island had everything from the Oriental Scenic Railway to a 360-degree loop that carried four passengers a minute.

By 1911 there were 1,500 amusement parks in the United States, many of them with wooden roller coasters that shook and rattled and scared the wits out of you, but most of them closed down and amusement parks would have gone the way of the blacksmith if

theme parks hadn't started.

**THEME PARK** owners don't like their fun places to be called "amusement parks" because the old traditional parks were based on roller coasters and other rides, while theme parks are based on a themed environment. The theme determines the architecture, food, entertainment, and of course the costumed characters. As we have seen, they are about to take over the world.

You may be asking yourself what this explosion of characters is all about, and the answer in one word is "visibility." Theme park characters usually have the park's name all over them, and they can regularly be seen outside their home park, at shopping malls, fairs, in parades and at children's hospitals.

Robert Blundred, retiring director of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) thinks that this world trend is costumed characters probably started at Santa Claus Land when William

*In 1884, a gentleman in Coney Island, New York, invented the roller coaster to divert young people from spending too much money in beer gardens. He called it Thompson's Switchback Gravity Pleasure Railway.*

Koch put his father-in-law into a Santa Claus suit and sent him out to amuse the patrons of his "theme park" in Dale, Ind. They didn't call it a theme park then, but that's what it was.

Bill and Allie Scollon, who design and costume many of the characters, call them "instant crowds." Allie was a puppet maker in the old days, and she and Bill were doing marionette shows in shopping malls when Disneyland was in its first decade. They got the right to tour the Banana Split shows, and later Yogi Bear and the Flintstones.

**THEN THE OIL** shortage came

along and it got too expensive to go on the road, so the Scollons started focusing on costumes. In the early seventies they took some of their characters to an IAAPA convention, and soon they were creating costumed characters for theme parks all over America.

They made lions and monkeys and pandas for Geauga Lake in Ohio, Hershey's Chocolate Bars and Reeses Cups for Hershey Park in Pennsylvania, and skunks for Peony Park in Omaha.

Six Flags didn't always depend on Warner Brothers, so Scollon made frogs and armadillos and bears for them as well as all those crazy charac-

ters at Sea World, characters with names like Shamu, Sir Winston Walrus, General Lockbuster and, of course, Punk Catfish.

They made orangutans, mandrakes and gibson monkeys for Busch Gardens, Berenstain Bears for Cedar Point and a bear with a bowler hat for Bob-Lo near Detroit.

Sometimes a park comes to the Scollons with a specific character in mind, or maybe just an idea. Sometimes the Scollons create the character literally out of whole cloth. Either way, the character must find the environment of the park.

It won't surprise you to know that this whole idea is spreading into the general population. They are starting to introduce costume characters into colleges and shopping malls. Where will it all end? Will the Shirt Tale kids take over the world? Will there be feuds between one family and another, war on the midway, costumed characters in the schools? Stay tuned.



There's nothing more entrancing to a youngster than a big cuddly cartoon character. This youngster warms up to Pluto at Disney World in Florida.

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