Walt Disney Visited a Ford Factory in 1948. What He Witnessed There Laid the Groundwork for What Would Become Disneyland

smithsonianmag.com/history/walt-disney-visited-a-ford-factory-in-1948-what-he-witnessed-there-laid-the-groundwork-for-what-would-become-disneyland-180988551

the Happiest Place on Earth

April 27, 2026

A new book argues that the film producer's trip to the River Rouge plant in Michigan inspired him to embrace the power of automation when designing the first Disney theme park

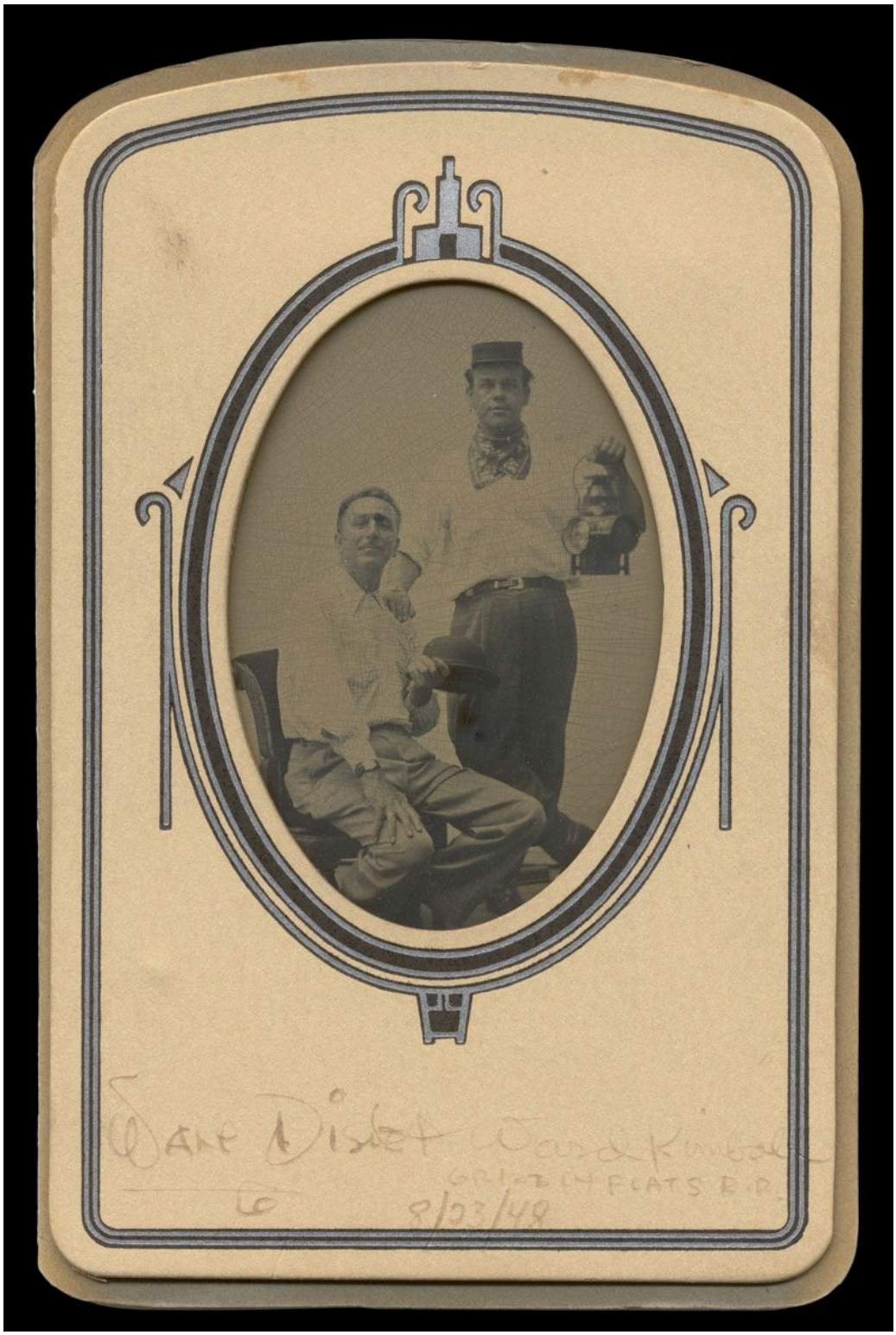
An aerial view of the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant, circa 1945 The Henry Ford

On August 23, 1948, Walt Disney arrived in Detroit with a colleague, the animator Ward Kimball. The pair had spent the past four days traveling to the Chicago Railroad Fair,an exposition commemorating a century of rail operations in the city. Their next stop was the Ford Motor Company complex in Dearborn, Michigan. The men spent the morning perusing a

collection of antique automobiles and locomotives, and the late afternoon at Greenfield Village, an outdoor living history museum.

In his diary, Kimball recounted how he and Disney had their photo taken “in [an] old tintype shop” and rode through the “village in [a] horse-drawn buckboard wagon.” They also visited what was perhaps the most impressive marvel in the complex: Ford’s River Rouge plant. “Good god!” Kimball wrote. “What a sight! My mouth hung open!”

Disney’s 1948 trip with Kimball has been widely identified as the spark for the development of Disneyland, which opened in Anaheim, California, on July 17, 1955. The “themed” spaces of Greenfield Village and the Chicago Railroad Fair, presenting sanitized and romanticized views of American history, clearly provided models for the areas and motifs of the future Disney park.

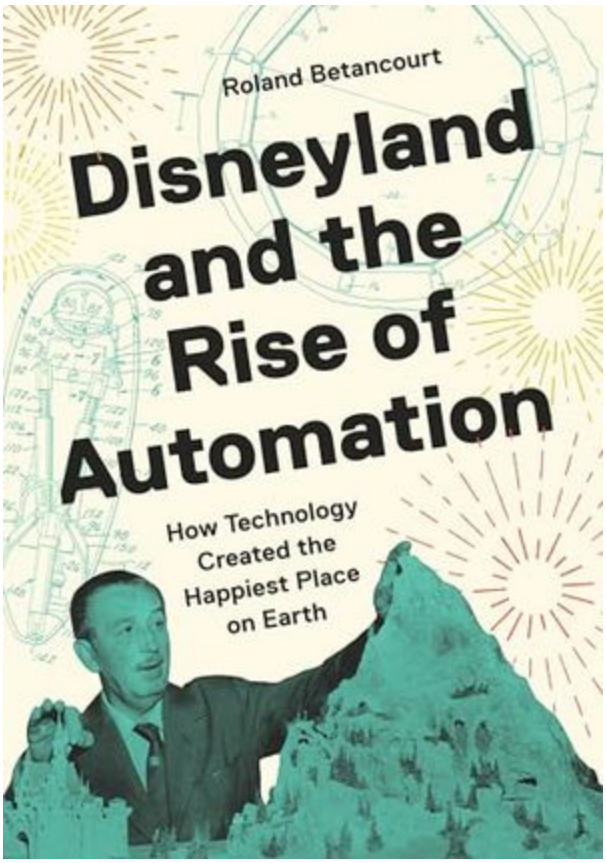


Walt Disney and Ward Kimball posing in the Greenfield Village tintype studio in 1948 The Henry Ford

As art historian Robert Neuman has expertly demonstrated, these sites were articulated at Disneyland with the artistic and technical know-how of studio craftspeople whose labor had designed the Hollywood backlots

of the era. Yet what has often been overlooked in the origins, conceptualization and development of this American theme park is its deep and inextricable entanglements with the rise of automation in the period.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, American audiences were fixated on this newly minted word: “automation.” The term spread like wildfire after businessman John Diebold published his book *Automation: The Advent of the Automatic Factory*in 1952. A revision of earlier words like “automatization,” it described the enhancement of the factory assembly line with automatic feedback systems developed during World War II. In 1948, during Disney’s visit to the River Rouge plant, “automation” had just received its name behind those very walls.



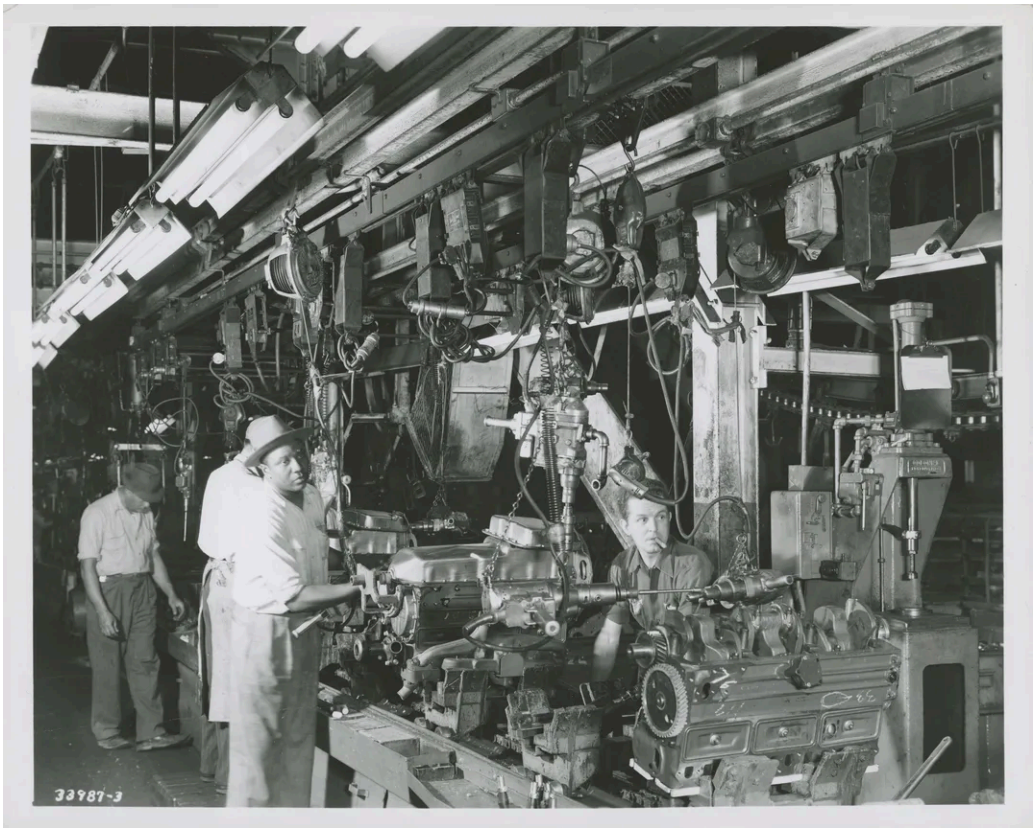
Disneyland and the Rise of Automation: How Technology Created the Happiest Place on Earth

A history of the engineering marvels behind one of America’s most innovative and beloved entertainment experiences

River Rouge was an imposing complex, towering and sprawling. Although it wasn't the company's only factory, it was emblematic of Ford manufacturing in the American imagination, synonymous with mass production and the assembly line.

In 1940, River Rouge even received a lushly illustrated profile in *Life* magazine that walked readers through its 1,200 acres. High-contrast color images of the foundry show molten ore flowing in glowing rivulets across trenches, while black-and-white images present crisp scenes of ceaseless overhead conveyors carrying tires and engines on various assembly lines.

The technological allure of the factory is emphasized by the article's language of transformation and transmutation, ceaseless and fluid movement. River Rouge's importance is succinctly described as "a complete and concise cross-section of modern U.S. industry." Contemporaneous tour maps of River Rouge show how visitors were loaded and unloaded from their tour buses at different stops. Their circuit across the factory emulated the flow of production as they followed the transformation of raw ore into a finished automobile, which, as *Life* remarked, all happened in just 28 hours.



Overhead conveyors on the engine assembly line at the River Rouge plant in 1948
The Henry Ford

During their visit to the plant, Kimball and Disney traced a similar path, starting at the dual-pronged processes of the coal-converting ovens on one end and the steel plant on the other, then flowing into the motor and car assembly lines, which were united by the interplant railroad. It was the motor assembly line that most fervently captured Kimball's attention that day. As he wrote in his diary:

> What a sight, miles upon miles of endless moving part belts and men (Black and white) and women assembling the engines, just like [Charlie] Chaplin's *Modern Times*—(It floored me!) We later walked the entire assembly line and watched the Fords roll off at the end!

Photographs taken that same year attest to Kimball's description with striking acuity. The images show an integrated workforce, consumed within an ordered nest of overhead tramrails, suspended tools, hanging parts, moving conveyor belts and an endless flow of materials, all resulting in shiny new automobiles that drive right off the factory floor.

Kimball’s words capture the critical sentiment that this factory tour could, in some ways, transport visitors into a scene straight out of Hollywood, much like Disneyland would eventually aim to do. While this might seem like a glib observation or an overstatement, the experience of the River Rouge factory was (and continues to be) a carefully staged tourist attraction. The facility started offering tours in 1924, four years before its official opening; these excursions struck the fancy of visitors and drummed up the mythic power of River Rouge.

A visitors' bus at River Rouge in April 1940 The Henry Ford

Visitors were shuttled around the complex in custom Ford tour buses, which had panoramic windows along the sides and a glass roof to provide viewers with an unobstructed, immersive experience. Souvenir brochures from the period attest to the factory tour’s popularity, heralding the plant as “the world’s largest industrial city!” and providing a take-home glimpse of its mechanical wonders. A filmed tour of River Rouge from around 1939 not only gives a sense of the bus ride but also of visitors’ walk through the factory. Modern viewers can appreciate the careful infrastructure built for the express purpose of conveying visitors throughout the plant, as well as the railings that offered guests staged

views high above the blast furnaces or at ground level on the assembly line.

If Greenfield Village presented an idyllic vision of a bygone American streetscape that might have inspired Disneyland's Main Street, USA, and the Western and Native American villages of the Chicago Railroad Fair anticipated the opportunities of Frontierland, then surely it was River Rouge that presented the possibilities of Tomorrowland, showcasing the latest advancements in the same vein as technology and industry pavilions at world's fairs.

Did you know? The push to create a Disney park inspired by American history

- In the early 1990s, Disney CEO Michael Eisner led efforts to open Disney's America, a theme park patterned after Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia.
- Outside observers questioned how a company known for its child-friendly offerings would accurately depict complex chapters in American history, including slavery and the forced removal of Indigenous populations. Ultimately, the park never came to fruition.

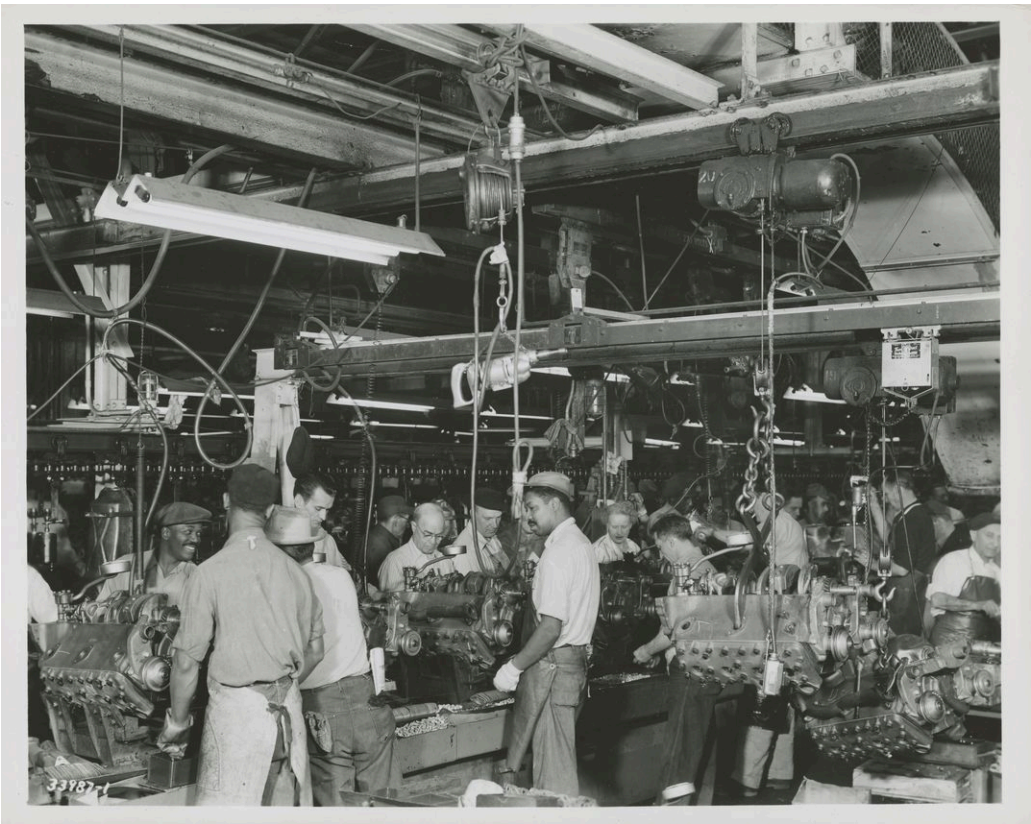
In fact, the Ford Rotunda that towered over River Rouge was originally made for the 1933-34 Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago. It was designed by architect Albert Kahn and later relocated to Dearborn after the exposition. Guests began their tour of the factory in the rotunda, where they purchased tickets and looked at a large globe highlighting Ford's international network, in addition to viewing an informative motion picture and displays and exhibitions. In some capacities, River Rouge most accurately captured the experience of a permanent world's fair or a Hollywood studio tour, offering visitors immersion into the very infrastructure of industry to a degree that would never have been possible at a local amusement park.

Yet the River Rouge plant also afforded Disney an intimate view of what the latest technological advancements could achieve when creating the future Disneyland. The factory that he and Kimball stepped into wasn't just the Rouge of past decades, but rather a rising beast in the latest technological advancement that would dominate America over the next decade and a half.

One person in particular who had a lasting impact on automation beyond the scope of Ford alone was Delmar S. Harder, who served as the company's vice president for manufacturing. It was Harder who gave name to the new developments in industry at the time. While people today might think of automation as synonymous with the early days of Ford, interchangeable with mass production and the assembly line, Harder first used the term when he created the "automation department" in 1947.

In the decade following Disney's visit, automation captured the popular imagination, seducing the public with daydreams of computers and fully automated factories. But it also sparked widespread anxiety about mass unemployment and a world run by machines that would contribute nothing to the economy. To put automation's impact alongside the rise of Disneyland in perspective, it is worth noting that the first occurrence of the word in this particular context in the *New York Times* appears in April 1950, in an article titled "Automatic Devices Sweeping Industry," with three additional appearances that year, similar numbers the following two years and a slight uptick to 11 in 1953.

In 1954, the *Times* witnessed a notable jump to 51 mentions. And, in 1955, the same year that Disneyland opened, a staggering 255 articles discussed automation in some capacity. Three months after Disneyland's opening, the congressional Subcommittee on Economic Stabilization held a nine-day hearing on "Automation and Technological Change." Two subsequent congressional hearings on the subject followed over the next two years.



Engine assembly at the River Rouge plant in January 1948 The Henry Ford

In the early 1940s, the River Rouge plant had become a flashpoint of labor activism. Labor disturbances peaked with a 1941 strike at the Rouge, which gained the recognition of the United Auto Workers. A 1941 animators' strike at Walt Disney Productions echoed the one at Ford. These matters were clearly at the forefront of Disney's mind after his trip to the Rouge.

On the way back to California, Disney opened up to Kimball about his feelings on the animators' strike. The film producer's views on these matters had been put on display in October 1947, when he willingly testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on communism in the motion picture industry. Disney had described the strike as a product of malign influence, saying, "I definitely feel it was a communist group trying to take over my artists, and they did take them over." Disney shared how these alleged communists falsely "called my plant a sweatshop." Later, he explained the need for such individuals "to be smoked out" because we "must keep the American labor unions clean. We have got to fight for them."

While admiring the New Mexico landscape on their train journey, Kimball and Disney got into a “hot argument,” according to the animator’s diary. Disney praised HUAC, calling it “good for this country—we’ve got to get rid of those damn pinkos and reds!” He went on to rant about how “New Deal labor … screwed the studio,” reflecting on the animators’ action and complaining at great lengths about Art Babbitt, one of the strike’s leaders.

Universal Newsreel Outtakes

Watch on YouTube

In response, Kimball wrote that he “shut up like a clam”—a damning judgment of his boss’ politics, which the animator staunchly condemned. In many ways, Kimball’s account of this trip presents a telling glance at this moment in history. Through the pages of his diary, Kimball unwittingly captured the technological change, labor strife and social anxieties of the dawning age of industrial automation from which Disneyland would emerge.

On August 31, 1948, just five days after returning to Los Angeles, Disney sent a memo to Dick Kelsey, one of his production designers, describing his idea for a “Mickey Mouse Park.” This message features one of the most coherent outlines of the park that would later become Disneyland. Intended to be built in Burbank, the attraction would include a main village with a railroad station and various stores, restaurants, horse-drawn carts and stables, a carnival section with roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, themed villages, and “typical midway stuff,” Disney wrote. “This will be worked out later,” he added in a parenthetical.

The parallels between Disneyland and the Chicago and Dearborn sites are undeniable, especially when one compares the official guidebooks of the Chicago Railroad Fair and Greenfield Village with the contents of the memo to Kelsey and drawings produced under Disney’s direction in subsequent years.

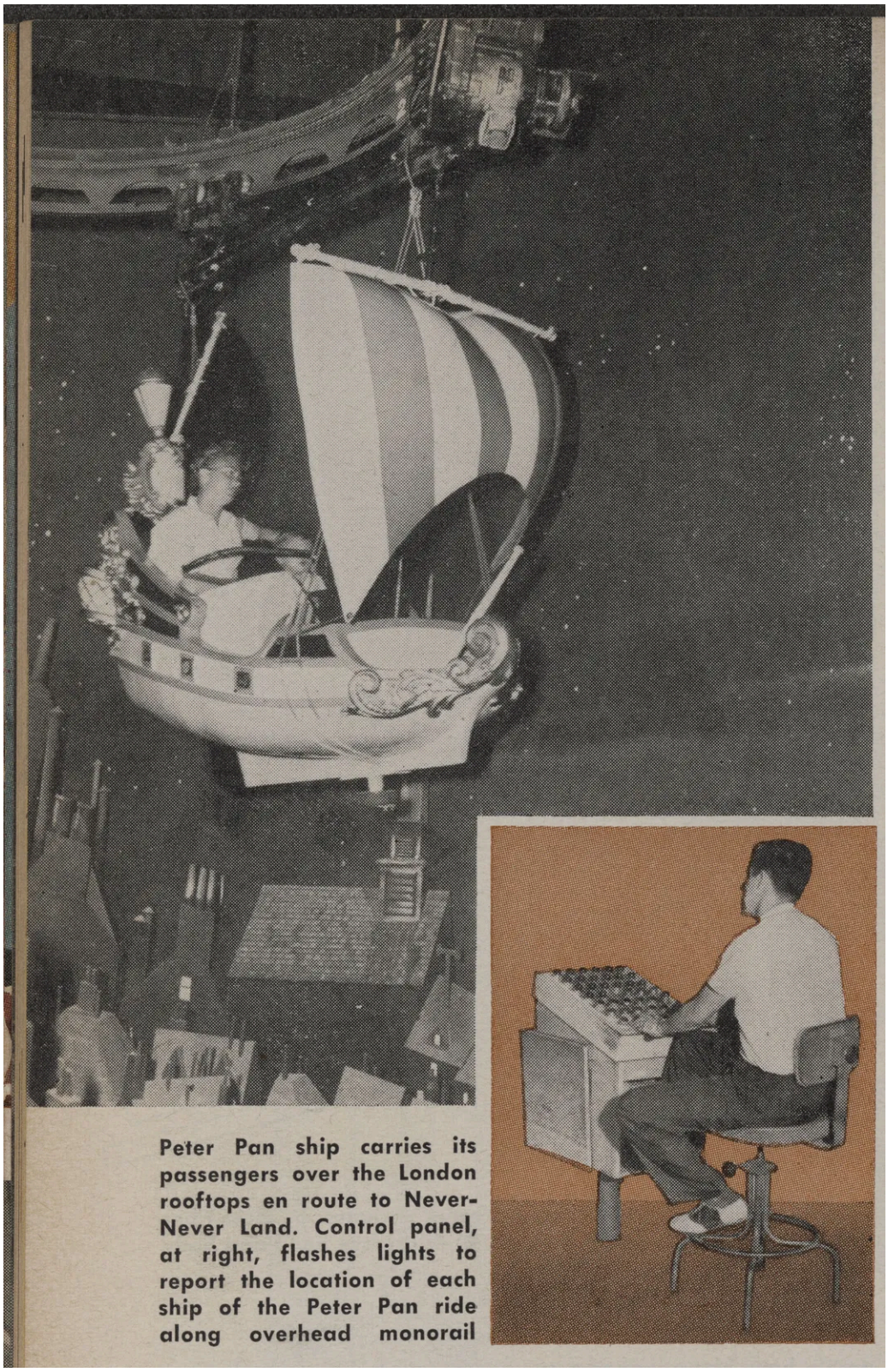
The entrance to Frontierland at Disneyland in Anaheim, California Keystone-France / Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

For instance, in 1951, when Disney returned to his amusement park idea, he asked artist Harper Goff to draw up several proposals for a park. In one piece of concept art, the park features a notable railroad encircling it, along with an old Western town, a train station and a

Mississippi steamboat. In another plan by Goff from the same period, annotated in what appears to be Disney's hand, a neat layout includes a bird sanctuary, a carousel, a carnival, a horse cart, fairgrounds, an old mill and town, a canal boat, a stagecoach route, a livestock farm and a castle, among other clearly labeled attractions.

Looking at the Disney theme park that was ultimately built in Anaheim, viewers can see striking parallels between the Santa Fe Railway's Indian Village and Disneyland's Frontierland, as well as between Greenfield Village's *Suwanee* steamboat, a 1929 replica of an original flatbottom steamboat from around 1880, and Disneyland's own Mark Twain Riverboat. Even elements of later Disneyland expansions, such as New Orleans Square, could be seen at the Chicago Railroad Fair.

In my new book, I argue that automation was Disney's greatest lesson from his August 1948 trip. While he might have been inspired by the themed re-creations of the American past at the fair and Greenfield Village, it was automation that offered him the means to make his dream a reality at the scale and consistency that he desired—the pixie dust that powers the magic.



Control console on the Peter Pan dark ride at Disneyland, as seen in *Popular Mechanics* in November 1957 *Popular Mechanics*

Automation allowed Disneyland to turn studio special effects into standardized effects that could operate continuously in “dark rides”—

enclosed, themed attractions like Peter Pan's Flight, Snow White and Her Adventures, and Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Machines handed tasks off to one another in a safe and efficient manner, building the architecture for how these rides operated.

The track for the Peter Pan ride was actually derived from a popular warehouse and factory conveyor system that allowed guests to be suspended from an overhead tramrail. At Disneyland, visitors could experience what Disney and Kimball had seen at the Ford factory, this time from the point of view of the objects being made, like taking a ride down the assembly line itself.

The technologies that made Disneyland a reality were adapted for the amusement park from the workings of Ford's assembly line and the newfound uses of automation. Between 1953 and 1955, Disney and his various collaborators designed and built Disneyland on the backbone of the very automation technologies of material handling and automatic control that were in their infancy at the Ford plant in 1948. At River Rouge, Disney got to experience the full, unbridled possibilities of automation, intimating the new horizons of technology that would eventually be repurposed at Disneyland to create the amusement park.

Adapted from Disneyland and the Rise of Automation: How Technology Created the Happiest Place on Earth *by Roland Betancourt. Published by Princeton University Press. Copyright © 2026 by Roland Betancourt.*