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Walt Disney's Tripp Ave. home an exhibit in the land of politics



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On Thursday, Mayor Rahm Emanuel declared "Walt Disney Day" in Chicago, and a press conference was held to announce the "restoration" of the little house at 2156 N. Tripp Ave. in the Chicago neighborhood of Hermosa, not far from the intersection of Fullerton Avenue and Pulaski Road — and where Walter Elias Disney was born on Dec. 5, 1901.

Why Thursday? That birth was 112 years ago. And Walt Disney has been a global icon for at least 60 years. So why has Chicago suddenly reinvigorated its connection to Disney, about whom it seems to have cared little for years? Heck, in 1997 the City Council even voted down a proposal by the city's own Department of Planning and Development, which had wanted landmark status for the house.

Is this a story of overcoming lethargy? A city eager to repair its violent image and snag more tourists? An administration wanting to make nice with Old Hollywood, which still green-lights some Chicago movie shoots? Something to do with business? Politics? Money?

Well, of course. This is Chicago. And might this all have something to do with a soon-to-be-released movie, "Saving Mr. Banks," and with a quiet, maybe almost a subconscious, decision by the Walt Disney Co. to change the way it guards the image of its founder? No doubt.

But like many things in Chicago history, the ingredients and the motivations do not negate the worthiness of the end result.

Certainly, the history and politics of the Tripp house are very interesting. Much of the tortured history surrounding whether Chicago should or should not care about the house on Tripp has been unearthed by a man named Werner Weiss, who has no official connection with Disney but who maintains a website called Yesterday, dedicated to defunct attractions at Disneyland and Walt Disney World and, as a sideline, Disney history in general. Weiss knows Chicago well.

In 2008, he wrote the story of the Tripp house in far more detail than any newspaper yet has managed. Here are his highlights. Elias Disney was a carpenter who moved with his draftsman wife, Flora Call Disney, from Florida to Chicago to work on building the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. He stayed in town thereafter and bought a lot at 1249 Tripp Ave. and built his own frame house from Flora's drawings. Walt was the couple's fourth son. It seems like reasonable speculation to assume that Elias told Walt about the Columbian Exposition from the inside, an event that would prefigure the theme parks the young Disney would go on to build.

You'll perhaps note the difference in the two addresses. That's because Chicago renumbered the houses on Tripp in 1909, although the Disney family had left for Missouri by then. Although the Disneys would return to live in Chicago again (at 1523 W. Ogden Ave., when Walter was 15), Tripp was Walt Disney's birthplace, not his childhood home. That home was in



PHIL VELASQUEZ/TRIBUNE PHOTO 2006
Walter Elias Disney was born in this Chicago house on Tripp Avenue.

Disney has more reason than ever to be interested in the birth- place of Walt Disney

Marceline, Mo., where the Disneys lived on a farm. Marceline now sports The Walt Disney Hometown Museum, although physical evidence of Walt's presence is quite scant.

In 1956, Walt Disney did travel back to that town when they named the pool in his honor. And the barn where he played was "rebuilt" by volunteers in 2001. Nonetheless, it seems like reasonable speculation to assume that a rural life in Marceline provided some of those famously wholesome values that Disney wanted in his family-oriented products.

Come to think of it, maybe that was Walt's biographical secret: a simple, all-American childhood bookended by time in a ravenously growing city.

So perhaps Chicago's Disney museum should celebrate ambition: It could be the Epcot Center to Marceline's Main Street, USA.

The house on Tripp where they held the press conference Thursday was not exactly the same structure that Elias Disney built. When Chicago aldermen voted down the landmark status, they did so mostly on the grounds that the house had been altered substantially (new aluminum siding and front and rear porches) and that the then-owner, a woman named June Saathoff, did not want the designation, since she figured it would tie her hands when it came to renovating for a sale. At the time it was reported she was a retiree on a fixed income.

Weiss then tracked the sale of the Tripp house to Radoje and Barbara Popovic in 2002 (for \$190,000). The Popovics seem to have been the first to understand they maybe owned something that could make them money, so they tried to sell the house by auction on eBay, seeking \$280,000. But nobody was willing to pay their price. Thus they continued to rent out both of the two floors.

That's where Weiss' timeline of the Tripp house ended, although he did also note that Elias Disney was the contractor who built St. Paul Congregational Church (now Iglesia Evangelica Bautista Betania) at 2255 N. Keeler Ave., just around the corner from Tripp. Elias baptized Walt there. The pastor was Walter Parr, a close

friend of Elias. Hence: Walter Elias Disney. Interesting. Surely worth a plaque.

Here's the update to Weiss' story, as it became clear this week. Dina Benadon and Brent Young, a couple from Los Angeles who own Super 78 Studios, which designs theme park attractions, now own the house. The New York Times reported this week that the couple bought it for a mere \$173,000 (a far cry from that eBay price and even below what the Popovics paid 11 years ago). For a small investment, they get a property in which plenty of people suddenly are interested. Roy Disney, who also was born there and who retains some influence in the company his brother founded, showed up for that press conference. The owners said they plan to operate a small private museum under the name Walt Disney Birthplace, competing with Walt Disney Hometown, although you don't find many Japanese tourists in Marceline, Mo. Benadon and Young are raising funds on Kickstarter.

On Dec. 13, "Saving Mr. Banks," a movie about the relationship between P.L. Travers, the author of "Mary Poppins" and Walt Disney, who wanted to turn "Mary Poppins" into a musical movie, opens in Chicago. This is the first time Disney ever has allowed someone to play the role of its founder. One easily could overstate the risk they took: Walt Disney is played by Tom Hanks, which is a pretty hefty insurance policy against some negative interpretation of this beloved figure.

Then again, it seems hard to justify such an interpretation. Richard Sherman, who co-wrote the songs in "Mary Poppins" and who is a character in the movie, looked me in the eye this year as he talked of Disney's creative genius and benevolence, and the intensity with which his associates tried to please their boss. Sherman was in the room for years. His character feels unshakable honest. It was clear that he was speaking the truth — his truth, at least.

"Saving Mr. Banks" really is the debut of another Disney character: Disney himself. Any kind of interpretation of the founding spirit of Disney has been repressed until now, unless you include the various ways in which Walt Disney left images of himself for subsequent generations. But this is a new day.

Which brings us back to that house on Tripp. Disney, which also has an ongoing exhibition of memorabilia up at the Museum of Science and Industry, has more reason than ever to be interested in the birthplace of Walt Disney, located in a big movie marketplace. Perchance Hanks now will make a return in a subsequent biographical movie about the not-so-secret life of Walt, cross-cutting between Chicago and Marceline, charting the course that changed the face of the popular culture all across the globe.

And so Benadon and Young are sitting pretty amid a perfect storm: Chicago wants more tourism and has a violent international image to live down; Disney has a movie to promote; Walt is emerging from his protective bubble and taking his place alongside that famous mouse.

Just \$173,000 for all that was a heck of a deal.

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