

FESS PARKER

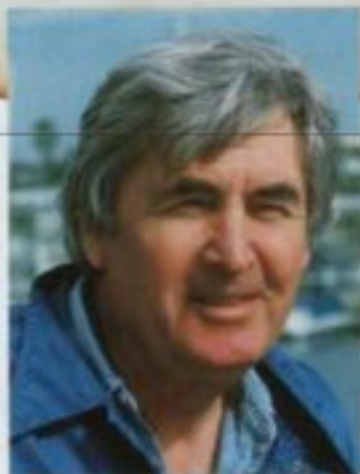
From Buckskins to Big Business

By Mark Hawthorne

As Disneyland prepares for its 35th birthday, it reminds us of the television series that Walt Disney

used to familiarize the public with his Park in the year prior to its opening. The name of the series was "Disneyland." One of the continuing serials within "Disneyland,"

"... coming to you tonight from Frontierland..." launched a nationwide mania for coonskin caps — and the career of its hero, Davy Crockett (otherwise known as Fess Parker).



Today, Fess Parker calls Santa Barbara "home."

Anyone who remembers the '50s will remember the Crockett Craze: It swept the country, and most of the world, like no other fad before or since. The impetus for all the fuss — why every boy (and girl) wanted a coonskin cap, and why "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" was topping the music charts — was Walt Disney's three-part television saga of American folk hero Davy Crockett. Its star was Fess Parker.

More than three decades later, Parker, still fit and soft-spoken, is blazing a trail of success in California real estate. Among his endeavors is the \$60 million Red Lion Resort in Santa Barbara, which opened in 1987. But love of the great outdoors is still close to his heart. Parker and his wife, Marcella, also own a ranch in the nearby Santa Ynez Valley, where they plan to embark on a family winery.

It was during a screening of the 1954 film "Them!" that one of the movie's minor players, Fess Parker, caught Walt Disney's attention. Walt was searching for someone to play the title role in his Davy Crockett story, to be showcased on the new

"Disneyland" ABC-TV series, and the tall Texan with one scene made an impression on him. When Walt saw me in "Them!" Parker explains, he turned around and said, "Who's that? Whatever quality Walt was looking for, he was able to see in that one scene."

Walt had found his Davy Crockett, and Fess Parker found sudden stardom. But stardom was hardly what he expected.

"I was just thrilled to have a job," he says. "After I graduated from the University of Texas, I gave myself 36 months to see if I could make a living in the film business. My 36 months were up in September of 1954, and I actually went on location for 'Davy Crockett' on September 8th of that year."

Parker was just enjoying the craze when — true to history — Crockett was killed off defending the Alamo in the show's finale. No matter, Parker reprised his role for two prequel shows (ed. note: episodes that should have been made before the show ended) and went on to star in other Disney features including "Old Yeller," "The Great Locomotive Chase," and "The Light in the Forest."

He also enjoyed a special relationship with Walt.

"Walt accorded me the privilege of visiting him at his office and, even if there was a meeting going on, I was never



Of his ride down Main Street, U.S.A., with Walt, the former "Davy" recalls "... they couldn't get the straps long enough!"

asked to wait. His secretary would show me in, and he'd just say, 'Fess, have a seat.'

"Walt was remarkably loose, yet he didn't want people fawning over him. But I think he enjoyed his unique place in the entertainment industry."

After leaving Disney, Parker went on to star in the long-running NBC-TV series "Daniel Boone." He hadn't seen Walt for several years when, at the 1964 cocktail party celebrating the pilot for "Daniel Boone," Parker felt a tap on his shoulder.

"I turned around, and there was Walt. He said, 'I just want to wish you well with your new series.' We talked for a while, and I spoke with his wife. I was extremely happy he did that. It was really a measure of Walt's graciousness." ♡