



The Life and Times of River Country



BY RAIN BLANKEN

A search for River Country online will instantly fill your screen with green boggy water, twisted branches clawing at leaf-encrusted waterslides, and the word **ABANDONED** (always in all caps).

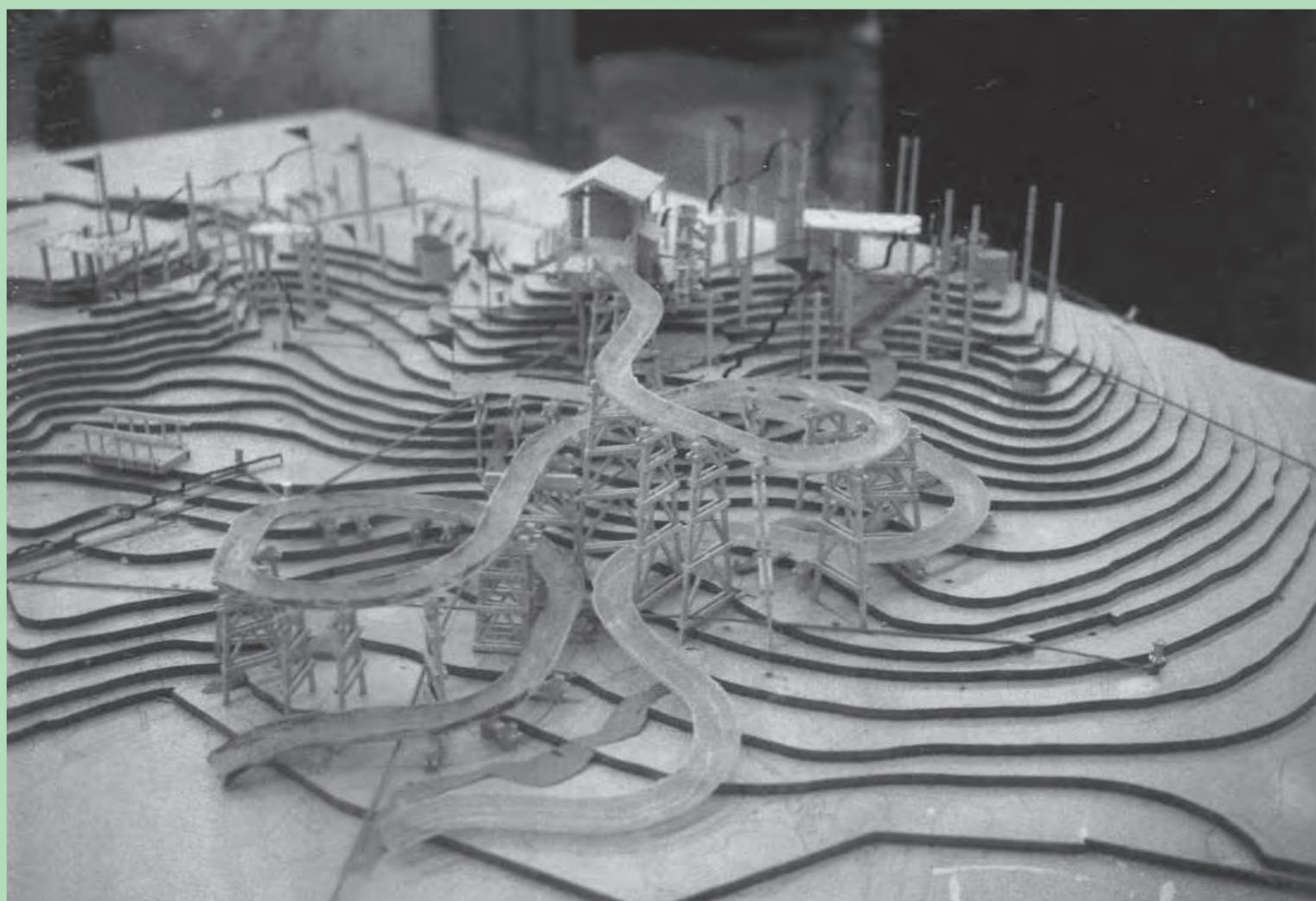
Trespassers searching for internet fame have long documented the former waterpark for personal gain, operating under the guise of “urban exploration.” So much digital media exists of these illegal excursions that they fully eclipse home video footage or scanned photos of the park during its 25 years of operation. It is an imbalance that welcomes mystery and rumor.

It’s true that River Country has rested quietly without guests since 2001. But it’s also true that this waterpark was an

innovative WED Enterprises undertaking. Like so many Imagineer creations of the time, it offered adventure the likes of which we may never see again. It’s cheap and easy to film an empty pool and whisper something spooky, so let’s do one better—dive much deeper and bring the life of this park to the surface.

BUILDING THE FIRST THEMED WATERPARK

Mark Twain stories like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* inspired River Country, so it was themed as the swimmin’ hole where everyone was welcome to take a dip, a dive, and maybe even brave the rapids. With an original working title of the cozy “Pop’s Willow Grove,” the waterpark was always meant to be as humble as its neighboring Fort Wilderness Campground. The theme used and imitated natural materials—think Tom Sawyer’s Island in Frontierland.



ABOVE: River Country scale model. PHOTO BY DISNEY ARCHIVES

RIGHT: From model to reality, the Whoop-'N-Holler Hollow slides.

PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER

This was a waterpark built by Disney Legends. Imagineer Fred Joerger, famous for creating the rock faces at Magic Kingdom and the rocks of the bygone waterfall at Polynesian Village Resort, sculpted the faux rocky mountain and boulders that shaped the landscape of River Country.

River Country was the first waterpark to use wooden trestle supports (spaced wooden frames much like a sawhorse) to support the waterslides. This provided a more rustic look than metal supports. Architect Dick Kline (the designer behind Fort Wilderness Campground) worked with Imagineer Pat Burke (whose projects included Jungle Cruise and Big Thunder Mountain) to bring the waterslide schematics at River Country to life.

In a 2011 interview with Disney & More, Pat Burke related how he planned out the trestle supports and elevations of the waterslides: "We had no computers yet, and I was given a flat drawing of the proposed slides ... I molded and modeled off rubber hose laid in the position of the plan. They were a lot like snake skins ... I built the slides out of fiberglass just as the real ones would be and figured out the themed wood tower heights needed for a marble to roll down them."

To make his 3D model fit the waterslide plans and land elevation perfectly, Burke sprayed photo emulsion (the



light-sensitive material on the front of a photograph) all over the surface of his model and used a projector to expose an image of the plans onto the model. He then developed the surface with chemicals—just like developing a huge photo. From here, he could layer wood to create the exact dimensions of the elevation and slides. The result was a 3D model that fit the plans perfectly, far before the age of computer imaging.

Pat Burke remembered, “WDW VP Dick Nunis was our slide tester, and let us know which corners needed to be higher, so you didn't fly over the edge like I heard he did.”

C’MON OVER, Y’ALL

Don't worry, Nunis survived to see the traditional Cast Member preview party for River Country (read about the Typhoon Lagoon cast preview on page 42). For a few days, Cast Members, including Imagineers, descended upon the park to test the slides and guest capacity. The park mascot, Goofy, attended the party—and showed up every day of park operation after that. When he wasn't waterskiing with Pluto in Bay Lake, he was partying poolside at River Country.

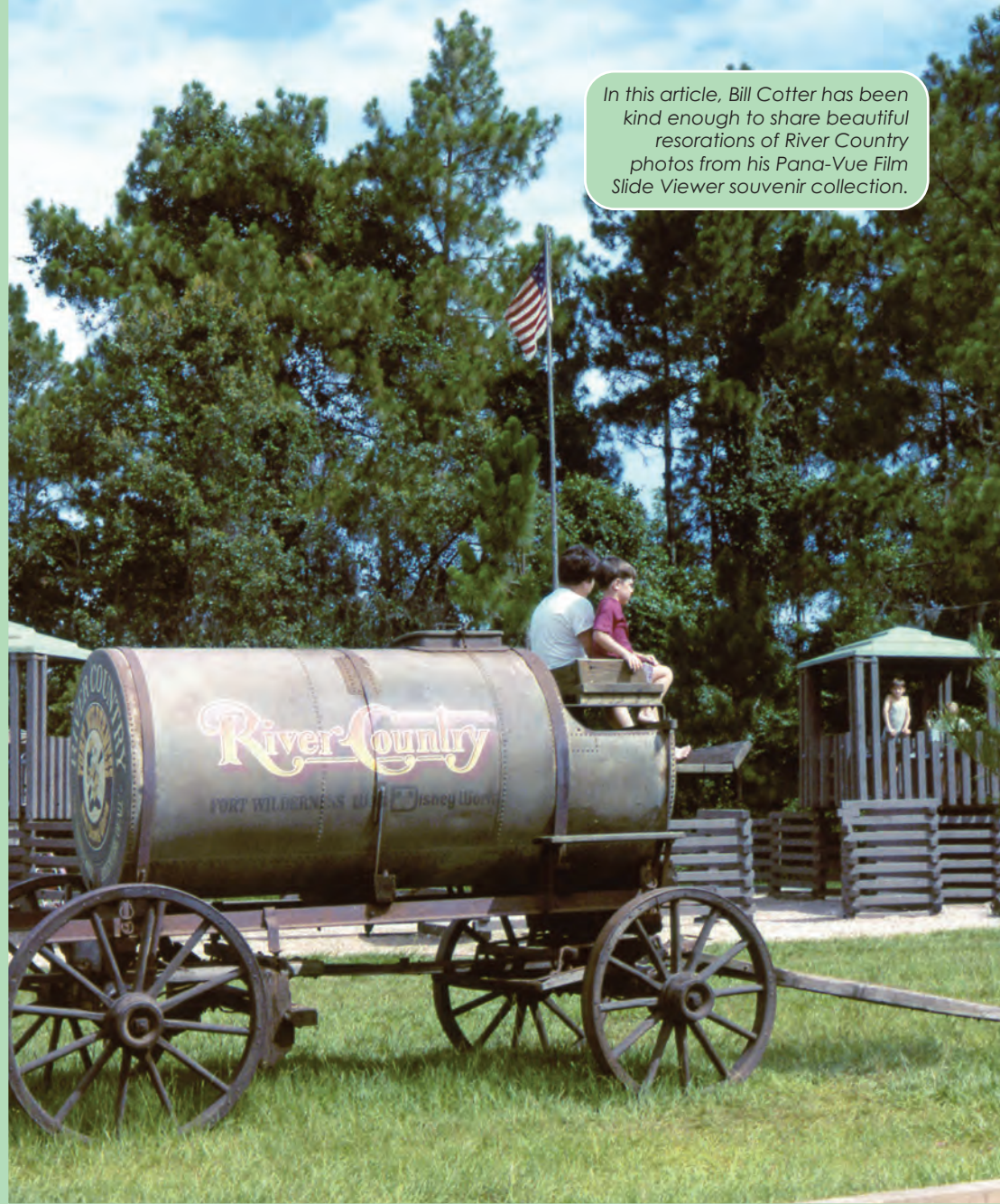
With all the preparations in place, all 6.5 acres of River Country opened with great fanfare on June 20, 1976. About 700 reporters watched as President Gerald Ford's daughter, Susan, dedicated the park and took the first official guest ride down one of the Whoop-'N-Holler Hollow slides.

But you didn't have to be presidential progeny to enjoy this park. With a \$4 adult ticket price (which would be about \$27 in 2021), it was one of the most



River Country advertisement circa 1977.
SCAN BY TOM SIMPSON

In this article, Bill Cotter has been kind enough to share beautiful restorations of River Country photos from his Pana-Vue Film Slide Viewer souvenir collection.



Entrance by the Water Wagon. PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER

affordable ways to spend a day at Disney World. Guests certainly agreed: The waterpark saw an average of 4,700 guests per day during the opening year.

IT'S A COOL PLACE TO BE

The half-acre Bay Cove pool at River Country was a sand-bottom lake that was not heated, keeping in line with the natural swimmin' hole theme. It appeared to be part of Bay Lake but was actually set apart via a large air bladder. The bladder's height prevented lake water from getting into the swimming area, yet allowed overflow back into the lake. The sandy shores of Bay Cove were littered with lounge chairs, begging guests to sit a'spell.

Whoop-'N-Holler Hollow was a set of two waterslides, 260 feet and 160 feet in length, that sent riders winding around that Fred Joerger mountain to Bay Cove below. Now, this is a rustic atmosphere, and while the backstory doesn't support

a tale of Goofy building these slides, we have our suspicions, as many riders reported a fairly bumpy descent (and then went back for more).

White Water Rapids, on the other side of the mountain, was a deceptively not-so-lazy river that lulled riders into a sense of tranquility before ending in rollicking rapids that dumped riders into Bay Cove.

While the Whoop-'N-Holler Hollow waterslides looked like what you may find at a contemporary waterpark, Slippery Slide Falls had a unique concept. Here, dual slides into the pools just ... stopped after the rock cliff, letting guests freefall 7 feet into the 330,000-gallon kidney-shaped Upstream Plunge pool. Its crystal-clear waters contrasted the sandy Bay Cove, as it was the only treated pool at the park.

Adding to the Huck Finn aesthetic was a tire swing, barrel bridges, rope swings, a

T-bar cable swing, and a wooden bridge that ran right along Bay Lake. Nature trails led adventurers through the woods and out onto a boardwalk overlooking the water.

The working title for the park found new life as Pop Willow's Picnic Area. Guests were encouraged to pack in their own lunches, which certainly added to the camper feel of the park. The Watering Hole Quick-Service restaurant had typical park snacks on hand, like hotdogs, fries, ice cream, and fried chicken.

Characters inhabited this park near the Bay Cove pool every day from 1:00 to 5:00 PM, where they would pose for photos and sign autographs. Goofy could be seen in a gingham shirt, rope belt, patched jeans, or even a fetching one-piece bathing suit.

The down-home hootenanny was an incredible success—the park was sold out for most of its 25-year operation. But it was too good. The popularity of River Country was likely what led to its demise.

AND THEN THERE WERE THREE

While our waterin' hole was hoppin', the nearby Wet 'n Wild Orlando waterpark competed with a contrast of newer and crazier waterslides. Disney saw room for expansion, and the word "expansion" means that this is where Michael Eisner comes in.

In 1984, Michael Eisner took the helm as CEO and Chairman of the Board of the Walt Disney Company alongside COO and President Frank Wells. The duo would go down in history for expanding every aspect of the company, especially where competition was present. Typhoon Lagoon

opened in 1989 not only as a response to the high demand for River Country but also to counter the threat of Wet 'n Wild's appeal to a younger audience.

Typhoon Lagoon was such a hit that Blizzard Beach opened just six years later. The two waterparks were behemoths compared to humble ol' River Country (it was about a fourth of Typhoon Lagoon's size), and each of the new waterparks offered a full day of fun while guests considered River Country a half-day adventure (especially as the pools weren't heated).

River Country tried to rustle up guests once again in 1998 with the All-American Water Party. Here, a good ol' fashioned barbecue hosted live music and games like sack races and tug-of-war while Mickey, Pluto, Chip 'n' Dale, and Minnie



ABOVE: Inner tubing down the White Water Rapids. PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER



Splashing down the flumes. **PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER**



The Upstream Plunge. **PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER**



Rapids and the ol' swimming hole. **PANA-VUE SLIDE RESTORATION BY BILL COTTER**

Mouse greeted guests. But it wouldn't be enough country charm to bring back the crowds.

River Country, tucked beyond Fort Wilderness, was more challenging to get to than Typhoon Lagoon and Blizzard Beach. This location was an advantage back when Magic Kingdom was the only main attraction at WDW. But with the development of EPCOT, Animal Kingdom, MGM Studios, and Downtown Disney, River Country receded into the background.

In 2001, River Country closed for the season, just as it had done every year since 1976. In April 2002, amid a recession, the Orlando Sentinel reported that the park would not reopen that year, and in 2005, Disney Parks finally announced that the days of the ol' swimmin' hole were over. River Country would not reopen.

AND SO IT SAT

Slippery Slide Falls can still be seen on Google Maps, sending no one into the concrete-filled Upstream Plunge pool. It's natural to be curious about rundown waterslides and empty buildings. And it's easy to lend that curiosity to rumors on why the park closed. A simple case of competition and budget changes during a recession just doesn't seem a worthy tale to match the overgrown imagery of an empty park.

But why do we have a morbid fascination with abandoned parks? Maybe because they are a shadow of what they once were—a place of excitement and fun. The quiet of this retired waterpark is deafening because it was once the scene of characters, barbecues, and kids swinging on tires. The reason it closed isn't particularly exciting, but that's just fine because the real story of River Country is the one that took place while guests smiled, splashed, and made lasting memories.

Overall, it was precisely what the Disney Parks commercials claimed:

"River Country was the kersplashingest, kid laughingest, slippery slidingest, raft ridingest, rope swingingest, swan divingest, summer swimmingest, sun snoozingest, picnickingest, old-fashioned, good, clean wet American fun you've ever had!" 🍷

