

# Knott's Berry Farm

by  
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Knott's Berry Farm, billed as America's first theme park, is the kind of success story that America was all about in pre-World War II America. A little guy, not looking for a handout, pulling himself up by his own bootstraps to eventually become a virtual American institution. It's the story of Walter and Cordelia Knott, who, in 1920, were sharecroppers in San Louis Obispo, CA.

They hadn't had it easy. They and their three children had already spent three years trying to homestead in the Mojave Desert (!). When Walter's cousin offered him a partnership in raising berries in Buena Park, it sounded like a good opportunity to stake a claim on their own farm. For \$1,000 a year, they could rent 20-acres on a five-year lease with an option to rent for another two years.

Things still didn't come easily. Most of the family's savings went to purchase equipment and berry plants. Several heavy frosts, almost unheard of in Southern California, nearly wiped them out in that first year in 1920. The second year, berry prices plummeted. But it was Walter's roadside stand that got the family through.

Walter had heard of a new type of berry, the "Youngberry," recently developed by a farmer in Alabama. He bought enough to plant half an acre, packaged his berries distinctively and sold them directly to the public, for Walter was more than a farmer...he had a talent for business and marketing, as

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well. He advertised the new berries, and interest became so high that the family grossed more than \$2,000 from the half acre.

The family enterprise prospered until an oil boom in 1927 drove land prices sky-high. The lease expired, and the landlord naturally wanted to sell the land. For the Knott's, it was buy or leave. Walter contracted to buy 10 of the acres at \$1,500 an acre and build a bigger stand and, behind it, a new house for his family. Walter wanted to add a restaurant, as well, but Cordelia said she already had her hands full with the stand and the newly proposed tea room.

In 1929, the stock market crash and the impending Depression threatened to ruin everything. Just in the nick of time, though, Walter's sharp eye saved the day. The USDA contacted him, asking if he knew anything about a supposedly new, superior berry developed by Rudolph Boysen of Orange County, Walter didn't...but he was certainly going to find out.

As it turned out, Mr. Boysen had developed a new berry, but he had given up on it because there didn't seem to be any commercial interest in it. Walter got permission to take the last few plants in existence. He tended them and found that they were not only very hardy, but the berries were so big that as few as 25 filled a standard fruit basket...and thus the "boysenberry" was born. Sales soared. The boysenberry was in demand for canning, cooking, and table eating. Knott's Berry Farm, the nursery, berry salesroom, and the tea room had all the business they could handle.

In 1934, still insisting that she wasn't going into the restaurant business, Cordelia added chicken and rhubarb to the tea room menu. The next day, using her wedding china, Cordelia served eight customers chicken dinners with rhubarb appetizers for 65¢. The response was phenomenal. Within weeks, people were waiting in lines at every meal. The Knotts doubled the size of their small tea room, and still there were lines.

Cordelia's 'restaurant' opened in 1937. On Thanksgiving Day, it served 1,774 dinners! Until her dying day, 40 years later, Cordelia still insisted, "I'm not in the restaurant business."

In his 50th year, Walter took stock. The berry farm was succeeding beyond his wildest dreams; his family had grown; but the country was still struggling to get itself out of the Depression. That's when it all happened...Walter decided that people needed to be reminded of the pioneer spirit that had made America great. He could build something on the berry farm that would be a monument to those pioneers (including his parents) and an educational diversion for people waiting to get into the restaurant.

Walter decided to get an artist to do a big 'cyclorama' (a painting with real objects in the foreground) of a wagon train crossing the desert. He'd build a town around it so that people could see how little those pioneers had to work with and yet how much they were able to accomplish. When the artist



suggested bringing in actual old buildings for a more natural atmosphere, that was all that history-loving Walter needed.

He found a hotel built in 1868 near Prescott, Arizona, and had it moved to the farm in 1940. An authentic saloon was soon found, although Walter wouldn't allow any alcohol to be sold anywhere on the premises. In the following year, he added other buildings, including a jail complete with a "talking" inmate, a Kansas school house, a blacksmith's shop, and a variety of shacks. Covered wagons, stage coaches, Boot Hill Cemetery, and employees dressed in authentic attire completed Knott's Berry Farm's now famous Ghost Town. Almost everything was authentic.

Between 1940 and 1955, Knott's grew into a genuine tourist attraction. Visitors flocked to see the Ghost Town; the restaurants were surrounded by successful shops; and Knott's berry Farm jams and jellies were packaged and sold throughout the United States. And then Disneyland appeared...the dream of another Walter.

The Knotts were apprehensive about the impact of Disneyland. As it turned out, 1955 went on to be a banner year for Knott's. Gradually, however, Knott's Berry Farm began to change directions. Rides and activities for the kids were added, including a whole mountain where six mine trains took people on a tour of a gold mine...the Calico Gold Mine. In 1968, the Knott family decided to fence the park and charge admission, a move many other amusement parks had already made.

The fence was a turning point. Before, people had come to Knott's for the chicken dinners and simply browsed through the other attractions. Now, when paying admission, people expected entertainment. \$17 million was expended on the farm to meet this demand. Between 1968 and 19976, the park added its Log Ride, Fiesta Village, and Roaring 20s amusement area. By 1976, the additions were complete. Attendance went up 52% in its first summer. Knott's Berry Farm now ranked third in national attendance, behind Disneyland and Disney World.



After Walter's death in 1981, the family vowed to keep Knott's oriented toward families and education. In 1983, Knott's allied itself with a much-loved comic strip, opening Camp Snoopy, featuring six scenic areas themed to the California High Sierra, complete with rushing waterfalls, a meandering stream, pontoon and suspension bridges, and all sorts of shows and attractions for the young-at-heart. Four years later, the Kingdom of Dinosaurs opened, offering a dark and noisy voyage through the world of the prehistoric. Recently, the park unveiled the new Boomerang roller coaster, which takes riders upside down six times in less than a minute. Today, Knott's sells 1.5 chicken dinners annually. Annual attendance tops 4 million people, and another million people come just to shop at Knott's MarketPlace.

Today, the Chicken Dinner Restaurant seats more than 900 guests at a time, serves more than 1.5 million guests each year, and is the largest full-service restaurant in California that serves chicken as its main course.



Over the years, Mrs. Knott's Chicken Dinner Restaurant has hosted thousands of celebrities and VIPs, including: Elizabeth Taylor, Connie Stephens, Lucy Arnez, Donnie and Marie Osmond, John Wayne, Harriet Nelson, Burt Reynolds, Jane Russell, Natalie Wood, Charles Bronson, Amos and Andy, Eddie Fisher, Jonathan Winters, Chuck Norris, and many more...

Amidst this grand success story, Knott's has immortalized its story with a succession of matchcovers, a few of which have been pictured here. Notice how the covers, almost all 20-strikes, chronicle the addition of new features to Knott's Berry Farm over the years. Also, notice the successive change of addresses. Finally, notice the addition of Snoopy to one of the later covers. The next time you come across such covers, you might stop to think about the story behind Knott's Berry Farm. Walter was right all along...the conestoga wagons and the Wild West are now part of America's past, but the pioneer spirit is still here. [<http://www.knotts.com>]

Looking through my own grouping of Knott's Berry farm covers, which I have with the Amusement Park section of my Famous Places collection, I can see 27 in all (26 20-strikes and 1 30-strike), including this one full-length Crown.

