

31 Months in Japan

The Building of a
Theme Park

By
Larry K. & Lorna Collins

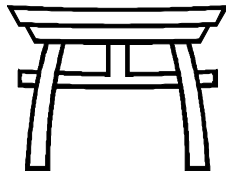


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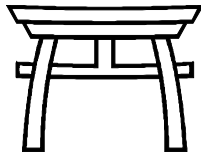
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the USJ team — from America and Japan — whose efforts and determination created one of the greatest theme parks in the world — Universal Studios Japan.



And in Memory of

Raouf Iskander

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Prologue

Theme Park

An amusement park in which the rides and attractions are built with a particular theme.

In the case of Universal Studios®¹ theme parks, the attractions are based on Universal films.

Lorna

I was lost, thoroughly lost, in a country where I neither read the signs nor spoke much of the language. I was just trying to get to a dentist. The crown on my front tooth had fallen out the day before, and English-speaking friends had recommended their Harvard-trained doctor. I called his office and made an appointment for that afternoon. Then I boarded the train.

“Take the *JR* (Japan Railway) to *Amagasaki* where you’ll catch the local to the *Koshienguchi* station in *Nishinomiya*,” they’d said. What they hadn’t told me was there were three different local trains as well as an express and a limited express heading that direction. Only one of them stopped at the specified station, and it wasn’t the one I was on.

I spotted the name written in English as the train whizzed past, but couldn’t get off until about three stations later when the car halted and the doors opened. I studied the schedules posted on the platforms, but at that point didn’t recognize enough Japanese to figure out where I needed to go. And there were no other foreigners in sight.

Japanese business people and students rushed past me, staring as if I had just dropped in from another planet. They seemed curious, but too intimidated to offer help. Unlike me, they knew where they were going and how to get there.

I eventually found the platform where I could head back, but still didn’t know which train to take. The first streaked past without stopping. The second was too crowded. I finally gathered my courage and boarded the third, only to pass my targeted station again, this time going the opposite direction. Fortunately, I was able to get off just one station beyond my goal.

For a moment I considered walking, but there were no streets paralleling the tracks. Being lost on the train was bad enough. Getting thoroughly confused on foot would have been even worse.

Once again, I changed platforms. The next train that pulled in appeared to be smaller than the previous ones and more worn. Figuring perhaps they saved the older ones for the routes with more stops, I got on, nearly an hour late and hoping this time I’d guessed right. Fortunately I had, but I spent the walk to the office wondering what the heck I was doing in Japan instead of back home in California.

The call that started it all came in March of 1997 from my best friend Pat who was working as contracts administrator for Universal Studios in Hollywood.

¹ Universal Studios and all ride and attraction names in this book are registered trademarks.

“Do you think Larry would be interested in working on the design for our new location in *Osaka*?”

Pat, Larry and I had all previously worked for the same engineering company. Larry was still there, but his office was being downsized. After nearly thirty years, he had begun to think about leaving.

“The position will require relocating to Japan during construction. How would you feel about living there for a couple of years?” she asked.

I had been interested in the Japanese culture for years. My friend, Kay, was born and raised in the port city of *Kobe* near *Osaka*, and we had previously hosted several Japanese students in our home.

I laughed confidently. “You forget we have ‘kids’ there. It’s probably the foreign country I’d most like to see. Over the years I’ve learned so much, it would be great to finally experience it for myself.”

“Well, the A&E (Architecture & Engineering) director, Tony, has been in my office all afternoon raging and ranting that he can’t find anyone for a position he’s trying to fill,” Pat explained. “He’s already interviewed a dozen people who sounded good on paper but weren’t actually qualified. I asked him what experience he was looking for. He told me bluntly I couldn’t possibly know anyone who would be adequate. So I dared him to describe the job to me anyway. He rattled off a long list of requirements, and it sounded like he was reading directly from Larry’s resume. That’s why I’m calling.”

That night we discussed Larry’s applying. He had worked on another theme park project a couple of years earlier and really enjoyed it, so he decided to submit his resume and see what developed.

Within a week, he was called for an interview, and it seemed like a perfect match. According to Tony, he was needed immediately and would be contacted shortly with an offer. March passed into April, then May and all the way into July with an occasional, “We’re working on it,” from Universal, but nothing tangible was forthcoming.

Meanwhile, Larry was approached about several other positions, all of which were clearly wrong for him. Then our friend Tom asked him to interview with his firm. The office was closer to home; the salary acceptable and it seemed like a good position. When he left for work the next day, it was his intention to accept.

At the time, it was our habit to eat lunch together on Fridays. Larry got off work at 11:30 and would come by my office to pick me up. When I got into the car that day, I asked, “Well, did you accept the job?”

I could tell by the look on his face, something was up. All he replied was, “Universal called.”