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After dark, the dirty work at Disneyland begins

A crew of 600 custodians, painters, gardeners and decorators works 365 nights a year to ensure that the 85-acre park meets Walt Disney's squeaky-clean ideals.



Visitors on Main Street U.S.A. await Disneyland's opening after its sprucing up by the night crew, upholding founder Walt Disney's vision of an immaculate land, free of the litter and grime of the outside world. (Allen J. Schaben, Los Angeles Times)

When the last Jungle Cruise boat docks for the night and lights fade to black on Sleeping Beauty's Castle, the real work begins.

At lush Pixie Hollow, gardeners don miner's headlamps as they begin uprooting stubborn weeds. On Main Street, custodians scrape chewing gum off the sidewalk. And over at Mickey's Toontown, painters sand and recoat chipped handrails.

Few see it happen, except perhaps for the dozens of feral [cats](#) that emerge from their hiding places to prow the park after hours, stalking rodents.

Welcome to the dark side of Disneyland.

Gone are Mickey and his friends. In their place are about 600 custodians, painters, gardeners and decorators, working to ensure that the 85-acre park meets the squeaky-clean ideals that [Walt Disney](#) himself extolled even before he launched the park 55 years ago.

During a recent overnight shift, Disneyland provided a rare glimpse into the work that goes into maintaining the world's second-most-popular theme park. Though park officials wouldn't divulge how much money is spent on Disneyland's overall upkeep, they said most is spent on the night shift.

And although most guests will never witness the after-hours work, theme park experts credit the park's continued success to its cleanliness and tidy conditions.

"Disney and many other parks recognize that keeping it clean and refreshed, with all of those little details that you don't notice until they are missing, are important to the park's success," said Gene Jeffers, executive director of the Themed Entertainment Assn., a nonprofit organization of designers and builders of theme parks and attractions.

It's one of the many reasons attendance at Disneyland jumped 8% last year despite the economic downturn, while the crowd numbers dropped at Southern California competitors like Universal Studios Hollywood, [Six Flags](#) Magic Mountain and Knott's Berry Farm, according to a recent estimate.

To keep the park in good order, it takes a crew that works 365 nights a year, toiling under portable floodlights. "It's a city that never sleeps," said David Caranci, the manager of resort enhancement and decorating. "There is something always happening."

And for nearly every nighttime task, there is a specific worker.

Three workers are responsible solely for repairing and replacing the 800 umbrellas, 25,000 chairs and about 7,000 tables in the restaurants and snack bars in Disneyland and neighboring California Adventure Park.

Four certified divers collect submerged trash and make repairs on water attractions like Finding Nemo and the Jungle Cruise.

The work can often be tedious and occasionally bizarre. At the Enchanted Tiki Room, a 17-minute musical show features 225 robotic birds, plants and singing tikis. Patrick Pendleton, the show's primary mechanic, has seen it more times than he can count.

To make sure the characters work properly, he plays the show repeatedly, watching each closely. "It's hard to catch everything in one show," he said.

Sometimes, the jobs require ingenuity, even for some of the more distasteful chores. For example, the [Indiana Jones](#) Adventure ride relies on nearly 1,000 black lights that shine on painted mesh screens to create floating ghost images.

But the effect is marred when guests sometimes spit at the ghosts, and the saliva ends up on the screens where it glows under black lights. Because typical cleaning products bleach the screens, David Graefen, the ride's service manager, said his crew created a special saliva-cleaning solution.

Park workers have also found a resourceful way to remove other unwanted guests — rodents.

Years ago — no one seems to know when — feral cats began to sneak into the park, living among the park's trees and shrubs during the day. At night, they venture out, and an estimated 200 cats now prowl through Disneyland and neighboring California Adventure Park.

But instead of evicting the cats, Disneyland's animal wranglers work to control the feline population by spaying and neutering the adult cats and finding homes for all kittens born in the resort. The cats eat at five permanent feeding stations installed throughout the two parks.

"We are not trying to get rid of them," said Gina Mayberry, manager of Disneyland's Circle D ranch, where the park's animals are housed. "They keep the rodent population down."

Other nighttime visitors are not so welcome. Before maintenance crews take over, security workers sweep through the park to find guests hoping to spend the night. (Don't even try hiding on Tom Sawyer's Island — park security knows all the hiding places.)

"If someone tried to hide, they would not stay hidden for long," said Disneyland spokeswoman Suzi Brown.

The primary goal of the after-hours crew is to pursue Disney's vision of an immaculate land, free of the litter and grime of the outside world.

Walt Disney himself led early efforts, insisting that attractions, gates and benches be repainted on schedule, even if a touch-up would suffice. He made sure light bulbs were replaced even before they burned out and trash cans were emptied before they were full.

"When I started on Disneyland, my wife used to say, 'But why do you want to build an amusement park? They're so dirty.' I told her that was just the point; mine wouldn't be," the founder said at the time.

Longtime park fans say Disneyland hasn't always sparkled. In the mid-1990s, they say, park managers turned away from Disney's emphasis on cleanliness to save on maintenance costs. "For 10 years or so, it was horrible," said Al Lutz, founder of MiceAge, a fan website. "That wasn't Disneyland."

But with the 50th anniversary of the park approaching in 2005, Disneyland officials renewed the push to operate a spotless park. And they turned, of course, to the night crew to make it happen.

Beginning after midnight, about 300 gardeners work to give the park its trademark manicured look.

Spotting tiny pests like aphids and spider mites can be difficult for nighttime gardeners. But Disneyland horticulturalist Steve Fox said his biggest fear was tripping or falling in the dark. "We try not to hurry and try to do the work that is needed as best we can," he said.

Meanwhile, the paint crews search for gates, fences, benches or buildings that have become faded, chipped or scratched. But they must use special paint that will dry before guests enter the park in the morning.

Some areas such as Mickey's Toontown require special attention. To reverse the effects of thousands of climbing, scampering children, the crews run through gallons of paint a year on the brightly painted cartoonish village.

"It's a pretty tough location," Caranci said.

Other overnight workers specialize on repairing damage caused by vandalism. Recently, park decorator

Frank Franco worked for several hours at the Indiana Jones Adventure replacing rope that someone had pulled free from the ride's scenery.

On a regular basis, Franco said, he finds that visitors have stolen or damaged fake skulls, lengths of bamboo, rope, nets and other props that create the ride's jungle ambience. Armed with epoxy glue and screws, Franco tries to ensure that the props stay in place.

"Every day is something different," he said.

As dawn breaks near Disneyland's Main Street, two custodians complete the final job of the night: scraping dried chewing gum from the pavement with metal blades attached to long poles. Gum is not sold in the park, but the sticky leftovers often end up on sidewalks, benches and tables.

Nearby, a crowd has gathered at the park's entrance, waiting to pass through the turnstiles. Park greeter Bob Daisey stands just inside the park and raises his arms to get the visitors' attention.

"We are about to open the original and most famous theme park in the world," he calls out, igniting cheers from throngs of fidgeting children.

Meanwhile, night custodian Steve Tomatis cleans up the last of the chewing gum on Main Street. It's dirty work, but he knows it's essential to preserving Walt Disney's ideals.

"We take care of this when everything else is done," he says. "It's a constant, ongoing problem, but it has to be done."

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