New "Disneyland Handcrafted" documentary shows a labor of magic, not just myth

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Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse in a Disneyland Fire Truck. Disneyland opened in July 1955. PHOTO COURTESY OF @DISNEYLAND/INSTAGRAM

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New "Disneyland Handcrafted" documentary shows a labor of magic, not just myth

When a new film about the Disney amusement park and media empire drops, most people wouldn't be faulted for thinking it's just another corporate nostalgia piece. The new documentary "Disneyland Handcrafted," on Disney Plus and free-to-watch on YouTube, seeks to flip this script by immersing viewers into the sweat-stained trenches of one of the most audacious creative projects of the 20th century.

Directed by Leslie Iwerks, granddaughter of famed animation legend Ub Iwerks and auteur in her own right, the film reframes the birth of the Disneyland park in California not as inevitable magic, but as the product of relentless human effort, risk-taking and sheer craftsmanship.

At roughly 78 minutes, "Disneyland Handcrafted" eschews modern talking heads and contrived narration in favor of previously unseen 16mm archival footage, most of it untouched for decades in the Walt Disney Archives. There's no sweeping orchestral score, no celebrity reflections on "legacy" — just the raw, unfinished reality of Anaheim orange groves morphing into the attraction we all know today.

As a casual Imagineering buff, I really enjoyed the choice to ground viewers in the daily lives of the people who made the park real: welders, painters, carpenters and designers whose names are rarely etched into history. It's in watching their hands lay tracks for the railroad or shape riverbanks for the Mark Twain paddleboat that the film's title earns its weight: this Disneyland was, quite literally, handcrafted.

Even for seasoned Disney fans, the experience is revelatory — Iwerks lets that immersive quality extends to the documentary's technical craft. Rather than merely stitch together silent clips with narration, the creative team partnered with sound designers to build a textured audio environment that feels alive. You hear hammers striking metal, engines chugging and boots crunching on gravel — soundscapes that elevate the footage from historical document to visceral experience.

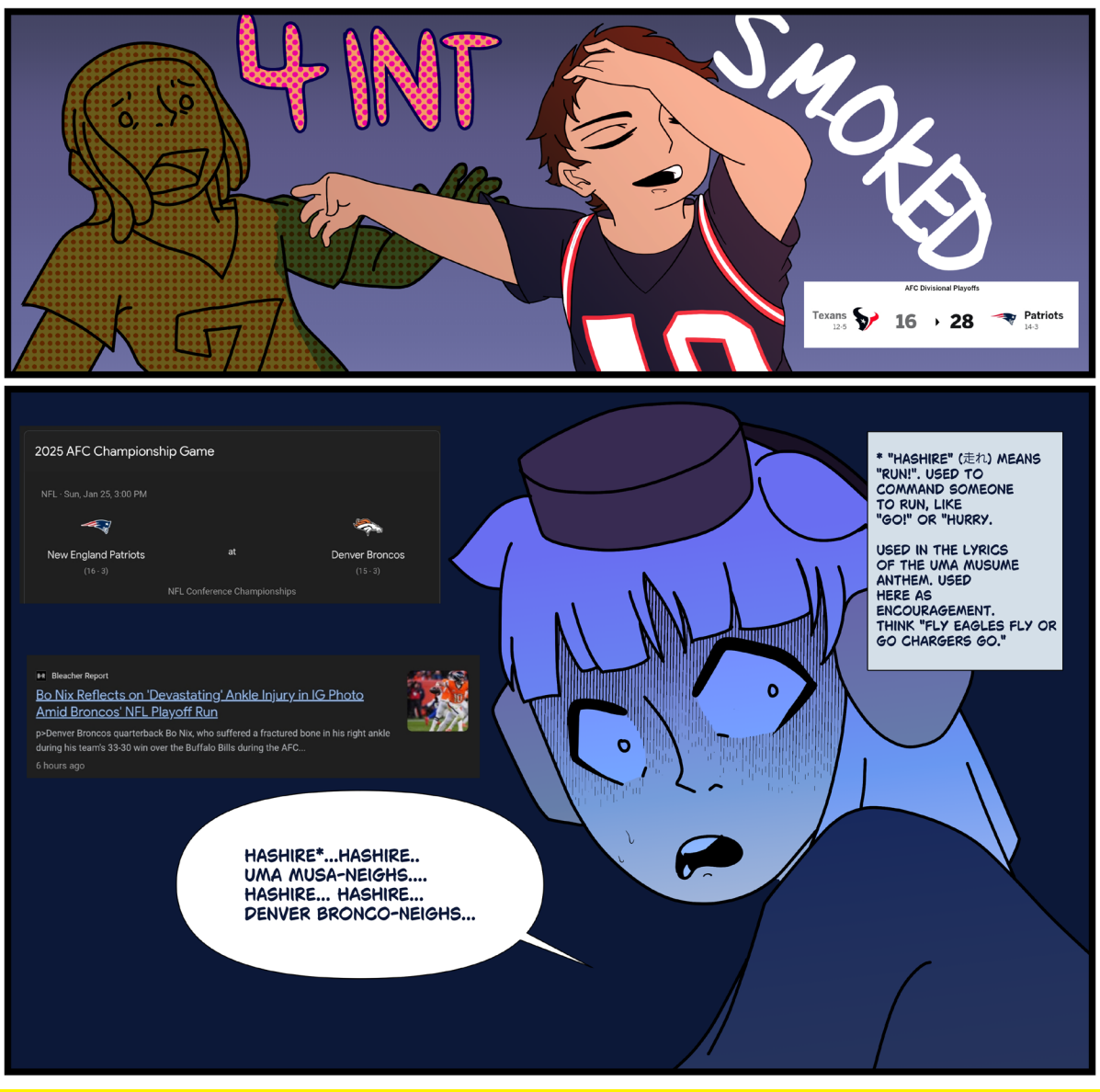
Yet, "Disneyland Handcrafted" isn't perfect. Its devotion to archival purity means pacing sometimes slows to a crawl, and casual viewers might find extended construction sequences less engaging without a robust narrative heartbeat to anchor them. This is a film for the curious, not the easily distracted — one that rewards attention with genuine insight.

But for those willing to lean in, the payoff is substantial. By the time the gates open on July 17, 1955 — captured in the film's closing moments — you don't just witness history; you "feel" it. The joy etched on the faces of guests on opening day hits harder when you've just spent an hour inside the trenches. It's an immersive conclusion that transforms Disneyland from an abstract cultural icon into something whose creation you've lived alongside.

Iwerks is also behind the excellent Disney Plus documentary series "The Imagineering Story" and retrospective "The Pixar Story." Even if you're not the biggest fan of the mouse and his house, they're great pictures of the stories behind the magic.

In an era of hyper-curated media and retro branding, "Disneyland Handcrafted" stands out as a documentary that doesn't just celebrate its subject — it respects the hands that built it. This isn't just a must-watch for Disney diehards; it's an essential reminder of the human work behind every dream.

Whether you stream it from your dorm room or gather around a TV with family, it's clear: "Disneyland Handcrafted" crafts magic from reality — and in doing so, honors the real people who made "The Happiest Place on Earth" possible.



comic by Seth Wallen

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