

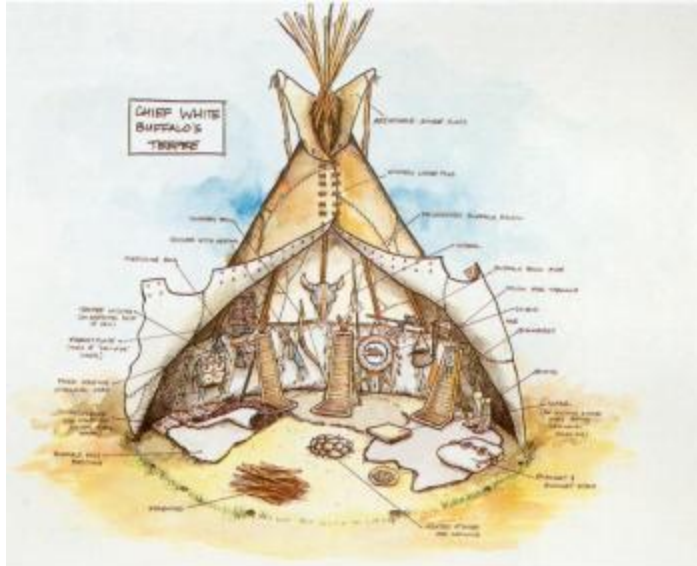
The Background Story of Thunder Mesa



The story of Frontierland's fictional town 'Thunder Mesa'. As told by Jeff Burke (executive producer), Bob Baranick (imagineer) and Craig Flemin (show writer).

Fort Comstock (named after a silver mine in Virginia City, Nevada) guards the entrance to Thunder Mesa - Frontierland - Disneyland Paris. It is a kind of log stockade that was constructed by its earliest inhabitants as a defense against an attack of native Indians (from the Shoshone's Tribe). Their tipis can be found in the vegetation surrounding the central hub of the Disneyland Park.

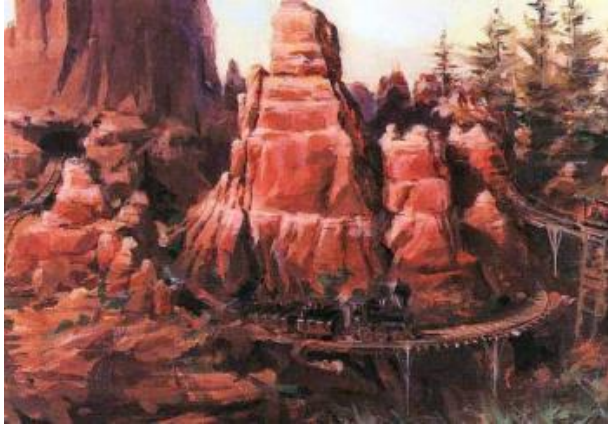




The frontiersmen who lived within the pristine surroundings of Big Thunder Mountain were farmers, poachers and smugglers. Tobias Norton & Sons Frontier Traders was the first shop in Thunder Mesa.



In 1853, Henry Ravenswood (born 1795) struck gold in the mighty Big Thunder Mountain. Soon the Thunder Mesa Mining Company was founded. Thousands of people were attracted by the new found wealth. Thunder Mesa's population was growing at an incredible pace.



New modern shops opened for business to meet increased demand for food and supplies (The Thunder Mesa Mercantile Building). The town prospered.

The miners and merchants settled on the Eastern part of town and relaxed at The Lucky Nugget Saloon (founded in 1858 by Miss Diamond Lill). Situated at the west side end of Thunder Mesa, close to the Ravenswood Manor, The Silver Spur Steakhouse was the most expensive restaurant in Thunder Mesa. It served upscale meals for the high society.



When the Disneyland Park opened its gates in 1992, the restaurant contained some real masterpieces by Edward Borein, Charles Russel and Albert Bierstadt that had been lent by an American collector. Unfortunately they were replaced by copies in 1994, as grease was penetrating through the glass showcases, a process which over time could have damaged the priceless originals.



The outlaws and desperados met each other at the Last Chance Café. While the Lucky Nugget Saloon and the Silver Spur Restaurant are a homage to gold and silver, the Last Chance Café offers a reference to the third seminal metal of the West through its counter made of hammered copper.

Big Thunder Mountain is protected by the Indian Thunder Bird God. When someone tries to rob the richness of the mountain, the God flaps its wings which draws lightning and shakes the earth. In 1860, the Thunder Mesa Mining Company was struck by the wrath of the Thunder Bird God. Henry Ravenswood and his wife lost their lives during the horrible earthquake. Due to security reasons, the gold mine closed and the mining company ceased its activities.

When the gold rush lost its edge, Thunder Mesa started to settle down. Miners and fortune seekers left town. Community life became important and agriculture was once more the most important economic activity (Cottonwood Creek Ranch, named after a tree species native to North America, Europe and Western Asia).



On special occasions the folks from Thunder Mesa would all come together for a party. Everyone would meet in the large barn bringing with them some tables and chairs from their own home (Cowboy Cookout Barbecue Restaurant). Once here they would spend the day enjoy tasty BBQ ribs, chicken and spicy chili.

Family Secrets

The original story of Phantom Manor

“... I would think to myself, ‘wow, this is a pretty detailed story that Jeff and Craig have come up with, almost like a movie.’”

–Greg Meader, Phantom Manor audio producer

Much proverbial ink has been spilled over the elusive story of Phantom Manor, with dozens of different versions and interpretations appearing in Cast Member manuals, on fan sites and discussion forums. It is perhaps a little known fact that even the Manor’s creators came up with not one but *two* versions of the story...

The first was a more detailed version which included a few additional family members, including Arthur and Gabrielle Ravenswood whose names were to appear on a stone crypt right in the center of Boot Hill and on various inscriptions throughout Frontierland. Other members of the ‘supporting cast’ would also have their own gravemarkers in this early incarnation of the attraction’s script. The elaborate sarcophagus now said to belong to the poor abandoned bride and her ever-beating heart, was originally conceived to hold the remains of family friend Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon.



Early Boot Hill concept. Detail of concept art by Dan Goozee. © Disney.

Eventually the story and many of its characters were dropped for a simplified version which focused on Henry and Martha Ravenswood and their daughter Melanie while Boot Hill received new epitaphs with a stronger emphasis on humor.

Yet, many other elements were kept in this new storyline and so the inclined reader shall find a number of intriguing insights in the following account, published here for the first time and based on the original elaborate storyline which show producer Jeff Burke and show writer Craig Fleming started to develop during the initial concept phase.



In the gold rush days of Thunder Mesa, two brothers who owned the Big Thunder Mine built a beautiful mansion overlooking town. Arthur Ravenswood, the more refined and level-headed of the two brothers, managed the family's business ventures, drafting the ownership documents of Big Thunder and investing the family fortune in railroad and steamship stocks. His rowdy, impetuous older brother Henry, on the other hand, spent much of his time bullying and womanizing which frequently kept him at odds with his family, particularly with his wife Martha. In spite of their contentious relationship, Henry and Martha had a daughter, the beautiful Melanie.

With Martha's motherly nurturing, Melanie grew into a lovely young girl despite her brash, overly protective father who forbade her to leave the Manor or its grounds to venture into town and socialize. Melanie's only friends were Jasper and Anna Jones who managed the stately manor house and its splendid gardens.

Tragedy struck the Ravenswood family in 1860 when a terrible earthquake hit Thunder Mesa. Henry Ravenswood, on an inspection tour of Big Thunder with Arthur's mine foreman Jake, was presumably crushed by falling timbers. Sadly, Martha also perished due to her weak heart. A mere six years later, Jasper died when his horse was spooked by a rattlesnake on the Manor grounds.



The beautiful manor house before the storm.
Concept art by Julie Svendsen. © Disney.

In the meantime, Arthur had become a sickly recluse, confined to the Manor and tended to by his young wife, Gabrielle. His faithful dog, Goliath, never left his master's side. As the Ravenswood fortune had been depleted, mostly by Henry's foolish, lavish spending, a wealthy San Francisco socialite and family friend, Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon, came to Arthur's financial aid. But the end was near for the Ravenswood legacy, as Arthur was to succumb to his illness in 1867 and Gabrielle died only a year later, most likely of a broken heart.

Melanie Ravenswood was encouraged by her dear betrothed, Jake, who no longer worked in the mine, to leave the Manor with him. Henry's dark, restless spirit, which had hovered over the ever-dilapidating manor house was outraged; he invoked his spiteful jealousy and became the vengeful Phantom. As the mansion was being prepared for the young couple's wedding reception, Jake met his untimely demise at the hands of the malevolent Phantom. Little did Melanie know that her dreams of a wedding would never come to pass or that her overly protective father would forever hold her captive in the manor house where she had grown up...



The preceding narrative was based on correspondence by Jeff Burke; slightly edited to appear on this website.
Many thanks to Jeff Burke for sharing his original vision for the attraction's backstory.

Edited by David G. Ravenswood