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KIDDIE HEAVEN: Children's Fairyland

Oakland park that once inspired Walt Disney nurtures youngsters' minds

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Through the arched, kiddie-size doorway of the giant shoe and past the lavender-hued gates ornamented with golden fairy silhouettes lies Children's Fairyland. When the 10-acre, storybook-themed park on Lake Merritt opened in 1950, Walt Disney visited, and it helped inspire him to create Disneyland.

Owned by the city of Oakland and operated by a nonprofit organization, Fairyland features classic tales through 30 exhibits and sets, a puppet theater, rides and programs. The goal here is all about fortifying the imagination of children age 8 and younger, and that's why it's deliberately low-tech.

After watching an elf statue blow bubbles from atop a red and white mushroom, kids like to pull the long tongue of the Happy Dragon before winding along several pathways. There, they come across whimsical storybook sets, including Miss Muffet, dressed in pink dress and white petticoats, frightened by a spider in her garden. For \$2, visitors can purchase a Magic Key, which activates a box containing a recorded narrative related to each set.

Animals live in pens among some of the sets, including a sheep in the corral of the "Mary Had a Little Lamb" set and bunnies in Peter Rabbit Village.

Puppeteers delightfully illustrate fairy tales in the outdoor Puppet Theatre, with shows at 11 a.m. and 2 and 4 p.m. Five decades old, it's the longest-running puppet theater in the United States and features prominent puppeteers.

Scaled-down rides offer thrills for small children, including the Wonder-Go-Round, an "Alice in Wonderland"-themed carousel; the Magic Web, a petite Ferris wheel; the Flecto Carousel; and the Jolly Trolley train.

Adventurous spaces to discover include the Old West Junction. Fashioned like a Western film set, it has a faux livery stable, bank and jail for kids to explore.

Families can pitch tents and spend the night during the Summer Sleep Overs on July 8 and 22 and Aug. 5 and Aug. 19. Including a barbecue dinner, rides, attractions and an appearance by storyteller John Weaver, it costs \$40 for adults and \$15 for children.

Other programs include Fairyland Children's Theatre, where 30 children between 8 and 10 years old hone their skills in voice, public speaking, acting, ethnic music and dance for free. Chosen from auditions in February, they rehearse and perform March through October.

10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mon.-Fri., until 5 p.m. Sat.-Sun., weather permitting. 699 Bellevue Ave., Oakland. \$6, younger than 1 free. Adults must accompany children, and no adults are allowed into the park without children. Call (510) 452-2259, www.fairyland.org.