

MARINE STUDIOS

Making Undersea Movie Magic



Clockwise from top left: Vintage postcard captioned “Pulchritude and a free fish dinner bring a porpoise out of water”; newspaper report of opening day, Marineland Archives; coquina marker, State Archives of Florida; postcard book, ticket, Marineland Archives; children greet dolphin, ca. 1948, State Archives of Florida; vintage postcard captioned “Action, Camera! Sounds and motion picture men shoot this scene thru one of the portholes.”

Marineland, the legendary Florida attraction that became synonymous with dolphins, actually got its start as a pioneering movie studio inspired by educational innovation.

In the 1930s, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, heir to both the Vanderbilt and Whitney fortunes and a trustee of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, thought museum directors were ignoring his ideas about educational innovations. Both Whitney and his cousin W. Douglas Burden, also a grandson of “Commodore”

Cornelius Vanderbilt, wanted the museum to create an experience for visitors that resembled watching a movie. Such an experience, they said, would bring the museum’s wonders to a much wider audience.

In 1938, the wealthy cousins joined forces to test their concept by opening Marine Studios near Jacksonville. Their colleagues in the adventure were Merian Cooper, a native of Jacksonville and the writer, director, and producer of the original “King Kong,” and Ilya Tolstoy, grandson of the famous Russian author Leo Tolstoy.

All the partners who participated in the creation of Marine Studios were involved in the motion-picture industry. In addition to “King Kong,” Cooper worked with the fabled director John Ford on several movies, received an honorary Oscar, and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Whitney also worked with Ford as producer of several films including “The Searchers” (1956) and was involved with Burden as a co-producer of “Gone With the Wind” (1939). Tolstoy had been a motion-picture cameraman.

“Where the Sea Comes Ashore”

Cooper led the group to a site south of St. Augustine that had access to both an inland waterway (Matanzas Inlet) and the Atlantic Ocean, converging within several hundred feet of each other. The challenges of developing the property were great: The one-lane road from St. Augustine was made of sand, the site was prone to flooding, and there was no telephone service or fresh water, according to Whitney’s autobiography, *High Peaks*.

In 1937 the group began construction of two steel tanks, a research lab, and other complementary buildings. Several tons of coral were shipped from Key West to provide cover for the smaller species in the tanks, which held “every kind of semi-tropical fish from huge sharks and rays to tiny fish,” Whitney noted.

The 1939 *WPA Guide to Florida* describes Marine Studios as a “cream-colored concrete aquarium, pitted with tempered glass portholes, and resembling a stranded Caribbean cruiser.” Burden claimed that the portholes in the tanks were arranged so that “each observer can sit comfortably in relative darkness” as if “in a motion picture theatre, looking out into a brilliant world of the undersea.”

Billing their creation as the place “Where the Sea Comes Ashore,” the founders were surprised and delighted when 20,000 people showed up at the grand opening to observe undersea life

The reverse-side caption of this vintage Marine Studios postcard declares that the “winding stairways and tropical plantings offer the amateur photographer many interesting angles.”



A vintage postcard shows visitors gazing through portholes at undersea creatures at Marineland. The clarity of the water was created by pumping 5,000,000 gallons of water a day.

through the portholes in the tanks. (At least one news report put the crowd at almost 30,000.)

Researchers showed keen interest in studying the marine life put on display in the tanks. Whitney proclaimed that scientists’ interest was so great that the partners had to expand plans for a laboratory and were “booked for a year after opening by visiting scientists.” In the 1940s and ’50s, Marine Studios grew to a leading institution for research on marine mammals.

Today the Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience operates on three acres adjacent to Marine Studios, on land Whitney donated to the University of Florida.

Exotic film location and birthplace to stars

In addition to filming underwater action scenes for movies, Hollywood studios were soon interested in filming the animal that garnered the most attention at Marine Studios: the bottlenose dolphin. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer created a short film called “Marine Circus” (1939) that introduced Marine Studios and its undersea life to audiences in movie houses nationwide. The stars of the film were the charismatic dolphins.

In the 1950s, Marine Studios began intensively training dolphins with help from animal trainers from Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The studio’s most talented dolphin was a bottlenose dubbed “Flippy” by Whitney himself. Flippy made his film debut in “Revenge of the Creature,” the 1955 sequel to “Creature from the Black Lagoon.”

Billed as “the world’s most educated dolphin,” Flippy and his growing popularity helped transform Marine Studios into Marineland, one of Florida’s top tourist spots during the 1950s and ’60s, attracting as many as half a million visitors a year. With Flippy as its leading representative, Marineland was responsible for shaping the popular perception of dolphins as intelligent, friendly characters of the sea, while providing the opportunity for scientists to study the behavior of the marine mammal.

Marine Studios was used in the filming of movies including the “Tarzan” films in the 1940s and the “Sea Hunt” television series in the ’50s and ’60s. Although the roadside-attraction aspect of Marineland peaked in the 1960s and then slowly declined in the 1970s after the 1971 opening of Disney World, film and television production continued there into the 1980s, when the studio was the location for a “Benji” TV movie in which the canine star became the first dog to scuba dive.

Marineland today

Eventually time caught up with the attraction that proclaimed itself the world’s first oceanarium, and the rusting attraction closed in 2003. Eventually, all the Marineland buildings west of Florida State Road A1A were torn down. The Trust for Public Land purchased 125 acres of the Marineland property and in turn sold 89 acres to Flagler County for the creation of a park. Today Marineland exists as a Dolphin Conservation Center where guests can enjoy up-close and personal experiences swimming with dolphins or participating in other eco-tour programs. ■



Clockwise from top, all from Marineland Archives: The star pooch during filming of “Benji Takes a Dive at Marineland”; a scene from “Zaat”; filmmakers at work in an unidentified production; undated postcard declaring that “for the first time, you can see and photograph the mysterious and dramatic life of the undersea world.”



- The first dolphin birth ever recorded on film occurred at Marine Studios in 1940.
- Clint Eastwood made his film debut in 1955’s “Revenge of the Creature.”
- The Marineland property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.
- In 1927 C.V. Whitney helped to establish Florida-based Pan American Airways and served as the chairman of the board until 1941. He was also a member of the Truman administration in the late 1940s.
- Merian C. Cooper’s name on the Hollywood Walk of Fame is misspelled as “Meriam C. Cooper.”
- Shark repellent used in World War II was developed based on research conducted at Marine Studios.
- Norton Baskin, husband of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, once owned the Dolphin Restaurant at Marineland.
- After a deal to sell Marine Studios’ innovative technology to a group in South Florida fell through, the rival operation simply hired away much of the studios’ trained staff and opened the Miami Seaquarium. The Seaquarium’s trained dolphin “Flipper” eventually eclipsed Marine Studios’ Flippy as the world’s best-known dolphin.

Marine Studios filmography

(all or some scenes shot at the location)

- “Marine Circus” (1939)
- “Port Sinister” (1953)
- “The Sea Around Us” (1953)
- “Creature from the Black Lagoon” (1954)
- “Revenge of the Creature” (1955)
- “Secrets of the Reef” (1956)
- “Sea Hunt” (1958, TV)
- “Live a Little, Love a Little” (1968)
- “Zaat” (1975)
- “Sea Dream” (1978)
- “Benji Takes a Dive at Marineland” (1981, TV)
- “The Flamingo Rising” (2001, TV)