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**Object and Authenticity: Investigating Conceptions of Calico at Knott's Berry Farm**

2025 Autry Research Fellowship Proposal

Modern-day prospectors seeking the silver-studded history of Calico, California, can take a short trip out of Los Angeles to the colorful Calico Peaks of San Bernardino County. At the Calico Ghost Town Regional Park, visitors are welcome to experience the history of the silver mining town through tours of restored buildings, a visit to the Lucy Lane Museum, and other educational activities. But this is not where most Southern California residents encounter the history of Calico. Over a hundred miles Southeast of the Regional Park is a much more famous representation of the town's history: the Calico Ghost Town of Knott's Berry Farm, also known as "the friendliest place in the West." I intend to explore the themes of object and authenticity in the Calico Ghost Town at Knott's Berry Farm, examining how the amusement park has iteratively engaged with historical storytelling.

In 1916, Walter Knott lived and worked in Calico at the Silver King Mine. Years later, he set out to create his own Ghost Town, one that borrowed the name and history of Calico. His project blurred the lines between real and imagined history as what began as a modest roadside restaurant became a nationwide tourist attraction. Knott's original Ghost Town represented a hybrid history, with real buildings living alongside new constructions by Art Director Paul Von Klieben. Now, years of change to the park have shifted these relationships even more, as rides and performances offer experiential depictions of the American West to thousands of visitors every day.

Knott's Berry Farm was enthusiastically researched by Phil Brigandi, accomplished historian and member of the Los Angeles Westerners Corral. His research in the Summer 2008 issue of *The Branding Iron* provides a strong account of the early years of the park. Building on the work of Phil Brigandi, as well as Knott's Berry Farm research by Christopher Merritt, Jay Jennings, David Kamper, John Willis, and Harper Keenan, I will examine the park as a dynamic space. My focus will be on the theme of authenticity within the various iterations of the Knott's Ghost Town-themed section, specifically highlighting *Calico Mine Ride*, which was added to the park in 1960.

The history of Knott's Ghost Town lives alongside the true history of Calico in the libraries and archives of the Autry Museum. In addition to referencing local newspaper archives and existing published research, I will be considering Autry's collection of illustrated Knott's promotional booklets and postcards from the 1950s. I expect these materials to direct me toward the variety of real places, people, objects, and events that inspired Knott's Calico. I will begin with the Silver King Mine, which directly inspired the *Calico Mine Ride*. I see the libraries, archives, and collections of the Autry Museum as the best place to explore the truth behind these myths, learning from and building upon the museum's scholarship on the American West in the popular imagination.

My goal is not only to explore the Knott's Ghost Town as it was at its inception, but to consider it as a dynamic space reflecting changing feelings about local history. Recent refurbishments to the 65-year-old *Calico Mine Ride* demonstrate careful consideration of the ride as a piece of history. What has been recently added or removed, and what do these changes indicate about authenticity and history in Knott's Calico? While cross-disciplinary researchers have published on Knott's Ghost Town, they have mostly focused on the early years of the park.

No previous publications have focused on the rides constructed in the 1960s, and few have addressed the modern iteration of the park.

Spending a month in Southern California as an Autry Museum Fellow would allow me to pair my archival research with field research at Calico Ghost Town Regional Park and Knott's Berry Farm. I am inspired by Dydia DeLyser's extensive research ideas of authenticity in the ghost town of Bodie. Professor DeLyser combines her research with on-site interviews, investigating the relationship between historical truth and visitor experience. I would adopt a similar approach, pairing extensive research with visitor interviews and field research. Time willing, I will also interview designers who have worked on recent additions and renovations, with the goal of learning about the research and development process for *Calico Mine Ride*. I am currently utilizing a similar combination of archival and field research methodology in my Fulbright research project.

I would appreciate the chance to present this work to the Los Angeles Corral of Westerners, who share my enthusiasm for passionate, citizen-led studies of history. I hope to build upon the scholarship of dedicated local Westerners, who sought to honor and preserve these often-overlooked histories. Public perception of the American West is fascinating. Those who study it must seek to understand the layered complexities of authentic histories and complex reinventions. This task is tricky, but I'm eager to tackle it using the research resources of the Autry Museum, accompanied by the Los Angeles Corral's local expertise and joyful approach to history.