**Nathan Smith**

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**Biography:**

Nathan Smith is a PhD Candidate and Lecturer at Mississippi State University. He also serves as a fellow for the MSU’s Consortium for the History of Agriculture, Science, and Environment in the South or CHASES. Smith’s primary areas of interests are 20th-century history, labor, leisure and tourism, and political economy. His dissertation, entitled, “‘There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow': A Labor History of the Disney Parks and Edutainment from 1950-2005,” explores narratives of work and labor woven into the Sun Belt’s most iconic tourist destinations. The project further contrasts these narratives with the actual laboring of Disney Park workers, or “cast members,” and their efforts to organize in an increasingly austere political climate.

**Dissertation Abstract:**

On October 1, 1982, Walt Disney World opened the gates to its second theme park. In contrast with earlier Disney parks where visitors discovered fantastical lands, or a mythologized American frontier, guests at EPCOT Center explored pavilions dedicated to the nations of the world and celebrating human innovation. This chapter examines the narratives on display within Disney’s permanent world’s fair and places them within the broader context of the United State economy’s neoliberal turn throughout the 1980s. Further, it tracks the Disney unions’ struggle to continue to win concessions from the company in a post-PATCO landscape.

The 1980s were a pivotal decade that saw an evolution of the relationship between the Disney unions and the company. Tensions had to come to a head resulting from the company’s policy of extracting profits from Central Florida and redirecting them back to California. This created an economic and housing crisis, straining the relationship between unions and Disney. Throughout the eighties, cast members (park workers) became disillusioned with their falling economic position and rushed to join the existing union structure at the parks. Cast members worked to collectivize in an increasingly hostile environment. In response, Disney used similar tactics as other corporations, allowed by the weakening power of the NLRB to undermine union efforts. The company also implemented more unique strategies. In 1981, the company rolled out the Disney College Program, which advertised work experience and college credit for cheap non-unionized labor. This work joins the growing scholarship on southern union organizing in the 1970s and 1980s and reveals a labor force, not disenchanted with organized labor, but rather in search of a way to make their demands heard.