



# Episode 002- The Mystery of the Copper Box (transcript)

## Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our digital collection of historical Burbank photos at [BurbankinFocus.org](http://BurbankinFocus.org).

## Announcements

Before we get to today's story, some announcements:

1. Would you like to help your child become a great reader starting from birth? Research shows that sharing books, conversations, and songs with young children builds their language skills, contributes to their healthy development, gives them the skills they need to succeed in school, and helps them learn to love reading. With the 1000 Books Before Kindergarten program, the concept is simple and the rewards are priceless. Read a book (any book, even the same book over and over again) to your baby, toddler or preschooler. Make it a daily activity. Read 1000 books together before your young one starts kindergarten and win prizes along the way! For more information and to sign up, visit the children's room at any Burbank Library, or visit the library's website at [burbanklibrary.org](http://burbanklibrary.org)
2. You'll find "A Universe of Stories" this summer at your library. From toddlers to adults, there is a summer reading program for every age level. Summer Storytime and weekly Family Shows are geared to Kindergarten and younger. Kids entering Grades 1-6 will visit the library for weekly entertainment and earn prizes for submitting book reports. Teen events include Book Café, Coding Class, Trivia Night, Scavenger Universe Lockdown, and prize drawings for teens submitting book reviews. And adults can attend programs, movies, and outdoor concerts and will be entered in the drawing for a grand prize by submitting 5 book reviews and completing a summer challenge. All programs are funded by the Friends of the Burbank Public Library and are free to the public. Online sign-ups begin May 21st at [burbanklibrary.org](http://burbanklibrary.org).

## Story

And now for today's story:

The 50-year-old rectangular box sat forgotten in a closet for over two decades. Slightly larger than a loaf of bread and made of copper, it was terribly dented and the outside was corroded, but when it was re-discovered excitement blossomed over the promise of exhuming hidden treasures of the past held within.

The time capsule had been filled in 1937, then buried in the cornerstone of the old library building on the corner of Olive Avenue and Glenoaks Boulevard. When the library outgrew the 10,500 square foot building less than 30 years later, it built a new 41,000 square foot Central Library in the same location. During the demolition of the old library in 1962, the capsule was damaged. Instead of opening it, it was stored away in an office closet where it remained, forgotten, for twenty-four years until Library Director Marcia Richards happened across it in the spring of 1986.

At the time of its re-discovery the City of Burbank was preparing to celebrate its diamond jubilee; 75 years since its 1911 incorporation as a city. In the past there had been contentions among Burbankers about which date to celebrate as the founding of Burbank. Local history buffs favored May 1, 1887 which was the date when the Providencia Land, Water and Development Company filed the plat for the town and the day city lots and farms were first offered for sale. While the City government favored July 8, 1911 which was the date the city was finally incorporated. This nearly 24-year difference makes a big difference when determining what anniversary to celebrate when. We won't get into the debate today, but suffice it to say that 1911 is the date that prevailed and the date that has more "official" celebrations.

As part of the diamond jubilee festivities, two time capsule ceremonies occurred during the year. The first was in July when a new time capsule celebrating the Diamond Jubilee, to be opened in 2011, was buried in front of City Hall. The new capsule contained, among other things, a Diamond Jubilee flag and medallion, a 1986 city calendar and puzzle, numerous city documents, a Los Angeles county flag, and videotaped segments from KNBC-TV's series on Halley's Comet.

A second time capsule ceremony took place in November, just a few days before Thanksgiving. This second ceremony was the highly anticipated opening of the half a century year old forgotten library time capsule. Nearly 50 people attended the event on the steps of City Hall. Reporters and those with cameras hastened to be there the moment the time capsule was opened.

Library board vice-chairman Marc Gillenson was tasked with opening the box. Because it was damaged and corroded opening it proved to be quite difficult. It was especially tricky considering Gillenson had to be careful not to inadvertently damage any of the unknown historical treasures held within. He hit it with hammer and chisel, and used tin snips to cut along the seam. But finally, the time capsule was opened and the contents exhumed. Mayor Mary Kelsey stood by waiting to announce to the gathered crowd the contents as they emerged from their copper container.

Before I reveal what treasures were discovered within, I'm going to digress a bit and tell you about an event that took place earlier the same year in a city 2,000 miles from Burbank. It has relevance, I promise. Maybe you've heard about it or maybe you were one of the nearly 30 million viewers who tuned in on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1986 for the live broadcast of the two-hour special *The Mystery of Al Capone's Vaults* hosted by Geraldo Rivera.

In 1928 Al Capone, the notorious head of the Chicago Outfit organized crime syndicate, moved his headquarters to the Lexington Hotel on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Capone, who was listed on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list, transported and sold alcohol during the Prohibition era, planned the St. Valentine's Day massacre, and was eventually indicted and convicted of income tax evasion in 1931.

By the 1980s the Lexington Hotel was to be converted to a nonprofit job training school for low-income women. During the renovations secret tunnels were found and a concrete wall was discovered in the basement which appeared to be blocking the entrance to another secret area. Stories emerged that behind the wall was a vault, which then led to more stories that inside the vault were money, and guns, and even dead bodies.

So what do you do with a mystery like Al Capone's lost vault? You make a television special out of it of course! A production company from Los Angeles hired a team of excavators to open the vault on live TV, and to host the event, Geraldo Rivera who was trying to regenerate a career after a highly publicized departure from ABC the previous year. The special was hyped to achieve maximum anticipation and on site during the program were a medical examiner (in case any bodies were found) and agents from the IRS (in case any money was found because at his death Capone still owed over \$800,000 dollars in unpaid taxes).

And there was excitement. Psychic Irene Hughes communicated with Capone (she said he was "laughing, laughing, laughing"), Geraldo fired a submachine gun, and at one point, dynamite was ignited.

But all of the hype led to a dimly disappointing ending, because when they finally got it open and looked inside, inside the vault was nothing but debris. Just a bunch of dirt and a few empty bottles.

And just like the opening of Capone's vault, the opening of the time capsule found in a closet at the Burbank Central library led to the discovery of what basically amounted to debris. The copper box had been inadequately sealed so water had seeped in damaging the contents. Moldy newspapers fell apart in Mayor Kelsey's hand. As she unraveled one clump of newspapers, Mayor Kelsey described them as "filthy, dirty and rotten." Tiny particles of the decomposed paper floated through the air like dust.

Even if the things inside were not so badly disintegrated, there really wasn't anything interesting. In addition to the newspapers there were a few library documents, like an invoice for landscaping and cards listing the names of library staff and board of directors. Spectators were disappointed and Library Director Richards compared the event to Geraldo's infamous televised opening of Capone's vault.

The City hired expert conservators to assess the contents of the capsule. Ian Spizman, the president of Aeresopic Engineers, Inc. (the company hired to salvage the time capsule contents), noted that "What people put into a time capsule has a lot to do with ego, what they believe future generations will be interested in." He concluded that the contents didn't quite make sense. Most of the contents had to be thrown away due to poor condition, but a couple items manage to survive to this day. One item is a 1932 map of the city produced by the Chamber of Commerce, and another is the aforementioned invoice for landscaping. Those two items are digitized and you can view them, along with photos of the ceremony, on the Burbank in Focus website. Just search for "time capsule 1986".

## News from Burbank

And now for the News from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the Monday, April 3, 1911 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*:

"The smooth stretch of the San Fernando road and its free out-in-the-country aspect hold out irresistible temptation to automobilists. The motorcycle force of policemen appreciate the fact or have heard

rumors of the machines that move past Burbank, each a puff of dust a streak and a speck in the distance.

Wednesday found a pair of the motorcycle men out on the smoothest, most innocent-looking part of this country road and for a few hours the 'pickin' was good. Several of Burbank's own citizens were surprised victims.

Fifteen miles is the speed limit for the San Fernando road, and the amount of automobiling, driving and teaming that hourly passes along it, makes the law a wise safeguard. Few accidents have occurred so far, but the danger is increasing with the daily increase of traffic."

And that's the News from Burbank on Monday, April 3, 1911.

## End credits

rememBURBANK is researched, written, edited, and hosted, by Janae Kambestad, Local History Librarian at the Burbank Public Library. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the episode, is Burbank's official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at [BurbankinFocus.org](http://BurbankinFocus.org)

Thank you for listening.