



# Episode 015 – Our Library’s History (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 collection of historic Burbank photos at [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org).

## Announcements

In nearly every community in America, you can be sure to find a local library. Naysayers spout that libraries are obsolete; and those unfamiliar assume libraries only exist to lend books, but the ardent library patron might tell you otherwise. Libraries have emerged over the past few decades as harbingers of innovation by offering computers to use, internet access, technology classes, literacy classes, makers spaces, virtual platforms in which patrons can borrow books, movies, music, and magazines, while still offering touchstone programs such as infant and toddler story time, children’s events, summer reading programs, and much, much more free of charge to any patron who wants to participate. But more recently, during the pandemic, scores of libraries switched to virtual programming so that the public could still be engaged. Just here at Burbank Public Library, we have offered virtual toddler story times, a summer reading program, teen events where they could play games virtually such as Dungeons and Dragons or Among Us; adults met for book clubs, and those with literacy needs met online with their tutors and for English conversation classes. The Burbank Public Library staff has been diligently working to bring Burbankers the best digital options by expanding our online book and movie collections. And for those who enjoy the feel of a physical book, we’ve offered curbside pickup so the public could still borrow books, cds, and movies; and more recently offered free limited printing services. These few examples show just how adaptable and relevant libraries still are. For these reasons and because the month of April celebrates National Library Week, this podcast is dedicated to the history of the Burbank Public Library. Now that the library has finally opened to the public, we can’t wait to see your faces as we miss interacting with you as much as you miss the comfort of the library. We will gradually return to full service hours as the county begins to open back up, so please check the website regularly for updated information. The library is also gearing up to 2021’s Summer Reading program for readers of all ages. Signups start on June 1<sup>st</sup> and the program runs until July 31<sup>st</sup>.

## Story

The library has been a pillar of the Burbank community for almost as long as the city of Burbank has been incorporated. In May 1913, the Burbank Chamber of Commerce started a library with a collection of books on loan from the Los Angeles County free library. Their space was originally located on the second floor of the Thompson Brick Building, which can still be found standing at the corner of Olive Avenue and San Fernando Road. As the collection kept outgrowing its space, the library location kept moving. And finally in 1935, a dedicated building was built at 425 E. Olive Avenue. It was approximately 6,700 square feet, cost \$33,000 to build, and was called the Olive Vista Library. By 1938, Burbank had cut its contract with L.A. County and began as an independent city department. And because they had to

return the 10,000 book collection they had on loan, they called upon Burbankers to donate materials and money and thus the Burbank Public Library was born. Elizabeth Ripley was the first appointed library director. She served from 1930 until 1952. Upon her retirement, the city council submitted a resolution to name the central library after her and so the library was called, for a brief time, "The Elizabeth Ripley Memorial Library."

The succeeding director, Edward Caswell Perry, was a Los Angeles native who got his start in the Los Angeles Public library system. He is said to have ushered in a renaissance of library service to Burbank with his most notable being his pioneering of multi-media elements into the library. In 1953, the library joined the Film Circuit of Southern California; they purchased 16mm films that were circulated among the members of the co-op, available on loan for patrons, and exhibited regularly at the library. The following year, the library began loaning out musical records. The Burbank Public Library was one of the forerunners in offering audio-visual services. Another of Perry's undertakings, was a dedicated collection of materials on California history and Western Americana that at the time was an exemplar collection. It was housed in what today is the office space for reference librarians at Central Library. It not only had books, but pamphlets, maps, and even cannonballs from the battle of Cahuenga on display. It garnered both local and widespread interest, as it became a premiere collection for scholars, teachers, and researchers of the genre. You might be surprised to learn that the Western Americana collection is still in existence at the Buena Vista branch, however it is now just a literary collection and the whereabouts of the historic cannonballs are a mystery, though it is likely they made their way to the Burbank Historical Society.

The 1950s was a decade of rapid growth, both for the City and for the library. Returning servicemen, weary of the rigors of war, came home to start careers and families. Orange groves and the farmlands in Burbank's Valley section gave way to businesses and residential housing. In 1954, the Burbank voters approved a 10-year capital improvement plan to help develop or rebuild several public buildings and park facilities. This included an addition to the old Buena Vista Branch Library for a new children's room in 1958. And in the spring of 1961, the city began planning for a new central library. It was the last of the city projects of the campaign and was completed in July 1963. When construction of the million-dollar library began, a 15-foot section of the rear wing of the old library building was demolished to allow clearance for the new one. During the construction phase, the old library continued to maintain service to the community with the new one going up immediately to the rear. The raised courtyard patio on Olive Avenue is the only remaining artifact from the original library. The patio currently contains several time capsules and the bust of Dr. David Burbank.

The third permanent library facility, Northwest Branch was built in 1972 and the following year Kenneth Wilson was appointed library director. Passionate Burbanker and library employee Mary Jane Strickland approached Wilson with a proposal to start up a Burbank Historical Society. He approved, feeling it was an endeavor in which the library should certainly be involved. The first meeting was held at Central Library on August 16, 1973 and nearly fifty years later, the Burbank Historical Society is still going strong thanks to many committed volunteers.

When Warner Bros. Studio closed their research library in 1975, they donated their collection to the City of Burbank. Director Wilson designated space on the second floor of the Central Library to house the materials and appointed staff to run the operation. The Warner Collection was estimated to include over 40,000 books, 30,000 magazines and technical journals, and over 5 million clippings from print sources that spanned 60 years. The collection was developed to provide specialty research for the studios. For more than twenty years, the Burbank Public Library provided this fee-based service to the entertainment industry, both locally and internationally. By 1993, however, the Warner Research

Collection was becoming a drain on City resources. The collection had grown exponentially and was outgrowing its space, safety issues were noted as this collection was the hardest hit during the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and lastly, many of the materials were fast becoming obsolete as technology afforded researchers online databases. By the turn of the century, the City of Burbank returned the material to its original owners.

In 1982, leadership of the library was taken over by Marcia Richards who had worked her way up from an entry-level librarian to Library Services Director. She was the first non-elected female department head in the City of Burbank, as well as being the first library director to have risen through the library ranks rather than being recruited from outside. Before her advancement to department head, she was instrumental in forming the Friends of the Burbank Public Library organization. During her time as Library Director, Mrs. Richards' main goal was to increase visibility for the library. She wanted to erase the image of the library as an 'ivory tower' and encouraged people of all ages and walks of life to utilize the resources available.

The Friends of the Burbank Public Library has been a vital component of the library's success. They were formed in 1980 and still, to this very day, provide the library with much of the funding needed to implement community engagement programs. Over the years, the Friends organization has filled many gaps in the operating budget and allowed the library to keep up with the rapidly changing technology. The Friends organization sponsors almost every program that the library offers, as well as purchasing needed supplies and equipment. They are a volunteer-based group of like-minded people who truly appreciate the value that the library has in the community. The Friends of the Burbank Public Library would have celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year in a grand fashion if not for the quarantine that hampered the world's festivities for all of 2020.

In 1992, the library received a grant to establish an adult literacy program. At present, the adult literacy department provides free one-on-one tutoring to adults, 18 or older, who speak and understand English, but read and write below an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. They host weekly English conversation classes for new English speakers. The 90s also saw the retirement of Marcia Richards and the advent of widespread computer technology. Newly appointed director, Sandra Christopher paved the road by implementing new technologies, including the automation of library procedures, online databases, and expanding computer access for patrons. She laid the groundwork for the development of the new Buena Vista Library, which began after her retirement.

The new branch was constructed under the supervision of then newly appointed director, James Fuchs. Its design reminiscent of the 1930s-style Southern California architecture combining Art Deco elements with Spanish Colonial. This new library was three times the size of the old Buena Vista Branch and boasted 40 public computers, four study rooms, and a magical children's area replete with enchanting murals and unified by a magnificent faux oak tree, courtesy of the Friends of the Burbank Public Library. John Fuchs was also the administrator who oversaw several public service innovations, such as the library's website, public internet access, and online book renewals. Fuchs resigned prior to Buena Vista's completion, and Sharon Cohen, longtime employee with the library advanced to the vacated position. Under her guidance, the library ushered in the era of wi-fi and an expansion of online resources. She championed Burbank READS which was a grassroots program designed to start a community dialogue and rediscover the joy of reading.

Just prior to the nation-wide shut down, the current library director, Elizabeth Goldman, unveiled a new digital media space, the Spark! Lab, which is housed at Central Library. It is a designated room that brings together computers, software, and other technology used in the media industry to create music, movies, animation, video games, and more. It makes available to library patrons, a 3-d printing machine,

a green screen, cameras, microphones, and software to help them create and explore innovative projects.

For more than two decades the community has endeavored to see a new Central Library built. Even as early as this year, the city council has looked at costs and considered proceeding with the plans for a new library. Having been built in the early 1960s, the Burbank Central Library is in desperate need of modernization. It lacks features that would make accessibility more equitable to all users, such as an unrestricted elevator. A new library could allow space for private study rooms, expansion of technology resources, a maker's space, a local history room, and possibly a café! A 2003 vote showed that 68% of voters approved funding for a new library facility, but for one reason or another it has not made it to fruition. Maybe the next decade will see the deliverance of a modern and well-equipped Central Library and can demarcate the next vestige of its history. This local historian certainly hopes she'll be around to witness the communal triumph.

## News from Burbank

Today's news come from the April 5, 1962 *Burbank Daily Review*:

### **Your Librarians Are Defenders of Free Speech**

It's not every profession that is on the first line of defense in the battle to preserve free speech.

But librarians are —and E. Caswell Perry, Burbank city librarian, is one of those who believes that he has a duty to quietly protect one flank of that line in his own way.

During National Library Week, April 8 through 14, it is fitting to point out how the ancient and honorable profession of librarian has traditionally been one that has kept alive the spark of debate in epochs that were otherwise totally devoid of critical, biting thought.

It was a medieval librarian, working in some cluttered monastery, who kept careful watch over a room filled with books by Plato, Aristophanes, and Thucydides to make sure they weren't stolen, vandalized or eaten by worms.

Today the monk's habit has been replaced by a business suit, but the duty to guard the written records of the culture (and follies) of mankind is still one that falls quite naturally upon the librarian.

City librarian Perry takes the job of guarding books as naturally as a mastiff takes to his job of guarding lives. Controversial novels by Henry Miller and deep volumes by great philosophers are not the only books gracing the Burbank library shelves.

The local library has a large children's room, a good reference collection, and subscriptions to many and varied magazines. Special emphasis is placed on material dealing with the motion picture, aircraft, and space industries.

Perry looks upon himself not as a literary hero, but just another librarian doing his job.

And that is the Burbank news from April 5, 1962.

## End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. 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 podcast, is Burbank's 1924 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 [burbankinfofocus.org](http://burbankinfofocus.org).

Thank you for joining us today.