



Episode 007 – It’s the Great Pumpkin, Burbank (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.

Announcements

Someone once said “you can’t buy happiness but you can buy books and that’s kind of the same thing.” You can buy books at our Friends of the Library Pre-Holiday Pop-Up Booksale on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2019, from noon – 4:30 pm in the Burbank Central Library Auditorium. What better way to spend a Saturday afternoon? Browse through thousands of books, DVDs, and CDs with prices starting at just \$0.25. Remember that every dollar raised goes right back to support the Library.

If you miss the booksale you can always shop at one of our two bookstores. They are located at Burbank Central Library and the Buena Vista Branch. All of the items for sale in our bookstores are gift quality used books that have been donated by individuals and groups in our community.

Story

And now for today’s story.

It’s starting to feel like fall around Burbank. The kids have gone back to school, the weather is dipping down into the 80s, and our thoughts harken back to a simpler time--a time when you could take your date out for a night of dancing inside a giant pumpkin. “What’s that?” you say. Yes, from the 1920s to 1957 there was a giant, orange, pumpkin-shaped building in Burbank with two doors and no windows. It stood at the corner of Magnolia Blvd and Hollywood Way, across the street from what is now Porto’s Bakery in Magnolia Park. Owing to its unique architecture, the building was useful to pilots flying into Lockheed terminal as an aerial landmark. Over the 30-year lifespan of the building, it served as everything from a nightclub, church, real estate office, hardware store and more!

The story of how the Pumpkin Building came into being is still somewhat of a mystery, but here’s what we know:

It originally opened as The Pumpkin Hardware Store around 1920.

By 1927, it had become The Pumpkin Palace, a restaurant and nightclub. A picture from the time shows a sign atop the building that reads “Pumpkin Palace, C S S, Dinners \$1.28.” However, it was almost over before it began, when a fire tore through the building on opening night. No patrons were hurt, but much of the furniture was scorched. The bad luck continued for the nightclub owner, who was quoted as saying “Heck, I ought to have had more sense than to fool around with a pumpkin.”

At some point in the late 20s or early 30s, the Pumpkin was known as The E&E Studio Club, named after Ed "Strangler" Lewis and his associate, Earl Peyton. Known for his much-feared headlock and stranglehold, Ed "Strangler" Lewis became a world champion wrestler who was willing to help out his friends by wrestling in matches for free. He was often a special guest judge at wrestling events held at Jeffries Barn in Burbank. The barn belonged to Burbank's first celebrity, James J. Jeffries, who retired undefeated as the World Heavyweight Champion in 1905 and then purchased a 107-acre alfalfa ranch on the corner of Victory Blvd and Buena Vista. Jeffries converted his barn into an arena and began promoting weekly boxing and wrestling matches from 1931 to 1953. It is unknown whether the Pumpkin played host to any wrestling matches, but it did eventually defeat "The Strangler," who gave up his share in the building by 1935.

In an unlikely turnaround, the Pumpkin became the home of the Valley Gospel Center from 1935-1938. The neighborhood milkman, Robert R. Klein, served as the preacher. The pulpit was located just in front of the bar. A newspaper from 1939 noted the irony of the milkman-preacher exhorting sinners to repent in the same place where scantily-clad dancers once performed.

The timeline of the Pumpkin's incarnations over time has become a little convoluted over the years. At one point it was the Stan Summeril Real Estate office, then Magnolia Park Hardware, and there are also reports of it being a children's bookstore.

In 1956, singer and television actress Mae Williams bought what was now the Pumpkin Inn. Williams was known for her sultry singing voice and from multiple appearances on the television show "This is Your Life." She was also nicknamed the Hard Luck Gal. She suffered a long battle with Polio, and after she had finally recovered, she fell down a flight of stairs at the studio and broke her back. Newspapers reported she hoped to change her luck by purchasing the Pumpkin Inn. The supper club hosted dances and performances by Mae's friends from show biz, such as vaudevillian Joe Frisco, actress Mary Dean, and big band singer and pianist, Ronnie Kemper. Williams could often be found in the kitchen, whipping up potatoes or a chocolate cake in between sets.

But the glitz and glam of the visiting Hollywood crowd was not enough to keep the Pumpkin Inn afloat. Like many of the businesses the great building had housed, The Pumpkin Inn was another short-lived venture, and plans to smash the pumpkin were put into place and demolition began on December 16, 1957. Magnolia Park's famed pumpkin shaped landmark would be no more by the end of 1957, and in its place would be erected a new building with a more modern look. The *Valley Times* sadly opined that

"Cinderella never knew what became of her pumpkin after she became de-carriaged. She didn't care because the prince found her. The prince has found Magnolia park and his name is spelled "progress."

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the November 17, 1954 *The San Bernardino County Sun*.

"Jeffries' Barn Gives Way to New Hotel

Jim Jeffries' Barn, long a Burbank landmark, is being torn down to make room for a new hotel.

The amateur boxing arena operated by the late heavyweight champion has been bought by Walter Knott and will be reassembled at his Buena Park showplace. Jeffries lived across the street from the barn until his death in 1953.”

And that's the Burbank news from 1954.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched and edited by Cesar Garcia, written by Laura McMahon, and hosted by Melanie Renfro. 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 burbankinfo.org

Thank you for joining us today.