



Episode 009 – The Early Days of the Media Capital (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 burbankinfo.org.

Story

And now for today's story.

Opening in January 2020, the Spark Digital Media Lab inside the Burbank Central Library will be a place to learn new technology used in the media industry to create music, movies, animation, video games and more. The lab will provide access to specialized equipment, along with opportunities to learn from experts, practice skills, and build portfolios. This new feature of the library continues on the long tradition of Burbank's connection to the media industry.

A connection that dates back to at least 1919. This is when the film "A Quiet Day in Burbank" was shown at the Victory Theater. The film touted the city's unique qualities and points of interest. Then, in 1920, a portion of Stough Ranch, previously owned by Oliver J. Stough, became home to Sacred Films, Inc. which produced Bible scenes directed by L.B. Taylor. Soon, many filmmakers began using Burbank as a backdrop. Comedian Fatty Arbuckle could be seen filming around town as early as 1921. Movie companies looking for rural locations often used the farmland at Third Street and Providencia.

In 1926, First National Pictures moved to Burbank. Founded as an exhibitor company in 1917, First National Pictures decided it had to have a hand in producing the films as well, to ensure the quality of the product. It began producing films starring Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford. In fact, it created quite a stir when the infamous "Million Dollar Contract" was signed with Charlie Chaplin. People thought this was "preposterous" at the time, but it did lead to many box-office hits, including "A Dog's Life," and "Shoulder Arms."

After signing with Charlie Chaplin, First National next acquired Mary Pickford, Norma Talmadge, and Constance Talmadge. The popular Mary Pickford movies produced by First National included "Daddy Long Legs," "The Hoodlum," and "Heart of the Hills."

Citing the need for more space, the company bought 70 acres of the Rancho Providencia in Burbank for \$1.5 million in 1926. Explaining how First National chose Burbank for their studios, General Manager Richard Rowland said

"We took Hollywood as the geographical center of production. Hollywood itself we did not consider suitable, for the reason that real estate values are very high and since the city is growing

rapidly there can be no telling what building restrictions might arise in the future. In every direction we went from Hollywood, except one, we ran into a highly developed sector—but in that one direction, toward the hills, we found Burbank. The moment I saw the present site, I exclaimed ‘What a perfect setting for a studio!’

The widening of the Cahuenga Pass made the drive from Hollywood an easy 10 minutes, and the real estate value was fair in comparison. There was also ample room for future development.

Commenting on the exceptional suitability of the location, Rowland continued

“Although the Burbank plant has been built economically, it is a thing of beauty. The natural setting is perfect, and I can imagine no greater inspiration for a writer, for instance, than to sit in his office at Burbank and look out over the foothills.”

The location was a 78-acre plot of land on Olive Avenue near the Dark Canyon Pass, which had been owned by rancher Stephen A. Martin and his family, it included a hog ranch and the original home of Dr. David Burbank. Construction began on March 27, and within 72 days, the studio facilities were complete. The studio included six paved streets, eight stages, and enough electrical generating capacity to serve a town of 15,000. It comprised 23 large buildings with over 350,000 square feet of floor space, not counting the various bungalows, sheds, and minor buildings. All the buildings were of Spanish architecture. Natural assets such as a river bottom and the wooded hills were preserved to use as filming locations.

With its prime location and an ever growing roster of stars and popular movies, First National caught the attention of Warner Brothers. They purchased First National in November of 1926 and announced a 10 million dollar program for the year 1927, including “Don Juan” with John Barrymore. On October 23, 1927 the first all-talking picture “The Jazz Singer” starring Al Jolson was released by Warner Brothers. Silent pictures were all but abandoned after the success of the talkies. Also abandoned was location shooting, which was common on silent films. The new bulky sound cameras and need to keep down background noise made sound stages crucial. The need to keep out star-struck fans led to the fortress-like facilities with guarded gates.

Our very own Joan Taylor Cappocchi from the Library’s Marketing Dept. has a connection to the early days of the Warner Brothers lot, since her grandfather, Arthur Taylor, nicknamed “Pappy” at the studio, was an upstanding employee in the studio’s labor department for almost 30 years. In the *Warner Club News* 1949 issue, Pappy’s story was highlighted:

"Pappy" started with our company in 1925, when Warners first bought Vitagraph and had charge of the laborers there and later on at both the old Sunset and Vitagraph lots. He came to the Burbank lot in 1939. Pappy has raised a family of twelve children, who are all grown and married, and his grandchildren would fill two or three school rooms. He is held in the highest esteem by all the men who know him and who work for him.

Around this time, other studios were popping up around Burbank. Harold Lloyd, the comedian and producer, bought a 5-acre tract around Olive and Victory. A 30-acre tract was bought by Sterling Company of New York in 1927. And Victory Studios began in 1927 as well. Mickey Mouse was created in 1928, and ten years later, Disney would come to Buena Vista and Riverside Drive in Burbank. In 1934,

Columbia Pictures purchased 40 acres at Hollywood Way and Oak Street to build exterior sets. Later, in 1952, NBC would relocate from Hollywood to Burbank.

Since that time many more movie, television, and animation studios have opened in Burbank, it would be impossible to name them all. What was true a hundred years ago, still holds true today: Burbank is an ideal location for the media industry it continues to attract innovators who will take us into the next golden age of entertainment.

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the September 9, 1973 *Los Angeles Times*

Burbank Laughs Last and Profits by Jokes on City

The airline pilot announces to his passengers, "We're now landing in Burbank. Fasten your seat belts and set your watches back 20 years."

So goes a typical Burbank joke, one of several popularized by television's Laugh-In, the show that poked good-natured fun at "Beautiful Downtown Burbank" for six years.

Laugh-In has been cancelled for the new season but Burbank jokes have not been. Johnny Carson has taken up where Rowan and Martin left off.

And the city's officials and civic leaders don't mind people continuing to laugh at their community one bit. They believe Laugh-In put Burbank on the map, not just in the United States but all over the world.

Former Mayor John Whitney, now city treasurer, recalls receiving calls from over the country after Laugh-In began making Burbank jokes.

Charles Compton, another former mayor, says he was recognized all over the world after the show socked it to him during a guest appearance.

City Manager Joseph Baker said he believes the show attracted new entertainment industry to Burbank.

Walt Disney Productions, Columbia Studios, Warner Brothers, the Burbank Studios, NBC television and several minor production groups now admit with pride that Burbank is their home.

As a matter of fact, you might say Burbank today is more Hollywood than Hollywood—an impressive feat for a city that started out in 1911 as a dusty agricultural town with 500 residents.

And that's the Burbank news from 1973.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched and edited by Cesar Garcia, written by Laura McMahon, and hosted by Melanie Renfroe. 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.