

# The President Goes to the Prom

## Intro

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:

- Did you know? The library has a digital collection of historic Burbank images. You can find the collection at [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org). Many of the photos were contributed by members of the Burbank community and you can contribute too! If you have photos of Burbank people, places, or events let us know! Go to [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org) and click on Contact Us.
- Speaking of contributions: Your library means a lot to you – and your library story means the world to us! Please share your memories and stories of the library's importance to you, your family, and your community. Your story can take any number of forms – funny anecdotes, treasured memories, or thoughtful reflections. We are ultimately interested in creating a multimedia display of stories, so we welcome photo and video submissions as well as written stories. To contribute your library story you can do so via the library's website at [burbanklibrary.org/shareyourlibrarystory](http://burbanklibrary.org/shareyourlibrarystory)

Thanks!

## Story

And now for today's story.

If you go up to the second floor of the Burbank Central Library you will see the walls of the hallway leading to the Administration office are lined with photos of past Burbank entries in the Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade. The city of Burbank has entered a float in over 85 parades since 1914.

Looking at the wall that is still covered in wood paneling you will notice that only one of the photos on this particular wall is in black and white. The photo is of a float covered in an abundance of flowers as it parades down the streets of Pasadena. On the float are three senior girls from John Burroughs High School in formal wear in a ballroom scene complete with floral chandeliers. At the front of the float is an empty rocking chair. Reading the plaque on the frame you will learn that the float was the city's entry in the 1964 Tournament of Roses Parade, that it won first place in its class, and that the title of the float was "The President Goes to the Prom".

There is a story behind the inspiration for the float, and that is an event that took place seven months prior on Friday June 7th, 1963.

The year before that event the students at John Burroughs High School began preparations for their annual prom. They decided on a date, and booked the grand ballroom at the Beverly Hilton for the

occasion. Like all high school proms, it was supposed to be a memorable time, a right-of-passage that teenagers look forward to. But this particular prom was to be even more memorable than just about any other high school prom in history.

Tickets for the prom had been sold when the students received bad news. It turns out that the Democrats decided to have a fundraiser on the very same night at the very same hotel. And the guest of honor at the fundraiser was to be then President John F. Kennedy. As the number of attendees for the fundraiser grew, even at the \$1000 a couple price tag (much larger than the \$18 a couple tickets to the high school dance), it meant the President and his guests would require the largest space in the hotel, which happened to be the grand ballroom that the students had reserved months prior.

About a month before the prom, the hotel informed the students they would need to move their event to make room for the President. Upset, some of the students wanted to sue or picket or call the President, but in the end cooler heads prevailed and the students agreed to move their prom to a different hotel on a different night.

One of the students, Jill Roberts, told her uncle about the situation. Her uncle, Delmar Watson, happened to be a newspaper photographer and he told Hank Osborne, who was the editor of the Los Angeles Times. The LA Times ran a story "Hard Lesson in Civics: High School Prom Bumped From Ballroom By Dinner For Kennedy" and at a press conference LA Times' Washington correspondent, Robert Thompson, asked the President about the situation. President Kennedy said he hadn't heard of the conflict and so refrained from commenting at the time. The story became a nationally popular human interest piece and journalists from all over flocked to Burroughs to interview students.

But by May 23 the President had come up with a solution to the dilemma. Rather than upset the future voters, the President decided the fundraiser would move either date or location allowing the students to have the grand ballroom as originally planned. He had his special assistant contact Eugene Wyman, the chairman of the State Democratic Central Committee and organizer of the Fundraiser, to rectify the situation. Wyman had the hotel move the fundraiser to two smaller rooms upstairs which was where the fundraiser was to originally have taken place until the guest list grew.

So thrilled were the students to have their prom back that in gratitude they sent an invitation to the prom to the President (because, you know, he was going to be at the same hotel on the same night anyway). They also chipped in to purchase a silver tray which they had engraved "To a real American President", which they would give to him if he actually did show up.

And if you haven't guessed already by the title of the float, and the title of this episode, the President did go to the prom. Not for the whole event, mind you. He did, after all, have a fundraiser to attend at the same time. He brought along comedian Jack Benny and quipped how the ballroom the students were in was much better than the smaller rooms the fundraiser was in. He even drew a loud cheer when he said that were he not President he would like to be a senior at (quote) "this High School". One can assume that by "this High School" he meant John Burroughs.

So June 7, 1963 was truly a night to remember for the seniors of John Burroughs High School. So memorable in fact, that it inspired the design of the City's Tournament of Roses Parade float for the following January. But if you remember history, you will realize that President Kennedy never saw the

float his appearance inspired. That's because just five months after the prom, on November 22, 1963 he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

*[Recording of remarks from President Kennedy at the John Burroughs High School Prom June 7, 1963. No transcript]*

## News from Burbank

And now for the News from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the Friday June 21, 1895 edition of *The Valley News*.

- Friday the Providencia school will be closed for the term, with appropriate exercises, but no graduating class; and we understand that no one has ever graduated from the grammar grade.
- Grandma Curtis was 73 years old Tuesday.
- William Ludlow visited the city Tuesday.
- H.B. Fawks is shipping blackberries.
- It is Hot.

And that's the News from Burbank on Friday June 21, 1895.

## End credits

RememBurbank is researched, written, edited, and hosted, by Janae Kambestad, Local History Librarian at the Burbank Public Library. Special thanks to Cesar Garcia for research help with today's story.

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.

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.