



Episode 004: Start of the Starlight Bowl

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.

Announcements

On Saturday, July 20, 2019 the Friends of the Burbank Public Library is hosting a pop up book sale. The book sale starts at noon and goes until 5pm at the Central Library. Find thousands of books, with bargains galore; prices start at just 25 cents. Shopping at the book sale is a good way to support the library and it is through these fundraising efforts that library programming, including this very podcast, is possible. For more information, visit the library's website at burbanklibrary.org.

Story

A note about pronunciation before today's story. After immigrating to America in 1752, the spelling of Gottfried Stauff's surname was changed from the original German spelling of S-T-A-U-F-F to S-T-O-U-G-H. This new spelling leads to some confusion because some see it and pronounce it as "Sto". But while Godfrey's descendants did drop the ending "F" sound, they kept the middle vowel sound of "ow". So, I'm going to pronounce it as they do, as Stough rhyming with "wow".

And now for today's story:

Oliver J. Stough turned either 101 or 91 in 1919. That depended on whom you believed. Either you believed Stough himself when he claimed to have been born in 1818. Or, you believed census records, vital records, the official history of the Stough family published in 1905 by the family historian, etc. and knew he was actually born in May of 1828 in Ohio. The reason for the deception was that when he met his future second wife, Florance, she said she would not be interested in a youthful man of 60 years. So Stough lied and said he was 70, and he kept up the ruse for the rest of his life, even after the death of Florance. She was already 34 years younger than him without him having to lie about his age. Whatever age you believed him to be, Oliver J. Stough was living in San Diego in 1919 as he had been for a few decades at that point, though he traveled up to Los Angeles that year for his birthday celebrations as he was well known in the area.

Four years prior to his 91st birthday (or 101st birthday if you believed the man himself), Stough's second wife died. Together they owned a 6,000 acre ranch in what is now the northwestern portion of Burbank. Though they spent most of their time at their property in San Diego, the Stoughs still managed to cultivate and develop their Burbank ranch as they did with all of the thousands of acres they owned

throughout California. In the 1910 census, Stough lists his occupation as capitalist, his primary business being land, and the Stoughs owned a lot of land.

At their Burbank ranch they had hundreds of acres of apricots, peaches, alfalfa, and, of course, melons in the flat portion of their ranch. As well as some of the best views of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley thanks to the road they built winding through the hills portion of their ranch to a viewing point 3,000 feet above sea level.

In 1916, the year after his wife died, Stough gifted 128.81 acres in the hills portion of his ranch to the City for the creation of a park. The deed of gift mandated that the area always be designated as Stough Park. The rest of the land he sold to a developer for \$1 million, who sold it to another developer a couple years later. That second developer, Ben Marks, made all kinds of elaborate plans for a model city to be built on the acreage, which, in addition to residential tracts would include a university, an industrial park, a new civic center... but that's a story for another episode.

The 128.81 acres Stough gifted to the City included an area in the northerly portion that made for a natural bowl amphitheater. The ravine at the base of the Verdugo Mountains provided excellent acoustics. Records show that sunrise Easter celebration services were held there in the early 1930s. But it wasn't until the summer of 1935 that the first scheduled use of the bowl for live performances took place. To accommodate performances, a platform was constructed for a stage, and, when needed, canvas tarps were suspended above it between trees and poles to protect performers. Salvage lumber and telephone poles were imbedded in the ground for seating, and pictures show some audience members brought blankets for a bit of extra comfort.

Two years after that first scheduled performance, in 1937, Leo Damiani and his wife Audrey came out to California from Minnesota in their Model A Ford, which they called Henrietta. Leo was a talented violinist, but an accident prevented him from playing consistently. After staying in California for a few years, they moved to New York City so Leo could take graduate coursework in conducting at the Juilliard School of Music where he attained many honors. Upon returning to Burbank, Maestro Damiani was inspired with an idea for a community orchestra for the city which was to be his home. There would be concerts attended by people who had no outlet for their interest in symphony music. With approval and oversight from the City's Parks and Recreation Department, and after five month's rehearsal time, forty-six musicians gathered, Sunday, July 30, 1944, to give their own community a free symphony concert and the Burbank Symphony Orchestra was born.

The Burbank Symphony Orchestra was the third highest rated orchestra in the western states, and performed all over the country and on television. It was a popular activity to be part of for all parts of the Burbank community, with more than half of orchestra members being hobbyists and amateurs and only a small portion, professional musicians. It was not unusual to hear Ed Johnson, mail carrier and string bass player, whistle a theme from the William Tell Overture as he walked from house to house the day before a concert. There was even a well-regarded Youth Symphony in which a young Debbie Reynolds played French horn.

Because the acoustics were so good, Maestro Damiani held rehearsals at the natural bowl amphitheater in Stough park. Though performances were held predominantly in the Olive Park Recreation Hall, they were sometimes held outdoors in the natural bowl amphitheater. Due to its popularity, the symphony association had great influence in the development of the bowl with improvements made each

successive year. For example, in 1946, surplus generators were added to supply electricity, replacing the need for lanterns, flashlights and matches as lighting sources. In the early days, despite successive improvements, the facilities were primitive, and it is said that during soft passages in the music, the quiet moments were frequently interrupted by the screams of female audience members as lizards scurried across their feet.

The orchestra's ultimate dream was to have its own dedicated performance space, and by 1950 they had convinced the City Council to make it happen. The symphony association led the drive to build a real amphitheater, a dream that was achieved in June of 1951 with the dedication of the Burbank Starlight Theater. That name was later changed to Starlight Bowl in 1957. Architect E. Dean Cowley designed the amphitheater, and since Cowley was an executive of the Burbank Symphony Orchestra Association, it was designed for the single purpose of presenting concerts. This single-purpose design made it difficult for other types of performances, such as plays, to be held at the newly built amphitheater.

The Bert Prival School of Ballet and Theater Arts was sometimes commissioned to choreograph ballets to accompany Burbank Symphony performances, and they often performed at the Starlight Bowl. Bert Prival was a Premier Danseur of The Metropolitan Opera Ballet in New York City before moving to California to establish his dance school in Burbank in 1939. Some who studied under Bert include Linda Kaye Henning (who played Betty Jo Bradley on *Petticoat Junction*), and Yvonne De Carlo (who you might remember as Lily Munster on *The Munsters* among other roles). Annette Funicello also trained under Bert Prival, and it was during a Burbank Symphony performance at the Starlight Bowl in 1955 that Walt Disney saw her perform as the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*. After seeing her performance, Mr. Disney decided to have her audition for a new show he was developing called *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Annette was the last Mouseketeer of the twenty-four that was cast, and she famously went on to become the most popular.

Since its opening in the 50s, the Starlight Bowl has had its ups and downs, its efforts at renovations, and even its prolonged closures. But, as of this recording, you can still attend concerts there during the summer. So while you are sitting under the stars enjoying an outdoor concert at the Starlight Bowl this summer, give a brief nod of thanks Leo Damiani and the Burbank Symphony Orchestra who turned the Bowl into what it is today. And while you're at it, sing a rendition of Happy Birthday to Oliver J. Stough, who would have us all believing that this year he would be celebrating his 201st birthday. But really we know it would actually be his 191st birthday.

News

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the Monday, May 6, 1935 edition of the Burbank Daily Review.

Gold Strike Rumor Circulated Here.

Rumors of valuable gold strikes in the hills above the city, which are in the habit of making their periodical advent, are being circulated on the streets again.

Activities in this line have gone so far as an application to the Park Commission for the privilege of mining in Stough Park. The Park Board has taken no action on the matter, however.

Martin Longo, who claims to know about the possibilities of gold in that locality, says there is no reason for getting excited over the matter. He says that himself, C.R. McMillian, and Winfield Thompson have done much prospecting on the basis of prospector's rights granted by the governor on a large section of the Verdugo Hills.

Number of Holes.

He says they have a number of holes from which they have taken gold, silver and quick silver which assayed as high as \$44.80 to the ton. Most of it has been of such small percentage as to make it worthless as mining propositions.

Reports of assays of three samples which Longo has just received represents values of \$5.95, \$3.85 and 70 cents, respectively. According to Longo it would take at least 20 percent ore to pay for mining it and more than that to represent a profit. Less than 20 percent ore, he said, would cost more to get it to the smelter than it would be worth.

And that's the news from Burbank on Monday, May 6, 1935.

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 podcast, 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

Thank you for listening.