



# Episode 013 – Crazy Like a Fawkes (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](http://burbankinfo.org).

## Announcements

Over four decades ago, Jimmy Carter pleaded the following to our country, "I'm asking you for your good and for your nation's security to take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or public transportation whenever you can, to park your car one extra day per week, to obey the speed limit, and to set your thermostats to save fuel. Every act of conservation like this is more than just common sense – I tell you it is an act of patriotism." While we are all sacrificing unnecessary trips due to quarantine, an upside is that we are using our cars much less. Hunker down over the holidays with a few good books, DVDs, or audiobooks that you can pick up curbside from any of the Burbank Public Library Branches. Go to [burbanklibrary.org](http://burbanklibrary.org) to get materials reserved, then set up a time to pick them up! It's fast, easy and free!

## Story

L.A. Traffic...

When you hear those words does it make your heart race a bit? Does the idea of driving to downtown L.A. cause a stir of anxiety in the pit of your stomach?

Well, you're not alone and as it turns out this has been a problem for more than a century.

When Walt Disney was still in grade school and had yet to dream up Tomorrowland, Burbank encountered another man's futuristic idea. A peculiar inventor named Joseph Wesley Fawkes cleared a space through his acreage and built an experimental monorail. You see, Fawkes was a farmer and a major obstacle he was keen to overcome was linking his produce with buyers in Downtown Los Angeles. In 1910, Fawkes had built a machine that he called the Aerial Swallow. It was a "torpedo-shaped car suspended from a 600 ft. length of rail in his back yard" (L.A. Times, 1960). It hung from the "overhead iron rail, balanced by a gyroscope, and used a propeller for locomotion. The monorail [theoretically] would glide over roads, ravines, and streams, eliminating the need for at-grade crossings and costly bridges" (L.A. Mag, 2013). It was "open to the air like many street cars of the era, the aerial trolley was 50ft long, weighed 2,000 lbs" (L.A. Times, 1960), could seat up to 56 passengers, and Fawkes claimed it could reach speeds up to 60mph. One of the downsides of this propeller-driven vehicle was that the propeller was placed on the front which would blow gusts of cold air onto the passengers. "Between 1910 and 1912, curious passengers climbed aboard the Aerial Swallow and enjoyed a breezy ride

through his estate” (L.A. Mag, 2013). But the contraption could only reach a top speed of 3mph. Locals soon lost interest and the dirigible sat lifeless on his property, corroding in the elements.

The monorail got labeled “Fawkes’ Folly” and Burbankers called the man “Crazy Fawkes, “though ‘eccentric’ would have been a more precise – and kinder – description” (L.A. Times, 1996). He lived with his wife, Emma, on a 20-acre ranch where they tended to apricot and walnut orchards on Olive Avenue between Victory Boulevard and Flower Street. They had no children. They lived in a modest gable-roofed farmhouse however, “weeds overran much of their property and they only halfheartedly worked their farm. They would ride into town in their stately carriage drawn by meticulously groomed horses, usually with their Dalmatians in tow. Fawkes was a bright and gifted man, but a loner with a temper and feisty disposition” (Bullock, 2005).

In a 1996 L.A. Times article, Cecilia Rasmussen summed the story up perfectly, she wrote:

“Even before Fawkes’ prototype was ready, the transportation crusader formed the Aerial Trolley Car Company. And started selling stock. He claimed that given the right of way, his monorail could speed from the Valley to downtown Los Angeles in 10 minutes. But while Fawkes labored frantically to raise capital as well as rails, the Pacific Electric red cars spread their network across the metropolitan area, derailing his efforts. That didn’t faze Fawkes, however. All he had to do was change his destination to Santa Monica. On July 4, 1912, with iron-like determination, he invited a group of potential investors to party on his ranch, with firecrackers, dinners and free rides in another version of the weird car hanging from a curved rack. Most of his potential investors shrugged and kept their hands firmly in their pockets. For his part, Fawkes agitated fruitlessly for recognition. As time went on, he also became a thorn in the side of Burbank officials. He locked horns with bureaucrats on numerous issues other than his beloved monorail” (L.A. Times, 1996).

Fawkes’ activism and downright stubbornness earned him many a neighborhood enemy. He was vehemently opposed to Burbank incorporating as its own city. “He campaigned energetically for Burbank’s annexation to Los Angeles. After his measure failed, [his] foes had a victory parade on San Fernando Road that included fireworks and setting fire to a likeness of him” (Bullock, 2005). He also spent many of his later years filing lawsuits against the city for reasons such as unlawful paving on Olive Avenue to dog license fee disputes, and even for water damage to his property. He won some, he lost some. “Though many of his efforts failed, he never gave up. He was unconventional, intelligent, stubborn, opinionated, and out of the mainstream, but he tirelessly advocated for what he thought was best for Burbank” (Bullock, 2005).

“Fawkes died in 1928 at the age of 67, his dream unfulfilled. In 1947, his monorail prototype was carted off as junk, rusted and dilapidated. The monorail’s site was used as a helicopter landing field for air mail service between Burbank and LAX until the late 1950s” (L.A. Times, 1996). Today you can find Borrmann Metal Center, Metro RV, and a slew of car dealerships on Fawkes’ old property.

It seems that Burbank has a reoccurring love affair with the idea of monorails. In 1959, talk of a privately financed monorail system was considered to connect Burbank to LAX. And again, in the early 1990s, Burbank invested \$250,000 into a study headed by an architecture firm. The study looked at connecting Burbank to Universal City using a, you guessed it, monorail! But for one reason or another, the love fizzles out and the monorail plans simply settle into our history.

## News from Burbank

Today's news come in the form of a letter to the editor printed in the December 8, 1955 Los Angeles Times.

Since I began working in Burbank I've had occasion to use the freeways and arterial streets many times...in my own car, in taxis, and driving with others. But no matter how one drives, or what the time of day, an automobile ride in this city is a hair-raising, nerve-shattering experience. I imagine the drivers who face it every day must develop a thick skin...or a sort of fatalistic approach. But to a newcomer it's truly an ordeal.

I'm a *reasonably young* man...not an old fuddy duddy. I've been driving for many years, all over this country and in Canada and Mexico. I loved driving...until I encountered Los Angeles traffic. What amazes me is that more people aren't raising their voices that something be done about it. How they can slam down the freeway bumper to bumper, day after day...How they can read the statistics in the paper. How they can continue to subject themselves to the nerve-racking road and grind of getting from one place to another, without demanding a change is more than I can understand.

Surely Los Angeles is the only sizable city in the world where such medieval driving conditions exist. And the reason seems quite obvious. It's the only sizable city in the world without an interurban transit system. Here everyone has to drive to work because there's no other way to go, unless you want to spend hours on a crowded bus.

I understand more millions are being appropriated for freeways which inevitably turn out to be inadequate. Why not spend some of this money on a monorail system or any kind of efficient interurban transit to link the downtown section to the suburbs? It would take thousands of cars off the freeways and crowded streets. It would reduce accidents and would eliminate a lot of our smog.

It can be done, and it should be done. Unless it is done, conditions will steadily worsen, no matter how many millions of taxpayer's dollars are tossed away on new eight-lane ulcer alleys!

And that's the news from December 8, 1955.

## End Credits