



Episode 025 – The Warner Bros. Collection (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:

Looking for a quiet place to study or get work done? Look no further! Study rooms are now available at both Buena Vista Branch Library *and* Central Library! Reserve up to 2 hours a day to work on group projects or do solo work in peace. Reservations can be made same-day only. Stop by the Information Services desk at each location or give us a call to reserve by phone.

You can also reserve a private room as part of Job Connect, our self-service job resource center at the Burbank Central Library. Come by and see how Job Connect can help you reach your career goals today!

Story

And now for today's story:

This year Warner Brothers Studio is celebrating its 100th anniversary; so, I thought it the opportune time to dedicate a podcast to the story of the late Warner Brothers Research Collection that was housed right here at the Burbank Central Library.

In the early 1970s, financial trouble inspired Warner Brothers and Columbia Pictures to merge. This also caused a reduction in space during the consolidation. By 1975, they decided to discontinue their Research Service Library and donate it to the City of Burbank. The director of archival operations, Carl Milliken, Jr. was set to retire. The collection was housed on the Warner Lot in Stage 15 which was valuable space for the studios. At the time, the collection was used "almost exclusively by major motion picture companies for the re-creation of set decoration and costuming for [both] motion picture and television productions." They felt that the Burbank Public Library would be a good fit as custodian for the materials because it would also give the public an opportunity to access the information stored in the once-restricted archives.

The collection had been curated for almost 40 years and included 20,000 books and 460 file drawers full of newspaper clippings and photographs. Upon donation, the only stipulation made by Warner Brothers was that the city should "house and maintain the collection" and that they would employ Edith Hodson, secondary archivist for the collection, for one year. She, too, had worked for 40 years with the

repository. Warner Brothers paid her salary for that year, after which she retired; but Edith continued to volunteer in the collection for more than 20 years. The city was to pay for two library employees to staff the archive. The first two charged with overseeing it were Mary Ann Grasso and Doris Crutcher. I had a chance to talk to Doris about her recollection of the archives. She said that it took them six weeks, seven days a week, to get the collection packed and moved from Warner Brothers to Burbank Central Library. She said that trash collectors from the Public Works department were assigned to transport the boxes of materials using city vans. Kenneth Wilson, who was the library director at the time of the acquisition, designated a 2,900 square foot space on the second floor, just behind the children's department to hold the extensive collection. Access to the Warner Brothers division was at the back of the library via the ramp entrance, that today, is reserved only for employees.

Doris also explained that the Warner Brothers Collection was not easy to navigate because it wasn't organized like a traditional library. Files were organized alphabetically by subject, but there was also a hierarchy of level of organization within the subjects. For example, German aircraft from World War II would first be in the file for World War II, then sub-organized by airplanes, etc. Inherited archivist Edith Hodson was the master of this unique cataloging system. The primary patrons of the collection were set and costume designers from the entertainment industry, but when it became open to the public, it was accessible to a larger number of people, since anyone who wanted to use it simply had to pay the hourly fee. None of the materials in the collection left the premises. More often than not, the library employees were doing the research for the studios which was primarily where fees were incurred.

The collection consisted of various items from bound volumes of the Illustrated London News dating back to 1876 to a two-volume set of books identifying the evolution of New York Police uniforms over the decades. It had various "memorabilia items, such as set design photographs, drawings, posters and scripts of classic movies." One task delegated to the library employees was to receive magazines, cut relevant photos out of them, label them and add them to the files. This would always ensure that newer trends were also being saved for future use. In a 1981 Burbank Daily Review article, Mary Ann Grasso was quoted as saying, "I can tell you what Panama looked like in 1850 or what Paris looks like today." "The clipping file [had] grown to more than two million pieces and [was] comprised not only of newspaper and magazine articles but of postcards, travel brochures and photos—anything visual that [could] help 'define an area' or era." Additionally, in that same year the library started offering a new script service called "Legal Script Clearance." This undertaking was devised to help "ensure that real names, addresses, telephone numbers, trademarks, and brand names were either omitted or used only with permission." It was designed for smaller, independent production companies who did not have large legal teams or research staff. They could also check scripts for "historical accuracy and authenticity."

Research staff recounted some of their more unique inquiries. "One particular question that was pitched to the staff" in the early 1980s was "If someone dies on an airplane, what happens to the body?" Joyce Kneisel, research assistant at the time, found the answer after tracking down an airline official. She reported back to the patron, "They wrap up it up and make it look like its asleep. When the plane lands, the passenger would be removed by stretcher 'because he is ill.' The information about the death would be radioed ahead and an emergency autopsy would be performed. If the results are kosher, the passengers would be released from the plane." Another inquiry was "How long could a person survive in a locked bank vault?" Then Fire Captain Jess Talamantes informed the librarian that there are "too many variables to give a definitive answer. He said the survival of the individual would depend on the size of the vault, the size of the person, and how long he had been locked up, [among] other factors." But most inquiries were standard research largely for costuming and set decoration.

By the mid-1990s, the city found that the collection was costing them more than it brought in. At the time, the collection was bringing in about \$98,000 per year, but was costing \$176,000 to operate. In late 1996, the City Council ordered the collection to shut its door to the public. This prompted “a letter-writing campaign among local film professionals who said they considered the thousands of rare books, news clippings, and other archival documents invaluable to their production research.” This crusade did delay the closure of the archive. But the hourly-use cost was increased, and the staff reduced to only one librarian.

The city became intent on selling it off. Over the years, the archive had been appraised several times and had been valued variously between 400,000 and 5 million dollars. Sandra Christopher, library Director at that time, hoped to use the money earned from the sale to build a new Buena Vista Branch Library. But as luck would have it, just around the same time as their urge to sell, the internet started to worm its way into companies and even homes. Physical collections, such as this, started to see sudden and swift depreciation. The city did have several offers from various independent sources, but the city felt offers of \$450,000 and \$500,000 were too low for this treasure. They dug their heels in and held out for a higher bid. By the year 2000, the city had given up hope and negotiated with Warner Brothers to take back the collection, free of charge. They “agreed to take over the valuable public collection in exchange for Warner Brothers product placement at the new Buena Vista Branch Library. [Sounds like an] even-balanced deal” to me.

While researching for this podcast, I tried to reach out to the current Warner Brothers Research Library but found it impossible to find a contact or phone number. It seems it has reverted back to being a clandestine archive only available to the entertainment elite. I really wanted to inquire about what became of the materials we sent back. While I fear that will continue to remain a mystery, it is clear that the history of Warner Brothers wouldn't be the same without the City of Burbank and vice versa. Happy 100th Anniversary, Warner Brothers! We will always be inextricably linked.

News from Burbank

Today's news is from the June 19, 1996 *Burbank Leader*.

Legends of Film Flock to Facility at Warner Bros.

Elizabeth Taylor arrives with Roddy McDowell—still together 53 years after they first co-starred in the screen gem “Lassie Come Home.”

Fay Dunaway and Warren Beatty—co-stars in the 1967 shoot-'em-up hit “Bonnie and Clyde” — were also there, hugging and kissing for the paparazzi.

Peaches and cream leading lady of the '40s, Virginia Mayo, a one-time James Cagney co-star in the Warner Bros. screen classic “White Heat,” made her appearance as well—posing once again for the pops and flashes of the waiting cameras.

Even child star Jane Withers walked down the red carpet, stopping before reporters to reminisce about “Jimmy” Dean and his powder-blue 500 Triumph motorcycle, barred from the Warner Bros. Lot.

What was the big to-do?

The grand opening of the Warner Bros. Museum, housed in a two-story building ideally located on the studio's lot.

The stars paid homage Thursday evening to the studio's rich history in the museum, which houses priceless costumes, props, correspondence between the studio bosses and stars, the piano used in "Casablanca," and even Dean's beloved motorcycle.

Safely displayed behind one glass case were numerous tickertape telegrams illustrating the friction between the studio's strong-willed star Bette Davis and the ever-powerful Warner brothers.

In another corner, a yellowed, four-page letter addressed to Al Jolson laid out his upcoming movie and explained how it would use sound recorded in sequence with the moving pictures.

And one treasure protected behind glass is Jack Warner's 'black book,' opened to a single page listing the phone numbers and addresses of Bette Davis, Olivia De Havilland, Walt Disney, Irene Dunn, and even the renowned father of surrealism—Salvador Dali.

When asked how she felt about the new home of the archival collection, 64-year-old Taylor joked, "Well, I'm glad I'm not in a museum."

But, as she stood in the middle of the museum, memorabilia from her past Warner Bros. screen classics "Giant" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?" surround the star, belying her joke.

And that's the news from June 19, 1996.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, edited, and hosted by Carolyn Alves.

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 show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfocus.org

Thank you for joining us today.