



Episode 026 – Burbank Tournament of Roses Association: An All-Volunteer Effort (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:

Neil Gaiman wrote, "A library is a place that is a repository of information and gives every citizen equal access to it. That includes health information. And mental health information. It's a community space. It's a place of safety, a haven from the world." The Burbank City Council is currently considering construction of a new Central Library as part of the Burbank Civic Center Project. Let the City Council know what a modern Central Library would mean to you and your community by emailing citycouncil@burbankca.gov. For project information and updates, visit burbankciviccenter.com.

Story

And now for today's story:

As the year comes to a close, Burbankers and Angelenos alike have an annual tradition to look forward to: the Tournament of Roses Parade. Spearheaded by Charles Holder, the first parade was held in 1890 and sponsored by the still active Valley Hunt Club. According to Rose Parade History, Charles Holder was quoted as saying "In New York, people are buried in snow. Here our flowers are blooming and our oranges are about to bear. Let's hold a festival to tell the world about our paradise." Transplants from other parts of the United States were amazed to find flowers flourishing even in the middle of winter and wanted to celebrate it. In 1895, the Tournament of Roses Association was formed to take ownership of the event. By the early 1900s, marching bands and motorized floats were included in the spectacle.

The city of Burbank first entered a float in the 1914 parade, just 3 years after its incorporation as a city. "The float was called 'Goddess of Plenty' and featured an ornate dragon's head, a large cornucopia overflowing with homegrown sweet potatoes, squash, and assorted vegetables." A high school teacher, Stella Hansen, was picked as the rider of the float and she was dressed as the Roman goddess of plenty Ops. Burbank participated in the parades intermittently. But in 1930, the Woman's Club of Burbank voiced opposition to the city entering a float. They disapproved of the city spending money on this elaborate expense. The 1930 and 1931 parades only saw decorated automobiles from the city. In 1932, the Burbank City Schools took responsibility of the floats which lasted through 1940. Burbank did not

participate in the parade during World War II, because parts and labor were needed at nearby Lockheed. Additionally, the parade was completely cancelled in 1942, 1943, and 1945 due to the war. The city sponsored the 1947 and 1948 floats, even City Councilman Ralph Hilton chaired the committee for the latter. In 1948, the City Council decided that the money allotted to the 1949 float would be better used for a sewer project.

But one local Burbanker decided to take the matter into her own hands. A Burbank Daily Review reported that "Because of one woman's pride in her home town, Burbank will have a float in the 1949 Pasadena Tournament of Roses...Mrs. Esther Klein, [of] 234 N. Keystone Street, already stimulated widespread community interest in a home-town built float, [as well] as designed a model of the proposed entry." Esther Klein brought her plans to the Burbank City Council along with an outline of tentative plans for a permanent rose parade committee. They gave their approval and she set out to achieve her goal.

Esther had decided that the project would be community-based. She enlisted both Boy and Girl scouts, along with other youth and adult organizations. She was a member of the Burbank Theater Guild and had constructed sets for several of their productions, which she thought would come in handy for the construction of the float. Prior to 1930, the Tournament of Roses did not have a theme. But when they finally instituted one, float designers were expected to stay in line with that year's theme. The 1949 theme was "Childhood Memories." Klein chose "First Love" as her interpretation of that theme. Her initial design was that of a boy and girl sitting under a flowering cherry tree, framed by a pair of enormous hearts.

After she was given the green light from city council, and showered with support from the community, Esther then had to drum up financing for the project. The newly formed Burbank Tournament of Roses Association set out to do just that. Meetings for the project were packed with invested citizens and Esther Klein was elected its very first president. To raise money and obtain supplies, it was decided that the city would be broken up into 41 districts replete with captains. The captains were to be women and they would be selected for each block to appeal to their neighbors for financial contributions or flowers from gardens. The city was to furnish a truck chassis, but everything else had to be gathered by the community. The predicted cost of the float was \$1500. Individuals were asked to donate \$1 and organizations \$25. Others who were partnered in the cause were local nurserymen, landscape artists, as well as other designers and decorators who would help build the float. Esther Klein noticed that the boundaries of Burbank were heart-shaped, with the tip of the heart near the Los Angeles river boundary and the divot between the auricles at Kimberly and Sixth Streets. Local art instructor, John Weaver, designed a poster that would be displayed at the J.C. Penney store on the corner of San Fernando and Magnolia for the second week of December. Paper roses were to be placed on the map denoting "which of the 41-districts [had] pledged their home-grown roses to the float decoration."

But this endeavor was not without obstacles. The first major crisis that Esther faced was that, although people had pledged money for the project, few were actually sending it in. By December 21st, they had only received \$200 of the \$1500 necessary. She implored the city council to contribute since flowers had to be ordered by the week's end. Councilman Floyd Jolley didn't believe that taxpayers' money should be diverted to aid the project, but the council agreed to underwrite the association \$1000 as they were all championing Esther's cause. The second crisis came in the form of vandalism. An almond tree had been donated to sit upon the float, but it was found sawed into small pieces. The association made an

urgent plea for a second tree donation. The third crisis was weather, that year there was a frost that damaged so many flowers that the association had order replacements which nearly doubled their costs.

The city rallied. The local radio station plugged the cause every 30 minutes and donations started pouring in. Local gardeners contributed their flowers and foliage. On December 27th, preliminary construction began on the float. Construction was being completed on Burbank city grounds. It was the first float to be built in the yard, where the annual Burbank entry is still built today. It is in a warehouse at the northeast corner of the Burbank Water and Power lot. "Welders, steel workers, and engineers...steadily" worked on the frame for two days. On the 29th, the form, which was made from chicken wire, cheese cloth, and plaster of paris, had to be fitted to the frame. On December 30th, a plum tree was donated to replace the flowering almond that had been destroyed. Two local children, Lee Knight (10) and Joan Planck (10) were chosen to ride as the children on the "First Love" themed float. Volunteers worked for two days straight to place all of the flowers. Over two hundred and fifty volunteers worked on building the float. The float was completed at 2a.m. on the first of January and arrived in Pasadena at 3:25a.m., "with only one blossom missing."

A December 31st Daily Review article read, "Burbank has emerged the winner in the float competition at the annual Tournament of Roses parade, even though judging of entries has not even begun. Win, lose, or draw, Burbank's float will be a genuine achievement for this city. Whether it wins an actual prize or not, Burbank has already won something infinitely more valuable. The float project sponsored by a group of public-spirited Burbank citizens, has been a demonstration of civic pride, private initiative, and community consciousness."

The fact is that the "First Love" float captured first prize for its division, for cities with populations between 50,000 to 200,000. It was constructed for slightly more than \$2,000 and competed with division floats that cost as much as \$10,000. Burbank came out victorious thanks to Esther, because the Tournament of Roses Association was not only impressed with the float, but with the spirit of community that made the float happen.

Oh, did I happen to mention that Esther Klein voiced her first appeal on November 16th to the city council? That means she had just about 6 weeks to get the project approved, backed, funded, designed, built, and delivered to Pasadena in time for the spectacular cavalcade. And her daughter's wedding took place on December 4th, which she helped plan and even baked the 9-tier cake for the reception. Esther Klein certainly was a Burbank super star. If you take a walk along the second floor of Burbank Central Library, you will see framed prints of most of the Burbank Tournament of Roses Float entries. She is paramount to the creation of each of these floats, because without her commitment and steadfast determination, there is no telling what may have come of Burbank's legacy of building fabulous floats each and every year to send along the parade route for the entire world to see.

News from Burbank

Today's news is from the December 13, 1975 Burbank Daily Review.

Better to begin late than never seemed to apply to Clark Jellison's last-minute entry which won first place in the annual city-wide Burbank Tournament of Roses Float Design Contest last April.

“The sketch was due on a Tuesday, and I hadn’t decided until Sunday evening to begin the rough draft,” said Jellison. “Monday night I painted in the sketch of ‘Let’s Celebrate America’s Natural Beauty’ under this year’s theme, ‘America Let’s Celebrate,’ and turned it in on the deadline.”

Jellison began his float-designing career during his junior year at Burbank High School. The Burbank Tournament of Roses Association placed an announcement at the school that said they were looking for students to help work and ride on the float.

“I entered the city-wide float rider contest and was one of the students chosen to ride the 1972 float titled ‘I Love You for All Seasons’ under the theme ‘Joy of Music.’ That float won the Grand Marshall trophy that year,” he said.

“Soon after, I joined the Association and later entered, for the first time, the design contest with the winning float named ‘Neptune’s Daughter’ under the 1973 theme of ‘Movie Memories.’”

The following year, he again submitted a float. Its theme began with “Happiness is…” and he finished the ellipsis with the 1974 winning entry, “the Beauty of Birds.”

During 1975, Jellison took a year off from his Burbank float designing and went to work for a professional parade float building company in Pasadena. There he supervised the building of the Nova Scotia and Glendale entries for that year’s Rose Parade.

With a taste of professional float building, Jellison came back with some new ideas to design the 1976 Burbank float.

“This year’s community-built float, which has two free-falling waterfalls and two animated butterflies with mechanical wings that move, will accommodate four riders.

[Jellison explained], “Community-built means that interested citizens in the community volunteer their time to design and build the float themselves. Five out of the 62 floats which appear in the Rose Parade are built as a community effort. That leaves 57 that are built by professional companies. Personally, I feel that is the most important part of the parade because each float built by the people of the area represents the community as a whole and that’s basically what the Rose Parade is all about.”

The city funds \$6,000 of the project and the rest of the money is brought in through fundraisers sponsored by the Association.

“The actual planning takes about six months,” said Jellison. “The metal structure, applied by the Burbank Public Service Department, takes around six weeks. Floral decorating takes place the last four days of the year.”

He said that the base of the float this year will include approximately 10,005 roses, 1,000 carnations, and 100 orchids. These and all flowers are purchased through a Burbank florist shop and all floral material used must be fresh.

“We’d really like to see more people join the Association,” Jellison said. “People are needed for different committees such as fundraisers, costuming, flowers, and choosing both the float and riders. The more people that join the better we can project the image of Burbank.”

And that’s the news from December 13, 1975.

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 burbankinfo.org

Thank you for joining us today.