Luther Burbank Home & Gardens: Brief History of the Volunteer Association

1977: Elizabeth Burbank died and, under her will, the residence property (Burbank Home, Carriage House, Greenhouse and Courtyards) came under ownership and control of the City. The surrounding site had been a free City park for some time, but did not include many Burbank-related plants. Instead it was treated as a nicely kept green space dedicated to Burbank's memory and maintained by a City staff of one. There was a small, dark, enclosed structure behind the inner fountain where display cases held some information on Burbank, and where visitors to the park could sign their names.

The City Council appointed an Advisory Committee on the use of the property. Its Chair was Sherman Boivin. (A name will be mentioned here and there, but by no means is everyone credited in this brief history.) That committee developed plans for a complex with a museum display area, tours and gift shop. Although the Council approved the plan in 1978, Proposition 13 came along and funding was eliminated. It looked as if the program had stopped before it could begin. Instead, the Advisory Committee gathered together a small grass-roots volunteer group that proceeded to carry out a greatly revised plan. This group was the nucleus of what we now call the Volunteer Association.

1979: Under Dee Richardson's direction, a training program for Docents was developed and a small class began its work. They did extensive research in order to train themselves and others. By the fall of 1979, the first public tours were given; one of the first reserved tours was to a group of Yogananda followers from Southern California. The handful of Docents operated from a card table by the kitchen door, taking the 50¢ fee and using a cashbox for change. The Chamber of Commerce supplied some rudimentary brochures about the Garden for visitors to take away.

Under Sally Joy's direction, the first rose garden was created, about where our Rose Garden is now; her husband built the entry to it, and she rounded up friends from the Redwood Empire Rose Society to plant the roses and help keep them up. She got initial funding from Eastside Rotary and from Hewlett-Packard and roses from Jackson-Perkins.

Donna Born, then on the City Council and their liaison member of the Advisory Committee, asked for help in thinking up products for a gift shop and together, we got $3,000 in funding for a few products from Bank of America and Exchange Bank. Local businesses donated rugs and curtains for a tiny Gift Shop space in what had been a tack room, and we raided the rest of the old Carriage House for shelving, hooks and tables, scrubbing away the spider-webs first.

1980: The Gift Shop opened in May, with drop-in tours given Tuesday through Sunday afternoons for a $1 fee. The Carriage House was VERY different than it is now. The building had no real "insides," the only heat was one or 2 inadequate portable heaters, lighting was terrible, and we had a toilet behind a partition—but no running water. (The first Gift Shop scrapbook gives a rough idea of the setup under which we operated for the next 6 years.) Rough or not, we were thrilled that in our first full year the Gift Shop grossed over $7,000. All profits went to support the Volunteer program, then as now.

Our first Holiday Open House was held in 1980, a one-afternoon event intended for Volunteers and their friends; we sold Shop items right in the House, and offered each other tea and home-baked cookies. Little did we know we were starting a long tradition! The Volunteers were a small but dedicated group, very loosely organized. Leadership either rose from the group or was brought in to do specific jobs. Gradually, the Advisory Committee essentially stopped meeting and left the work to the active Volunteers.

1983: There was concern on the part of the Volunteers and, more to the point, on the part of the City that the effort needed a more formal organization. We were bringing in money in the form of fees and gift sales, we were operating on City-owned property, we needed more City services and the City needed ours. But they wanted us to be a little more formal and structured.

It took about a year of meetings with Volunteers, the City's Park and Legal people, and a professional organizational facilitator (who donated his work) to draw up the original City Ordinance that, **by 1984**, set forth our official structure. It called for a City Council-appointed Board, at first 5 members, to be combined with the 4 members of the Volunteer Association who were elected to specific Volunteer jobs. With some updating, that Ordinance blessed our over-all structure for over 25 years — with the Board as a hybrid creature setting policy, and the Volunteer Association doing the everyday work. The new LBH&G Board drew up a resolution detailing the structure of the Volunteer Association, and with updates as needed, the structure remains in effect.

Through these formative years the Volunteers conducted yearly training sessions, became known for public tours and a Children's Tour program, developed a professional Archives program, grew the Gift Shop and the Rose Garden, and — along with being self-supportive in terms of programs like these — set aside funds to contribute to every major rehabilitation effort performed at the site.

For the first few years the City provided a succession of caretakers who lived on the top floor of the Carriage House. Later it became apparent that we needed office and storage space (and office help: first a lone half-time clerk provided by the City), so the upstairs space was remodeled for that purpose and the caretaker's job was eliminated.

1985/1986: Funds from a property donated upon the death of Bob Whiting, who had worked for Mrs. Burbank many years, were combined with Volunteer-raised money to create architectural plans and build an interior form into the Carriage House. During the months the City-run construction went on we operated from the Greenhouse. Visitors didn't mind a bit, but it was difficult for us Volunteers, especially as the weather heated up in May of that year — when it didn't rain! We were proud to open our beautifully renovated Carriage House Museum and Gift Shop in June of 1986.

During the 1980s a variety of special events were planned and carried out by the Volunteer Association in an effort to raise additional funds and to bring more people to

the site. These included Living History Days in 1984 and 1987 and Ice Cream Socials in 1985 and 1989.

During the **late 1980s** memorable events occurred such as the death and removal of the Cedar of Lebanon, replication of the Carriage House cupola by volunteer contractors, and rehabilitation of the inner Courtyard and parts of the Greenhouse. But these matters were only a pale preview of the three years we endured while the entire Gardens were rehabilitated and renovated in the early 1990s.

1990/91/92: Most current Volunteers are familiar with the Gardens as only as they are now. We have the Memorial area honoring Burbank (left intact from its dedication in 1960), surrounded by demonstration beds and signage explaining Luther Burbank's work. We have a stunning Rose Garden with big, beautiful trellis arches. We have wide brick pathways and an open, inviting site. What we have now was a MAJOR change which cost the City about a million dollars. Volunteer-generated funding paid for the initial planning and for the Graphic Wall, together totaling about $100,000 — not a small contribution! Planning for the rehab at the Board and City level had taken about a year, essentially 1989; the work itself was done in three very messy phases covering most of the next three years. Dedication of its completion and of the Graphic Wall was in **1992**.

Throughout, the Volunteer programs continued even though we were dusty, fenced off in various places, had to devise alternative routes for tours, and so on. Our Volunteers hung in there, and our visitors loved it. There is something about watching construction that interests almost everyone, and we had good press during and after the project.

The Garden Rehab steered our entire operation, and the Volunteer Association, in new directions. Previously the Burbank Home was the major attraction with the Carriage House and Greenhouse the secondary draws, but the surrounding garden had been just a nice, green park. Now, we became much more Garden-oriented. A new Garden Curator focused attention on Burbank plants, and a new part of her job was to supervise a whole new crew of Volunteer Gardeners added to the Association (while before, we had only a few Rose Gardeners). Tours were enhanced to lead visitors through the Gardens. The property gradually became integrated as a living museum honoring Burbank, with visible evidence of the kind of work he did. We showed off the site with a series of Garden Expositions from 1995 through 1999.

2000: A team effort between the LBH&G Board, City staff and Volunteers had "run our show" successfully for many years. Unfortunately, the times and the economy were about to undergo dramatic change. By the middle of the first decade of the New Millennium the City found it necessary to cut funding from all areas, including Luther Burbank Home & Gardens. Staff support was reduced, all but basic maintenance was eliminated, and lengthy discussions about solutions ensued. These discussions continued for the next few years as the City's financial situation worsened.

The eventual result in 2009/10: The LBH&G Board was dissolved by a formal action of the City Council. A new 501(c) 3 nonprofit entity, the Luther Burbank Home & Gardens Association (LBHGA), was formed to oversee our operation under an agreement with the City, still the owner of the site and assisting as funds allow.

The LBHGA Board and the Volunteer Association have an agreement also — to work cooperatively and imaginatively so that our programs flourish and grow into the future. Attention is being given to the use of internet publicity and other new technologies to bring our programs and needs before the public. Experience with events such as Midsummer Garden Tea, and our annual Holiday Open House (held now for over three decades), will benefit us as we plan for other fundraising events in the future.

Maintaining and improving our programs and our irreplaceable historic site will take energy, dedication and hard work, as it has in the past. But our Volunteer Association has weathered change for over 30 years, and we are looking forward to the challenge.

Dee Blackman, originally written 2006/updated 2010