

History Comes Alive!



by Hynda Rudd,
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LEFT: Dodger Stadium under construction, 1961. MIDDLE: Eviction in Chavez Ravine: Abrana Arechiga, 63, weeps as she reads an eviction notice tacked on her home by Deputy Sheriffs, ordering the family to move from Chavez Ravine to make way for the Dodger ballpark. Five children are members of two families who must get off the property by 9 a.m. Monday. Photo date: April 10, 1959. (This photo originally appeared in the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner.) RIGHT: Walter O'Malley in front of an almost-completed Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine, 1962.



From Brooklyn to Los Angeles: The 'Unbelievable' Story of the Dodgers

■ With another baseball season upon us, *Alive!* columnist Hynda Rudd tells the story of how a baseball team was born, and a neighborhood died.

As Los Angeles approaches the rites of Spring and the opening day at Dodger Stadium April 12, it became obvious when my daughter, Melinda Feldman, suggested that this column should review the history of how this beloved sport came to Los Angeles. And so it shall be.

Dodger Stadium was the first privately financed Major League facility since the opening of Yankee Stadium back in 1923. Opening day for this monumental occasion was April 10, 1962. The cost to build the Stadium with a 56,000 seating capacity was \$23 million. The Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley paid \$494,000 to complete the purchase of Chavez Ravine. The property was valued at the time at \$92,000. The architect was Emil Praeger. Dodger Stadium, which also hosted the Los Angeles Angels from April 1962 to September 1965, was considered one of the sport showcases of its time in the United States. But, the Stadium did not become a reality in Los Angeles without a troubled local past.

The story begins in an area known as Chavez Ravine that overlooks downtown Los Angeles. This canyon community was named for pioneer Julian Chavez. He lived in the area from approximately 1810 to 1879. He was a member of the City's first Common (City) Council in 1850. Those minutes, with the Chavez signature, can be found in the City Archives in Spanish with an English translation. He was also known to have served on the first County Board of Supervisors.

Originally, Chavez Ravine was a potter's field in 1850. Later, the site became a small-pox infirmary, then a tuberculosis sanitarium, and then a Jewish site for the Hebrew Benevolent Society Cemetery from 1855 to 1910 prior to the land becoming a barrio for an established but poor Mexican-American community. Many of these residents had fled persecution in Mexico with the intent of finding a secure home nestled in the hills of this canyon. But, in time, they once again, would become uprooted!

A later account of the Chavez Ravine transition begins back in 1946 when it became known to the City of Los Angeles through the City's Planning Commission as

one of eleven "blighted urban areas" in the City. This area was considered improper land use.

Most housing was considered sub-standard; there were poor street layouts; there was a lack of proper sanitation; juvenile delinquency was rampant; and tuberculosis was evident. By 1948, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) had taken an interest in Chavez Ravine.

On July 24, 1950, the residents of Chavez Ravine received a letter from the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. This overwhelming communication stated "that a public housing development will be built on this location for families of low income ... The house[s] you are living in [are] included."

The letter continued by stating that the new federal housing project, the Elysian Park Heights development, co-designed by Robert Alexander and world-renowned architect Richard Neutra, would be available to the Chavez Ravine residents, if they were eligible for public housing. In October 1950, the City Council approved \$110 million for 10,000 public housing units for all eleven "blighted urban areas."

In 1951, foes of public housing often referring to it as 'creeping Socialism,' were beginning to rear their public head. By December of that year, the City Council voted 8 to 7 to cancel the contract for redevelopment.

The Housing Authority then asked the courts to rule on the legality of the Council cancellation. In response, the Council asked for a referendum on June 3, 1952, for the public to vote to continue or abandon the public housing developments. The California Supreme Court in April 1952 ruled that the City Council could not revoke the Housing Authority contract. Also, the referendum would not have legality for the contract cancellation. Nevertheless, the City held the election, and more than 600,000 people voted by a 3-to-2 margin to abandon public housing. California Senators William F. Knowland and Richard M. Nixon pressed for federal legislation to make the contract cancellation legal.

Meanwhile on the other side of the country in Brooklyn, New York, Walter O'Malley, an attorney and owner of the major league baseball team the Brooklyn Dodgers, was turned down by local authorities when he requested to build a new, larger stadium in New York to replace their home, Ebbets Field. Other major league teams were moving from their original habitats to far off destinations, sometimes halfway across the

country. This was an inspiration to O'Malley.

Back in Chavez Ravine, most of the residents of the area had sold their property and left according to the law set down by the Housing Authority. Some of those properties were torched for the purposes of training Fire Department personnel. Other sites were auctioned off for valuable items including bricks, windows, etc. Still other people of the area refused to leave because they wanted fair value for their property and resented what had happened to their neighborhood. Later, many of those independent individuals were literally removed from their property by force.

By the fall of 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court had reaffirmed the findings of the California court rulings that the cancellation of the housing contract was illegal. During that era of "communist red-baiting" in America, three top administrators of the Housing Authority had been fired after being called before the State Senate Un-American Activities Committee; they all pled the Fifth Amendment. In July 1953, Norris Poulson became the 47th mayor of the City. His platform was to remove "federal domination of the City." He then renegotiated with the weakened Housing Authority so that Chavez Ravine and other urban blighted area housing projects would be abandoned. In August of the same year, the Housing Authority sold 170 acres of Chavez Ravine land to the City for \$1.25 million, a loss to the federal government of \$4 million. Congress mandated that the City use the land "for public purposes only."

It has been said that Mayor Poulson and some of the City Council of the time were interested in turning the City-owned acreage in Chavez Ravine into a major league baseball field. The first team considered was the Washington Senators. It became apparent later that O'Malley and local Democrats, the Mayor, City Council

members Kenneth Hahn and Rosalind (Roz) Wiener Wyman, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's son James found each other. The City felt that a major league team would be profitable economically and positive for public relations for the country's third largest city.

In March of 1957, the Mayor and other city and county officials met with O'Malley to offer him a site in Chavez Ravine for the Brooklyn Dodgers. On June 3, 1958, a referendum was set allowing the city to sell an additional 130 acres or 300 acres total to the Dodger organization. By a vote of less than two-percent, the Dodger organization won. In October of that year, the City Council approved a resolution to transfer Chavez Ravine to the Dodgers. Once again the City Council was admonished by the courts for illegal delegation of duty and public trust. Also, at that time, after much legal and political negotiations, Walter O'Malley convinced New York Giants owner Horace Stoneman to move his team to San Francisco.

On January 13, 1959, the California Supreme Court ruled for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

In May of that year, under the use of eminent domain the City had the police compel then bulldozers evict the final few families that had refused to leave Chavez Ravine. Construction of Dodger Stadium began on June 3, 1959, on the one-year anniversary of the referendum vote approving the transfer of Chavez Ravine to the Dodgers. Original plans to open the Stadium in 1960 suffered from many building delays. Finally, Dodger Stadium, on the hill, became a reality on April 10, 1962, for its opening day festivities.

It should also be noted that the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958, and played major league baseball for four years at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. The new Los Angeles Dodgers team played their first game on April 18, 1958, defeating the San Francisco Giants 6-5 before a crowd of more than 70,000 people.

In last month's *Alive!*, Hynda wrote about the history of the various former City halls in Los Angeles. Here is another photo (taken near the time of the building's official use) of the earliest of L.A.'s first City Hall. (The photo we used is a modern photo of the same building.) Enjoy!

