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# Los Angeles and the Dodger War of 1957-1961

CARY S. HENDERSON  
James Madison University

In the 1950's the baseball map underwent drastic alterations as established franchises long associated with cities in the East shifted West. Baseball had, of course, been a commercial operation, but somehow uprooting these old, sometimes cherished and locally colorful teams was exceedingly traumatic. Connie Mack's old Philadelphia A's were wooed to a new municipal stadium in Kansas City, and the Boston Braves accepted a generous offer from Milwaukee. Of course, Mack was dead and the Braves, Bees, or whatever, had never elicited the fanaticism of Bostonians as had the Red Sox.

This is a story about a team very closely identified with its old home town, the borough of Brooklyn, with many legends, and with a solid core of fanatical fans. The Dodgers were synonymous with color and zaniness and considered an inseparable part of the Brooklyn scene.

Walter Francis O'Malley, the Dodger boss who had purchased the team from Branch Rickey in 1949, was as shrewd an entrepreneur as baseball has ever produced. He did believe the Dodgers belonged in Brooklyn, but he also knew they should be generating far more income than decaying old Ebbets Field permitted. For years he had let New York City officials know that a new ball park was needed and that other cities were giving significant monetary assistance to their teams in such matters. But, he insisted, the ballpark must be in Brooklyn, not in Flushing Meadows where the city offered to subsidize the effort.

Failing in this effort, O'Malley had sent out feelers to Los Angeles after the '56 Series which had been witnessed by that city's mayor, Norris Poulson. Poulson hoped to land the Dodgers and had even suggested a stadium site — city-owned (largely) Chavez Ravine, which had originally been purchased for a public housing project. No housing was ever built on this 185 acre tract, so it was available for a "public purpose."

Negotiations became serious in early 1957 when O'Malley purchased a forty-four seat jet plane and the Los Angeles Angels, a Pacific Coast franchise belonging to the Chicago Cubs organization. Obviously the Angels and Wrigley Field were incidental to O'Malley's ultimate purpose of bringing the Dodgers to Los Angeles.

Mayor Poulson had no doubts that they were coming. While O'Malley kept talks alive in New York, he began a campaign to induce the L.A. City Council to make a generous offer. However, it was soon evident that no stadium would be built with city funds. Only \$2 million could be produced and O'Malley's projected stadium would cost over \$12 million. The 185 acres could be used if the "public purpose" restriction in its deed could be satisfied. O'Malley was obviously disappointed at this rather piddling offer for a team which had been in the previous World Series against the Yankees, once as winner and once as loser.

A formal contract was signed in late September, 1957, although it had been adopted by only the barest majority and was potentially vulnerable. Immediately the opponents of this "giveaway" came to life. A petition was circulated and enough signatures collected to force a public referendum on the Dodger contract, scheduled for June, 1958. Then a suit was filed in State Superior Court to invalidate the contract, based on the fact that a profit-making baseball team was not a "public purpose." A second suit was filed in the Superior Court in Los Angeles on the same grounds.

In April, 1958, the Pasadena Court spoke first, declaring the contract null and void, even implying fraud. This nullified the barely-favorable referendum held on June 3 and tied the matter up in the Courts until the fall of 1959. The California Supreme Court had overturned both unfavorable Superior Court rulings, but the complainants appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Thus, no work could legally be done on Dodger Stadium until that august body decided not to hear the case.

Unlike all the other baseball franchise shifts and expansion teams created, the Dodgers bought much of the land and paid almost the entire cost of clearing the land and building. Hence, for O'Malley it was a gamble no other owner was willing to risk. The Dodgers, for example, were liable for substantial property tax assessments, from \$1 to 2.5 million per year. But the gamble paid off handsomely; the Dodgers have set such high attendance records that only they can set new ones.