

Baseball and the Urban Development of San Francisco: Politics, Ball Parks and the Neighborhood

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Although baseball's development in the Bay Area was anteceded by the game in the East by 20 years or so, at first glance its evolution follows a remarkably similar course. The game's boosters initially struggled with professionalism, Sabbatarianism, and financial stability, just as they did in New York and Boston. In their essential physical features, the ball parks and grounds were also very similar. Numerous incidents and individuals, however, gave baseball a unique Western flavor in San Francisco.

A vast majority of San Francisco's early baseball facilities were constructed in a large area called the Mission District. The district was an area dominated by family units and home ownership. Land prices were relatively low and mass transit lines coursed throughout the entire District, which enable middle-class patrons to get to the ball park's turnstiles.

The first organized baseball game in San Francisco was played in 1860 on a sand lot in the Mission. Using a ball made from sock yam and rubber from a discarded pair of galoshes, the San Francisco Base Ball Club and the Red Rovers battled to a 33-33 tie. This game was followed by others which were played on patches of conveniently located open ground.

In 1868 Recreation Grounds, the first wooden park in the West and located in the Mission, was opened. Four thousand spectators paid to see a game between the Eagles and the Wide Awakes of Oakland. In addition to baseball games, cricket matches, track and field and circus events paid the rent.

Cozy Central Park was constructed in 1883 near the downtown civic center. Both foul poles were less than 300 feet from home plate. Approximately 150 feet out toward center field were two additional flag poles which marked the home run territory; any ball hit over the fence between the foul line and second set of flag poles was scored as a ground rule double.

On April 3, 1887, the California League opened the Haight Street Grounds directly across from the Golden Gate Park. Over the next two decades, the Haight Street Grounds proved to be the most consistent source of income for the League.

Recreation Park was opened in 1897 and proclaimed as the city's most elaborate field. Recreation Park was the home of the San Francisco Seals, who joined the PCL for its inaugural season in 1903. Unfortunately, it was among the 28,000 buildings that were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.

The new Recreation Park, a 15,000 seat facility became the home of the Seals in 1907. The new Park was notable for its two notorious sections, the "Gambling Section" and the "Booze Cage." The first was located in the upper grandstand section along the first base side. Although gambling was illegal, no one interfered with the action as bettors waged on the outcomes of games, at-bats and pitches. The "Booze Cage" was comprised of 8 rows of bleachers, located underneath the grandstand. Fans who sat in the "Booze Cage" received either a shot of whiskey, two beers, or a ham sandwich with their 75 cent admission.

In 1914, Ewing Field was opened near the Presidio. It was the city's first fire-proof grounds. Unfortunately, fog was a consistent problem in the park, and after one year, the Seal moved back to rickety Recreation Park.

1931 marked the debut of the \$1 million Seals Stadium. The new park sported an elegant Romanesque-facade along the single-level, uncovered grandstand; there was no warning track at the base of the 30 foot outfield wall; white stars bearing the names of players who had managed to hit balls completely out of the stadium adorned the right-center field wall; and advertising billboards hung on all of the outfield fence, including the hitter's background in center. Seal Stadium served as the home for San Francisco's PCL entry, and the Giants played

their first two campaigns there in 1958 and 1959, before relocating to Candlestick Park in 1960.