

**“Henry, don’t go out there. It’s cold and
it’s damp.”:
Geographical Stability in the
Major Leagues, 1903-1953**

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From 1903, when the American League solidified its eight-team arrangement by moving the Baltimore Orioles to New York, where they became the Highlanders (later called the Yankees), until 1953, when the National League’s Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee, major league baseball experienced rock-solid geographical stability. Each major league had eight teams located in a total of ten cities. Single teams played in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Washington. Four cities had two teams: Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. And New York had three teams: the Giants, the Yankees. and the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Then as now, major league owners complained habitually that running a baseball team was a proposition guaranteed to lost money. Owners preferred to call themselves sportsmen instead of businessmen, and they took comfort in the 1922 U.S. Supreme Court decision that refused to define baseball as “trade or commerce in the commonly accepted use of these words.”

Whether their teams operated at a loss or not, no owners during this period tried to improve their economic prospects by relocating franchises. The Braves limped along in St. Louis. When franchise movement finally did occur, two of the first three teams to pull up stakes left the East for the Midwest, and the third abandoned the Midwest for the East. No team took off for the West coast until the Dodgers and Giants did so after the 1957 season.

This paper examines the reasons for this geographical stability. Why did no franchise move from one city to another for a half-century? Why did neither league expand from the existing eight teams to embrace other economically attractive cities? Why, when relocation finally did come, was the West Coast not a primary target? And why, when the Dodgers and Giants announced their intention to move, did significant elements voice opposition?

The research for this paper has been conducted in the library and archives of The Sporting News, one of the pre-eminent research facilities for sport in the country. Much of the evidence will be gleaned from the pages of The Sporting News itself. For most of the period under consideration, The Sporting News was devoted exclusively to baseball. Virtually a trade publication, The Sporting News gave intensive coverage not only to the game on the field but also to the business side of the sport from a proactive perspective. The corporate library and archives contains other significant materials to round out the research effort.

This paper shows that baseball’s owners formed an innately conservative group that resisted change irrespective of potential economic benefit. We expect to see also that shifts in baseball’s geographic base had to wait for advances in transportation, especially transcontinental airplane travel. And finally we expect to discover that opposition to the Dodgers and Giants moving west was based on a combination of self-interest from the dissidents and fear of the unknown.