

CHAVEZ RAVINE AND THE DODGERS: MYTHS AND REALITIES

By John S. Caragozian

An oft-repeated myth is that the Dodgers forsook their loyal Brooklyn fans and swooped into Los Angeles, literally bulldozing a poor Mexican-American community to build Dodger Stadium.

The truth is deeper and worth pondering.

Dodger Stadium sits on land now known as Chavez Ravine, a mile north of L.A.'s City Hall. Since they began arriving in 1781, Europeans used the hilly land — originally a Tongva Native American site — as a ranch, brickyard, and cemetery. By the 1920s, Chavez Ravine had three residential neighborhoods known as Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop. They included mostly owner-occupied (and many owner-built) homes, a public elementary school, and a nearby church.

By 1950, those neighborhoods contained almost 600 households. Approximately 85% of residents were Mexican-American, many of them immigrants with blue collar jobs. Often, residents chose Chavez Ravine because of housing segregation, which prevented Mexican-Americans from buying or renting elsewhere in Los Angeles.

The neighborhoods had city water and electricity. They were also subject to city zoning and building codes and to local property taxes. Otherwise, the city largely ignored these neighborhoods. The city never paved the streets or installed streetlights, and few roads and no public transportation connected Chavez Ravine with the rest of the city. Indeed, a 1948 visitor described Chavez Ravine as a “poor man’s Shangri-la.” Don Normark, “Chavez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story” (1999), at 11.

After World War II, Los Angeles faced a housing shortage for thousands of military veterans, formerly imprisoned Japanese-Americans, and migrants. Reform mayor Fletcher Bowron and an activist City Housing Authority believed that public housing offered at least a transitional solution. The city identified Chavez Ravine as a suitable site, because it was underdeveloped and “blighted” acreage closest to downtown.

In July 1950, the authority mailed letters to all Chavez Ravine residents stating that their land would be developed for public housing named Elysian Park Heights. If owners would not voluntarily sell, the city had eminent domain power to condemn the homes. The letter added that dispossessed residents would have priority in becoming renters (though this priority was illusory for homeowners and non-citizens, neither being eligible for public housing). See *generally*, Eric Nusbaum, “Stealing Home: Los Angeles, the Dodgers and the Lives Caught in Between” (2020), at 95-157.

The same year, the city signed final contracts with the federal government for Elysian Park Heights, including loans and advances. Per internationally famous architect Richard Neutra’s original plans, 10,000 people would be housed in a mix of low- and high-rise buildings sited with

the natural topography. Unusual for public housing at the time, the project would be racially integrated. L.A.'s sole Mexican-American City Councilman, Ed Roybal, and other Mexican-American and church leaders supported the project. *See id.* at 149-59.

Chavez Ravine's residents protested, but the city proceeded with purchases and condemnations of Chavez Ravine homes.

Almost immediately, however, the tide turned against public housing. Nationally, McCarthyism held sway, and public housing was deemed socialist. In L.A., a leading housing authority official was accused of being a Communist Party member and refused to answer questions about such membership. Moreover, local business leaders opposed public housing on the ground that the private sector could do the job. *See id.* at 190-197.

In December 1951, the City Council voted 8 to 7 to cancel the Chavez Ravine project. In early 1952, the council modified its position, voting to hold a public referendum.

The city's housing authority then sued the city to compel performance under the signed federal contracts. The California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the authority; the city could not abandon the project after signing. *Housing Authority of City of Los Angeles v. City of Los Angeles*, 38 Cal. 2d 853, 857-66 (1952).

However, the city still held the referendum. In June 1952, 59 percent of voters opposed the Chavez Ravine project.

The next year, U.S. Congressman Norris Poulson, touting his opposition to public housing, defeated incumbent Bowron in the L.A. mayoral election. Mayor Poulson lobbied congress for permission to abandon the never-constructed Chavez Ravine project. He succeeded, and the city was allowed to keep the acquired land, provided that it be used only for some "public purpose."

The land laid fallow after the departure of most Chavez Ravine residents. One of the remaining residents sued to reverse the condemnation of his house because the original basis—public housing — had been abandoned. The courts rejected the suit, holding that, once title had passed to the city, the transaction could not be undone. *Arechiga v. Housing Authority of City of Los Angeles*, 159 Cal. App. 2d 657, 659-60 (1958).

Meanwhile, across the country, Major League Baseball's Brooklyn Dodgers were repeatedly thwarted in their efforts to build a new stadium to replace their aging Ebbets Field. Even when winning their first World Series in 1955, the Dodgers averaged only 13,000 people per home game.

Los Angeles officials met that year with Dodger owner Walter O'Malley about the possibility of moving the team to L.A., but O'Malley was non-committal.

The next year, however, O'Malley sold Ebbets Field (retaining lease-back rights) and bought the minor-league Los Angeles Angels, including their ten-acre home ballpark in South L.A., Wrigley Field.

In 1957, the Dodgers and the city signed an agreement for the Dodgers to move to Los Angeles. The agreement's terms included: (a) the city would initially lease to the Dodgers 300 Chavez Ravine acres (185 of which the city already had already acquired) and, after 20 years, transfer title to the Dodgers, (b) the city would spend \$2 million to level and otherwise prepare the site, (c) the Dodgers would build a 50,000-seat stadium at their own expense, (d) the Dodgers would set aside 40 Chavez Ravine acres for 20 years as a city-administered recreation site and spend \$500,000 to build and \$60,000 annually to maintain facilities there, (e) the Dodgers would transfer Wrigley Field to the city, and (f) the city would try to eliminate the "public purpose" restriction on the Chavez Ravine acreage, failing which the entire agreement would be void.

The deal's opponents pursued two tracks. First, they succeeded in calling a referendum. They campaigned that the deal was a give-away of taxpayer assets, but voters approved the deal, 52 to 48 percent.

Second, opponents filed lawsuits, arguing that transferring city land to a private party, namely the Dodgers, was illegal. The trial courts agreed, but the California Supreme Court held that the city had discretion to enter into the Dodger agreement. *City of Los Angeles v. Superior Court*, 51 Cal. 2d 423 (1959). The supreme court reasoned that the public was directly benefitting from the acquisition of Wrigley Field and the use of the Chavez Ravine recreational site. In addition, the court noted that the Dodgers' would pay local property taxes. Although the Dodgers would also benefit, the court deemed it "immaterial," especially given the city council's declaration that the city no longer needed the Chavez Ravine acreage. *See id.* at 432-35.

The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles beginning with the 1958 season, playing in the L.A. Memorial Coliseum while Dodger Stadium was being constructed. By 1958, perhaps 20 families remained in Chavez Ravine. Sheriff's deputies forcibly removed the last residents before the city bulldozed their homes.

Dodger Stadium opened in 1962 and is now the third-oldest ballpark in Major League Baseball. Most of Chavez Ravine's former home sites are not under the stadium itself, but, rather, under parking lots

Looking back, hundreds of families suffered grievously in losing their Chavez Ravine homes. The later decision to abandon the public housing project deprived thousands more Angelenos of affordable housing. On the other hand, Dodger Stadium has benefitted the city financially and culturally, with, for example, decades of attendance totaling over 100 million. Would L.A. be better off with housing (private or public) in Chavez Ravine instead of Dodger Stadium?

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