

## MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

# Preserving a 60-year-old postcard

**Joe Mock**

Special to USA TODAY

What are the two oldest ballparks still in use in Major League Baseball?

Even those with a modest knowledge of the sport know the answer to this trivia question: Fenway Park (1912) and Wrigley Field (1914).

But did you know that the third oldest park in the big leagues is Dodger Stadium?

With its pristine landscaping, gleaming exterior and impeccable interior, it doesn't seem possible that it could be that old, but it's true. This week marks the 60th anniversary of its opening.

Few newer parks look as shiny and modern.

## Destined for the West Coast

If it's hard to imagine Dodger Stadium being 60 years old, think for a moment about the places where major league baseball was played in the early 1950s. The St. Louis Browns and Cardinals were the teams farthest to the west, leaving the entire left half of a map of the USA bereft of big-league clubs.

Even when the last-place Browns fled St. Louis after the 1953 season, they moved east to Baltimore to become the Orioles.

The major metropolises on the West Coast were feeling left out.

On Sept. 23, 1954, the Los Angeles City Council passed a resolution directing all city agencies to work together to find a site that would be "suitable to the Major League Baseball Clubs' owners" for a ballpark to be built.

The resolution added that big-league baseball was "destined for the West Coast of the United States."

Walter O'Malley had become the primary owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1950. A copy of the Los Angeles resolution was sent to all 16 MLB owners, with the one sent to Brooklyn landing on O'Malley's desk. In the coming years, leaders in Los Angeles targeted the New York Giants and the Dodgers as likely candidates to move west, as both yearned for a new park.

"My dad's focus was really on Brooklyn," O'Malley's son Peter tells USA TODAY Sports from his office in downtown Los Angeles. "There were overtures from elected officials here in LA wanting to talk to him about moving here, but I



**Dodger President Stan Kasten refers to the view beyond the outfield as Dodger Stadium's "postcard." It was paramount to the team that this view remain the same as when the ballpark opened 60 years ago.** JOE MOCK

know for a fact he turned them down."

Starting when he was an attorney and minority stockholder in the Dodgers in the late 1940s, the elder O'Malley worked to build a replacement for aging Ebbets Field somewhere in Brooklyn. He even investigated building the first domed stadium so the Dodgers wouldn't lose revenue due to rainouts.

There were "roadblocks politically" in Brooklyn, says Peter O'Malley, and only after 10 years of trying did his father realize he needed to start looking elsewhere. "And that's when the dance with LA began."

## Heading west

The arrangement called for O'Malley to move his Dodgers to Los Angeles at the same time as Horace Stoneham moved the New York Giants to San Francisco. While a stadium was being built for the Dodgers near downtown in an area

called Chavez Ravine, the team played at cavernous LA Coliseum from 1958 through 1961.

Los Angelenos went crazy for their new baseball team, as over 1.8 million fans attended games during their first season.

"The person who played the most major role in the acceptance of the Dodgers is Vin Scully," explains Peter O'Malley. "Everyone brought transistor radios, so you could hear Vinny throughout the Coliseum. Vinny introduced us, the franchise, the team, our family, to the city."

Ground was broken for Dodger Stadium on Sept. 17, 1959. "He wanted to build it himself," says Peter O'Malley of his father. "He wanted to help with the design of it. He wanted to own it. He wanted to maintain it. Those kinds of things really appealed to him."

For the architecture, his father worked with Emil Praeger, the talented engineer who'd designed Holman Stadium at the

Dodgers' spring training home in Vero Beach, Florida. O'Malley was on the Dodger Stadium construction site every day. He even asked Praeger to design one of the elevator-shaft towers with a little apartment at the top of it.

"That's how much he was in love with the property," explains Peter O'Malley, adding that his mother talked his father out of the apartment idea.

The night before the first game at Dodger Stadium, O'Malley threw a dinner party at the Stadium Club within the ballpark. Even as the O'Malleys were dining with their closest friends from Brooklyn and business titans from LA, out in the park, workers were painting the outfield fence. Even the outfield grass was painted so it would look as green as possible.

"Talk about a photo finish," says Peter O'Malley.

"When it opened, my dad was truly happy, and I think relieved."



## Opening day

Peter O'Malley was 24 on April 10, 1962. He had graduated from Wharton School of Business and was immersed in the family's baseball enterprise, running the team's spring training complex, then known as Dodgertown. He wasn't going to miss the first game at his father's shining showplace, though.

The opener was on "a beautiful day," he recalls. "There was just a very warm feeling for my sister, my mother and dad and friends. It was an accomplishment."

A glance at the box score of the game shows that a capacity crowd of 52,564 watched the Cincinnati Reds beat the Dodgers 6-3.

A closer look shows that 16 players appeared in the game for the Dodgers. Only three of them are still living: Maury Wills (age 89) was the shortstop; Frank Howard (85) pinch hit for Wills; Tim Lincecum (84) pinch hit for a pitcher. Sadly, Tommy Davis, who would win the batting title and set the team record for RBI in 1962, died on April 3 at 83.

"It's hard to believe it's been 60 years," says Howard from his home in Aldie, Virginia.

"We went from a hitter's park – especially for right-handed hitters with the short left field – at the Coliseum to a bigger ballpark at Chavez Ravine," he recalls. "The Dodgers wanted to cater their personnel to the (new) park, so they really became known for their pitching with Don Drysdale, Sandy Koufax and Johnny Podres."

His opinion of Dodger Stadium is that it's still "the premier piece of architecture as far as ballparks go. And it's always so clean. You could go in and eat off the floor of the restroom."

## Everyone's a critic

Baseball fans can rejoice that so much Dodger history has been maintained and displayed on [walteromalley.com](http://walteromalley.com). There you'll find galleries of photos and memorabilia that the O'Malley family has preserved, as well as scans of actual letters to Walter O'Malley from Walt Disney, Harpo Marx, Danny Kay, Jerry Lewis, Johnny Carson ... and Milton Berle.

"As you know, Ruth and I and our guests have waited as long as thirty-five to forty minutes for an elevator. Then, when it does arrive, we can't get in. If I wanted to faint, I couldn't find a place to fall," writes Berle two months after Dodger Stadium opened.

The comedian known as Uncle Miltie wasn't finished taking swipes at the new park. "Who hired the usherettes ... Eichman?? Walter, I don't think that you want your Stadium run like a concentration



**As part of the new center field area, mementos from Tommy Lasorda's office are displayed in the original player lockers from 1962. The lockers were removed from the Dodger clubhouse during the 2013 renovations.** LOS ANGELES DODGERS

camp with Dachau damsels."

Remember, this was 1962. Berle referenced a concentration camp and misspelled the name of Nazi Adolph Eichmann, but spell check was a little spotty in those days. As was political correctness.

Jerry Lewis was kinder in his letter to O'Malley: "I can't begin to tell you how happy I am with the tickets. My pride in being a Dodger fan is only exceeded by our friendship."

## Preserving the postcard

After working in the Dodgers minor league organization, Peter O'Malley came to Los Angeles in 1967 as vice president of stadium operations. By 1970, he took over from his father as team president. (The elder O'Malley died in 1979.) Peter operated the Dodgers for 28 years, overseeing eight division titles, five National League pennants and two World Series crowns.

In 1998, the O'Malley family sold the team and Dodger Stadium to media giant News Corp. They, in turn, sold controlling interest to Frank McCourt in 2004. Following a period of financial turmoil – including bankruptcy – Guggenheim Partners paid \$2.15 billion for the franchise and ballpark in 2012. One of the investors in this group, Stan Kasten, is now the Dodgers president.

Kasten had worked with Janet Marie Smith in Atlanta while he was general manager of the NBA's Hawks and NHL's Thrashers and president of the Atlanta Braves. He gave Smith the responsibility of converting the Olympic Stadium into Turner Field and of overseeing the design of what is today called State Farm Arena in Atlanta.

When he joined the Dodgers in 2012, Kasten was anxious to make improvements to Dodger Stadium.

"This building is iconic and historic, but when you refer to wiring and plumbing using those words, that's not good," he quips.

Smith was brought in to make as many impactful changes as possible as quickly as possible.

"She has a passion for this. She has a reverence for our game's history," Kasten notes.

And of utmost importance to him, the appearance of Dodger Stadium was not to change, no matter what construction was to be done.

The park "has the most iconic view in sports. The view of these bleachers, those palm trees, those San Gabriel Mountains is iconic and can never be replicated. We have to treasure that and revere it. That has been an article of faith for both Janet and me," he adds.

Kasten refers to the idyllic view looking out beyond the outfield as Dodger Stadium's "postcard." He adds "the most important thing I've ever done is to restore this franchise and this venue to its rightful position in the sports firmament."

When Smith took on the initial round of renovations, she was happy that the previous owners had valued the importance of continuing the ballpark's look.

"One of the beautiful things about Dodger Stadium is that nobody messed it up," she says. "Maybe Dodger Stadium is just so bloody strong architecturally that it tells everybody what to do. I don't know that every building has the luxury of having people who give it as much thought as I think all of these owners have over the years."

The first wave of renovations took place during the offseason following the 2012 season. Concourses were widened, restrooms enlarged, concession stands were significantly upgraded, and the players received a new clubhouse. Both fans and players were thrilled – as was Peter O'Malley. "Janet Marie is a superstar. I credit Stan and the ballclub for letting her put in place her vision to enhance while maintaining as much as possible."

But Smith was just getting warmed up.

When Dodger Stadium was initially tabbed to host the 2020 All-Star Game, Smith led the charge to completely reimagine the center field entry to the ballpark. While the pandemic postponed both the 2020 midseason classic and construction on the improvements, the \$100 million area made its debut last season. The Dodgers will finally get to host the All-Star Game this July 19.

"The No. 1 thing about the renovation of center field is that we were faithful to the 1962 pavilions," she explains. "Emil Praeger had designed these originally. That (wavy) roof line is so classic 1960s, mid-century modern. It's so unique to Dodger Stadium. Stan said over and over that you just can't screw that up. Don't screw up the postcard view."

The improvements in center field were numerous, including adding new entry gates, concession stands, elevators, escalators, a landing behind the top row of pavilion seats and lovely lounges underneath those seats. Smith gave new life to memorabilia and decades-old signs from the ballpark, including using the actual players lockers from 1962 as display cases.

Smith is proud of a space created under the right field pavilion seats.

"We've come to call it the Speak Easy, because it's so tiny and hidden away," she says.

Her team carefully researched the plans for the original Stadium Club when Dodger Stadium was first constructed, and the plans are replicated here.

Entering the lounge is like stepping back in time six decades, as all of the tables, chairs, bars, wall coverings and even the TVs look exactly as they did in 1962.

She adds that the space is a nod to famed Southern California architect Edward Fickett, who not only designed the original club in the ballpark, but hundreds of public buildings, homes, resorts and restaurants. It's also a nod to Walter O'Malley, who hosted his family and closest friends in the original Stadium Club the evening before Dodger Stadium's inaugural game, 60 years ago this week.