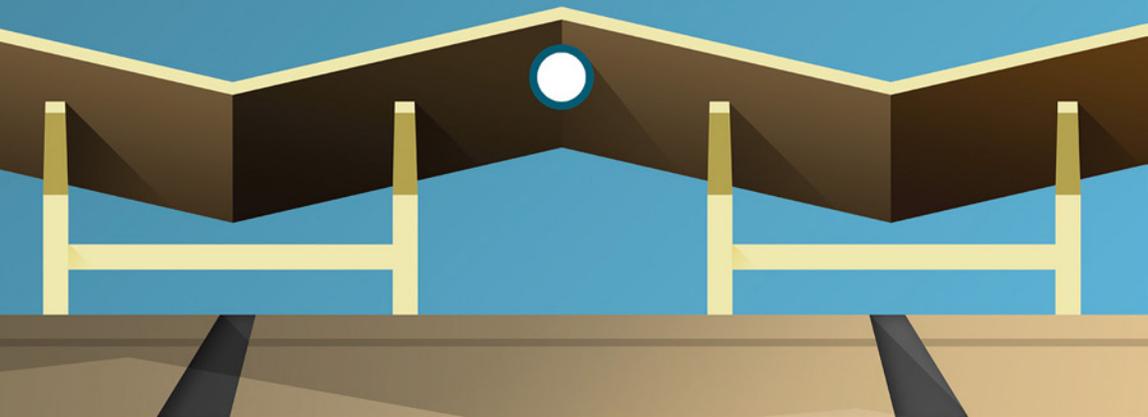


ERIK SHERMAN

DAYBREAK AT CHAVEZ RAVINE

**Fernandomania and the Remaking
of the Los Angeles Dodgers**



Daybreak at Chavez Ravine

DAYBREAK AT CHAVEZ RAVINE

**Fernandomania and the Remaking
of the Los Angeles Dodgers**

ERIK SHERMAN

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln

© 2023 by Erik Sherman

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

The University of Nebraska Press is part of a land-grant institution with campuses and programs on the past, present, and future homelands of the Pawnee, Ponca, Otoe-Missouria, Omaha, Dakota, Lakota, Kaw, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Peoples, as well as those of the relocated Ho-Chunk, Sac and Fox, and Iowa Peoples.



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sherman, Erik, author.

Title: Daybreak at Chavez Ravine: Fernandomania and the remaking of the Los Angeles Dodgers / Erik Sherman.

Description: Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022043572

ISBN 9781496231017 (hardback)

ISBN 9781496236364 (epub)

ISBN 9781496236371 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Valenzuela, Fernando, 1960- | Los Angeles Dodgers (Baseball team)—History—20th century. | Pitchers (Baseball)—United States—Biography. |

Pitchers (Baseball)—Mexico—Biography.

Classification: LCC GV865.V34 S54 2023 | DDC

796.357092 [B]—dc23/eng/20221013

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043572>

Designed and set in Lyon Text by L. Auten.

For my dear friend Jeanne Glazer
and the countless Mexican immigrants inspired by
Fernando Valenzuela to fulfill their dreams

And in memory of three iconic members of the Dodgers family
who made indelible impressions on Fernando Valenzuela
and who passed away during the creation of this project—
Vin Scully, Tommy Lasorda, and Mike Brito

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
1. A Reluctant Hero	1
2. David versus Goliath	7
3. LA Goes Dodger Blue	15
4. The Mexican Experience	
North of the Border	21
5. Uncut Diamond	29
6. Prelude to Greatness	37
7. The Fable That Came to Life	47
8. A Star Is Born	55
9. The Kiss That Sparked a Movement	61
10. Fernandomania!	73
11. An International Frenzy	87
12. Manias	95
13. Mr. Valenzuela Goes to Washington	101
14. Struck Out	107
15. A Star-Spangled Return	119
16. The Lasorda Effect	125
17. Houston Has a Problem	139
18. Blue Monday	149
19. Speaking “Catcherese”	169
20. Comeback Kids	177
21. The Legend Grows	183
22. Missing the Party	199
23. Leaving LA in Style	209
24. The Long Road Back to Glory	219
25. Legacy	231
Acknowledgments	243

ILLUSTRATIONS

Following page 138

1. Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine
2. Jaime Jarrín, longtime Spanish-language Dodgers broadcaster
3. Legendary Dodgers scout Mike Brito
4. Nomar Garciaparra, a Mexican American All-Star shortstop
5. Longtime Dodger Stadium clubhouse manager Mitch Poole
6. Tommy Lasorda with David Marc Bronow and Erik Sherman
7. Dodgers historian Mark Langill
8. Valenzuela jersey worn at Dodger Stadium
9. Today, roughly 50 percent of fans at Dodgers games are Latino
10. Rick Monday
11. The fortieth anniversary celebration of Fernandomania in 2021
12. Mariachi bands are a regular presence at Dodgers games
13. Valenzuela memorabilia adorn a wall at Dodger Stadium
14. Mural of Valenzuela at Dodger Stadium
15. Pedro Guerrero
16. Steve Garvey

PREFACE

Many of my friends are writers. When I told a few of them that I planned to write a book on Fernando Valenzuela's impact on the Latino community, the idea was generally met with something along the lines of, "Wait, you mean it hasn't been done before?" I knew then that it was a story that needed to be fleshed out in book form, with a deeper dive into the transformative life of a baseball, ethnic, and cultural icon than what's been reported in the media.

I came to understand quickly why another author hadn't undertaken this task. For decades, Valenzuela has been unwilling to cooperate in the writing of a book or movie script of his life—the latter seemingly a natural for a pitcher whose star blazed brightest in the shadows of the iconic Hollywood sign. Without Fernando's help, authors and biopic producers steered clear, believing that, for as great a story as his may be, a book would truly need the input from the subject himself.

At first I was somewhat disappointed, though not entirely surprised, when my communications to Fernando's representative seeking an interview with him were met with something less than enthusiasm. But then one of those writer friends I alluded to earlier reminded me how sometimes the greatest storytelling is done by observing subjects of interest and interviewing those in and around their inner circle rather than the subjects themselves. He reminded me that Gay Talese once wrote a celebrated essay for *Esquire* entitled "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," a profile on the legendary singer and actor despite Sinatra's refusal to cooperate with the renowned writer on the piece. It inspired me to press forward, and the result was more than I could have hoped for. Through voluminous interviews, I would capture a truth about the man that wasn't known by even his biggest fans. And I decided to press even further

beyond those who knew him, expanding my reach to include prominent figures on whom he has had a profound impact.

One of the things I came to realize through my interviews, research, and even a brief interaction with the man was that while Valenzuela is a deeply private and shy individual, there has long been another side to him. While he is universally admired and respected by those around him, this often publicly stoic figure has long been playful, a prankster, and man-childish with teammates and friends. And while he is a man of measured words and an eighth-grade education acquired in Mexico, he is extremely observant and perceptive in his surroundings—whether on the pitcher’s mound, his beloved golf course, or in the press room cafeteria. If his words are few and dry, and if he’s maintained a poker face and made good use of the shoulder shrug in response to certain questions, it’s mostly out of cautiousness, not from a lack of literacy in either his native Spanish or second language of English. He’s long leaned on Ford C. Frick Award winner Jaime Jarrín, the Dodgers’ Spanish-language broadcaster and very much a father figure to him, who served not just as his interpreter (even when he didn’t really need one) but as a shield from beat writers. He’s admittedly reserved, always thinking twice about what to say or do to achieve certain things in his life, then acts accordingly. I would hear repeatedly how his limited use of English later in his career was more by design than an unpolished or substandard understanding of it. All of this created a mystique about the man that still exists today.

He treasures his private life with Linda, his wife of more than forty years, their four grown children, and their grandchildren and has largely managed to keep them all completely out of the spotlight. When approached by promoters to appear at autograph signings, his asking price is reportedly as much as \$40,000 for a couple of hours of work—an exorbitant price tag clearly designed to preclude placing himself in such very public settings. When the Dodgers celebrated the fortieth anniversary of their ’81 World Series championship, Valenzuela, despite having been the brightest star of that team, was the last of the players to arrive at the ballpark; he preferred finishing up eighteen holes of golf. And after he wraps up his work on the Spanish-language broadcasts for the Dodgers’ games, he regularly leaves the stadium after the seventh inning—not just to dodge the LA traffic but also to avoid being stopped every ten feet on his way out by his adoring fans. Into the night he goes,

trying to stay incognito and anonymous, blending in as he enters the crowded elevator and then briskly walking to his reserved parking spot. It's not that he doesn't care about the adulation but rather that he doesn't seek the attention that these events and circumstances bring to him. He simply avoids fanfare at all costs and chooses not to fully embrace his stardom or celebrity. By contrast, he is in his greatest glory driving his silver Corvette to a country club for a leisurely round of golf with friends, joking around, and avoiding talk about himself and his halcyon playing days.

As a result, after more than four decades in the public eye and the bright lights of Los Angeles, he has never made a wrong step publicly. In all those years, he has simply never given his legion of fans a reason to be disappointed in him. As a result, he's long been one of baseball's great ambassadors—if also its least vocal one. The mere mention of his name brings a smile to anyone who knows him.

But Valenzuela's story is hardly just about a reclusive yet beloved former All-Star pitcher from four decades ago. That would sell him short. Coming from humble beginnings in the small, poor town of Etchohuquila, Mexico, Fernando burst onto the baseball scene late in the 1980 season, dominated it the next, and instantly became a social phenomenon by being who he was and what he represented to the Mexican and Latino population in Los Angeles and around the globe. His face and likeness suddenly appeared everywhere—on murals, T-shirts, and advertisements. He was mobbed by fans everywhere he went. He was like a composite of the Beatles—only in Dodger blue. His appeal was universal. He wasn't just a baseball player, he was a healer in a time when, much like today, many Americans viewed Mexicans as second-class citizens. He was to Latinos what Jackie Robinson was to Black Americans. And their feelings for Valenzuela have only grown stronger over the years. There is still a sense of humility in the man that draws people to him. Their jaws drop when they come face to face—or even when they catch a glimpse of their hero. Yet, the sense from many who know him well is that he still doesn't recognize this reality.

The sea change Valenzuela generated on a long-embittered Chavez Ravine more than twenty years after the city's forced removal of its Mexican American residents was more impactful and profound than any no-hitter or World Series game he ever pitched. He was the driv-

ing force during this remarkable “Fernandomania” period of the early 1980s, which helped to unite a racially divided city simmering with anti-Mexican sentiment. He was an inspiration to countless Latinos who identified with him. He was like their Mexican uncle or cousin, with his everyman, unathletic-looking shape. But despite not taking on the appearance of an exemplary physical specimen, he proved he could be the very best in the world at his chosen field. He made Mexican Americans want to be not only ballplayers but doctors, lawyers, teachers, and business professionals. Whether he professed to be or not, he had become a reflection of the great Mexican American civil rights icon Cesar Chavez, a leader to a people largely doing low-paid manual labor. They had come to believe that if Fernando could succeed, so could they. He changed their lives. He was their salvation.

Valenzuela also forever changed the Dodger Stadium landscape, creating multiple generations of Mexican American fans beginning with his rookie year of 1981. Every night he pitched was like a Mexican festival, which notably included some of the very people who had been displaced by the construction of Dodger Stadium. As many as half the fans at Dodgers home games today are of Mexican descent—many of them too young to have seen Fernando pitch, yet wearing his replica jerseys nonetheless. This is a far cry from the pre-Fernando days, when the percentage of people coming to watch the home team play at the ballpark was less than 10 percent Mexican American.

But even to label Valenzuela a trailblazer for Mexican Americans and other Latinos would, once again, sell him short. He also initiated the global bridge for non-American players entering professional baseball—from Japan and South Korea and from countries across Latin America. A strong argument can be made that he introduced baseball to more people around the world than any ballplayer who has ever lived.

Valenzuela’s six dominating All-Star seasons at the beginning of his career were as many as Sandy Koufax had. Fernando’s mastery of his signature pitch—the screwball—baffled hitters and led him to become the first player in the history of the game to be named Rookie of the Year and Cy Young Award winner in the same year—the year he helped lead the Dodgers to a World Series championship. But his perseverance and love of the game were just as impressive. His no-hitter in his final season as a Dodger in 1990 came after he had battled back from a serious shoulder

Preface

injury related to severe overuse the first seven-plus years of his career. And after being unceremoniously released by the Dodgers the following spring, with his career teetering on the brink, he spent the next several years working his way back through stops in the bedraggled Mexican League and brief back-of-the-rotation assignments with the California Angels, Baltimore Orioles, and Philadelphia Phillies before reinventing himself once more and becoming a front-line starter, leading a young San Diego Padres club to a division title in 1996.

But while much light is shed in this book on how Valenzuela's left arm captivated the baseball world at the height of Fernandomania in 1981—easily the most exciting period in Dodger Stadium history—it's ultimately a story about the emergence and lasting impact he had as a savior to both the Latino community and the Dodgers franchise itself. No other Mexican figure has come along since Fernando to assume that impactful role. Yet, in the case of the humble, mysterious, and unassuming Valenzuela, it's obvious he still doesn't fully grasp the magnitude of what he has meant to so many. Perhaps this book will show him.

Daybreak at Chavez Ravine

A Reluctant Hero

1

Fernando now realizes his impact, but it took a long time after he retired to think about the great things he did for the sport and for the fans.

—PEPE YÑIGUEZ, Spanish-language broadcaster for the Dodgers

The legend sits alone in the crowded Dodger Stadium press box cafeteria wearing a navy blue blazer, light blue shirt, and dark sunglasses one late August afternoon. His face is round, and his jet-black hair is cropped short. He is almost ghostlike in the sense that somehow it's easy to walk right by or sit near him without noticing the all-time Dodgers great. An icon should light up every room they enter. Instead, this one tends to blend in. He sits alone, not because he's egotistical or self-centered—in fact, quite the opposite. In a city built on larger-than-life superstars, Fernando Valenzuela is an inhibited and reclusive one.

“He’s like Greta Garbo,” said longtime Dodgers historian Mark Langill, referencing the actress famous for her subtle and understated nature. “I can close my eyes and think of all the times Fernando was at the Dodger Stadium front desk—just a guy in a jacket, hat, and sunglasses—very quietly and politely talking to the receptionist, and so many people would do a double-take and go, ‘Wait a second, that’s Fernando.’”

“Fernando always kept things from everybody since he was a ball-player,” explained Jaime Jarrín, the venerable Spanish-language broadcaster for the Dodgers who acted as Valenzuela’s interpreter during the Fernandomania period and then welcomed him into the broadcasting booth for a long partnership behind the mic. “He is very tight and extremely private.”

When, after a time, a reporter stops by his table, Valenzuela is reserved, soft-spoken, chooses his words wisely, and sometimes just

shrugs his shoulders. Still, when something the reporter said amuses him, there is a warmth in his toothy grin and a shine to his cheeks. There is a kindness about his voice, and, despite his star quality and a certain shyness about him, he has the endearing quality of being very approachable. But no one should ever mistake his perceived detached behavior as aloofness. “He doesn’t miss a thing,” the insightful former Dodgers outfielder and veteran announcer Rick Monday proclaimed. “There could be twenty people walking into a room and some could be doing one thing, others doing something else, and another group doing something else as well. I firmly believe that Fernando could sit down and make a list, writing, ‘Well, this guy put his wallet down over there; this guy put his phone over there; this guy made a phone call,’ and so on. That’s the way he was on the baseball field, and it’s the same now. He takes everything in.”

He doesn’t always sit alone in the cafeteria. On other days he would be with his inner circle, which might include his other broadcasting partner, Pepe Yñiguez, and Jarrín, as well as the scout who signed Valenzuela—the white Panama hat-wearing, cigar-chomping Mike Brito.

There is great irony to the fact that Valenzuela, the most private of men, is a television and radio baseball analyst—a most public occupation. After two decades of that work, he continued to receive rave reviews for his understated commentary. “He picks his spots and does a very good job in not talking too much,” observed José Mota, the Dodgers’ Dominican-born announcer and son of former player and coach Manny Mota. “He doesn’t use a plethora of meaningless information just because of who he is. I’ve seen his journey as a broadcaster with Jaime and Pepe and his growth and understanding of having to be objective if a call goes against the Dodgers. He only gives information when needed and does not overstep his boundaries. He respects his play-by-play people. And he sounds like Fernando—it’s like he’s just talking to you.”

A great deal of the credit for his success as a broadcaster goes to his working with two of the best in the business—Jarrín and Yñiguez. “We helped Fernando *a lot* when he came to the booth,” Yñiguez recalled. “Jaime is probably a big reason why Fernando came back to the Dodgers after finishing his career [mostly] in San Diego. Jaime was always there for Fernando from the very beginning, as his friend and translator at the press conferences. He talked with him all the time. And when Fernando

joined Jaime and me in the press box, we became the Three Amigos—like in the movie.”

Yñiguez was even able to get the reserved Valenzuela to display signs of his personality that only those closest to him typically see. “Fernando was so shy at the beginning,” he recalled. “Even as a player, he was so shy to talk. But I told him that sometimes when the game gets slow, you can talk about any anecdote or whatever you want. So sometimes he makes some jokes on the air—and not just about baseball. I told him when Orel Hershiser came to the Dodgers booth [in 2014] that I had listened to the great job he did announcing games at ESPN and said I wanted him to be like Orel—or even better than him. I told Fernando he needed to be the best commentator in Spanish, that we’re here to help him. And he’s doing *great* right now.”

The formula seems to be working well, as the Spanish-language broadcast team has received notable praise—even from some unlikely sources. “I spoke with Kevin Kennedy [who announced select games on the Dodgers Radio Network from 2014 through 2018] a few years ago,” Yñiguez commented. “And he goes to me, ‘I’m going to listen to Vin Scully the first three innings, but during the fourth, fifth, and sixth, I want to listen to you and Fernando.’ I said, ‘Really? But you don’t know Spanish, man.’ He said, ‘True, but I know baseball. And I’m watching the game and listening to you guys talk about different strategies and I *learn* Spanish because of it.’”

Still, outside of calling games, Valenzuela keeps the lowest of media profiles. He has never written what would be a most sought-after autobiography, has turned down movie deals for his life story, and almost always declines requests for interviews. He doesn’t even have a Twitter account, practically a prerequisite for anyone in the broadcasting field these days. There is a mystique about Valenzuela. People want to know more, but he doesn’t let his adoring public into his world. He is seen many nights leaving the broadcast booth and heading for the press box door after the seventh inning with a fast-paced walk like the one he had after retiring the side during his halcyon playing days. Still, he can’t always avoid the unwanted spotlight. “People still stand by the Vin Scully press box door waiting for him to leave after he broadcasts games,” former Dodgers director of publicity Steve Brener told me. “People are still in awe of Fernando.”

For as much as Valenzuela might understand some of the imprint he left on the game and with the Mexican and wider Latino communities, Yñiguez believes he lacks an understanding of the full extent of it. “We walk together sometimes when we travel with the team, and kids approach him and say, ‘Hey, Fernando, can you sign my ball?’ And Fernando will look at them and ask, ‘Do you know who I am?’ But even the kids, they know who he is and what he means. I can’t explain why he doesn’t completely understand this. I’ve explained it to him many times.”

One would think that if the autograph seekers of all ages weren’t enough to convince him of his legendary status in the Latino community, the sea of Valenzuela jerseys worn mostly by young people at Dodger Stadium surely would. “That’s when I have to remind him about the parents and grandparents talking to their kids about him,” Yñiguez says. “And those Fernando jerseys aren’t just seen at Dodger Stadium. Wherever we travel throughout the Western Division—San Francisco, Colorado, Arizona, San Diego—you will see people wearing them. It’s *incredible*.”

After finishing his pregame meal, Valenzuela puts on his COVID-era face-covering, another layer of anonymity that he likely embraces, and walks down to the first row of press tables, which give the best view of the entire stadium. Long ago he made the conscious decision to stay in the press box during batting practice to keep from being a distraction. On his way down, Dodgers radio broadcaster Charley Steiner calls out, “Hey, Lefty!” to him while another bystander extends his hand for Fernando to shake. In light of the pandemic, the ever-cautious Valenzuela shakes the man’s wrist instead.

He then exchanges quick pleasantries with Venezuelan-born freelance correspondent Claudia Gestro, one of the hardest-working reporters on the Southern California sports beat and a regular presence in the Dodger Stadium press box. Gestro would later describe him to me as a nice, quiet man whom she only remotely knew. Her description of him and their relationship was consistent with other media members in the press box who knew him—friendly if somewhat detached.

And then there was this—a few private moments for Valenzuela to gaze out at the pitcher’s mound, where he was a dominant presence four decades earlier with his signature eyes-to-the-sky delivery and devastating screwball. As batting practice finished up, he glances out toward left field, where two marvelous young Mexican Dodgers pitchers—Julio

Urías and Victor González—are shagging fly balls. *Would they even be in Dodgers uniforms had Valenzuela’s brilliance not opened the doors for prospects from his native country?* Now looking out beyond the left-field pavilion, he drinks in the breathtaking sight of the sunset-lit San Gabriel Mountains under what Vin Scully often called cotton candy clouds—the most beautiful backdrop of any stadium in sports.

“When I think of Fernando,” Nomar Garciaparra, the Los Angeles-born All-Star shortstop and current Dodgers color man, reflected that night at Dodger Stadium, “I think more about what he’s meant to the Latino community than what he did on the field—which was amazing. Just look at all the Latinos in the stands here that follow and support the Dodgers. There’s a generation—just like for me to be a Dodgers fan—because of what he created—from our parents and grandparents and so forth. They became Dodgers fans *because* of him.”

What Fernando gave those Latino fans was someone they could relate to and be inspired by. The “everyman” Mexican with the perfect windup and the imperfect body made his fans believe that if he could reach the pinnacle of the baseball world, then they could succeed in whatever they endeavored to do in life. “He’s an icon, an ambassador from Mexico and from anywhere baseball is played,” Yñiguez said. “If Fernando ran for president in Mexico, he would win. He’s been a great inspiration not just for people his age and older but for new generations as well.”

So just what was Valenzuela—the most celebrated Mexican player in baseball history and now a grandfather in his early sixties—thinking about as he peered out from the press box to “Dodger Blue Heaven”? Was he finally allowing himself a moment to fully comprehend his career’s impact on Mexicans and the countless other Latinos to whom Garciaparra and Yñiguez alluded?

To fully understand the “meaning” of Valenzuela, one must go back to the early 1950s, several years before Fernando was even born. And much of that meaning took shape where Fernando focused his gaze on this late summer evening—Chavez Ravine, in the San Gabriel Mountains—where three Mexican American neighborhoods once stood.

David versus Goliath

2

Few human beings have been as honorable as Cesar Chavez, the co-founder and first president of the United Farm Workers of America, a labor union based in Southern California. As a human rights leader and activist, he organized peaceful protests and demonstrations from the 1950s until his death in 1993, all to promote humane working and living conditions for farmworkers (most of whom were Mexican) throughout the United States. In the same vein as earlier activists such as Mahatma Gandhi and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Chavez emphasized direct but nonviolent tactics, kicking out of the union those who disobeyed the peace principle—even those who fought back against aggression from others.

Chavez was the most righteous of men. He also refused to ever set foot in Dodger Stadium.

Such was the stance of many Chicanos—a term that became widely used beginning in the 1960s for natives of Mexico in the United States and their descendants to express a pride in their shared ethnic, cultural, and community identity—during the first two decades of Dodger Stadium.

Their feelings stemmed from the city's deployment of eminent domain to force more than eighteen hundred Mexican American families from three neighborhood sections of the Chavez Ravine area—La Loma, Palo Verde, and Bishop—throughout the decade of the 1950s. Though Chavez Ravine was a poor area during that period, it was still an active, joyful, and cohesive community—one its residents could call home in a place that broadly discriminated against Mexican Americans and did not allow them to live in other parts of the city. But local politicians also understood the value of land in this postwar period, when Los Angeles was in serious growth mode.

Mexican-born Teresa Romero, who in 2018 personified the American Dream by becoming the first Latina and first immigrant woman in the United States to become president of a national union—the United Farm Workers—believed Chavez’s reasons for not attending Dodgers games was justified at that time. “Cesar Chavez believed in protecting people, in protecting workers,” she said. “If he believed in something, he was going to stand up for it and was going to lead by example. He believed that what happened to Mexican Americans [in the 1950s] was wrong, and there is no doubt in my mind his decision of not attending a game was because he was convinced people were wronged, and he was not going to support [the Dodgers] in any way.”

Marc Grossman, who served as Chavez’s press secretary, speechwriter, and personal aide, felt that Chavez’s outrage never waned. “Cesar literally, nearly a quarter century [after Dodger Stadium opened], still held bitterness toward it,” he told me, before giving insight into Chavez’s deep-rooted feelings against bigotry. “When Cesar was just an eleven-year-old boy, his father, Librado, was a migrant farmworker in the industrialized agriculture industry of California in the early ’40s. His father once stopped early in the morning at a café in a little farm town in the Central Valley. Librado told his two sons, Cesar and Richard, to stay outside and not to go in with him. Well, little kids like that, they didn’t pay attention. So, when they went inside, the Anglo waitress told Cesar’s father, ‘We don’t serve Mexicans here.’ Cesar told me he never forgot the expression on his father’s face—pure humiliation. So, Cesar had a strong sense of what it meant to be the victim of racism. And I think that had a lot to do with his decision to refuse to go to Dodger Stadium.”

Chavez would become the national director of the Los Angeles-based Latino civil rights group CSO (Community Service Organization) in 1959, the same year of the bitter episode when some of the last remaining residents of Chavez Ravine were literally dragged from their homes and saw them bulldozed before their very eyes. The visuals of the gut-wrenching scenes captured the hearts of the nation.

“The CSO was involved in the resistance as it pertained to eminent domain as a forced removal,” Grossman noted. “So, if Cesar wasn’t directly involved in that effort, he certainly knew about it, as his organization was involved—turning out for demonstrations and such. Cesar felt strong emotion about discrimination.”

But even before the tragic events of Chavez Ravine unfolded, and well before the idea of the Dodgers building a stadium there arose, the demise of its neighborhoods was considered a foregone conclusion by some—including photographer Don Normark. He photographed life in Chavez Ravine in 1949, the year before the residents received letters from the city government directing them to sell their homes.

Decades later, after Normark published a book with his photographs, *Chavez Ravine: 1949*, Dodgers historian Mark Langill asked him why he took those photos. “He said because he didn’t think Chavez Ravine was going to last,” Langill said. “He saw this community by the freeway, and, in his mind, he thought with the rapidly changing landscape of the city, this probably wasn’t going to last. He said he kept those photos in a drawer for about twenty years before people had a renewed interest in that area.”

To be fair, the blame for the Chavez Ravine saga hardly began or should fall solely on the Dodgers. In fact, it began well before Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley had any ideas or designs on moving his club out West. It’s well documented that O’Malley’s original plan was to privately finance a new stadium in Brooklyn to replace the aging and small (by big league standards) Ebbets Field.

“[Walter O’Malley’s] critics have claimed that he never really wanted to keep the team in Brooklyn, that he always planned to be in Los Angeles,” Peter O’Malley said in defense of his father in a *Los Angeles Times* piece in 2021. “That is *not* true, and our files are very complete on this subject. It was only when he realized, after many years, he couldn’t make it happen in Brooklyn that he considered alternatives. It is interesting to me that when the National League owners approved the move of the Dodgers to Los Angeles, my dad didn’t have a handshake on where to play just months later or when construction could begin on the new stadium. My dad didn’t shoot from the hip and believed in planning, and I have always thought the move took a lot of guts.”

“Los Angeles was the ultimate ‘Plan B,’” Mark Langill noted. “O’Malley was just so focused on New York. But when it came time to move to Los Angeles, he gets the territorial rights from Phil Wrigley. So, for all his planning and the genius of a businessman that he was, I just can’t believe that O’Malley did not know the political climate of Chavez Ravine because, in his mind, he’s just making a deal with the city. He

thinks that's it. He doesn't even know there's something called a referendum. So when he gets served [a subpoena, which challenged the city's approved contract with the Dodgers] on the actual tarmac when the Dodgers' plane lands in LA and Roz Wyman, the councilwoman, asks if he knows what it was about, he was blindsided. He had no idea. He thought once [the City of Los Angeles ordinance officially asking the Brooklyn Dodgers to move to LA—binding the city by contract with the Dodgers] was approved—10-to-4—that was it. I don't think he had any notion as far as the political climate geography-wise. He knew exactly what he wanted because, from the helicopter, he could see that land being connected by the surrounding freeways.

“As far as the politics of Chavez Ravine,” Langill continued, “I really think he was caught off guard. It wasn't just a question of the Dodgers and the Latino community but also the city leaders and the greater conversation as far as public use—it was supposed to be a housing project. Of course, the post-World War II [Red Scare] put an end to the project in 1953. But at that time, LA was not even on the Dodgers' radar. Regarding public use of the land, it's important that groups like Culture Clash [*Chavez Ravine: In 9 Innings*] and Eric Nusbaum's book [*Stealing Home*] discuss this because even though the team made the deal with the city, the feelings of the neighbors [weren't] in a vacuum—it's part of the city's history. I think the biggest thing was that for all of O'Malley's genius as a baseball person and all his planning, innovation, and design, this was just one of his blind spots because he honestly thought when he made the deal with the city, that was it. He was looking at it from a geographical point of view.”

The fact is, the ultimate elimination of the Chavez Ravine neighborhoods resulted from a series of collective failures, starting with what many deemed a “well-intended” city housing project in 1950 that promised affordable living to thousands of Los Angelenos. That initiative would eventually be canceled amid the Red Scare hysteria brought on by McCarthyism, which was gripping the country during the early 1950s. Had the housing project come to fruition, those ravine barrios would have been replaced with apartment buildings, garden homes, and stores—the so-called “better good” phrase that city officials like to throw around in matters of eminent domain. Then, as real estate values began to soar throughout the city, shady politicians and judges refused