



Painful memories of Chavez Ravine still linger

By John Rogers, The Associated Press

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Next spring, when a city's fancy turns to baseball, the Los Angeles Dodgers will take the field in a neighborhood newly christened Dodgertown. But Rachel Cantu and others who once lived there won't be celebrating.

The area's former residents will be marking the 50th anniversary of when the last families were driven out of a close-knit, largely Hispanic neighborhood they knew as Chavez Ravine. They were tossed out to make way for a new major league ballpark that would be called Dodger Stadium.

For Cantu, the memories are particularly painful. She was 10 when her mother, Aurora Vargas, was dragged by sheriff's deputies down the steps of her home of nearly four decades and taken to jail. Minutes later a bulldozer knocked the house down, and the rubble was buried under what is now the stadium parking lot.

"I don't have anything against the Dodgers. They're our team," said Cantu, 59, who still gets choked up when she talks about that day in May 1959. "It's just the process by which they got here. My mom is the one they carried out of her house."

To some, the name change is one more insult.

"I think `Dodgertown' further eradicats the memory of the community that was lost to the construction of Dodger Stadium," said Eric Avila, a Chicano studies and history professor at UCLA.

Nine years before the team arrived from Brooklyn in 1958, local officials put forth a plan to raze the poor, semirural neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine and replace them with low-income public housing. Residents forced to sell their homes for what they complained were below-market prices were promised first crack at the new housing.

But after much of the land was acquired through eminent domain, Mayor Norris Poulson was elected in 1953 on an anti-socialism platform and the public housing plan was scrapped.

A few years later, as an enticement to come to L.A., the land was offered to the Dodgers. The final few residents who had fought for years to stay were kicked out.

"It was one of the most bald-faced, trick-bag things ever done in a city. It was absolutely nauseating," said musician Ry Cooder, whose acclaimed 2005 album "Chavez Ravine" recounts the area's history.

The bulldozing brought to an end three small communities consisting of about 1,000 families. The area, made up of winding canyons and brush-dotted hills, and with stunning views of the downtown skyline, is sometimes remembered

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as the poor man's Shangri-La, although Cantu said that's an exaggeration.

"There was just a lot of hills with weeds and stuff," she said, laughing. "But it was like our own country."

The move to rename the 276 acres that encompass Dodger Stadium and the parking lot was proposed by City Councilman Ed Reyes, who was not always the Dodgers' biggest fan.

"I had relatives who were impacted by the displacement, and I understand the sense of betrayal that certain folks feel," Reyes said. But times have changed, he added.

What's more, Reyes said, some of the area immediately surrounding the stadium will still be known as Chavez Ravine, the name linking it to 19th century rancher Julian Chavez, one of the first members of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Reyes' motion, passed by the City Council this month, still needs federal approval because it would create a separate ZIP code for Dodgertown.

The Dodgers say they have no intention of burying the original name, and are looking into ways to promote it as part of a refurbishing that will add shops and a restaurant by 2012.

Albert "Beto" Elias will be back in Chavez Ravine again next summer - not for a Dodger game, but for a picnic across the street at a park where he

and other members of a group called Los Desterrados (Spanish for "The Uprooted") have been gathering almost every year since they had to leave their homes.

"'Dodgertown,' huh?" he said contemplating the new name. "How can you call it a town when no one lives there anymore?"

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