



Episode 010 – Major League Burbank (transcript)

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfo.org.

Story

And now for today's story.

Did you know that Burbank was once the spring training home of a major league baseball team? That's right, from 1949 to 1952, the St. Louis Browns of the American League called home a ball park that was only a long home run from downtown Burbank – Olive Avenue Memorial Stadium.

In preparation for this podcast, I poured through old microfilm from the *Burbank Daily Review* that is housed at our Central library. During this time in the city's history, it was abuzz with excitement about the Brownies, as they were affectionately called, and took immense pride in their choosing Burbank as their home away from home. Some headlines from those times proclaimed:

"Dinner In Honor of St. Louis Browns Draws Capacity Crowd"

"The Brownies Are Here—And We Don't Mean Walt Disney's!!"

"World Champion Cleveland Indians Play Browns Here Monday: Record Crowd Expected to Jam Memorial Field For Ball Game."

In a city that never had a professional sports team to call its own, the St. Louis Browns became just that, and the sports page had the Browns headlining nearly the entire month.

At the annual welcome back dinners held for the Browns at the Olive Recreation Center, mutual admiration between the city and team was always the topic of conversation, as Burbank Mayor Floyd J. Jolley said: "Burbank is a young city and the Browns are a young team. We hope that the two can grow together." In response, the entire Brown organization appeared to be well pleased with the warm weather, the friendly fans, and the small-town feel. And their training facilities were described as "the grass being green as the rookies, the stands clean and the parking adequate." There's no wonder team owners the DeWitt Brothers declared Olive Memorial as "one of the finest training fields in the country."

In fact, the condition of the beautiful Olive Memorial Field drew high praise from players, coaches, visiting newspapermen, telegraph operators, and old time ball players, as exclaimed by Brown coach and former player Fred Hoffman, "I've never trained on a better in field in my 33 years in baseball."

Some facts:

The park and stadium both have seen many incarnations. Originally commissioned in 1935, it wasn't built until 1946 for a cost of \$64,425, in honor of the Burbank veterans of the armed forces who died in World War II. It was dedicated in May of 1947 as Olive Avenue Park and Memorial Stadium; The stadium was later called Burbank City Stadium and then Olive Memorial Stadium. It could seat 1,100 fans.: During the Browns' first year here, a season's ticket pass cost \$9 for the six games that would be played. According to a March 31st, 1949 headline, the Browns had drawn over 32,000 paying customers to Burbank. That was just in 27 days! There were a lot of things to be proud of with Burbank's first brush with the majors and everything seemed that the city would have no trouble landing a major league club each spring.

There were also many fun and interesting anecdotes from this time that weren't always baseball related. In a 1952 article the *Los Angeles Times* highlighted the spring training routine of Roseann Brennan Delsing, wife of outfielder Jim Delsing, describing it as "more work for the better half than it ever was for the Bread 'n Butter Half!"

Roseann, a former Miss Long Beach and airline stewardess said: "For a spring training trip of 2000 miles, like this one, I start getting ready two months ahead...This entailed taking along six suitcases, one baby, one full-sized playpen, three dozen diapers and a few other odds and ends... before we finally settled down in a one-room kitchenette motel in Burbank." Despite the difficult expedition, the major league wives took over Burbank like a "St. Loo suburb" in no time.

Susie Hodgson, of the Burbank Historical Society, has also documented player interviews from local Browns fans, Burbank dentist Dr. Joseph Dossen, and museum docent Brian Callahan, who got to see the Browns play on the field as a Burbank youngster. Player Roy Sievers said that the players stayed in an inn across the street from the field called the Olive Manor Motel (now gone), "it was a great area to train in, plus the city itself was great!" Player Billy DeMars commented that the boys had "exciting times [going] to and from the ball park and the hotel!" And another player, Ned Garver, also enjoyed meeting the movie stars: "Bing Crosby came in the clubhouse and I got a picture with him. The Browns team was also introduced on Groucho Marx's TV show." Similar attitudes were common among the young players from their spring training experience in Burbank, as Dr. Dossen described: "The players back then weren't stars. They were more like common people, only more visible."

The grandstand of the 26-foot high stadium was always full of many families, baseball fans, retirees, workers on their lunch break, and numerous movie stars and celebrities who came out to watch real baseball. Legendary players such as Satchel Paige, Willie Mays, Bobby Thompson, and manager Roger Hornsby are all known to have grazed Olive park during this time. The proximity to Hollywood was also an attractive addition to the mix, as the movie studios for baseball films, and the likes of Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Dinah Shore, Nat King Cole, Ronald Reagan often used it, and the young starlet Marilyn Monroe, often visited the field to watch and mingle with the team. Despite not being a good big league team, the Browns were indeed a popular attraction in Burbank, popular enough that Marilyn Monroe even wore shorts on her visit.

It is important to note that the team was never very good and holds the record for most losses, essentially making them the worst team to ever play the game. However, during their second year here, their manager brought in a psychologist to boost the team's morale! According to an article, this Dr.

David F. Tracy was expected to use “hypnosis and the power of suggestion to rid the team of inferiority complexes and a defeatist attitude.” While that season started out strong with some wins for the Browns, it did not lead them to any overall transformation as a victorious team.

“We were not all that good a team, but Burbank was just happy to have a major league team and the guys we had playing were just happy to be in the major leagues,” said former Browns infielder John Beradino.

Heading into their 1952 spring training, Browns one-time manager Roger Hornsby was oozing with confidence: “This is a new deal all around... The Browns definitely are not going to finish last and they might finish first. It’s going to be a rough, tough ball club. And I’m not just making a lot of noise to sell tickets, or something.” They ended the season second to last in the American League, and no plans were made for the team to return to Burbank the following spring. After another catastrophic season in 1953, the Browns moved to Baltimore and became the Orioles and the rest is history. Burbank tried to regain the glory of having a sports team to call their own by inviting the Detroit Tigers for spring training in 1954, and hosting as a practice field for the L.A. Rams football team for a few seasons from 1958-1963. But they never reclaimed the magic of those years serving as the spring training home for the Browns.

Unfortunately, by the late 1980s, the worn field and stadium fell into disrepair and became a frequent site for graffiti taggers. While portions of the playing fields were used by softball and little league teams, the stadium’s locker rooms, dugout and concrete bleachers had been closed to the public for safety reasons. After a series of studies in the early 90s it was concluded that the stadium’s masonry walls were beyond repair and overall improvements would cost as much as building a new one. Then the 1994 Northridge Earthquake happened, causing further structural damage to the old stadium.

While there was still sentiment attached to the stadium and a group of people tried to save it, the sports needs of the city were different than when the stadium was built, and it was demolished in 1995 in favor of a facility more appropriate for recreation use, from T-ball to adult softball. The only piece of Olive Memorial Stadium that was kept is a concrete column and a set of plaques that honor World War II veterans; the plaques can be viewed on the Olive side of the park, in front of where the stadium once stood.

The park is still popular with Burbankers, and they know it today as the George Izay Park. In 1984 it was dedicated and renamed for George Izay, who served as the Burbank Parks and Recreation director for more than two decades. In 1992, the Hank Riggio playground was opened as one of the first inclusive play areas designed for children with disabilities. The park touts four fields, each of which is named for Burbankers who left their mark either in the parks and/or sports history of the town. The park grounds also includes the Joslyn Adult Center. Dedicated in 1972, the city developed this senior center to provide activities, meals, outreach, and much more to Burbank’s elderly population, which it still does to this day. The park not only has a rich history, but also promotes the preservation of history by housing an amazing gem, The Burbank History Society Museum where artifacts, photos, and stories are thoughtfully maintained, and displayed for locals and visitors alike to experience the Burbank of their ancestors. Visit the museum to see a collection of Browns memorabilia compiled by local Browns fans, Dr. Joseph Dossen, and museum docent Brian Callahan.

I am sure that many Burbankers think of this stadium with fondness and as “reminiscent of yesteryear.”

One of the library's own, Library Assistant Cesar Garcia, spent much of his youth playing baseball on this field. He is with us now to share with us his memories of this special place....

"I grew up and still live a block away from Olive Park, and as a kid, that dilapidated and behemoth of a stadium was part of my every day. It was a regular sight to and from Walt Disney Elementary school, and on weekends, my family and I would play and picnic under its shadow. However, I did not know much history about it except from what I was able to read on the plaques on its walls, so, I saw it with a sense of romanticism and always wondered about the days when ball games were played there. How I wished I could have experienced that.

Fortunately, a lot of my questions about the structure were answered after reading Burbank history books at the library, and when Burbank in Focus was launched in 2016 I was able to see photos of the stadium from its heyday. A couple years ago my interest in the stadium was again rekindled when a friend and the former local history librarian, Janae Kambestad, was going through boxes of photos for scanning and she showed me colored photos of the stadium shortly before it was demolished in 1995—how I last remembered it.

Even as a little leaguer I knew that I would never play or watch a game there, but I was fortunate enough to enjoy the diamond in Sunday pick-up games with other kids, and it also served as a majestic backdrop to the end-of-the year skills competition at the Burbank Hap Minor Civitan Day. But I especially enjoyed the visitor's bullpen where I used to practice my pitching. It was so perfect for a baseball crazy kid with big league dreams, from the raised pitcher's mound, to the strike zone made from layers of chalk on a wall right behind a home plate. This was incredibly convenient for those of us with only a few baseballs because after the pitch hit the wall it rolled back almost all the way to the bump, which meant more pitches to throw.

Of course, I was greatly saddened to see it demolished, and if I had been a more daring kid, I probably would have snuck into the locker room to see what baseball memorabilia was left behind.

That old baseball stadium truly represented my wonderful childhood in Burbank. Even if I did not live the full extent of my baseball dreams on that field, I have been able to enjoy easy access to green and well-kept fields through the years, and I truly appreciate that the current Olive Park serves more of our community in a greater capacity.

It is said that the Browns lost hundreds of baseballs during their stay here. I could only imagine the joy of those Burbank kids who were fortunate to find a big league souvenir in their neighborhood park."

When all was said and done, the Brownies liked Burbank and City liked the Brownies. The lowly ball club enjoyed an impeccable field and received the adoration of a loyal fan base. While the City of Burbank not only got entertainment, but a glimpse of nascent growth and progress.

Fred Haney, manager of the Hollywood Stars baseball team and former Browns player said in 1949: "What has gotten into Burbank lately? Burbank was a sleepy little village until about two years ago. Then something happened. And look at you now. Burbank has awakened... I wonder if you can appreciate the value of having a major league team here. This is a value that will go on and increase for years... Incidentally, this wonderful ball park of yours is a monument to the progress of the city."

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

March 29, 1949, *Burbank Daily Review* — *Sports*:

File For 1950

Memo to City Council, Park Department, Chamber of Commerce, etc. for 1950: The St. Louis Browns have left Burbank after spring training. It just occurred to us that as a community we missed a news bet that would have made newspaper sports pages throughout the country. We could have had a dinner for the Browns with only Burbank persons named Brown as guests. (Probably Brauns would have tried to crash the party.)

Maybe next spring when the St. Louis Browns return, the city can do it. It would make a pip of a story for hundreds of sports pages—with a Burbank dateline of course.

And that's the Burbank news from 1949.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, edited, and hosted by Carolyn Alves and Cesar Garcia.

Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfofocus.org

Thank you for joining us today.