



Vince Guerrieri | On 28, Aug 2019

For nearly 30 years, the property formerly home to League Park sat, mostly unused and largely unwanted, in a neighborhood that had suddenly become frightening.

But 40 years ago this week, an event was held to show what the former Indians' home could be League Park Day, August 25, 1979, featured visits by former players, pick-up games and an unveiling of a historic marker – culminating in a classic car parade to Cleveland Stadium for an Indians game that night.

It was the brainchild of Peter Jedick – who was just looking to sell some books. Jedick, a firefighter who worked at the station on East 66th and Chester, just a few blocks away from the ballpark, had become the unofficial history writer for Cleveland Magazine, covering topics like Euclid Avenue's millionaire's row, Garrett Morgan and Eliot Ness' time in Cleveland.

He'd done research for another story on League Park, only to find no interest for it at his usual sources.

"I did all this work, and I didn't want to throw the story away, so I decided to publish it myself," he said. "I use this as a lesson now: Never write a story until you know you've got it sold."

Jedick ended up self-publishing a small book on League Park in 1978 – around the same time interest was rekindled in the Plain Dealer newsroom for the east side ballpark. Bob Dolgan wrote a big takeout on the park in 1976. With origins back to 1891, it was home to a Temple Cup champion, a World Series champion, a Negro League champion and an NFL champion. Owned by the Indians, it was sold with the team by Bill Veeck to Ellis Ryan, who was all too happy to give it to the city to get it off his hands.

The city – which had seen League Park compete for premier events and had it used as a bargaining chip by Indians ownership – tore down most of the structure, leaving behind the building that had served as the team's offices on East 66th and Lexington and a section of grandstand along East 66th Street that included the former team clubhouses. In 1966, the neighborhood around League Park – the Hough – was the site of fierce rioting.

But there were still plenty of people who saw the historic value of League Park – particularly as the Indians were playing before small crowds and large amounts of empty seats at Cleveland Stadium. For the 20 years after their 1954 pennant – many spent below .500 – the Indians were linked to just about every city that was looking for a new team. It was only Nick Mileti's purchase in 1972 that kept the Tribe from splitting its home field between Cleveland and New Orleans.

"I wanted to save the place," Jedick said. "It was a historic place, and I thought we should rebuild it." And the interest of the Plain Dealer sports department led to other volunteers, like Bob Emling. "Hal Lebovitz wrote a lot about the ballpark," Emling said. "And when he talked about League Park Day, I thought, 'I had to be a part of this.'" In addition to Mayor Dennis Kucinich (and his eventual successor, then-councilman George Voinovich), attendees included Joe Sewell, Bob Feller, Mel Harder and Bill Wambsganss. "They asked if someone could pick up Bill Wamby," Emling recalled. "My hand couldn't go up fast enough." After the event, plans were considered for an old-timers game – or a game by one of the Indians' minor-league affiliates – on the site, but they never came to pass. The land continued to languish, despite the best efforts by Fannie Lewis, the longtime councilwoman representing the area. Ultimately, the city completed a \$5 million renovation of the property, reopening it in 2014 with a field, a visitors center on the site of the old clubhouse and a museum in the old office on East 66th and Lexington.

"I like to tell people I was 40 years ahead of the curve on that," Jedick said. Emling. "Hal Lebovitz wrote a lot about the ballpark," Emling said. "And when he talked about League Park Day, I thought, 'I had to be a part of this.'" In addition to Mayor Dennis Kucinich (and his eventual successor, then-councilman George Voinovich), attendees included Joe Sewell, Bob Feller, Mel Harder and Bill Wambsganss. "They asked if someone could pick up Bill Wamby," Emling recalled. "My hand couldn't go up fast enough." After the event, plans were considered for an old-timers game – or a game by one of the Indians' minor-league affiliates – on the site, but they never came to pass. The land continued to languish, despite the best efforts by Fannie Lewis, the longtime councilwoman representing the area. Ultimately, the city completed a \$5 million renovation of the property, reopening it in 2014 with a field, a visitors center on the site of the old clubhouse and a museum in the old office on East 66th and Lexington. "I like to tell people I was 40 years ahead of the curve on that," Jedick said.

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