



Hal asks

Restoring League Park?

By Hal Lebovitz
Sports editor

The other night there was a burglary at the Boutique Polonaise on River Road in the Flats.

The Boutique is a little store where Polish arts and crafts — items made by people of Polish descent — are sold.

The thieves took just three things — a hand-carved chess set, an expensive jewelry box and ten copies of the pamphlet, "League Park."

The owner of the shop immediately ordered ten more copies.

"It was the quickest sale my book has had," said author Peter Jedick, a 29-year old west sider and free lance writer.

There is a mystique about League Park, the cozy old ball park at East 66th and Lexington Ave., now in disrepair. All of us over 40 remember it. We were there at one time or another. It still has that strong nostalgic appeal. It appeals to burglars, too, obviously, and even to the young, for Jedick, who had the compulsion to write the book, was born long after 1946, the year the ball park saw its last major league game.

There is now some happy news to pass along about League Park. There is a strong likelihood that soon it will be more than a memory. A committee is hard at work seeking to have the old ball park restored — the park where the shadows of Cy Young, Larry Lajoie, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Tris Speaker, Babe Ruth, Joey Sewell, Addie Joss, Jack Graney — I could go on and on — stroll roam.

Here is what already has been done:

•A League Park Day has been set for Saturday, August 25th. The Indians are working with the committee and the present plans include a motordrome of old automobiles from League Park to the Stadium. During the day there will be some events at the old park and in the evening they will continue at the Stadium prior to the Indians-Oakland game. An old-timers game, with old-time baseball uniforms and other vintage costume events are in the works.

•The City Landmark Commission and the City Planning Commission last week approved the site as a Cleveland Landmark. As soon as City Council gives final approval, a commemorative plaque will be placed there.

•Also last week the Ohio State Preservation Advisory Board gave it an okay. It now goes to the National Heritage Trust and Restoration Committee and if approved there, it becomes eligible for federal matching grants.

These grants would equal any seed money raised here and League Park Day would be the start of the fund-raising campaign.

The League Park Restoration Committee has been meeting quietly every two weeks and clearly it is composed of activists. John Cimperman, head of the Cleveland

Landmark Commission, is chairman. Working closely with him are Peter Meros, of the private Cleveland Restoration Society; Peter Pucher, Properties Director for the city; John Nagy, recreation commissioner, and several other solid workers. Jedick heard about the group, gave them free copies of his pamphlet and is now a busy member.

The old ball park currently is a sad sight. It is now a neighborhood recreation center. There are two ball diamonds on the location, both in bad shape. The remaining concrete seats are crumbling. The plan is to rebuild the diamonds, have our best sandlot teams play there, reconstruct the wall and the seats and turn it into a healthy and much needed recreation facility. The city's Design and Construction Department currently is doing a study on the costs of restoring the grand old place.

This may be all a dream, but I have a hunch thousands upon thousands of nostalgic buffs in our town will rise to this effort. Admittedly, the old neighborhood has changed greatly, but this is a shrine worth preserving and it could help the community and the area. I'm still sick every time I go past the spot where the Arena used to stand and see the empty lot. League Park, of course, is much more historic and the skeleton is still there.

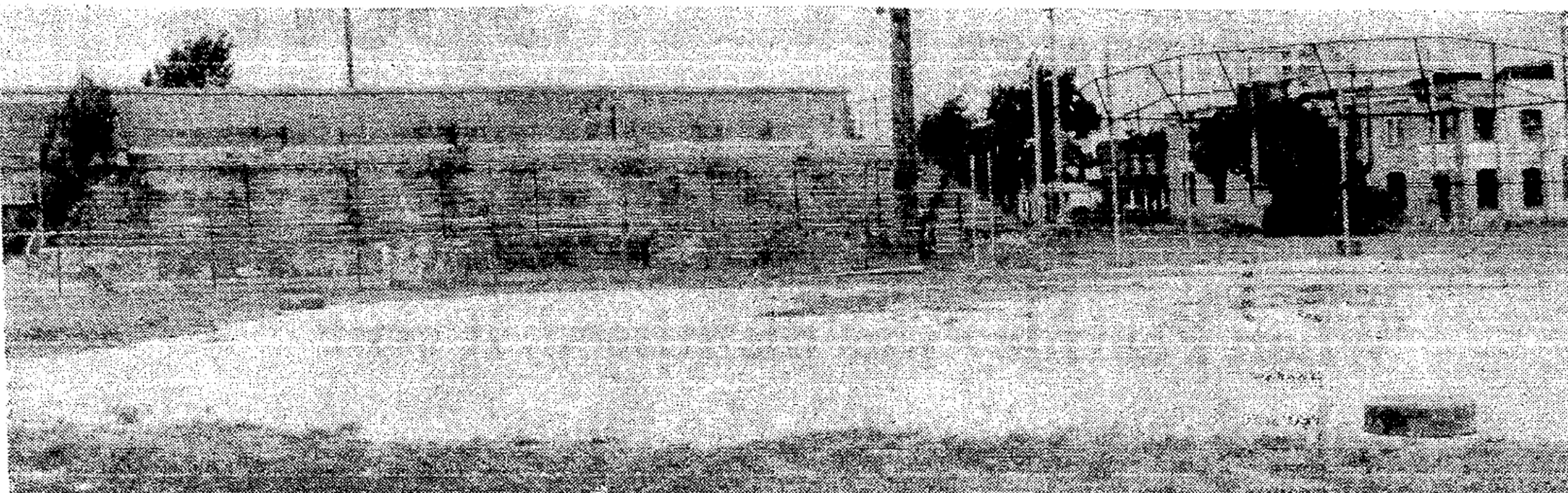
I'm certain there is a multitude who have kept the park alive. The mail is evidence. Around spring training time especially, visions of the old park come into sharp focus through the letters.

Here are two recent ones: From Albert M. Brown, 35 Severance Circle, Cleveland Heights: "I have been a baseball fan ever since 1911, when as a boy of ten, along with a few other boys, I was shown how I could see a game at League Park by lying on the sidewalk and peeking through the small space at the bottom of the fence. There was Larry Lajoie, Joe Birmingham, Ty Cobb and so many others we idolized. But perhaps the greatest thrill came in 1920...

"Before that thrilling day, however, I remember a very sad day, August 20, 1920, when Cleveland's brilliant shortstop, Ray Chapman, was hit by a pitch that Carl Mays threw and Chapman died on the way to the hospital. I remember standing on the corner of East 9th and Superior, along with thousands, outside the great church where the funeral was held. Men, women and children wept openly. I did, too.

"Then came THAT great day, Saturday, October 9th of that year when I lined up at 7 o'clock in the morning at League Park to get a bleacher seat to the first World Series game ever held in Cleveland. The Indians won, 5-1, but it really was not an exciting game. Stanley Coveleski just mowed down the Dodgers.

"The next day I decided to 'listen' to the results outside the Plain Dealer building on E. 6th and Superior, so I missed one of the



League Park, circa 1976... Weeds, junk and deterioration



League Park, circa 1934... In its heyday

greatest World Series games ever played: Bill Wamby's triple play, Elmer Smith's grand slam. Still, I DID see the first World Series game ever played in Cleveland... in old League Park."

From James Handyside, 1150 W. Market St., Akron:

"My father was an ardent ball fan and he told me the Cleveland ball club's first field was located on land which is now East 46th and Cedar Ave.

"Then the ball field was built at E. 66th and Lexington.

"I am an oldster of 95 years but can remember when I was 12 and my father took me to my first game at League Park. That was when the Cleveland club was in the National League and called the Spiders.

"The catcher had only a mask and when nobody was on base he stood back of the batter, far enough so he could catch the ball on a bounce. When a player was on base he got behind the batter...

"That day Cy Young pitched for Cleveland and won the game and Chief Zimmer was the catcher.

"I also saw a game when the Cleveland club was called the Misfits, for during the middle of the

season, about 1899 or 1900, Frank Dehaas Robison, the owner of the club, moved the regulars to St. Louis, thus forming the St. Louis National League team. In order to finish out the season every team gave excess players to form the Cleveland club. Thus the name, Misfits.

"This may be very interesting to you if you don't know about it already."

I knew some of it and am amazed at the memories of Mr. Brown and Mr. Handyside and the many others who have the early baseball doings indelible on their minds.

And I'm even more astonished that it wasn't an old-timer, rather than 29-year-old Jedick, who decided to write the history of old League Park.

It's a small pamphlet, containing about 4,500 words, reads fast and sells for \$1.95. It contains some old photos and his sister, Patty, is responsible for the graphics.

Undoubtedly a more definitive work will be — and should be — done some day about the old park, but Jedick's at least is a needed start. And for a "youngster" who never saw a game there because it was closed by the time he was born, he has done a commendable job.

While researching the project and writing it, he supported himself driving a taxi. He found much of his material at the Western Reserve Historical Society and he talked with men who played at League Park, George Uhle, the late Paddy Livingston, Bill Wamby and Alonzo Boone, a member of the Cleveland Buckeyes of the Negro League. The groundskeeping Bossard family gave him material and so did Bob Gill, who started in the concessions department at League Park and worked up to become the Indians' traveling secretary.

Jedick, a graduate of West Tech and Kent State, played ball at Kent and for the Automatic Sprinkler team in Lakewood Class A, accounting for his keen interest in the sport. Always he heard about League Park and a great curiosity developed. He visited it, decided to write about it and he even paid for the printing.

Initially, he printed 1,000 copies. The Sunpapers, where he once worked, charged him a modest \$400. Jedick took the pamphlets to the city's book stores and, happily, the sale has been good. He is just beginning to show a small profit and last week he had another 1,000 printed.

The location of League Park, E. 66th and Lexington, was chosen because the Payne Ave. and Superior Ave. streetcar lines intersected there. Fans could take a trolley directly to the field and get off just a few yards from the entrance. The owner of the streetcar lines was Frank Dehaas Robison, the same gent who owned the team. Smart fellow, Dehaas Robison.

Here is how Jedick's chronicle begins: "On May 1, 1891, 25-year old Denton Techumseh 'Cy' (for Cyclone) Young stood on the pitcher's box 55 feet from home plate, spit on a brand new Spalding baseball, smiled grimly, wound up his massive body and let loose a blazing fast ball that would make him baseball's winningest pitcher.

"The Cincinnati Redlegs' Biddy McPhee didn't move a muscle in his baggy blue uniform as the ball shot onto Charles 'Chief' Zimmer's

fingerless glove. Umpire Phil Powers muttered 'strike one' and League Park, the bright new brick home of the Cleveland Spiders, began its illustrious career as the city's sports mecca.

"By the time the Spiders won an easy 12-3 victory, a record crowd of 9,000 fans were already in love with their new ball park."

The "Misfit" year, mentioned in Mr. Handyside's letter, caused Cleveland to lose its National League franchise and in 1901 it became a member of the newly born American League. The park eventually proved too small and in 1910 was expanded — new facade, new concrete wall, two tiers of seats, etc. — to accommodate over 20,000. Fans were allowed to stand on the field behind ropes when the seating capacity proved too small.

The pamphlet contains many interesting tidbits. For example, the first year the team was in the American League it was called the Blues, because the players used the Spiders' old blue uniforms. Next season the name was changed to Broncos. There were a few other changes until the town finally settled on the Indians.

In 1902 the team was so hard up for pitchers the manager called for a morning tryout. He was impressed by a semi-pro, Otto Hess, and pitched him that afternoon against the Philadelphia Athletics. He won, 7-6, in ten innings, got a contract for the rest of the season and won 20 games.

Of course, the famous right field wall — similar to Fenway Park's Green Monster, is mentioned prominently in Jedick's account. Here we found a major typo, too late to be corrected in his second printing.

The distance from home plate to the wall was 290 feet, a very short poke, contributing to the excitement and the anticipation. He has it even shorter, at 240 feet.

If the burglars who stole the ten books read this, they should make the correction. Maybe they'll even contribute to the restoration of the park. Anonymously, of course.

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