Why, how baseball left NY City

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"It is my belief," New York City Council president Abe Stark told members of the anti-trust sub-committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1957, "that a baseball franchise morally belongs to the people of a community. It is not the personal property of any individual, to be removed at the slightest whim."

Less than a year later, journalist Robert Murphy reminds us, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants abandoned The Big Apple for Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Murphy's main characters — and I mean characters — are the owners of the Dodgers and Giants: the ingratiating, irascible, arrogant, compulsively devious Walter O'Malley and the bright, bibulous, sentimental, and stubborn Horace Stoneham. Sired by wealthy, well-connected, willful, finagler fathers who "would steal the milk out of your tea and ask why you were drinking it black," O'Malley and Stoneham knew how to play the game of bluff, bargain, blame, and bolt.

Sometime competitors and co-conspirators, as different from one another as Duke Snider was from Willie Mays, these baseball barons thought of themselves as New Yorkers. They didn't intend to leave, at least not at first. They wanted bigger and better ball parks, parking concessions, and government exercise of the power of "eminent domain" to grease the wheels of stadium construction.

When public officials didn't comply, they did some California dreamin'.

Acknowledging that "what they were thinking at various points in the drama cannot always be known," Murphy suggests, not entirely persuasively, that an "acute case of greed" wasn't the only cause of the death of National League baseball in New York. And that it wasn't really over till it was over.

Even as he portrays O'Malley and Stoneham as "complicated, even contradictory" men, "forced by circumstances" to leave the city they loved, Murphy maintains that Robert Moses, chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority and New York's housing czar, wasn't the villain, either. He admits that Moses blocked the use of public authority to clear the way for a privately-owned stadium at the junction of Atlantic and Flatbush avenues in downtown Brooklyn.

But he takes the era's archetypal "power broker" at his word that he wanted to help identify a more suitable location.

Like an Agatha Christie novel, in "After Many A Summer" everybody did it. Mayor Robert Wagner was slow out of the batter's box. John Cashmore, president of the borough of Brooklyn, had control problems.

And Nelson Rockefeller, the prospective Republican candidate for governor, pinch hit in the bottom of the ninth, with an offer to buy property that the city would condemn and lease back to the Dodgers — and struck out.

Despite Murphy's quibbles and qualifications, however, it all came down to two men, O'Malley and Moses.

In pledging their good faith, in all likelihood, both of them protested too much. Moses knew how to get to "no" without leaving any fingerprints. Walter O. kept everyone dazed and confused, garnishing his vow "to die for dear old Brooklyn" with "shamrocks, harps, and a bouquet of Irish whisky."

While working with Stoneham to ensure that the Dodger-Giant rivalry would resume on the left coast.

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Fans hold placards urging the Dodgers to stay in Brooklyn in 1957. Courtesy