

“The Padres in Westgate Park”

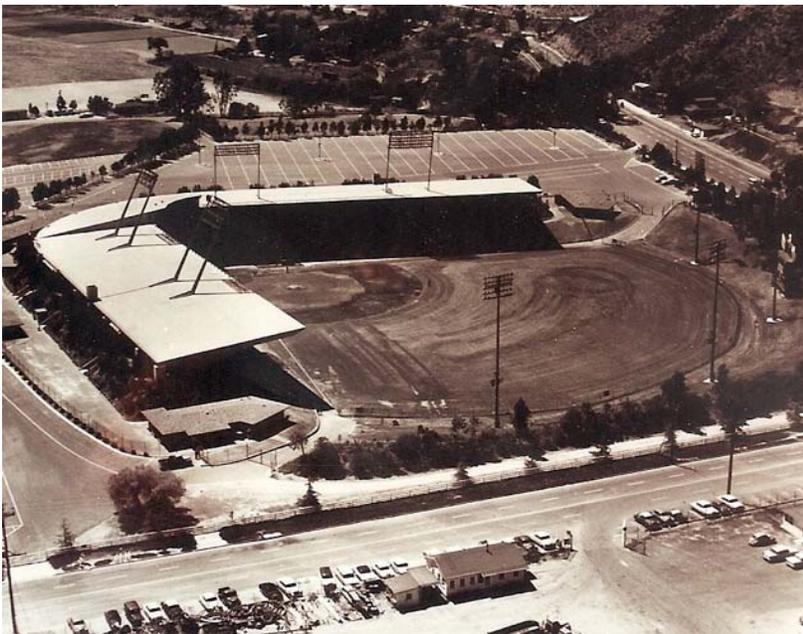
Not even Yankee Stadium or Boston’s Fenway Park can surpass the comforts and conveniences of the Padres’ new home . . . This is a real ballpark, built for the game of baseball, a ballpark in which the city of San Diego can take great pride.

-- Jack Murphy, San Diego Union, April 22, 1958

With great enthusiasm, the *Union’s* sports columnist Jack Murphy celebrated the wonders of Westgate Park, San Diego’s new baseball stadium in Mission Valley. “It’s clean, it’s modern, it’s classic in its simplicity.” The million-dollar structure replaced the aged Lane Field, the downtown stadium at Broadway and Harbor Drive, where the Pacific Coast League Padres had played since 1936.

Local businessman C. Arnholt Smith, owner of the Westgate-California Tuna Packing Company, had acquired the Padres in 1955. He immediately made plans to replace the “termite village” with a modern stadium to showcase his new property.

Building a minor league ballpark with private capital was risky in 1957. The nation was in a serious recession. PCL officials also worried that the pending moves of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants to California would kill interest in local minor league baseball



Westgate Park on the site of today’s Fashion Valley Shopping Center.

Photo courtesy Bill Swank

And the site of Westgate Park—in the “pastoral heartland” of undeveloped Mission Valley—was controversial. Smith won approval for the project only after serious courting of the City Council. Ignoring objections by the Planning Commission, which feared growing commercialization in the valley, the Council blessed the project in the fall of 1956.

After a vigorous construction schedule, which included surfacing Friar’s Road--the access street from Highway 395 (today’s 163)--the stadium was

introduced to the public in a “Meet the Padres” open house on April 28, 1958. Free buses ferried fans to the stadium from Horton Plaza. Comedian Joe E. Brown was the featured speaker for the box lunch. The Padre players were introduced, wearing their new, pin-stripe white uniforms.

The fans found a stadium with a seating capacity of 8,268—small by major league standards but spacious for the minor league Padres. There were 5,752 box seats and 2,516 grandstand seats. There were no bleachers and every theater-style seat featured an armrest. A steel roof shaded almost the entire grandstand.

The concession stands were a wonder. Jack Murphy marveled at the vast kitchen in the “catacombs” under the stands with its walk-in coolers for beer and soft drinks. He was particularly impressed by the heated storage room for peanuts where the temperature was maintained at 120 degrees and held 10,000 bags of peanuts, 23 peanuts to a bag.

Opening day was Tuesday, April 29: a double-header against the Phoenix Giants, led by 20-year-old, future Hall of Famer Willie McCovey. The afternoon game drew 4,619 fans who watched their team beat the Giants 5-3, led by strong pitching from Dick Stigman.

The night game drew 7,129. Actor Dick Powell threw the opening pitch to Pacific Coast League president Leslie O’Connor. The Giants’ McCovey was held in check but Dusty Rhodes—the New York Giants hero of the 1954 World Series—hit Westgate’s first home run. The Padres responded with a homer by Larry Raimos and by the sidearm pitching of Bill Werle. They took the nightcap, 3-1.

Most of the ballplayers of that opening day were in the twilight of their careers. The Padre stars—Rudy Regalado, Bill Werle, Larry Raimos—would soon be out of baseball. Dick Stigman would have several productive years with the Cleveland Indians and Minnesota Twins. Several Giant players of that day—Willie McCovey, Tom Haller, Leon Wagner, Joey Amalfitano--were starting successful major league careers.

The Padres would play ten years at Westgate Park and win three PCL championships: 1962, 1964, and 1967. Ballpark expansion was contemplated for a time in the mid-1960s when the Milwaukee Braves briefly considered moving west. Blueprints were drawn up to add a second deck and outfield bleachers, bringing the seating capacity to 40,000.

But instead of expansion, Westgate Park would get a pink slip. In December 1967, plans were announced for a \$40 million shopping center to be built on the site of the ballpark by Westgate-California Realty and developer Ernest W. Hahn. “The finest minor league facility in the country” fell to a wrecking ball and the Fashion Valley Mall emerged in its place two years later.

San Diego’s PCL Padres opened the 1968 season in the new San Diego Stadium. The same year the city was awarded a National League franchise. The Padres returned the next year as a major league team. San Diego Stadium, renamed Jack Murphy in 1980 and then Qualcomm in 1997, hosted the Padres until their move to PETCO Park in 2004.

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