

FOREVER BLUE

*The True Story of Walter O'Malley, Baseball's Most Controversial Owner,
and the Dodgers of Brooklyn and Los Angeles*



MICHAEL D'ANTONIO

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*For Dodgers of every era,
and their fans, forever blue.*

Preface

On the night when major-league baseball died in Brooklyn, fewer than seven thousand fans went to the old ballpark in Flatbush to pay their respects. Most sat in the lower level, behind home plate, and along the baselines. In the big empty sections of the grandstand a light autumn breeze blew paper cups and empty peanut bags down concrete aisles and against rows of old slatted chairs. On the field, players moved with the extra weight of knowing that this time there would be no “next year.” After many seasons of joy—in the face of Jackie Robinson, in the bellowing voice of Hilda Chester, and in the roar of standing-room-only crowds—Ebbets Field had become a desolate and unhappy place.

The Dodgers beat the Pirates 2-0. Organist Gladys Goodding played “Auld Lang Syne” as the grounds crew raked the infield and, out of habit, spread a tarp over the pitcher’s mound. Emmett Kelly, the sad-faced clown who had performed his act before Dodgers games throughout the season, would recall seeing many women—and a few men—crying as they left Ebbets Field for good.

Brooklyn had already entered an era of loss. The daily paper, the *Eagle*, had died in 1955, and the trolley cars had stopped running in 1956. Several big retail stores and theaters had closed, and young families were moving to the suburbs of Long Island. Now the great Dodgers baseball team was leaving and there was nothing anyone could do about it. For some the wound was so deep and ragged that the pain would never quite disappear. Almost fifty years later, in one of the last interviews he gave before his death, Dodger pitcher Clem Labine’s voice trembled as he recalled the day and asked, “Why did he do it?”

“He” was Walter O’Malley, the team’s owner, and what he did would go down in history as a betrayal equal, in some minds, to Benedict Arnold’s treason at West Point. At a time when people in Brooklyn were fighting to hold on to their optimism and identity, O’Malley uprooted the most important symbol of their plucky spirit and moved it to Los Angeles.

In the years since they moved west, the old Brooklyn Dodgers became the subject of more intense worship and hagiography than any ball club in history. The Yankees of Ruth and Gehrig were more worthy of awe and the Cubs have certainly earned the underdog love they enjoy every season. But Frank Sinatra sang of a ballpark in Brooklyn, not Chicago, and only the Brooklyn Dodgers of the 1950s could inspire Roger Kahn’s *The Boys of Summer*, which became one of the biggest-selling baseball books of all time.

Kahn’s elegy, published in 1972 and maintained in print ever since, was followed by

an entire genre of Brooklyn Dodgers literature in the form of books, articles, and even academic papers. In many of these works, and more casual remembrances, O'Malley is portrayed as a villain. New York writer Jack Newfield famously called O'Malley one of the three worst human beings who ever lived. His colleague Pete Hamill, who has published at least twenty books, is known as much for his hatred of O'Malley as for anything else. When, in 2007, O'Malley was finally voted into the Hall of Fame, Hamill wrote "Never forgive, never forget" and declared that with his election the hall took all morality out of the honor of getting a plaque at Cooperstown.

But as much as Hamill might disagree, O'Malley actually deserved a spot in the hall. With his fateful decision to leave Brooklyn, he did more than anyone to make baseball a truly national game. And during his reign, the Dodgers became one of the greatest franchises in all of sport. From the day he moved to Los Angeles until he died in 1979, O'Malley's team would be the best in the National League, winning three world championships and seven pennants and finishing second seven times. (In all of baseball, only the Yankees had a better record.) O'Malley also built the first truly modern stadium in America, a gracefully designed ballpark that remains, after nearly fifty years, one of the best places in the world to watch a game of any sort.

Although a few hard cases in Brooklyn would never forgive him, millions of fans in the Los Angeles area came to regard O'Malley, who didn't need padding to play the role, as some kind of Santa Claus. They felt this way because he had given them the gift of elite-level baseball and affirmed their city's status as "major league." O'Malley became so popular in Los Angeles that on the fiftieth anniversary of the team's arrival in the city, a five-foot-high bronze frieze of his image was installed at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Court of Honor. There he joined other sports figures—including Knute Rockne, Jackie Robinson, and Jesse Owens—deemed to have contributed to the "growth and glory" of the city.

THE ANIMUS And the affection heaped on O'Malley long after his death raises an obvious question: How could a sportsman be so hated in one place and so beloved in another? The Brooklyn/Los Angeles divide suggests part of the answer, but parochialism does not explain it all. It's important to recall, too, that O'Malley was an imposing figure who wielded power over a popular institution and supervised many ambitious and headstrong individuals. Few people ever enjoyed more direct authority than the owner of a ball team in the days before free agency and the players' union. This power allowed him to accomplish great things, but it also aroused suspicion, envy, and animosity.

Any attempt to explain O'Malley must also consider the gaps in the record of his life. He was not the type who would reflect aloud on his motivations or reveal his innermost thoughts. From the outside anyone could see that O'Malley was devoted to his family and that he thoroughly enjoyed his wealth, status, and the trappings of

success. But while he lived, he avoided close analysis. This was especially true when it came to events surrounding his acquisition of the team and the move west. Once these struggles ended, he rarely spoke of them in public. He insisted on calling old rivals his friends and usually declined to defend himself against his critics.

Because he was so reticent, anyone depending on the public record would be challenged to understand O'Malley, or the moves he made, with any real certainty. Fortunately he left behind a vast archive of personal and business files that help fill in the picture. Made available by his surviving children, these papers became the documentary foundation for this book. They reveal the inside story of O'Malley's rise from the son of a Tammany Hall pol to the boss of baseball and place certain historic events in a new light.

The O'Malley archive offers a new and more realistic perspective on the game's great sage, Branch Rickey, and on the long, torturous political fight that preceded the team's flight from Brooklyn. Beyond these issues, the O'Malley papers show how much he risked in building Dodger Stadium and that delays and rising costs brought him close to bankruptcy.

Short of having access to the man himself, the thoughts O'Malley expresses in his notes and letters, the diaries that chart his travels and contacts, and all the rest of the material in the archive make it possible to see the man more clearly than he has even been seen before. Add interviews with those who knew him, countless contemporary articles, and dozens of relevant books, and the portrait becomes even more reliable and distinct.

In the end, it's up to anyone who would judge O'Malley to consider the evidence and to attempt to see the man in full. If, ultimately, you reach more than one conclusion, you'll have something in common with many who knew him back when. He was not a simple person who would fit easily into a single category or simple definition. But then, what man or woman worthy of history's consideration ever was?

One

TWO O'MALLEYS

On the last day of August 1921, a short and stocky man with wavy dark hair walked alone to a witness chair set behind a small wooden table in the ornate council chamber at New York City Hall. Despite the ninety-degree heat, thirty-nine-year-old Edwin O'Malley wore a formal suit and tie. To his right, Washington and Lafayette peered down from gilt-framed paintings. To his left, huge windows that flanked a plaster statue of Thomas Jefferson let bright cathedral light into the room. Behind him, the gallery was filled with a legion of friends and political allies.

O'Malley, who clenched a soggy unlit cigar between his teeth, paused for a moment to take some papers out of his briefcase and spread them on the table. He then sat down, and stared defiantly through pince-nez glasses—the kind that Teddy Roosevelt wore—at the latest in a long line of investigators and legislators who had tried to destroy the city's legendary Tammany Hall political machine. O'Malley had spent weeks dodging the so-called Meyer Committee and charges that he and his department were guilty of graft and corruption. In this moment he seemed outnumbered and besieged. But if history was a reliable guide, he had nothing to fear.

Do-gooders had been trying to reform New York City since before Edwin O'Malley was born. The previous campaign had been conducted by an insider, Mayor John Purroy Mitchel. Aided by an ambitious political newcomer named Robert Moses, Mitchel had crusaded for a merit-based civil service. But like all the others before them, they had failed. John F. “Red Mike” Hylan, whom Moses called “the Bozo of Bushwick,” drove them out in the election of 1917 and Tammany roared back to life.

As Red Mike's commissioner of public markets, O'Malley had come under scrutiny when the Meyer Committee focused on a city-run network of food warehouses. Noisy, dangerous, and infested with rats, these public markets housed dealers who were licensed to receive and distribute virtually everything anyone in New York ate or drank. The space controlled by the department's men was precious, and according to a butcher who testified before the investigators, \$450 paid to an inspector named George A. Winter was the going rate if you wanted to transfer permits when a business was sold. Another market man had said that O'Malley had pressured him to sell his building on Vesey Street to the New York Telephone Company, which planned a massive skyscraper for the spot. A fishmonger's widow testified that she was threatened with eviction from the market if she didn't pay \$1,000.

For the butcher and the fishmonger's widow, the hearings brought a moment of fame, but only the naïve would be shocked by their testimony. Generations of rule by political operators like G. W. Plunkitt—most famous for saying, “I seen my

opportunities and I took 'em"—had affirmed that the city ran on graft. Politicians retained power by doling out jobs to the working class and big favors to those with money or influence. Everyone knew how the game worked, and many admired the ingenuity of those who played it well.

During the Meyer investigation, O'Malley had maneuvered so well that the committee had agreed to let him appear on his own terms. This included allowing him to make an uninterrupted opening statement that would address every issue raised by his accusers. On the day he testified, O'Malley pressed for another advantage: immunity from prosecution for anything he might tell the committee. Here the men from Albany drew a line. O'Malley, who insisted that his accusers were backed by powerful men in the food industry, was duly outraged.

"Is that the last instruction from the governor," said O'Malley, slamming his fist on the table, "to get me by hook or crook, or break both my legs, because I have been fighting the food interests?"

The crowd at City Hall applauded and O'Malley, not waiting for an answer, then launched a free-form monologue intended to take full advantage of the committee's assurance that he could speak without interruption. After offering brief denials of the graft and extortion charges, he commenced a detailed, rambling address on the value of a public markets system that began with a description of their founding and continued to include character sketches of the men who made it work. One, August Silz, "made the guinea hen famous," said O'Malley. "Unfortunately poor August is dead. He was a splendid character."

In his second hour O'Malley attacked his accusers. One had stolen chickens, said the commissioner. Another was complaining, even though her permits had actually been granted. A third must have been confused about payments made for the fixtures in a market stall. Everyone *knew* that city permits could not be bought or sold, he said.

O'Malley's testimony was a spectacular display of bluster and filibuster, so energetic that at one point an irritated deputy attorney general asked, "Are you electrically wound up?"

"Well, I don't know what you mean," answered O'Malley.

"You don't seem to run down."

"I am telling you what happened, about this thing."

And so it went for more than two full hours. At several points those hearing the testimony grew impatient with this grand display of talking without communicating, a practice the British called "talking Irish." A committee lawyer named Leonard Wallenstein actually rose out of his chair to demand that O'Malley provide direct answers to specific questions. To the delight of the crowd, O'Malley said he wouldn't let the lawyer "pin me down."

Wallenstein rose to his feet and shook a fist. "Now, Mr. Witness, you remember—"

"Aw, sit down, don't get excited!"

Behind O'Malley, the crowd erupted with prizefight cheers.

“You don’t want me to tell you what I think of you!” shouted Wallenstein.

“I don’t care! I wouldn’t believe what you say anyway. Sit down. Keep your hands to yourself too.”

More cheers.

“Is this a beer garden?” asked Wallenstein, straining to be heard.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the crowd, a man called out, “Get off of the stand, O’Malley!” It was John J. Halpin, a politically connected lawyer, who had cried out. “I appear as his counsel,” he said. “I advise him to leave the stand.”

“Throw him out!” commanded one of the Republicans on the panel.

Having told his story of the public markets and created a drama to please the crowd, O’Malley rose and swept the papers on the table into his briefcase. When Wallenstein asked if he refused to answer more questions, O’Malley answered, “I do!”

The Tammany men in the hall applauded loudly as O’Malley picked up his hat. They stood and kept clapping as he turned to walk out of the hearing with Halpin at his side. A large contingent followed, continuing to cheer as the embattled commissioner and his lawyer passed Washington and Jefferson and Lafayette, left the hearing room, and descended the marble steps of City Hall. The only thing they failed to do, as they showed their support for their man O’Malley, was hoist him on their shoulders.

The next morning the lead headline in the *New York Times* read “O’Malley, in Rage, Quits as Witness” and the paper predicted that the commissioner would have to resign. However, weeks and then months passed and O’Malley remained. The Meyer Committee would issue a report describing the public markets as a “vehicle for the collection of graft.” Further evidence of the department’s problems emerged in a trial related to a racket that targeted pushcart vendors, who were also under the department’s purview. As he ruled on the pushcart case, Justice James Cropsey described a level of “lawlessness” in the markets unequalled since the days of the breathtakingly corrupt Boss Tweed.

Ultimately, Inspector Winter and nearly a hundred other “market men” were fired. The pushcart scheme was ended. And a lavish peddler’s ball, which was planned to honor Edwin O’Malley on his fortieth birthday, was cancelled when it appeared that city workers had threatened to revoke the licenses of those vendors who refused to buy tickets. Some of the peddlers, who mostly spoke Yiddish, Polish, and Italian, said they were relieved by the cancellation, since few of them appreciated modern music or knew how to dance.

But though he wouldn’t get his testimonial, Commissioner O’Malley kept his job and would serve until the end of 1925, when his patron’s term ended. In that time O’Malley never shrank from the spotlight. When the Port Authority moved to take over food distribution, he began construction of a new \$10 million public market in the Bronx. When the New York Housewives Sugar Committee marched around City Hall to protest high prices, he joined the mayor to cheer their complaints against “big

food.” And when a delegation from Japan came to visit, O’Malley served as eager host, tour guide, and publicist. S. Honda, the Japanese secretary of agriculture, liked what he saw but said he’d prefer to cut out the middlemen who rented the stalls and let the government sell directly to the public.

Before O’Malley left office, the leaders of Tammany Hall, who occupied a clubhouse called The Wigwam, would mourn the death of G. W. Plunkitt, who expired in 1924 at the age of eighty-two. (A memorial in the *Times* noted that Plunkitt, who died a millionaire, had begun *his* career in the public market.) As he settled into his new precinct at Calvary Cemetery, Plunkitt would have been fascinated to know that Robert Moses, the eggheaded reformer once defeated by Hylan, had learned to play the rough game he once abhorred and was gathering old-fashioned power and influence in both New York and Albany.

WHILE EDWIN O’MALLEY spent much of 1921 and 1922 in conflict with state investigators, his son Walter waged his own struggles a thousand miles away, at the Culver Military Academy in rural Indiana. An isolated and expensive haven for the elite—his class included Procter & Gamble heir Louis Nippert—Culver might seem, at first, a strange place to find the son of a Tammany pol. It had once seemed like a strange choice to Walter Francis O’Malley. The very idea of an exclusive, all-male, private military academy nestled behind cornstalks in Indiana offended his sixteen-year-old’s political sensibilities. He was a man of the people, like his father.

“Me for the democratic principles!” Walter wrote to his “Pa” in the summer of 1920. “Public school, grammar and high school; then a city college.”

The letter was sent from a Boy Scout camp in upstate New York where Walter worked as a counselor. The Scouts were formed in 1910 in response to widespread concern that American boys were becoming effeminate and dissolute. Walter had joined after moving with his family from the Bronx to Hollis, Queens, which was on the almost-rural edge of the borough. He loved the outdoorsy, quasi-military organization and was a superior Scout. Since Culver was like an extreme, round-the-clock form of scouting, his father had reason to believe Walter would thrive there too. Culver could also be a shelter from New York politics and a step up the social ladder.

Edwin O’Malley had great expectations for Walter. Father and son looked alike, with the same pursed-lip smile and twinkling eyes. While he spoiled the boy, Edwin also taught his son to be tough. “Chin up,” he said. “Keep slugging. Never let anyone walk over you.”

Walter’s future was so important to Edwin that even as his political enemies circled, he had gathered his son’s records from Jamaica High School in Queens and solicited recommendations from military men in New York. On August 12, 1920, Walter was accepted by Culver. And while his son was already developing a stubborn streak—“I

don't like being told where to go," he said—Edwin O'Malley overruled his objections. Soon enough he was on a train headed west.

In early September this skinny boy with pale skin, slicked-back hair, and big black-rimmed glasses was settled on a campus that looked more like an army fort than a school. The mess hall and riding center were built with watchtowers. Crenellated parapets topped the dormitories. When Walter O'Malley looked out the window from his room, all he could see, including cadets dressed in the academy's high-collared gray uniform, would remind him of West Point in miniature.

It was no accident that Culver's uniforms, program, and architecture echoed the U.S. Military Academy. Founded in 1894, the school had been built and staffed by West Point alumni. They promised to make good boys into great men and to prevent rascals from becoming real troublemakers. Wendell Willkie, for example, had spent the summer of 1906 at Culver to atone for his sins at public school, which had included stealing a skeleton from a science lab. The hazing at the academy made him miserable, but he returned to his family so thoroughly cured of rebellion and prepared for a sober life that he would win the Republican nomination for president in 1940.

When O'Malley attended, Culver was dominated by a charismatic officer named Leigh Gignilliat—he pronounced it "Jin-eh-let"—who was responsible for the school's fame. He had formed the Black Horse Troop, which performed at Woodrow Wilson's inauguration in 1913. He also led the cadets to rescue townspeople stranded by flooding in nearby Logansport. By 1916, Gignilliat was Culver superintendent and, through his book *Arms and the Boy*, had become a national advocate for "straight bodies, straight minds and straight morals." Indeed, his boys were so strong and disciplined that they endured tonsillectomies and other surgery with only local anesthetic.

Daily life at the academy was governed by the official Routine of Duty and the "Culver Way," which stressed efficiency and cohesion. This included mundane activities like bathing. No ordinary showers or tubs for the Culver men. Instead they marched through a maze of pipes and automatic sprayers that resembled a modern car wash. This contraption could clean a battalion in minutes.

Even the special events scheduled to break the routine tended to promote the Culver way of doing things and to prepare the cadets to play swashbuckling roles on important stages. During Walter O'Malley's first year at the academy, he heard from more than a dozen prominent men—adventurers, leaders, and achievers—who addressed world affairs, military matters, and, more than once, the qualities that make for a moral, upright American male.

Although the moral condition of the young is a perennial American obsession, in the years immediately following World War I this worry had intensified. As four million young men returned from that horrific war, many brought a more realistic if not cynical view of human nature, authority, politics, and even fate. Soon Sinclair Lewis issued an indictment of repressive American mores called *Main Street*. He was joined on the best-seller lists by Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, H. L. Mencken, and others who assaulted American convention.

In this period of questioning, certain events fueled doubts about public institutions and the basic fairness of American society. Race riots shook major cities and strikes idled steel mills and docks. Even the sports page carried bad news as eight White Sox players were charged with fixing the World Series. After the truth came out, once-innocent fans could no longer assume that the game—long promoted as a bastion of goodness and virtue—represented America at its best.

Together, scandal, crisis, and social criticism challenged the idea that the United States was an exceptional country. In response, guardians of the mainstream did what they could to honor and reinforce traditional sources of strength and stability. At the extreme the Ku Klux Klan, which young Walter noticed was particularly powerful in Indiana, used the so-called Red Menace to justify attacks on immigrants, Jews, and Catholics. Moderates were content with standing up for the virtues of faith, strength, ingenuity, and capitalism, often through fraternal organizations, schools, and the press. Baseball installed as “commissioner” a federal judge named Kenesaw Mountain Landis and gave him extraordinary powers. Landis immediately barred the Black Sox conspirators for life.

While Landis sought to restore the mythic virtue of the great game, social commentators who saw nothing wrong on Main Street rose to defend its inhabitants. In *The Return of the Middle Class*, John Corbis acknowledged that the faith and well-being of the average American had been shaken but would soon be restored. In its effort to promote models of sober superiority the *New York Times* asked twenty different experts to name the most important American men. Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Edison appeared on nearly every one of the lists, which were heavy with businessmen and military leaders such as John J. Pershing and Leonard Wood.

Appearing at Culver, Major General Wood issued an address called “A Warning Against the Red Immigrant.” In Wood, Walter O’Malley’s cadre saw a man so close to ideal that he was a young Douglas MacArthur’s role model. An Indian fighter and Rough Rider, Wood was almost the Republican nominee for president in 1920. He had been a major force behind the Palmer raids that had swept thousands of supposedly dangerous radicals into jail on little or no reliable evidence. (At the height of the Red Scare, fears were so high that an Indiana jury acquitted a man who had killed a foreigner who had shouted, “To hell with the United States.”)

What the boys at Culver knew about politics depended almost entirely on what they heard from the likes of General Wood and the academy staff. Even mainstream news was hard to come by at the academy. Big-city papers didn’t circulate there, and commercial radio—the first broadcasts were in the fall of 1920—was not yet available in rural Indiana. Chicago, the nearest big city, wouldn’t get its first major station until 1924.

Although they would surely be excited by radio, the cadets were kept so busy marching, learning, and training that no one had much time or energy for the music or news it beamed from distant cities. This was especially true of parochial matters like investigations of municipal affairs. As Walter explained in a letter home, even the faculty was unaware of the public markets and Edwin O’Malley’s struggles. Freed from the cloud that hovered over the family name back in New York, Walter would

have been able to pass as an ordinary plebe. However, he was hardly ordinary.

Within months of his arrival at the academy Walter O'Malley was pegged as a leader by his teachers, who reported as much to his mother and father. Of course, Walter was hardly a perfect cadet. In one two-month period he committed twenty-three infractions—most involved tardiness or failing to report—that were serious enough to make it into his record. But he also earned promotion to corporal faster than most and became well known by writing for the academy paper. And a reader doesn't have to check between the lines of his letters to his father and mother to see that he brought a bit of Tammany style to the barracks.

In one letter Walter notes that he defeated a host of senior officers to win election to an artillery battalion post. "I didn't even attend the election, so perfect was MY political machine," he writes, and then adds, "That is some awful egotism, hey?" In another letter Walter playfully reports that his new roommate is the nephew of Eugene V. Debs, the great socialist, but "he is a mighty fine fellow and not very radical—in fact he will be a strong Wigwam man when I get thru with him."

Walter O'Malley was mastering the system at Culver, distinguishing himself among cadets who had been at the school much longer and winning the admiration of the faculty. He dabbled in baseball and soccer but excelled on the school paper. Even when he got into real trouble, Walter's character and personality served him well. During his second and last year at the academy he interviewed government inspectors before he wrote an article about their visit. The trouble arose when he discovered that his notes were not quite complete and "I had to use my imagination and fill in the vacant places." The result was a piece that included misquotes and misinformation that outraged General Gignilliat, who destroyed the press run and demanded, "Who in blazes wrote that asinine article?" O'Malley confessed, apologized, and was forgiven. Unshaken, he sent a copy of his formal apology note to his parents and playfully requested they preserve it for his scrapbook.

Aided by reports from school authorities, Edwin and Alma O'Malley followed their boy's progress at Culver closely. In 1922, as graduation approached, his grades fell and Culver administrators took his name off the list for exams that might have gotten him admitted to Princeton. Alma traveled to see him for Easter and to talk to academy officials about her boy attending West Point. Walter had already opposed this idea, in a long and well-considered letter that included an objection to medical school—"I'd never be a success with the iodine and the knife"—and raised the idea that he might follow his father into public service. When Alma arrived, three senior faculty members argued against a military career for young O'Malley and suggested, instead, journalism or politics. She and Edwin agreed, and two years after Walter was overruled and sent to Indiana, he took a bit more control of his own destiny.

With West Point set aside and his dream school, Princeton, out of reach academically, Walter visited Cornell and found it too big. And, like Princeton, Cornell required a better academic record than he could show. O'Malley was beginning to see how his spring slump hurt his chances, and he confessed this much in a letter to a colonel at Culver, writing, "I wish that I had all the languages and everything else in the academic curriculum so that I could go anywhere!!"

The letter, written just weeks after he left Culver, was the first of a long correspondence he would maintain with academy officials for years to come. This habit of keeping in touch with an ever-increasing number of friends, teachers, colleagues, and acquaintances became an O'Malley hallmark. It also reflected the values of a time when proper etiquette—from the French word for ticket—was considered essential for those who wanted to gain entry to the upper class. Emily Post's *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* debuted in 1922 and was one of five similar guides published that year for anxious strivers. Whether coached by his elders or one of these books, Walter O'Malley became a master of social grace. Eventually he would accumulate hundreds if not thousands of correspondents. In a time long before the term was used, he was “networking” his way to people who would help him throughout his life.

When he was accepted and enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, O'Malley could count several Culver alumni as fellow classmates and more still among the older students. (Later in life he would say that nearly forty classmates went from Culver to Penn.) Few freshmen could have had more support, and fewer still would have been as well prepared for the idiosyncratic, ritualistic, and intensely male environment of the Ivy League in the Roaring Twenties. It's hard to imagine a place or a time when camaraderie, revelry, and bonhomie would have been more important to success.

ROPES AND STAKES MARKED a battleground inside the famous Penn Quadrangle, where brick dormitories formed the four sides of a sheltered patch of green crisscrossed by walkways. The space, which was secluded from the nearby city streets, resembled the inner ward of a castle. At about five p.m. on a Wednesday at the start of the fall semester, Walter O'Malley joined hundreds of his fellow freshmen—the class of 1926—who poured into the quad. At five fifteen about three hundred sophomores, many dressed in their worst clothes, entered amid taunts and jeering.

O'Malley, and all the others who would fight, climbed over the ropes and into the ring, leaving their less aggressive classmates to join a crowd of onlookers that included members of the faculty who had witnessed this ritual before. The sophomores massed in the middle, forming circles of protection around twenty classmates, each of whom carried a small sack of flour.

The gates to the quad were swung shut. Someone outside the ring fired a pistol. (Presumably the cartridge was blank.) With cheers filling the air, O'Malley and his brothers stripped off their shirts. Each one had the number 26 dabbed in iodine on his chest and his back. Shouting and growling, they charged at the sophomores, breaking into the rings of defense and attacking the men at the center.

While the sophomores fought to protect the flour sacks, the freshmen swarmed and tore at them. Following custom, the assault included yanking at the sophomores' clothes until many of them were naked or nearly so. Flour flew through the air, coating

faces and bodies. Breathless, sweating, and dirty, the students struggled until three sophomores, stripped but still clutching their flour sacks, were able to wriggle out of the scrum and flee. Another shot was fired signaling the end of the fight and a win for the “sophs.”

As Walter would write to his parents, the Flour Fight was “a sweet little scrap,” which was really the point. The fight was the thing, not victory or defeat. The annual battle, which sometimes produced concussions and broken bones, was part of a freshman initiation process based on long-standing traditions that governed life at Penn and other colleges. It was a variation on Penn’s original sophomore-freshman contest, which involved a fight over a symbolic bowl that was so ferocious it had to be banned in 1916 after a freshman named William Lifson died of suffocation under a pile of wrestlers.

After Lifson’s death, faculty, administrators, and community leaders tried to end the ritual battles. A substitute called the Penniman Bowl, named for the school’s provost, promised glory to the class that won a series of more civilized games. But the peace was short-lived. By 1922 the Flour Fight was embedded in UPenn’s local culture and a second traditional fight had also been started—the Pants Fight, an end-of-the-year brawl that involved, as anyone might imagine, ferocious attacks and counterattacks that ended with the losers stripped.

Extreme as they may seem today, during the era of hip flasks, raccoon coats, and ukuleles, initiation rituals were, like fraternities and eating clubs, the true focus of life at many universities. As one study of UPenn traditions noted, students regarded their college years as the last boisterous hurrah of immaturity, and the faculty encouraged this view. In this way, rather than promote or extend youthful rebellion, the college let young men blow off steam while preparing them to lead conservative lives and preserve bedrock institutions, including political parties, businesses, investment houses, and white-shoe law firms.

The emphasis was on men because the few women at Penn and most other Ivy League schools were not fully part of the life of the school. And, to be more precise, one should note that these institutions generally promoted white Christian men. Penn was a bit of an exception, more open to Catholics and recent immigrants. Jews were admitted to study, even if they weren’t welcomed at fraternities. This policy was in part responsible for the school’s ranking, which, in the minds of the American elite, fell somewhere behind the more discriminating institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

As might be expected, some young men were better prepared than others to rise to the top at a place like Penn. Toughened by the physical and social training at Culver, Walter O’Malley reveled in college life, writing home excitedly when, for example, the provost cancelled classes so that a victory by the football team, which was coached by John Heisman, could be properly celebrated. Students did a snake dance down Broad Street in downtown Philadelphia, and the night brought a bonfire and a rampage called a Rowbottom (after a student who helped start the tradition) that involved hurling almost everything that wasn’t too big to be lifted out of residence hall windows.