

A Final Resting Place for People and Pets – *Signs of the Past by Ed Allen*

It became apparent early on that a community for retirees would need a cemetery. Uncertain of how this would be perceived by prospective buyers, a 164-acre site was located two miles north of where houses were being built in Phase 1. Back when the Mariette Ranch was planted in cotton, this was the location of North Camp Well – one of the major wells on the ranch and site of tent homes for many field laborers.

An aerial photo from 1963 shows how barren the land was then. The pond on the right remains but the smaller pond was eventually filled in and today's office building sits there. Note the road from bottom left to the middle of the right side. That was 107th Ave. When Phase 2 opened in 1969, it was decided to bend 107th – now Del Webb Blvd – to the east and screen the cemetery with three churches between it and the boulevard.

Sunland Memorial Park officially opened in 1963 with DEVCO predicting it would be one of the most modern and decorative in the country. A series of religious floral gardens were planned, and shade, palm and flowering trees added to the park's beauty. DEVCO's vision paid off when the memorial park received the "Most Beautiful Cemetery in Maricopa County Award" in 1967.

A chapel, mortuary, and offices were completed in 1964. DEVCO had no experience running a funeral business so they leased the chapel and mortuary to Lunbergh Mortuary of Youngtown and Glendale.

One famous person interred at Sunland is Harvey Kuenn, American League batting champ in 1959 and first manager of the Milwaukee Brewers. The Wilsons of Wilson Sporting Goods are interred there too, alongside an extra casket full of their company's sporting goods. Erma Bombeck's mother, Erma Harris is at Sunland. My father and mother, Rev. Earl Allen and Frances Allen are buried there, giving me a special connection to the memorial park.

The Beth Chayim Section of the park holds a special bronze and granite memorial to pay homage to the 6,000,000 Jews who perished in WWII. Installed in 1989, it was designed by local Rabbis and members of their temples and Jewish organizations.

One of the most unusual burials involved a husband and wife who wanted to be buried in the same casket. The fact they might not both die at the same time didn't deter them. Eventually, the park agreed. It would be more than a year between the deaths of the husband and the wife, and the workers rebelled at the request to dig up the casket to insert a second body! But eventually the task was completed. Good thing they were both slight of build!

Not as lucky was the couple that wished to acquire three plots, one for each of them and one for their pet chimpanzee. Rules were clear: pets are only allowed in the pet cemetery! Learning of it, the couple asked if they could be buried there alongside their dearly loved chimpanzee. Sorry, No!

Sunland has had three owners. First was DEVCO who in 1982 sold to Mathews Intl. Corp., the nation's oldest and largest producer of bronze memorials. In 1996, they sold to the current owners, the Service Corp. Intl. of Dallas, TX.

The original 164 acres was much more than the cemetery needed. One of Sun City's first clubs, the Agricultural Club, was extremely popular and relocated several times as Phase 1 unfolded. In 1969, DEVCO moved it to the west side of Sunland where it grew to 300 plots. It prospered until its lease was terminated in 2003 when the current owners of Sunland began the search for a residential developer for excess land.

The Travel Trailer Club quickly outgrew two Phase 1 storage compounds, and in 1970 DEVCO offered 15 acres west of Del Webb Blvd between the memorial park and the Agricultural Center. The 735 spaces gradually filled up and in 1984 a huge, new storage compound was built west of Sun City.

The Sun City Sheriff's Posse was looking for a central location for its headquarters in 1989, and obtained land from the cemetery. The initial agreement, however, limited access to the headquarters via Agua Fria Drive to the west. There was to be no direct access to the posse building thru the memorial park. Very inconvenient, and since changed.

We'll save the 5-acre Pets Rest Cemetery for an article of its own. One pet was an Internet celebrity – Grumpy Cat – perhaps the most famous, recent resident in all of Sunland!

