

Sun City's first and only movie theater – the ALCO *Signs of Sun City's Past by Ed Allen*

By 1971, Sun City's population had grown to more than 18,000, and a 4th shopping center was started – the La Ronde Center. Like the streets around it, the center was circular with Del Webb Blvd slicing through the middle. Surveys of residents had showed a desire for a local movie theater, and this center would include one – the ALCO.

DEVCO owned the building but leased the theater and parking spaces to a group of Phoenix-area investors. The 450-seat theater opened Jan. 12, 1972 with the film "Song of Norway."



While the movie theater had been widely anticipated, it was lightly patronized. DEVCO tried to help keep it going by reducing the leasing fees, but the theater struggled.

A deal was worked out with the Boswell Memorial Hospital Auxiliary to sell books of tickets at a discount to help build attendance, as well as raise funds for the medical center. In 1978, sales through the Auxiliary accounted for more than 60% of the theater's revenues but nowhere near enough to achieve profitability.

Along the way the theater tried to broaden its appeal by offering some "R" and "X-rated" films, but those were even less popular. A return to the "golden oldies" like "Gone with the Wind" spurred attendance for a while, but the popularity of TV – and movies on TV for free – worked against the ALCO.

As a result, the investing group announced plans to close the theater at the end of their lease. This would be to DEVCO's advantage as they had been leasing the space for a much lower rate than could be obtained from a commercial tenant. Sun City Town Meeting Association members strongly protested the closure, and Meeker gave them the opportunity to show their support by providing a written promise to sell the number of tickets required for the theater to break-even. They had the hospital auxiliary's support, and only needed to marshal their members to add to the number of tickets sold to meet that goal.



The theater stayed alive and in subsequent years was managed for a time by Blair Theatres, and then by United Artists Theatres. Oddly enough, the greatest success of the Alco Theater would come as a place to host community meetings. While residents didn't turn out in great numbers for movies, they filled the theater for public meetings of SCHOA, the Sun City Taxpayers, and other civic organizations. Meetings to discuss Incorporation filled the theater to overflowing. Church groups used the theater until their memberships grew to the point they could build their own facilities.

But movie attendance continued to decline. An offer to turn the ALCO into a live theater fell through, and its last film, the police thriller "Q&A" was shown Feb. 4, 1990. Fewer than 40 people paid the \$2.50 to attend.

The building was soon converted to other commercial uses. The entire La Ronde Center was given a new façade a few years ago, but the curbside planter and two thin, twin pillars mark the ALCO's location on the west side of the Center. Today, the building is part of the Maxwell Group clinic and offices.