

#10: 1964/1965 – “There’s a Calm Before the Storm”

Don't you hate it? When you get a tune in your head and it won't go away? As I pondered where to go with calendar years 1964 and 1965, all I could hear was John Fogerty and CCR's ballad, Have You Ever Seen the Rain. The haunting lyrics playing non-stop, "Someone told me long ago, There's a calm before the storm, I know, it's been comin' for some time."

No surprise, because it is a song about change, dramatic departures from how things were done. Transitional for sure. I suspect for many that seems silly given the immediate and remarkable successes Sun City enjoyed the first four years.

Last week I left you with one of Del Webb's absolute tenets: Every project manager filed weekly reports. He wanted to know how things were going. He was in charge of none of them, but oversaw all of them. His finger was always on the pulse of the companies' heartbeat.

As the United States become embroiled in the war in Vietnam, the country found itself in an economic downturn. That almost always impacts construction projects the hardest. From major corporate investments to home sales to hiring a workforce, every aspect of the Webb business felt the pinch.



Shocking: The genius behind Sun City was Tom Breen, Joe Ashton and L. C. Jacobson. This picture of Tom and Joe at the entry to Sun City from 1964 hardly tells the story of what was to come. Within a year both were let go and Jacobson was transferred to Las Vegas and quit shortly thereafter.

We already know the California and Florida Sun City projects were DOA (dead on arrival). The land they had bought outright was strangling them; carrying costs were astronomical. The real crunch came when he saw the reports from his crown jewel; there were only 433 home sales in Sun City Arizona in 1964 and 1965 was worse with 395.

Del Webb was not a man to wait and watch, he was a man of action. He went to L.C. Jacobson, Tom Breen and Joe Ashton, the genius behind the community and said they needed to do something, change things up. They disagreed. In a move rarely seen, Webb let Breen and Ashton go and Jake was transferred to Vegas where he resigned months later. L.C. was the biggest surprise, he was the glue behind the scenes and had been with Del for 30 years.

The strength of the Webb Corporation was always the people. Voids were filled because there were always qualified and competent employees to fill the holes. Bob Johnson was invaluable and John Meeker, once Webb's caddie while in high school, both stepped up. Del also came back to the fray; at the age of 65 he became both the president and the chairman of the corporation.

Oops, we are getting ahead of ourselves. 1964 was an interesting year. They opened the Series 30 Models, with slightly higher prices; \$11,250 to \$18,995 and for the first time offered twin homes with 1,148 sq.ft. for \$15,250. They also had a "Try Before You Buy" vacation program on Peoria Ave with 22 units. You could rent one for \$150 a month or \$50 a week.

Town Hall was turned over to residents and the Sun Valley Lodge was constructed. Incorporation was the hot button issue of the day and the community voted it down 2,258 to 1,036. DEVCO also built an experimental home filled with gadgets and solicited feedback from residents on what they liked and what they didn't.

In 1965, with the community taking over Town Hall, their dues went to \$20 per person per year (up from \$12). The battle still raged between Community Center and Town Hall. DEVCO introduced several Mediterranean style apartment units across from Town Hall, some had second levels.

As Webb forged a new era in oversight on Sun City's direction, he brought in John Meeker as Corporate Vice President of Community Development. He came with a fresh perspective. It was all centered on a wholly different concept, community driven. It was such an intriguing change, our series will continue by featuring it in-depth next week.

John first steps were big ones. The national marketing department of 50 people (who had produced incredible ads that didn't work very well) were let go. They were replaced with a group of three, and had one central theme. DEVCO's offices were moved to the Sun City Professional Building on the corner of 103rd, just off of Grand Ave.

Sun City's first private golf course was formed when a group of residents committed to securing 250 proprietary memberships at a cost of \$1,000 each. It became the Sun City Country Club. The "Try Before You Buy" vacation units were sold and the Kings Inn was their go-to spot for out-of-town visitors. The first of several softball fields was built, this one west of Grand Shopping Center where a local women's team, the Ramblers played.



You would never know times were tough in 1964 and 1965 in Sun City. The 5th anniversary parade was one of the biggest. While sales fell dramatically, the residents were loving every minute in their "new way of life." Those "hard times" for the Webb Corporation would become the catalyst for changes no one could see coming.

As the company developed further South, the Spurr Feedlot stench was more noticeable. That battle raged for another half a dozen years and dozens of law suits. The DEVCO board approved two pending projects: They loved the concept of the Sun Bowl and they also saw potential for developing horse ranches with larger lots. They became Rancho Estates.

One of the standout features and one that is still prominent in Sun City, is Sunshine Service. Reverend Thistlethwaite was running the free equipment and assistance from his house and carport. DEVCO built their new building at cost, paid for by donations from residents and organizations.

1965 was clearly a troubling year for the Webb Corporation. Turmoil, change and challenges were ever-present. Next week, we will see just how Sun City was saved. Until then, bonus points for any of you who can name John Fogerty's band, CCR (without Googling it).

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