

#12: 1966/1967 – Building a Sense of Community

Almost everything that endures begins with a strong foundation. The Webb Corporation personified that concept. Everything they built was done well. From the construction jobs to the internal processes within the company, they were built to last.

1965 was butt ugly. Maxine Newman, long-time Webb secretary said in an interview: “It was bad in 1964 and 1965. Morale was bad because we had what was called pink slip Fridays. Nobody knew who was going to get one.” Webb, Johnson and Jacobson were the core of the company and at the beginning of 1966, Jake quit.

When Meeker was assigned to Sun City, he understood the importance of the task he was given. He knew Del and Bob Johnson would take care of the rest of the company; his immediate focus was to take Sun City, a community with a strong foundation, and turn it into something special.

He quickly looked inward. While the other Sun Cities around the country were all but dead, he knew the potential the Arizona site had. He quit worrying about the big picture and looked only at small picture Sun City, AZ. It wasn't just great bones associated with the homes they built, but with the quality of the people living here.

He understood eventually ownership of the process of governance was going to be theirs. Rather than ignoring it, he worked tirelessly to help those living here embrace the idea. We saw in last week's story how he re-energized the clubs, but that was just the tip of the iceberg.



Started in 1966, the Grape Picking Festival became a long-standing tradition where Sun City residents could go pick leftover grapes at Webb/Boswell grape fields. Most people made raisins by putting the grapes on screens to dry in the sun. Used the raisins as snacks and utilized them in baking cookies, pies, etc.

The first 5 years, there were a couple of yearly events; typically a parade celebrating the opening of Sun City and the annual Strawberry Festival sponsored by the merchants. Seeing the impact these types of celebrations had, Meeker aggressively began like-minded programs. Here is a short list from 1966:

The first Watermelon Whing Ding and Sing was held at Fairway featuring Dolan Ellis of the New Christy Minstrels.

States Days promotions with entertainment and refreshments paid for by DEVCO.

The Father's Day Root Beer Bust at the Sun Bowl.

A Dixie Day Celebration in July drew 1,000 people.

The free Grape Picking Festival was held at the Boswell Company's Cactus Lane Ranch and it drew 2,000 people.

Sun City hosted the Amateur Rose Growers Show for New Mexico, Southern California and Arizona. There were 1,000 entries and 5,000 viewers.

The crown jewel though was the opening of the Sun Bowl. It was a “soft opening,” but still drew 3,000 people.

Beyond the big events, they also helped start the Sun City Community Fund, the local women's softball team's name was changed from the Rambler's to the Sun City Saints and Reader's Digest with a circulation of 26 million subscribers featured Sun City in an article entitled “Where Life Begins at 65.”

They also held a January Grand Opening for the 40 Series model homes located at 105th and Peoria Avenue. The year's models showcased 6 single family homes, 3 duplex models plus one garden apartment and 5 new Mediterranean Villas. Prices ranged from \$12,590 to \$23,490. Golf course lots were now selling for \$2,450 extra.

One of our goals in the coming years is to build a comprehensive web page featuring the remarkable model home booklets and floor plans. In conjunction with it, we will map out all of the locations for the various model home openings.

There was also preliminary discussions for a 61 bed Sun City Community Hospital, but talks broke down when a local church group decided they didn't want to be involved. DEVCO then formed a non-profit corporation with residents and DEVCO to explore other options.

1966 was indeed a busy year. 602 homes were sold that year and it appeared as if Sun City AZ was back on track. Better yet, 1967 was further proof the newly revised concept of working with the community was bringing buyers back.

The kickoff to the New Year was wildly successful. Liberace formally opened the Sun Bowl with 7,000 people in attendance. Throughout the year, Sun Bowl attendance was outstanding. The original plan was turn the Bowl over to the Sun City Home Owners Association, but due to its marketing success, DEVCO continued to own and run the programs.

In February of 1967, the new Series 50 model homes opened. It was unusual for DEVCO to hold back-to-back model home openings, but with the Mountain View Rec Center (Town Hall South) on the books and the newly formed Sun City Country Club having sold out memberships, they wasted no time.

The models were located on Mountain View near the soon to be built center. Prices were up slightly and interesting to note, the popular “Mediterranean Villas” exteriors were replaced by Spanish tile, mansard roofs and became “Spanish Villas.” Rancho Estates also opened that year with one acre plus lots available.

The Boswell Foundation offered to donate 1.2 million dollars toward the building of a hospital on a matching fund basis. There were 3 provisions: It had to serve the entire West Valley, it needed to be a landmark building and it had to be named the Walter O. Boswell Memorial Hospital.

DEVCO accepted Boswell's offer and in turn, donated a 10.6 acre site for the hospital, just north of Grand Ave. They also hired a professional fund raising organization. The effort was wildly successful with 1 million dollars being pledged and \$800,000 collected through 1968.

Unfortunately, one of Sun City's longest running problems would not go away. The Spur Feedlots legal battles were getting worse, as was the stink. Resident lawsuits had mounted to nearly 5 million dollars. Webb offered to buy the lot and the owner responded by piling 58 tons of manure on the corner of Olive and just west of 111th Avenue.



In July of 1967, the Mountain View Recreation Center opened with Del Webb, Bob Johnson and John Meeker performing the ribbon cutting. It was, by far, their nicest facility to date and was well received. DEVCO continued all of the popular events started the year before, and the community was growing to love the community and the amazing way of life they were enjoying.

Arizona Highways magazine featured Sun City in one of their magazines that year and it was used by the sales department in their marketing efforts. There was little question at this point, Sun City was back as they sold 737 homes and 662 profit units (pre-sales) were booked for a pre-tax profit of \$1,348,000. 224 sales were attributed directly to the Play and Stay Program.

While strong sales were an absolute necessity for Sun City to move forward, the most important fact was the residents were quickly taking ownership of the community. Meeker knew without their involvement, the entire concept was in jeopardy. As exciting as this story is, what happens the next 10 years is staggering beyond belief.

Thanks for reading.

Bill Pearson