

#13: 1968 – Meeker’s Magic

Understanding history and the actions of those before us requires some level of speculation. No matter how much we read, we often are left with our best guess on intent.

With that caveat out of the way, let me take you on a short journey of what I perceive John Meeker’s vision was. I have read his oral histories at the museum and several of his writings and am quite comfortable in my assessment as being spot on.

While many in the company looked at Sun City as a cash cow, he saw it as an undertaking into social change. It was way more than just a “return on investment.” It was about creating a sustainable community wholly different from where they came.

He understood to do that, it required both hands-on and hands-up. It wasn’t just build it and they will come. It was build it and help them shape the community they want. Provide them the tools and resources and a community that was owned by the residents that would last long after DEVCO had moved on.



The Sun City Symphony started in 1968 and is shown on the stage at Town Hall South (now known as Mountain View). They originally began with 60 plus members and for years played an important musical role in the community.

As he did that, he drove some of the DEVCO folks crazy. He didn’t look at what something cost, but what it returned to those living here. Community ownership and buy-in was ultimately the bottom line in everything he did.

What is fascinating is, no matter how much he spent, it just kept making DEVCO more money. Which is exactly why Mr. Webb continued supporting almost every decision he made.

1968 was a pivotal year. He knew they were on track to cross the tracks on Grand Ave. He knew the Sun Bowl was huge in the selling of Sun City. He also knew, if this was going to work, he needed to clean up the mess made 8 years ago.

We talked about the “mini-Berlin Wall” in an earlier segment. The fact those living around Community Center (Oakmont) being different from those signing “facilities agreements” for the Town Hall Center (Fairway). So much so, the centers were not interchangeable. It was a situation that had to change.

With the opening of Town Hall South (Mountain View) and the pending move north of Grand Ave, splintered centers would pose an enormous problem. John credits Owen Childress and community leaders with solving the dilemma; it didn’t hurt he agreed to spend money to upgrade Community Center.

When Town Hall South opened in July of 1968, all of the residents could use any of the facilities. As John said, it paved the way for the community to move forward and grow. Little did he know how fast and just how important that decision would become.

Once the challenge was resolved, the Company moved quickly. A general plan was submitted to the county for Phase 2 which included Arizona’s first man-made lake sub-division. The Lakes East and West golf courses were started and circular design on the streets were added.

Here are John’s exact words regarding the lake and how it would work: “The lake was designed to be filled with well water via a stream system through the golf course and pumped back to the golf course sprinkler system for circulation purposes and to prevent algae growth. The stream concept and design were by Site Development Manager Jeff Hardin and was used on several subsequent golf courses.”

That year was also notable as the Sun City Symphony Orchestra was formed and the programs run by DEVCO at the Sun Bowl were drawing record crowds. The company tried to attract both the Kansas City Royals and the California Angels for spring training but were unsuccessful.

The Vacation Special (Play and Stay program) continued to grow in popularity. In addition to the 158 units they were using by the fall of 1968, they had to grab the 97 rooms at the Kings Inn during the winter season.

Phase 2 models were opened early and at a higher price tag, to help sell the remaining lower priced homes in Phase 1. There were 1,175 homes sold and another 975 pre-sold for a pre-tax profit of \$2,569,000. Little wonder Del supported virtually all of Meeker’s decisions.



John Meeker threw out the first pitch for the Sun City Saints. They played for years in Phoenix and when they moved their home field to Sun City, they became the Saints and were truly beloved drawing huge crowds.

I had toyed with bundling 1968/1969 together. I opted not to, because 1968 was such a significant year. It also gave me the opportunity to let you look into the soul of the man who pushed the envelope well beyond what most were comfortable with.

It’s easy to suggest Meeker’s Magic was the end all be all. It wasn’t, John understood it was more complex than just his influence. It took those above him to trust his choices and let him run with it. More importantly, it took the community to come together, buy into the idea they were what really mattered as they went forward.

Meeker’s Magic was simple; what the residents wanted was the key to everything working in harmony. It’s why 60 years after the fact, Sun City is still strong, vibrant and growing in popularity.

See you all next week when we move across the tracks and kick it into high gear.

Bill Pearson