

#14: 1969-1970 – The Other Side of the Tracks

From my biased perspective, the Del Webb/Sun City story has been pretty darn good to date. We have woven through his early years and the trials and tribulations. We've seen the growth and the successes the company enjoyed. We watched Sun City explode and then sort of wither on the vine. Nobody, not Webb, Johnson, Boswell or Meeker could have projected what would happen when they crossed the tracks.

Meeker's three years in charge (66, 67 and 68) changed virtually all of their preliminary plans. The area designated as an industrial park all but disappeared. The small hospital scheduled behind Sun Valley Lodge became a large one on Thunderbird. The two lakes (Viewpoint and Dawn) sub-division were unique and would add to the allure of the community.

In January of 1969, the Grand Opening of the "Exposition for Living" 60 Series model homes took place. They bordered Viewpoint Lake and there were 4 "modes" of living and 18 models. The opening was crazy successful. They introduced a round sales rotunda and portable sales offices around the periphery.



The first man-made lake subdivision created quite the stir. Viewpoint Lake was a natural attraction and the grand opening of the Exposition for Living models in January of 1969 were wildly successful. DEVCO used the lake for constant promotions.

It was the model homes that were the true stars of the show. They featured 7 single-family floor plan options ranging in base prices starting at \$17,590 (981 sq ft) to \$27,990 (1,895 sq ft). The Garden Court Apartments with 4 floor plans, the Duplexes with another 4 plans, and finally the Patio homes across Del Webb Blvd with 3 models available. Oddly, the Patio homes were the most expensive (\$30,000 to \$33,000) and the one model that was never repeated.

The Patio homes did not sell well. Meeker claims it was due to a lack of visitor parking and very short garage setbacks (10 feet). Those 72 initial patio homes have common walls but no homeowners association because they have no common grounds. They are unique homes to this day.

Golf course lots were now an additional \$5,990 and the lake lots premiums were \$8,000 to \$17,000 depending on size. It should be interesting to note these increases were fairly significant in comparison to Phase 1 properties. Lakeview Rec Center won't open till later in the article, but the higher prices were reflective of additional costs for the lakes, golf courses and nicer amenities.

On January 29, the groundbreaking for Walter O. Boswell Hospital took place. It would originally be a 99-bed facility with an expansion of another 1,000 beds. By this time, the community had already donated more than 1 million dollars. With the Boswell gift, they were well on their way to cover \$4,500,000 costs. DEVCO built it at cost without fees.

It took nearly 2 years to complete with the first patient admitted on November 16, 1970. By 1982, the hospital had expanded to 355 beds. The Boswell Hospital Auxiliary was formed and their 1,700 volunteers saved the hospital millions of dollars in labor costs.

By the end of May of 1969, they had sold 1,000 homes and after the first 7 months, there had been 1,512 sales, more than their projected year's total of 1,500. Staggering. By year's end, 1,902 units had been sold and 180,569 visitors had passed through the sales complex. The pre-tax profit was \$6,823,000. Even more staggering.

A couple of other quick highlights for 1969 before we move on: 192,225 rounds of golf were played that year at North, South and Lakes West golf courses. 107th Avenue north of Grand name was changed to Del Webb Blvd. DEVCO proceeded with a study of life care facilities in Sun City. Harry James and Rich Little performed at the Sun Bowl in the spring series and the company scheduled 3 free shows in the fall.

1970 was every bit again as successful. The biggest event was the opening of the Lakeview Recreation Center. The round two-story building was resort-like and a dramatic departure from years gone by. Prior centers were more utilitarian while this one was pure glitz and glamour. It didn't hurt being on the lake and visitors were enthralled at the prospect of buying into a community with an amenity like this.

The raised park we lovingly call Meeker Mountain, was opened with serpentine walkways without steps, trellised gazebo and a gorgeous waterfall. It included a heavily landscaped picnic area with tables and barbecues that were very popular. An elaborate 18-hole mini-golf course was introduced along with indoor therapy pools.

During 1970, a record number of visitors, 196,066 came to Sun City. Home sales were 1,916 with pre-tax profits at \$8,392,000. All of which helped make Sun City the 12th largest city in Arizona. Amazing, considering we weren't even a city. It took just 10 years to do it.

The year was notable on several other fronts: The golf courses became profitable for the first time. Lakes East Executive course was opened and residents were allowed to play free for 1 week. Tom and George Fazio consulted on designing the Riverview course. The initial plans were made for a combination billiard parlor/bowling alley; they were unsure if it would be a commercial project or a community amenity.



The dedication of the Walter O. Boswell Memorial Hospital in November of 1970 drew 5,000 people. More importantly, the hospital has played an integral role in the marketing of Sun City. Most age-restricted communities don't have their own hospital.

Housing production was increased from 9 to 12 units per day. Let me repeat that; they were building more than 10 homes per day. Dawn Lake was completed. Natural gas was becoming tough to get and the conversion was made to all electric homes. The population reached 14,882. The Boswell Hospital dedication was held with 5,000 people in attendance. Another 5,000 residents took in the annual grape festival.

Crossing the tracks was a risk, but John Meeker and DEVCO left very little to chance. By this time, they understood Sun City was well beyond those initial stages of appealing to low to middle end homebuyers. They understood everyone loved a bargain, better yet, they understood buyers loved their new home and community.

Next week, we will see just how much as Meeker taps into his most powerful sales tool. Fascinating to say the least.

See you then.

Bill Pearson