

#15: 1971-1973 – The Greatest Show on Earth

I am doing something different this week. The header is paying homage to 2 dear old friends (heavy accent on old). You will note the photographs I am using are young men who were mainstays in Meeker's efforts to turn Sun City around.

Jerry Svendsen (early 60s) and Don Tuffs (early 70's) played prominent roles as Sun City evolved. John Meeker in his interview said "both of these young men came across to residents as if they were their own sons." Quite a tribute, and the reality is the Sun Bowl shows and their success was in large part due to what they did.

"The Greatest Sales Force Ever."

John Meeker was quite emphatic about why from 1971-1978 they sold 15,000 plus homes in Sun City. By the way, it would have been much higher but by mid-year of 1978 they had sold out Sun City lots and potential buyers had to look at Sun City West. Had the lots been available, they would have averaged more than 2,000 home sales per year.

I took liberties with the second header, in that I never saw a quote regarding the "greatest sales force ever" from Meeker. However, if you read any of his writings, you will see just how much he valued resident referrals.

From nearly the beginning, DEVCO used any number of tools to get those living here to reach out to those living "back home." They provided Christmas cards to mail to former neighbors prodding folks buried in snow to see how life without the white stuff was better than with it. They helped produce articles for those returning home to give to local newspapers.



Pictured above is DEVCO's remarkable Public Relations man Jerry Svendsen along with the one and only Liberace. His shows were sell-outs and traffic through the model homes always spiked following Sun Bowl performances like his.

Those early efforts paled in comparison to Meeker's vision. After dumping the 50 person in-house advertising agency, he took the money they were wasting on ad campaigns and invested it in community events and internal organizing. It worked.

Residents loved Del Webb and the amazing life he gave them. Meeker always smiled at that thought, because they used Del sparingly and Mr. Webb was always a bit put-off by the admiration he got when he did come to Sun City. It was as if Del had built each of their homes with his bare hands.

John turned the community into an amazing ball of energy. So much so, he wouldn't let salesmen do "hard sells" to visitors. He told them, let the residents give the pitch, their job was to do the paperwork. For anyone who has bought a car recently, you know how you hated pushy salesmen. In Sun City, if they pushed, they were gone.

The Stay and Play promotion was tailor-made to put potential buyers next to residents. Between club events, golfing, the pools and the Sun Bowl, the opportunity for those loving living here to mingle with those thinking about moving here was a match made in heaven. So much so that DEVCO had a formal program run by community volunteers that ran bus tours and acted as guides for the visitors.

I don't mean to blow by these 3 years, they were exceptional. In 1971 they held the "it's Showtime" 70 Series Grand Opening. 247,753 visitors came through the models. When you walked through the front door of the H-78, the combination living room/dining room provided a view of the lake and the dock. That year they sold a record 2,322 homes with a profit of nearly 12 million dollars.

Also that year, Jimmy Durante appeared at the Sun Bowl. The La Ronde Shopping Center opened, featuring the Alco Movie Theater. Palmbrook Country Club was formed and DEVCO built its first 16 lane bowling alley. Sun City Stadium opened July 4 with Del Webb throwing out the first pitch.

1972 was more of the same. Sales fell off a little with 2,230 closings. The Riverview golf course was built and opened in the fall. The Lakes Club was slated to open the end of March, but the day before opening, it caught fire and was badly burned. They quickly made repairs and opened later in the year.

1973 was the biggest year yet. Sundial Recreation Center opened featuring a 50 ft. by 100 ft. indoor swimming pool. Not everyone liked the idea, but Meeker pushed ahead and to this day residents love it.

Sunshine Service moved to their new building in the down-sized industrial park. DEVCO introduced the "quads." It was an X shaped four-plex unit that buyers found interesting. The Milwaukee Brewers played 11 games of their Cactus League schedule and committed to move to Sun City the next year. By year's end, play began on the Willowbrook and Willowcreek golf courses.



Looking like a youngster, current museum President Don Tuffs went to work for DEVCO in 1971. Don learned the PR business from Jerry Svendsen and went on to manage the Sun Dome in the 80's. The dynamic duo were loved by residents who often thought of them as their sons.

Home sales that year reached 2,516. DEVCO claimed 1,469 came through the Vacation Special Stay and Play. There was a record 276,394 people that visited the models. The pre-tax profit was a whopping \$10, 518,000.

In the coming year we want to build a website where we can showcase each of the model openings and the amazing sales brochures that went with them. Clearly, these articles don't do justice to the quality of the work and the dramatic change in home styles when they crossed the tracks.

Just to let you know, we are on schedule. Next week will be 1974, 1975 and 1976. We close out the series with 1977 and 1978. The Epilogue will be posted just prior to the grand opening of the Museum and the members only preview. To be invited to that exclusive event, you can join the Museum now and still get your invitation.

See you all next week.

Bill Pearson