

#17: 1976-1978 – The Best of Times

There's only one word to describe the last 3 years of buildout in Sun City, EXPLOSIVE. Sorry for shouting, but it would be akin to the Arizona Cardinals winning the Super Bowl 3 years in a row (as if that will ever happen).

With only 800 new home sales in 1976, one would have thought DEVCO would duck and cover. Not Meeker, he came out swinging for the fences. He was undeterred by the crappy economy and determined to get back on track.

They moved across Bell Road into Phase 3 and launched the "Heritage Collection." It was their most aggressive and innovative series to date. The models bordered the Willowcreek golf course and had features that included an indoor swimming pool, in the living room no less.

John had this to say about the Heritage Collection: "Every plan was refined to ensure that it provided the homeowner with the finest fixed appointments, and optimum spaces for the arrangement of valued personal possessions and home furnishings."



The massive 94,000 square foot Bell Recreation Center opened in 1976 and became an instant hit with residents. Partially sunken tennis courts, tough miniature golf and a huge library were just a few of the features that made it so popular.

They discontinued flat roof contemporary elevations on the single family homes. They did showcase a solar powered heated and air conditioned home, but costs were too high and they didn't sell. Also introduced were angled room designs that to this day often leave potential buyers attracted to their unique look and feel.

The 1976 prices were still pretty good, but by 1978 the larger models had increased from \$52,990 to \$85,490. Even the smallest single family home went from \$25,990 to \$45,990. The Garden Court units took a massive jump as well with a \$21,000 dollar price hike.

After the model home opening, the most excitement came when the massive 94,000 square foot Bell Recreation Center was unveiled. The center had taken nearly two years to complete and the turnout for the celebration drew tens of thousands of residents. It was a state of the art facility. Unfortunately DEVCO went way over budget; which resulted in trying to renege on building the Marinette Center.

Sales during 1976 were good, as they climbed back to nearly 1,700 new homes sold. Pre-tax profits were a touch over 4 million dollars. Sales traffic was 288,437 and another 1,400 secondary markets sales were made.

It was clearly a sign the economy had rebounded. DEVCO saw the hand writing on the wall, knowing the potential to finally sell-out Sun City was within a matter of years. They began buying more land that had come available around Sun City West. By then, West was projected to be a third larger than Sun City.

Little did they know just how fast that would happen. In 1977 they recorded 3,485 new home sales with more than 14 million dollars in pre-tax profit. Total home sales in that year when combined with resale homes were more than 5,000. Think about that for one minute; 5,000 homes sold in one year.

Headliners at the Sun Bowl in 1977 included Count Basie, Al Hirt, Rosemary Clooney and Andy Russell. The Lecture Series featured newscaster Douglas Edwards, Donald Rumsfeld, Bishop Sheen and a host of others. Everything DEVCO touched turned to gold.

The biggest news for residents came when the golf courses were turned over to the community. The RCSC took ownership for what John laughingly said was \$10 and a cup of coffee. They had a net value of approximately \$8 million dollars and had been paid for by lot premiums on homes bordering the courses. DEVCO had no interest in owning or running them.

The huge sales numbers were the stimulus for DEVCO to move forward with the Sun City West project. So much so they advanced the opening from 1980 to 1979. It was obvious in John's Journals his attention was already on the new development and how he could make it even bigger and better.

DEVCO was using the Sun City models to sell Sun City West homes until the Sun City West Encore Series opened on December 1, 1978. 2,850 homes were sold in West with the remainder of the lots sold out in Sun City by the middle of the year. A record pre-tax profit was recorded with \$32,367,000 between the two communities. \$23 million dollars was from Sun City.

Staggering numbers by anyone's imagination. It was clear, the future was bright...or was it? But that's a discussion for another series somewhere down the road.



The universal gym at the Bell Center was a starter, but it was before the fitness craze. Bell's fitness area today is spectacular while this equipment would fit in a maintenance closet.

We've reached build-out in Sun City. It's been a long and fascinating journey. My thanks to those of you who followed along. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it.

I would ask one small favor; be sure to read the Epilogue coming out the day before the opening of our new addition at the museum. While everything to date has been a fun read, the summation of Del Webb, The Man, The Company is truly what this exercise was all about. As Paul Harvey used to say; "It's the Rest of the Story."

See you all next week.

Bill Pearson