

#4: Timing is Everything In Life... Or Is It?

The Webb's left California in the summer of 1928. The move to Phoenix Arizona was more about health concerns than business opportunities. The city was growing, but it was still the middle of nowhere for most of the country. Air conditioning hadn't been invented yet and even fans were considered a luxury.

Del got his first job working as a carpenter for the Crane Company. He quickly jumped back into baseball, playing in the Industrial League. In his first game, he hit a memorable home run. To his shock, after the game he was thrown off the team. There was a thirty-day residency rule, and he was one day short of meeting it. It was the turning point in his life.

In an article with Sports Illustrated years later, he told the reporter: "That did it; I guess a fellow couldn't like baseball any more than I did, but I knew I had to swear the game off forever." With his passion gone for the game, he turned his energy towards succeeding in business.

Any number of stories exist about Del's breakout moment. There are two most commonly told. The first is regarding the massive Westward Ho Hotel project, where he worked hanging doors. The contractor was looking for someone to be on hand opening night in case there were issues and he wanted a carpenter. He asked if any of them owned a black suit; Del said he did and was on duty that night.



To say Del Webb's first office at 1633 West Jefferson in Phoenix was modest would be a gross understatement. Anyone who knew him understood he would never be satisfied to stay small, and he didn't disappoint.

The opening was big and anyone who was anyone was there. The story goes he met A. J. Bayless, who owned Bayless Markets. There are conflicting stories, but either way, Webb ended up going to work for the Bayless family. When a contractor bailed on a job, Webb was asked to finish it and inherited the contractor's meager tools (a concrete mixer, ten wheelbarrows, twenty shovels and ten picks) and got the store opened. It became Webb's calling card in business; on budget and on time.

This is the perfect time to defer to the header; "timing is everything in life." It's easy to forget dates when reading history. The Webb Construction Company was created in 1929, the year of the stock market crash. Times were already tough in Arizona, but the argument that it didn't impact Phoenix that much are quickly refuted by Jon Talton, former writer from the Arizona Republic.

He had this to say: "The severe contraction from 1930 through 1933 claimed two of the city's six banks and two of its five building-and-loan associations. Another, Valley Bank, was on the edge of failure. Depositors were wiped out in these pre-FDIC days. Arizona's big Three Cs of copper, cattle and cotton were decimated as demand collapsed. Twelve theaters closed in Phoenix. The state actually lost population in the early 1930s. The average income of American households fell by 40 percent from 1929 and 1932."

All of which makes the Webb success story that much more powerful. In spite of the collapsing economy, Del Webb was noted for quality construction, fair prices and work always done on time. He quickly became the contractor to go to, especially for the retail establishments springing up all around Phoenix. He often built stores for competing retailers across the street from one another.

There was a secondary impact most don't realize from the market crash. The federal government began helping fund local projects to stimulate growth in states. Webb was the beneficiary of much of that work. One of the projects was an addition to the Arizona State Capital and may have been the turning point in his business. In 1932, Webb built the pyramid that sits above the Phoenix zoo; it is where Governor Hunt was interred when he died in 1934.



Once Del was established and began the massive projects around the state, he quickly moved to much larger headquarters than pictured at the top of the page. Success was inevitable.

During those growth years of the 30's, he also hired two of his key employees; Bob Johnson and L.C. Jacobson. Both men stayed with him for years and were by his side through the good and the bad. Jake left in the 60's to go off on his own, Bob stayed with him till he retired in the early 80's. Mr. Johnson became president of the Webb Corporation when Del died in 1974.

The state projects led to Del's massive amount of work awarded to him on federal jobs. Rumor has it, that he didn't have to bid jobs against other contractors. His reputation was such he presented bids and was given the work. They knew he always finished on time and on budget. He became friends with presidents and politicians of both parties. With over 325 building projects to his credit, there are too many to name. At some point, we will post a link to all of them.

Webb's explosive growth through the 30's was legendary, but what happened in the 40's is even more extraordinary. That's a topic for next week. What we know from this read is, timing didn't matter as much as Del Webb's drive to succeed.

See you next week.

Bill Pearson