

## #7: One Million? Not Quite

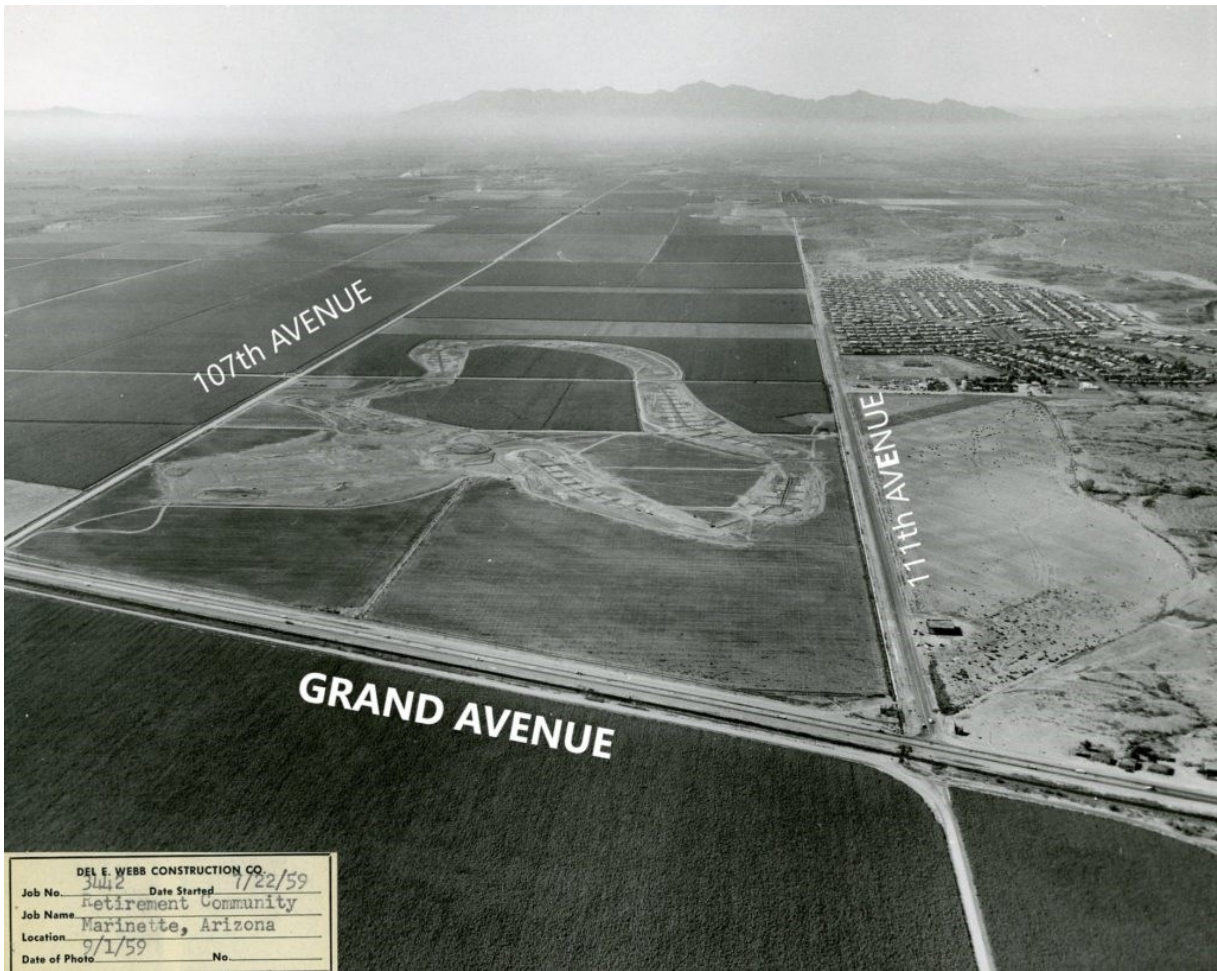
Hard to believe, but true; the population of Arizona in 1955 was under one million people. By one accounting online, 987,000 residents. If we are going to be reflective, the vast majority of them were in Phoenix proper and the East Valley of Scottsdale.

All of which makes the story about California builder Elmer Johns and Russian born, New Yorker “Big” Ben Schleifer more compelling. In 1954 they teamed up to open a new concept in retirement living. Situated in the West Valley of Phoenix, the newly formed “Youngtown” was literally the middle of nowhere.

The small startup was located on 300 acres and consisted of 100 homes and a small store. What made it attractive was the low cost to buy a place in the sun. My wife and I once delivered a Meals on Wheels lunch to one of the row type units and we were stunned at how spartan it was. I suspect back in the day it was much more appealing.

The idea garnered national attention. The community was featured on Allister Cooke’s program Omnibus and more importantly Dave Garroway’s NBC Today Show. The later drew a huge public response and caught the attention of several of Webb’s employees.

The concept was interesting and sent L.C. Jacobson, J. R. “Joe” Ashton and Tom Breen scurrying for research on the topic of retirement and more importantly, potential buyers moving away from the family. The initial reaction from the “experts” was “are you crazy?”



The empty plot of land just off Grand Ave and 107th is framed perfectly to give viewers an idea of just how desolate and barren the area was. Short of the start of the front nine holes of the North course, there wasn’t much to see.

Webb’s input was limited to two factors: Both his father and grandfather lamented on the lack of things to do as they aged and Del, as a card carrying carpenter recognized the changes made when the Taft Hartley Act became law (1947). This allowed unions and employers to negotiate defined benefit retirement and health care plans. He understood that would dramatically impact working men and women when they retired.

Not to be deterred, Tom Breen asked his friend Lou Silversteen to take on a research effort away from the “experts.” Lou was headed to Florida and Tom paid him to interview seniors living there. This type of cheap housing for seniors was available in the sunshine state, but all of them were built on the premise once they reached critical mass, they would add all kinds of amenities. A promise that never came.

Joe Ashton found a professional at the state mental hospital by the name of Dr. Robert L. Beal. His take was wholly different from the others who advised against it. He was adamant they were on to something very big. It was following these two revelations that Breen, Ashton and Jacobson began pitching Webb on taking a leap of faith.

It did not hurt both Jacobson and Webb bought into Mark Twain and Will Roger’s statement; “buy land, they aren’t making anymore.” So in 1958, the Webb Corporation began aggressively looking for cheap tracts of land. Bob Johnson belonged to an investment club where cotton farm owner Jim Boswell was a member.

When Jacobson and Boswell got together, it took only hours for them to come to an understanding. Boswell’s cotton fields, adjacent to the recently built Youngtown, was priced right. Better yet, it allowed for the perfect opportunity for Boswell to gradually move out of cotton as the market was changing and demand was not what it once was.

The fact he had two 10,000 acre tracts made it even more attractive. The best was yet to come; Jim Boswell saw the potential and formed a partnership with Webb, becoming a 49% owner in the Del E, Webb Development Corporation (DEVCO) with Del holding 51%. The agreement worked out perfectly as they paid Boswell for the land, only as they opened new sub-divisions.

Breen, Ashston and Jacobson explained to the newly formed partners, if this was to work, they absolutely had to have the amenities in place. Promises would never sell the premise. With that in mind, Webb and Boswell put up \$50,000 each; Jim added \$600,000 with Del providing \$600,000 with in-kind work. It was a substantial investment in a community that had been given little or no chance to succeed.



A modern day miracle is the only way I can describe it. It’s not unusual to watch contractors take months and months to remodel a kitchen or bathroom in Sun City. Webb’s crew built everything shown in the picture in a scant four months. Spectacular is a gross understatement.

In July of 1959, they began carving out the front nine holes of the North golf course and roads. Around the first of September, they began building the rest of the community. It consisted of a shopping center, five model homes, the Hiway House motor hotel, the North course pro shop and would later add a gas station. They completed it all by years end; an unbelievable four months.

I often tell the story; in 2010 we changed the signage on the museum from the Sun Cities Area Historical Society to the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum. The Pulte Corporation graciously agreed to pick up the cost and do the legwork, which included application from Maricopa County. The new sign (roughly 4 foot by 6 foot and smaller than the original), took 6 months from application, through approval and building it. Think about that for a second or two; four months to build a community, six months to build a sign.

The night before Sun City opened, the Webb gang met at Manuel’s Place in Peoria. The question that was eventually asked was simple; “Will anybody come tomorrow?” It was a fair question, as everyone involved had gone out on a limb hoping they were on the right track. But that is the story for next week.

Before we leave you, here is the rest of the story for this week: Arizona’s population beginning 2019 is 7,275,070. Suffice to say, the Webb/Boswell venture made a staggering impact on the West Valley and the state of Arizona as a retirement destination. Beyond all of that, the Del E Web Development Corporation changed the nation and how retirees would live out the remainder of their lives.

If that’s not a legacy, I don’t know what is.

Bill Pearson