

#8: 1960 – Will Anybody Come Tomorrow?

We left you last week with Owen Childress, John Meeker and Jack Ford sitting around Manual's Place in Peoria. It was New Year's Eve and they had crushed it getting ready for the opening. Beyond the question was Owen's bigger concern: "I'm worried, how am I going to get a 30 year mortgage on a guy who is 65 years old?"

All understandable, but before we go there let's have a bit of fun. I'm no Sean Spicer when it comes to arguing crowd size, so let me just let you ponder the logistics of what is constantly cited. The common talking point is 100,000 plus people showed up over the three-day weekend (New Year's Day was on a Friday). If they were open 12 hours a day that works out to 1500 cars (2 people per car) per hour. Think about that for a minute.

Here's the rub (from my perspective): The population in all of Arizona in 1960 was 1.3 million (men, women and children). That meant that over those three days, roughly 8 percent of the state trekked out for the grand opening. True or not, suffice to say, it was an extraordinary event. Besides, 100,000 looks and sounds better than 92,252, not that anyone counted.



Easily, this photo from January 1, 1960, is the most recognizable and often reproduced in Del Webb's storied history. From front-page newspapers across the country and magazines throughout the world, it told the story of the massive crowds flocking to Sun City Arizona. Simply spectacular.

We know for certain the crowds were crazy big. We know the Webb employees were overwhelmed and sales were brisk. The traffic on Grand Ave was real, the pictures show it. We know the excitement for this new concept was wildly successful. Jubilee (Sun City's 25th anniversary book) says 237 homes were sold in the 72-hour period. By month's end 400 homes were sold and plans for another 675 were underway.

Those that drove in for the opening found the following: Del Webb's Hiway House Motor Inn was open for business. It included a coffee shop, bar, 12 hotel rooms and 18 one-bedroom rental units. The 30,000 square foot Grand Shopping Center with a Safeway was open. A drug and variety store came in April. The Union Oil service station opened shortly after kickoff. The front nine holes of the North course were ready for play complete with pro shop and cart storage. Community Center (now Oakmont) had a 250 seat multi-purpose auditorium, out-door pavilion, swimming pool, clubrooms, shuffleboard court and lawn bowling green.

The real showstoppers were the five model homes. They were well appointed, priced right and don't forget, built really well. The Kentworth, the least expensive is now the home of the Museum. You could buy that model for \$8,500. The three bedroom, two bath with 1,600 square feet was a steal at \$11,300. By April of 1960, buyers began taking ownership. The first to move in was Wendell and Emilie Fraser on April 10. Imagine being that initial homebuyer and the only one on your block.

Sales inspired the DEVCO team to pick up the pace. An additional 30,000 square feet was added to the shopping center with furniture, hardware and 13 other stores. The back nine holes of the golf course started, so it would be open in December. They also began planning for a second recreation center to open in 1961.

Directly south of the Hiway House was another interesting twist. The one bedroom Garden Court Apartments and the two bedroom fourplexes opened their models in May. The Garden Court Apartments were exactly what they sounded like, attached units surrounding a common courtyard. They were 785 square feet and sold for \$8,000. The two bedroom attached homes were four in a row and hosted 1,158 square feet for \$10,000. Buyers owned the home but the common area was jointly owned by the buyers.

The phenomenon known as Sun City was helped along greatly because Del Webb knew everyone who was anyone. His name recognition drove the media to a frenzied level of coverage. Shortly after opening, Trans World Airlines brought in a large group of travel writers from around the country. Their positive reviews spawned a host of articles in major magazines, all touting the remarkable "new active way of life" for seniors.

1960 was an amazing time for the Webb Corporation and DEVCO. In addition to Sun City's opening, the Del E. Webb Corporation went on the common stock exchange. While it took away the private ownership Webb had enjoyed, the dynamic changed the company to one with unlimited potential.

Just when you think 1960 was all coming up roses, we need take a deep breath and acknowledge a couple of missteps. Sun City was so successful, the company was convinced they had found a can't miss proposition. Later that year, they went to Kern County, California (near Bakersfield) and outside Tampa, Florida and bought large tracts of land. They replicated the Arizona community, but in neither case did it catch on. They didn't have the same kind of land deal, paying cash up front, and neither location was very desirable. Both were sold by 1970.

Everyone understood Sun City Arizona was their workhorse. The company had done an amazing job building and marketing the community. New owners were in love with the concept and sales just kept growing. The company hoped to sell 1,700 homes in the first three years. Jubilee claims they sold 2,000 homes in 1960. Jubilee was admittedly written from contributors' best recollection.

The interesting aspect of writing this series is the conflicting data I have come across. In John Meeker's journal, he reports the following: "A total of 1,301 sales were recorded for the first year, and 1,228 profit units were booked for a pre-tax profit of \$1,784,000. At that time, accounting methods allowed profit units to be recorded on a percentage of completion basis. A majority of sales came from Arizona and California." Data from Meeker's journals claim home key deliveries of 1,050 (actual number of people taking ownership of their home).

Obviously, there are differences. In the end, it matters not because we know from the grand opening through the end of 1960, Sun City sales exploded beyond anyone's wildest imagination. As buyers moved into the community, their lives were changed forevermore. Even with some of the daunting problems they faced, and there were several, life in Sun City was infinitely better than from where they came.



This picture from 1960 paints a picture to the simplicity of life in Sun City. Every home built that first year was an easy bike ride to the Safeway store. The fact it was open for business before anyone lived here spoke volumes about Webb's commitment to developing a community that was forward thinking.

Before I leave you, here's the answer to the question Owen Childress asked about 30 year mortgages for 65 year olds: Meeker's memoirs report in the first year, 70% of the buyers in Sun City paid cash for their new home. Obviously, that made Owen's job easier.

This segment is detailed to a fault. It's on purpose because like the homes, Sun City was well built, but with room to evolve. There was no manual on the right way to build an age-restricted community. There was a learning curve and as we walk down the path of coming years, we will see how the company and the residents changed to meet the needs.

For now though, close your eyes and picture being Wendell and Emilie Fraser, the only resident on your block and living in the community. And you think it's quiet here at night now. Just imagine then.

See you next week when we explore 1961, 1962 and 1963.

Bill Pearson