

Yesterday & Today: Sun Bowl



Workers in 1966 construct the outer bandshell of the Sun Bowl Amphitheater, and as it appeared shortly before it opened to the public. The facility officially opened in January 1967. Nothing has changed much at the Sun Bowl over the years. Improvements have been made to the structure, the bandshell has been painted and upgrades have been made to the Sun Bowl sign and landscaping.

Sun Bowl brings top entertainers to Sun City

After its initial success in the early 1960s, Sun City home sales began to dwindle in the mid-60s and it took a change in management to turn things around.

John Meeker would eventually assume control of the Del E. Webb Development Company (DEVCO). His solution to rejuvenating Sun City's excitement was twofold: Build better homes and improve amenities available to residents.

The introduction of larger model homes resulted in a steady increase in the sale of new homes throughout most of the latter part of the 1960s, but his shining achievement may have been the half-dome outdoor amphitheater that still exists on the corner of 107th Avenue and Clair Drive.

When construction began in 1966 on the 9-acre Sun Bowl, there were many sceptics who questioned the wisdom of building an outdoor concert arena.

The community was still small in population, and some wondered if there would be sufficient support for such a large venue. Would big-name entertainers travel to this lonely outpost in the middle of the desert to entertain small audiences?

And then, of course, there was the heat. Would residents be willing to sit on lawn chairs or on the ground (there would never be any permanent seating installed at the Sun Bowl) to watch a show in temperatures that

could easily be in the 80s, 90s or even hotter?

All concerns were answered when the Sun Bowl opened in January 1967. Popular pianist Liberace performed before a sell-out crowd of over 7,000 and the facility proved to be a huge hit with audiences and performers alike. Performers who have graced the Sun Bowl stage over the years include Lawrence Welk, Guy Lombardo, Myron Floren, Jimmy Durante, Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians, Rosemary Clooney and more.

The Sun Bowl, however, was not Sun City's first outdoor amphitheater.

Sun City's second recreation center -- Town Hall Recreation Center (now Fairway) -- featured the Greek Theater. Similar in style to the Sun Bowl, albeit much smaller, the Greek Theater featured terraced seating to provide all audience members an unobstructed view of the stage. The theater hosted community events such as the Easter Sunrise Service for several years before it was converted for other uses.

DEVCO turned over ownership of the Sun Bowl to the Recreation Centers of Sun City, Inc. in 1984. Other than a new coat of paint and the addition of an electronic sign promoting upcoming performances, the facility remains nearly identical to how it appeared when it first opened in 1967.