

The Men of Del E. Webb Development Company (DEVCO)

Del E. Webb

Del Webb began his construction career in Phoenix hanging doors at the Westward Ho Hotel. When a carpenter was needed at the hotel's formal opening to make sure nothing went haywire, Webb (the only one with a dark suit) volunteered. His meeting that night with grocer A. J. Bayless turned his life in a new direction.

Webb was already a laborer on the new Bayless grocery store when the contractor decamped. Bayless hired Webb to finish the job, which he completed in 27 days. The subsequent work, building and repairing Bayless grocery stores, provided steady work and **Del E. Webb Contractor** was in business.

During the lean depression years, government-backed jobs were not greatly profitable but offered a margin of security that allowed the company to expand. The 1938 addition to the **Arizona State Capitol** was a "breakthrough job... that led to constant alterations and repairs" and established Del Webb as a major builder in the area.

Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 brought demands for **military installations** in Arizona. Del Webb formed a joint venture with Tucson road contractors to use part of their bonding capacity to cover his building projects at Fort Huachuca, Luke Field in Glendale, Williams Field in Mesa and, its biggest challenge to date, the Japanese Relocation Camp in Parker required to house 125,000 internees within 120 days.

The **company's reputation for on-time quality** was the product of hand-picked supervisors, subcontractors, craftsmen and laborers carrying out their tasks as evidenced by massive reports, endless phone calls and under the scrutiny of Del Webb himself.

Webb's standardization and efficiency were legendary. The offices were run according to a "Blue Book" which specified even what kind of desk calendar pads were to be used and what kind of lettering must be on the door. When one Webb employee drove a tan car instead of the required black one, he found it towed and repainted while he was at work. Only when a group of employees carried out tests to prove that light colored cars were cooler in the Arizona heat did Webb eventually relent.

The nerve center of each construction site was a specially designed "portable office building" with identical layout and furniture and progress reports on each area of construction, electrical, plumbing, carpentry, posted in the same place. Webb was able to walk into any of his projects anywhere in the country and check its progress.

By 1960, the Del E. Webb Company was building on a scale that could only be financed by public ownership. On December 8, 1960, the Del E Webb Construction Company became the **Del E. Webb Corporation**. The stock sold quickly and within three years the company would be listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

Webb's greatest strength was his ability to choose good men and let them work. This exhibit is the story of those "Men Who Built the Sun Cities."

While Del Webb delegated to others most of the planning for his new retirement community in Arizona, he did make one personal contribution. A contest was announced to find a name for the venture, a company hired to oversee the contest and the entries were reduced to just a few when Del Webb walked into the deliberations and said "I like Sun City". His decision was final and today, with 44 Sun Cities across the country, it is a name synonymous with active, retirement communities.

Webb's other forte was traveling the country, supervising his farflung enterprises and meeting the glamorous, powerful people who helped build his business. Logging 50-125,000 miles a year and living out of hotel suites, he was never destined to retire. He died on July 4, 1974 at age 75. Ten days later, 5000 of Del Webb's "closest friends", most of whom had never met him, gathered in Sun City to memorialize the man who built their community and challenged them to fulfill its promise.

L. C. "Jake" Jacobson

While Webb acted as "front man", the "street-smart man" tending the store back home and keeping things going was **L. C. Jacobson** who came on board in 1938. An out-of-work carpenter with \$10 and no union card, he bypassed the long line of applicants, went straight to Del Webb's office and finessed himself past the secretary by representing himself as "a contractor from Tucson here to see him about something important." Webb called him in, they talked for a long time and he was hired.

Jacobson started as a timekeeper, became one of the first estimators and rose in the ranks to become a working partner with 25% ownership of the company. It was Jacobson who helped build the Webb empire into national leadership not only as a huge contractor for government, corporate

and residential projects but also as a diversified developer owning hotels, motels and casinos.

When a *Today Show* report on Youngtown, the newly organized community in Arizona for people over age 60, elicited 50,000 responses, Jacobson gave the go-ahead to explore possibilities in the market for **retirement housing**. When other developers discouraged the idea of separating retired people from their families in age-restricted communities where more would die than move in, Jacobson persisted. "We bristled like a hound dog in a fight," Jacobson said, "and we decided to give the idea a whirl contrary to their recommendations."

Jacobson went on to serve as company president from 1962 to 1965 when a disagreement over how to dispose of losing properties caused a rift with Del Webb that led to **Jacobson's resignation** and the end of a friendship that spanned four decades.

Tom Breen and J. R. "Joe" Ashton

In 1956, Webb Vice President Tom Breen was given the task of analyzing the retirement market and he set out to study geriatrics with a vengeance. When consultations with the so-called experts did not elicit the answers he wanted, he asked a disk jockey friend to survey retired people in Florida.

The result was "the best information we got" compressed into a memo stressing "Activity, Economy, and Individuality." The company should build affordable housing with shared recreational facilities and leave it up to the residents to organize and make the most of it.

Next to get involved with the project was Webb Vice-President and Land Developer Joe Ashton, who sent Breen to consult a state psychiatrist! Dr. Robert L. Beal gave the first positive professional opinion of the idea...longer life expectancy and better pension plans would mean a growing population of affluent retirees.

The team of Jacobson, Ashton and Breen convinced Del Webb that investment in a new retirement concept could succeed and they became the prime movers in the creation of Sun City.

On December 31, 1959, after four years of study and an investment of \$2 million, the new venture was ready for opening day. Tom Breen remembers, "We were all wondering the same thing. Will anyone come tomorrow?"

By daybreak of New Year's Day 1960, cars were lining up. Many people bought within an hour of arrival and 237 homes were sold in the first weekend. Before the end of the first month, plans were being made to open the second group of 675 homes. Tom Breen, who headed the housing department, had stepped up the construction schedule by 6 months. Sun City was "Arizona's fastest growing" community.

James G. Boswell II

James Boswell was president of a family company that owned cotton fields between Peoria and Luke Air Force Base. Predictions of a falling water table had him looking for a buyer when he heard that Webb was seeking property to develop.

Arriving unannounced at Jacobson's office, he was first greeted with skepticism. "We're looking for rather large tracts and you're probably not qualified to provide that." Surprised to hear that Boswell had 10,000 acres along Grand Avenue, Jacobson went out to take a look and immediately saw the possibilities. On their return trip, Boswell casually mentioned that he had another 10,000 acres on the opposite side of Grand Avenue.

Once he saw the extent of Boswell's holdings, Jacobson was eager to make a **deal** and the two men hammered out the essentials: the land was to be transferred as building proceeded so that the Webb Company did not need to tie up large amounts of cash and the Boswells could reduce their ranching operations at a gradual rate.

The partnership became the **Del E. Webb Development Company (DEVCO)** with Webb and Boswell each owning 50%. In addition to the \$50,000 start-up money for the company, Boswell advanced \$600,000 to build a golf course, recreation center and shopping center with Webb to match the amount "in kind."

When the shopping center on Grand Avenue was under construction, there were as yet no residents and no grocery store was interested in leasing the space. Joe Ashton called Boswell, who was on the board of **Safeway**, and a deal was worked out by which Safeway would pay no rent and only a percentage of its sales. The store was ready for business on Sun City's opening day.

In 1962, when the lack of medical facilities in Sun City became an issue, James Boswell opposed the plan for a 62-bed medical center in favor of a **state-of-the art hospital** to serve the entire region. Named for

Walter O. Boswell, the "original Arizona Boswell", it became a monument to the family who contributed \$1.2 million to get it started.

As one Webb executive said, "You talk about having **partners** who hinder you and give you problems; Jim was totally the opposite. He religiously would attend all the board meetings, he would listen to our ideas, he would make contributions or suggestions about what he thought was the way to go, but it was never on the basis that you better do it this way or else. Jim Boswell, and the residents themselves, were two of the reasons we were successful." In 1983, DEVCO bought out the J.G. Boswell Company's then-49% share of Sun City.

Tom Austin

Tom Austin was Sun City's first Activities Director. With his encouragement, 32 clubs were organized in the first two years including swimming, lapidary, exercise, dance, chess, photography, ceramics, art, woodworking, knitting, sewing, agriculture and mosaics. He also provided space at the Town Center (Fairway Rec Center) for the first library.

The Recreation Center became the meeting place for residents and Austin spent many nights and weekends working to meet the new homeowners expectations and allay their misgivings, offering friendship, guidance and support for new ideas.

He organized the resident Hostess Group who welcomed visitors to the model homes and presided over the Sun City exhibits at area fairs.

Austin led the first Easter Sunrise Service at the Greek Theater (now Fairway Rec Center) finishing his inspiring talk just as a flock of silvery birds flew over into the rising sun. On January 1, 1961, Sun City's first anniversary, Austin presented a cake with one candle to Ralph Hawley, president of the Sun City Civic Association, forerunner of the Recreation Centers of Sun City. Both events became annual Sun City traditions.

He and the other DEVCO executives projected the image of Del Webb so effectively that many residents later remembered seeing Webb at local events when it was really Tom Austin. Austin later became

the first administrator at Sun Valley Lodge, the community's first nursing home, and then Sun City Hospital Planning Director in 1966.

John Meeker

Few people had more to do with the success of Sun City than **John Meeker** who started with Del Webb as an office boy in 1946 and advanced steadily to become supervisor of design and engineering by the grand opening in 1960. When the company was hit by the recession of 1964-5, L.C. Jacobson and Tom Breen had moved on. Webb asked Meeker to turn things around. Meeker was named president of DEVCO and held that position for 16 years.

Meeker **reversed the existing policy** that DEVCO would build houses but not become involved in the lives of the people. He diverted money from expensive national advertising to projects like Viewpoint Lake, the Lakes Club, the Vacation Apartments, the stadium and the Sun Bowl.

To promote use of the recreation centers, he offered color television sets as door prizes. He encouraged the building of churches by providing lots at low cost and gave land for the Sheriff's Posse, Community Center, agricultural club, RV storage and Sunshine Services.

A 60-day Warranty Program was instituted that corrected any problems with a new house no matter who caused them. Cheap vacations, celebrity performers and enthusiastic residents became his best selling tools.

In 1975, Meeker announced plans for a second adult community to be built on 13,000 acres northwest of Sun City. This would be a "bigger and bolder" **Sun City West**, with facilities unmatched anywhere else and centered on **Hillcrest**, a major professional golf course qualified to host PGA tournaments.

On the northeast corner was "the largest private facility for recreational and creative activities in Arizona" covering 48 acres and named **R. H. Johnson Recreation Center** in honor of the company president.

Along the western edge he built the **Sundome**, Arizona's largest indoor theater, a multipurpose auditorium that could accommodate any theatrical or musical performance, with seating for 7000 on one floor, state of the art sound system and air conditioned comfort.

Overlooking the golf course was **Crestview**, a lavish clubhouse with space for a major restaurant, private banquet rooms, an informal

bar and headquarters for the vacation apartments that would house visitors to the area.

Meeker also constructed a separate **library** building distinguished by its bell tower that could be seen far across the flat desert landscape. It soon became a local landmark and the most used facility in the community.

No detail was overlooked...Meeker even had a **100-acre nursery** growing and transplanting mature trees so that there would be plenty of greenery to welcome new residents from more verdant areas.

Following a pattern that had proven successful in Sun City, Meeker offered a new set of **model homes** every few years, each set more elaborate and expensive than the last.

Although originally projected to have a **population** of 70,000, Sun City West topped out at 32,500 after part of its land was sold off during a recession in the 1980's and an additional "expansion area" to the north was added in 1992. Meeker's plans for a major shopping mall and hotel were never realized.

Owen Childress

Owen Childress was in charge of contracts for Sun City's 1960 Grand Opening and he was worried..."how I'm going to get a 30-year mortgage on a guy who is 65 years old." He soon had another problem to worry about...the line of buyers was so long, he had to call in Webb secretaries to help process the down payments and had to send out for printed store receipts when the supply of contracts ran out.

The growth of Sun City was steady and substantial. Childress originally projected construction would reach from Grand Avenue south to Olive about the time he was ready to retire. Instead, it took just 10 years to reach that point and begin Phase II on the other side of Grand.

As Project Director in 1966, Childress pursued amalgamation of the feuding recreation center groups and successfully resolved

the conflict in a little over a year, assuring that residents had full access to all present and future Sun City facilities.

In 1974, Owen Childress, then Executive Vice President of DEVCO, announced the planning of a separate library facility to be built as part of the Bell Recreation Center complex with 10,250 square feet and room for a 5,400 square foot expansion.

Jerry Svendsen

Jerry Svendsen, who arrived on the scene in 1962, spearheaded public relations for DEVCO, planned the programs, arranged for entertainment and often acted as MC. He saw the start of the Newcomers' Coffees, Mother's Day Strawberry Festival, Root Beer Blast, the July Fourth fireworks and many other Sun City traditions.

The residents themselves were the best salespeople. Childress and Jerry Svendsen concentrated on community relations, calling on residents in their homes to make sure they were satisfied.

Over his 20-year tenure, Svendsen saw a growing interest in physical fitness and organized the first Physical Fitness Festival in 1977 and the first 5000-meter run in 1978

According to John Meeker, "it took the constant efforts of Public Relations personnel Jerry Svendsen and Don Tuffs to keep the year-round resident involvement programs and esprit de corps ongoing. Their excellent work made the program a resounding success, especially when residents were complaining about being too busy in Sun City to write to their family and friends back home. Many residents looked upon these young men like their own sons and let DEVCO management know that they really appreciated their efforts, bad jokes and all, in no uncertain terms."

Fred Kuentz

Fred Kuentz was an electrical contractor who joined the Del Webb Company in 1949. His early projects included building factories and scouting foreign locations for development.

When L.C. Jacobson left the company in 1965, Kuentz became corporate executive vice president and president of the International Division. Faced with serious company losses, Kuentz (along with Webb, Johnson and others) pledged his own funds to guarantee bonding for international projects. Major projects in Honduras and El Salvador were completed by 1972.

In 1982, during a period of financial crisis, he took over management of DEVCO and the Sun Cities developments. Home sales and profits increased dramatically when he "renewed emphasis on community relations, realigned home prices, built new and up-to-date models and initiated a quality assurance program that enhanced the community's twenty-four-year-record of fine craftsmanship."

In 1983, Kuentz announced the gift of 3.63 acres at R.H. Johnson and Stardust for charitable and educational purposes. One acre was used for the SCW Posse building.

The **Community Center** building is operated by the Sun City West Foundation and houses Interfaith Day Care, a thrift shop, and meeting rooms.

The PRIDES. volunteers who look after the plantings

Robert H. Johnson

After working his way through business school, **Bob Johnson** joined the Del Webb Company in 1935 as a timekeeper, on-the-spot personnel officer and materials manager responsible for reports and paperwork. He implemented the efficiencies that made construction go smoothly and did the extensive traveling that was necessary to oversee far-flung work sites.

When L.C. Jacobson left the company in 1965, the way was open for Johnson to become **president** of the firm in 1967 and **Chief Executive Officer** in 1973, just months before Del Webb's death on July 4, 1974.

Under his leadership, **Sun City** reached its planned goal of 25,000 residences and 48,000 population. In 1978, a new 13,000-acre companion development called **Sun City West** was launched.

Heavily invested in casino operations, the corporation was targeted for takeover by Frank Sinatra and others. Bob Johnson successfully resisted that takeover and continued as head of the company until 1981 when he retired to devote his time to the **Del E. Webb Foundation**, which was the beneficiary of the bulk of Del Webb's estate.

Starting with \$28 million from the sale of Webb's stock in the corporation, the Foundation, under Johnson's management, had built up assets of more than \$60 million and had given away \$50 million more by 1997. It ranks as **one of Arizona's largest charitable organizations**. Major beneficiaries of grants have been Del E. Webb Hospital in Sun City West and Walter O. Boswell Hospital in Sun City.