

Sun Cities Area Historical Society
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Case # 201 (Tape 1 of 2)

Interview with Tom Austin

August 22, 1991

Date of Birth: August 2, 1908

Place of Birth: Manhattan, New York

Tom was the Activities Coordinator for DEVCO in Sun City. In this position, he was credited with setting up and organizing approximately 100 clubs, and the Homeowner's Association. He was also the director of Sun Valley Lodge in Sun City.

Synopsis:

- Mother born in Scotland; father born in England.
- Father was in construction business, high rises, office buildings
- Mother was a housewife
- Born in Manhattan; moved to Westchester county at age 12.
- Grew up in multi-class neighborhood (upper and lower), among many nationalities and cultures (blacks, Chinese, etc.).
- When from a large city... don't trust anyone; didn't know neighbors
- In Sun City, he was 'father confessor' with people from various parts of life, and many parts of the country, where ways of life were different. First group was from the NW, back to the old barn-raising days when people did things without being asked; worked for Dad 3 to 4 years ; mother died of cancer; family friend was chief engineer of large Jewish Hospital in NY City offered me a job.
- Worked my way up the line; was made head of the X-Ray Dept. in the 400 bed hospital.
- Met wife there; dietician; lived in Irish, middle-class neighborhood on Long Island
- We traveled, stopped in Tucson, hooked up with cancer specialist doing deep x-ray therapy; saw classified ad for Del Webb project in Tucson for managing apartments. Hired for that job in 1956-57; eventually moved up to Phoenix.
- Researched project on Central Avenue; company was researching retirement; what did the elderly like, not like; also researched Florida; differences; fly fishing not popular here in AZ; we played it by ear; early Florida research

originally thought retirees would not want to live together; did help with recreational facilities: lapidary, painting, ceramics, etc. I called them 'studios' and found teachers to teach.

- Del Webb advertised for plumbers, electricians or painters to assist in building retirement community;
- Del Webb wanted to bring things in for people who couldn't afford luxury; Breen had nightmares about success of project.
- In national advertising, Sun City was originally called 'New Life' before national campaign to name new community.
- Advertised as an 'active retirement community'; will that fly?
- No one expected new concept of Sun City to be so successful
- One first day of Sun City sales, traffic jams, office jammed, long lines, some folks just stopped by to see what all the commotion was... and stayed... and bought
- As new residents moved in, the moving van would pull up, whole town showed up to help unload, retired farmers as well as heads of corporations
- Breen started the 'greeters'; Breen is Mr. Sun City' Jerry Svendsen is the public relations director; involved with every new comer. Holds Sat. morning coffees, writes articles, etc. It was Breen's idea to build rec. ctrs./amenities first.
- Key ceremony for new residents became part of tradition; hostesses volunteered time in Hostess program; visited new residents.
- Webb Company looked at info gathered to see how cheap we can build and still make a profit. He wanted to build a good house.
- Most Sun City folks paid cash for their homes and this was way above national average.
- I became director of the Sun Valley Lodge nursing home; Reverend Walter Witt behind it.
- Need for hospital brought response of 60-bed hospital bid with donation of \$1 million from Boswell Foundation with a request that the hospital be named Boswell Hospital.
- No one wanted to think of needing a cemetery.
- I assisted in writing the bylaws for some of the clubs; organized about 100 clubs
- Sun City had a personality; reflected by the people
- After 7 years, I left to retire in a new Green Valley community

Tape 2 of 2

- People in Sun City only heard of Del Webb; many mistook me for him because I arranged all arts and crafts, shuffleboard clubs, etc.
- When Del due to arrive his plane was late and rec halls were filled to overflowing, even conducting a sing-a-long while they waited; ceramics women made a gift for Mrs. Webb; police arrived to conduct traffic around Rec Ctr. We visited every activity; Webb couldn't believe they had made the ceramics; had a hard time getting him out.
- It became a status thing to know Del Webb; Bob Hope came out here once to play golf with him. Webb returned for 5th anniversary of Sun City.
- Other Sun Cities not as successful as AZ; people made the difference. Retirement community in Tampa, Florida not as successful.
- Always a conflict between rec centers; first one in 1960; when next one goes up, stage might be bigger, so always a conflict. As Sun City sections add on, someone will always think the newer one is better.
- I had little to do with Boswell Hospital but did organize the Lodge; did all the hiring, getting licenses, organized 1st auxiliary; asked for volunteers; Lodge opened 1965-66. A large number moved in at the very beginning.

AUSTIN, TOM

Aug 22, 1991

Release Form

This interview agreement is made and entered into this 22 day of August, 1991, by and between Tom Austin (herein after called "Interviewee") and Melanie Sturgeon (herein after called "Interviewer".)

I agree to participate in a tape-recorded interview with Interviewer in association with her research on Sun City, this research being done under the supervision of the Arizona State University Graduate Program in Public History.

This agreement relates to any and all materials originating from this interview or subsequent interviews by the Interviewer, namely the tape recordings and the indexes and abstracts of the interview, and any other written materials, including but not limited to notes, transcripts, or any other materials prepared from the tapes.

In consideration of the mutual covenants, conditions, and terms set forth below, the parties hereby agree as follows:

1. Interviewee irrevocably assigns to the Sun City Area Historical Society and the Arizona Historical Foundation, co-owners, all his/her copyright, title, literary property rights, and interest in and to the Interview.
2. By virtue of this assignment, Interviewer and the Sun City Area Historical Society and the Arizona Historical Foundation will have the right to use the interview for research, educational, and other purposes, including possible publication.
3. All materials from the Interview, including but not limited to transcriptions or other finding aids prepared from the tapes, may be copied, reproduced and/or published.
4. Interviewee acknowledges that he/she will receive no remuneration or compensation for either his/her participation in the Interview or for the rights assigned hereunder.
5. Interviewer and the Sun City Area Historical Society and the Arizona Historical Foundation agree to honor any and all reasonable restrictions on the use of the Interview, if any, for the time specified below as follows:

Signed

Tom Austin

Date

22 August 1991

Interviewee:

Tom Austin

(name)

2701 E. Allred Ave.

(address)

Mesa, AZ 85204

Signed

Melanie Sturgeon

Date

22 August 1991

Interviewer

Melanie Sturgeon

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intrvw

SUN CITIES AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tom Austin

The interview was conducted by Melanie Sturgeon on August 22, 1991

Transcribed by Belva McIntosh on 22 July, 2007

STURGEON: This is Melanie Sturgeon and on behalf of the Sun Cities Area Historical Society I am interviewing Tom Austin, the Activities Coordinator at Sun City. This interview is being conducted in his home in Mesa, Arizona.

STURGEON: Mr. Austin, can you tell me the dates and places your parents were born?

AUSTIN: I can't give you the dates but my Mother is Scotch and my Father is English and they were born in those countries. I can't give you the date they were born and my memory of even my infancy is extremely dull. So I can't answer your question really.

STURGEON: So your parents immigrated over here then, as adults or children?

AUSTIN: Yes, as adults.

STURGEON: Can you tell me what they did for a living?

AUSTIN: My father was in the construction business and my mother was a housewife.

STURGEON: What did your father do? Did they build houses or---

AUSTIN: He was involved in high-rises, office buildings. This is all in New York City and occasionally in out of town jobs, but mostly in New York City.

STURGEON: Do you remember what their educational backgrounds were?

AUSTIN: No, I haven't the slightest idea.

STURGEON: Do you think they might have graduated from high school or did they have some education?

AUSTIN: Oh, yes. I would imagine my father probably had a higher education, but as far as my mother was concerned she was just a normal Scottish housewife.

STURGEON: Can you tell me about yourself, when you were born and where.

AUSTIN: I was born in New York City, in Manhattan on August 2, 1908, and spent the biggest part of my youth in New York City. Then we moved up to Westchester County and continued my schooling there and that is about it.

STURGEON: Did you move up there with your parents?

AUSTIN: Yes, I was probably about twelve.

STURGEON: Was your father still doing construction work?

AUSTIN: Yes, he commuted and so did I when I finally went to work.

STURGEON: When did you go to work, after you graduated from school?

AUSTIN: Yes, and my first job was with the New York Central Railroad and I was a – in this little village we lived in Westchester County I was a big shot among those of my age because I had a pass to ride the railroad. But what I was was an office boy, but when some people would maybe drop in to say hello I had my own office.

STURGEON: About how old were you when you first started?

AUSTIN: About 21, in that area. I went from there to work for Chevrolet plant

in Tarrytown, working on a chain. I hate to admit this but I was always behind. I always had to stay late to catch up because the chain would keep moving. I could never keep up with it. But this little town we lived in was one of those family little towns, where everybody knew everybody else. One of my real true friends in that town was a red-headed Catholic priest and I'm not catholic. We got together and had a great friendship. And every Sunday he would say to me, when are you going to come to church? And I went to another church. But that is the kind of a town it was.

STURGEON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

AUSTIN: I had a brother who was born in Scotland and a sister who was born here in the United States. My brother was the student of the family and I was constantly being told, why don't you do what your brother does? Even teacher's, we went to the same school and I followed him, and my one math teacher, he was always after me, you aren't like your brother. But he was the student and the brains of the family, not me.

STURGEON: Did he go on to college after he graduated then?

AUSTIN: No. He had that intention but he was offered a good job on Wall Street which he took. He stayed there for a long, long time on Wall Street and our family for some reason or another disintegrated, I don't know why. We were very much attached to each other but it was just one of those things. Everybody went their own way.

STURGEON: Did your parents end up staying there near White Plains?

AUSTIN: No, they moved back to New York. My mother, believe it or not, became strictly a New Yorker. She liked to open the window and look out and see people and cars. That's what you couldn't do in a little town. My father bought this nine room house as more or less a present to my mother and she didn't do anything but gripe for three years. So back we went.

STURGEON: Did you ever go to college?

AUSTIN: No

STURGEON: And what about your sister, did she ever go to college?

AUSTIN: No, none of us were a ---whatever I have done in my life was in the school of hard knocks. I think my biggest asset was liking people. I worked for a number of years in a hospital, and that changed my philosophy of life, working in a hospital.

STURGEON: And what did you do there?

AUSTIN: I became head of the x-ray department in a 400 bed hospital. You learn to try to understand people, sick people especially. My philosophy is nobody wants to gripe, something has happened in their lives to make them. And by the grace of God hope we don't go through that. So I can understand and have compassion for people and I think probably that is the foundation of why I ---I like people, I became in Sun City father confessor. People came to me about all their troubles, private or otherwise. Very often I would sit and do exactly what you are doing, listening. When they were finished they would say, gee thanks, you helped me an awful lot; but only because they got it off their chests. Sun City was a revelation really because you had people from all walks of life. I have learned that the seniors, I hate that term senior citizen, I don't know what else to call them. I learned that depending on what part of the country you come from, your way of life is different. And by the Grace of God the first influx of people in Sun City came from the northwest. They were people they came in and so help me, you go back to the old bond raising days and that is the way they were.

STURGEON: I have heard that from several people.

AUSTIN: I didn't have to ask them to do this or ask them to do certain things. That's the way they were. They did it automatically. I would get "gee, he's great" but that is the way it was. And I honestly believe the pioneers of Sun City were the ones that made Sun City. Make no mistake about it. They are the ones

that made Sun City what it is. People that have moved into Sun City in the last ten years, or Sun City West, these people are different. Every generation is different. I am sure Sun City West is nothing like the original Sun City. I am not degrading them; it is just a different generation. The retirees, they are younger. I say I was activities coordinator, hell I was activities director of two Sun Cities in California and one in Florida. I was commuting between here and Tampa. People are different. There were times – the physical plant was the same and every time that I made a visit as Activities Coordinator at that particular project, we would call a community meeting and then I would get up and give it the old college try. There were times when I momentarily forgot where I was because they looked the same. But most of the questions were essentially the same, at that particular time, now they would be entirely different, because you have got a different generation of retirees. Their way of life was different. If you have kids your kids are different than you were. This is going to go on. A perpetual thing. Very often when my wife and I are reminiscing or something, she would constantly remind me, you wouldn't get away with that today. And I probably wouldn't.

STURGEON: Let me go back to what you were saying about the hospital. Did you go from working for Chevrolet to the job in the hospital or did you have some jobs in between that?

AUSTIN: No, I worked for my father for a while, but then I got the bug that I wanted to be a performer. I could sing; maybe not good but I made some inquiries and things of that nature and I wanted to perform. I got involved with an agent and one day in going to his office which was full of agents and everything else and there was a whole line of people and I got off the elevator and went over and well they were amateurs. And I said do you get paid for this, you are an amateur and you get paid for it? At that amateur show in New York was a big thing. So I told my agent, hey they are getting paid for it. I was singing in Chinese joints, so I got on the circuit of amateurs and finally my father put his foot down, because I did this once every summer. He said either come here and go to work or don't come back. I was about 23-24 then. But I was mediocre.

STURGEON: So your father put his foot down and you went back to work for him?

AUSTIN: Yes, my mother said, you better do good. You better do what your father says. But I enjoyed it. I am a ham, let's face it. I am always performing. Like the former office manager, Jack Miller, said, if Austin hears a camera clicking half a mile away he ---

STURGEON: So you worked for your Dad, about how long did you work for your Dad then?

AUSTIN: Probably about three years. My mother died from cancer and a friend of the family was a chief engineer at a large Jewish hospital in the Bronx. As I say he was a good friend and one day he says hey Tom, why don't you come work for me? I said you kidding and he says no, come work for me. I asked my father do you think I should, and he said why don't you try it and I tried it. It was the only hospital of its kind, really in the United States, it is all chronic diseases. It was a huge, huge place and I became intrigued with the morgue, isn't that ridiculous. So every once in awhile through the loud speaker system in the hospital I would hear, hey Tom, where are you, get over here. And I was always in the morgue, so he would find me and he said now look you've got to make up your mind, are you going to work for me or are you going to work for the hospital? So I said, that is easy, I'll work for the hospital. So I started taking care of the guinea pigs and the rabbits and all that in the lab and gradually went up the line and to school in x-ray and came to a project for the United States Public Health Service and Michigan Health Department. I went to Michigan. I was loaned out; I came back out and became head of the department. I was about in my late 20's or early 30's then.

STURGEON: So you made a big career jump then.

AUSTIN: The reason I really went in was because of my mother when she died I felt helpless, I thought there was something I should have been able to do. I stayed in x-ray. That is where I met my wife. She was a dietitian. We were at this hospital and the war broke out and we were frozen. As soon as we could get out of there we got out and moved to Long Island. We went up to see this aunt in New York and we had met a number of doctors and their wives and we landed in

Oklahoma and stayed there only for a year. We wanted to go to California. We stopped off at Tucson. We stayed there and went back to Long Island and came back and I kind of hooked up with a cancer specialist. He did x-ray therapy. One day I went to get a hair cut and I am sitting in the chair reading a newspaper and I read all the newspaper and I got to the classified ads which I never read and here is what they call a blind ad. You ask me what my phone number is and I gotta to stop and think now, but I can remember the phone number of that ad. I looked at Barbara and called and it was Del Webb. He had a project for apartments and duplexes in Tucson. I explained to the man who answered the phone, I said I was interested in his ad and what is it about. He said why don't you come and talk to me about it, it is the Del Webb Company. I didn't know who the heck Del Webb was. Now I knew nothing about this. It was about '55 or '56. And I got the job as the manager. I was managing the apartments. Why he took me I don't know. The place was loaded with applicants. I was ready to turn around and walk out and the girl at the desk said----- . And that was my beginning with the Del Webb Company. Then I was sent up here to the main office eventually. I did some research work there on Central Avenue and Indian School. Then at a management meeting - they had been researching retirement for three years, information from the United States Government on what the elderly like, what they don't like and a lot of it was from down in Florida. Then at a management meeting - we gotta put somebody out there that can talk to these people. Well, I had grey hair, do I have to say more? But as I say, for the lack of a better title I was called coordinator. But I wore many hats. I worked with equipment; this was before it was opened. I went out there in 1959, and it opened January 1, 1960.

STURGEON: Well, let's a - if you don't mind I would like a little more detail on Del Webb a little bit later. If you don't mind there are a few more questions I would like to ask about, could you tell me about - you met your wife and she was a dietitian, had she gone through school to become a dietitian or had she learned that through the hospital?

AUSTIN: Through the hospital, oh no, she went to Pride Institute in New York to become a dietitian.

STURGEON: Can you tell me about your children- how many children do you have?

AUSTIN: No children.

STURGEON: Now I am going to ask you about the communities you lived in, the kind of communities you lived in so if you could sort of describe them. When you lived in New York, which is where you were born, you lived there until you were about twelve, what kind of a neighborhood did you live in, did you live in a ethnic neighborhood?

AUSTIN: This is difficult, because in New York City you either - there were two classes really - the upper and the lower, and we were in between. Now when I went to school we had blacks, yellow, we had a racially integrated school, lot of Jewish people and I think that was good because you learn, you really do. Although you don't socialize with those people. I mean when school is over you don't see them again. But during that period of time you learn that blacks are human beings just as you and I, and the same with the Chinese. Of course in New York at that time we had a lot of Chinese laundries.

STURGEON: Now were you right in New York City or were you in a separate--right in New York City.

AUSTIN: That's why I will reiterate, go back to how the different ways you lived had a reflection on your life. Now when you come from a large city, like New York City, for some reason or the other you were brought up not to trust anybody. If someone stops to talk and says Hey how are you, you say what are you after? what do you want? Half the time you don't even know your neighbor, or the persons living on the same floor with you. But this is the way you were brought up. So the result is people - retirees coming from New York City are entirely different than the people that came from the Northwest. And as I said before, by the grace of God we got people from the Northwest.

STURGEON: Now when you lived in New York and you were growing up did you live in a house or an apartment?

AUSTIN: In a apartment.

STURGEON: So you interacted with lots of different kinds of people in the apartment building.

AUSTIN: Right, but you never really got to know them, even as a kid. That's city life. They say New Yorkers are cold and in a way they are. They are cold if you compare them with somebody from some other part of the country. That is the way they are. And very often they are rude. Actually they don't know it. So that is what I say, Sun City West, I know, I am sure, is entirely different. I don't think I could handle the people out there the way I handled the people in Sun City.

STURGEON: When you moved, you mentioned it was a small community and everyone knew everyone. Did your parents get involved in the community there at all?

AUSTIN: No. My father did briefly in the City Council, but he quit because a Jewish tailor wanted to come into town and they objected strenuously so he quit. My brother had a very good friend who was a Jewish lawyer, wanted to join a country club and he couldn't because he was Jewish. You know, that is terrible.

STURGEON: Yeah it is. About how big do you think that little town was?

AUSTIN: I would say it was around 5,000. It was halfway between Tarrytown and White Pine.

STURGEON: Did you get involved in the community at all when you lived there?

AUSTIN: No, not at all.

STURGEON: Did you find it easier to make friends there than in New York?

AUSTIN: Oh yes. It was a different type of friendship – looser.

STURGEON: Then when you moved back to New York did you move back into an apartment building again?

AUSTIN: This was in the Bronx instead of Manhattan, and it was almost a small community within itself. The area we moved into was called Highbridge; where before we had a lot of Jewish people, here we had all Catholics. Me, being at that time an Episcopalian. There wasn't this, that we have now, which is very unfortunate, the blacks and the Spanish and that. People wouldn't say, hey are you a Catholic or are you a Protestant? You never asked that question. It didn't make any difference.

STURGEON: So was this an integrated neighborhood you were in, would you say there were blacks and Hispanics in your neighborhood there?

AUSTIN: No. The blacks in New York took over Harlem. Then the Spanish moved in and the Puerto Ricans, but the area we moved in, I guess most of them were Irish. It was a middle class neighborhood.

STURGEON: When you moved had you lived in New York until you moved to Tucson or had you moved around?

AUSTIN: We lived in Long Island where we were employed in the hospital. We left there and we went visiting through the country and we ended down in Tucson.

STURGEON: Now when you were in New York, in Long Island were you involved in the community at all there?

AUSTIN: No

STURGEON: Were you involved in your church at all?

AUSTIN: No. It was earlier than that I was involved in church very heavily. I used to go around to various churches and form the young people's clubs. But then I got involved too much with the inner workings. See up to this point I didn't realize that the church needed money to operate, so then I got involved in the

money part of it and that didn't sit well with me at all. I couldn't see a minister getting up and pleading for money. But I was very active in church, was in the Reformed for a while, prior to that it was the Episcopalian Church and prior to that was the Scottish Protestant. But I still believe in God though I don't go to church.

STURGEON: When you worked at the hospital were you involved in – besides working at the hospital were you involved in any groups in the hospital?

AUSTIN: Well, yes. At that time I was involved with church work. And the church I belonged to had a young people's caucus. We all took turns and my turn came up I decided to speak out on mercy death. Now what kind of a subject is---; so I went to my medical director. I told him I wanted to talk on mercy death and I don't know the first thing about it. Can you help me? He says yes I can help you. He called in his assistant, about as young as you are. He said take Tom around the hospital. He has to get material on mercy death. See if you can help him out. So we went around and we went to the --- therapy and he explained it all to me. Finally down in the basement, as I said this was a huge hospital with physical therapy. And here was an old man sitting like Mahatma Gandhi rubbing two pieces of wood. He said, now here is the final example. This man thinks he is constructing something. He is happy in what he is doing. But he is of no use to any one. Should we put him to death? He is happy, he is not in pain. Actually he is of no use to any one. Take those sticks away from him and he will die sure as you are born. So that was the thesis of my talk on mercy death. I never did arrive at a conclusion. But it was interesting.

STURGEON: OK I am going to ask you some questions about the depression and retirement concerns. Do you remember the depression?

AUSTIN: Very vaguely. It didn't affect our family.

STURGEON: Why didn't it affect your family?

AUSTIN: I don't know. My father always had work. I can remember people standing on street corners selling apples. But we were never without food or things of that nature.

STURGEON: Did your father always have contracts during the depression then?

AUSTIN: Yes, we didn't have any problems.

STURGEON: Did he own his own company then or did he work for someone else?

AUSTIN: He worked for somebody else. He was the top supervisor. And as I say we never did – we went through it and we were aware of it of course as every body was but we didn't have to tighten our belts as I recall.

STURGEON: So you always had a job during the depression too, as you remember?

AUSTIN: No. I don't think I was ever really out of work. If I was it was my own doing, because I didn't feel like it or something.

STURGEON: Do you remember – you say you saw people on the street corners so do you remember what working conditions were like for most people during the depression?

AUSTIN: I think it was very bad. I think probably eight out of ten families were suffering.

STURGEON: Did you have neighbors who were in that condition?

AUSTIN: I don't believe so. At least I don't recall. The area we lived in was a fairly stabilized area and there weren't what you would call manual workers. I think most people had some suffering – some very bad and never got out of it. And we recall reading about the people who committed suicide, jumping out of windows when the crash came.

STURGEON: So the crash didn't affect your father either.

AUSTIN: Not really.

STURGEON: Do you remember when the social security act was passed?

AUSTIN: Not really. I know I am on it. I don't recall being aware of it until I got into retirement and started to explore it.

STURGEON: Was your father affected by the social security act?

AUSTIN: He died before that. He died in Florida and I don't remember the year.

STURGEON: Did he die in the 30's?

AUSTIN: Probably. When he retired he used to sit in his chair and you couldn't get a word out of him until we got him to see our family Doctor. My brother called the doctor and said you got to do something about him. So he convinced my father, he said travel and my father went down to Florida and that is the last we saw of him. He died quite a while after. I would get concerned about him every once in a while and he would write back and say as long as you don't hear from me I'm alright. And as I say my brother and my sister, we all went on our own ways. I don't even know whether they are alive or not.

STURGEON: Did he die before WWII then?

AUSTIN: Yes.

STURGEON: Do you remember when Social Security was passed did you think it was a good thing?

AUSTIN: I didn't give it any thought.

STURGEON: Do you remember were any of your neighbors who might have been affected by social security?

AUSTIN: No

STURGEON: As you started approaching retirement age what were your concerns about the future.

AUSTIN: I never gave the future a thought. I probably should have but I didn't. When I really became concerned about social security I read an article and I went around speaking about it too. When I was pushing Sun City. I called it the Tale of Two Cities. At that time I was concerned about the people that were on social security making maybe \$60 - \$75 a month. Who is taking care of these people? Where were they living? How could they live? In Sun City people would write out a check for the whole amount of the house they were buying. I wasn't concerned about those people. I was concerned about the people who at that time were getting 60 to 75 dollars a month. So I tried to stimulate interest in the developers and the builders. At that time FHA was strong, they could get money, to forget their big profits, not to lose money but build apartments, not fancy or anything else so these people could live in dignity. They were good people.

STURGEON: This was while you were at Del Webb that you were doing this?

AUSTIN: Yes, I don't know if they appreciated it or not.

STURGEON: Did you ever, when you were thinking about retirement, did you ever think about your own health and what the future might be about your health? What about social activities and interaction?

AUSTIN: I had a heart attack while I was with Del Webb. Here again, it didn't bother me. I don't think I am very smart.

STURGEON: What about social interactions with people? Did you ever wonder what it was going to be like when you retired?

AUSTIN: No.

STURGEON: You were just an outgoing person and --- When you got ready to retire in addition to social security which you probably drew, did you have any pension plan or anything like that, or investments that you were able to draw on?

AUSTIN: What I did have was gone -- period -- that was ended. Right now we are on social security, my wife and I. We don't have any other income.

STURGEON: When you retired where were you living when you retired?

AUSTIN: In Phoenix; just before you come to Glendale, there in Phoenix.

STURGEON: About how long had you been living there before you retired?

AUSTIN: A few years.

STURGEON: Now I am going to start asking you a lot of questions about Del Webb. Talk to me a little bit about the kind of effort that went into the development of Sun City. How did they decide to do this? Why did they decide to do this?

AUSTIN: As far as I can recall Del Webb himself, you would have to know Del Webb, really, to appreciate this. He himself wanted to build, had in his mind a retirement community for the plumber, the electrician and the painter, this type of thing. Was it possible? Could this be done? Then three years of research went into this. Much of the research that was gathered by the government, the universities and so on, much of it was false, it was wrong. We found that out. For instance the reports that came back, the retired and the elderly didn't want a bathtub, they wanted showers, they were afraid of bathtubs. So what happened, the first model we put up didn't have a bathtub, and if you don't think all hell broke loose. So you know what happened immediately, in came the bathtubs. Another fallacy, and this was quite prevalent with the journalists, with the people involved in research work, you couldn't bring together a group of retirees, they

could never live together in childless communities. This was really printed in the papers. Sun City was not going to get off the ground.

END OF TAPE 1

This is Melanie Sturgeon and on behalf of the Sun Cities Area Historical Society and the Arizona Historical Foundation, I am interviewing Tom Austin in his home in Mesa, Arizona. This is the second interview we have had and the date is September 17, 1991.

STURGEON: Mr. Austin, I was wondering if you could tell me how involved Del Webb, as a person was actually involved in Sun City.

AUSTIN: May I ask you to call me Tom? Thank you. How involved was Del Webb in Sun City. I think we would have to go back three years before Sun City, when Del Webb came up with the idea and the thought of a retirement community for the working person. There were three years of study of the country and different universities. From that study evolved Sun City, Del Webb himself. Although the people of Sun City in the very beginning only heard of a person called Del Webb. As a matter of fact many people thought I was Mr. Webb. When it reached a point when we had quite a number of residents I got a hold of Mr. Webb and I twisted his arm and I told him, come out and meet the people, please. He finally consented to come out – he and his secretary, bless her heart. He came out and I arranged, of course, to have all the arts and crafts occupied, shuffleboard, I had the whole ball of wax. It was choreographed, unbeknownst to Mr. Webb. To start off the occasion he was out of town that morning and his plane was late, so I had a whole rec hall filled to the gills with people. We had the band, it was like a kitchen band, you know what I mean, so I got them to get there instruments and every thing and we entertained the people. I had a sing-a-long and we did this for an hour before he showed up. When he did show up to meet the people, the women, I think it was in the Ceramics Club, had made a little gift for Mrs. Webb. Did you know we had to have police around to conduct the traffic? Really, around the rec center. You know, policemen that were off duty. Anyway, I brought him around and we went to each and every activity. I couldn't get him out of the place, especially ceramics. He couldn't believe that they made

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these things, you know you had to go into a store and buy them and here they were making these beautiful things. At any rate, as I say I had a terrible job getting him, but one thing about Mr. Webb, that is why he had his secretary, he would take off his hat and put it down and forget where he put it, and it was her duty to pick it up and carry it along with them. Mr. Webb came out one other time after that that I knew of. He came out with Bob Hope to play golf and I got an autographed picture with Bob Hope. But he, himself, I know he got constant reports. I used to have people come into my office, like you were saying that Webb was out there all the time, well he wasn't. I used to have, especially this guy, would come into my office and say I know Dell Webb, I met him. I would say oh you did, he would be tickled to death to hear you, let me get him on the phone. That would be the end of that conversation. I did it every time. But he was heavily involved, in the beginning. Eventually of course, they were a construction company, period, and they had jobs going on all over the country and eventually it was turned over to Tom Breen, ostensibly, and L. C. Jacobsen, at the time and Ashton, although they didn't play a personal part as Breen. So Del Webb did, he was very much interested. He came out at any big function, like the fifth year anniversary. I will tell you a little story about that. I rode in a convertible, my wife and I rode in a convertible with Webb. We were passing the bandstand and the announcer was up there saying here comes Mr. & Mrs. Webb and Tom Austin. Then we had the big party over at the ----- . Oh, there was a number of things he attended really, but not every day.

STURGEON: It sounds like he didn't have a lot of interaction with the people of Sun City then.

AUSTIN: There was one occasion when we got a rumor that there was going to be a demonstration. They weren't all Webb fans, you know. Webb should be doing this or that. We got word there was going to be a demonstration but it never materialized. But occasionally we would have someone would write a letter in the paper, about Webb not doing this or why don't they do this. It wasn't too often. But it did happen. And I used to say to Bert, why do you print this stuff? I would say, now Bert, this is off the record and he would say, Tom, don't you ever say that to me. There is nothing off the record. There was no special person. But Webb yes, he played a very important part.

STURGEON: You mentioned last time that you were constantly going between the Sun Cities in California and the one in Florida, how soon after Sun City opened did he open the others?

AUSTIN: You know, my memory is very vague on that. I will take a guess and say probably three years.

STURGEON: Did he sort of wait and see if Sun City was going to be successful?

AUSTIN: Yes.

STURGEON: Were the other ones as successful as Sun City?

AUSTIN: No, not near as successful as this one. Sun City Florida in Tampa is the most beautiful place you ever saw. I mean it's beautiful. I think I told you going down on the plane with Webb; this was going to be it. But contrary to his prognostication, no they weren't near as successful as this, not at all. Probably, again and I go back and sound like a broken record, it was the people. A woman in California, she had two places in California, and I used to have to go around and visit these places, the manager, or whatever he was, the rec center coordinator would arrange to have the community in the hall to meet me and talk to me and ask me questions, which they always did. I was a big shot. This woman came up to me after the meeting and she said Mr. Austin, you keep saying this is the friendliest place in the country. She said it is the most unfriendly place. I said how can you possibly say that? She says well, nobody comes around to talk to me. I said I can't believe it, now tell me what happened. She says, well when I moved in the usual people would come around and I was too busy fixing up my house, I didn't have time to sit and chat. I said, you were the one that was unfriendly, they wanted to help you. That is the only time that anybody ever told me that Sun City was unfriendly. A little story about Sun City, Arizona, when someone would die, I would go and pay my condolences. Nine times the spouse would go back to where they came from. I went to this one widow, her husband had just died and I said Mrs. So-and So, I suppose you will be going back home.

She paid me what I thought was the greatest compliment ever paid Sun City. She said, Tom, this is my home. This is where my friends are. You can't beat that.

STURGEON: I've heard that when the rec center moved across Grand Avenue in Phase II, there was some conflict between the two? Can you talk about that?

AUSTIN: There always will be a conflict. Number one, when Sun City, Arizona rec center went up, that was in 1960, so a new one goes up and naturally there are going to be changes made, things might be a little better, in other words the stage might be a little bigger. The PA system could be a higher quality, a better piano. So there always will be a conflict, always. I am glad they are going to add on to Sun City West. The new one is going to be a little different than in Sun City West. So you are going to get a conflict there – it is better, look what they did. There will always be that, always. I am sure the people in the original Sun City look down there noses at Sun City West. The people in the original Sun City, this is their home for a long time. Don't you dare talk down to my home. So you are going to get that. It goes on. It is a regular domino effect.

STURGEON: I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about the hospital. Boswell hospital – you did tell me that Boswell had come to you with a check. I was wondering if you could talk about the board a little.

AUSTIN: As far as the board was concerned I had very little to do with it. Once Boswell came ----- who I got to know very well. Once they became a vital part of the hospital – it's your baby. Now as far as the board, the lodge, see now that was a different thing. We played a vital part; that is I did, under the company. But the Boswell Hospital, no.

STURGEON: Well, could you talk to me about the Sun Valley Lodge then, how you were involved?

AUSTIN: Sun Valley Lodge was interesting to me because I was there from the word go in organizing it, and greeting the people that came in. Don't forget they were all people I knew. I remember once a little old lady, her niece came to visit her. The little old lady was sitting at the piano playing when her niece came in. I

didn't know she could play the piano. That niece sat down and cried. I tell you she was having a ball at that piano. But again the feeling for some reason or another went from wherever you were you brought it with you. So in the Sun Valley Lodge the feeling in there was exactly the same as it was out in the middle of the street.

STURGEON: Why did Webb organize the Lodge in the first place?

AUSTIN: He didn't organize it. We helped Reverend Witt. He was the one. It was his baby. He saw the need. Don't forget, people will talk to a minister and say things to a minister that they won't say to you or I. I think enough of the people were not in financial straits, not by any stretch of the imagination, but the little added thing broke their back. So I think he saw a need for supplying things. It started off in a small way, crutches, bandages, bed pans, things of this nature and it grew. No charge, there wasn't any limit, and it grew and it was Sun Valley Lodge. This is how that came to be. He had subscriptions. He was the one that handled the whole thing. He was a great guy.

STURGEON: What did you do there?

AUSTIN: I was the first manager, administrator. I did a lot of hiring and setting up of the various rooms and the furniture and getting the licenses from the State Department, organized the first auxiliary. I would call for volunteers and you would get far more than you could use. But again I go back and I say this, it was the people. Purely and simply. I am an organizer. I can walk into a situation I know nothing about and in 24 hours I will have it organized. But that is all I would have to do with these people. You can just drop a hint. This was around 1965.

STURGEON: Did a lot of people move in that first year?

AUSTIN: Right from the very beginning ----- . No question about it. It was needed badly and it was from that – we were talking about a sixty bed hospital and I did a lot of research on what you build – you build a ten, twenty, forty bed, fifty bed one, when is the breaking point and it was sixty beds. My office was

plastered with all kinds of pictures. I don't know if it was told to you I had to go before the State Department of Health and present, so we could get our license. You know what I did? I had slides made, colored slides made. Needless to say we got our license. But those are the things that I love to do. There was a great satisfaction. You know this time that I said Webb came out there to visit? I brought him through the office to meet the office people. They had never met Webb. At that time we had a brand new PR man, a little kid, snotty nosed and he was in his office typing away with his back to the door. This is true. I told him, hey and called him by name, can't think of his name. I said hey, I want you to meet Mr. Webb, and he damned near fell through the floor. He couldn't talk, but they are not Mr. Webb. He was a great guy. He really was. He was sincerely interested in every employee he had. He was interested in the kids and if they had kids. He could for instance, say he met me for the first time, got any kids, I'd say year, Johnny, Johnny's got a cold at this particular time, six months later Webb would walk into my office and say, how is Johnny's cold. This was Webb.

STURGEON: You were telling me earlier that you felt that perhaps it was the advertising agency that really helped. Could you talk about that a little bit?

AUSTIN: Bob Golin's agency took a personal interest in Sun City, I think far and above what an agency would usually do on an account. Bob would be there at every function almost, every meeting. He would sit in the back I mean, he was very inconspicuous. His campaign throughout the country had to be extremely successful because that is what -where the hell did all these people come from? It wasn't by word of mouth. So Bob, if he is alive today and I don't know if he is or not, he could tell you I think another side of the story that I am not familiar with at all other than that I know that Bob had to be responsible for this tremendous opening. At that opening people were waving checks. It was the most ridiculous thing you ever saw. And Bob, if he is still alive, but if he is and it is Phoenix, he could give you another side of the story.

STURGEON: One of the things that Bill Chapman said to me was that he thought things went so well in Sun City because people that served on boards had served in other capacities in businesses and were just such go-getters that they got every thing done. Do you agree with that?

AUSTIN: Yes, 100%. Definitely. It was because of that, don't forget I don't know everything, it was because of their expertise and many of them were small business people, had a little store or something, they weren't all executives by any stretch of the imagination. They understood. Now this is more or less between you and I. I did a lot of volunteer work here in Mesa. I sat on a number of boards. On one specific board we were talking about the lower class people in Mesa. Now we got to do something for these people. Sitting on that board were women with diamonds and they didn't understand. I got up and walked out on a number of them because they just didn't understand what we were talking about, as opposed to the boards in Sun City. They knew what they were talking about.

STURGEON: Did they get involved in some of the communities outside Sun City like El Mirage?

AUSTIN: Not the board. Some of the clubs did. Some of the clubs became very much interested in El Mirage, the kids, the health. Peoria for some reason or other, I attended some of the meetings in Peoria Chamber of Commerce, they didn't get in too much on that. But El Mirage, yes. They did a lot of charity work and they are still doing it I understand. But this again, I go back to the early part, these people are very compassionate. The Sun Valley for Crippled Children in Phoenix, I went there a couple of times and it would break your heart. Oh, brother. They became very much involved, a couple of the clubs in that. I think it was the Puppet Club, Dress a Living Doll, which was a program started in Phoenix, and all year long they would make clothes for the school kids and have the kids out here. This is nice in a community. Little things that would happen without any fanfare, any publicity. That is why many people think they are cold hearted. They are not. Unless it is changed.

STURGEON: One of the criticisms I read about Sun City in the papers is the fact they weren't interested in paying any school taxes to support any of the other communities.

AUSTIN: I wasn't involved, but I had my thoughts. I think it is wrong. Someone paid for your education. You don't know who they are. Besides for

your folks. I think that in every part of the United States there should be a school district. They were wrong and they know it because I have expressed my feelings. The school board in Peoria eventually got the majority. Now a school is like a building, eventually it gets old. Eventually it needs renovation. They voted down every darn thing. Peoria is growing and it is growing because of Sun City. They voted it down. This is wrong. They are still citizens of the United States they should assume the same amount of responsibilities. I am violently opposed to this. I think it is wrong.

STURGEON: Were there many in Sun City who agreed with you at the time?

AUSTIN: I don't know that I voiced it publicly. I will tell you one thing, and I never will, you can come into my office and say just what you are saying now and I will tell you how I feel about it, I don't know how you will feel about it when you walk out of my office. I don't polish anybody's boots and that includes Mr. Webb.

STURGEON: I had asked you earlier about incorporation.

AUSTIN: I think they appreciated it too. Hands off. The only thing we insisted on when a club was formed and they set their dues was they set them low. This we controlled. The first, you know that box I gave you? In that box was the original Articles of Incorporation. They sent it to me by the board and I think they appreciated the fact that we didn't exert any pressure. I will tell you that has nothing to do with what you are getting at. Again this is personal. You can do whatever you want with it. It could be a controversial subject. I think when any time a community reaches, say 50,000 people, it should be automatically, no ifs ands or buts, be incorporated into the county. There is too much fragmentation in Maricopa County. Now Sun City got to the point eventually and I suppose they still do, where they expect the county to do everything. I think again that whenever a community reaches whatever figure it is, say 50,000, they should automatically be mandated -----you are incorporated into the county. I think it is time that they assumed their responsibilities. And as far as school districts everybody should be, because again people paid for your education. They did a great harm to Peoria, I think, a great harm.

STURGEON: I had read somewhere that Sun City did really well for the first 3 or 4 years then it sort of sloughed off for a while, then it came back again.

AUSTIN: That isn't entirely true. If you are going to take numbers yes. But the amount of sales in Sun City almost doubled the accepted figure that is given for how many are being sold in a community. So the period you are talking about probably went down, which it did, went down below-----and its critics would say that we were suffering, naw. They never did. We entertained editors, reporters, journalists from all over the country who came out to Sun City to see. You would be surprised how many of those people went back to their office and said it is not going to work. You can not have community that is all retired. You are not going to have a community that is childless. It isn't going to work. It came out in print. They ate their words a few years later. But, no, they just couldn't see it.

STURGEON: Would you tell me about the bus tours they set up. Did you have anything to do with those?

AUSTIN: Actually no, other than to coordinate and occasionally on some of the shorter ones, like we went around Sun City and we went around Youngtown. A few of the shorter ones I would go and stand up in the front. They did on certain occasions they would bus them into the shopping centers, Chris Town, Webb owned Chris Town, in the beginning. I remember on one trip we were coming out of Youngtown, flags flying in the town hall. This woman says to me, is it a holiday? This is what has happened. I didn't say what I wanted to say.

STURGEON: The bus tours where they brought people into Sun City, were those successful where they would go out to the motels and things?

AUSTIN: I would say there were because they were impressed with what they saw. One thing the salesmen, and this was a hard and fast rule, no hard sell. The people themselves, they would walk into ceramics or whatever this might be, people greeted them, show them around, proud, they were very proud. And that sells. That is the best selling. We had so many people that bought into Sun City that brought back with them flocks of people. There are regular little colonies.

Jerry Svendsen came up with the idea of writing back to these home towns. He would always write and tell about Mary Jones etc. That was successful. Then he had a coffee every Saturday for the new comers up at the King's Inn. All these little things. It wasn't all Tom Austin you know.

STURGEON: Del Webb the man didn't really supervise you in all these things did he?

AUSTIN: No, not personally. Yes, you are pretty much on your own. You either sank or swam. The one thing that helped tremendously was Tom Breen again. Cause he took a vital interest you know. He was a lovable guy, good guy. But he himself took an interest in these various things. He became a real part of Sun City in a quiet way. I would imagine many people, they know of him maybe, have heard his name but didn't know him. But I think maybe as far as my part was concerned it may have been a little over-exaggerated. I think it belongs to the people, the pioneers. They are the ones that made it.

STURGEON: One of the pioneers, Reverend Thistleswaite. Did he come out here as a minister to start a church?

AUSTIN: No, I think he was retired.

STURGEON: And he started the Sunshine Club.

AUSTIN: Yeah, he was the one that started it. It started in his garage. Reverend Witt was the first church, then the first Catholic Church, Father ----, French Canadian. He was a devil. He used to fall all over Dorothy. He would come into the office, our office was like a railroad flat. The minute he walked in that door you would hear him. Great guy.

STURGEON: Del Webb didn't really set a place for churches did he? The people organized their own.

AUSTIN: Oh yes, they organized them but they had to work through Webb for the land. That I had nothing to do with. Did I tell you about the mail boxes? I

got a company to bring in four or five mail boxes. These were going to be distributed throughout the community. The community could pick whichever one they liked. So Father – came to me one day and said what are my chances of getting a mail box. I said I doubt it very much. He said Oh I would love to have one for ----- . I said I would love to be able to give you one but I can't. Next morning one was missing. I think it was on his 50th anniversary in the priesthood the Catholic Diocese in Phoenix wanted to have a ceremony. We had it in the rec center. The priest who was supposed to be the master of ceremonies came down very ill. Father ---- came to me crying. This was like tomorrow. He asked me if I would do it. I said I am not a catholic, I wouldn't know the first thing about it. So I consented. The Bishop was there. I walked out on the stage and half the room is filled with catholic priests. The Bishop gets up and says this is the first time I have ever addressed a community where children weren't allowed. A number of little things happened. Since I spoke to you these things come back to mind.

STURGEON: You mentioned that Del Webb built this for the plumbers and--- Did you find that those were the people who were coming out the first few years?

AUSTIN: No. Primarily I think they were small business people. Had a little store someplace, or a farmer. No, it never materialized into that type, but that was the original thought. The prices of the homes at that time back it up. These were homes that people could afford. Today, any of these communities, you have got to be well loaded.

END OF TAPE 2.