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Era of Suburbia Grew Out of Mid-'50s Housing Boom

BY DAVID COLKER

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Long before the Valley Girl entered pop culture, the San Fernando Valley gained fame for its housing--vast tracts of single-family ranch-style homes that came to epitomize a suburbia where even the middle class could have backyard swimming pools.

For the first half of the century, much of the Valley was still dusty ranchland, but after World War II subdivisions began to fill in the landscape.

All the elements seemed to be in place for a housing boom. The land was generally level and easy to develop, local aerospace and motion picture companies had jobs to offer, and thousands of returning GIs were looking for a place to buy a home and start a family in Southern California.

Although there is no single date to mark the start of the postwar housing boom here, Sept. 1, 1948, is probably as good as any. That was when the deed was signed for the first home in the master-planned community of Panorama City.

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This new community was founded by legendary real-estate developer Fritz B. Burns and industrialist Henry Kaiser. They had formed a company that aimed to create whole towns, with commercial districts and land set aside for schools, parks and medical centers.

Panorama City, carved out of ranch land in the north-central San Fernando Valley, was their most famous venture.

“There was just nothing out there, back then,” recalled Ken Skinner, who as a teenager went to work for Burns as a bookkeeper. “Shepherders used to come by and watch the construction.”

Built with pre-cut materials, the houses went up at the rate of up to 40 a day. All 2,000 of the homes ultimately built in the original development had the same basic one-story plan, with a garage at one end. The plans were flipped and the fronts of the houses given different configurations to disguise their sameness.

The first Panorama City home was given away in a contest on the national broadcast of “People are Funny” radio show to kick off an advertising and promotional campaign.

Panorama City was still considered country in the late 1940s, with much of the surrounding land given over to dairy farming and raising chickens. Even with the housing shortage, sales in the suburb were so slow at first that Burns moved into one of the typical, 1,000-square-foot homes and personally oversaw the sales operation.

Bolstered by the new General Motors plant in Van Nuys, sales finally picked up to the point that some salesmen could boast of selling more than 20 homes in a single day.

In addition to the homes, Burns and Kaiser put in a shopping center--lavish for its time--that drew customers from all over the Valley.

Panorama City became a model suburb, celebrated in Life magazine and elsewhere as an alternative to crowded, dingy cities.

The publicity helped popularize the Valley and spur real-estate development in parts of it once considered too remote for viable suburbs.

Perhaps more than any other decade, the 1950s set the pace for Valley development. The population more than doubled from about 403,000 in 1950 to more than 840,000 in 1960. The Valley had gone from ranchland to L.A.'s most emblematic suburb.



David Colker

David Colker previously wrote and edited obituaries – a beat perhaps foreshadowed by being on the Timothy Leary death watch in 1996 when he took the assignment so seriously he was at Leary’s bedside when he died. He left The Times in 2015.

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