

A family's story: Farmers to Developers

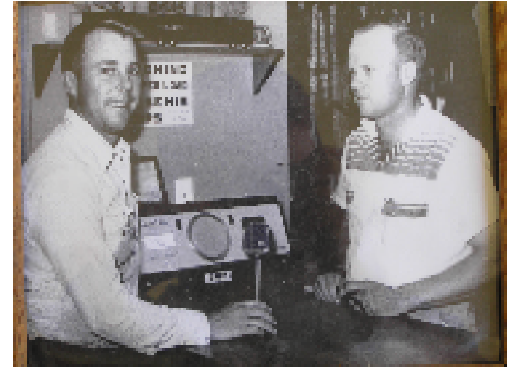
Morrison family builds community of character

By Kelly Mixer
Independent Newspapers

Scott Morrison, a third-generation member of one of Gilbert's most recognizable farming families, said the clan is committed to maintaining the agricultural heritage of the town. "We wanted to have our property be reminiscent of the way it was when we were growing up," he said, describing the sprawling Morrison Ranch master-planned community.



Independent Newspapers/Kelly Mixer
Scott Morrison, a third-generation member of one of Gilbert's most recognizable farming families, said the sprawling Morrison Ranch master-planned community is reminiscent of the town's agricultural heritage. The family has kept four of its landmark silos as part of its new development.



Special to the Independent/Morrison family
Scott's father, Marvin, right, with his brother, Kenneth, in the original offices at Morrison Ranch in the 1950s.

In 1997, Morrison Ranch began with the residential development, Higley Groves, which will eventually include 6,000 homes in 12 neighborhoods. About seven builders have built homes so far; styles range from one-acre homes to apartments. The three-square-mile Morrison Ranch development runs from just south of Guadalupe Road to Warner Road and the SRP Eastern Canal on the west and Power Road on the east.

The development will also include the 240-acre Power Technology Center, a business and technology complex, on the eastern edge. The Morrisons said the center would provide quality jobs to those living in the development and elsewhere in the East Valley. Within the industrial component, members of the community and other players will be able to enjoy an 18-hole Power Technology Golf Course.

Morrison Ranch offers lush landscapes, tree-lined streetscapes, open spaces and large setbacks. There are parks and play areas and diverse ball fields in each community. Pedestrian-friendly greenbelts cover more than 400 acres and 8 1/2 miles of paths and walking trails wind through the community. Three schools, including a junior high, will be located along the greenbelt and have been partially funded by the Morrisons through land donations and voluntary impact fees.

"Growing up, I tagged along with my father (Marvin) out in the fields raking hay for a dollar an hour. I considered those my formative years and I wanted to create that same atmosphere for my four kids," Scott said. "I was gratified when we had large numbers of people lining up for lotteries to buy houses here."

Neighborhood shopping

Every resident needs a nearby store to stop and pick up a loaf of bread or gallon of milk. The Morrisons thought of everything for their 2,000-acre master-planned community. Lakeview Village Center, at the southeast corner of Higley and Elliot roads, features connected storefronts, with three-color palettes and brick. The stores look more like individual stores rather than the homogenous varieties still so prevalent in the Valley.

"It's a typical neighborhood shopping center that fills the needs of the residents there," said Howard Morrison, Scott's brother.

Low white fencing, a trademark of Morrison Ranch, lines the center and connects it with the rest of the master-planned development. A bell-tower at the southern end anchors an area devoted to restaurants and outdoor cafes.

Assisting Scott and Howard in the development are their cousin Dawnie Stewart and her husband, Justin, as well as

master-planner Don Tompkins, whose firm helped design the Arizona Center in Phoenix and the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort at Gainey Ranch.

The Morrisons are developing the Lakeview Village Center through a 50-50 partnership with the Sterling Realty Group of Arizona, part of a 27-year-old company based in Toronto, Canada.

“We wanted the center to have a residential look - from site design to landscaping, to materials,” said Russ Watson, vice president of development for Sterling.

The 17-acre center is anchored by a 53,000-square-foot Albertson’s/Osco and includes 30,000 square feet of inline shops and six pads. Shops include Mail Boxes Etc., Subway, Water & Ice, Golf Etc. and a variety of professional offices. Bank of America sits on one of the pads and a future Panda Express and other businesses are in negotiations to locate at Lakeview Village.

The shopping center is the first of two planned for the development. The second, Parkview, will be at the northeast corner of Warner and Higley roads. Both centers are part of the 115-acre Morrison Town Center, which runs one mile from Elliot Road south to Warner Road. The area includes the shopping centers; a six-acre lake, where an 80-foot-high fountain operates twice a day and during special events; the Arizona Farm Bureau headquarters; and the Morrison family’s ranch headquarters with its agricultural education center and four landmark silos, which will remain as part of the family’s commitment to maintaining the agricultural heritage of the community.

Family legacy

The Morrisons came to Arizona in 1932 from Oklahoma, as part of the Dust Bowl migration. Howard C. and Leatha Morrison began clearing land for others before they would buy their own land. They built a home in 1953 at the northwest corner of Elliot and Higley roads, a building that will remain as part of the community, serving as a home office for the development.

Over the years, the family has created one of the East Valley’s largest farming operations, including one of the world’s largest dairies. Today, the family continues to farm 1,500 acres of the original ranch and will do so until the development requires the land.

In 1993, the Morrisons began developing in west Gilbert at the 80-acre Neely Ranch, also part of the family for years.

“We wanted a community of character with neighborhood shopping centers, a development that celebrates Gilbert’s agricultural heritage and its family values,” Howard said. “We wanted to create this with the same pride that our grandparents and parents farmed this land. We want to leave a legacy.”

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