

## FOUNTAIN PARK HISTORY

40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY, 2023

**“What’s optional elsewhere is standard at Fountain Park.”**

**“Near many of the City’s most prodigious offices and finest schools.”**

In 1912 Fred Wright and his wife Dolores moved with their children to the area where the Harrison/Wrightstown curve is now located at 1690 N. Harrison. He planted onions and sold them to the mining camps. Since he needed a way to get the onions to the camps, in 1914 he incorporated his site as a post office, which he named Wrightstown; he graded a rough road onto his property.

Wright also deeded ten acres of land for a school near what is now Wrightstown Road across from what would later become Grace Ranch. Wright transacted this in 1914 so that his five children would have a convenient place to go to school.

At that time the area was heavily agricultural with no housing developments in sight. Some people in the area raised and boarded horses. There are four capped irrigation wells on the Fountain Park property which may indicate that agriculture once occurred on this land.

Some Fountain Park residents recall riding their horses in this area before the land was developed by Licavoli. Others who attended UA in the early 1970s found this area to be an excellent away from campus party site. A couple of times, cars ended up in the wash on the east side. It was considered way out in the boonies.

In 1946, Detroit mobster Peter Licavoli purchased 72 acres of land at 8910 E. Tanque Verde (now Wrightstown Rd). He built Grace Ranch on the land, naming it in honor of his wife, Grace Bommarita. He raised thoroughbred racehorses, and eventually his property included an air strip, art gallery, and several casitas. along with a rumored mesquite furniture factory. Many Detroit and Chicago mobsters wintered in Tucson during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. They often made the news. This has been helpful to those of us who did the historical research for Fountain Park’s forty plus years.

Many are intrigued with the Licavoli story. To learn more about the days when he was the owner of the property that is now Fountain Park, turn to the Footnotes at the end of the document.

In 1979, Cienega Development bought Grace Ranch for \$1,000,000 so they could develop 180 luxury single family homes. Joe Cesare’s Broadway Realty and Trust represented Cienega in the transaction.

Cienega, headed by local developer Andy Kelly, had just completed a very successful development near Swan and Grant called Arcadia Square. Its clientele included well-to-do Mexican families who wanted vacation homes.

The Acacia Park development (aka Fountain Park) was focused on attracting young families and professionals. Cienega also wanted to focus on an environmentally sound, sustainable project.

In a 2021 interview with Kevin Oberg, who succeeded Andy Kelly as president of Cienega, we learned that the park was planned so that “Cienega wouldn’t have to deal with the federal government regarding the floodplain.”

The housing design was to be solely single story with zero lot lines that included minimum side yards to make up for setbacks required in the front yards. (The side yards were considered wasted space.)

Barry Berkus, a renowned Santa Barbara CA architect, was commissioned to design the homes. An USC alum, Berkus was described as “visionary in residential design.” He often used salvaged and recyclable materials. He was best known for innovative housing for a mass housing market. He said, “As an architect, I am paid to dream.”

Berkus Design Studio focused on “production housing” like Fountain Park. He also had a design studio for custom homes: B3Architecture. Berkus said “Residential architecture is about romance and fulfillment of a journey. It should never be below you to do housing.” During his lifetime he had a portfolio of 600,000 dwellings. He employed 210 architects around the United States. He died in Santa Barbara in 2012.

A rezoning of the property was required, and the ARIZONA DAILY STAR noted that “47 acres were to be rezoned from suburban ranch to multiple residential uses.” The article noted that the property had been part of Grace Ranch and a zoning administrator at the time said that “single family homes on small lots would be built, leaving open space.” The Board of Supervisors approved the rezoning which complied with the Rincon Area Plan.

On March 9, 1981, the original plat was recorded in Pima County. There were no sidewalks because Fountain Park was in Pima County which did not require them at that time.

There were seven models ranging in size from 1233 square feet and priced at \$74,400 to 2173 square feet homes that were priced at \$90,900.

From 1981-1984- 180 homes were built with a five-acre park. The model homes were located on Chauncey. A realtor named “Greg” (last name unknown) oversaw the sales office.

Cienega promoted its Fountain Park development with newspaper ads: On November 29, 1981, touting its grand opening, the ad stated, “The price barrier has

been broken! Announcing 13-1/2%- thirty-year financing at Lazy Creek and Fountain Park. Cienega's fixed rate mortgage-and lower home prices- add up to sensational savings for you!" In fine print: "Save \$71,000 on an \$85,000 home."

It is interesting to note that interest rates at that time were so high to stop inflation. A newspaper ad from that time is below.

The 5-acre park was noted which featured a swimming pool and lighted tennis courts. There were double garages, deluxe appliances, and an atrium in every home. There were 7 "extremely spacious floor plans to choose from with patio walls and fences." It was possible to have double master bedroom suites.

Then, on March 27, 1983: "Cienega introduces new view lots and new standard features in our finest community. Now you can live in a huge 2-5-bedroom single family home on the northeast side with a five-acre recreation site in the low 80s. One of Tucson's last practical and attractive locations, Models open 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. You can see the difference in every home we build."

An October 16, 1983, ad announced, "very special below market financing at Fountain Park," and it said that Fountain Park was Tucson's "most fabulous buy-and now an even better buy with lower interest."

**Low priced luxury on the Eastside or in town**

Cienega offers single family homes from the \$50's to the \$90's—  
with below market financing!

**Fountain Park . . . 2-4 bedroom masonry homes from the \$70s**

All the homes in Fountain Park have room to stretch out and live—even the "spare" bedrooms are spacious!

Cienega has incorporated today's most innovative floor plans into Fountain Park. This model features a Great Room.

**Fountain Park . . . Single family homes in a park-like setting on Wrightstown Road, about 1 mile east of Pantano Road.**

- Ideal Eastside location—on **Wrightstown Road**—is close to schools, shopping, medical facilities and Restaurant Row.
- Recreational facilities galore—including a **5 acre park, lighted tennis courts and swimming pool.**
- Double garages, deluxe appliances and atriums in every home.
- 8 extremely **spacious floor plans** to choose from—with front landscaping and patio walls/fences included! Even **double master bedrooms** are available.

**Finally, the price barrier has been broken.** Cienega has combined a great location, spacious floor plans, large yards and fantastic community-recreational facilities—and made it all affordable!

Large, bright kitchens—with plenty of cupboards and counter space—are a practical part of every Fountain Park home.

Since the park was in the floodplain, structures could not be built there. A swimming pool was part of the park. Tennis courts were added, and a resident, who was a professional tennis player, gave tennis lessons. There was also a basketball court which was popular with teenagers.

Former Fountain Park resident and president Rick Felker recalled that the 1983 flood did some damage in the park. He also recalled that the exercise track in the park was laid out in 1983. Chuck Huckelberry provided some assistance in the design of the track. (Huckelberry was Director of Pima County Transportation at that time and was later County Administrator.)

Also noteworthy: Cienega had plans to build five 3.3-acre homes on the banks of the wash. However, the 1983 flood probably dashed hopes for that plan.

Early resident and former Fountain Park president Tom Baker said, "This land was never part of our subdivision. Access was to be through our subdivision and that is the reason the Fountain Park Drive (cut-out) and the street cut-out west of 9031 E. Seneca were constructed." Baker: "This land is in the floodplain, so building pads would have to be built up at high costs. Given this, Cienega approached Pima County Floodplain Department about buying the land, and they did purchase the land (from Cienega). "

"Pima County has purchased several parcels along the Tanque Verde Creek over the years, always with the intention of keeping the land as open space and not allowing bank protection along the Tanque Verde Creek." All of this explains why land behind our Seneca homes is owned by Pima County. There continues to be severe erosion along the banks of the wash. Since the park is considered "private property," no government entity is willing to mitigate this.

On April 12, 1984, Fountain Park and the surrounding areas were annexed into the City of Tucson.

Cienega turned management of the association over to the homeowners around 1984. Rick Felker recalls that a woman was hired to help manage the finances and transcribe the board meeting minutes. There was a newsletter too, and it was mailed to homeowners.

By the early 1990s the homeowners realized that managing the association required too much time to continue without a management company. Glenn Patching was hired to manage the association. Paul Ash HOA Management is the current property manager (2023). Many of the rules from the "self-managed" period were still in the by-laws before the 2022 version.

Rick Felker, Tom Baker, Ruth Watson, David Libraro, Carol West, Carol Barnard, Neil West, Jeff Brown, Paul Earls, Beau Alexander, and Alicia Navia have served as board

presidents. Many residents have also served as board members and committee members.

When Fountain Park was built there were no other subdivisions on Wrightstown Road. The park was lush with a variety of native plants, like a nature preserve.

There were a lot of cacti in the park, especially prickly pear. But it was close to the walkway and dangerous, especially for children on their bikes. Some of the mothers took it into their own hands and “removed” them with bats.

When the Tanque Verde Well Owners were about to sue the city for over-pumping, a board member had to show the well-owners’ attorney his water bill from Tucson Water to prove that FP was not pumping from those wells located on our property. We don’t know if it is still reporting non-usage, but this area and the land to the west was farmed in the past and there would have been old irrigation wells which would have been capped and covered over. You can still see portions of irrigation ditches on land to the west.

The neighborhood has always been called Fountain Park due to the large fountain, but the legal name of the subdivision was recorded as Acacia Park and that is still the legal name.

In 1994 the Tanque Verde Wash became a raging river and caused damage to the park along the bank. The erosion there is still problematic.

In 2022 the residents voted to approve some much-needed upgrades to the By-Laws and CC&Rs. The Rules and Regulations will be updated in 2023. This was an ad hoc committee project.

The Association has remained active and sponsored a “picnic in the park” for many years. There has also been a Fourth of July Parade. Some young families worked to design and help construct a popular children’s playground in the park. The playground was renovated in 2012. There is also a Little Free Library in the park.

Fountain Park continues to be a desirable place to live: ten original owners are still living here, and about 1/3 of the residents have lived in their homes for twenty years or more.

## Resident comments

We asked long-time residents why they decided to buy a house in Fountain Park, what they liked and what they would change. Many of these responses would likely be echoed by residents who have moved in more recently. In addition, they were asked for suggestions for changes.

### **The floor plans:**

No stairs, large enough for mother-in-law quarters, enough bedroom and closets, the fireplaces. Right sized house for downsizing,

### **The neighborhood:**

The pool, the park, the mountain views, a safe neighborhood, nearby Wrightstown School, a small community feel, close enough to walk across the wash to the shopping area on Tanque Verde, holiday decorations.

### **Suggestions for changes:**

The park: more natural desert plants, find a solution for the missing fence area on the north side of the park, update park irrigation.

Bring recreation amenities back to the park: ramadas, games court.

Update the palette of house colors, allow front doors to be painted a different color.

Have potlucks, game days, coffees by the pool, house and yard tours.

Zero lot line concept needs to be better explained to realtors and new owners.

Do something about cars parked in the street.

Bring back neighborhood watch.

Better lighting at the entrances to the community.

Stay child friendly.

## Stories of wildlife encounters

- Cougar sitting on wall around house and finally, with much encouragement from resident, went into a neighbor's garage.
- Rattle snake in yard---while being removed another neighbor watched over situation, prepared with their shotgun.
- Cat coming in for the night from the garage carrying a garter snake.
- King snake in the house, shut it in hot water closet, mysteriously escaped
- One resident took in his garbage can and went back outside and found a rattlesnake had been underneath the garbage container trying to keep warm.
- A bobcat jumped into the atrium and an owl was in the chimney. It took some ingenuity to "rescue" them.
- There are lots of plants in the yards which attract doves, finches, hummingbirds, etc. A king snake hangs out in their yard, keeping the packrats under control.
- An AZ Rock squirrel lived in their back yard and was neat and tidy. However, the next bunch ruined parts of the yard.
- Sometimes javelina are observed running around the fountain very early in the morning. Four coyotes were running fast in single file down Fountain Park recently.
- Hawks like the nearby Eucalyptus trees. Skunks sometimes surface. One unusual skunk was white.

## **Good Deeds:**

Over the years many residents have stepped up to volunteer as board members, committee members and committee chairs and members. We thank them for their service. It has made a huge difference in our community.

Some noteworthy volunteer projects:

In the mid-2000s heavy rains and runoff from Wrightstown Road caused a very large, deep sinkhole and erosion that prevented truck access to the park NE gate. A small group of owners shored up the south Tanque Verde bank and scoured the entire area north of the Seneca homes- decades of discarded bricks, cement, and other debris were cleared from the property and wheelbarrowed to fill the sinkhole.

When the pool area landscape was refreshed, a cadre of owners with shovels, wheelbarrows, and rakes moved tons of gravel from the parking lot into the pool area.

## **Other community volunteer projects include:**

Sanding and staining picnic tables and fountain repair was a past community project.

Healthy soil project in the park

Planning for new recreation amenities in the park

Splash newsletter

Daily testing of the pool water during the summer

## **Committees:**

Architecture

Hospitality

Pool

Security

Compliance

Recreational amenities

Landscape

In honor of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we had a party at the park with about 90 neighbors in attendance. The Tucson Fire Department brought a ladder truck, and the police department sent a SWAT vehicle as well as a community service officer.

Many have contributed to this story of Fountain Park. We appreciate and thank all our volunteers over the years. Many people have volunteered over the years; so many that we can't list them all here. Thanks to all our neighbors who have stepped up. Community involvement was and continues to be important to Fountain Park



## Footnotes

\*Licavoli was a Detroit mob boss of the so-called "Purple Gang." Authorities said that this gang were rum runners to Canada during Prohibition. Their other "enterprises" included narcotics, gambling, prostitution, and they were not above extortion or murder.

Licavoli was held in contempt of Congress for his refusal to testify about his activities. He was charged with 38 counts, including tax evasion, acquiring stolen goods, the contempt charge, etc., but he was only convicted of four of those indictments over time. He served a total of 5-1/2 years in prison.

Licavoli decided to "widen his base" by moving to Tucson, where he was involved in land deals, (Rillito Park) and gambling. However, authorities said he continued to maintain control of the "Purple Gang" in Detroit that reportedly grossed over \$150 million a year!

Local news reporters were fascinated with the Detroit and Chicago mobsters who wintered in Tucson. In fact, much of this biographical information is derived from Peter Licavoli's obituary that was published in the NEW YORK TIMES on January 12, 1984. He died at the age of 81.

In 1953 ads were placed in the Tucson papers for rentals on the Licavoli property. These noted the same amenities that Fountain Park residents value today: "fresh air, sunshine, peace, and quiet." Another ad was looking for a "sober white couple" to work on the Ranch.

Things began to unravel in Tucson for Licavoli. In July 1968 a bomb caused extensive damage to a shed and destroyed four vehicles on the Grace Ranch property. Police speculated that gang rivalries caused this violent act. By this time Licavoli had purchased a home in nearby Ricardo Small (established 1960s), so he was not at Grace Ranch when this disaster occurred.

In 1977 tenants living in one of the casitas were arrested for possession and trafficking in heroin and other illegal drugs. In 1979 Peter Licavoli was convicted of attempting to sell a 500-year-old stolen painting. He served 13 months in the Pima County Jail for this offense.

## THEN AND NOW

From Wrightstown Place. Forty years of tree growth.



- From Waverly



The park- then and now—basketball court and grass by the picnic area and tennis court







Dark cabinets were one of the design options





This document was authored by Carol West, Judi Dalton, and many neighborhood historians.

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