

A one-man welcome wagon

Resident historian John Bowker is also a radio buff, newsletter publisher and emergency volunteer.

By JAY CRIDLIN

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SUN CITY CENTER -- To the average eye, John Bowker's monthly welcome session for new residents of Sun City Center seemed to go just fine.

Just as he does every third Thursday of the month, Bowker stood before a crowd of about 50, speaking in his gravelly, radio-ready baritone about everything from the security watch to plumbing tips to how residents can protect themselves from scams.

All seemed to go well. But afterward, Bowker realized there was one thing he forgot.

"I forgot to introduce myself," he said with a chuckle.

This, most Sun City Center residents would agree, is not a problem. Nearly everyone who lives here already knows Bowker, or at least his name.

Bowker is Sun City Center's one-man informational kiosk, the historian of its community association and chairman of its historical society. His "Welcome Neighbor" program allows him to tell the story of Sun City Center to dozens of new residents each month.

But it doesn't stop there. Bowker publishes an e-mail newsletter, eNEWS, which reaches thousands of locals each week. He's an emergency squad volunteer, the program chairman of the Men's Club and an active member of the Amateur Radio Club. He even proofreads the Sun City Center phone book.

"He's a man about town," says Walt Cawein, president of the Sun City Center Community Association. "Not many people don't know John."

Collating the pages of Sun City Center's history comes naturally for Bowker, 72. His own life history is intricately cataloged in an archive of stories and moments, which he narrates with aplomb.

Take his childhood in Middlebury, Vermont, when he would stay up late listening to the radio to hear the call letters of AM stations. The next day, he'd write to the stations for free mugs and souvenirs.

Radio became a lifelong fascination. At Middlebury College, where his father served as dean of faculty, he built a college station. When he graduated, he landed a coveted research position with RCA Laboratories in Princeton, N.J.

There, in the 1950s, he worked on such technical innovations as a television not unlike today's digital TV. Push a button, and the set would print out the daily news, or even breaking news direct from teletype.

That invention never took off, but his standing with RCA did. He soon became the company's go-to source for knowledge on its, and subsidiary NBC's, radio, television and satellite licenses.

He was never far from the airwaves, though. He hosted radio shows in New Jersey until the 1980s and once helped produce a radio show hosted by broadcast legend David Brinkley.

"Do I know you?" Brinkley asked him through the glass.

"No, Mr. Brinkley, you do not know me," Bowker replied.

"You look nervous."

"Sir, I am nervous."

"Please don't look nervous," Brinkley said. "You'll make me nervous."

Bowker left RCA when it was purchased by General Electric in 1986, but he and his wife, Linda, a computer systems analyst for RCA's space division, stayed in New Jersey until she retired a few years later.

By that time, the couple had a motor home and an idea. John had taken to collecting recordings of top-of-the-hour station identifications from AM radio stations across the country. The day Linda retired, the couple set off in the motor home with an atlas and a radio rigged with recording devices.

John would contact the Federal Communications Commission to see which AM stations had changed call letters that week, and he'd mark those cities on a map. The couple would then connect the dots and crisscross the country.

Linda didn't mind. She and John had known each other since John's first day of high school, and they remain, as John says, "best friends." An avid sewer, Linda simply worked her hobby into the travel itinerary.

"We were very compatible," she says. "He was very happy to sit in the parking lot in front of a fabric store and listen to the radio stations. That worked out fine."

In the course of putting nearly 100,000 miles on their RV, John collected 13,800 station ID's, a total that at least one international radio group has proclaimed the largest ever. He has 142 on stations with the signal 1240.

One ID in Detroit stands out. As a tribute, some friends at a Detroit station ran the following promo late one night: "Radio One, WWJ-Detroit: Keeping John Bowker and the world informed."

Bowker is still recognized as an authority in radio circles. The National Radio Club's audio cassette magazine, DX Audio Service, features a Bowker segment on station ID's in every issue.



The Bowkers came to Sun City Center in 1991. They got involved with the community's many clubs and volunteer organizations almost immediately.

"I learned very quickly how to make friends here," he says. "After all, everybody who comes here came here by choice. Nobody was born here. Nobody's company brought them here."

As he became acquainted with local history, he realized that each of his neighbors had a tale to tell.

"The whole 20th century is right here in Sun City Center," he says. "We've got everything from farmers to military, religion and industrial. I would love to go up and knock on every door and say, 'Hi, you don't know me, but would you tell me the story of your life?'"

Bowker wrote a booklet about Sun City Center's history for the community's 40th anniversary last year, and he and the Historical Society of Greater Sun City Center are awaiting the publication of a 260-page book about Sun City Center.

Now in its fifth year, his eNEWS has attained a wide audience, too.

"I know of many people who not only get eNEWS on their computers, but they make copies for friends and neighbors who don't get John's eNEWS," says longtime friend Mary Lou Munro. "That's how important it is for them."

John and Linda aren't slowing down. They'll celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in August; three days later they'll be back in Vermont for John's high school reunion. Then it's off to Dallas for a National Radio Club convention.

It'll be a busy time. "I think we're going to celebrate the anniversary in June," he says.

Perhaps. But if anyone in Sun City Center can handle a packed calendar, it's Bowker.

"He's very generous in giving his time and energy, and he is full," Munro emphasizes, "of energy."

NAME: John Bowker

- AGE: 72
- HOME: Sun City Center
- SPOUSE: Linda
- CHILDREN: Two sons and one daughter.
- POST-RETIREMENT OCCUPATION: Sun City Center Community Historian, chairman of the Historical Society of Greater Sun City Center.
- PRE-RETIREMENT OCCUPATION: Licensed all radio, television and satellite transmitters for RCA- and NBC-owned stations.
- THE TWO TOWERS: Bowker has built two radio stations: WRMC at Middlebury College in Vermont, and WWPH, a high school station in Princeton Junction, N.J.
- TOUGHEST TASK: Signing the license to San Francisco station KNBR over to Westwood One radio in 1986, thereby completing General Electric's buyout of RCA. He resigned after the buyout.
- TRAVELING MAN: John and Linda logged 96,000 miles on their motor home between 1988 and 1998.
- COLLECTION: Bowker has recorded 13,800 AM radio station identifications -- by at least one account, the largest in the world.
- TO REQUEST BOWKER'S NEWSLETTER: E-mail him at jbowker@tampabay.rr.com.