

Ray Watt

Ray Watt, 90, was a real estate pioneer, philanthropist and public servant who played an instrumental role in redefining the real estate industry in the Western United States.

He got his start in the business during a housing shortage after World War II. To meet the demand in Southern California he worked from dawn until dark and named his company Day and Night Construction to suggest the hours he was keeping.

His first project was a mobile home park that he built with his brother, Don, in 1946. From this quiet beginning he created Watt Companies, one of the most prominent real estate development businesses in the United States.

Throughout a career that spanned more than 60 years, Watt developed projects that have come to define the California lifestyle. He pioneered the development of condominium dwellings in the state, helped to popularize strip style shopping malls, introduced time-share vacation homes and created residential communities that combine housing with Sunbelt amenities from golf courses and tennis courts to swimming pools and lakes. A visionary in his industry, Watt was the first to develop condo and time share projects on the West Coast.

Watt passed away of natural causes on Tuesday, July 7, 2009, at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, California.

Among his many achievements and honors, Watt was appointed Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during the Nixon Administration in 1969 and inducted into the California Homebuilding Foundation Hall of Fame in 1987 for his commitment to the community and his leadership in the housing industry.

Often working in partnership with land developers and others, Watt built more than 100,000 single family homes, office buildings, mobile home parks, motels, industrial and retail centers. His best known projects include Watt Plaza, twin office towers in Century City, and Fairbanks Ranch, a luxury housing development in Rancho Santa Fe with an equestrian center that was the site of the 1984 Olympic Equestrian event.

“Ray never saw a piece of ground he didn’t fall in love with,” said Al Borstein, of Borstein Enterprises, one of dozens of men and women who worked in partnership with Watt over the years. “He was a visionary,” said Borstein who recalled how Watt would look at a barren stretch of land and see condominiums, a golf course and clubhouse.

He held the same high standards of design and construction for the thousands of moderate income properties he developed in Torrance, Hawthorne, Covina and other Southern California cities.

“At the end of the day it’s all about partnership,” Watt said at a gathering to honor him on his 90th birthday in 2009. “Partners with communities. Partnerships with other businesses. Partnerships with customers.”

Watt had his first taste of the real estate business as a teenager working summer jobs, pouring concrete and doing carpentry for contractors with his brother Don. Over time he got hands-on experience in every aspect of the business and advised others to do the same. “I’m talking about buying land, developing it, processing it, building the project, financing, merchandizing the houses and selling them,” Watt explained in a 2006 interview with California Builder magazine.

Long time real estate leader Kenneth Leventhal of the Kenneth Leventhal Company first met Watt in the early 1950s. He referred to him as “a genuine risk taker and innovator” who led the way on lot sales programs and the merger of development companies into publicly traded industrial companies. For his wide ranging vision and integrity, “Ray has received every honor that can be bestowed on an individual in his profession,” Leventhal said.

Dozens of people who worked with Watt through the years consider him a mentor. He made colleagues and co-workers feel like family members.

“Ray is one of a kind,” said Phil Nicholson of Cox, Castle and Nicholson LLP who went to work for Watt when he was fresh out of law school in the 1960s. “He is a great entrepreneur, a highly effective leader, building not only buildings but people. He gave many of us the discipline to succeed.”

Through the 1950s Watt concentrated on building homes and industrial parks in small cities near Los Angeles.

In 1960 he ventured into condominium housing with New Horizons, a 240 unit complex designed around a nine-hole golf course in Goleta, near Santa Barbara. He did it because the financing options seemed to him like a better deal for home buyers.

At the time, “we had co-ops,” Watt later recalled of the local housing market. (Cal Builder Mag 2006) “The problem was that you had one loan for the entire building. Every individual that bought a unit was liable for the taxes and the mortgage payment on the entire building.”

With condominiums, he explained, individual owners are only responsible for their own mortgage and taxes. Watt helped to push through legislation that permitted condominiums in California.

His high standards, innovative approach and commitment to the industry earned him the “Builder of the Year” award from the Building Industry Association of California in 1968.

The following year Watt was appointed Assistant Secretary of HUD, the Federal Government Department of Housing and Urban Development, under Secretary George Romney. He traveled the country, encouraging industry leaders to build quality moderate and low income housing in partnership with the government. He also served as president of the National Corporation of Housing Partnerships which was affiliated with HUD.

Watt later said he learned valuable lessons working for the Federal government that served him well on the local level. “You can’t just go up to Sacramento once or twice a year and expect results,” Watt said. “You have to pursue it.” (2006 California Builder mag.)

He returned to the private sector in the early 1970s and managed a publicity coup in 1973 that captured national attention. Watt was selling homes in the newly completed San Diego Country Estates, a residential community near Ramona, California that featured a state-of-the-art tennis compound.

Tennis champion Bobby Riggs, who was retired at the time, came to see the development. Soon afterward Watt arranged to sponsor the “Battle of the Sexes,” a match between Riggs and Australian women’s champion Margaret Jean Court that turned out to be a prototype game. It was held at San Diego Country Estates and was televised. Excitement and publicity surrounding the event won Watt a reputation as a marketing genius.

Riggs, then age 55, beat 30-year-old Court in a stunning upset and then challenged tennis superstar Billy Jean King to a game. She accepted. They met at the Houston Astrodome for the now legendary "Battle of the Sexes." King won that contest.

Through the 1980s and '90s Watt developed or acquired some 50 shopping malls in California, Las Vegas and Arizona, including Crenshaw Plaza in Los Angeles which his company redeveloped in the early 1990s. Watt Companies continues to manage most of them, along with hundreds of thousands of square feet of office and retail space in the Southwest.

During these prolific years, Watt completed several projects in Century City, including the luxury condominiums, Century Woods and Century Hill, as well as Watt Plaza. He was named Citizen of the Year by the local Chamber of Commerce in 2008, for excellence in community relations.

Raymond Aneas Watt was born Feb. 26, 1919 in Keota, Colorado, one of seven children. His father moved the family to Los Angeles and began working in the construction business when Ray was five.

Watt graduated from University High School in Los Angeles and attended UCLA where he majored in business.

As a successful businessman, Watt became a trustee of USC in 1967 and contributed substantially to the school through the years. Watt Hall of Architecture and Fine Arts is named in his honor.

Watt was also a sponsor of the Boy Scouts of America and in 2008 he contributed to the building of a new headquarters for the organization near downtown Los Angeles.

Watt married his first wife, Nadine, in 1940. They had three children, Sally, Janet and Scott who joined his father in the business in 1958. J. Scott Watt is now Chairman of the Board of Watt Companies.

Other family members to work with Watt include his granddaughter, Nadine Watt, who is Vice President at the company. A nephew, Bill Watt, worked with Watt for many years before he founded his own Baywood Development Company in Newport Beach.

Watt was married three times. His first marriage ended in divorce. His second wife, Joyce, died in 2002.

He is survived by his third wife, Gwendolyn, his children, Sally Oxley, Janet Van Huisen, and J. Scott Watt. He is also survived by seven grandchildren and a number of great grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family encourages that donations be made to the University of Southern California - Elaine and Kenneth Leventhal School of Accounting, or the Eisenhower Medical Center Foundation – Renker Pavilion.