

## HISTORY OF THE TELLICO VILLAGE BRAND

### The Tellico Village Brand: The Beginning

The first communication channel for the Tellico Village (TV) brand was the mailbox.

Direct mail had always played a big part in the promotion of Cooper Communities Inc. (CCI) properties since its founding by John Cooper Sr. in the mid-1950s. The Arkansas company was one of the pioneers in developing second home communities. Reaching out to people in their mid-40's to mid-50's using direct mail had worked well in the creation of two large CCI communities in Arkansas - Belle Vista and Hot Springs Village.

When the business deal was sealed between CCI, Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Tellico Reservoir Development Agency (TRDA) in December, 1985 to create a master planned community on the shores of Tellico Lake, the company intended to use the postal system to introduce its newest brand.

A division of CCI, Cooper Consultants, was charged with conceptualizing the new community. The consultants quickly realized the company's latest acquisition was situated in the heart of the Cherokee nation. Sequoyah, the legendary Cherokee chief, had been born a few miles from the new property. Sequoyah had established the first reading and writing system for Native Americans and was a revered leader. Purportedly, laying under the new Tellico Lake were two ancient Cherokee towns. The consultants decided an appropriate name for the new community would be Tellico Village and all the



*Tellico Reservoir*  
DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

neighborhoods and community roadways would have Native American names. The Tellico Village brand was born.



By the spring of 1986, the CCI direct mail program was underway. Recipients were encouraged to visit and consider Tellico Village as an ideal location for a second home. The first housing permit was issued in August, 1986 for a property just off the intersection of Toqua Road and Chuniloti Way.

In 1987, the Village's first residents had taken possession of their homes. CCI had constructed the town home communities of Chota View, Chota Shores and Chota Hills. In the spring of that year, a large official grand opening celebration was staged which brought busloads of people from Knoxville. Thousands of visitors thronged the property anxious to win a jet ski and stared wide-eyed at the large hot air balloon rented by CCI for the occasion. Tellico Village's local brand awareness skyrocketed. *(Ask Dan Cooper if he has any photos of the opening.)*

Sales of lots moved briskly in the late 1980's. The actual home construction process evolved at a slower pace. Loudon County's work force was not prepared for the large home-building demand. Cooper enlisted Knoxville home builders and their crews to meet the burgeoning building needs in the community.

CCI changed its marketing approach in 1990. The direct mail campaigns ended and the company became a large presence at big boat and golf shows, primarily in the Midwest and Northeast. A successful Tellico Village property-owner referral program was instituted. This activity, plus the leads generated by the trade shows, propelled the next growth spurt in the community. The communications program soon expanded to include print and billboards on the nearby interstates.

The billboard program grew in sophistication. When CCI learned about an impending large layoff at an auto plant in Michigan or Ohio, the company purchased strategically placed billboards promoting the Tellico Village brand. Actions like these and Knoxville's location as being the halfway point for

Michiganders headed to and from Florida fostered the development of the Village. In its early years, the community seemed like a Michigan enclave.

The inflow of former Michigan and Ohio residents was also changing the original concept of the Village as a second home community. They were making Tellico Village their permanent home. Thanks to many of the new residents having generous auto industry retirement packages, Cooper's concept of a cottage type community soon faded. The new arrivals were building much larger homes than summer cottages.



The CCI messaging started to emphasize this point to retirement age prospects: Tellico Village is the place where you want to spend the next stage of your life.

Through the late 1990's into the early 2000's, the prime elements of the brand communications program were the trade shows, the resident referral program, some print and the billboards. In 2002, CCI sold the last of its originally plotted 6,816 buildable lots. The CCI land operation shut down and a few years later Cooper Homes and Real Estate Company closed.

## The NRPI Years

In the mid-2000's, Tellico Village experienced an explosion of brand awareness from a totally unexpected source. A California land speculation company, National Recreation Properties Inc. (NRPI), descended on the Village buying undeveloped lots from property owners, offering sometimes twice to three times what the original purchasers had paid for the property. At that time, more than 1,200 Village property owners lived within 30-40 miles of the community. Tellico Village was one of 23 large master planned communities targeted by NRPI throughout the country.

Central to the NRPI marketing effort was a television campaign featuring former *CHIPS* co-star Erik Estrada. The media buy was a combination of infomercials and sixty second spots concentrated in large urban areas across the country. For a time in the mid-2000's, the Village enjoyed national brand awareness, because of the Estrada campaign.

The campaign message always concluded with viewers being solicited to call an 800 number where a trip to East Tennessee could be arranged. Once in Knoxville, the prospective buyers were sequestered in a Turkey Creek hotel, then bused to Tellico Village and shown only NRPI properties. The lots were now priced three to four times above the price paid by NRPI to the original owners. Hundreds of lots changed hands under this method in the mid-2000s.

The housing market collapsed in 2007. Soon, NRPI was bankrupt, its assets sold to another California company which quickly followed NRPI into insolvency. The now resident-run Village was saddled with hundreds of non-revenue generating lots. The community was dependent on a combination of monthly assessments and user fees to fund its operating budget of \$16,000,000. The Tellico Village Board of Directors consisting of seven residents elected from the general population was in a quandary.

The Village housing market was in dire straits by 2011. The sale of existing homes had declined steadily over the intervening years and lot sales had also dwindled. The market bottomed that year, only 88 existing homes were sold.

Critically, Village property values had fallen dramatically and the time on market for a resident had stretched to almost nine months. If a Village seller found a buyer, they soon learned they might be one of three TV homes the prospective purchaser was considering. The buyer was often playing a bidding game among the three Village sellers.

The situation was untenable, especially for an aging community where homes were a significant portion of their owner's overall net worth. Often, older residents needed to sell their properties, because they needed the proceeds from these transactions to underwrite the next stage of their lives, possibly in an independent living or nursing facility.

Compounding the situation was the lack of a broad scale, coordinated Village brand communications effort. Some of the local Realtors promoted Tellico Village in conjunction with Village real estate.

### **The Re-launch: Getting Organized**

The Tellico Village Property Owners Board of Directors resolved to address the situation in 2012. The Board was handicapped, because none of its members had any marketing or brand management experience. It was decided to convene two planning meetings. Invitees were Board members, representatives from the Board's advisory committees, some local Realtors and other involved Villagers. The meetings usually totaled thirty participants.

At one of these sessions in June, 2012, Villagers Joe Bogardus and Fred Toettcher were introduced to each other. Bogardus had worked in brand management domestically as well as overseas for two large legacy brands and at a major advertising agency. Toettcher had brand management experience as well, but the bulk of his career had been spent as a principle in one the nation's largest independent advertising agencies.

After the meeting, Bogardus invited Toettcher to his home. By the end of the visit a partnership had been formed. It was agreed Bogardus would write a marketing plan to re-launch the Tellico Village brand while Toettcher would craft a new brand strategy for the community. For the final two weeks of June, 2012, the two exchanged ideas, critiqued and changed aspects of each other's work.

Finally, in early July, with the help of the community's public relations manager, John Cherry, they presented their work to the Village's General Manager Winston Blazer, the Board chairman, Bob Coates and vice-chair, Joe Marlette. In that meeting, Bogardus and Toettcher told the Board representatives, this is the type of all-inclusive program that was required to spur flagging home and lot sales. They had no idea how much it would cost.

The two marketers told the Board leadership the most expedient way to determine the cost of the program was to conduct an advertising agency review., Because of their experience, Bogardus and Toettcher offered to identify possible local agency candidates, prepare a request for proposal, interview the responding agencies and recommend a set of three finalist to present to the full Board. The proposed plan and the process outlined by Bogardus and Toettcher were swiftly approved by the Board.

Working quickly, Bogardus, Toettcher and Cherry brought three candidate agencies to the full Board by the last week of July. After a day and half of presentations, Knoxville's Tombras Group was selected to work with the Village team of Bogardus, Cherry and Toettcher. The trio became known as the Marketing Team and were charged with relaunching the Tellico Village brand by January, 2013.



The communications program devised by Bogardus and Toettcher was comprehensive in scope including a new website which would become the face of the brand, print advertising, new brochures, a trade show booth, billboards, social media, internet advertising and a public relations component. To have all of this

ready in a five-month span was a daunting task, because none of these materials existed.

The threesome met with the Tombras account, creative and production teams in early August. The marketing plan and brand strategy were reviewed in detail. The TV Marketing team returned to the agency three weeks later for a major creative presentation. Tombras had taken the Tellico Village brand strategy which centered on four primary pillars of ideal location, outstanding amenities, terrific lifestyle and a value proposition second to none to craft a new communications slogan: “Tell’em it’s better at Tellico Village.” *(Insert graphic of Tell’em it’s better at Tellico Village.)*

Unbeknownst to the TV Marketing Team, the Tombras creatives had spent a mid-August day at the Tanasi clubhouse casually interviewing Villagers. The team had been overwhelmed with the positive responses. Each resident comment seemed to start with “you should tell’em ....and then you should tell’em” and on it went for almost a full day. Villagers wanted the Tombras creatives to tell people how wonderful it was to live in Tellico Village.

The four-hour agency presentation laid out the creative for all the program elements. The Village Marketing Team was amazed at the quality of the ideas and the work. Cherry arranged for the TV Marketing Team and Tombras to present to the Board. The Board readily approved the work, authorized the production budget proposed by the agency for the remainder of 2012 and established a brand investment for 2013 of more than \$300,000.

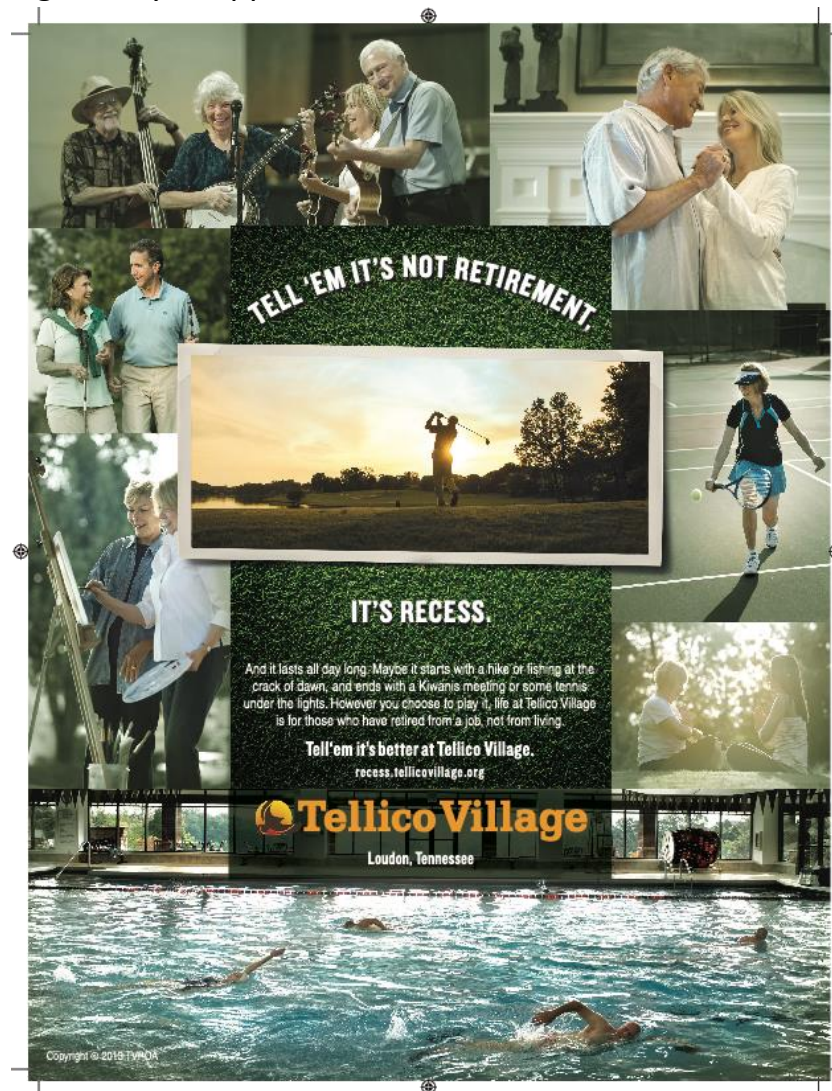
Concurrent with this activity, Bogardus and Cherry organized a major two- and half-day photo shoot within the Village. Dozens of Villagers volunteered to be models and spokespeople for the program, saving the team and community tens of thousands of dollars in fees.

In November, Bogardus and Toettcher met with General Manager Blazer. In the marketing plan, the two Villagers had stressed the need to hire a marketing communications manager to oversee the day-to-day management of the program. Beth Kuberka, a former Director of Marketing for Rarity Communities,



one of Tennessee's largest master planned community developers, had started working part-time at for Tellico Village in September. Bogardus and Toettcher had been impressed with her and pressed Blazer to hire her for the envisioned role. Kuberka was shifted to full-time as the marketing manager in December.

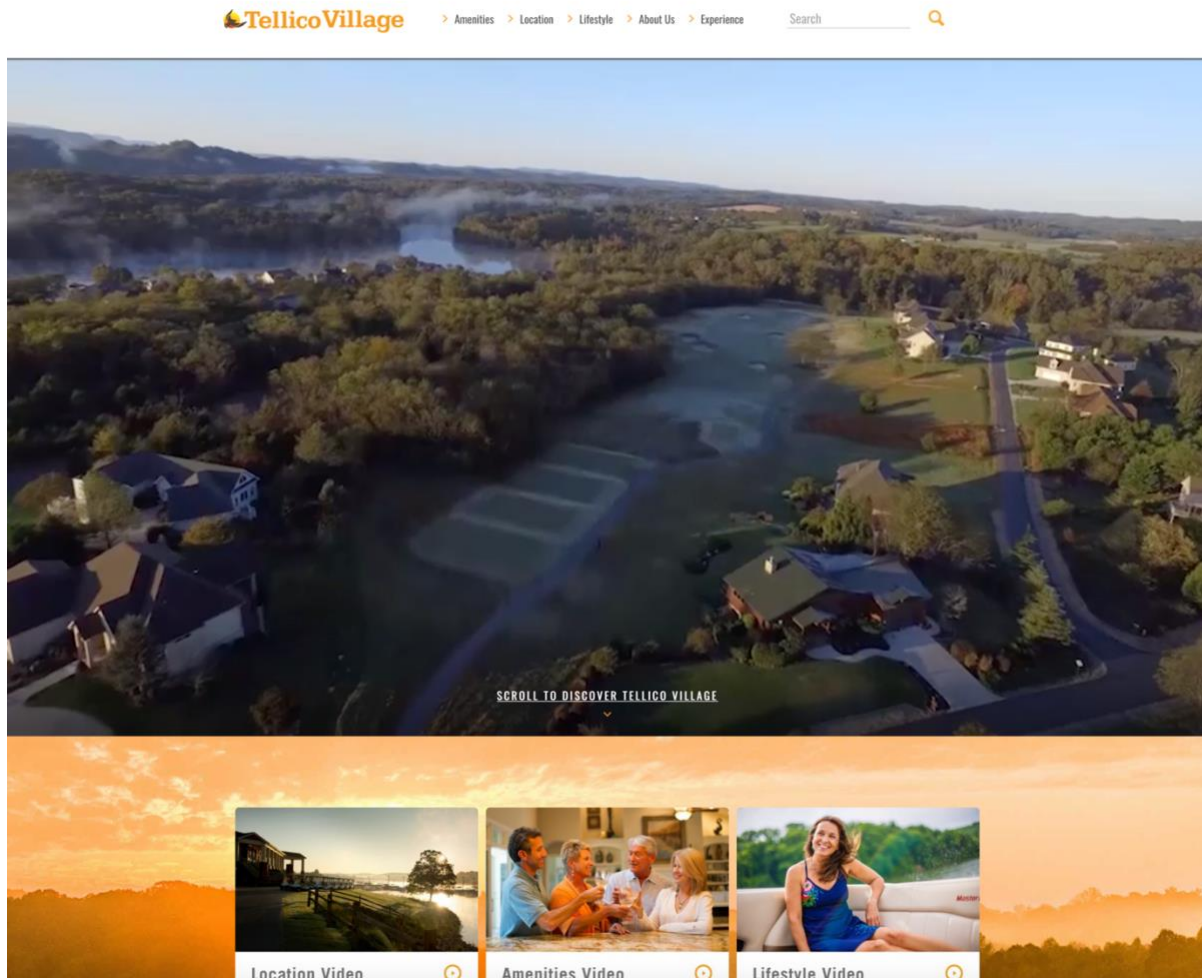
The majority of the campaign was completed by early December, 2012. The TV Marketing Team and Tombras held a community meeting at the Tellico Village Community Church the first week of that month. Hundreds of Villagers braved a stormy night to attend the event which ended with residents applauding vigorously in appreciation for the work and efforts of the teams involved.





## The Relaunch of the Tellico Village Brand

The Tellico Village brand was officially relaunched during the first week of January, 2013 when the community website – [tellicovillage.org](http://tellicovillage.org) - went live.



The economy was performing well, but the national housing market had yet to fully recover in 2013. The relaunch program started slowly. By year end, existing home sales had improved to 191 units sold from the low of 88 existing home sales in 2011.

Community property value finished 2013 at the lowest level in nine years and stood at \$121.24 per square foot. Out of all the Tellico Village Multiple Listing System (MLS) sales, only 13 per cent could be traced to leads generated by the new marketing communications program.

The TV Marketing Team, now consisting of Bogardus, Cherry, Kuberka and Toettcher, convinced the Board to maintain its investment in the brand. The Board allocated another \$300,000 for 2014. The TV Marketing Team had begun in 2013 and continued to augment the budget provided by the POA by selling advertising on [tellicovillage.org](http://tellicovillage.org) to local Realtors and home builders. These additional revenue streams soon pushed the total spend into the \$400,000 range.

In the spring of 2015, United Community Bank which had one of three bank branches in the Village acquired the MoneyTree Corporation and its wholly owned subsidiary, First National Bank of Lenoir City. As part of the merger, the First National Bank branch in the Village was closed and the building put up for sale.

The TVPOA Board moved rapidly to acquire the property located in the center of Village Square. It's frontal location in the square was perceived by the Board to be an excellent position for a Welcome Center. The purchase proved controversial with some Villagers. The expense was not part of the community's five-year budget and this vocal minority was not pleased with the lack of transparency surrounding the transaction.

The new Tellico Village Welcome Center opened in late September, 2015. It provided a focal point for visitors where they could obtain information about the Village, Realtors could meet clients and tours of the community could emanate.

The Welcome Center left an excellent, progressive impression with first-time visitors to the Village.



The relaunched program really started to take hold in 2015 with visits to the websites reaching 100,000 plus, completed tours of the community were up and leads escalated from all the program's activities. Importantly, MLS existing home sales tied 2005 with existing home sales of 226 units and sales per square foot finished the year at \$135.43. Out of all the MLS homes and lots sold in 2015, 35 per cent were credited to leads from the marketing program.

The following year, 2016, existing homes sales set a record with 280-unit sales. Because of the walk-in traffic at the new Welcome Center completed Day Tours increased by 29 per cent.

All together almost 900 people visited the community looking for an active adult lifestyle. Many of these prospective residents were looking for homes in the 1800 to 2200 square foot range. The Village's inventory in this size existing home was under pressure. Demand was outpacing supply.

The hundreds of NRPI lots which had gone into foreclosure were not generating any assessment revenue for the Village. There were also hundreds of other delinquent lots not producing income for the POA. The total reached 900 lots or 13 per cent of the total buildable land.

Late in 2015 and early 2016, Kuberka conceived a plan and persuaded the Board to let her create a test community within the Village. The Cheeyo Place Park project was born. Situated in the southern end of the community, Cheeyo Place had a concentration of POA owned non-revenue generating lots. Through a bidding process, Mashburn Homes, a company which had built in TV for many years, was selected to develop a selection of 1500 to 1800 square foot homes. A central community park would be developed as part of the project. Less than two years later, 12 of the 13 POA lots had homes on them in Cheeyo Place Park.

In January, 2017, Cherry left Tellico Village for another opportunity. Kuberka assumed responsibility for the public relations and community affairs activities and was promoted to marketing communications director.

Bogardus and Toettcher continue to stay involved. Toettcher formulated a number of tracking metrics to ensure the program was performing. Each month he produced a ten-page report comparing month-over-month and year-over-year performance. This proved invaluable in late 2016 and early 2017, as the TV Marketing Team and Tombras, using Toettcher's report, agreed to start shifting funding away from magazine advertising to greater investments in digital marketing.

### **Re-launch Results**

More than 1,100 people visited the community in 2017 and again in 2018. Existing homes sales exceed 300 units in 2017. As 2018 drew to end, property values were at an all time high: \$151.90 per square foot. Leads from the market program accounted for 57 per cent of all the MLS community's home and lot sales.

In six years, since the inception of the relaunch, more than 3,900 people had either purchased existing homes or built homes on vacant lots. The community's population had passed 8,000 residents.

After the success of Cheeyo Place Park, Kuberka introduced three additional

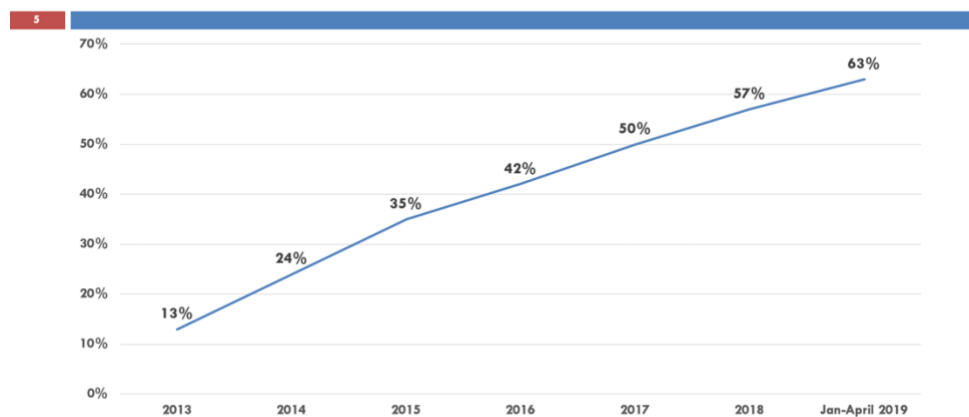
communities for development in 2017: Mialaquo Coves again with Mashburn Homes; Chatuga Point with Bishop Construction and Tanasi Hills with Cook Brothers. At the conclusion of 2018, the portfolio of non-revenue generating lots owned by the POA had been reduced by 143 lots.

Visitations to the Welcome Center surpassed 8,600 prospective residents in 2018. After the program's digital program, the Welcome Center generated the second most leads for the year.

Over the two-year interval of 2017 and 2018, building permits jumped. The Village's growth rate was 3.7 per cent and 3.8 per cent. Roughly 300 people moved into new housing in the community each year expanding the population



### Program's Importance to MLS Sales



base. Existing home sales were exceptionally strong with 308 units in 2017 and 289 units in 2018 being sold. The turnover in the existing home population was also robust during this period.

The new arrivals re-energized the community. Many of the countless clubs in the Village experienced a renaissance with an influx of new members bringing fresh ideas. All the Village organizations, churches, the businesses and non-profits throughout the county benefited from the newcomers.

Notably, the revitalized Tellico Village benefited the community's oldest residents. If an unfortunate circumstance befell them, and they needed to sell their Village home, they now could rest easy. There was a viable market which would pay a fair price for their residence and they could expect to sell their home in a reasonable amount of time, often, less than three months.

Everyone in Tellico Village gained from a more vital and vibrant community: the newest to the oldest residents and all the organizations social or community service oriented within the Village and nearby.

It was just another reason why you needed to: "Tell'em it's better at Tellico Village."