



SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

Two courses on the outskirts of Orlando, both owned and operated by Illinois natives, have grown and prospered into popular golf destinations

BY LEN ZIEHM

COURTESY ROYAL ST. CLOUD

You live in northern Illinois and you want to play golf all year long? One way to do that is to move to Florida, and some who did even went a step further; they bought their own courses in the Sunshine State and have taken them to new, higher levels.

Two Orlando-area facilities — Mission Inn Resort & Club, in Howey-in-the-Hills, and Royal St. Cloud Golf Links, in St. Cloud — are thriving under the guidance of transplanted Chicago-area residents.

The tale of Mission Inn, a resort with 36 holes located 35 miles northwest of Orlando, goes back to 1964, when Nick Beucher, a Wilmette resident who worked as a salesman for Morton Salt Company, bought the Hotel Floridian and its dilapidated golf course. He gradually brought



family members from Chicago to help in the development of the place.

A son, Bob, came to Florida first and eventually became the resort president.

Bob is now retired, but retains the president's title, while his brother, Bud, directs the day-to-day operation. Nick Beucher died in 2005 at the age of 88, but the family spirit remains at Mission Inn. In addition to the two sons, three of their four brothers-in-law, one of two sisters-in-law and all 16 grandchildren have been involved in the resort's operation.

Royal St. Cloud's story is much different. It involves two former Chicago-area residents — successful Hinsdale businessman Tom Butler and Bill Filson, a former teaching professional at Oak Brook Golf Club. Butler was one of Filson's pupils there. Together, they opted to buy Royal St. Cloud in 2003 with Filson becoming the general manager and face of the facility.

Filson had a background in golf. He grew up in La Grange and his father was superintendent of Illinois Masonic Children's Home. Tom Byrd, the late head professional at the since-closed Timber Trails golf course, taught the basics of the game to Filson, who eventually joined Trey Van Dyke's staff at Oak Brook after giving up hopes of becoming a tournament player. Filson worked at Oak Brook 11 years before leaving for Florida.

While Filson was guiding Royal St. Cloud's emergence as one of Orlando's busiest courses, the highly respected Mission Inn was blossoming as a full-service resort spread over 1,100 acres. The resort has 176 guest

rooms and suites, four restaurants, two lounges, a poolside cabana, a 54-slip marina, fitness center and spa. The two courses, though, make it a special place for golfers.

In St. Cloud, Fla., about 25 miles southeast of downtown Orlando, the story of the Royal St. Cloud started ominously.

The grand opening of the first 18 holes came two days before the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. That course was known as the St. Cloud Golf Club

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and the designer was Chip Powell, who was a product of Danville Community College and Illinois State University before starting his architectural business in Florida in the early 1980s.

Powell created the course for St. Cloud's original owners, who sold it two years later. Then the Illinois influence became much stronger.

A PGA professional for 24 years, Filson's role at



Royal St. Cloud is much broader than that of the usual GM.

His first order of business when he arrived was rebuilding the original 18, and Filson did that while working with Powell. Next came the addition of a new clubhouse, which opened in November 2008. Blessed with plenty of open space for expansion, Butler and Filson didn't see the need for 18 more holes; instead, they opted for a third nine. Filson, again working with Powell, designed it and they had it up and running in 2009.

Each of the nines is a par 36 and only 43 yards separates the shortest nine (White) from the longest (Blue). The fairways are generous throughout, but there are special touches. Each hole has a name, some examples being Wake Up, Mouse Trap, Nesse's Back, Brent's Bridge, Hookenfacher's Nose, Gauntlet of Palms and Oliver's Field. Their stories are



COURTESY MISSION INN RESORT

The El Campeon course at Mission Inn

told on unique signs, which provide reading material throughout the course.

INFO: royalstcloudgolfinks.com

Mission Inn's El Campeon was built in 1917 and is the fifth-oldest course in Florida. A Chicago architect, George O'Neil, built the original course, then known as Howey Golf Club. It was also called Chain O'Lakes, Bougainvillea and Floridian before the present name — it means *the champion* in Spanish — was adopted.

A Scottish architect, Charles Clarke, updated El Campeon after 10 years and is the architect of record, though more updates followed over the years. Despite its age, it's still very much relevant for any level of golfer.

The other course at Mission Inn, Las Colinas, is in its 23rd season and, like El Campeon, consistently has been listed among Florida's top 25 in various polls. That's saying something since Florida is rich in golf courses with well over 1,000 in operation.

Las Colinas was designed by Gary Koch, a veteran PGA Tour player, in 1992 and renovated by the respected Ron Garl in 2007.

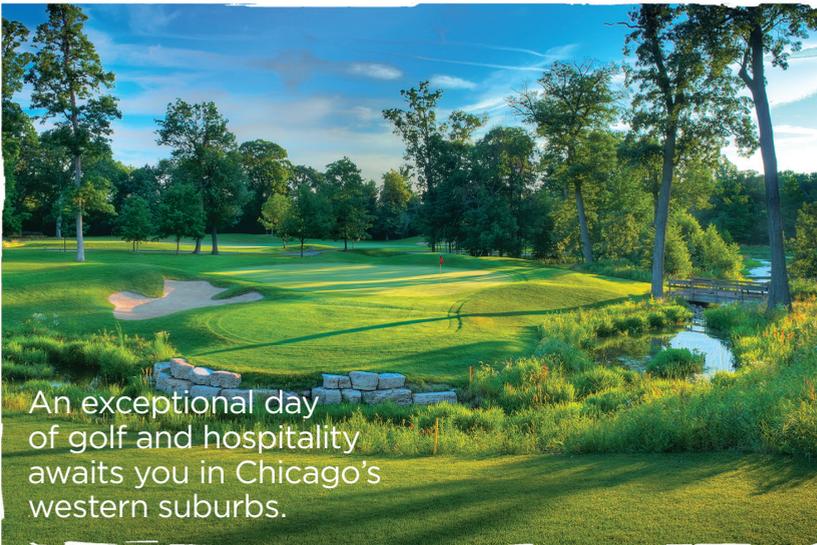
El Campeon doesn't look like it belongs in Florida. With 85 feet of elevation changes, it offers a most memorable golfing adventure thanks in large part to major design tweaking over the years supervised by Bob Beucher. Now El Campeon even has an island green, at the par-4 16th

Las Colinas, Spanish for *the hills*, is a more typical Florida resort layout. Las Colinas is player-friendly but still interesting throughout. The courses are similar in that both are par-72 layouts with one par 5 on front nine and three on the back.

INFO: missioninnresort.com

Len Ziehm, a columnist for the Daily Herald of Arlington Heights since 2010, has covered golf for several publications since 1968.

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