

THE FRENCH LICK SPRINGS HOTEL AND THE WEST BADEN SPRINGS HOTEL are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and recognized as Historic Hotels of America by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



The Donald Ross Course features flat bottom bunkers with gnarly faces protecting square or rectangular shaped greens.

The Donald Ross Course at French Lick Resort prepares for its centennial celebration.



FRENCH LICK, INDIANA: With political mudslinging between Democrats and Republicans in full swing, it's easy to lose sight about what a terrific country we live in. The Midwest earned a reputation as the backbone of America. Citizens are hard-working, family oriented, and appreciate the freedoms afforded us.

When Dave Harner, director of golf operations, arrived at French Lick Resort in 1976, it didn't take him long to experience firsthand a Midwesterner's love of country. "It was America's Bicentennial commemorating the adoption of the Declaration of Independence," explained Harner. "The town was adorned in red, white, and blue. Patriotism was alive and well."

MARKING ANOTHER MILESTONE

Next year, French Lick, an afternoon's drive south from Chicago, celebrates another anniversary. "Our Donald Ross Course at French Lick Resort turns 100 years old," said Harner.

"Ross was a gutsy character. Born in Scotland, he emigrated to America at

French Lick Springs Hotel is an American Classic. Amenities include a full-service casino with 1,100 slot machines and 40 table games; a full-service spa; a 109,000 square-foot conference and event center; indoor tennis, pool, and basketball courts; a shopping gallery; a bowling alley; the Kidsfest Lodge; horse stables; and walking access to the Valley Links Golf Course.

27 years of age with only \$2 in his pocket! He is most known for his Pinehurst No. 2 design in North Carolina.

"The course at French Lick opened 10 years later. According to old newspaper clippings, it was considered a radical design with a modern irrigation system and complex green contours," detailed Harner. "It was well received by the world's best players. The course hosted the 1924 PGA Championship, won by Walter Hagen."

AN INTERESTING SOLUTION

French Lick Resort is comprised of two hotels: West Baden Springs and French Lick Springs. Combined, they offer 686 guest rooms and suites; the largest resort meeting space in the Midwest; a 51,000 square-foot casino; 63 holes of golf, and two full-service spas.

At the turn of the 20th century, the hotels were considered America's playground. It was not uncommon to see Howard Hughes or Lana Turner walking the gardens.

"The reputation of the resorts faded over time," lamented Harner. "We needed an owner who had the financial muscle and resolve to bring us back on the national stage. Bill Cook, founder and owner of Cook Medical, did just that. His commitment to historic preservation of architecturally significant buildings in Indiana was a natural fit. The majestic dome lobby at West Baden is often referred to as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World.' The massive, \$581 million restoration project shows."

With the resort shuttered for construction, a major renovation of the Donald Ross Course was completed.

"We brought on Michael Fay, executive director of the Donald Ross Society, as a consultant to assist Lee Schmitt in the recreation of the original design," said Harner. "Over a century, 35 bunkers disappeared and the greens dramatically shrunk in size. We replaced the bunkers and through a pain-staking process, using soil probes to measure topsoil mixtures, greens were returned to their original shapes.

"We faced a perplexing challenge during grow-in. Poa annua grass intruded the bent grass greens. If we replaced the greens with 100 percent bent, they wouldn't blend well," vexed Harner. "Our solution was novel. We removed sod from our Valley Links Course greens and used every blade of grass in the Ross remodel. The result is a perfect, consistent mix of grasses."

A PLACE IN GOLF HISTORY

French Lick Resort hosted the 76th annual Senior PGA Championship in 2015, the PGA Professional National Championship in 2010, and the LPGA Legends Tour for the past four years.

"Plan to carve out at least two days for golf during your visit. The Dye and Ross designs are courses of opposites, pitting 'old school' design versus modern technology," continued Harner.

"Ten dump trucks, running 12 hours per day for 18 months, were needed to grade the land for the Pete Dye course. The result is a sculpted course with narrow fairway corridors and 40-mile panoramic views of the countryside.

"Little dirt was moved during construction of the Ross Course. Its greens have more pronounced breaks while the Dye Course greens have developed a reputation for being lightning fast.

"When I started at French Lick almost 40 years ago, I had a lean staff," grinned Harner. "Our golf operations staff has expanded fivefold since then. The economic benefit the resort has provided Southern Indiana is substantial and credited with creating thousands of jobs.

"After all this time, I relish sitting on the 5th tee box of the Ross Course as the shades of sunset close in. The sense of accomplishment of what we have been able to preserve for golf's future generations is overwhelming." ■

The resort is located within a short distance from many Midwest cities. It is a 90-minute drive from Louisville, 2.5 hours from Indianapolis, 3 hours from Cincinnati, 3.5 hours from Nashville, and 4 hours from St. Louis and Chicago.

For more information on seasonal golf packages, please visit FrenchLick.com, or call (888) 936-9360.



West Baden Springs Hotel offers the essence of European luxury. It was fashioned after the great mineral spa of Baden-Baden in the Black Forest of Germany. Its 200-foot diameter atrium is a popular gathering spot and photo opportunity. The pet-friendly hotel features 243 luxury rooms and a relaxing spa.