

**A snowbird sanctuary  
Mayfair Inn brought a sparkle to Central Florida**

**Written by Charles Cobb  
Copyrighted ©Seminole Little Sentinel Sunday, March 21, 1982**

**Once upon a time – long before Walt Disney World – there was a famous and glamorous resort hotel in a rather unlikely Central Florida setting, the quiet little farming “village” of Sanford.**

**Celebrities such as Tallulah Bankhead, Arthur Godfrey, Victor Borge, H. L. Hunt, Thornton Wilder, and even Al Capone stayed at the hotel.**

**Arnold Palmer, Sam Snead, and Patty Berg displayed their skills on its golf course. Then-U.S. Sen. Claude Pepper spoke there.**

**Major league baseball greats like Leo Durocher, Mel Ott and Carl Hubbell lined up to register in its elegant lobby.**

**Each year when the hotel opened for the winter season, it held a gala ball that attracted more than 500 people, including the local gentry.**

**Women in formal gowns and men in tuxedos sipped cocktails under huge crystal chandeliers in the gaily decorated lobby and danced to the house orchestra in a ballroom overlooking the palm-lined shore of Lake Monroe.**

**Then, in the early 1960s, the almost legendary Mayfair Inn closed, never to reopen as a hotel.**

**“It was the end of an era,” said Frank Mebane Jr., who managed the hotel during its heyday in the 1950s.**

**The three-story stucco, Spanish style structure with 155 rooms was built in 1925 at the dizzy peak of Florida’s boom. But the bubble soon burst and the hotel was forced to close.**

**The Mayfair Inn reopened in 1935. But its Golden Age was delayed until the New York Giants baseball organization took over the hotel 13 years later, using a portion of its rooms to house some of the team’s Triple-A League ball players.**

**The Giants refurbished the dilapidated building and launched an extensive advertising campaign to promote the hotel in Northern cities, said Mebane. The inn was repainted inside and out, and a new roof, new plumbing and new kitchen equipment were installed.**

**The “magnificent lobby, about half as big as a football field, was completely carpeted” and potted palms were added, said Mebane.**

**New draperies and furniture were bought. Enormous crystal Venetian chandeliers were hung in the lobby and in the dining room, which could seat 450 guests. Brass chandeliers were installed in the ballroom.**

**The hotel’s cocktail lounge was redone in Hawaiian motif and called the Bamboo Room. A band entertained there nightly. The hotel swimming pool – the first in Sanford – was now heated.**

**The Mayfair Inn became “the showplace of Central Florida,” said Mebane.**

**The Giants also acquired the Mayfair Country Club and offered hotel guests a package deal that included free use of the golf course.**

**More than a few snowbirds abandoned the glitter of Miami Beach for the more bucolic pleasures offered by the hotel on the big lake in a small “upstate” farming town. Mebane said that when Northerners would call to make reservations at the Mayfair Inn, they would usually ask, “Where is Sanford?”**

**They thought it must be up somewhere around Fort Lauderdale but inland a few miles. They didn’t even know where Orlando was. All they knew was Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach.”**

**There were no direct flights from New York to Orlando (the nearest commercial airport to Sanford) in the 1950s. “They had to change planes in Jacksonville to get to Orlando, where we met them with buses and station wagons,” Mebane said.**

**After the Giants bought it, the Mayfair Inn became “extremely popular during the winter season from the first of December until the middle of April,” said Mebane. “We were usually booked solid a week in advance.”**

**The golf course was put on the professional golf circuit for four years and “one year we had the Ladies’ PGA (LPGA), too,” he said. Several of the most famous golfers in the world flocked to Sanford: Snead, Lionel Herbert, Dow Finsterwald, Berg, Louise Suggs, Marlene Hagge – and a young player who showed considerable promise, Arnold Palmer. Jay Hebert became the Mayfair’s playing pro.**

**“The Mayfair Open was to Central Florida back then what the Bay Hill Classic is now,” said Mebane. The Mayfair Open purse was worth \$15,000, compared to Bay Hill’s current \$300,000.**

**The Mayfair Opening Ball on the first Saturday in December was the high spot of the Sanford social season. About 550 people in formal attire, including about 300**

hotel guests, turned out each year for the cocktail party, dinner and dance. Special New York cut steaks were flown in from New York.

**“All the local leaders, politicians, society and business leaders were there,” Mebane said.**

**“Unfortunately, Sanford has nothing like that today. It was the most big time thing we had in Central Florida then. Orlando had no hotel to match it. About 75 percent of our guests came from New York City. Most of the rest came from Chicago and Boston.”**

**Mebane thinks Sanford’s friendly, small town atmosphere and the hotel’s reasonable rates were the main factors.**

**“Back then Miami Beach was sitting on top of the world. It was the winter resort city. It was hard to get a room there during the season,” Mebane, who knows the business, having managed an oceanfront Miami Beach hotel before he took over the reins of the Mayfair Inn.**

**He said the employees at the gaudy palaces on Collins Avenue’s hotel row and the city itself were “cold, abrupt and discourteous” to visitors.**

**“They had more business than they could handle and they didn’t care if guests came back or not.” Sanford offered a warm and welcome contrast.**

**“The Mayfair Inn and Sanford were friendly. The guests loved it. They thought Sanford was charming and quaint. They always called it, ‘the village.’ It was quiet and they found it a relief from Miami,” Mebane said**

**“And we provided a fun atmosphere. There was free golf and some kind of entertainment at the hotel every night: canasta, gin rummy, bingo, dancing and movies.”**

**The hotel had a “Western Night” once a week featuring country-western music and square dancing. “The guests weren’t used to it and we had to teach them. They had a lot of fun.”**

**The inn provided transportation to the greyhound races at the Sanford-Orlando Kennel Club. And Orlando was nearby if any guests wanted to visit a bigger city.**

**After the Giants purchased the Mayfair Inn, a room for two persons cost \$20 a day and that included three meals a day for each person and fee golf. A room with a view of the lake cost \$25.**

**At that time, hotel rooms in Miami Beach ranged from \$25 to \$50 a day without meals or golf, Mebane said, “and some rooms were as high as \$100 a day even then.”**

**So many tourists flocked to the Mayfair Inn that the Giants built a modern 20-room addition to the hotel that included a solarium.**

**“We had to turn people away,” Mebane said. But Mrs. William E. Kirchhoff of Sanford remembers a gloomier time in the Mayfair Inn’s past.**

**She and her husband leased the hotel in 1934 after it had gone bankrupt and closed. During the height of the Great Depression, when paying guests were almost as scarce as Herbert Hoover buttons, the Kirchhoffs managed to reopen 40 of the inn’s rooms in 1935. They bought the hotel in 1937.**

**“Business was so bad we even considered changing the name of the hotel to El Rancho Grande,” Mrs. Kirchhoff said with a laugh. “We had brochures made up using that name.”**

**During World War II from 1942 to 1945, the U.S. Navy rented the hotel from the Kirchhoffs and used it to house officers stationed at the Sanford Naval Air Station.**

**After the war, the Kirchhoffs tried to attract celebrities to the inn by offering them reduced rates, hoping their presence would boost business.**

**Thornton Wilder stayed at the hotel during the 1946-47 winter season and wrote one of his most famous works, “The Ides of March,” during his visit, Mrs. Kirchhoff said.**

**Wendie Barrie, a Broadway actress and dancer, and Arthur Godfrey also stayed at the inn, she said.**

**After the Giants bought the hotel from the Kirchhoffs in 1948, major league baseball was well represented on the guest list, including such names as Leo Durocher, Branch Rickey, Mel Ott, Carl Hubbell, Mrs. John J. McGraw and Horace Stoneham, president of the Giants.**

**But the glory days of the Mayfair Inn were numbered after the Giants deserted New York for San Francisco in the late 1950s, Mebane said.**

**“They (Giants) began gradually selling all of their property east of the Mississippi River. I could see the handwriting on the wall. I left the hotel in 1960 and joined my family’s oil business,” said Mebane, who still lives in Sanford.**

**In 1961, the Giants sold the Mayfair Inn. “Without the Giants’ money and backing, it gradually went downhill,” Mebane said.**

**Within a few years the grande dame of Central Florida resort hotels passed into history. It was converted into a private military school called the Sanford Naval Academy.**

**In the mid-1970s, the building was bought by the New Tribes Mission Church and now serves as its national headquarters.**