Skiing has been a popular sport in Michigan for nearly a century. The Mitten State is the home to more ski areas than any other state except New York, and today, skiing and snowboarding in the state is a $4 billion industry.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the first Michigan ski areas were developed, both in the Upper Peninsula, in the northern region of the Lower Peninsula. Other ski areas followed, and by 1964, 87 ski areas were listed on a statewide winter sports guide and ski map – more than any other state in the country.

The idea of skiing is not new; petroglyphs that depicted people on skis were found in Russia dated to 8,000 years ago, and carvings were found in China dated to 3,000 to 5,000 years ago. No matter which is truly the oldest, it is widely accepted that whoever first strapped on a pair of skis likely did so to hunt animals.

By the late 1800s, skiing had become a way of life for Scandinavian cultures. Records from the early 1200s describe Norwegian soldiers on skis. Skiing in Scandinavian cultures was not notable; it was just a part of everyday life. Children learned to ski shortly after they learned to walk.

The Idraet Ideal
One of the reasons Michigan became a ski state is immigration. During the late 1800s, Norwegian immigration to the United States was at an all-time high due to Norway’s strong caste system and population growth. Many of them settled in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as along the East Coast in New Hampshire and Maine. These immigrants regarded skiing as an important part of their culture called “Idraet,” which means to exercise in the outdoors in order to build moral character and physical prowess.

Cross-country skiing and ski jumping were both important parts of the Idraet ideals, and by the 1800s, they were organized sports in Norway. Once in the United States, the immigrant Norwegians in Ishpeming, Michigan, formed the National Ski Association.

Ishpeming hosted what was touted as the “Greatest Exhibition of Skiing Ever Witnessed in America” and became the center for ski jumping in the U.S. The Norden Ski Club – renamed the Ishpeming Ski Club in 1901 – held the first formal ski jumping tournament on Feb. 25, 1888.

During the early years, ski jumps were fashioned out of snow and pushed up against boards to form the scaffold. Then, snow was piled up for the bump or takeoff and smoothed out for the landing.

Flying Through the Air
Competitions were held in the early 1900s, and by the 1920s, skiers had become skillful enough that the ski clubs began building with scaffolds that provoked a certain amount of fear and danger, exhibiting death-defying feats by the skillful jumpers who would come from around the country to Ishpeming to compete. Mont Ripley is one of the first ski hills in Michigan, built in Houghton in the 1930s, a town with strong Norwegian roots.

As ski jumping was becoming popular in the Upper Peninsula, residents in the Lower Peninsula began to look for winter recreation opportunities. In the 1920s, the inhabitants of Grayling cleared Division Hill, an area where the National Guard camp is currently located, and called it the Winter Sports Park.

From the very beginning, the park was a nonprofit started by the families in the region. Selling snowsports equipment such as skis, toboggans, skates and sleds funded the Winter Sports Park; Hanson Hardware Co. and Sorenson Bros were the places to go in order get such items. The Winter Sports Park would stay in Grayling but move back and forth between hills.

The reason for developing the Winter Sports Park, which is now named Hanson Hills, was because the local residents of the area wanted something fun to do in Michigan’s long winter. The park became so popular that it was a tourism draw as well, as snow trains brought visitors from Detroit and Chicago.

Caberfae in Cadillac
Snow trains also helped build popularity for the ski area in Cadillac, now called Caberfae Peaks, and Civilian Conservation Corps aided in its development. Pete Meyer, the general manager of Caberfae, says Cadillac was a popular summer vacation destination due to its scenic location among hills and lakes. The city had a railroad stop, and visitors came in the summer from Detroit and Chicago. During
The winter, these same trains took skiers to Caberfae's slopes.

The area originally encompassed 28 square miles and was intended as a cattle ranch. The government first purchased the ranch as a national forest, and a fire tower was erected near the top of the highest peak. Then in 1936, the Civilian Conservation Corps, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, cleared ski runs, built access roads and constructed a shelter house for skiers.

With the onset of World War II, Caberfae had to close, but it was reopened in 1946 and became a major tourist destination. Many American service personnel returning from Europe had been introduced to skiing during the war.

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American service personnel returning from Europe had been introduced to skiing during the war, and this spurred an increased interest in the sport in Michigan.

“When Caberfae reopened for the 1946-47 season, an estimated two million Americans had taken up skiing,” ski historian Jim Neff says. “At this time, the resort had a whopping 14 runs and seven electric tows. The electric towropes were a major improvement from the gasoline engines that powered previous tows.”

**Technology on the Slopes**

As the popularity of skiing grew, the need for better facilities, more user-friendly lifts and more comfortable accommodations increased, which is what drove Everett Kircher to develop Boyne Mountain in Boyne Falls.

Much of the changes in the development of ski areas during its early years came about by Kircher; he pioneered snowmaking, introduced the Midwest's first chairlift, developed the three-place and four-place chairlifts and brought the first six-place chairlift to the United States.

Kircher had experienced skiing at Sun Valley in Idaho and wanted to bring that experience back to Michigan. He spent long weekends...
studying topographical maps and found a location with an elevation of 1,150 feet and opened Boyne Mountain in Boyne Falls in 1947, complete with a chairlift that he had purchased from Sun Valley. Skiers loved this new convenience, and Boyne became a popular destination very quickly.

Another reason for Boyne’s popularity was its European ski school. Kircher hired Stein Eriksen, a gold medalist at the 1952 Olympics to head up the Boyne ski school. This introduction brought Austrian ski instructors to Boyne and established the tradition of Austrian Ski Schools at Boyne resorts.

**Meanwhile in Thompsonville**

While all this was happening in Boyne Falls, Crystal Mountain in Thompsonville, south of Traverse City, started as a high school class project and a community-owned facility.

Chris MacInnes, chief operating officer of Crystal Mountain and daughter of George Petritz, one of the original developers of the ski area, says Crystal Mountain started out as a community ski area called Buck Hills.

Crystal Mountain started as a high school class project and a community-owned facility.

It all began in 1955 by a group of locals, led by Ward Creech, geography teacher and principal of Benzonia High School. As a class project, Creech had students identify the best location for a ski area in Benzie County based on elevation, vertical drop and natural snowfall. Bucks Hills range best met the criteria. The Buck Hills Ski Club was formed, and this group volunteered their time and talent to build and operate the ski area for the benefit of the community.

**Skiing Staycations**

The 1960s saw a good deal of new ski area openings and the expansion of existing ski areas. Real estate sales were another reason for skiing’s growth. One of the most innovative concepts for a ski area came about in 1967 with the opening of Schuss Mountain in Mancelona. According to Dan Iannotti, son of the ski area’s founder, Daniel R. Iannotti, it was originally called The Kingdom of Schuss, and it came complete with border guards, a mote and its own currency. The idea of The Kingdom of Schuss was to sell skiers on purchasing real estate to build a vacation home. With the sale of lots, these homeowners—or “land barons,” as they were dubbed—would serve not only provide startup capital, but also as customers of the resort for years to come.

Skiing’s popularity also created a demand for ski areas closer to home. Joe Kosik, one of the most prolific ski area developers in Michigan and Wisconsin, developed “backyard ski areas.” He started by creating Mt. Grampian near Lake Orion in 1957, which he sold in order to develop Mt. Holly in Holly.

Later, he and his brother purchased Alpine Valley in White Lake. In 1962, he purchased Pine Knob in Clarkston. Kosik also developed Bittersweet Ski Area in 1982 and another Alpine Valley in Wisconsin.

What all these ski areas had in common is their proximity to a major metropolitan area. Except for the Wisconsin facility, none of the ski areas included lodging. The idea was that people who wanted to ski could do so without committing to a trip to northern Michigan; they could drive an hour or so from their house, ski for the day, and then drive home afterward. These ski areas quickly became popular, even though they were built on smaller hills than those to the north.

As you can see, skiing has been a popular sport in Michigan for almost a century, so now it’s time to get out and enjoy the slopes!