

An aerial photograph of a snowy mountain slope. The terrain is covered in snow, with numerous ski tracks visible. The slope is dotted with evergreen trees, some of which are densely packed in certain areas. In the lower right, a ski lift structure is visible, and several people can be seen skiing down the slope. The overall scene is a winter landscape with a mix of snow and forest.

# Making Red Lodge Mountain



UPPER RIGHT: Montana's first fully certified Ski Instructor team headed by former Aspen Mountain Ski School Manager Curt Chase. (L-R: Ed Vestal, Larry Lennon, Bobbie Ostrum, Spike Beemer, Bev Kurtz, Jake Jacoby, Betsy Chase and Curt Chase) ABOVE: Red Lodge Mountain Resort as it looked in the early days. Photo colorizing by Karl Leas.



The time was the 1950s. The place was Red Lodge. And ski-loving, wild-partying Silver Run Ski Club members were about to change the course of a mountain.

**GONDOLAS AND SIX-PERSON, HIGH-SPEED CHAIR LIFTS ARE** amenities boasted by most large ski resorts these days. But 60 years ago, local enthusiasts were lucky to find a rope tow that wasn't a stomach-jostling, white-knuckled trip 800 feet up the side of a mountain.

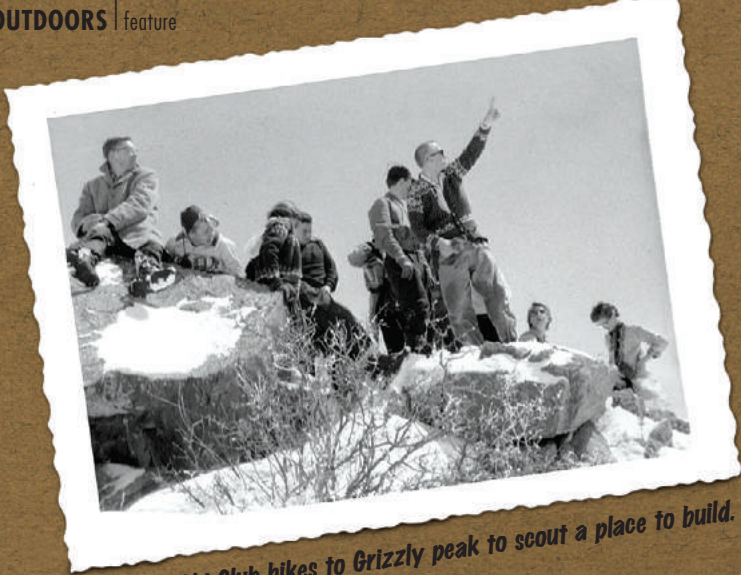
#### **Just having a great time**

Reflective of the competition-centric youth of today, the Silver Run Ski Club is now a finely tuned race team. But in the 1940s and '50s, the group was all about skiing, partying and conquering as many slopes as possible.

"We were young and foolish and having a great time," said Bobbie Ostrum, a longtime member and one of the original instigators of Red Lodge Mountain.

"When we weren't skiing, we were fishing, and when we weren't doing that we were mountain climbing or hiking."

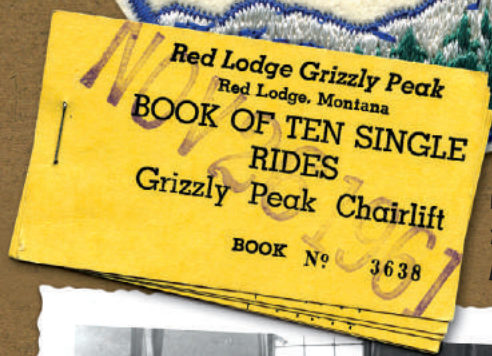
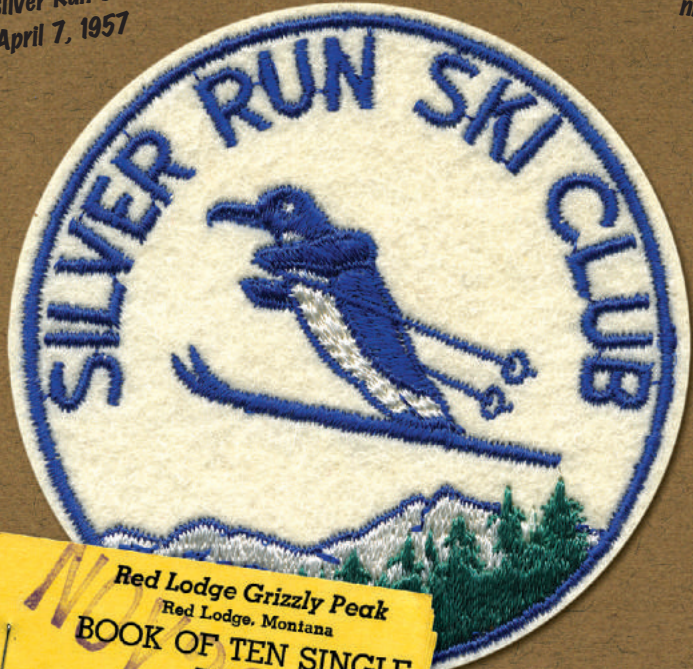
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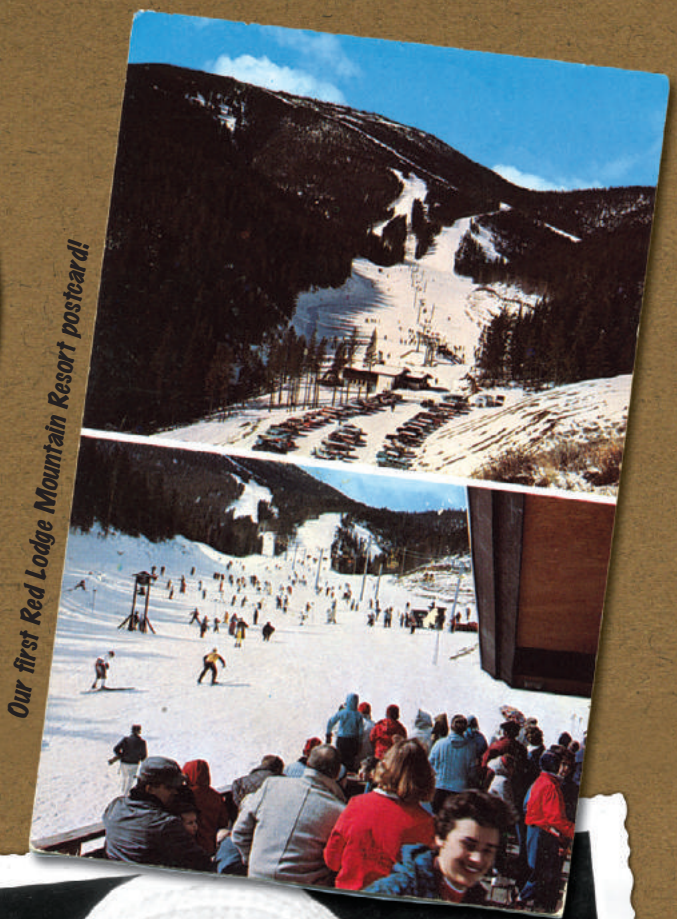
Silver Run Ski Club hikes to Grizzly peak to scout a place to build. April 7, 1957



Jim Graff, Bobbie Ostrum, Bob Lyons and Jack Diteman enjoy a night at Natalie's in Red Lodge. 1957



What we used to get up the hill in '61.



Our first Red Lodge Mountain Resort postcard!



Warming our toes at Willow Creek's warming hut. 1950



Oh that Bobbie!

continued from page 27

### **In search of cold smoke**

Long before the development of Red Lodge Mountain, skiing was already a popular sport. Skiers just had to be more creative in finding a slope and then getting to the top of it.

One of the favorite local spots for the group was Willow Creek, which operated where Palisades Campground is today, just below Ski Run Road. A combination of two rope tows hauled skiers up a quarter mile to ski back down a 500-foot vertical drop.

A turn-off just before the current home of the Piney Dell led to Sundance, another popular small run that was rumored to have old theater seats as lift chairs.

"I don't know if they were actually from a theater, but that was the story," said Ostrum.

When they weren't skiing their local runs, members would rent buses and travel all over the West to places like Sun Valley and Aspen. They would also visit regional slopes like Big Mountain in Whitefish, Mont., which had one of the only chair lifts in the state at the time.

In the early '50s, the SRSC sponsored a National Rocky Mountain Ski Association-sanctioned race on the Gardiner headwall in the Beartooth Pass. Participants would camp below the switchbacks and have a pancake breakfast before heading up for their first run. "A rope tow pulled us up part way, and then we'd hike up to the road, then hop on the back of a pickup that would take us up the rest of the way," Ostrum explained.

### **Taking development into their own hands**

As the '50s rolled in, the youngsters of SRSC began hiking to higher ground at Willow Creek to find more powder and to escape the growing crowds at their slope.

"Some of my favorite memories from those days are climbing up the drainage at Grizzly Peak to get pictures and getting stuck in snow up to our waists," Ostrum said.

What they were scouting was the perfect spot for a modern ski resort close to home, with chair lifts instead of rope tows, and a lodge instead of utility buildings turned into warming huts.

After a five-year search involving many backcountry treks, it was decided that Grizzly Peak was the best place for their venture.

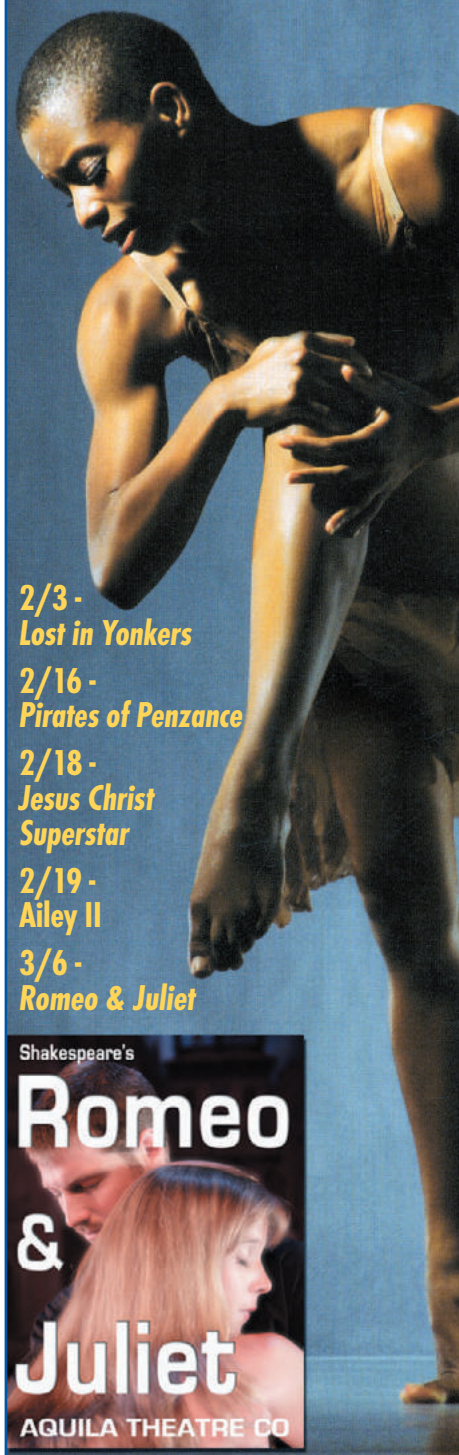
Red Lodge Grizzly Peak was incorporated in 1955, with 13 members from Red Lodge and 13 from Billings. That same year, the group sought support from the U.S. Forest Service and was granted a special-use permit by Custer National Forest for 2,800 acres. But six long miles lay between West Fork Road and the base of their planned resort. Federal funding of \$300,000 was secured to build a road in 1957, but it required a local match of 10 percent. And so the SRSC got busy raising money.

"We had ski fairs at the Shrine and at the airport, which really got our name out there and got people interested in the mountain," Ostrum said. They had parades and shows at Senior High as well, but most of all they had a good time.

The majority of the funds were raised through a stock sale that was opened up to the members of Grizzly Peak Inc. Each share was \$100, and anyone who purchased \$1,000 received a lifetime pass. At the same time, Fred Marble II, a developer from Billings, was laying out plans for TeePee

continued on page 30

## **Celebrate the Performing Arts!**



**2/3 -  
Lost in Yonkers**

**2/16 -  
Pirates of Penzance**

**2/18 -  
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Superstar**

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(L-R) Jack Nichol, Wayne Benham, Ed Ayers and Miles Wallace look on as Bobbie Ostrum takes her turn at a balance training drill at the Billings YMCA during the off-season.

continued from page 29

Village near the proposed ski area. In order to complete his project, Marble offered to purchase the remaining stock and became the majority shareholder of Grizzly Peak.

Trails were cut on the mountain during the summers of 1957 to 1959, and Grizzly Peak officially opened in 1960.

### Making a name

As Jim Graff remembers it, around the mid-'60s there was a terrible incident at one of the national parks involving a grizzly and two young women. Worried that the name Grizzly Peak might draw negative connotations, the board changed it to Red Lodge Mountain. However, the corporation's name remains Grizzly Peak.

By the early '70s, Big Sky Ski Resort had opened and Bridger Bowl was expanding. It was time to make Red Lodge Mountain more inviting to the Billings crowd. Then-manager Tim Prather was given the go-ahead to expand into the Cole Creek area and to add high-speed chair lifts and grooming and snow-making equipment.

All of these efforts may never have happened, though, without the perseverance of a few people who just loved to ski.

"The membership of the Silver Run Ski Club was really the impetus of Red Lodge Mountain," Graff said.

Ostrum and some of the other members still in Billings don't let the memories fade. "There are 10 or 15 of us that still get together and laugh about how much fun we had back in those days, partying and skiing and just having a good time," Ostrum said. ■