

FELLOWSHIP AND FOLLY AT MICHIGAN'S MT. HUMBARD

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BELOW • Mt. Humbard was only open for the 1972 season and had barely enough snow to operate, but Michigan skiers aren't afraid of tough conditions.
Photos: Mackinac State Historic Parks Archive

At the top of a steep bluff on Mackinac Island, a dot of land between Michigan's two peninsulas, sits a dilapidated concrete pad. A few rusting cables snake from the surrounding bushes, and the slab is almost obscured by moss. It's unremarkable, besides the words spray-painted in the middle: "Humbard's Folly."

This was once the top of a chairlift, and it's all that remains of the Mt. Humbard Ski Area. The terrain is as humble as the views are huge, encompassing Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. It is also the setting for a one-season drama that included megachurches, fraud and a lack of divine intervention.

Rex Humbard is often regarded as the "founding father of televangelism," and by the late 1960s was on a spending spree of biblical proportions, snapping up real estate, businesses and even a girdle factory. He was also looking to start a fellowship retreat center, and a failed college on Mackinac Island caught his eye. The school had folded after graduating just one senior class. But, while operational, the students had cleared a ski run as a side project. In the spring of 1971, Humbard bought the whole college and its associated infrastructure for a cool \$3 million. He kept the college running, although with a religious focus. But it was the ski hill where he saw potential.

Stands of old-growth cedar were clear-cut to make way for four new runs (one named "Cain and Abel"), and an 838-foot-

long double chairlift and Poma tow provided access to 190 acres of terrain. By its grand "reopening" in January 1972, Mt. Humbard even flaunted a new lodge and restaurant, complete with a bowling alley.

Humbard began inviting families from his megachurch in Akron, OH to enjoy a "Winter Vacation with Inspiration." He brought them via plane (or snowmobile, if the ice bridge between the island and the mainland was stable), where they enrolled in fellowship programs alongside the few college students. Between runs, families could enjoy sermons, gospel-inspired ski songs and board games. Both the school and hill were alcohol- and cigarette-free, as Humbard wanted to eliminate all unholy shenanigans associated with ski culture.

Mackinac Island's harsh logistical realities, however, became apparent at the grand reopening.

"The whole island came out," says Mark Chambers, who grew up on the island and worked at Mt. Humbard as a high school senior. "Rex and his people wanted someone to ski down first. I happened to have my skis, so I took off. I made a couple turns before seeing sparks come off my edges, because there was barely any snow."

The weather would prove insurmountable. The island saw less than 100 inches of annual snow, and with most of the resort facing southeast, off-lake winds scoured away what did fall. Even with these difficulties, Humbard planned to expand the island's airport and broaden his fellowship programs.

But as the area was preparing to open for a second season, *The New York Times* revealed Humbard been funding many of his nonreligious real-estate projects with bonds from his followers, which he was largely unable to reimburse, as well as millions of dollars in dubious loans from the Teamsters Union. The subsequent investigation uncovered numerous cases of fraud, and while the pastor would escape prosecution and remain a prominent figure in televangelism, nearly all of his and his ministry's assets were forcibly liquidated. That included Mt. Humbard, which closed indefinitely.

The chairlift was sold four years later, ending up at Big Sky, MT, and the runs are only slightly discernable through the alder and white pine. But the concrete pad and "Humbard's Folly" remain, a testament to the greed of a less-than-godly televangelist. §

