Skiing From/ 13C

Nonetheless, Skinner, with Ryan Development Co. of Grand Rapids, Minn., and Eden Prairie, embarked on a $25 million expansion program at Lutsen that could make it the largest ski resort in the Upper Midwest.

"We're starting on a $5 million improvement program at the ski area," Skinner explained, "including development of Moose Mountain, which has more than 800 feet of vertical rise and will eventually have six chairlifts up it." The first phase, a single lift, will cost $500,000 to install this summer, he said.

Moose Mountain will have the only slalom race course in the Midwest approved by the Federation Internationale de Ski, Skinner said, and will "offer the first opportunity to people as far away as Chicago to drive to real mountain skiing without going to the Rockies."

The Ryan firm, meanwhile, built 22 condominiums and 20 townhouses at Lutsen the past winter, and has sold 38 of them, according to Thomas Ryan, president. As at Rocky Mountain resorts, he said, people can ski from their homes onto the runs and ski back to their doorsteps when finished.

"We had an extremely good season," Ryan said. "We're aggressive about the future of Lutsen and we're going to start the second phase of our program in June."

Eventually, he said, the firm will have built 160 vacation homes there, worth an estimated $25 million, adding at least 100 full-time jobs to the troubled Cook County economy. Plans call for 80 condominium units in four buildings and 80 townhouses in 11 buildings.

But the experiences of several smaller areas contrasted sharply with the Lutsen euphoria.

"The weather and economy both hurt us," said Jim Gruenhagen, a Boy Scout camp ranger who bought Hardscrabble Ski Area at Rice Lake, Wis., four years ago. "We survived, but it was nothing to brag about — with radio and TV saying every five minutes, 'Do not travel. Do not leave your yard.' "

With a recently acquired liquor license, Gruenhagen is building a new deck and barbecue area for summer trade at his chalet. "It's next to impossible to make it without a summer program," he said.

"We were down 30 percent," said Ursula Lanners, who with husband Bob operates Eagle Mountain at Grey Eagle, Minn. "In rural areas like ours there is a feeling that skiing is just for the rich people. We're getting more into inner-tubing — it's less expensive and people can easily do it."

"It was a poor year, not a disaster like last year but not good," said Bette Bensch, who with her husband operates Viking Valley near Ashby, Minn. Still, the Bensches are adding snowmaking equipment for next season. "We're in for the duration," she said.

"We're not going broke, but we're not jumping for joy, either," said Tom Kelly, public relations director for Mount Telemark at Cable, Wis. "It was an improvement over last season, but not a boom period by any means. We've lost some downhill skiers to cross-country. It's cheaper, easier, more exercise."

The financially troubled Telemark ski area, which is going through bankruptcy proceedings to clear up its obligations, attracted more than 6,000 competitors to its American Birkebeiner cross-country race Feb. 28.

"Two winters without adequate snow hurt us," Kelly said. "When there's no snow in the Twin Cities — our marketplace — people just don't come up here, even though we've made plenty of snow to ski on. All those dropouts haven't yet returned to the sport."

Fortunately, he said, the resort's summer traffic for golf, tennis, canoeing, fishing and horseback riding is strong.

"I would not do it again," said Brent Primus, whose family closed its Ski Tonka area in Orono after the 1976-77 season and is still looking for a buyer. "You have to make it all during Christmas vacation and on 10 weekends. Lose one of those days because of rain or cold and it hurts. Like a farmer, you rely on the weather — and there's nothing you can do about it."

No Minnesota ski areas closed this year, as such places as Lookout Mountain, Lockhaven, Inglewood, Inver Hills, Moon Vally, Cedar Hills and Pine Bend have in the past. And at least one new area opened.

"All in all, I was quite encouraged," said Vern Anderson of Alexandria, Minn., who opened a ski area called Andes Tower Hill 15 miles west of there for the 1981-82 season. "We had over 4,000 skiers, plan to add more tows and we're betting on the long pull." The area relies largely on southwestern Minnesota and eastern South Dakota for its skiers, he said.

Buck Hill, on Interstate Hwy. 35 in Burnsville, had a good season, said owner Chuck Stone. "Our gross volume may be near an all-time high, but not our net," he said. But Powder Ridge, which Stone also operates near Kimball, Minn., was hurt because "all the January weekends were busts, and it's a big weekend area," Stone said.

Skier visits to Duluth's city-owned Spirit Mountain were down 3 percent, but skier spending was off 8 percent, according to executive director Bruce Simons. "Despite losing three weekends in January, we're going to show a profit over last year," he predicted.

Trollhaugen at Dresser, Wis., did "better than expected," said Pat Peterson, marketing director. "We had a good year in spite of January, including a lot of beginners," she said. The area will operate its chalet as a restaurant during the summer and plans music festivals and other special events, she said.

Many ski areas have summer activities. Quadna Mountain Lodge, at Hill City, Minn., offers a varied program. Deepwood, at Wheeler, Wis., has a golf course and restaurant. Buck Hill has volleyball courts and a mountain slide. Spirit and Eagle Mountains offer camping. Val Chatel at Park Rapids, Minn., remains open year-round as a restaurant and hotel.

The economy and "overzealous weathermen" affected ski business across the nation, said Cal Conniff, president of the National Ski Areas Association in Springfield, Mass. In the Midwest it was down 10 to 15 percent, although record ski business was done in the Northeast, Southeast and Rockies, he said.

"Our total skiers climbed from 47 million two years ago to better than 50 million this season," Conniff said. "The rental business was especially brisk — due to the economy, more people were renting skis for single weekends or a season."

At Holgaard's Ski Shop in St. Louis Park, more people bought cross-country skis than downhill skis for the first time this season, said Glen Pfaff, marketing vice president. More beginning skiers were noted, and people coming back into skiing. It was a good year for ski boot sales.

"All in all, business was pretty good," Pfaff said.