

This Day in History... February 18, 1960

Eighth Winter Olympic Games

On February 18, 1960, the eighth Winter Olympic Games opened in Squaw Valley, California. They were the first Winter Games held in the US since 1932.

The choice to host the Games at the small alpine resort of Squaw Valley was hotly debated. It was small and run down with inadequate facilities. An unincorporated village, Squaw Valley had only one resident at the time and did not even have an operating local government. Nonetheless, proponents of the site touted it as a blank slate where the ideal Olympic resort could be constructed. Investors and the State of California committed \$5 million to the project in order to secure the winning bid. Much to the dismay of several European nations, in 1956 the International Olympic Committee awarded the right to host the Games to Squaw Valley.



This was the second US Winter Olympics stamp.



This was America's first Disney stamp.

Over the next four years, a new state-of-the-art resort was constructed. Among the innovations, these would be the first Olympics to use artificial ice for the skating and hockey competitions. To create and maintain the ice, they built a refrigeration plant. The heat generated from that plant was then used to keep spectators warm, heat water, and melt snow from roofs. They also had a quartz clock that measured to the hundredths of a second and a new computer to catalog results.

After all this planning, the games were nearly a disaster, as there was no snow up until the opening ceremonies. A sudden drop in temperature changed the drenching rain into much-needed snow just in time. In fact, there was so much snow, it delayed the opening ceremonies by an hour. The Games managed to open as planned, though, on February 18, 1960. Acting as the US representative to the Olympics, then Vice President Richard Nixon declared the Games open. Walt Disney served as chairman of the Pageantry Committee, planning the opening and closing ceremonies. The opening ceremony included 5,000 performers and a dazzling firework show.



Vice President Richard Nixon oversaw the opening ceremonies.

In an earlier version of the 1980 "Miracle on Ice," the US Men's hockey team upset favorites Canada, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia, to win the gold medal. This was the first time the US won a gold medal in the event, and the last time the Soviets didn't until 1980. Another highlight of the games was Norwegian skater Knut Johannessen, who broke the world record in the 10,000-meter race by a large margin.

The biathlon and women's speed skating made their debuts at the 1960 Winter Games. These were the first and only Games that didn't include the bobsled. The organizers didn't think it was worth the cost since only nine countries planned to participate.

The games came to a close on February 28. In all, 665 athletes from 30 countries competed in 27 events. The Soviet Union had the most gold medals and the most medals overall, followed by Germany and the United States. Thanks to the Games, Squaw Valley became an incorporated city and destination ski resort to the rich and famous. Now one of the largest ski resorts in the United States, it logs an average 600,000 visitors each year.

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