

The Menomonee Valley: A Historical Overview

by John Gurda

The Menomonee Valley has been one of Milwaukee's distinguishing features since long before the dawn of urban time. Four miles long and a half-mile wide, it was formed by meltwater during the retreat of the last continental glacier, which departed Wisconsin roughly 10,000 years ago. Although the Valley's topography varied from year to year and even from season to season, it was generally a sprawling expanse of open water punctuated by beds of wild rice and dense mats of cattails, rushes, and reeds. Writing in 1875, pioneer historian James Buck described the Valley east of Fifth Street as "a wild rice swamp, covered with water from two to six feet in depth; in fact an impassable marsh."

The Valley was not impassable to native canoes. It was, in fact, a storehouse of resources that attracted human settlement centuries before anyone contemplated a city. The Menomonee River provided a canoe route from Lake Michigan to the interior, but far more important were the plants and animals it supported. Wild rice was a critically important food source for the procession of tribes who made their homes in the area. (The name "Menomonee" itself is derived from the word for wild rice.) Wetland plants provided the raw materials for baskets, mats, and shelters. Fish and waterfowl were abundant. James Buck penned a verdant description of the Valley in the 1830s: "All the marsh proper ... would, in the Spring, be literally alive with fish that came in from the lake.... And the number of ducks that covered the marsh was beyond all computation. Thousands of young ones could be seen in the breeding season, apparently not a week old, swimming around as happy as need be"

Such a wealth of resources made the Menomonee Valley a natural choice for native settlement. Archaeologist Charles Brown identified five village sites on the Valley's rim in the early historic period: two on Walker's Point, one near Fifth Street and Wisconsin Avenue, a fourth on the present site of Mitchell Park, and the last in the vicinity of Twenty-fourth Street and Wisconsin Avenue. The land adjoining the Valley was a favored location for the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, Sauk, Fox, and other tribes who settled in Milwaukee after 1600. Because it attracted natives, the Valley also drew the white traders who did business with them. French Canadians began to arrive in the 1600s, but the fur trader most closely associated with the Valley came in 1795, when Jacques Vieau opened his post atop the bluff in today's Mitchell Park. The site offered a commanding view of the Valley and easy access to Lake Michigan via the river. Even more important, it adjoined a native village and the time-worn trail between Milwaukee and Mukwonago. Although he spent his summers in Green Bay, Jacques Vieau is sometimes described as the first permanent white settler in Milwaukee. A somewhat abused tablet placed by the Old Settlers Club still marks the site of his trading post and cabin in the northeastern corner of Mitchell Park.

Solomon Juneau married Vieau's oldest daughter, Josette, and became his boss's son-in-law as well. In 1825, after a tour of duty in other Vieau posts in southern Wisconsin, the couple began to trade at the present corner of Water Street and Wisconsin Avenue. It was the first solid ground on the east bank of the Milwaukee River. John Fonda, an early visitor, described the view from the trader's front door: "South and south-west of Mr. Juneau's house, could be seen extending large marshes, covered with tall swamp-grass, rushes and water."

Solomon Juneau presided over Milwaukee's fur trade during its final days. Overhunting, smallpox, and alcohol drastically depleted both the supply of fur-bearing animals and the corps of hunters necessary to harvest them. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Juneau remained at

his post and learned to trade in a new commodity: land. A wave of settlement that had been surging west since the colonial period finally reached the western shore of Lake Michigan in the 1830s, and virtually everyone arrived by boat. Milwaukee's broad bay and deep river created the best natural harbor on the shoreline for many miles, and promoters flocked to the site.

Milwaukee came into urban existence as a trio of competing settlements: Juneautown, Kilbourntown, and Walker's Point.

Byron Kilbourn was the first to bridge the Menomonee River. In the earliest years of white settlement, overland travelers generally crossed from Walker's Point to Juneautown on a ferry — a function immortalized in the name of Ferry Street. In 1836, Kilbourn built a bridge across the narrow end of the Menomonee Valley at today's Plankinton Avenue.

Milwaukeeans viewed the Valley as a sort of in-town hunting and fishing preserve. James Buck recalled a novel method of gathering the fish that filled the marsh each spring: "We used to wade out beyond Clinton [S. First] street and shoot them, the report of the gun stunning them, when they could be easily taken out by the hand, before they recovered from the shock. This was fun for us, but not for the fish." Sportsmen who braved the depths of the Valley often found it difficult to keep their bearings. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* (August 12, 1861) described the hazards of navigation:

When you fancy yourself sailing up the stream, the chances are that you are only being lured into a *cul de sac* of wild rice, and when you fondly imagine you are miles away from the city, some sudden turn will bring you up before a great brewery or ship yard, where several hundred employees stare at you ironically.

The Valley's days as a natural novelty were numbered. Milwaukee meant business, and its landscape was radically reshaped in the service of commerce.

In 1847 — one year after Milwaukee became a city — Byron Kilbourn founded the Milwaukee & Waukesha Railroad, a line he promoted as a vital artery of commerce linking the lakeshore community with its rich hinterland. Kilbourn's crews began to prepare a roadbed on the northern edge of the Valley, near Second and Clybourn, in 1849. They soon encountered some unusual challenges. Tracks laid on one stretch of landfill disappeared into the marsh overnight, sinking more than thirty feet into the muck. The marsh's appetite for railroad tracks was eventually satisfied. Solid ground emerged, and Kilbourn's railroad made its maiden run up the Menomonee Valley to Wauwatosa in 1850, traveling at the break-neck speed of thirty miles per hour. By 1857, the pioneer line had reached the Mississippi.

Railroads multiplied, and they became iron funnels pouring the bounty of Wisconsin's farm region — especially carloads of wheat — into Milwaukee. Mammoth grain elevators rose along the margins of the Menomonee Valley, and by 1862 the city was the largest shipper of wheat on the planet. Milwaukee was realizing its destiny as the state's commercial capital, serving as the primary point of exchange between farm products headed east and finished goods coming west.

The next stage in Milwaukee's economic evolution was apparent even before the Civil War began in 1861. Instead of simply *shipping* agricultural products, local entrepreneurs began to *process* them as well, turning wheat into flour, barley and hops into beer, and hogs and cattle into meat and leather. In 1848, German immigrants Guido Pfister and Frederick Vogel opened a tannery on the south rim of the Valley, just west of today's Sixth Street bridge. It would grow to become the flagship facility of the largest tanning company in America, filling thirty-eight buildings spread across fifteen acres of land. Just west of the Pfister &

Vogel plant was the Melms brewery, once Milwaukee's largest, which became a Pabst facility in 1870. Farther west on the bluff, near Sixteenth Street, the Burnham family operated the region's largest brickyard, turning Valley clay into the Cream City's best-known building material. Out in the country, near today's Thirtieth Street, Franz Falk opened his Bavaria Brewery on the south rim in 1856. It would soon become the fourth-largest in Milwaukee.

Near today's Twenty-seventh Street viaduct, the Meadow Springs distillery turned local grains into hard liquor; the company's successors would earn national fame as makers of yeast marketed under the Red Star label.

As flour mills, breweries, packing plants, tanneries, and other processing industries grew with the region, the banks of the Milwaukee and Kinnickinnic Rivers were built to capacity. Attention turned naturally to the Menomonee Valley, whose vast open spaces and superb transportation potential seemed ripe for industrial development — after the wetland had been converted to dry land. In 1869, a group of local businessmen launched the Menomonee Improvements and went to work. Concentrating on the east end of the Valley, they developed a system of canals, boat slips, and rail sidings that may have been Milwaukee's most ambitious infrastructure project of the nineteenth century.

Landfill was the greatest challenge. Using picks, shovels, and horse-drawn scrapers, immigrant laborers pulled down unimaginable quantities of soil and gravel from the adjoining bluffs to the Valley floor. James Buck estimated the depth of fill in the central Valley at twenty-two feet on average, and he claimed that the north rim of the Menomonee Valley was lowered by as much as sixty feet. Steep bluffs were softened to the gentle inclines of the present day and, load by load, the marsh began to disappear.

The *Milwaukee Sentinel* (September 16, 1886) described the scene behind a "Free Dump" sign in the Valley: "Here rotten potatoes and fruit,

the contents of paunches and entrails of animals, the refuse of meat shops, and all sorts of filth are deposited in the marsh and a thin covering of ashes and dirt placed over them.” Landfill activity continued into the twentieth century, but the bulk of the work was done between 1870 and 1900. By the turn of the century, the days of duck hunts and wild rice harvests in the Menomonee Valley had become fading memories.

The results of all this activity were soon apparent. In 1871, only two years after the Menomonee Improvements formally began, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* (August 4, 1871) took note of the changes in the Valley:

Few residents of Milwaukee, comparatively speaking, are aware of the great transformation that is taking place in the Menomonee Valley. The marsh which has hitherto been devoted to the growth of pond lilies, rushes and rank grass, is yielding to engineering skill and industry, and is becoming most desirable and valuable property. The Menomonee Improvement Company alone, which made an original purchase of fifty-seven acres, has dredged from Melms' brewery to the west line of their grounds making a channel 13 feet deep and 130 feet wide, and have already built 3,000 feet of dock south of the main track of the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway. There is opportunity to build 2,000 feet more of dock along the line of the Menomonee River.

The Menomonee Valley ultimately boasted nearly 1400 acres of “made land,” several miles of docks, and some of the best rail connections in the state. Industries moved in almost as soon as the muck was dry. They represented every phase in the city's economic evolution. Grain elevators continued to receive the bounty of Wisconsin's farms and ship it out again. (One large bank of elevators remains in use today near Eleventh Street.) The processing industries grew by leaps and bounds. Pfister & Vogel continued to tan hides through the 1920s, and meat-packing became a Valley specialty. In 1869 the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad opened a large stockyard on reclaimed land just north of today's Mitchell Park. It became a critical point of supply for John

Plankinton, Philip Armour, Frederick Layton, and other pioneer packers who built great packing houses on the Valley floor near Muskego Avenue. In 1879, packing was Milwaukee's most important industry, and the Valley was its undisputed center.

Ideally situated at the intersection of land and water, the Menomonee Valley also became a center for the storage and transfer of bulk commodities, including lumber, stone, salt, cement and, as fossil fuels became prevalent, coal. The storage function is still important, particularly for scrap metal, but one commodity — lumber — gave rise to a sizable processing industry. Beginning in the 1870s, the Menomonee Valley sprouted a number of millwork plants that turned out doors, sashes, blinds, mantels, lath, shingles, pickets, and other wood products for a national market. Sanger, Rockwell & Company, on the south side of the Valley near Eleventh Street, was perhaps the largest, occupying six blocks and employing more than 500 people in 1889.

Although the processing industries remained important, it was manufacturing that finally took center stage. Milwaukee became the self-proclaimed "Machine Shop of the World" in the late 1800s, with a particular emphasis on all sorts of metal-bending. Utilizing the latest technologies, a small army of tinkerers graduated from small shops to sizable factories between 1880 and 1910, and the Menomonee Valley was their favored location. Nordberg (mine hoists and Diesel engines) had its roots on the south side of the Valley, adjacent to the Pfister & Vogel tannery. Chain Belt (chain drives and construction equipment) opened a large factory near S. Sixteenth Street. One block west was the Milwaukee works of the International Harvester Company, whose local plant made gasoline engines and cream separators. In the southwestern corner of the Valley, the Harnischfeger Company built a twenty-acre plant, still in operation, that became the world's largest supplier of overhead cranes.

The north side of the Valley housed an important supplier of industrial energy: a complex of red brick buildings near Twenty-fifth Street that produced “manufactured gas” from coal. The Milwaukee Gas Light structures are probably the most distinguished architectural ensemble still standing in the Valley.

Virtually filling the Valley west of Thirty-fifth Street, the shops made and repaired all the rolling stock for one of America’s leading railroads; their output reached 668 locomotives and nearly 67,000 freight cars by 1937.

Although giants like the Milwaukee Road, Falk, Cutler-Hammer, and Harnischfeger were better-known, the Valley housed scores of smaller enterprises that turned out everything from passenger elevators to paper boxes. St. Paul Avenue on the north side and Bruce and Pierce Streets on the south were lined from end to end with industrial buildings, many of them still in service. Businesses of all sizes provided tens of thousands of jobs, and there is little doubt that the Menomonee Valley housed the largest concentration of industrial employment in the state.

That concentration had a formative impact on Milwaukee’s development. The presence of so many jobs so close to the heart of town enabled the community to remain an unusually compact city; in 1902, only Boston and Baltimore had more persons per acre. Industrial employment also spawned a variety of industrial neighborhoods. On the south side of the Valley, the original Walker’s Point settlement became a polyglot community of blue-collar workers. Clarke Square, named for a park donated by a pioneer family, developed west of Sixteenth Street. The neighborhood around Thirty-fifth Street and National Avenue was known as Silver City, reportedly because local saloons were awash in silver dollars every payday. On the north side, Merrill Park, between Twenty-seventh and Thirty-fifth Streets, became a stronghold of Irish railroad workers whose anchor was St. Rose Catholic Church. Tucked into the river bend west of Thirty-fifth was Pigsville, a unique settlement

of Slavic immigrants whose community's name was derived from a pig farm on the west bank of the Menomonee. Workers from all of these neighborhoods and more distant locales formed a "bucket brigade" that streamed into the Valley with their lunch pails every morning and streamed out again at night.

The Menomonee Valley provided jobs for residents of all Milwaukee neighborhoods, but it also created a physical gulf between the North and South Sides. As the city grew, it became a practical necessity to bridge the gap, and a series of viaducts — each a half-mile long — became fixtures in the local landscape. The first, completed in 1878, crossed the Valley at Sixth Street; it was replaced by a more durable structure in 1908. Other spans followed at Sixteenth Street in 1895 (replaced in 1929), at Twenty-seventh Street in 1910, and at Thirty-fifth Street in 1933. The first viaducts saw nothing but horse and pedestrian traffic, but all were eventually retrofitted for streetcars and then automobiles.

The Menomonee Valley, viaducts and all, was something less than an aesthetic triumph. As early as 1874, a distillery on the south canal was charged with producing "a nuisance simply stupendous in character." The *Milwaukee Sentinel* (July 17, 1874) described the pollution in graphic terms:

Certain it is that from some cause that body of water is a river of death, disgusting in the extreme to the sight and fearfully offensive to the olfactories. From its frightfully filthy depths arise boiling springs and a stench so penetrating and all-pervading as to be utterly unbearable.

The Valley was also the site of a novel attempt to deal with Milwaukee's solid waste troubles. In 1890, the city installed a "garbage crematory" on the Valley floor east of Sixteenth Street.

The city's garbage was eventually diverted to other channels, but the Valley's air pollution problems lasted into modern times. In a period

when coal was the universal fuel, locomotives, factories, foundries, and the gas plant belched enormous clouds of acrid smoke into the atmosphere every day. There was a permanent pall over the Valley, and housewives learned not to hang their wash outside when the wind blew from the wrong direction.

The Menomonee Valley's economic importance was obvious, but its persistent pollution problems and the generalized ugliness of much of its development made the district a civic embarrassment to some Milwaukeeans. It was not, ironically, until the Valley's heyday had passed that some of the most pressing problems ceased to be concerns. Most employers expanded in the 1920s, contracted with the rest of the economy in the 1930s, and then climbed to new heights during World War II. It was in the years following World War II that the Valley lost its momentum. As ship and rail traffic gave up ground to rubber-tired transport, canal slips and side tracks ceased to be important selling points. Some old-line Valley firms fell victim to technological obsolescence or competitive pressures, but many moved, by truck, to more efficient plants in outlying areas. A new highway hastened their exit. Interstate 94 opened in stages during the 1960s, following (and obliterating) the route of the Rapid Transit line, a high-speed electric rail service that had been in operation since 1926.

As many of the traditional firms departed, there were selective but significant signs of new life in the Menomonee Valley. Milwaukee County Stadium opened at the western end in 1953; four years later, the Braves' triumph in the World Series created pandemonium in the streets. The Valley power plant was completed two miles downstream in 1969; it became America's largest cogeneration facility, providing power for electric customers and steam heat for the city's downtown. Year by year, the Valley lost economic mass, and quiet reigned where there once had been the shriek of factory whistles and the pounding of machinery.

By the late 1970s, city officials were concerned enough to take corrective action. Mayor Henry Maier's administration rebuilt roads, cleared blight, and bought land in the Valley. There was some irony in the creation of an industrial land bank in the middle of a one-time industrial powerhouse, but Maier was clear about his priorities: "The major goal in the Valley is to provide jobs." Writing in 1978, the mayor saw no limit to the district's potential:

This area holds out the strongest hope for this city's continued economic stability. It is the engine that drives our economy and that engine is rapidly gaining in strength and sustaining power. The Menomonee Valley redevelopment project is probably the largest industrial revitalization project in the country and I am determined that it will also be the best.

Maier may have overstated the case. The city built a new municipal garage on Canal Street, improved truck access to the Valley, and helped to erect the largest recycling plant in the country, but those steps constituted something less than a transformation.

The pace quickened after Mayor John Norquist took office in 1988. A series of public and private initiatives, not all of them coordinated, raised expectations for an area that had become one of the most underused in central Milwaukee. Jobs remained the focus, but there was a new emphasis on amenities that would integrate the Valley with the larger community: bicycle trails, open space, and even a proposed golf course. "Ultimately, we're going to have a very beautiful valley," said Norquist in 1998. Private-sector developments were already changing the face of the Menomonee Valley. Marquette University developed its Valley Fields athletic complex on the site of an old coal yard, and in 1991 the Potawatomi Bingo and Casino opened on Canal Street. Dispossessed 150 years earlier, the natives had returned.

In 1999, as redevelopment efforts gathered momentum, a new organization emerged to focus energy and attention of the Valley: the

Menomonee Valley Partners. MVP's members represent a comprehensive range of interests: Valley business owners, public officials, neighborhood groups, landscape architects, educators, and community advocates. The group's stated goal is nothing less than to "Revitalize the Valley," with an emphasis on "high-quality, high-yield development."

The Menomonee Valley today is, and will be for years to come, a work in progress. Virtually every stage in its long evolution is still visible. Grain is still stored, meat is still packed, and hides are still tanned. But more obvious are the empty spaces left by the deindustrialization of recent decades. Everywhere is testimony to the resilience of nature: wild plum trees, raspberry vines, and even cattails and rushes in this former wetland. Deer have returned to the riverbanks, and kestrels and herons patrol areas from which they had long been absent. For all the bustle of its past, for all the density at its margins, the heart of the Menomonee Valley is quiet, a resource waiting, waiting to be reborn.