The Menomonee Valley

A Window to Milwaukee's Past and a Projection of its Future

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The one constant through the Menomonee Valley's past has been its river. Of course, the river and everything around it has gone through astounding changes in the last few centuries, but the valley has always facilitated the flow of the Menomonee River on the final leg of its journey to Lake Michigan. Along this final path, specifically from Wisconsin Avenue to 27th street, the river passes some of the most striking symbols of Milwaukee's past, present, and future which connect like nowhere else in the city. In this stretch, a baseball stadium and its vast parking lots pass by while a business park sits just behind the lots. Further down the river, two old smokestacks serve as the centerpiece to a new park, with steel trusses, manufacturing plants, and railroads in the background. At first, there may not seem to be much connection between these landmarks, but a closer look reveals that is the collision of these contrasting symbols in the geographical center of Milwaukee that makes the Menomonee Valley so remarkable. The economic initiatives represented by the smokestacks once contrasted with the ecological attributes still symbolized in the parks and river that first made the valley attractive to settlers. The impact of economic growth on the valley's ecology is vital to understanding why the Menomonee Valley and the City of Milwaukee remain connected to this date.

As the constant in the valley, the river is the best place to examine these changes. Today the Menomonee River cuts through the east stadium parking lots and abruptly turns to flow directly along the valley's south bluffs (Figure 1). The river is guided through the valley through a narrow but evenly sloped channel, with occasional concrete lining constricting the water through its directed path. The river bed consists of similarly sized rocks with jagged edges, suggesting a geological timescale of mere decades. The rocks along the river are marked several feet higher than the current autumn level, suggesting that the trickling inflow from the concrete tunnels may swell to a deluge at times. Wildlife on the river consists of a group of about thirty mallard ducks, while a few large salmon are present in the river's deep sections. The air smells

of decay from the also present dead fish, though it has not deterred a few fishermen from attempting to catch the few remaining live ones. As a whole, the scene is a rather pleasant urban retreat, as a bike path and wildflowers follow the river through the valley, which serves as an abrupt contrast to the highways, smokestacks, and concrete parking lots surrounding the scene. From here, there is no place to go but back in time and let the past unfold the mysteries of the modern river valley.

At the beginning of the valley's past, after the melting glacial flow that carved the valley slowed to the trickle of the present river, the valley's ecology consisted of much more than a small urban retreat. When French fur trader Jacques Vieau first encountered the valley in the late 18th Century, he saw an abundance of resources worthy of sustaining a settlement. Vieau chose to build a fur trading post on a bluff overlooking the valley, where he would have been able to see the whole stretch of the valley from Lake Michigan to the bluffs on the valley's west edge.[1] Vieau's decision to put his Milwaukee trading post along the valley was clearly motivated by both the vast ecological resources in the valley region along with its close proximity to the trading routes of Lake Michigan. Although Vieau did not leave a personal account, Milwaukee historian and pioneer James Buck described the valley's wildlife in the 1840s as being, "literally alive with fish that came in from the lake", and "the number of ducks that covered the marsh was beyond all computation."[2] These vast resources combined with the water's connection to other trade routes made the valley a perfect location for early trade.

Of course, a trading post requires trading partners. It was not Vieau, but the Potawatomie Indians who first settled near the ecological resources of the valley. Vieau's son, Peter Vieau, recalled a Potawatomi settlement of about 150 on the valley ridge in the 1820s where they

[1] Andrew J. Vieau Sr. "Narrative of Peter J. Vieau" in Reuben Thwaites, *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (Madison: Democratic Printing Company, 1900), 458-460.
[2] James S. Buck. *A Pioneer History of Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee: Swain and Tate, 1890), 110-111.

cultivated corn and fished in the river.[3] In addition, a number of burial mounds were present on the valley's bluffs. Wisconsin pioneer, scientist, and author Increase Lapham noted that mounds were located near hunting and fishing grounds, as Indians, "had an eye for the beautiful as well as the useful, in choosing their places of abode."[4] For Native Americans, the valley not only sustained their survival, but also had spiritual meaning, as its resources served as the center of their culture.

The transition of the valley from an ecologically abundant center to an economic center had begun with Vieau and other fur traders, but it was the 1833 Treaty of Chicago that sealed the valley's fate. The treaty pushed the Potawatomi to the west of the Mississippi and opened the doors for white settlers to move westward and exploit the valley's economic potential.[5] Increase Lapham was well aware of the impact of the treaty, as he notes in the preface of his 1843 Wisconsin geography book that its purpose was to be a guide to the thousands of newcomers, as well as to preserve Wisconsin historical facts that might soon be lost by their development.[6] In regards to the Menomonee Valley, Lapham notes the mill and limestone quarry potential, which indicates that any lament over the loss of natural history was overshadowed by the excitement of expansionism.

Lapham's predictions would soon be proven correct, as new settlers began to extract the valley's resources and manipulate its geography to suit their needs. Settlers showed no attempt to maintain the valley's ecosystem, as James Buck took note of their unorthodox method of fishing. Buck describes people wading out into the marshy portions of the valley and shooting a gun into the water to stun the fish, before picking the stunned fish out by hand.[7] Interestingly, the

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[3] Thwaites, 465.
[4] Increase Lapham. *Antiquities of Wisconsin*, (Washington DC: The Smithsonian Institute, 1855).
[5] William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 29-30.
[6] Increase Lapham. *Wisconsin: Its Geography and Topography.* (New York: Plane and Burgess, 1846), iii.
[7] Buck, 110.

fishermen of today's valley continue to employ unusual fishing methods, as a man using a netting system appeared unnerved while I was photographing the river. Unfortunately for the fish, the early pioneer's method was completely legal, and the original abundance of wildlife quickly succumbed to the pressures of a growing city.

These early settlements centered on the river, as it provided means for survival and later for profit. The valley also connected the settlers to the Great Lakes, as well as the major land trading trails. The founding of Milwaukee in 1846 brought about the desire to change the valley's topography to better suit a developing city, as trade expanded and economic needs took precedent over the valley's ecology. The valley's vast marshes suddenly became more of a burden than a benefit while its steep slopes made land travel difficult. The river's annual spring flood brought an added nuisance to both development and transportation. The river was referred to as being "off the reservation" when it flooded, and soon city founders looked to draw a reservation to keep it in, just as their predecessors had done to the Potawatomi Indians.[8]

Water transportation was essential in Milwaukee's early settlement, but it was the railroad that facilitated Milwaukee's economic growth. City founder Bryon Kilbourn was the most instrumental figure in developing the railroads. Kilbourn was aware of the importance of railroads in transporting the Midwest's growing agricultural production, as he had a map in his office of a network of proposed railroads leading directly to Milwaukee, where agricultural crops would be shipped through the Great Lakes to Eastern markets.[9] In 1836, Kilbourn hired Increase Lapham to survey land for potential railroad development. Lapham promoted the Menomonee Valley for a potential railroad due to its gradual upward slope away from Lake Michigan.[10]

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[8] F.M.S. "Milwaukee's Valley of Vulcan Holds Romans of Wild Days Gone By: How We Won Long Fight With River". *Milwaukee Journal,* April 3, 1921.
[9] Raymond Merritt and Carol Snook. *Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Site*. (National Architectural and Engineering Record Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, 1980), 4.
[10] Lapham, 111.

Kilbourn raised $100,000 in capital and obtained the charter for the Milwaukee-Waukesha railroad in 1847. The railroad opened as a 10-mile stretch in 1851, but by 1857, it had reached the Mississippi.[11]

This railroad signaled the end of the Menomonee Valley as a marshland. At first, it appeared the marsh would put up a fight, as a whole section of railroad track including fill, ties, and rails disappeared into the swamp in a single night. The railroad builders responded by dumping "trees, shrubs, anything, everything" into the marsh to build up the land and constrict the swamp.[12] James Buck remarked that the valley's bluffs had been lowered by up to sixty feet in certain areas, while the valley floor went up by around twenty feet to bury the marsh.[13] In the subsequent decades, the Menomonee Improvements Project provided the capital and labor for additional projects. Between 1869 and 1873, 13,700 additional feet of dock space was added through the valley through the addition of canals.[14] Charles Lapham, the son of Increase Lapham, led the project dig a new "straight and narrow" channel for the river on the western end of the valley, which has not changed significantly to this date (Figure 1).[15]

Canals, railroads, bridges, and factories would all combine to bury the valley's rich ecological past. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the changes in the valley's topography between the natural contours (Figure 2) and the 1930s (Figure 3). An 1882 drawing of the valley (Figure 4) reveals factories beginning to fill the easternmost portion of the valley, while the rest of the valley became a manufacturing hub by the 1920s. These drawings still resemble the valley today, as all four of the viaducts across the valley are still in place, with their steel trusses still visible just as they were in the early 1900s. The Milwaukee-Waukesha railroad still runs along the

[11] "Milwaukee Road is 85 Years Old". *Milwaukee Journal*, November 23, 1932.
[12] F.M.S. (*Milwaukee Journal* article), 1921.
[13] Buck, 121.
[14] Merritt and Snook, 3.
[15] F.M.S. (*Milwaukee Journal* article), 1921.

northern end of the valley, as passengers and freight are still being moved from Milwaukee to the rest of the Midwest. However, the valley failed to retain a number of its industries to the present day, with the most notable subtraction being the Milwaukee Road railroad factory, which once filled almost the entire valley between 35th street and County Stadium (or Miller Park today). The smokestacks still remain today as the most obvious sign of Milwaukee's former manufacturing dominance. The railroads brought factories and industry to the city, which in turn brought pollution, which soon had profound ecological consequences for the valley.

As quickly as the factories populated the valley, the newly dredged river became filled with pollutants and the air became clouded by smog. According to a 1921 *Milwaukee Journal* article lamenting the loss of the valley's ecosystem, the canals had to be dredged every spring to remove accumulated waste. However, the article concludes by describing the multitude of "brilliant points" of light in the valley, symbolizing the progress that has occurred since only stars and fireflies lit up the valley at night.[16] The Milwaukee Association of Commerce, organized in 1861 by a group of business men, frequently published pro-industry materials which served to stimulate commercial activity. An image published in 1915 (Figure 5) portrays factories as the pillars and supports of Milwaukee, while businessmen such as General Otto H. Falk proclaimed that the valley was bound to emit smoke, soot, and smells, as more factories meant "more prosperity".[17] For the first half of the twentieth century, the businessman's perspective dominated, as the workers of Milwaukee and the valley's factories depended on each other for their combined prosperity.

After World War II, this prosperity began to wane. The dagger in Milwaukee's industrial heart was I-94, which was part of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act. I-94 took its place along the valley's river and railroad, but with the expansion of the suburbs, many businesses chose to

[16] F.M.S. (*Milwaukee Journal* article), 1921.
[17] Merritt and Snook, inside cover

relocate elsewhere. In addition, railroads gradually lost their significance as trucks escaped the geographical bounds of the rails. Hence, the Milwaukee Road went bankrupt in 1977, leaving behind a toxic wasteland that signified the fall of Milwaukee's industrial prosperity.

With the fall of the valley's industries, city leaders looked to revitalize the fallen valley. Mayor Henry Maier worked to add new jobs an a recycling plant in the 1980s, while Mayor John Norquist helped bring the Potawatomis back to the valley in 1991, ironically by opening a casino.[18] `Milwaukee Brewers owner Bud Selig's lobbying efforts in the mid-1990s helped to build Miller Park, whose parking lots helped to cover some of the Milwaukee Road wasteland. The 1990s brought other significant change to the valley, as the Menomonee Valley Business Association formed in 1992 and supervised the $20 million cleanup of the Milwaukee Road toxic mess, the largest environmental cleanup project in Wisconsin history.[19] In 1999, the Menomonee Valley Partners formed with a goal of creating sustainable development including natural landscaping and storm water facilities, while rebuilding the workforce at the same time. Therefore, the Menomonee Valley of the future looks to include the best of Jacques Vieau's valley and the best of Otto Falk's valley, as both ecological and economic needs are being given equal priority.

The Menomonee Valley never lost most of its original features, even though the bluffs have been shortened, the river remains channeled, and wildlife has been reduced. The recent improvements are gradually bringing together urban civilization and nature to create a modern, clean urban oasis (Figure 6). Adjectives such as "wilderness" or "marshland" will certainly never apply to the Menomonee Valley again, but wildflowers and trees have been planted, while most pollution has been reduced so at least some fish can survive in the river. Theses projects are not

[18] John Gruda. "The Menomonee Valley: A Historical Overview". Menomonee Valley Partners Website. <http://www.renewthevalley.org/files/pdf/GurdaValleyHistory.pdf>
[19] City of Milwaukee. "City Completes Largest Environmental Cleanup Project in History" Department of City Developlement. November 28, 2004. < http://www.mkedcd.org/news/2004/MRVcleanup.html>

yet completed, but it is already clear that the valley will remain a central geographic, ecologic, and economic component of Milwaukee for many years to come.

Figure 1: The Menomonee River as it cuts perpendicular to the valley through the stadium parking lots

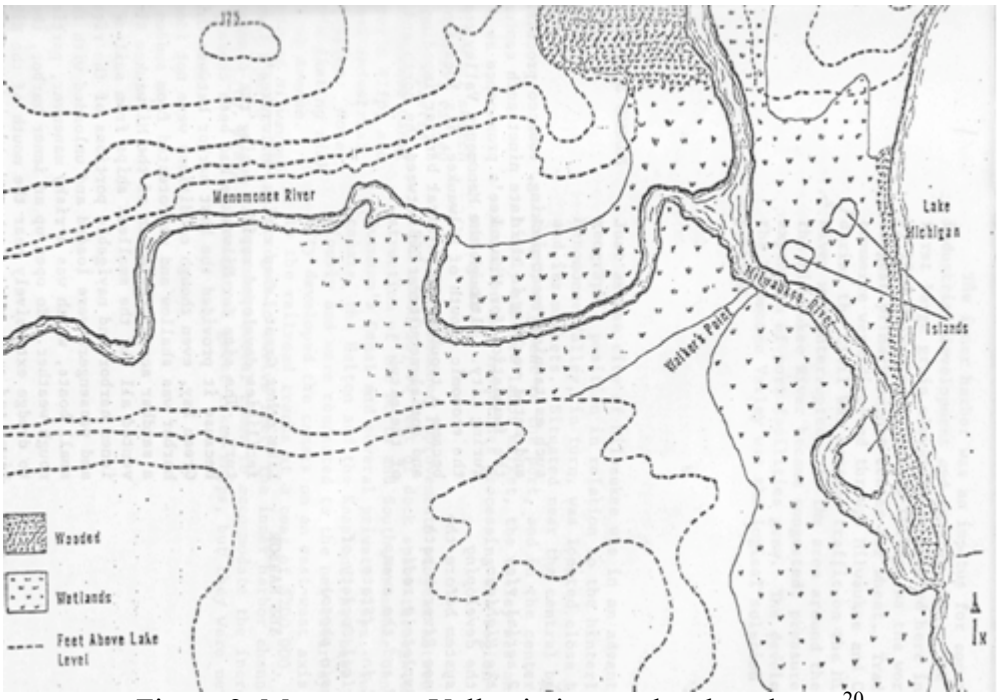

Figure 2: Menomonee Valley in its pre-developed state[20]

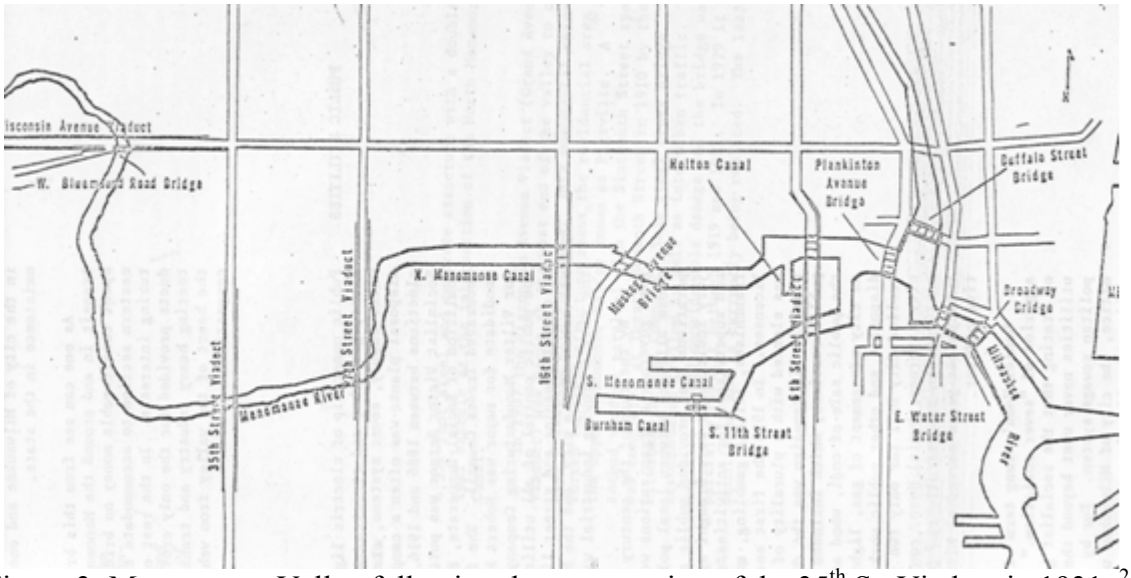

Figure 3: Menomonee Valley following the construction of the 35th St. Viaduct in 1931. [21]

[20] Merritt and Snook, 1.
[21] Ibid., 11.

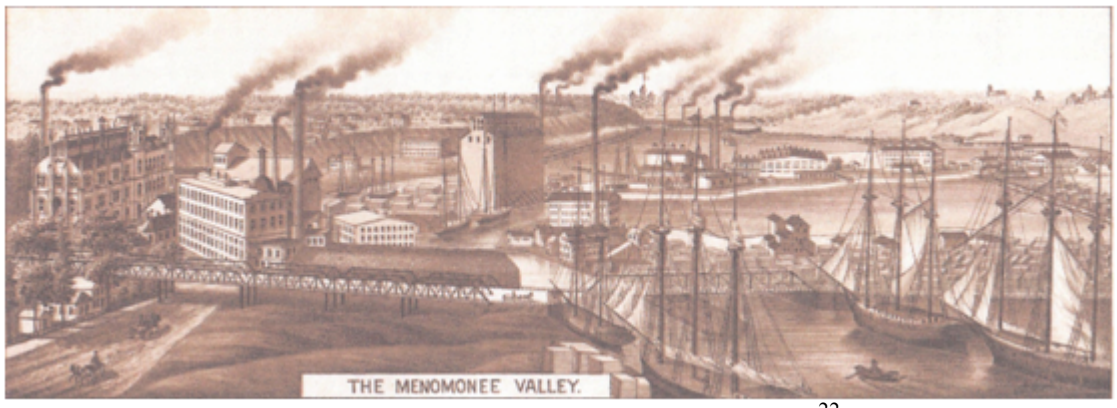

Figure 4: The Menomonee Valley in 1882[22]

Figure 5: Promotional drawing for industry in Milwaukee

[22] Milwaukee, Wis. Map. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division. 1882.

Figure 6: The new Chimney Park, which combines green space and a bike trail with the old Milwaukee Road smokestacks and steel trussed 35th St. viaduct