

A WONDERLAND ON THE RIVER

Story by Larry Widen

At the beginning of the 20th century, Milwaukee had a number of large amusement parks that offered warm weather enjoyment to the public. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, city residents traveled by electric trolley to the parks for an afternoon or evening of music, theater, dancing, and thrills. Their destinations included Pabst, Blatz, and Schlitz Parks, White City, Chutes Park, and the Whitefish Bay Resort. But the biggest and brightest of the local amusement parks was a veritable wonderland located on the Milwaukee River in Shorewood.



Amusement parks became an important part of America's entertainment culture in the years following the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. Among other things, the fair offered a huge, vertical steel wheel designed by engineer George Ferris. His invention carried seated passengers two-and-a-half revolutions into the air, affording them a splendid view of the Exposition and surrounding areas. The Columbian Exposition

also displayed an amusement park midway, which, to the dismay of the promoters, was far more popular with visitors than the fair's scientific and cultural pavilions.

The public's thirst for more of these attractions led entrepreneurs across the country to construct parks of their own, adding water slides, roller coasters, carousels, and of course, Ferris's wheel. The benchmark was quickly established by Dreamland, Luna Park, and Steeplechase Park, the elaborate amusement parks at New York City's Coney Island. The growth of amusement parks nationally was assisted by urban electric trolley cars that extended their passenger service beyond the city limits. Knowing customers now had a way to get there, amusement park operators began to utilize previously inaccessible suburban lands.

Oscar Miller, a Milwaukee theatrical manager, made plans for a New York-style amusement park to accommodate city residents. Miller's career in show business began in 1880 when he leased a small vaudeville theater at South 2nd and Pierce Streets. Later, with financial backing from the Uihlein family, he opened a theater within the Exposition Building (located on the site of the present Auditorium at 6th and Kilbourn) and presented summer musicals and opera in the Schlitz Park theater at 8th and Walnut Streets. In 1896, when the Schlitz brewery built the Alhambra theater at 4th and Wisconsin, the Uihleins appointed Miller as the manager.



To begin construction on what was to be Milwaukee's finest outdoor amusement park, Miller found a large tract of land near the 3500 block of North Oakland Avenue. The location had a history of being a summer recreation spot that dated back to 1870 when Frederick A. Lueddeman transformed a portion of his farm into public picnic grounds that became known as Lueddeman's-On-The-River.

The park offered several gazebos and a number of benches that overlooked the river. Crowds watched boat races on Sunday afternoons and children swam in the cool waters. A decade later, Lueddeman's was sold for \$9,000 to Otto Zwietusch, a local soda water manufacturer, who renamed it Mineral Springs Park. Zwietusch added a few more amenities for visitors, such as a

billiard hall, restaurant, and music pavilion, but he operated the resort primarily as an advertisement for his line of soda and mineral waters.

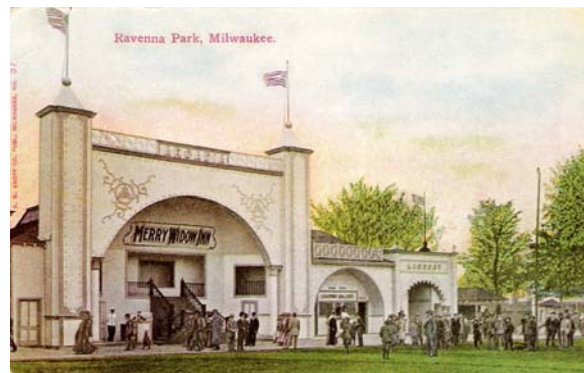


It was Mineral Springs, down on its heels twenty years later, that caught Oscar Miller's eye. The 33 acres, bounded by Menlo, Edgewood, and Oakland Avenues and the Milwaukee river, could be rebuilt into his dream park. Even more attractive was the price; Zweitusch's heirs were looking to unload the property, and Miller, without revealing his plans to renovate the park, negotiated a shrewd deal to acquire it. No doubt the sellers were a bit dismayed to see a front page story in the Milwaukee Sentinel several days later that proclaimed "One of the greatest

amusement enterprises ever contemplated outside of Coney Island will be launched in Milwaukee early this summer."

Miller's park, which he actually called Coney Island, opened to the public on Sunday, June 10, 1900 with nearly 30,000 in attendance. Admission to the grounds, through the Menlo Avenue gate, was free. A band concert on the lawn and a high-wire aerialist act were among the attractions that were also offered at no charge. However, Coney Island's biggest rides and shows had separate ticket charges attached. The Scenic Railway, a huge wooden roller coaster that wove through the grounds was very popular, as was the Oriental Elephant, a massive funhouse shaped like its namesake that boasted a "haunted center," if one could find it. Coney Island also had several theaters that offered opera and various vaudeville acts such as acrobats, comedians, jugglers, dancers and singers. Beer gardens, refreshment stands, shooting galleries, games of chance, a boat launch and a zoo rounded out the park's offerings.

Despite Oscar Miller's best efforts to make Coney Island a profitable venture, the park closed after three seasons. His only failure in thirty years of show business, Miller simply could not make enough money operating during the 14 warm-weather weeks of the year.



The property remained dormant until 1905 when it was purchased and reopened under the name Wonderland. New rides, including a Ferris wheel, water chutes, and the 200-foot Electric Tower were added, and the crowds returned. Four years later Wonderland was purchased by R. W Hopkins and renamed Ravenna Park. Ravenna operated until 1916, when the Village of Shorewood, acting on residents' complaints of noise, trash, and boisterous behavior associated with the park, refused to issue the owners a permit to continue.

When Ravenna Park closed, the park's 33 acres were split three ways. The Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light company bought the southern portion of the land and constructed new streetcar barns. To the north, a subdivision was created and Newton and Menlo Avenues and Morris Boulevard were extended. The remainder was allotted for the site of what is now Hubbard Park.

