

Milwaukee Notebook

The people and events that shaped a city

Drinking Pabst in Whitefish Bay



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[/pabst_whitefish_bay_1909-e1435364905869.jpg](#)

The Pabst Whitefish Bay Resort was a favorite summer destination for Milwaukeeans, as famous for its planked whitefish dinners as it was for ice cold lager. Carl Swanson collection

In the 1880s, Captain Frederick Pabst built a magnificent beer garden, restaurant, hotel, and amusement park on 200 wooded acres atop a bluff in Whitefish Bay. With 1,000 feet of lake frontage and about 1,100 feet on Lake Drive, the new Pabst Whitefish Bay Resort occupied what real estate experts of the time called the finest piece of property north of Lake Park. It was also then far out in the country, distant from the heat, smoke, and noise of the city but still close enough to reach by steam train, horse and carriage, or by one of several boats making regular trips between downtown Milwaukee and the resort.

For much of its history, Henry Konopka, formerly the manager of the Pabst Co. store room, operated the resort under a lease arrangement. He made sure a fine dance band was always on hand and his planked whitefish dinners (the fish being caught in the nearby bay) gave the resort a nationally famous signature dish. Surprisingly, for a beer garden, there were days the company's famous lager was not available. The resort was a popular spot for school picnics, and it was an iron-clad rule of Capt. Pabst that no beer was to be served while a school group was on the grounds.



[/pabst_whitefish_bay-e1435364927444.jpg](https://milwaukeeenotebook.files.wordpress.com/2015/06)

A long switchback sidewalk connected the resort's pier on Lake Michigan with the park grounds atop the high bluff. If nothing else, the climb was good for working up a thirst. Carl Swanson collection

Prospect Avenue and Lake Drive – so called from their locations along the edge of the grass-covered bluff – following the lake, turning slightly to the right, becomes one of the most beautiful drives of our great country, following the shore for over five miles, giving glimpses through the trees of the limpid water and by turns embowered by the great arching oaks and elms, passing through Lake Park leads to what is known as the Pabst Whitefish Bay Resort. Resting on the bluff, its site admirably chosen at the very center of a deep, perfectly semi-circular, sweeping bay, upon the grassy bank over a hundred feet above the surface of the water, and shaded by a grove of arching trees, is the pavilion building. It is accessible primarily by the broad and perfect highway already described, by electric cars, the railroad, and by steamer. During the summer season daily concerts are given by a celebrated band, and rarely do strangers come to Milwaukee who do not spend at least an afternoon or evening at this famous place. – C.N. Caspar Co.'s *Guide to the City of Milwaukee*, Sixth Edition, 1904.

The railroad mentioned, the Milwaukee & Whitefish Bay, was a bit of a joke. Early accounts talk of the railway's diminutive steam "dummy" locomotive, which, with a terrific amount of wheezing and puffing, managed to drag a three-car train from Milwaukee to Whitefish Bay, very slowly.



[/steam_dummy-e1435717644121.jpg](https://milwaukeeenotebook.files.wordpress.com/2015/06)

The Milwaukee & Whitefish Bay operated a steam train service between Milwaukee and the North Shore starting in 1888 using this 12-ton "dummy" locomotive.

There is a tale, repeated in several local histories, that the little engine had a stuffed horse mounted in front so the train wouldn't frighten real horses. It's a nice story but it's not true. A "dummy locomotive" is one in which a wooden box structure – looking a bit like a passenger coach – surrounds the steam boiler and drive linkage. Yes, the point of the enclosed design was to prevent panic among horses. No, the design did not

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include a dummy horse.



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/pabst from lake.jpg)

In the 1880s, Captain Frederick Pabst built an elegant resort on 200 acres overlooking Lake Michigan. The beer garden included the Hotel Bellevue, shown here, amusement rides, a restaurant, live music, and, of course, plenty of cold lager. Postcard collection of Carl Swanson

The Milwaukee & Whitefish Bay Ry. was soon replaced by Milwaukee's rapidly expanding streetcar system. The electric cars were quiet, fast, and clean. It is not known what horses thought of the new trolleys but they were certainly a hit with passengers. The resort's business surged dramatically. On Saturdays and Sundays conductors worked 12 to 14 hour days to accommodate the crowds. For this they earned 19 cents an hour. The fare was five cents from Whitefish Bay to the Milwaukee city limits. There conductors collected an additional five cents from riders wishing to continue on into the city.



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/bloomer girl dock.jpg)

There were several ways to get to the Pabst Whitefish Bay Resort: steam train, horse-drawn carriage, bicycle, or via the "Bloomer Girl." This boat shuttled between a downtown dock and the resort's pier on Lake Michigan. Postcard collection of Carl Swanson

Or one could choose to travel by steamship. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* recalled in a 1967 article:

"A favorite Sunday outing for our Milwaukee grandfathers and grandmothers was a trip to the resort aboard the excursion steamer *Bloomer Girl*. Passengers boarded this craft in downtown Milwaukee at the Wisconsin Avenue bridge and lined the rails as it steamed down the river, out across the harbor and into the lake. At Whitefish Bay, the boat docked at long piers that projected out into the water some 200 feet at the foot of what is now East Sylvan Avenue.

"The excursionist would disembark and climb the steps to the resort at the top of the bluff. There the fun seekers could dine and dance and listen to name bands. There was a bandstand with its Sunday concerts, picnic tables in the woods overlooking Lake Michigan, beer gardens, and even a ferris wheel."



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[/ferris_wheel-e1435531603798.jpg](#))

The Ferris wheel was invented by George W. Ferris, and was a sensation when it was introduced at the Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Later that same year the Pabst resort installed a smaller version of the famous ride. Carl Swanson collection

Summer after summer, the visitors arrived. Seated at small round tables they enjoyed a lovely view of the curving bay and Lake Michigan while music floated through the trees and children shouted and laughed on the amusement rides. But as the years passed an evening under twinkling lantern lights, surrounded by music and loved ones and with a glass of lager close at hand, didn't appeal to a younger generation uninterested in old country ideas of entertainment.

The Whitefish Bay Resort closed after the 1913 season. The *Bloomer Girl* finished her days shuttling between port cities in South America.

There was talk of making the old garden, with its spectacular views of the lake, into a county park. The Pabst Co. had other plans. Divided into residential lots the land was sold piece-by-piece (to select friends of the company, or so it was hinted). It was not a popular decision. In its April 20, 1914 edition, the *Milwaukee Journal* reported:

The popularity of Pabst park, Whitefish Bay, as an outing ground for residents of Milwaukee was illustrated Sunday when hundreds visited the place, although all the buildings have been taken away and it is being plotted for a residence district. The crowd was so great that the streetcar company found it necessary to run extra cars. The purchases by county or city officials of this resort for park purposes was advocated last year by many people.

"This would have been an ideal outing place," said a man who stood on the high shore overlooking the lake. "Not to buy such grounds as these when opportunity offers shows penny wisdom. People will not realize the loss until this bit of lake shore is closed permanently to the public."



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[/whitefishbay_locator.jpg](#))

After the resort closed, Pabst divided the lake front property into several large lots for residential construction. The lots are northeast of the intersection of Lake Drive and Henry Clay Boulevard.

Carl

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Well done! Excellent story with a great mix of local history, beer history and railway interest!

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