

hallowed ground

It's within spitting distance of Miller Park. Cars whiz past it on I-94. But many area residents don't even know about Soldiers Home, a veterans' hospital and respite center that dates back to the Civil War and now has the eerie, timeless feel of a sanctuary worlds apart from modern life. Plans are afoot to preserve it as a historical monument.



An evening sun illuminates the towers of the main domiciliary (1869), the signature building of the Soldiers Home, which once housed as many as 1,000 veterans. In addition, it held the dining hall and administrative offices. It was designed by Milwaukee architect William Townsend Mix and is an example of Second Empire Victorian work. At that time, Soldiers Home was located out in the country, and Milwaukee residents would catch a trolley or train to spend a day picnicking, visiting veterans, or seeing a performance in the theater there.

RISING FROM HIGH GROUND IN THE VERY CENTER OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY, the Gothic Revival tower of a building called the main domiciliary at the National Soldiers Home looks out in four directions. When it was built in 1869 it dominated a largely rural landscape. The city of Milwaukee lay a few miles to the east and only farms or crossroads settlements were nearby.

By the 1890s, the domiciliary stood at the focus of what Marquette University history professor James Marten called "a stately village" occupying 400 acres. The village had a hospital and convalescent wards, a library, an elegant theater, a multi-

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL G. HAYES



A partly cloudy day provides contrasts of shading to otherwise pure white headstones in the national military cemetery at the Soldiers Home. Some 37,000 veterans and spouses are buried here. Starting with a veteran of the War of 1812, they represent all American wars since. The cemetery still is active and open to veterans.

denominational chapel, a firehouse, fine homes for the director and staff, a headquarters, and many auxiliary buildings.

Inevitably, a military cemetery began to grow west of the Soldiers Home. Its function, of course, was to receive veterans of the Civil War and, as it turned out, all later American wars.

As many as 3,000 invalid and aging men at a time were housed and cared for at the National Soldiers Home. The population changed with the wars, Civil War veterans first, then veterans of the Indian Wars, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. A veteran of the War of 1812 is

buried at the cemetery, as are a few who served in the Mexican War.

A WOMAN'S WORK

That there is a national soldiers' home in Milwaukee is due to Wisconsin's women.

Economically the Civil War lifted Milwaukee and Wisconsin. Demand grew for wheat, wool, wood, and other commodities that grew inland, and these were shipped eastward through the bustling port of Milwaukee. A labor shortage—no state sent more men per capita into battle than Wisconsin—

forced farms to mechanize, and farm implement factories hummed.

Wisconsin's population grew from 776,000 in 1860 to 868,000 in 1865; Milwaukee's from 45,000 to 55,000. The Badger State was thriving.

While the war brought prosperity and some profiteering, Wisconsin's citizens were mindful of its cost in lives lost or damaged. Governor Louis P. Harvey, appalled by reports of suffering by Wisconsin soldiers at the Battle of Shiloh, led a mission to Tennessee to distribute 90 boxes of medical supplies for the wounded and ill.

Starting home, he stepped from one steamboat to another in the dark, lost his balance, and was drowned in the rushing Tennessee River. Upon his death, his widow, Cordelia, devoted her life to Union soldiers. Shocked by conditions she witnessed in hospitals in Missouri, Arkansas, and Tennessee, she directly lobbied General Ulysses S. Grant and even President Abraham Lincoln to allow her to bring the wounded and sick home to better care in Wisconsin.

The Harvey United States Army General Hospital opened in Madison in 1863, and other hospitals opened in Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien in 1864.

As the war progressed, Milwaukee women working as the West Side Soldiers Aid Society operated a refuge for soldiers in storefront buildings on

West Water Street (now Plankinton Avenue). After the war ended, the women, led by Lydia Hewitt, organized a 10-day soldiers' fair in the summer of 1865 in a donated wooden hall built at Main and Huron Streets (now Broadway and Clybourn).

The fair raised more than \$100,000, a huge success. With this, the Milwaukee Soldiers Home Association sent their husbands to Washington, where they succeeded in persuading the federal government to establish one of its first soldiers' homes in the nation in Milwaukee in return for the money with which to buy land.

Of three original National Soldiers Homes mandated by the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers Act of March 3, 1865, Milwaukee's remains the most complete. The others

were at Togus, Maine, and Dayton, Ohio. The act was one of the last signed by President Lincoln before his assassination.

THREE PRESIDENTS (AND LIBERACE)

In May 1867, 212 veterans moved into makeshift quarters on the new grounds. The grander main building, designed by Milwaukee architect Edward Townsend Mix, was finished in 1869.

According to Marquette historian James Marten, while the home's population profile changed from year to year, at any given time as many as two-thirds of the Civil War veterans were foreign-born, mostly from Germany or Ireland. Most called themselves "farmer" or "laborer" by occupation, a quarter had

The multi-denominational chapel (1889) was built by soldiers who wanted a separate church structure and who contributed their own resources for its construction. Both Protestant and Catholic services were held there. It is in dire need of restoration.



wives or minor children, and 88 percent had served as privates in the army.

Elizabeth Corbett, who was a small girl when her father became chief financial officer of the National Soldiers Home in 1891, drew a pretty picture of life at the home. The family moved into one of the homes on the grounds where she and her brother grew up, using its library and theater and roaming at will.

In 1941, Corbett, by then a successful novelist, published *Out at the Soldiers' Home*, a memoir that put flesh and names on real people who occupied the National Soldiers Home.

The veterans could voluntarily check into the home and they could voluntarily leave it, but while they were there they observed a military-like regimen. They were organized into companies, stood weekly inspections, wore uniforms, arose at six to a bugle call, ate

communally in a huge dining room in the main building, worked according to their abilities, and needed a pass to leave the grounds.

And while any of them could bathe as frequently as they wished, all were required to take a bath a week. One particularly "hard case" checked in, Miss Corbett reported, and promptly checked out again when he learned of the bathing rule. "I ain't had a bath since I fell in the river at the Battle of Shiloh, and I'll be God damned if I'm goin' to begin now," he said.

Growing up, Corbett made friends among the old veterans and enjoyed them. The grounds, rich with flowering fruit trees, veteran-tended flowerbeds, and groomed lawns, provided an idyllic environment.

The veterans were painters, gardeners, and kitchen workers, tended

horses, and drove wagons. One who preferred solitude managed the rowboats on Lake Wheeler that could be rented by the visiting picnickers for half an hour at a time. The boats were named "Grant," "McPherson," "Hancock"—all Civil War generals. Charley the Boatman slept on a couch in the boathouse among oars and oarlocks. He collected tinfoil in his spare time, rolling it into cannonball sizes.

The Fourth of July and Decoration Day, both patriotic holidays, brought scores of civilian picnickers out in carriages and buggies from Milwaukee. The sidewalks were lined on both edges with American flags. On Decoration Day flags on the buildings flew at half-mast. Squads of veterans marched to the cemetery to pay homage to the dead and fired muskets in salute. On the Fourth of

This is an end view of Building 6, a hospital and convalescent ward, built in 1879 and designed by Milwaukee architect Henry Koch, himself a Civil War veteran, who also designed Milwaukee's City Hall and Turner Hall. The third hospital on the grounds, it held elderly veterans for years, providing them with sun parlors filled with rocking chairs, easy chairs, writing desks, flower stands, canaries, goldfish, and early gramophones and radios. It held federal offices until July 2004, when it was vacated.





People still visit graves of loved ones buried there.

July, cannons thundered and a grand display of fireworks ended the day.

A military band played regularly at the home, and its bandstand concerts were part of the summer weekend entertainment. The theater booked both homegrown and professional plays and concerts. The old soldiers lined up early for shows, got in free, and comprised a tough audience, Corbett said.

“They liked girls, gaiety, and jokes,” she wrote. “They despised anything talky or highfalutin’; most dramatic conflict and practically all pathos bored them.”

During Corbett’s life at the home, three presidents, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft visited the home. The theater remained active for 80 years, bringing in minstrel shows, temperance lectures, melodramas, and variety acts.

Veterans of later wars as well as civilian patrons from Milwaukee were

treated to appearances by Will Rogers, Bob Hope, George Jessell, Burns and Allen, Sophie Tucker, and a young pianist from nearby West Allis named Liberace.

But Marquette’s James Marten describes a starker side of life at the home. Relying on sketchy surviving records from the home, Marten derived a picture of men who bore emotional as well as physical scars of war.

Alcoholism was pervasive. The old soldiers could buy beer on the grounds, but for serious drinking patronized a row of saloons that opened on National Avenue.

“In 1896, for instance, more than thirty clustered near the northern and southern entrances, many with names like ‘Lincoln,’ ‘Sheridan,’ and ‘Sherman,’” writes Marten.

“A *Milwaukee Sentinel* correspondent claimed that ‘the baser sort from the

city’ haunted these saloons, shrewdly getting veterans to buy them drinks and then, after the old men were ‘stupidly drunk on vile whiskey,’ robbing them in the street,” his account continues.

Drunkenness and other offenses were punished by courts martial at the home. While the records are fragmentary, Marten was able to document violence, fights, and sexual frustration and maladjustment. Punishment ranged from extra duty to fines to confinement.

Originally intended to admit only veterans so physically disabled that they could not care for themselves, in 1884 Congress removed that restriction and opened the home to any elderly veterans.

A GHOSTLY PRESENCE

Today, the National Soldiers Home is a ghostly, beautiful, enticing presence. Geography, topography, and federal ownership protected the campus over the decades, even while the city of Milwaukee and its suburbs filled up the land around it.

Major streets and roads passed close to the grounds, including National Avenue (which may have been named for the National Soldiers Home), Grand Avenue (now Wisconsin Avenue) and, much later, Interstate Highway 94. But none cut through the Soldiers Home campus, partly because it stands on dense limestone bedrock. The east face of the high ground is the exposed rock of a coral reef of the Silurian period.

(The reef was the source of many of the fossils that explained the underpinnings of Milwaukee—Increase A. Lapham, Wisconsin's first scientist and a founder of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, discovered it in the 1830s—and it was deemed important enough to be listed on the National Registration of Historic Places in 1993.)

The federal government eventually gave up 137 acres of the original 400 to allow for the construction of Milwaukee County Stadium and its parking lot and Interstate 94, which cut through the cemetery on the north. In the 1990s, Miller Park, which towers above all else on the eastern horizon as viewed from the Soldiers Home, replaced Milwaukee County Stadium.

Until the larger stadium with its high brick walls was built, old soldiers could sit on benches on top of the reef and watch the world-champion Milwaukee Braves and, later, the Milwaukee Brewers.

In the 1960s, the federal government built the Clement J. Zablocki Hospital on the south edge of the campus and renamed the entire facility the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center. A number of veterans are in residence, but they occupy a domiciliary built in 1933.

Older buildings dominated by the main domiciliary have been grouped into a historic district that is the concern of Soldiers Home Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit working to preserve it. Volunteer Patricia A. Lynch, secretary-

Posters of the performers and performances were pasted up on the walls of a prop room at the theater.





Building 1, Headquarters (1896), was the main office of the VA center until 1942. It currently houses offices for local American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts; the Veterans poppy shop; Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War; and the Soldiers Home Foundation, which is trying to preserve the campus and its buildings.

treasurer, says the foundation is concentrating on six buildings: The towered main domiciliary (1869), the chapel (1889), Ward Memorial Theater (1881), Headquarters (1896), Wadsworth Library (1891), and the old hospital and convalescent wards (1879).

While the library still functions and the headquarters are used by veterans groups and the foundation, the others are in serious disrepair. The domiciliary is used mainly for storage; the interior of the theater is rapidly deteriorating, its stage littered with plaster. Several years ago, the group raised funds that, when matched by VA money, helped shore up the chapel's foundation.

Congress acted in 2004 to provide \$20 million a year for restoration projects at 11 historic VA sites. The Milwaukee site alone could consume that and more. Ward Theater restoration has been esti-

mated at \$6.5 million. At the same time, the federal government said that the best hope for restoration was to find new, commercial uses for the buildings.

That's controversial, as attested to in an article by respected architectural critic Whitney Gould in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Gould quoted an American Legion officer as saying, "Once you open the gates to development, how do you define appropriate use? Where do you draw the line? Would you put a Starbucks in the White House?"

Lynch's group keeps the flame of hope burning. Each summer, the foundation sponsors an annual "Reclaiming Our Heritage" event at the Soldiers Home. This year's took place in early June and included reenactments of Civil War and World War experiences, lantern-lighted night walks of the ceme-

tery, and a visit by the 118th Medical Battalion of the Wisconsin National Guard, which served in Iraq.

Also, it is finishing an application to list the entire historic district as federal historic landmarks. At present only the theater is so listed.

That this place remains hallowed ground is evident. Last year the National Cemetery, which since 1996 had been turning away requests for new burials on grounds that it was all but filled, was directed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to identify sites for graves of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since then there have been a dozen or so such burials. The first was that of Michelle Witmer, one of 20-year-old twin sisters from New Berlin then serving in Iraq, who was killed when her military police vehicle came under attack.

Milwaukee mayor Tom Barrett is interested in the Soldiers Home grounds. In his State of the City address in February, Barrett said he was prepared to lead a community-wide planning effort for the land, especially 34 acres south of Miller Park, that could be used for development. "My goals," he said, "are to preserve a priceless historic asset, create jobs through new high-tech and biotech development, and honor our veterans." Z

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This is a corner view of the Ward Memorial Theater (1881). Until a separate chapel was built in 1889, the theater also served as a religious center. A ticket window at the rear sold passenger tickets for a rail line connecting with Chicago and Madison that stopped at the Soldiers Home. The tracks remain and are occasionally used. The theater was used for 80 years for vaudeville, minstrel, variety, and serious drama. The Ward Theater, named for Horatio Ward, a banker who created an endowment for such memorial halls around the country, is the only campus building officially on the National Register of Historic Places. Other buildings are "list eligible."