

Palisades Park Could Have Doomed State Park

Tales of Other Days

By Bob Dewel For BNR

We've mentioned the Palisades Park project before, but new material has surfaced and it deserves mention again. Had Palisades Park succeeded, we doubtless would not have Devils Lake State Park. In the words of Ken Lange in an earlier article, "Devils Lake would most likely be another private resort development, probably like Wisconsin Dells."

Palisades Park, of course, was the brain-child of one Arthur R. Zeimer, in 1893. The State Park did not exist then, and all of the land around the lake was privately owned. During his final year at UW Madison, Zeimer's interest in the lake area was piqued while on a geology class visit. This enterprising young man, upon experiencing the magnificent view from the top of the west bluff of the lake, saw the commercial possibility and began planning a 90 acre development there.

Zeimer named the area Palisades Park, after a similar view on the Hudson River in the Catskill Mountains of New York. After acquiring the 90 acre property, work began in earnest in 1894, plating out a village with several small parks dividing areas of housing development. Some lots were directly on the crest of the bluffs, with no doubt a commanding view of the lake. One choice lot on crest of the bluffs is marked on the plat for Zeimer.

This was a surprisingly sophisticated enterprise, and we have copies of the platted area, showing well over 200 building lots. Even the streets were named, including names like Cliff, Range, Plateau, Archer, and of course Palisades. There was also a small lake, really a pond. An incline railroad was proposed for access to the lake below. As if the 560 foot bluff view of the lake was not enough, an 85 foot viewing tower was constructed, and a faded picture of it remains.

The Specifications

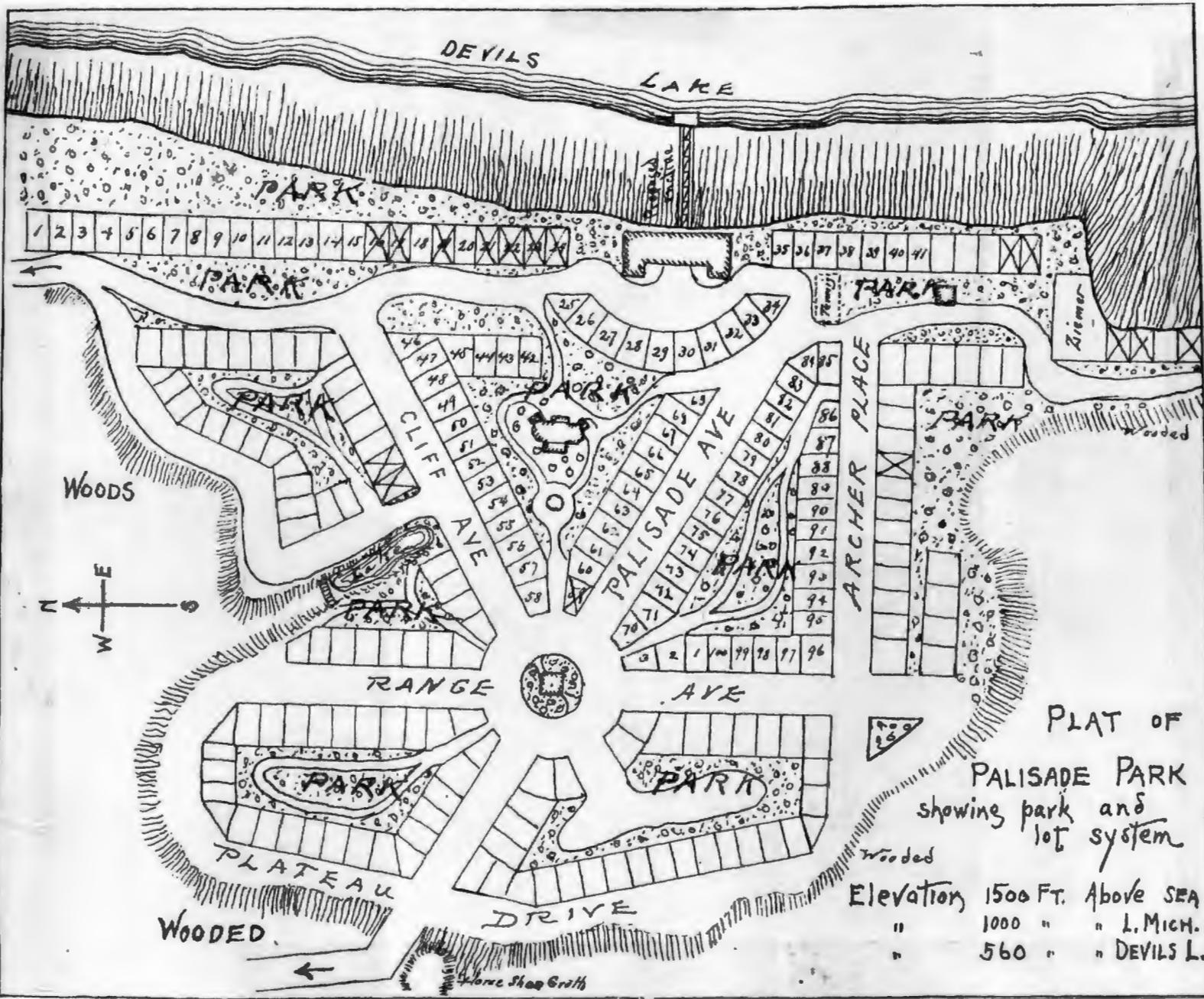
In a 1987 article, Lange reports that "For \$500 the management offered to build an 'artistic' story and a half house with stone fireplace, and deed a lot." Frances Schluter, in a 1993 article, reported that the tower had a telescope, and that roads were constructed with stone from the "Hopkins Quarry on the South Bluff." You could rent a cottage, however, for \$2.75 per week per person. Meals in the "large dining pavilion" were \$4.75 per week per person.

A surprisingly well done 8 page promotional booklet was prepared, with illustrations, for the summer 1895 Opening Season. It promised rest, diversion, repose, and health. A steamer would ply the water, burros would ascend the steepest trail, and a hop (dance) would be given each Friday evening in the large pavilion overlooking the lake. The area was called the "Baraboo Mountain Range" and an absence of mosquitoes was promised.

Swimming instruction would be give, and the water supply could come from the clear "Minnehaha Spring." A generous description of the area attractions is given, and the brochure promise "no saloons, stores, or boisterous crowds" to mar the elegant existence. "It is the purpose of the management to secure the best class of people."

Failure

With such glowing reports and a known idyllic area, why did Palisades Pak fail? Fate intervened, for Mr. Zeimer died in October, 1895 from typhoid fever, said to have been acquired by drinking water from a nearby spring. Without his leadership, and perhaps due to the bad publicity about typhoid fever, the resort quickly declined into a ghost city with a few shacks, and eventually only the stone fireplaces remained.



PLAT OF
 PALISADE PARK
 showing park and
 lot system

Elevation 1500 Ft. Above SEA.
 " 1000 " " L. MICH.
 " 560 " " DEVILS L.

Horse Shoe Grift



Picture taken probably in the 1930's Although the few remaining structures had quickly deteriorated, the Fireplace remained for many years.

Lange wrote that the 1922 county atlas still showed 22 lots. Schluter says that Ben Shew bought several lots in 1923 and operated a refreshment stand on the crest of the bluff. It was the beginning of the WWII era before the area was shut down completely, though well known to boys of the early century as a place to explore the abandoned buildings, and perhaps assist in their destruction.

We do not wish to exult in the misfortune of Mr. Zeimer, but it is probable that had the project succeeded, the entire lake area would surely have been taken over by attractions such as can be seen in our neighbor to the north. Such attractions may have their place, but not in one of nature's finest lakes and range in the Midwest, and now available to all citizens as a state park and nature preserve.

It was hard enough to get a state park started in the succeeding decade, as detailed in another article (**Vol. II, 535-7**) without the burden of encroaching tourism and commercial development. The view from the top of the bluff remains breathtaking, even if you are already out of breath from the climb! Also, the view is free to all, not just to the affluent had the Zeimer development succeeded.

Please Note. This story first appeared in 2006. For the 2011 Devils Lake State Park, we reproduced it in an almost identical form. Because it appeared in 2011, we have included it here despite its near duplication of the 1206 story, so as to show a complete record of the article we submitted to the News Republic.

An introduction in 2011 read as follows: "Had a project in the Town of Baraboo 120 years ago succeeded, we'd be writing now about the Village or City called Palisades Park."

The text of the closing paragraph of 2006 was also altered slightly, with no significance.