

WINNIPEG BEACH



MOONLIGHT DAYS

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Moonlight and trains once had much in common. In fact, for decades they were synonymous words for thousands of Manitobans—those who were once part of the Winnipeg Beach scene.



During the summer of 1900, Sir William Whyte started it all as he and two acquaintances chugged along the western shoreline of Lake Winnipeg in Captain Robinson's "motor boat." Sir William was president of Canadian Pacific Railways and thus one of Canada's most distinguished businessmen. This day he was looking for a playground—a resort site to attract the citizens of booming Winnipeg. He knew a good business venture when he saw it, and he knew as he cruised along that 1½ mile crescent of sand that he had found the ideal situation.



Sir William was obviously a forthright man. He forthwith made his company's deal for 330 acres of lakefront land and set crews to work preparing Winnipeg Beach. Two years later a community was laid out, a dance pavilion built and a station located for the rail line being pushed through 30 miles of bush and swamp.



When the laboring track layers reached Winnipeg Beach in 1903, they provided more than a rail line. They started a social phenomenon. Winnipeggers were ripe for a resort and adopted "The Beach" as their very own summer retreat. Hotels, parks, picnic grounds, a pier, boardwalk, carny concessions and cottages were suddenly there and crowded. Winnipeg Beach lured the elite and laborer alike.

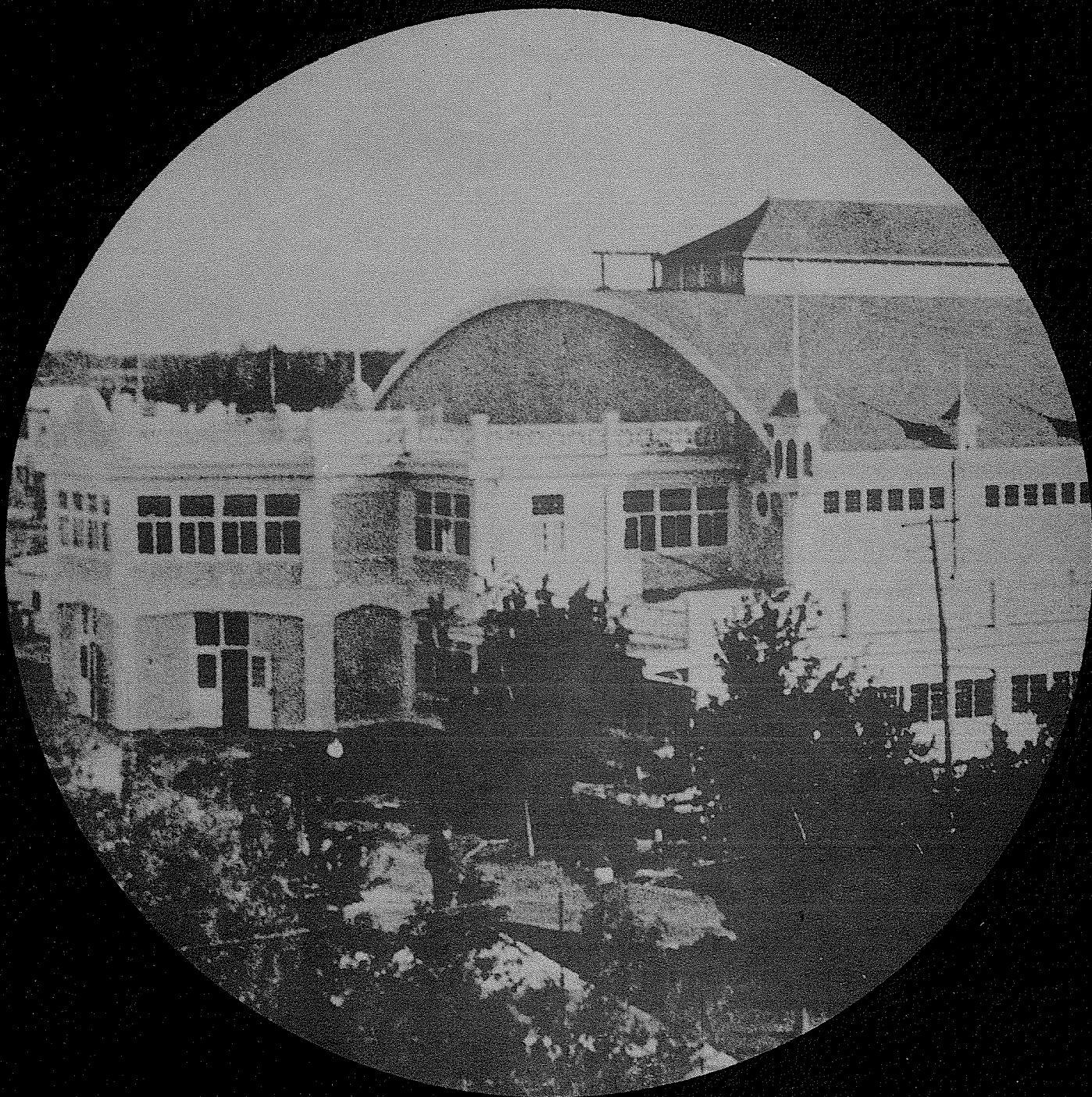


Moonlight and beach raise many a spark and spark many a memory. To those who frequented Winnipeg Beach though "moonlight" has special meaning—trains. The "Moonlight Special" from Winnipeg to "The Beach" and return ran for over 50 years; every Saturday evening in summer.

It was, indeed, special, particularly in the heydays. After a six-day working week, young and old alike would fill the trains wicker or green plush seats. At "The Beach" they would spend the evening hours promenading the beach and boardwalk, dancing for free, listening to concerts, singing at the pier and even swimming. The Moonlight boarded for the city at midnight. And all it cost was 50 cents return.



CPR trains were very busy. As well as the "Moonlights" there were the "Daddy's" trains. These left Winnipeg every day all summer at 5:20 bringing "home" those fortunate fathers who owned a cottage where the family spent the summer. Every morning the daddies commuted back to work. Daddy's and Moonlights were simply the routine specials. Ordinary unnamed passenger trains kept up regular schedules too. On weekends there were extras. One Sunday in 1920 the CPR had 13 passenger trains on the line.



Winnipeg Beach dances were highlights of the summer. So popular did they become early in the life of the resort, that the original pavilion soon proved too small. The CPR then built an ornate dance palace with 14,000 square feet of dance floor, claimed to be the biggest in western Canada. To play a Winnipeg Beach dance engagement was a sure sign among dance bands that they were among the best. Many top name bands of the teens' to 40's era were booked into the pavilion.



The first motor car drove down Winnipeg Beach streets in 1913 and promptly ran over the police magistrate's dog. To get there, the motorist had to travel almost all day over rough, rutted trails. Two years later a road was built as much an award to the electorate of the town for wise voting as a recognition of the needs of the motorists of the day.

From then on the putter and backfire of hundreds of automobiles added to the weekend din of train whistles and wheezes, hawkers shrills, and band music.



The happy chaos of summers was not destined to go on indefinitely. Economic depression, world war, competition and changing living patterns and even Lake Winnipeg eclipsed the resort. In time the Moonlights waned and the Daddy's no longer returned. The once gayest and gaudiest resort in Manitoba slumped into social impotence. In 1961 the CPR halted passenger service completely. By then the automobiles were heading in other directions.



But, Sir William knew a good beach when he saw one and his tastes could not be ignored—in 1900 or in 1970. Winnipeg Beach is back again—reincarnated perhaps—but still displaying the best qualities of its first life.

Under the Canada-Manitoba Interlake FRED plan, Winnipeg Beach was purchased and redeveloped by the provincial Parks Branch. Since 1967 over one million dollars has been invested into developing the site as a day use recreation and tourist beach for vacationing families. It is one of several major sites along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg—an essential component in a destination area plan along with Gimli, Arnes, Hecla Island and the Narrows islands and Grindstone Point.



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Winnipeg Beach now has a quieter personality. Gently rolling grassed mounds have replaced the boardwalk concessions. An imaginatively designed restaurant caters to all tastes—from fine foods to chips and soft drinks.

New change houses and facilities reflect the unique architecture. Playgrounds for young and older are planned; also a marina. The Town of Winnipeg Beach is planning complementary changes. Winnipeg Beach is back again to create new sets of memories.