2020

Alongside Despair: Signs of Life on the River des Peres

Marina Henke
Bowdoin College

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An Honors Project for the Program of Environmental Studies

By Marina Henke

Bowdoin College, 2020

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Acknowledgements

Deepest gratitude to all of the professors who made this project possible. Particularly Connie Chiang for her tireless work in conversation and editing. Thanks to Samia Rahimtoola and Mary Rogalski, as well as Jill Pearlman, Tess Chakkalakal, Michael Kolster, and the Environmental Studies Department at Bowdoin College.

A special appreciation to Jen Kaslow for opening her cafe to me, and the community of Meshuggah Cafe, without which so many stories of the city would go unshared. Many thanks to all of those I interviewed: Arnie, Patricia, Mary, Tony, Victor, Tom, Maya, Mark, Shelley.

And finally, thank you to my parents and siblings who inspired in me a love for Missouri, even as we lived amidst fly-over country.

Introduction

When I was eleven my friends and I signed up to help at a local river clean-up on the Mississippi. We were all part of an afterschool program called “River Kids,” which threw sporadic and vaguely related watershed awareness events throughout the year. Really, it was a way to hang out with friends and be part of the much anticipated yearly benefit party the school threw in support of the program.

That fall afternoon we began at Chain of Rocks bridge, the original path of Route-66 that cuts across the Mississippi. It was a quick car-ride away from the inner-ring suburb of St. Louis where most of us lived.

Clean-ups always brought the likelihood of certain dependable treasures: shopping carts half buried in mud, rusting car parts, stove-tops, tattered boxes full of clothes. The day started with hopeful anticipation.

I soon came across a piece of cloth peeking out at the base of a tree. Usually this meant the rewarding process of dislodging some massive portion of buried tarp or bedsheet, so I knelt down on my muddied jeans and began brushing away debris. The fabric loosened from the soil, bringing with it chucks of ground studded with earthworms and roots.

Immediately, though, I realized that this was not just some piece of cloth, some forgotten item in a pile of trash or a plastic bag captured by spring floods. It was a pillowcase. I felt the prickle of excitement that is so specific to childhood, and called over several of my friends. We overturned the bag, and watched as dozens of pieces of jewelry poured out. Their price-tags were

still intact, albeit caked with mud and musty. I still remember the handwriting on one of these tags, a scrawled out “$450” damp and smelling of mildew.

We talked over each other in total excitement. We ran to get parents and teacher chaperones, but soon faltered in describing what we had found, worried that the novelness may disappear under an adult’s eye.

I’m unsure of what happened to the rusted jewelry after that day, and I quickly didn’t care too much. What mattered most was that initial minute of discovery, of putting our eyes and our hands on what, at the age of eleven, certainly felt like the unimaginable.

The memory long infused with me a proud knowledge that river banks were unusual places, where much could be found that veered from the typical expectations of daily life. Simultaneously, they were the places where stories were left unfinished, where questions were often just followed by more questions.

As it happens, St. Louis is a river city. I grew up and learned I was not alone in my awe at these banks, where in fact generations of river-workers had come before me. In fact, in earlier years there was no distinguishing St. Louis from the Mississippi, this mammoth river that bisects our country, banks so wide they sometimes reach two miles across. Life in the city stemmed from this waterfront, from steamboats lined up neatly along the banks, sometimes stacked in rows of two or three.

These boats were the “palaces" that Mark Twain described in *Life on the Mississippi,* his homage to years spent as a steamboat worker. No one had as much affection for the city than Twain, and the feeling has always been very much mutual (his flattery of the city certainly helped cement his local notoriety, as the man who famously wrote, ‘the first time I ever saw St.

Louis, I could have bought it for six million dollars, and it was the mistake of my life that I did not do it"). In the four years before the Civil War, Twain worked on a steamboat, where he saw a version of St. Louis where boats moored at the waterfront were, "tallied with the citizen's dream of what magnificence was."[1] In a similar vein to St. Louis, you also couldn't have the Mississippi without Mark Twain.

In that way, he also predicted the waterfront's decline, noting it even in his final years working on the river. "St. Louis is a great and prosperous and advancing city; but the river-edge of it seems dead past resurrection," he wrote in one of his last stops at the city's edge.[2]

Sure enough, the waterfront declined in what was initially fits and starts. Come the twenty-first century, few in St. Louis would interact with the Mississippi. These days, the most prominent reference to our once communal pride is the River City Casino, which sits squarely on the Mississippi's banks with an adjoining Asian buffet and hotel.

There is, though, another river in St. Louis.

It is called the River des Peres, and it skirts nine miles through the city and county, half encased in concrete tubing, half run through a wide and shallow open channel. It's certainly never two miles wide, and for the most part so narrow that a child could throw a stone from bank to bank. Its story is not glamorous, and it is filled with plenty of decline.

Through a series of dated engineering projects, the river underwent great transformations across the twentieth century, including a multi-year contract in 1924 that placed much of the river in a concrete lined corridor. Since then, it has become the backbone of the city's sanitary and sewer water system, bringing with it a host of challenges and an increasingly invisible

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[1]Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, N.Y: Signet Classics, 1883).
[2] Twain.

presence. Spring flooding may bring attention to the des Peres, but for the most part locals know little about this odd waterway. Those that know some parcels of information are often ill-informed and care little to investigate further.

But despite this disconnect, the des Peres continues to reflect and inform the city that it runs through. Because as the des Peres rose and fell, emerging today with ambiguous and ambivalent results, so too did St. Louis. The city, once a hotbed of growth and modernity, fell largely to pieces in the twentieth century, quickly overshadowed by Chicago in the north and defined by the close of the second world war squarely as "fly-over" country. As of late, it's entered somewhat of a renaissance, with promising new industries moving in and a younger population staying put for longer. At the same time, most of its deeply embedded problems remain. In 2015 after the shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown, the national gaze settled upon what was months of civil disarray, largely protests from the African-American community demanding an end to deadly police brutality in their communities. All in all, this is a city where division remains strong, and decline in many places still runs rampant.

Traversing this landscape of contradictions and division is the unassuming and often unnoticed des Peres. Its own history mirrors much of its city: of optimistic growth and of somewhat tragic decline. Just like St. Louis though, there's undoubtedly a complexity to it all, a narrative that is not black and white (despite the city's insistence to remain divided in this way). It's a site worthy of redefinition, and simultaneously maybe one more appropriately associated with our "River City."

So, at the close of my own time living in St. Louis, I set out to consider such a redefinition, suspecting that my subpar water quality and sewer knowledge would bring some

limitations. But a year home from college in St. Louis afforded me the time to sink into this content, which I so did not know. With four whole seasons, time was on my side, and what began as an aimless perusal of local library archives soon became an impassioned pursuit of anything I could find. That being said, in most cases there wasn't always that much *to* find. Whereas whole libraries could contain the literature amassed on the Mississippi, the des Peres holds a sparse paper trail.

But out of the modest library listings and cardboard boxes of construction photos came one unusual suspect who did dwell on this river. While perusing the archives of the Missouri Historical Society in my first humid summer home, I came across a photocopied volume of poetry about the des Peres, entitled *Beyond Despair*. Already conditioned from the very few local creative pieces I'd come across, I readied myself for a series of low-brow poems. Maybe they'd be readable, but more than anything would just hold a historical marker for some period of time. I was proven wrong quickly.

The author's name was Donald Finkel, a prominent poet during the close of the twenty-first century. Finkel was an accomplished author, working at the Iowa Writers Workshop and Bard College before accepting a tenured position as poet-in-residence at Washington University's English Department. He authored dozens of poetry books, including *The Wake of the Electron*, *Answer Back*, and *What Matter of Beast*, texts not familiar to most, but much beloved within the ranks of other contemporary poets. Although he lived in St. Louis for most of his adult life, he and his wife frequently travelled back and forth to Mexico, one time on a

prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. His work revolved heavily around the juxtaposition of the already odd with a niche chapter of history, and almost always, of exploration.[3]

In one series he chronicled a personal trip taken to Antarctica. He wrote of old mammoth caves in Kentucky and of a sailor who disappeared at sea after notoriously faking an around-the-world trip. A beloved professor (his son recounted to me how Friday afternoon classes always lead straight into three or four hours at the local bar and hamburger joint just off campus), Finkel was odd in every way. For years, he kept a framed photo in his office of animal excrement found in a southeastern cave.

And then, near the end of his writing career in 1994, Finkel self-published a short collection of poetry called *Beyond Despair.* It's a brief volume of poems, tied together by explorations of the River des Peres and the travelogues of Moses Austin, an American businessman who began early efforts to colonize Texas. Typical of Finkel, these two subjects are a seemingly nonsensical match. The cover of the book is an old map of the des Peres, one I have still never been able to track down.

For Finkel, the des Peres was a place of the discarded. As he said, "I like rubble, and I've always liked rubble. I like things that are broken and smashed and damaged."[4] In his own words, he wanted to "resurrect" such refuse. The goal is certainly reflected in *Beyond Despair's* pages. He writes of the bounty Austin found in Missouri, and also of dirty condom wrappers and oil slick water. These rancid catalogues of the des Peres are, of course, certain realities of the river. But Finkel takes a nuanced, albeit narrow, lens.

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[3] Personal Interview with Tom Finkel, by Marina Henke, November 7, 2018.
[4] Poetry Foundation, "Donald Finkel," (Poetry Foundation), https://www.poetryfoundation.org.

Curiosity drove me to learn more. A quick internet search told me that his son used to work at a local newspaper and now is a reporter at the *Miami New Times*. After a phone call - me in my house in Maine, him on a flight home in a New Jersey hotel - Finkel's relation to my research begins to feel even more uncanny. As Tom Finkel informs me, the family lived down the street from me, only three houses away from the home that I was born in. For many years, Tom himself frequented the local cafe my two siblings and I work at, and Finkel held a position at the same university where my parents are both currently employed. His walk to work was a walk I have done thousands of times. The stretch of the des Peres he walked, often late at night with the family dog, is the same stretch I most frequent. I came to see that our St. Louises were not very different. What he saw, I would see too, albeit it a decade or so before me.

Beyond Despair is published in an edition of six hundred copies, twenty-six of which have been lettered and signed by the author "for friends of Garlic Press."[5] The paper copy I eventually track down is one of these signed versions, inscribed "For Rosie & Bill - passionately, Donald Finkel." The wrinkled copy came from neighbors down the street, one of whom used to give intermittent violin lessons to my brother and me, and, as I come to learn, were dear friends with the Finkel family.

As much as the coincidences move me, I also intercept Finkel's book amidst hundreds of other primary sources that gradually emerged from the woodwork of St. Louis. They related much more directly to the history of this river I wanted to piece together, not interspersed with obtuse references to great American explorers. So while I flip through *Beyond Despair,* I don't

[5] Donald Finkel, *Beyond Despair* (St. Louis, Mo.: Garlic Press, 1994).

dwell on it long. Nonetheless, the collection becomes an anchor. I store the volume on the bottom of a stack of books on my desk.

Finkel became an unlikely companion, but I suspect that he and I had a similar amount of background knowledge before the onset of our respective projects. And, perhaps for pure companionship as I began research on an unpopular topic, I wanted to believe that he would commend my efforts. I may not have been narrowing in on the trash-filled underbelly of the des Peres, but from the onset my project certainly felt like a juxtaposition of my own - to believe I could learn and write about St. Louis through way of what is often locally considered a concrete mistake.

As it turns out, what followed that year offered a broader meditation on a world far beyond St. Louis. Over time, the des Peres has become a tapestry from which to watch generations of people interact with their environment. The river has always reflected human's attempt for control and has long answered back with the raw power of the natural world. It offers countless alterations of what "natural" or "nature" is supposed to mean, and gives a landscape from which to observe how we all chose to accept or reject the places around us. In fact, never did I feel more afforded this gaze than when looking for signs of life along the River des Peres.

Chapter One

"Des Peres, the map reads - River of the Fathers -
sliding eastward under a scrim of slate-grey ice
past pennants of saffron plastic clattering in the bracken,
past urine-yellow tabloids, a froze squirrel
temporizing belly-up, clutching in its mummy paws
one last inedible morsel

Despair - that's what the locals call her -
a moniker, like Old Trollop, or Granny Goat,
but who knows what names the Father of Rivers
mutters each morning as she ambles to greet him
in her slush peignoir, slovenly, pensive, wanton
cleansed of hope?" - Donald Finkel, "What's in a Name"

Initially when I began my research, I was ready to discover a more natural des Peres. When I moved back to St. Louis in May I was sure that a realer des Peres, maybe even a beautiful one, lay tucked away in parts of the city. With this eagerness, I spent much of my first summer on a wild chase to find these enclaves. On an afternoon thick with midwestern heat, my sister and I traipsed south through the city, following River des Peres Drive, the road constructed in the mid-twentieth century with the intent of serving as a natural greenway.

This highlighting of the des Peres seems almost comical now. The road traces the wide-cut channel on either side. While cars follow its track undulating like the motions of a river, the concrete channel of the des Peres remains largely straight, continuing its steady march to the Mississippi. It's an odd feeling to watch a river come in and out of view, not because of its own natural oscillations but because of the swooping angles of a paved road. I'm used to river water's

eddying, skirting from left to right and cutting sharp currents around bends. These are largely the rivers of my youth: the Cuivre, the Meramec, Pickle Creek just south of the city. Years later, different rivers would become objects of my adolescent fascination: the Colorado, the Chama, the Vallecito, and the Rio Grande. The des Peres is a far different place. On this day, we pulled off of the drive, which eventually bends its way also to the city's waterfront.

The two of us followed a crumbling sidewalk that intersected with a tributary stream to the des Peres. There was nothing particularly beautiful about where we were, only one hundred feet or so from rushing traffic. To the left of us were the backyards of homes, constrained by fraying chain link fences. Vines weaved their way in and out of the wire lacing, so thick at points that it was hard to make out most of the houses. This part of St. Louis is a far cry from the professor-studded neighborhood that the portion of the des Peres most familiar to me intercepts as it trails silently underground.

The sidewalk slowly dissolved into smaller and more uneven pieces of jagged pavement. The stream was to the right of us, shrouded by a wall of brush. Parcels of trash scattered the ground and browned grasses sagged towards the earth. Grapevine entangled its way through the clumps of maple trees that crowded a clearing's border, which were so thickly clouded by these incessant vines that even belief of a nearby streambank seemed doubtful.

And then, in the middle of this somewhat derelict clearing, minutes after departing from the guidance of concrete I suddenly came face to face with a deer. He stood stock still only a few feet away, panting, painfully thin and with ribs sticking out like ladder rungs across his chest. We stared at each other, each seemingly as shocked as the other. I held my breath, and tried hard not to move. It was the first time I'd seen a deer in city limits. Seconds passed. When it became

apparent that he wasn't going to immediately run, I tested the boundaries, and stepped closer. He moved back, but slowly, and turned his body to walk away from me, hugging the treeline. With such an invitation, it only seemed natural to follow him. The two of us moved in silence, him weaving his ways silently through the brush, me following along in the grass, as if in some tethered choreography. The chain-link fences disappeared. I wondered what he was seeing, how he made sense of this place, whether he frequented it routinely or if this was all new as he wandered aimlessly through the sparsity of these outer city neighborhoods.

For a brief moment in this odd dance, I forgot about the concrete goliath several hundred yards away. It was easy to feel that this was the wild des Peres I had suspected still existed. I wondered if my prayers of discovering some untouched river had been answered, brought along serendipitously by this deer.

Of course, we were worlds away from that reality, distanced not just by concrete slabs and garbage-laden water, but by centuries. In 1700 two French priests established a mission at the mouth of a small stream coming off the western banks of the Mississippi, one that would soon be named the River des Peres. It was the first white settlement on Missouri land. A group of Kaskaskia Indians travelled with them, coming from the opposite side of the river, what was then Mississippi territory. Compared to this currently nameless stream that they would soon call home, their previous place of residence was one of great historical prestige. Travelling under the protection of these French missionaries, they had originally settled for a short period of time at the site of Cahokia Mounds, one of the most storied settlements of indigenous peoples in the twelfth and thirteenth century. However, by 1700 the area had long been fraught with conflict

and decline. Encroaching settler pressures had precipitated rising tensions between native groups, leaving it all but uninhabited.[6]

By the close of the year, the Kaskaskia Indians found themselves in a similar predicament when conflict with roaming forces of violent Iroquois erupted. This pushed them to move further south and ultimately cross into uncharted Missouri territory, which is where they ultimately found themselves come 1700. While nobody had yet claimed these banks a permanent home, a regional evaluation of the area taken in 1986 suggested that before the arrival of Europeans in the late seventeenth century the Little and Big Osage, Missouri, Illini Confederacy (including the Kaskaskia), Fox, and Sauk Indians all may have used the land nomadically. The tribes primarily subsisted through foraging and hunting in this Mississippi Valley, and archaeologists pointed to the stream's plentiful nearby springs as further enticement for these various Indian groups. By the time the Kaskaskia arrived, many of the other tribes had long relocated, including the Little Osage and Missouri farther northwest along the Missouri River and the Fox and Sauk Indians all the way to the southern portions of Wisconsin.[7]

Although the settlement was planned as a temporary residence before further travel down the river, by 1702 additional missionaries arrived to the village with news from Paris that a permanent mission should be established. This was to be the first French settlement in the new Missouri territory, and firsts only continued at this small outlet off of the Mississippi. Shortly after arrival of the news, both initial fathers began construction of a longstanding mission within

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[6] Rev. Gilbert Garraghan, "The First Settlement on the Site of St. Louis," *Illinois Catholic Historical Review* IX (1919): 342–47.

[7] Joseph Nixon, M. Colleen Hamilton, and Laura Kling, "A Prehistoric, Protohistoric, and Historic Overview of the River Des Peres Drainage Basin, St. Louis County, Missouri" (St. Louis, MO: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District, June 1982), 9.10, Sa24n, Missouri Historical Society.

the limits of the territory, hoping to continue converting the natives under their protection. A year later, one of these same priest's passing brought the first recorded death on Missouri land.

In the following years, twenty or thirty huts of French and Indians studded the banks of this small waterway. The stream was named the River des Peres, or "River of the Fathers," after its inaugural founders, Father Pinet and Marest. However, as is often the case, history is strewn with other suggestions of its namesake. A later history of the area suggests that it came after a missionary mysteriously drowned in the waters. A magazine in the 1860s joked that the name came from the stream's winding path, with the suggestion that several people had dubbed it the river of their own father, in thinking it a different waterway than the many curving streams surrounding it.[8]

But nonetheless the name stuck for this small stream, its banks still so uncontrolled by humans at the time that before emptying into the Mississippi, a small island sat at the mouth of the river. In later years this earthen piece of land, studded with trees and bushes, merged with the northern portion of the banks, carved away by changing and quickening currents brought on by greater populations.

The centrality of the des Peres to this developing area can not be understated, perhaps a hard thing to imagine in the decades and centuries that have marred this now urban river into a relatively inconspicuous existence. A set of old maps, drawn in 1732 by French explorer Sieur Diron D'Artaguiette, which locates the site of this mission with a small white cross, speaks to this importance.[9] I gasped when I found Artaquiette's maps, tissue paper thin and torn from a book of collected essays. Here, the river snakes like a tentacle off of the Mississippi. It's the

[8] "Origin of the Name," n.d., NEC. II P - p. 69, Missouri Historical Society.
[9] Gilbert J. Garraghan, "Some Newly Discovered Missouri Maps," *Missouri Historical Society Collections 5*, 1928, 256–64.

largest tributary in sight and commands an undeniable sense of central locus. In comparison, many other streams are unmarked or unnamed. Written further up the carefully drawn lines of the des Peres are notations in tight French cursive script that I cannot make out. Again and again I see the word Kaskaskia. I wondered what it was like for them to live here alongside whites, whether this relocation felt like one of their own will, or a means of survival, as settlers encroached and erupted boundaries of European metric. Today, the originals of these maps sit in the National Library in Paris, a reminder of the distance traveled by those who came and stayed in Missouri.

Beyond these few documents, there is little evidence of human life alongside the des Peres from this time, and already in 1797 successful American businessman Moses Austin, of Texas fame, referred to the mission and greater settlement as a "phantom-like" village.[10] Unrelenting cases of malaria along the des Peres quickly made the mission inhospitable and pushed settlers farther south by 1703. In its place, as a later historian commented, "there survived only a dim memory of [the settlement], lasting down the years as a vague tradition which research has only recently verified and placed on a basis of actual fact."[11]

Over the next several centuries, neighboring encampments gained historical prestige. Today, Cahokia in the north boasts a network of guided interpretation paths and is one of the foremost destinations for Midwestern pre-Columbian research. Fort de Chartres, positioned in the south on the opposing side of the Mississippi, hosts frequent reenactments of this period of French occupation alongside replications of structures similar to what most likely studded the des Peres. As they sit amidst frequently soaked flood lands and sparse rows of farm houses, they

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[10] John Franklin Jameson, "A Memorandum of Moses Austin's Journey, 1796-1797," in *The American Historical Review* (New York, N.Y: American Historical Association, 1900).
[11] Garraghan, "The First Settlement on the Site of St. Louis."

have avoided the pressures and tensions of urban growth often eager to lay waste to historical pasts.

In this way, as much as these other settlements' bare surroundings lent to a more pristine restoration, it was easy for the des Peres village to find itself swept up in the evolving urban landscape of St. Louis. In 1763 two French fur-trappers, Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau, established a settlement just south of the des Peres, granted charter by King Louis IX.[12] What began as a convenient point of commerce along the well-trafficked Mississippi, grew by the early 1800s into a busy port, central in the burgeoning channel of trade for French, Spanish, and English powers jockeying for power in the fertile and mineral rich Mississippi Valley.

Despite the storied history of this village on the banks, one so emblematic of the trials and tribulations to greet Indians and French forces alike in the close of an era fraught with shifting powers and violence, the city limits of St. Louis grew in future decades to leave no trace of a mission. By the early twentieth century the entirety of the site was covered by the Laclede Gas Light company. Archaeologists proposed excavation in 1927, but little came of it and today nothing exists in recognition of the plot's history.[13] Such a deletion of the past was a tragedy already felt more than one hundred years ago, when local historian Gilbert Garragan mourned the carelessness with which this chapter in time was treated. Speaking of the des Peres village, he wrote, "When shall we rear fitting memorials to these and other outstanding figures that lend the glamor of their imperishable careers to the dawn of our municipal history? For the ground we daily tread stood, not aside from, but mid-stream in the currents of high adventure and romantic

[12] Andrew Hurley, *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997).
[13] Donald Finkel personal notes, Washington University Special Collections.

achievement that flowed with surprising volume through the Valley of the Mississippi in the days of the fleur-De-lis."[14]

These 'days of the fleur-De-lis,' when St. Louis reigned as an economic powerhouse in the region, continued well into the nineteenth century. By this point the Kaskaskias had long abandoned the area. As their numbers had decreased from disease and violence to all but a dozen, Austin explored the potentially lucrative mineral mines of the Mississippi River. At the close of the eighteenth century it was easy for Austin to imagine a future for this new city without the nuisance of such natives, who he reported of as "equally lazy and debauched as the neighboring tribes." Leaving Missouri shortly after these remarks were written, Austin himself would soon be associated with enticing masses of whites to settle in Texas, bringing along with them further vitriol and violence towards many Tejanos and indigenous groups. He predicted, perhaps aptly considering the persecution that would continue to target native groups, that the Kaskaskia would "soon be extinct."[15]

Meanwhile, during this first century of St. Louis, the des Peres remained central to the developing area. Not yet was the river an arm of public service, but an escape from what was an increasingly industrialized and populated city. The des Peres, during these early days of St. Louis, was one of unparalleled splendor, yet another promising feature of a city that was well on its way to becoming one of the urban centers of the developing Midwest. Still far enough removed from the growing waterfront at the Mississippi, the des Peres largely made its way through the outer reaches of the city. Wild animals roamed so freely along these banks that when the wealthy Grachet family established a residence in 1780 at the expanding southern section of

[14] Garraghan, "The First Settlement on the Site of St. Louis."
[15] Jameson, "A Memorandum of Moses Austin's Journey, 1796-1797."

St. Louis, they had to construct fences to keep their property free of roaming elk, wood-land bison, and deer.[16] By the mid-nineteenth century, the property, the Sulfur Springs Resort, opened to the public, as a celebration of the tranquility of the des Peres and the medicinal properties of the sulfur rich spring that bubbled from its path. Sections of this homestead along the river also held never before seen animals brought from the western territories of the country.[17]

A review in the Missouri Republican in 1852, shortly after the resort's opening, encouraged all residents to make the trek. "Citizens who wish to recover from the fatigue of these warm summer days must take a drive out," the paper wrote. "A fine repast and a glass of good wine for those who are merely prostrated, medicinal baths, and any quantity of sulfur water for invalids, plenty of shade, and a pure invigorating atmosphere to all, cannot but have the effect to draw out crowds."[18]

These advertisements were no hyperbole. A visitor in 1851 described the retreat of Sulfur Springs. "I could not stop to rest, or drink or talk over old scenes in the chaparral, but hurried out to enjoy the wild, picturesque and beautiful scenery around me. The spring gushes out of this bank of the little river in a stream as large as your arm… a running stream shaded by native forest trees, a variety of wild flowers and wild birds around me, a rocky bank and a sparkling fountain, and the large white stone house seen through the trees in the background, is a rough sketch of the picture before me. The day was exceedingly warm, but I passed it in company with many others very happily at the Sulphur Spring."[19] A later guest to the resort that same year said it most succinctly, "this is a place to charm me and I spent the day very much to my

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[16] Jim Creighton, "A Forgotten Landscape of St. Louis," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 1, 1978.
[17] Boyd Pickup and Jamie Leiendecker, *A Sewer Runs Through It*, Documentary, n.d.
[18] Pickup and Leiendecker.
[19] Walter Stephens, "John Bradbury's Investigation," *Centennial History of Missouri: One Hundred Years of the Union (1820-1921)*, 1921, http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/dogtown/history/sulphur-1819.html.

satisfaction." Water ran so clearly that visitors described cattle and deer coming in throngs from "distant parts of the prairie" to drink selectively from the creek.[20]

It was during this era that the des Peres provided retreat, a contrast to a city that had grown from 4,500 in 1820 to 77,000 by 1850. This spike in population brought its own growing pains: cholera plagued the city beginning in 1832 and an 1849 fire brought the destruction of nearly 500 homes and damage to much of the downtown.[21] These disasters, brought about by overcrowding, from an abundance of cheap, yet flammable building materials, and a still laissez-faire approach to handling house-hold and human waste, were all emblematic of the challenges facing countless growing cities around the country. In this way, St. Louis was one of many.

Nonetheless, this was still an era when the river swept a meandering course through St. Louis, a moment in time just prior to the tipping point when an unchecked des Peres could not thrive alongside unprecedented city growth. Soon this refuge of the city would be dirty and defiled. But before that, an 1875 collection of maps shows St. Louis in fine detail during these decades before the tides would turn for the des Peres. In these pages, darting from left to right, a thin stream at times, a mere dry cut in the land, a steady flow of water with stone bridges peppering its path, runs the des Peres.[22] It was a river still celebrated. "A clear crystal stream, a thread of silver sheen that stretched a serpentine course through groves, orchards, and farmlands broken with a delightful vista of bluffs, hills and valleys," wrote an unnamed author in 1860.[23]

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[20] Edwin James, "Edwin James' Account of S.H. Long's Report of Meeting John Bradbury at Sulfur Spring in 1819" (A.H. Clark Company, 1819), http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/dogtown/history/sulphur-long-1819.html.
[21] Hurley, *Common Fields*.
[22] Camille N. Dry and Rich J. Compton, *Pictorial St. Louis: The Great Metropolis of the Mississippi Valley* (St. Louis, MO, 1875).
[23] Pickup and Leiendecker, *A Sewer Runs Through It*.

Many locals still spent summer days traveling outside of the slowly congesting city to picnic along the des Peres' banks.

It was a singular photo, stumbled upon in the first few weeks after returning to the city, that turned my interest towards this time before concrete was commonplace. Distracted by the immensity of culverts and rebar, this curiosity towards a different des Peres had not yet even occurred to me: a des Peres of another era, one that had held worlds within worlds, landscapes of imaginative enchantment and entrapment.

Sitting under the arched ceilings of the Missouri Research Library, I found this proof of that past, an image entitled 'River des Peres de Hodiamont, 1890.' It stopped me in my tracks.

Taken north of the Sulfur Springs Resort, in a neighborhood of St. Louis referred to then as Hodiamont, the picture shows a des Peres thick with bank-side foliage. A fallen tree hangs across the water. The river bends gently, widens and narrows at its own will. And almost perfectly camouflaged, two figures stand on the edge of the bridge-like tree trunk. Hidden behind branches, a young girl clutches a cloth doll as she teeters anxiously on uncertain ground. She wears a dress down to her ankles and a wide brimmed hat. Holding her hand, and farther out along the trunk, is an older woman, perhaps a mother or a sister. She also wears a dress, this one white, with a dark belt fashioned upon the waist. She leans against another thick tree branch to steady herself. Footprints stud the sand bank beneath them.

Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N29019.

I became obsessed with this image, unable at times to stop staring at it, to pull myself away. When I talked to people about the des Peres and saw their blank stares of apathy in response to such a periphery landmark in their vision of the city, I would conjure this photo in my mind and do my best to explain it. The pair are enveloped by their surroundings, fading into the banks as if part of the landscape itself. Even now, as intimately acquainted as I've become with the image, at times I still have to search for the two.

When younger, I adored a book called *Bridge to Terabithia*. In it two children explore the expanses of a small parcel of near-bye woods, and construct a world of fantasy mapped out in curving streams and toppled over logs. It increasingly becomes unclear to them as to what is real and not real, and their 'Terabithia' as they dub it, becomes a natural escape. Similar, I think, to

most children, I desperately hoped for my own Terabithia. I wanted a moment of some uncontrolled discovery, where the tenuous hold between reality and fantasy would loosen, and I too would find some world within a world. It felt to me that this girl in 1890 seems to have been on just the precipice of such a moment. Looking at it now, I felt like she exuded such a sense of willful determination, but also total terror: in her grasp of her partner's hand, her clutching of the doll.

It would echo to me, almost immediately, as a profound example of the sublime, the term long explored by Western philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. These men, writing amidst a time when their everyday environment was transforming alongside an ever industrializing world, would dwell on the phenomenon of amazement and terror that seemed so steeped in particular encounters with natural spaces. These notions of the sublime permeated discourse far beyond the narrow realm of theoretical philosophy. Only several decades before this scene at the des Peres, Ralph Waldo Emerson had published his essay "Nature," and with that continued America's long-sought fascination with the grandeur and grace of the country's wilderness.

Typical notions of the sublime conjure up images of steep mountain tops and boulder studded rapids. But for me, few photos have evoked the notion more than this grey-toned shot of the des Peres in these northern suburbs of St. Louis. Almost seeping through the print seems a sense that both these figures, suddenly positioned as some intrepid explorers, could lose themselves in a world far beyond the realms of their everyday. Simultaneously, there is such palpable terror to it all, in the immensity of this fallen tree, in this precipitous height. All of it, the terror, the trepidation, the excitement: it's what I found myself so yearning for as a child.

To feel that nostalgia so viscerally with this image was disorienting. I had never known the des Peres as this, had never had a moment seemingly as profound along its banks. It was hard to believe that I could feel nostalgia for an event I had not witnessed, and even harder to believe that this was once the reality of the des Peres. But, in fact it was. And it continued to be for the next several decades. At the close of the nineteenth century this des Peres of awe, the des Peres of this mysterious unnamed girl still very much existed. Oak groves dotted its banks, quail rested in nearby brush, and white tailed deer and elk roamed freely.

City planners hoped to develop St. Louis in celebration of this waterway, which local newspapers described as the "garden spot of the city." On a sunny day in June of 1872 a group of these planners invited prominent members of the city to an outdoor picnic on wooded grounds off the western edge of St. Louis. Here, near the "golden waters" of the des Peres they made a case for the establishment of an urban park so large that no such comparison existed in the United States at the time. Snaking through these 1370 proposed acres would be the des Peres. In 1876 this dream came to fruition, and Forest Park came to be.[24] In its early days, *The St. Louis Post Dispatch* wrote in avid support of the proposed project, "Nature seems to have intended the spot for a park," the newspaper wrote, "the gentle slopes provided a variety of scenery. Sport fish jumped in the park's clear streams."[25]

By the early 1890s, the park welcomed nearly three million visitors annually, by way of an impressive network of streetcars that wove its way through the city. Following suit with the recently established Central Park in New York, Forest Park was a spectacle unlike most others in the country. An impressive zoological gardens stood at the park's southwestern end. With the

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[24] Caroline Loughlin and Catherine Anderson, *Forest Park* (St. Louis, Mo. : Columbia: Junior League of St. Louis ; University of Missouri Press, 1986).
[25] Loughlin and Anderson.

coming anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, city planners set their sights on the park-grounds for a World's Fair that would celebrate this wild parcel of the city.

Again, a photo from the time shows the reality of this sentiment. In grainy black and white, an image taken in the 1870s shows two men fly-fishing on the banks of the des Peres in Forest Park.[26] They stand in shallow water, wearing dark suspenders against white cotton button-ups, with eyes staring down at the rivers' path. Sunlight filters through trees dotting the banks. The des Peres meanders, eventually escaping out of the frame as it rounds a bend thick with oak groves.

It must have been no challenge around this time to see the merits of the des Peres. At the close of the nineteenth century, city engineers presented plans for a sewer that would bypass the river, emptying water straight into the Mississippi without dirtying one of the city's recreational focal points. But, foreshadowing future struggles, they never produced the funding to build this sewer system.[27] And with that, this period of perhaps naive belief that this type of primitive sanctuary could remain in city boundaries came to an end. Within several decades efforts to keep the des Peres untouched would seem a futile goal given the sewage-filled ditch that the river came to resemble. These prior hopes became an outlandish wish of a chapter closed in history.

So, to see such an image of these fly-fishers in these dwindling years of the river's heyday is nearly unbelievable. Surely this is not our River des Peres? A place that is now a sunken concrete culvert, sometimes with just a trickling line of putrid, oil-topped water? A 1930 *Post Dispatch* article grieved a time when it was possible to see the "fresh footprint of a raccoon in the soft mud of the bank."[28] Wishes today seem even more plaintive than that; a nostalgia for

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[26] Loughlin and Anderson, *Forest Park*.
[27] Boyd Pickup and Jamie Leiendecker, *A Sewer Runs Through It*, Documentary.
[28] Loughlin and Anderson, *Forest Park*.

soft animals paws in the mud seem far too optimistic a hope when for several miles the des Peres does not even meet sunlight as it flows underground.

Children play in the River des Peres just south of Forest Park, 1890. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N28040.

That being said, there had been animals in my des Peres, more than one century after the creation of Forest Park. In elementary school, my siblings and I spent a whole summer keeping an eye on a family of foxes that had settled on the upper banks of the river, several blocks from our home. Walking to the dog park or to the grocery store, on a route that would bring us across a crumbling cement bridge overlooking the river, we watched for their den or for their shifting orange coats moving through the brush. The only other place I would see young foxes again would be in the Grand Tetons several years later. Tumbling over each other in tall grasses, with a backdrop of jagged Wyoming mountains, these animals were offered a different upbringing than

their Missouri counterparts. Their home in Wyoming, underneath the old floor-boards of a forgotten barn, was a far cry from the den dug along the des Peres.

These days, a community garden sits next to this same portion of the river. Its southern end slopes towards the water, offering a far less dramatic descent than the other options present, namely crawling down rocky drainage piles. One summer afternoon several weeks before my encounter with the deer, I felt inclined to return to the site of these childhood foxes. Holding onto knotted roots and tree limbs strewn with tattered plastic bags, I scrambled downwards to the water. I quickly reached the river's flat concrete bottom, only a short walk from where the animals had lived more than a decade before.

Iron-colored water lapped over the concrete. I could hear a family sitting out on their patio on the most northern street of our urban subdivision. Homes at the southern end of the neighborhood, far from the river, have stately white pillars and historic plaques reading 'Century Home.' There are Tudor homes next to Spanish stucco next to Victorian wood-siding. But four blocks north, all in the same subdivision, houses shrink in size. Bordering the des Peres, there are single story ranch homes and warped strips of vinyl siding. Backyards empty into the river, often with fences that have begun to retreat into the bank, as land erodes and flood waters pull straight lines of chain link into undulating waves. On summer days the air can be thick with the smell of sewage. At times the humidity makes the smell stick to your skin. Here, people often say the same thing about the des Peres, that you can smell it before you can see it.

Even so, as I stood on the river's bottom it was enticing to imagine living right up next to the banks. In the early evening on the concrete flats of the des Peres cicadas hummed, loud enough to bring echoes of our region's iconic portrayals: of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer

making their way through watersheds of their own. There was movement to the water, enough that I could hear the faint trickling sound of a current. I imagined nights outside in the backyard of these ranch homes, with views of honeysuckle and catalpas dropping down to evidence of a sunken bank. It's a type of view that isn't frequently seen in the city. However, other realities also come to mind: staggering flood insurance, unrelenting odor, basements filled with water. Perhaps my own moments of enchantment come from naive visions of raccoon prints in the mud.

But weeks later, as I follow this deer off of the des Peres' tributary, I am reminded again that these fleeting moments of beauty do carry a profound weight to them, perhaps stronger than some easily faded evidence of animal tracks. Back in South City, the deer gradually walked further and further away from me, becoming harder to make out through thick brush. Within a few minutes of this odd dance, he was out of sight, making his way farther west, through terrain that I could not so easily walk through.

I came closer to the bank, following a small foot path with ancient candy wrappers and chip bags pressed into the hardened ground. Clambering through the underbrush, I made my way to the water. Huge shelves of rock lined the eastern side of the stream. The sky opened up, free of protruding branches where tattered grocery bags hung like ornaments. Although River des Peres Drive sat only several hundred feet away, it felt far away. Instead, several birds chirped. Water lapped against stone, making the same noise as it had miles north by the old fox den.

While the stream was wide where I stood, to my left it narrowed considerably. In its narrowing, water frothed. Oil stood on top of the surface. The water's texture here was thick, with several centimeters of brown matter floating stubbornly. I walked towards this curious bend, which became bordered by hand-placed stones on either side. Here, there was an odd

yellow tinge to the wate, unclear as to whether it came from the water itself, or the rusted red tones of stone just beneath the surface.

I stepped into the shallow waters. The act felt like one of rebellion, proved further by my sister's tenuous question behind me. "Are you sure that's okay?" "Well," I said in response, "it seemed good enough for the deer." Of course, this starved animal may not have been the most reliable marker for the water's health, especially compared with the frequent metal signs drilled into trees around the city, which read "WARNING: DO NOT PLAY, SWIM, OR FISH. Possible Sewage Overflow Exposure from Water May Cause Illness." Recently I saw a new warning, hung beneath the rusting and bent originals. This one said in bold letters, "CAUTION: COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOW - the water flowing from this pipe may contain impurities during or after a rainstorm." But, the deer didn't take heed of these signs, and went into these waters perhaps blissfully unaware of the dangers that may have laid afoot. One could argue that he could make no sense of these words, while I could. Still, it felt like a radical act to join alongside.

Sure enough, the landscape was much easier to traverse once I accepted contact. No longer was it a hesitant balancing act, a childish game of hot lava, in which one jumped from one piece of furniture to the next, avoiding carpeted ground. Around the narrow bend, I immediately felt the ecosystem transform. Knotted grapevine and thrush opened up to a canopy of branches, tall and splintering light across the pebbled stream bed that stood before me. Had a tree fallen across the banks, where I stood would have been an exact replica of the image taken at Hodiamont, more than one hundred years ago. Several birds jumped from bushes nearby, surely

interrupted by what I guessed was a rarely human tread landscape. They disappeared into the branches overhead, looking so entirely at home that the notion of a nearby road felt preposterous.

Several minutes passed and it felt time to return back around the bend. Shortly, I was back at the broad stream with its wide stone steps. Moments later, my sister and I returned to the des Peres itself, the monstrous channel wider than most city freeways.

We sat on a strip of grass between the drive and the beginning of the stoned sidings. Wind moved quickly down the channel, which had several inches of water slowly moving along its bottoms. Cars rushed several feet behind us, launching bits of sand and debris onto our backs. On the far side of the des Peres, I watched a school of ducks bobbing, their feet probably centimeters from concrete flooring. Just like the deer, they had never known of a time when the river was different, when where they swam was a 'romantic little stream' or a 'garden spot of the city.'

This troubled me at the time, but I also wondered whether it really troubled them. Did these animals sense the differences of the des Peres they tread? It was hard to imagine that the deer didn't know of its hunger or the foxes of the dog barks that interrupted them as they made a home feet from a chain link fence. And what about the bison and the elk of the early eighteenth century? I can't help but wonder if they knew how good they had it, if they knew that they existed, in an odd way, during an era of the des Peres that would come to be as equally illusionary as desirable.

Regardless, history shows that the close of the nineteenth century brought an end to a singularly defined des Peres, a place in which it would not shock or surprise people to find a deer or a fox, or even as commonplace a city-species as aimlessly floating ducks. There was a certain

simplicity to this des Peres, a ruggedness that fit well in line with one's most natural conception of a river. I'd hope to find it when I walked off the crumbling sidewalk. I had thought I had found it in my first moments with the deer. Watching these ducks, though, having returned from the field of pebbles peppered with sunlight, from the trees decorated with dangling ornaments of trash, the conclusion of it all remained unclear. I drove back north through the city unsure of what'd I'd found, thinking of when and where my tires were crossing over a buried river.

Chapter Two

"Salty slattern,
snoozing in open sewer like a bag lady,
copping the first thin rays of winter light,
dreaming of old rampages when she climbed her banks,
some late spring night and did the town.
There's a streak of mischief in the old girl yet" - Donald Finkel, "A Winter's Journey"

The new era that would begin on the des Peres at the turn of the twentieth century was one of unyielding force. I would come to understand this circuitously; what started as a sharp attention to details of intervention and early construction along the river brought me to scenes of chaos, and of violence. I began to see again and again that as is so often the case, it was such chaos that preceded most civil actions of order.

Amidst all this, as I moved through the year, the des Peres followed me closely, largely as a conscious choice. I brought the river with me most places I went, probing neighbors with questions, listening for off-the-cuff references to the river or, more often, people's obliviousness to it.

I tell my hairdresser, Randy, about my research one afternoon in the fall. He moved to St. Louis from Denver when he was twelve, lived in Webster Groves, a suburb just southwest of the city until he was twenty. There, Deer Creek, one of the largest tributaries to the des Peres, still runs zig-zagging through the neighborhood.

Randy's a massive man, probably more than 250 pounds and ironically has alopecia, so is entirely bald. He's run the Side Street Barbershop for decades. It's a one-man-show,

one-windowed storefront, with brown venetian blinds that constantly hang down. The shop looks as though it's perpetually closed and all the equipment inside dates to the eighties. He's somewhat of a legend on Delmar, the street under which the des Peres cuts unbeknownst to most. His favorite thing to do is fish on his boat, and I'm sure he knows the waterways well around here, although I suspect not the des Peres.

He stands inches away from me, cutting my hair. "So my question, baby doll, is when did they make the River des Peres a river?" he asks. Not pausing for a response, he continues. "My understanding is that it's a place for flooding, so when the Mississippi river floods the water will just go back up the des Peres, you know, as a way to avoid flooding problems." He certainly didn't have any affection for the river, but he did seem fairly adamant, even as he posed the question, that it must hold some purpose, especially for a waterway so mangled and channelized over time.

Randy's wrong and right at the same time. Of course, the river's always been a river, or at least gifted the false name out of exuberance in 1703 (technically by way of ecological definition, the waterway should be cited as a stream). No declaration of sewer system or engineering feat transformed dry land to water-laden. There was no bulldozing to create a river bed. There was no official declaration of when the des Peres existed or when it did not.

But as many minor tributaries to the Mississippi do, the des Peres does provide flood relief for the surrounding area. An ecologist would describe it as an ecosystem service, although I would guess that with the subsequent havoc this city-central spillway causes, most people in St. Louis see it as an inconvenience. Still, without the help of the des Peres, the Mississippi would swell past the city's waterfront, above the wide stone steps leading up to the Gateway Arch,

maybe even topping its stainless steel siding, seemingly in competition against the high water marks of the record-breaking 1993 flood.

Then, and now, the des Peres provides relief. In times of flooding, its current reverses, traveling up and north, away from the Mississippi. If all goes well, it keeps waters out of basements and away from roads. Of course, it does not always happen so seamlessly.

I explain this to Randy and tell him that the des Peres has always been here, although it's changed a lot over time. I say that it would make sense for him to wonder if it had been created, as there's nothing natural about a river with sharp ninety-degree concrete angles cutting its bank.

"Hm, I didn't realize that." He continues to cut my hair. The conversation was short, and I suspected that the des Peres was all but a passing thought in his day, mulled over momentarily in one of the many hours of conversation held with customers as they reclined in his vintage barber chair.

Hanging on the faux wood paneled walls of Randy's shop are illustrations of the St. Louis waterfront, depicting sometime from the early 1900s. Boats sit moored on the city's docks, thick with storefronts and commercial production. For a downtown that is now eerily quiet, the streets depicted on his wall are crowded with people.

The des Peres empties into the Mississippi about eight miles south of the site of these illustrations, as the crow flies. Although the drawings boast a thriving city, even by this point in time St. Louis was already being ravaged by sanitary issues. The sewage that ran freely through the des Peres' waters had since graduated from household scraps and waste water to include offal discards and industrial waste from factories popping up in the southern portions of the city.[29]

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[29] Katharine Corbett, "Draining the Metropolis: The Politics of Sewers in Nineteenth Century St. Louis," in *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997), 107–26.

Now, with a historian's eye, I can't help but see these rumblings of sanitation problems as a harbinger for the chaos and violence to come. In the coming decade, problems would grow unchecked, making memories of industrial and animal waste the least of city officials' concerns.

Nonetheless, as a way to combat these increasing sewage problems St. Louis had developed one of the premiere sanitary systems in the country by the mid-1800s. Ironically, it was the city's poor natural drainage that called for their early start on the municipal system's advances. While the Mississippi River was the obvious final destination for the metropolitan area's wastewater, natural drainage to this goliath of a waterway proved difficult. Subsurface limestone ridges ran parallel alongside the Mississippi, making sewer-lines running towards the large river difficult and costly to construct. Instead, without attention, water pooled naturally in areas throughout the city.[30]

Local engineers made progress throughout the nineteenth century to keep St. Louis clean, but often with little success. Early attempts to use natural sinkholes quickly backfired. In the mid-nineteenth century street commissioner Henry Kaiser attempted to run city refuse through natural drainage points along the surface. On Biddle Street, in St. Louis' growing downtown, one of these holes quickly clogged, leaving, as reported by local residents, "a very ugly body of water, which in summer changed to a yellow-green, and which emitted vapors freighted with chills, fever, and death." By 1850 construction of the city's first major sewer began, which attempted to slowly drain the many stagnant lakes utilized to consolidate sewage water. However, the city always seemed in a race against time and in need of non-existent public funding. By 1866 an outbreak of cholera struck St. Louis, concentrated most heavily around the

[30] Corbett.

new Mill Creek Sewer, which was handling far more waste than initially intended. More than 5,000 individuals died in a year's time from the water-borne disease.[31] Old sewers began to age, and their outdated timber structures easily caused disaster. Amidst this all, as the des Peres struggled to remain a welcome recreational refuge for locals, the river provided ample dumping grounds for refuse, especially when the alternative (and more appropriate) waste avenues were routinely clogged. To make matters worse, for many, the option of utilizing the appropriate sanitary systems was a moot point. As of 1900, the population had swelled to 600,000 within city limits, but the entire southern reaches of St. Louis were without proper sewers. Even more disastrous, by this time much of the once impressive sewer infrastructure of the early nineteenth century had begun to break down.[32]

All of this did not bode well for the state of the des Peres, as its once clean waters became a natural dumping ground for household and industrial waste. Especially in the southern portions of the city, the des Peres quietly remained the most inconspicuous site of quick waste removal. Natural sinkholes and shoddily built sewer lines may have failed, but the urban waterway within reach of many people's homes, particularly when taking into account the myriad of small neighborhood tributary streams, meant that waste disposal could be easy. While Randy seemed unsure if the river actually served a purpose, in these early days the des Peres' function was becoming more and more clear: a public gutter.

[31] Corbett, 115.
[32] Corbett.

Naturally the des Peres continued to suffer more and more. A report at the turn of the century described the river as "practically nothing less than a monster open sewer, poisoning the air with the most dangerous corruption and menace to health known, the corruption of sewage."[33]

During previous decades, city officials had foreseen some of these problems, although the disasters that would soon come were most likely unfathomable. In 1887 city sewer commissioner Robert McMath argued to the Engineers Club of St. Louis that problems would become unavoidable if steps were not taken to protect the des Peres. McMath hoped that sewage presently going straight into the des Peres could be intercepted and pumped into larger collecting sewers, far removed from the stream's natural course.[34] This water would then eventually lead into the city's main sewer line, entirely bypassing the course of the des Peres (notably, with strong faith in the ability of the Mississippi to flush out impurities, the sewer department would not instate any kind of sewage treatment until 1972).[35] While politicians were in support of the plan, they did not pass the funding required for the project. Such continued a familiar pattern of negligence in the city, and many other urbanizing spaces across the country. Financial constraints would halt important, and most often unseen sanitary work, merely putting off problems to simmer for several years time.

Ironically, in the same year that McMath's proposal faced reluctant acceptance, a city ordinance declared that discharge of sewage into the des Peres was banned, with simultaneous promises to create appropriate disposal sites for the city's growing waste. Despite lofty theoretical promises, the tides had long turned for the des Peres. While the river was once an

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[33] Caroline Loughlin and Catherine Anderson, *Forest Park* (St. Louis, Mo. : Columbia: Junior League of St. Louis ; University of Missouri Press, 1986), 57.
[34] Jeff Brown, "Protecting St. Louis: The River Des Peres Sewerage and Drainage Works," *Civil Engineering Magazine Archive*, April 2014, Civil Engineering Magazine Archive.
[35] "The History of the River Des Peres: Timeline from 1700-2010" (River des Peres Watershed Coalition, 2010).

asset of Forest Parks, by the close of the century it quickly became a palpable nuisance. Visitors to the Forest Park zoo complained of a "thick, gummy exaltation" from a nearby "sewer creek." City Health Commissioner Max Starkloff warned that the "contaminating influence of the gases that arose from the river was certainly injurious to health."[36] Problems only continued into the first few years of the twentieth century. Meanwhile Forest Park developed more facilities, continuing to grow as one of the more premiere urban parks in the country. The des Peres had become an unavoidable problem.

As sewage issues came to the forefront, more destructive problems from the waterway began to batter the city. Frequent heavy flooding brought debris and driftwood from farther and farther out in the county. Although the frequency of local flooding had not changed, the growth of St. Louis and an onslaught of newly impermeable surfaces made such events more pronounced. Entering into the narrow banks of the river, which tangled its way through the park, destruction became commonplace. Flooding of the des Peres in 1892 and 1897 destroyed popular bridges throughout the grounds, bringing the violence of the river into the spotlight for many St. Louisans.[37]

It's difficult to imagine this kind of distinct chaos that began to grow along the banks of the des Peres in response to a changing St. Louis. As I read of these moments in time, so distinct from the city I lived in, I struggled to connect the dots. The Forest Park I know now boasts of a sewer-free 1,300 square acres, complete with tennis courts, paddle-boats for rent, and even a yearly outdoor Shakespeare Festival, set overlooking a restored wetlands frequently full of ducks

[36] Loughlin and Anderson, 57.
[37] Loughlin and Anderson, 51.

and muskrats. Of course, none of these waters come from the des Peres, which pumps silently underground.

Perhaps in an attempt to understand this dissonance I saw in the changing constellations of the river both then and now, I began to go the river more often in the fall. On a wet November afternoon, home from school, I was particularly eager to reacquaint myself with the des Peres after months of writing about it from more than a thousand miles away. My sister's boyfriend, newly a resident of St. Louis, was eager for an adventure, perhaps hoping too that quality time spent with his girlfriend's twin would bode well for his own romantic relationship.

Already the weather was foreboding. It had poured rain the night before and an unlikely autumnal thunderstorm was predicted for the night. Driving to the northern boundaries of my neighborhood, we found that the creek-bed which typically was quite walkable was swollen with water. To make matters worse, Matt had never before read the signs plastered on tree trunks that warned of combined sewer overflow during heavy rains and now did not even want to touch the water. Admittedly, he did have a point. The river was running high and fast, as a result of the week's precipitation. It was likely that the watershed had exceeded the capacity of its foul water sewers, which trace the des Peres' path. With such overflow, the current was undoubtedly carrying with it human waste, amidst car run-off and the normal deluge of storm-water impurities.

Initially, the entrance to the river by way of the dog-park seemed the most promising, but quickly revealed itself too swollen with water. We walked farther east, ducking under greying honeysuckle and side-stepping past trash. Soon we came to a sparse area on the bank, that

revealed a section of dry concrete river bed down below, albeit lasting for only several inches before the concrete, as if melting sections of an icy lake, broke off into jagged chunks.

Down at the river's bottom, clusters of honeysuckle and oak immediately transformed into slick concrete siding, appearing as a miniature version of the river's channelized southern portions. A thick electrical wire, severed and long out of use, dangled down the sloped walls. Matt suggested we hold onto it as a faux-repelling system. I nixed the idea, but still found an area of stuccoed concrete to slide down upon on the seat of my pants. Rainwater from the week's bad weather dripped from overhead leaves onto the river's fast moving surface.

As permanent as it all felt, the concrete we found ourselves scrambling on, and even these forgotten electrical wires, were relatively new in the grand scheme of the river's history.

The path toward a concrete-lined des Peres began with the city's preparations for the World's Fair. By 1901, the des Peres, although quickly tallying up a myriad of inconveniences, was largely still guided and held by natural banks. Around this time, just as problems with the river were coming to a head, St. Louis began preparing for the upcoming World's Fair, which would be held in Forest Park. The looming onset of the international eye upon the city brought a new impetus for dealing with what was increasingly becoming an eyesore of the city. Fair planners would have to pay attention to the des Peres, especially as plans for the exposition were largely centered around the river's circuitous path.

Officially called the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the fair celebrated the one-hundred year anniversary of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, an acquisition made by Thomas Jefferson that remains the largest expansion of United States territory in the country's history. With the coming celebration, Americans were eager to showcase their technological and industrial advances. And,

at the time, there was perhaps no better a place to celebrate such growth than St. Louis. A travel guide published in 1900 promised much from the midwestern hub, describing the city as "not only the metropolis of the great and productive Mississippi Valley, an empire in itself, it is more - it is the geographical center, broadly speaking of in the country." "It is cosmopolitan as well as metropolitan" he continues waxing poetic, "a city in which any citizen of the world may feel at home."[38]

A city as cosmopolitan as metropolitan, a place promised as a virtual artery for the dynamic energy of the new age, could not have a squalid river frequently ripe with the discarded contents of household chamber pots front and center during their celebration.

Thus, in 1901 construction began on what would be the first government-led manipulation of the des Peres. This inaugural manipulation was largely a cosmetic project, and did little to deal with the growing unruliness of the river's course and current. The city would pay for this in the coming years, but at the time it was far off the minds of city planners. Approved by the Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company and overseen by the Department of Public Improvements, the project entailed simply rerouting sections of the river that went through fairgrounds and encapsulating them with a temporary wooden channel. Accordingly, the channel and rerouting would be removed after the close of the fair to ensure that construction would not change the much beloved landscape of Forest Park.[39]

However, promises of lavish exposition grounds, complete with sculpted fountains and a proposed 'Palace of Liberal Arts,' meant that much of Forest Park would be altered. It had to get worse before it got better, or such was the promise of the leading architects and organizers of the

[38] Gould Directory Co, *Gould's Illustrated Handy Guide to St. Louis, Mo*, 1900.
[39] Brown, "Protecting St. Louis: The River Des Peres Sewerage and Drainage Works."

fair. Indeed, photos taken during construction for the World's Fair display a bleak environment. And, front and center in this soiled wasteland is the des Peres, a muddied cut in the land that feels a far cry from its once meandering path of several decades prior. A photo of early construction, taken around 1901, shows a field of newly cleared trees, dozens of ragged stumps marking their past existence. Cutting through the apocalyptic field is the des Peres, only a few feet wide, bare of any bankside vegetation, and eerily unmoving. It looked as much a pool of stagnant water, apt to appear amidst the chaos of any construction zone. Perhaps even more bleak, on first glance, it reminded me of the photos of the trenches of World War I, complete with Mars-like terrain, and frequent pits of squalid standing water. Notably, such a war-torn era was only a decade away as St. Louis prepared for a celebration of the order and accomplishments of the Western population.

The construction of this 'wooden box sewer,' as it was referred to, required hundreds of workers. Another photo taken a year later shows two hitched-up horses pulling against the weight of a stump firmly embedded in rocky soil. The field behind them is peppered with similar episodes, thick with young men donning dark bowler hats and button-upped work vests.

World's Fair Construction, 1902. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15483.

Photos from this chapter of construction fascinated me, with their teeming crowds of men at work on this river that I was gradually coming to know. A later sepia-toned shot shows an image of the des Peres resembling something close to, but for the first time not exactly, a river. In this photo the des Peres runs dry, and in place of water the thirty-foot wide stream-bed is filled with wooden planks. Some are stacked precariously along now vertically cut earthen banks, others begin to make the framework of the rudimentary wooden tunnels that would cover the unsightly river. These early interventions on the des Peres reflected absurdly simple logic. The river would run largely the same course, albeit with a few alterations. Workers would carve into the earth, and run the water underground, covered conveniently by a wooden top.[40] In this second image, similarly dressed men pepper the work zone, a striking reminder of the generations that

[40] Caroline Loughlin and Catherine Anderson, *Forest Park* (St. Louis, Mo. : Columbia: Junior League of St. Louis ; University of Missouri Press, 1986), 72.

have spanned the des Peres' gradual transformation. Pea coats swing dangerously close to what appears a swampy bottom. Men on the top of the bank peer down, some lugging more planks, others simply facing the site, in seemingly raptured concentration at the whole matter. Different from the kind of construction that would come only several decades later, these men didn't appear to be working with any sense of dire urgency. Cosmetic undertakings allowed a slower pace.

The river in Forest Park, 1904. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N16088.

By the start of the fair on April 30, 1904, the once unsightly des Peres was simply nowhere in sight. Of course, this omission from the public eye did not eliminate the river from still playing an important role in the celebration. For the duration of the exposition, public toilets

emptied directly into the river, beginning a legacy of many future cubic feet of waste to trail through St. Louis underground by way of the des Peres.[41]

Of course, now there is a certain rapture to it, and even a hearty wink of irony. As the city of St. Louis prepared to celebrate the accomplishments of a modern world, the first order of business would be to hide the accidental drainage system of the city.

Despite earlier promises to undo all construction imposed by the fair, with the close of the exposition, and the gradual demolition of many of the constructed attractions, little was done to rectify changes made to the river. Come the new century, the des Peres' deteriorating existence now ran incongruent with Forest Park, a place hopefully free of the urban nuisances that marred newly industrializing city life. At the close of the exposition, the chief architect of the fair declared that the des Peres was "now nothing more than a great sewer" and advised that it be treated as such.[42]

The proceeding years continued with scattered physical interventions to the river. As in 1877, without the palpably felt crisis of a public event, little was done at a city-wide level. Such was commonplace in cities across the United States, as excitement for growth was apt to supersede the risk assessments and environmental protection plans that now thoroughly encapsulate modern plans of similar scope. In 1913, the city constructed a foul water sewer along the des Peres, which diverted sewage that typically ran through the river in its final six-mile course to the Mississippi. However, oversight of the system proved challenging, and river water and sewer water frequently mixed. Even more concerning was the simple lack of a unifying plan.

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[41] Jeannette Batz, "A Sewer Runs Through It," Riverfront Times, December 6, 2000, https://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/a-sewer-runs-through-it/Content?oid=2473041.
[42]Batz.

While some sections had distinct oversight, others, such as the open creek bed in portions of Forest Park south of the old fair grounds, were virtually untouched.[43]

As I read of this era, I realized I was slowly watching a shift in public consciousness towards the des Peres. Noted in the growing amount of literature poking fun at the river, in the new photos or descriptions that peppered early city newspapers or reports, I looked on as locals began to conceive of their des Peres differently. It was becoming less of a river, and more a mechanical arm of the city's drainage system. With the close of the World's Fair, the des Peres that remained in Forest Park continued to be managed as a storm-water drain. What had probably always been a stream at best, but bestowed the classification of river out of affection and centrality, the des Peres was gradually losing its grip on its own name, that of a 'river.' Randy's confusion of when the des Peres *became* the des Peres was born out of this moment in time.

Public works services had already become inextricably linked with the waterway, although the functionality of the the des Peres to both provide natural flood relief and sewage disposal remained subpar. The foul water sewers that already travelled along some sections of the des Peres were not enough to discharge the amount of waste-water St. Louis produced. This particularly became a problem when storms quickly pushed pipes past capacity, aggravated especially by a swelling city and county population. Ultimately, these unconnected and sparse drainage works were, as the 1914 report that established the des Peres as a sanitary district wrote, "expedients to meet the most pressing emergency."[44] The City Plan Commission urged a more united front, hopeful that this would curb infectious diseases - which had only just been linked

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[43] "The Nomination of the St. Louis Section, A.S.C.E. to Designate the River Des Peres Project as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark" (Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District, February 25, 1988), Missouri Historical Society.

[44] "Establishment of a Sanitary District" (The City Plan Commission of St. Louis, January 1914), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t1hj2fb8q&view=1up&seq=1.

with water sources. Ultimately, this report marked a shift in the evolving definition of the des Peres. With this new sanitary district, the Public Works Department would have to take responsibility for the urban waterway as a primary, and increasingly dangerous, conduit of massive amounts of city waste.

And then came the violence. Of such an accord, in fits and spurts, that what had merely been an unsightly landmark now reflected a foreboding power. In the decade following the World's Fair, the problem of this morphing river grew more and more unmanageable. While a wood cover had shielded the city from embarrassment during the year-long exposition and had done a sufficient job in controlling what was becoming an obtrusive stench, problems increasingly became harder to ignore. The river, once a welcome source of escape outside the city, now brought with it an untempered violence, a power that simply cannot go understated. This violence was not some uniquely villainous trait of the river, for the des Peres had always flooded, and brought with it piles of debris and marks on the landscape. But the river banks met a morphing landscape come the twentieth century: laid with bricks, or increasingly concrete. These hard and flat surfaces, impermeable to saturation in a way soil wasn't, moved rain water quickly and across great distances. Thus, the effects of flooding were simply much more visible in the growing city.

Such an unyielding force revealed itself on August 20th, 1915, when a Texas hurricane poured 6.4 inches of water onto the city overnight. As a local newspaper reported, "The rainfall of Thursday night and Friday was sufficient to have made August a rainy month if it had been distributed in a normal way throughout the whole thirty-one days."[45]

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[45] "Editorial Calling for Control of River Des Peres," *St. Louis Republic*, August 21, 1915, CvR Date File, Missouri Historical Society.

What amounted to a three-day period of 7.4 inches of rain (for context, the average rainfall in St. Louis for the month of August is 2.98 inches) was an environmental catastrophe unparalleled in the city's history. Most of the damage followed the still dawdling natural path of the des Peres. More than 1,000 homes flooded as waters raged through St. Louis, widening the river to a mile across in some parts of the city. What maybe an uninhabited tract of Missouri forest could have handled, St. Louis certainly could not, with its densely populated streets and public institutions. A photo taken of what is now our local history museum shows waters lapping at its front steps, putting the swollen banks that Matt and I dodged this last fall into a sobering perspective.

River des Peres Flood, August 1915. Looking towards Jefferson Memorial Building. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15188.

During this summer weekend, the city fell into a spiraling chaos. In Forest Park, the bear pit at the St. Louis Zoo flooded, filling like an upright mixing bowl. Rescue workers became stranded as waters rose rapidly, including a teenager found unconscious, somehow clinging to a fence in wait of help. Newspapers describe the mayor of the time, Henry Kiel, personally directing workers and boats in rescue efforts along busy streets.[46]

Transit collapsed into a series of misfortunes and miscommunications. North of the city, a landslide of several tons of earth and rock fell across railroad tracks, narrowly missing a train containing more than two hundred passengers. Meanwhile several trains that had avoided that deadly catastrophe lay stranded amidst rising waters. Social conventions dissolved. By late evening, elderly women aboard one streetcar reportedly passed around their lunchboxes to fellow passengers while one of the onboard servers was said to have increased prices on sandwiches five-fold, seeing an opportunity to make a healthy profit out of disaster. Finally, out of impatient desperation, two women and their children departed the marooned train to walk two miles towards the nearby trolley, hoping to get to the local Union Station for a train to New York. As a later newspaper described, they tossed tailored suits and hats aside and made their way across muddy banks.[47] As rain subsided, one man opted to swim across a flooded tributary of the des Peres, all in order to get to work. When asked about the feat, twenty-four-year-old Axt explained that he had thought little of it. “I had been swimming around in the backyard at home rescuing

[46] “Mayor Directs Boats in Flood Rescue Work,” *St. Louis Republic*, August 21, 2015, CvR Date File, Missouri Historical Society.
[47] “News Butch on Flood - Caught Train Near Ferguson Gets Rich Seeling Sandwhiches at ‘Premium,’” August 21, 1915, Missouri Historical Society.

my chickens" he said, "and so was in good practice." Ironically, across town a local factory lost more than 100,000 of their chickens to the flood.[48]

Late into Tuesday's night, Mayor Kiel ordered the use of the city's convention center, the Coliseum, as a place of refuge for flood victims. Before the executive order came through, two homeless men had already sought cover there and were found sleeping on the tops of tables inside. Eleven months later, this same building would host the 1916 Democratic National Convention, in which Woodrow Wilson was nominated as presidential candidate. In the place where vagrants had slept before a deluge of flood victims entered its dry interior, thousands would convene nearly a year later, gathering around principles of order and freedom. This day of democratic pride proved a sharp contrast from the rain-laden night where any semblance of order seemed far away.[49]

By the morning of the twenty-first, the banks of the des Peres dramatically receded. Only then could rescuers find casualties. Eleven people in total died over the course of these three days, ten of whom were black. In a city of 642,000 by 1910, where blacks made up only 6.4 percent of the population, this majority was significant. Such began a long legacy of the city's African-American population bearing the brunt of the des Peres' chaos, which would become even more visible as the black population doubled in the next twenty years. Today, with city and county combined, blacks make up roughly twenty-one percent of the population, with near majority representation within city limits.[50] No one would put words to the concept of

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[48] "Young Man Swims 60 Feet Across Flooded Etzel Av. In Order to Reach His Work," n.d., Missouri Historical Society.
[49] "Coliseum Beds Begging Two Hobos Rest There Flood Victims Lacking," *St. Louis Republic*, August 21, 1915, CvR Date File, Missouri Historical Society.
[50] Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Population Division (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

"environmental racism" until well into the 1980s, with the onset of the environmental justice movement, but the des Peres' growing death toll suggests such inequalities had existed long before the literature caught up.

In a one-room cabin just south of Manchester Road, there was David Bowman and his wife Adeline, along with their two young children Ruth and John and four-year-old granddaughter Bessie. Two miles downstream James Copen and his wife died as well, along with their three young daughters, Mamie, Elizabeth, and Ethel. And finally, across the street from the Bowmans, was eighty-year-old Annie Wagoner, who drowned trapped beneath her bed, which had pinned her by the force of flood water.[51]

Reading old newspaper clippings, scouring front-pages for a photo or accompanying obituary, it seemed that if anything spoke to the brutality of St. Louis' growing pains alongside the river was this death of elderly Annie. Consider for a moment, drowning beneath a bed in a room full of debris, or home decor swept into a washing machine of chaos, maybe even of the blood and wreckage of others who met such an unlucky fate. This was the breed of violence that had begun to plague St. Louis, oozing from the banks of what was once an asset of the region. In reading about these floods, I came to understand the palpable sense of chaos that often simmered in cities of the early twentieth century. This is the same time period where rats ran unrelenting through impoverished quarters of St. Louis, or when an infant died in North County by animal bite while asleep in their crib. As much as cities across the country basked in their unchecked growth, attempts to hide the discards of such success often brewed disaster.

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[51] "11 Bodies Found in Flood District; Search Continues," August 21, 1915, CvR Date File, Missouri Historical Society.

Because of the river's later rerouting, the land where David Bowman and his family died is now a scrap lot for an industrial chemical company. Hermitage Avenue, the Bowmans' and Annie's street, still remains residential, except for several patchy empty lots. Determining exactly where they lived proves difficult, particularly because the family of five was poor and black, and lived in a one-room cabin, which was destroyed by floodwaters. As is the case for many tragedies of the impoverished, there's nothing on these streets alluding to their summer evening's deaths. But what remains is the des Peres, which still winds its way around this site of grave misfortune. The river still stands feet from where Annie drowned, cutting an impressively industrial figure with its box-sewer form. What had been loose, muddy banks during the weekend of this Texas hurricane now has the controlled edges of concrete and rebar. Plaintively, seeing witness of such construction, I had assumed that tragedies of this magnitude must strike less often now. I had hoped that the engineering since then has certainly done its job.

It doesn't take me long to realize my naivete, and to develop a growing uncertainty about the claims and capacities of engineers. Sitting outside on Delmar one afternoon, talking to Mark Gorman, a landlord of our greater neighborhood, University City, he mentions a pair of boys who drowned in the river several years ago. I had spent the past days immersed in a time period before the World Wars, in the stories of Annie Wagoner and David Bowman. The thought of a death so barbaric in my lifetime seemed hard to believe. I would soon come to realize that even across time, the des Peres has continued to contradict a futile wish that strengthening human intervention proves inversely proportional to less tragedy.

Mark's reference to these boys stuck with me, and I soon turned to local newspaper archives to dissect what little details I could find. In the late summer of 1992, twelve-year-old

Tony Trumbo, alongside his brother Gregory and four other friends, made their way to the banks of the des Peres. All of a mile from the site of the Hodiamont photograph, in University City, they too were enticed by the river, which ran quickly this particular afternoon from recent heavy rains.

At the top of the banks, the boys found a garden hose tied to a tree, not much different from the electrical wire I had urged Matt to pass up. This group chose otherwise, and used the hose to inch their way down to the river's bottom. There, the current rushed strongly, and four of them waded through knee-deep waters. Perhaps unknown to them, or perhaps precisely known to them as adolescent boys, the water was still rising. It was rising quickly enough and moving fast enough that when Tony tripped over a crack in the concrete bottom, he lost his footing and grabbed onto his friend's waist. Within an instant, the two were swept away.[52]

Perhaps the slip would not have been as disastrous had they not been a short distance from the subsurface entrance of the des Peres, which begins just before the northern boundary between St. Louis city and county. But in fact they were only several hundred yards from it, and within seconds, the boys disappeared into a tunnel that snakes its way through the city for nearly five miles. Eventually, the second boy managed to grab hold of a service stairwell, leading up to a grated manhole in Forest Park about three miles from where he began. However, not Tony. His body was found seven days later, in the south at Hampton Avenue, finally pushed from the underground tunnel out into the open air.

An article published in the St. Louis Post Dispatch soon after the death, titled "River Search Ends for Boys Swept Away" describes the events.[53] Here, there is a photo of Tony. A

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[52] Thomas Mummert, Trumbo v. Metro. St. Louis Sewer District, No. 64337 (City of St. Louis May 31, 1994).
[53] "River Search Ends for Boys Swept Away," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 29, 1992, www.newspapers.com.

young African-American boy, he's cherub-faced with rounded cheekbones. Wearing a striped collar shirt, he seems younger than his twelve years, especially as he grins broadly. He looks like many of the young boys who still live in the neighborhood, innocent and lively, with a palpable shyness.

Or, really like any young boys I see anywhere. One day this winter as I biked along the southern portion of the channel I passed three middle-school aged boys, crawling under a concrete overpass which cut across a nearby tributary stream to the des Peres. Any one of them could have been Tony, boyish and black and just on the cusp of adolescence. Old brush and vines crammed the darkened underbelly of the bridge, with remnants of old fire circles, and beer bottles cast about. Strewn next to the bridge was an old car, rusted and forgotten, with gaping holes where wheels ought to be. It's the exact kind of place that would have fascinated me when I was young, only all the more enticing with the treacherous drop of the streambank several feet away. The boys ducked their heads and spoke to one another too quickly for me to make out exactly what they were saying.

And then, one of them saw me, and yelled out in a high voice, perhaps a year or two behind puberty,

"Hi!"

The exchange was brief. I called back with a hello, slowing my bike to add, "Pretty cool isn't it?"

"Yeah!"

They continued bobbing beneath branches along this precarious bank, clearly immersed in a moment of adventure that I may have momentarily interrupted.

Back in 1992, Tony's mother sued the Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District for the death of her son. She lost. Allegations that the city should have repaired the cracked concrete on which her son had tripped held little legal warrant, especially as unfortunate proof emerged that the cracks had been intentionally created to allow for seasonal swelling and shrinking. The case went up for appeal several times, until in the spring of 1994 the courts released its final denial, and Rose Trumbo, finally in defeat, did not object.[54] Years later, scholars cited the case in an insurance and risk management handbook for local governments, as a case study of steadfast sovereign immunity, in which a state is immune from civil suit or criminal prosecution. The law claimed that the city of St. Louis had done no wrong.[55]

While Tony's death shook the community, the city did not bat an eye. However, nearly a hundred years prior, the local government found themselves in a far different position, eager to outline, address, and even publish on the risk of the river. This was largely because in the beginning of the twentieth century, with city-built infrastructure almost non-existent, the local government was much to blame for the ebbs and flows of the des Peres. In turn, it had to build public support for channelization projects. In the case of Tony, though, by 1992 that infrastructure had long ago been ensured, and this case of death by concrete came down to a matter of individual mistake. This is a dance often played out in engineering projects, one which silently slides the risk over to the public's responsibility.

But, notwithstanding this future tragedy, in 1916 city engineers presented a lengthy report to the Board of Public Service titled "A Report on the River des Peres Drainage Problem."[56] The

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[54] Thomas Mummert, Trumbo v. Metro. St. Louis Sewer District, No. 64337 (City of St. Louis May 31, 1994).
[55] Thomas W. Rynard, *Insurance and Risk Management for State and Local Governments* (LexisNexis, 2019).
[56] Wesley Horner, "A Report on the River Des Peres Drainage Problem" (St. Louis: Board of Public Service, December 16, 1916), Missouri Historical Society.

plan is detailed and meticulously peppered with hand-drawn diagrams of sewer depth and diameter. But shockingly moving, considering the mathematical and analytic pages that follow, is the cover letter that chief city engineer Wesley Horner later wrote when presenting the report to further city officials. So emotive did others find the prose that an excerpt was later used as an exemplar of scientific writing in a 1917 edition of *Engineering News*.[57]

This lead engineer wrote effusively, with a clear dedication to a project that he had long cared for. Horner, a Missouri native born in 1883 and a graduate of Washington University with a masters degree in Civil Engineering, had published a thesis designing a sewer system for Gingrass Valley, the watershed north of the city.[58] He was a proud resident of St. Louis. In the years preceding his submission of the des Peres plan he published frequently on issues concerning the intricacies of the Missouri drainage landscape, with titles such as "Sewer Construction in St. Louis and Methods of Sewer Design" plastering the pages of monthly engineering publications. Few men were better suited for the multi-decade project, a fact that was apparent in Horner's cover letter.

> *Exactly 40 years ago, the City of St. Louis took to itself a portion of the River des Peres Valley. The stream was then a common country brook, clear and attractive, but subject to freshets which submerged an occasional cornfield. Since that time the City has proceeded to occupy the valley and has used the stream as a dumping ground for rubbish and sewage, and because the stream is no longer able to purify itself, it is looked upon with aversion.... The City has forced on the stream a utilitarian character, which it is unable to assume and the result is an ugly and inefficient sewer*
>
> *The city has paved and covered the absorbent soil with roofs until the runoff of the freshet has greatly increased. It has filled up the banks of the stream and narrowed its bed and has placed valuable improvements and traffic ways in the old cornfields; and when the streams, attempting to carry off the increased burden under these handicaps placed up into, floods more than before, the city is aghast and horrified.*

[57] "Good Writing and Good Engineering," *Engineering News*, February 15, 1917.
[58] Wesley Horner, "The Gingrass Valley Sewer System" (St. Louis, Washington University, 1908), Washing University Archives (Wesley Horner Series 6).

> *The city has forced on the stream a utilitarian character, which it is unable to assume, and the result is an ugly and inefficient sewer. For over 15 years the people have been clamoring for the improvement of this condition and during the most part of that time the city's engineers have been preparing for the day when the demand would become insistent.*[59]

The plan that followed was nothing short of one of the most ambitious public works projects of the century. Rather than rehabilitating the river, a plausible response to Horner's chastisement of this forced utilitarian character, he wanted to bury it. The portions of the des Peres that ran through city limits (all but the northern reaches beginning in present-day University City), would flow through a newly constructed man-made channel. A culvert measuring thirty-two feet wide would run underground for two miles in the north, until entering, beneath Forest Park, an even wider series of two twenty-nine-feet tunnels, weaving through the grounds for two miles. Finally, after more than four miles underground, the des Peres would resurface, and travel for nine miles down the Mississippi, widening its banks from a narrow eighty-nine feet to two-hundred-four at its intersection with the country's most massive waterway. Through an underground foul water sewer constructed beneath this already sunken river, the plan would deal with what Horner described as the "twin issues of storm drainage and sanitary waste at once."[60]

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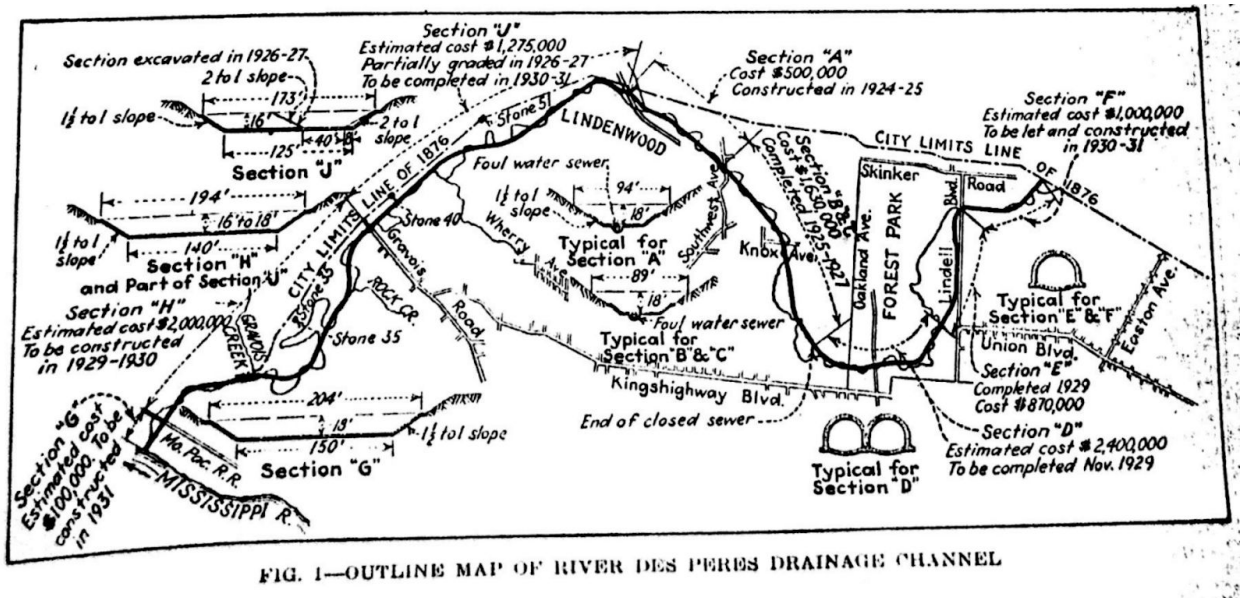
[59] Wesley Horner, "A Report on the River Des Peres Drainage Problem" (St. Louis: Board of Public Service, December 16, 1916), Missouri Historical Society.
[60] Horner, "A Report on the River Des Peres Drainage Problem."



The popularly released map of Horner's 1916 proposal. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

Horner had first come to know the des Peres at the age of twenty four, only a year older than me. Even then, it was a river worlds away from the one he would come to bury. He wrote pragmatically in his introduction to the river, an indication that his emotion would be mostly expressed in what neared an obsessive dedication to this singular project. He did not dwell on the tragedy of the river's demise, nor what it was, or may never be. Instead, he made matter-of-fact observations of his first interaction with the river. In an interview he said, "my first acquaintance with the River des Peres came in the winter of 1907, when I was sent out as a cub surveyor to locate the meanderings of the stream. Even so recently as that the flow in the southwestern part of the city was inoffensive enough that our tougher rodmen used it for drinking water."[61] He went on to chart out the following years, in which sewage problems worsened and flooding continued to batter the city.

[61] Mr. W. W. Horner, St. Louis Puts the River des Peres Into Its Place, transcribed, November 1929, St. L, 627, R524, Missouri Historical Society.

Presentation of Horner's plan did not bring immediate action. The public lagged, reluctant to approve such immense funding from the local level. With a staggering price tag of eleven million dollars, it was no small feat to bring Horner's plan into motion. Famously, in an effort to move along the funding process, the Mayor Kiel installed a massive billboard in Forest Park, reading, "What other big city would have an open sewer running through a fine big park?"

Eventually, a combination of these types of marketing ploys and the continued failures of the open sewer brought a shift in public opinion. In 1923, seven years after Horner warned of this "ugly and inefficient sewer," the bond passed, which included an amalgamation of other public works projects. At $87 million dollars, this would be the largest municipal bond issued in the United States at this time, passed at a time when the nation was eager to update and modernize failing municipal systems.[62]

Almost one-hundred years from the bond's passage, Matt and I would come to this tunnel that was so hopefully imagined in 1923, the same tunnel where Tony Trumbo drowned nearly a hundred years later. Standing under its impressive arched top, I watched water roar into the dark abyss, creating a pile of frothing foam, as the water jutted its way down ragged concrete edges, still cracked as they had been in 1992. Graffiti lined the walls, tinted green from a moist moss that spread from the concrete's top to bottom. The two of us walked into the tunnel, shuffling our way along its slippery edges. Within fifty feet or so, the river's path bended, slightly to the north, and enough that the rest of the water's path was well out of our sight. I refused to follow the tunnel any farther, viscerally aware of what already felt like a crescendoing series of poor risk assessments. Coming back out to the open, the water roared. I had never seen this sort of strength

[62] Boyd Pickup and Jamie Leiendecker, *A Sewer Runs Through It*, Documentary, 2009.

from the des Peres, never this type of vigor, which could easily, in that place of jutting concrete and mossy graffiti, sweep me from my feet.

In awe of this cold fact, still unaware of the proximity with which we stood to an afternoon that ended far differently for a group of young boys, we walked back upstream, returning to dryer sections of the bank. My eyes now fell to the ground beneath me, to the worlds of items and trash, of puzzles, that I have increasingly realized litter these banks no matter what section of the city or county I passed through. As in South City, there were the normal offenders: styrofoam QuikTrip cups, broken beer bottles. But, also, more distinct relics. A metallic cup, splintering colors as water lapped along its edges. More tattered electrical wires. Ripped bed sheets, casting floral and geometric designs beneath leaf litter. Chunks of carpet. Disintegrating t-shirts. An old garden hose, maybe much like the one Tony had lost hold of. Attempts to mask our neighborhood's discards seemed so futile, seeing as the moment you looked to the des Peres they were as present as ever.

Such were the moments when the divide between our tidy lawns and this dirty river disintegrated. All it took was a quick current to sweep two boys into our city's underbelly which we had tried to cover. It's deaths like Tony's that bring the clarity to reckon with the fragility of these efforts to bury what we didn't want to see. As a firm reminder, one small boy was quite literally sucked straight into it. Of course, no one seemed to grapple with this contradiction at the time, certainly not any engineers.

Reaching the top of the bank, we walked back to our car, in an ambiguous nether-region of not-quite-backyard, and not quite the confines of the des Peres. We passed a rusting metal bench, nearly consumed by invading grapevine. As desolate as it seemed now in mid-November,

this was the same section I had come across earlier in the summer, where I had been moved by the hum of cicadas and trickle of stormwater. No doubt it would be a pleasant perch in the summer, if you could get past the trash. I wonder who, if anyone, used it.

On the way home, Matt and I stop at the grocery store. Standing in the freezer section, contemplating rows of frozen dinners, was Niels, one of the daily regulars from our neighborhood cafe. He's lived in University City his entire life, where he now rents out several properties to college students and does landscaping on the side. His parents, long retired, live just a block south of the des Peres and religiously meet at our coffee shop every morning for cappuccinos. They're staunch advocates of University City, wholeheartedly convinced that there may be no better place to live in the world. Such kind of enthusiasm is common in the neighborhood, especially from families like Niels': liberal and white and frequently touting their chosen resistance to the white flight that drained much of the surrounding area. These are the families who most endorse our neighborhood's byline, "Neighborhood to the World" and who proudly tell me while ordering coffee that they had demanded their children attend the once-standing Delmar Harvard Elementary School, as it had been the only non-segregated program in the district. Last spring Jen Jensen, Niels' eight-five-year old mother, made T-shirts for locals emboldened with "I WENT TO DELMAR-HARVARD." I've only seen white people wearing them.

The make-up and landscape of University City is important in understanding the des Peres, particularly the sections of it I most travel. With a population of roughly 35,000, our inner-ring suburb is, in fact, diverse, with whites making up only forty-percent of the populous. Still, being the 'Neighborhood to the World' may be a stretch. Named aptly after its proximity to

Washington University, the neighborhood has a high concentration of both academia and wealth, but only in specific enclaves. Division remains entrenched, where my subdivision is nearly entirely white, as are the surrounding streets, including the Jensen's.

That being said, I've met few families who so devoutly commit themselves to the entirety of the community. Knowing this, at the grocery store, I suspect Niels will have something to say on the des Peres. I ask him what he remembers about the river from growing up with his two sisters.

"The des Peres?" He immediately lights up.

"Oh, you bet, we used to play at the section on Pennsylvania. You know, because my folks live just up the street. We'd make rock dams and then see what happened when it rained. Sometimes, after it rained really hard we'd put paper boats in the river and see how long they'd make it."

He laughed, "They never made it that long." We quickly said goodbye, after offering mild opinions on the numerous frozen lasagnas up for consideration.

Niels testing paper boats after heavy rains. Matt and I scooting down stuccoed concrete, debating whether to use a rubber-coated electrical wire to assist. And Tony Trumbo, swept off his feet, dragged underground to his death. It occurs to me only months later, again thousands of miles away from the river and pouring through a binder thick with primary sources, that these three events all happened within half a mile of one another.

Before any of this concrete though, long before me or Tony or Niels had been born, much had to be done to the des Peres. Which brings us back to Horner and his plans for a new chapter of the river's history. In his eyes, and in the eyes of many, the time had long passed for the river

to run its meandering course. As Horner wrote out his plans and persuaded tax-payers to vote for his project, the deaths of eleven people still loomed large. Unknown contagious illnesses brought terror, and worries that another hurricane could strike at any time unsettled the city.

So, in response to this, Horner acted as we may hope any noble civil servant would. Despite my growing skepticism towards the city's engineers, I'm very aware that, as is the case with most public works, Horner was trying to make the city more livable, less lethal, and a place to support growth and change. It seems ironic, though, and certainly an unresolved contradiction. In 1916, Horner had bemoaned the city forcing upon the river a "utilitarian character." However, his own plans were of impressively utilitarian character, as he tried to counter the violence stemming from earthen banks. Long trained to solve problems through an engineer's eye, perhaps for Horner the only way out was through.

Fittingly, construction for Horner's transformation of the des Peres began during heavy rains in the spring of 1924. An onlooker described the banks as sliding like a "potter's slurry," conjuring an image infused with so much of the chaos to have preceded this moment.[63] But times were changing for the des Peres, when such a pottery's slurry would not slip and slide. Concrete would soon be the conduit for the city's stormwater, and in 1924 there was genuine hope that this would control a river that had begun to feel uncontrollable. However, decades still remained until a twelve-year-old boy would drown, just as David Bowman had, just as Annie Wagoner. Though in the case of Tony, it wouldn't be mud or raging waters left untampered by human intervention that caused his watery death, but instead a crack in concrete and the dark and untouchable confines of an underground tunnel.

[63] Batz, "A Sewer Runs Through It."

Chapter Three

"So they ran her down where she strayed through the park.
elm twigs and condoms in her hair,
and straightened her kinds and paved her banks
till she strolled the fairgrounds like a proper lady.

Transforming the River
as a sewer, it is probably
the World's Most Gigantic
the biggest and the best

For into their hands was every beast delivered,
and every fugitive stream, clean or unclean
buried or burnt, seedtime or harvest, flood time or dry --
though now and again she climbed from her bed,
ran barefoot through the August grass,
leaving a trail of baleful lakes --
till they set out to bury her, mile by mile." - Donald Finkel, "An Entirely New Idea"

It's late in the fall, and the sun sits low in the sky. I'm at the southernmost part of the river, with hopes of biking to the mouth of the des Peres, just as it intercepts the Mississippi. The air is cool, and the water is only slightly high from heavy rains of the past weeks. Still, it's nothing like the flooding that hit the city last spring, which was mainly overflow from the Mississippi. I bike briskly, stopping every now and then to squint down the sloping rip-rap at various pieces of trash. One of the women I work with had mentioned that there had been a Ford SUV in the middle of the channel last week. It wasn't an unusual sight - all sorts of mysteries sprout up in this southern section. For a while now at an embankment overlooking the river there's been a tattered old recliner facing a broken television. Nobody knows who put it there, or

what kind of practical joke it was supposed to be. Still, people keep pulling over on the side of the road to take its picture.

As I get closer to the river, the residential buildings grow more sparse. I cross a busy road, and the bike route stops. A narrow path road continues for a while, full of potholes and scattered with loose gravel. Here the des Peres is most like a river, not a stream or a concrete channel. Twenty feet across at least, it has deep bottoms and banks covered with trees. It's beautiful, even with a backdrop of a hose supplier and hydraulic repair service.

Dozens of gulls are flying in tight circles several hundred feet from me, diving down, beaks biting at the water before shooting upwards like a propelled rocket. It's not often you see this many birds in the city. Curious, I jump off my bike and make my way through the bankside vegetation. An old Lacoste towel hangs in the bushes, the alligator logo still as prominent as if worn by teenagers strutting down high school hallways.

Perched precariously on the river's edge, I hold onto a nearby root to steady my balance. Only then do I see the water's surface. It is littered with hundreds of dead fish. Tiny, probably all of three or four inches long, but dead nonetheless. I look to my left and right, only to realize that they've also washed up along the banks. In fact, the entire river's edge looks like it's been outlined in shiny, ever so translucent, paint.

Taken aback by the whole scene, I assume that these are the source of the bird's feeding. But, I realize that it's not these floating silver medallions they're snatching up. I look closer and make out dozens of sourceless ripples stretched across the water. They're hundreds of fish, across the entire width of the river, gasping for air, mouths opening wide, emerging just above the water line. They're easy pickings for the gulls, who scoop up parcel after parcel by the

second. Immediately, I feel as though I've walked into something I shouldn't have, something like the feeling a child gets after bursting into a room during adult conversation. I remember thinking in those moments, *I'm not supposed to know that this is going on.*

This is what I feel at the des Peres: I'm not supposed to know what's going on. People shouldn't see this. Admittedly, I know it's one portion of the river, on one day. But, staring at the ripples and the overturned silver bellies, I feel uneasy, like a crack has maybe begun to form in my understanding of how controlled this river is.

I go back to my bike, propped up against the Lacoste towel, and realize that the trail I was hoping to take stops just shy of the Mississippi, in a dusty field with massive sections of concrete culverts lying against the beams of a highway overpass. Following the culverts, train tracks cut across the river, blocking my hopes to reach the two rivers' convergence. I walk up to the culverts, touch them, and wonder if these are leftover from a hundred years prior. It seems unlikely.

But still, these two scenes show such an eerie juxtaposition. The gasping fish, with their all but dystopian aura, and these concrete cylinders, nostalgic to a time when trust in intervention superseded a concern for the ecological landscape of a city. Back then, people believed in the des Peres, or at least in the des Peres' ability to reflect the efforts of the engineers who took charge of it. The sentiment also held true across the city. But, the mid-twentieth century would be a time of reckoning for St. Louis. It took several long decades to accept that the hopeful course that charted out a city rivaling Chicago was becoming fantasy. By the closing stretch of the twentieth century, St. Louis, like the des Peres, had become a beast of its own.

But before that, locals generally held both the des Peres and St. Louis in good favor.

During that summer of 1924, what began as work amidst this 'potter's slurry' quickly transformed into a construction project unmatched by most cities at the time. Several things about the des Peres drainage project stood out: namely its plan for signature double arched tunnels alongside such a dramatic re-shaping of the river's course. The river would be bent and deepened well beyond its intended path. Until this project, no engineer had attempted these two tasks simultaneously. The des Peres would be the first project of its kind, a fact that the city was well aware of.

As I delve into the intricacies of this era, I realize my own inadequacy in translating the cramped script of engineering type. Culverts and beam lengths and cubic-flows-per-second were well outside my knowledge. I begin to yearn for help in translation.

So one day I bring a recorder to work at our local coffee shop. I start talking to people about the river, asking our regulars if they wouldn't mind sitting down for an interview. "Just tell me anything about the des Peres, even if you don't know anything," I say. I draw up a sign and tape it next to our tip jar. "Have anything to say about the River des Peres? Gripes, affections, photos, memories?" At the bottom I write out my email and phone-number, closing with, "Help a barista out."

My plan for this sewer education doesn't always work out. Most people know close to nothing about the des Peres and squirm nervously when I begin to ask questions. A seventeen-year-old girl barely makes it two minutes before she exhausts the subject.

"I know it's a river in St. Louis. I don't know where it goes. I don't know how big it is."

I ask her where she thinks it is in the city.

"I don't know. Maybe… not west of me, more east. Or south." She sheepishly continues. "I mean I have recollections of seeing the river. Maybe driving out of St. Louis when I'm leaving St. Louis?"

"The Mississippi? Like the big one?" I ask her.

"Maybe."

In 1929 such blissful ignorance would have been unheard of in St. Louis. As construction began at the close of the decade, there was no way of ignoring the des Peres, or increasingly, the construction that concentrated around it.

A St. Louis Chamber of Commerce newsletter reported on the drainage project, assuming naturally that the subject was prominent in people's minds. "The matter has become known as one of the world's greatest municipal drainage schemes," the article reads. "It will not only be a wonderful improvement for us in St. Louis but has surprisingly turned out to have had a remarkably wide advertising value for St. Louis.... from both viewpoints, St. Louis is making no mistake in building one of the world's biggest municipal drainage works."[64]

Construction had two main elements: first the excavation of the main river channel and second the installation of sewer tubes and a concrete lining. This early excavation of the channel proved a daunting and complex task. In 1924, only a year into major construction, spring rains inundated much of the recently excavated river-bed. That summer, a flash flood struck and killed one worker. Another flood pulled a ten-ton construction carriage four miles downstream, before

[64] Wesley Horner, "Covering the Des Peres," *St. Louis Chamber of Commerce News*, 1930, Copy of the Nomination to Designate the River des Peres Project as National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, Missouri Historical Society.

catching on newly installed grating in the south. As the *Post Dispatch* detailed, "The River des Peres does not give up easily."[65]

The work required to encapsulate this river in a virtual concrete straightjacket required constant and countless men. Personal stories from these workmen proved difficult to find. I do my best, though, to piece it all together. I come across a photo of a man swinging on the ball of a low-lying crane.[66] You can just make out a grainy smile. Below him, a pick-up truck sits on the river's bottom as two other men lean against the iron beams of a newly begun bridge.

Most evidence I find doesn't suggest such levity. Dirty faces. Glazed stares. Pants caked with mud. A blurry photo of a man inches from a camera, his head cut off by the frame, and hands in pockets. Two horses dot the background.[67] Most of these men were coming from equally tasking manual labor jobs, many from the nearby General Motors plant. It is all unfamiliar to me, though, especially as I think of the des Peres of now, so stagnant and inconspicuous. It's hard to merge these scenes: of its present desolate concrete channels with the strain of such labor years before. For most days of the year, the des Peres remains largely static and unassuming. In the 1920s, I read of conditions so treacherous that workers often found themselves knee deep in swirling mud.[68] Still, these were welcome jobs at the onset of the Great Depression, which brought unemployment rates in St. Louis to a staggering thirty-three percent. Under such constraints, men readily signed up to work on the unrelenting banks.

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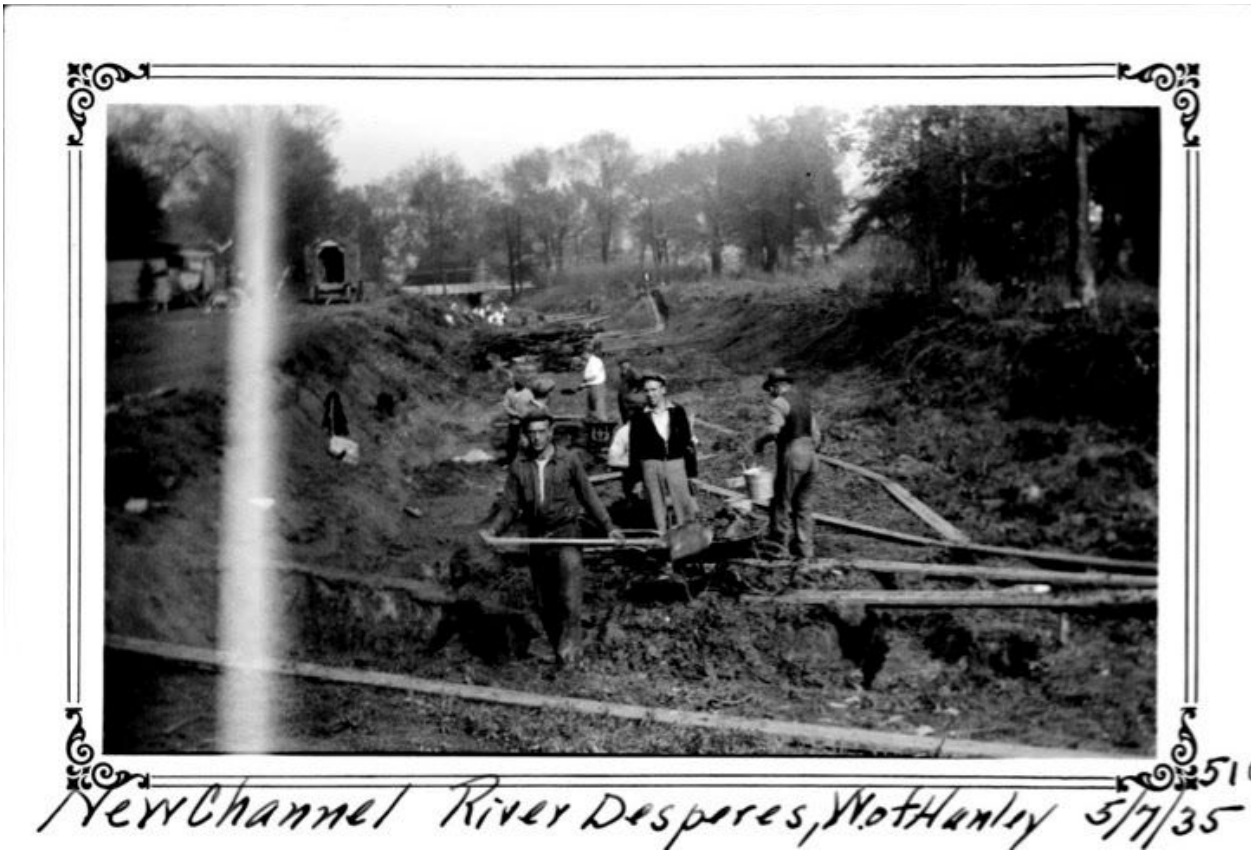
[65] John McGuire, "The Ghost River," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Magazine*, October 30, 1998, University City Historical Society.
[66] *Untitled*, n.d., Photo, n.d., A Master Plan of St. Louis County Sanitary Facilities, Missouri Historical Society.
[67] *River Des Pere North from Ahern Av.*, December 11,1933, f142, 34, University City Historical Society.
[68] "Sewer Treatment in England and Germany," *Engineering News-Record*, July 31, 1930.



From the Archive of the University City Public Library

Adding to these conditions was the loftiness of the project, virtually stripping a river of its curve, and lowering it in some places as much as twenty-five feet below its natural elevation. To do this, engineers first had to lower the surrounding water table, the upper portion of ground that water permanently saturates. In the beginning, these soaked soils caved in often while workers attempted to dig deeper and deeper. What often followed was fast moving quicksand, which became a major obstacle of the project: halting a day's progress and prompting frantic construction of barrier walls, made of sheet piling, timber, and sand bags.[69]

These problems and their concurrent solutions added to outsiders' admiration of the project. In the case of the water-table debacle, engineers soon realized that if given time the

[69] John McGuire, "The Ghost River," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Magazine*, October 30, 1998, University City Historical Society.

water would naturally seep to lower depths on its own. With this in mind, they gave up the cumbersome and short-term solution of propping up supporting walls and began to mechanically pump groundwater to lower levels. In a piece Horner wrote for the *Scientific American,* "St. Louis Buries a River," he commended this natural seepage technique. "Sewer construction has for a long time been in the hands of practical men who have been accustomed to fight their way out of difficulties," he explained. "It is very interesting to find how often an adaptation of some relatively simple law of science can make easy the progress of work of this kind."[70]

It's a curious thing to merge these engineers' struggles with a solution found in the natural laws of science. So often these two realms, of engineers' efforts and natural law, are so diametrically opposed. Typically, engineering projects originate from some limitations of the surrounding environment. In response, laborers toil to force a new shape or chart a better course. It is a pattern that extends well beyond the des Peres: to the flat waters of dammed lakes in California to eroded levee walls in New Orleans. When the *American* writes of some serendipitous connection between natural law and engineering, I can't help but find it ironically antithetical to the project at hand: of "burying a river."

But, work continued, with little attention paid to these contradictions so visible to my modern eye. Instead, the project, and by proxy, the des Peres, was once again became a thing to admire. A reporter in 1929 spoke to this public spectacle that the project had morphed into, "They say that more foreign cars are parked along this mammoth sewer project than you will find even at the Zoo. Vast throngs have been interested in the largest steam shovel ever seen in these parts… a shovel so immense that it took a half dozen railway cars to carry it down here."[71]

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[70] W. Horner, "St. Louis Buries a River," *Scientific American*, August 1930, Missouri Historical Society.
[71] Mr. W. W. Horner, St. Louis Puts the River des Peres Into Its Place, transcribed, November 1929, St. L, 627, R524, Missouri Historical Society.

Importantly, much of the city's fascination was also fueled by some hearty skepticism. Although intermittent floods had wreaked havoc in the past and the odor of the river was undoubtedly a nuisance, many of people were not sure the problem of the des Peres needed construction at such a large scale.

Such was the emerging dichotomy of the river and what has long made it so hard to pin down singularly in public imagination. The *St. Louis Globe Democrat* reported on this existential conflict: "In fair weather the tube looked too large, but when wet the weather recalled the tempestuous performance of the stream in times of unusual storm." For a river that naturally often had little to no flow, on dry days it would have seemed incomprehensible that the des Peres would soon inhabit tunnels large enough to fit a three-story home. Support of this construction took an odd act of faith that storms would come and water would in fact rise (Importantly, it was around this time that scientists began to coin terms such as "fifty" or "one-hundred" year floods, those sporadic, yet high intensity events such as the Texas hurricane of 1913).[72]

As I thumb through these news reports, I wonder about the spectators visiting these construction sites. What did they think the project was for? What did they think needed to be buried? Understandings of watersheds and flooding, of point source pollution were not (and still largely are not) in the lexicon of the everyday person. Certainly though, the immensity of the project, the intricacies of the equipment scattered across the river's banks, must have inspired confidence.

Because above all else, the names of complex machinery peppered reporting on the des Peres: "Monogan walking dragline," "locomotive crane," "bottom-dump buckets," "compressed

[72] Horner, "Covering the Des Peres."

air plant," "electric-driven Smith mixer."[73] I have to say, I find myself impressed with the technicalities of it all and uncomfortably face-to-face with a field of which I know so little. I wonder if that's what spectators would speak to if asked why they came and watched banal tasks like concrete mixing. Was it calming to see rows of dump trucks? Did they feel safer or believe that a project of this proportion was remedying the problem of the des Peres? Maybe they thought this path of tunnels and quicksand was the only way out. Or maybe these banal tasks of sewage construction simply became extraordinary at the scale of Horner's project.

This past spring, while walking through Washington University's campus I ran into a neighbor walking his dog. The two were headed on a path which ended overlooking the university's newest construction project. At the time, it was still a gargantuan pit, so massive it left the construction workers hauling piles of earth resembling ants. I ask where the two are headed off to on what was an unseasonably warm spring day.

"Oh we're going to *the pit*. We try to check it out like every week." He beamed.

As he walks away, I think about the des Peres and the lines of people watching steam shovels and bucket-dumps. Almost one-hundred years distancing these two construction projects, not much has changed.

Horner's work continued onwards. Once excavation of the channel was finished, the next step was to lay concrete and tubing. Construction varied along the river, shedding light on the slowly morphing areas of St. Louis through which it ran. The decision to make the project only partly enclosed, opening up in a wide channel for the last nine miles, was made out of both

[73] "Contrasting Methods on Large Sewer Construction in St. Louis," *Contractors and Engineers Monthly* XIX, no. 4 (October 1929).

engineering and economic necessity. It would be a choice that would define the urban landscape of the area for decades to come.

In Horner's eyes it was a matter of money, weighed pragmatically alongside the vibrancy of the surrounding area. He wrote, "At the same time the character of the district changes sharply from park and residential to heavy industrial. Extending the closed sewers farther along this reach was considered, but this proved to be economically unsound."[74] Moreover, the portions of the city that the wide southern channel cut through were heavily packed with poor residents, sprinkled amidst a growing industrial landscape. In short: Horner and company were not inclined to spend too much money on areas full of the impoverished. Visionary of a new sanitary system he certainly was, but Horner was no social justice reformer. Today, the area still struggles, with small dead-end streets of housing jutting off from infrequently traveled industrial parkways. This is the section where Annie Wagoner and David Bowman lived, the area that had been inundated with flood waters. At that point in time, the residents in the area were primarily black, a reminder of the environmental racism that was becoming a hallmark of life along the most underdeveloped areas of the des Peres. In this way, the des Peres was one of many sites to reveal such inequalities, joining a long legacy of spaces to become both a dumping ground of waste and neighborhood for those deemed undesirable.

If putting the river in a tunnel was considered the best plan, the choice to allow some of it to remain open further confused the whole intent of the project. Still, Horner was emphatic, saying, "It was clear that these types of construction would not be justified on land worth less than $1 a square foot."[75] Meanwhile, the enclosed portion of the project ran under the wealthier

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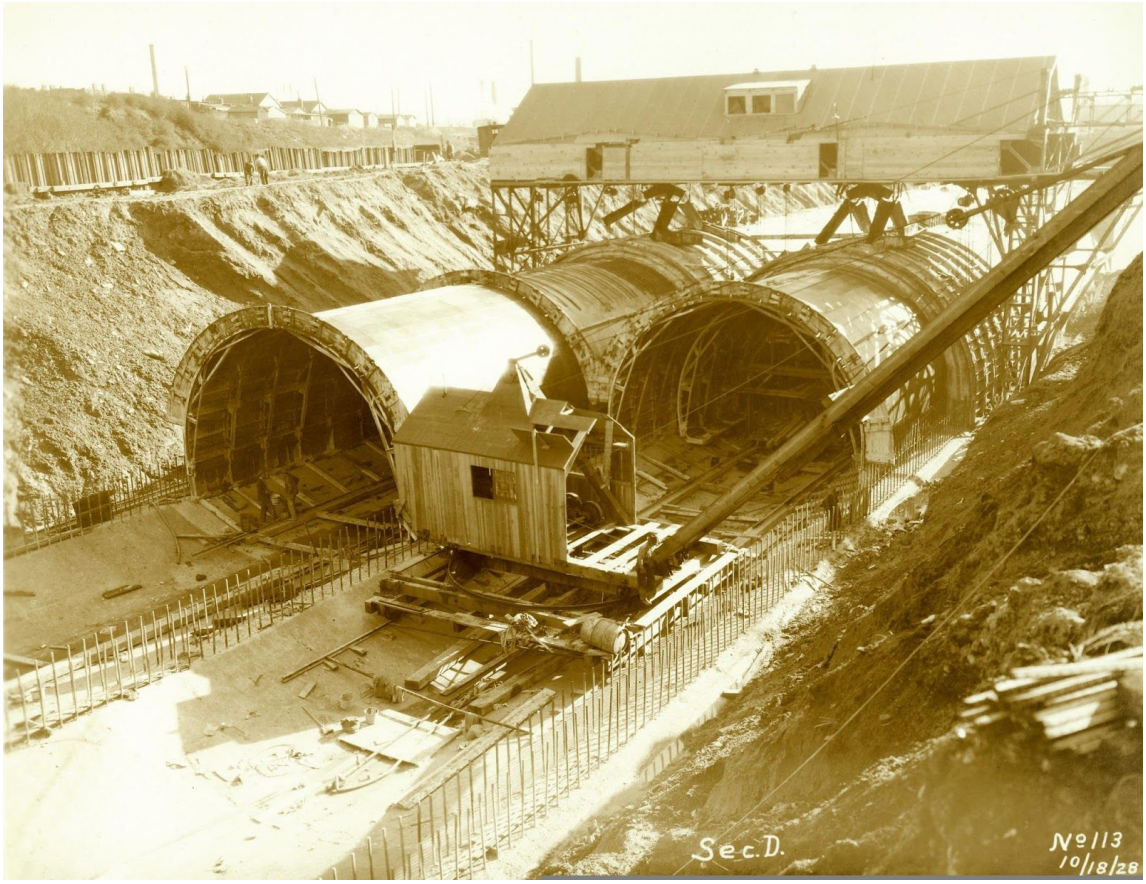
[74] Wesley Horner, "Design of River Des Peres Drainage Channel, St. Louis, Mo.," *Engineering News-Record*, June 24, 1936.
[75] Horner.

portions of the city, including a mile-long strip home to the city's most impressive real estate. Photos of Lindell Boulevard under construction show the emergence of two very separate spaces: the underground world of sewage-filled water and the above ground blocks of wrap-around driveways and spacious carriage houses.



Construction in 1928. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15212.

Whether the river was flowing underground or above, the work that continued after excavation was immense. Shoddy wooden pavilions studded the rivers banks, as workers needed dry land to lay concrete. Most of all though, it was the concrete culverts that garnered the most attention. Account after account highlight the intricate detail of the size and scope of these pipes. Even in later decades, reporters still sink into grandiose descriptions of the structures. A news reporter describes one of these moments: "At Union in what was thought to be the largest pipe

sewer in the world, the thirty-two foot tube was joined with a pair of twenty nine foot horse-shoe-shaped arches which continued for two more miles." A *Post-Dispatch* feature story added, "The double arches go south through the park and under Highway-40 and Oakland Ave just before the high school and the school's football field. There are depressions left by the old river channel."[76]

I know just the area, having biked down it often while cutting across the city. It's a portion of my route that I often relish: coasting down the long hill which drags west along Oakland Avenue. With a highway on one side and a local community college on the other, the last thing the neighborhood evokes is running water. It isn't until veering south and crossing into the Italian neighborhood that the des Peres is visible. Here, it's a narrow concrete ditch which infrequently runs dry. Surrounded by industrial parking lots and scattered electrical poles it feels eerily dystopian. This is just the area that Horner and the engineers defended as not warranting an encased tube. Above all else though, it's a focal point no more. People drive by the des Peres aimlessly, probably unaware of its presence.

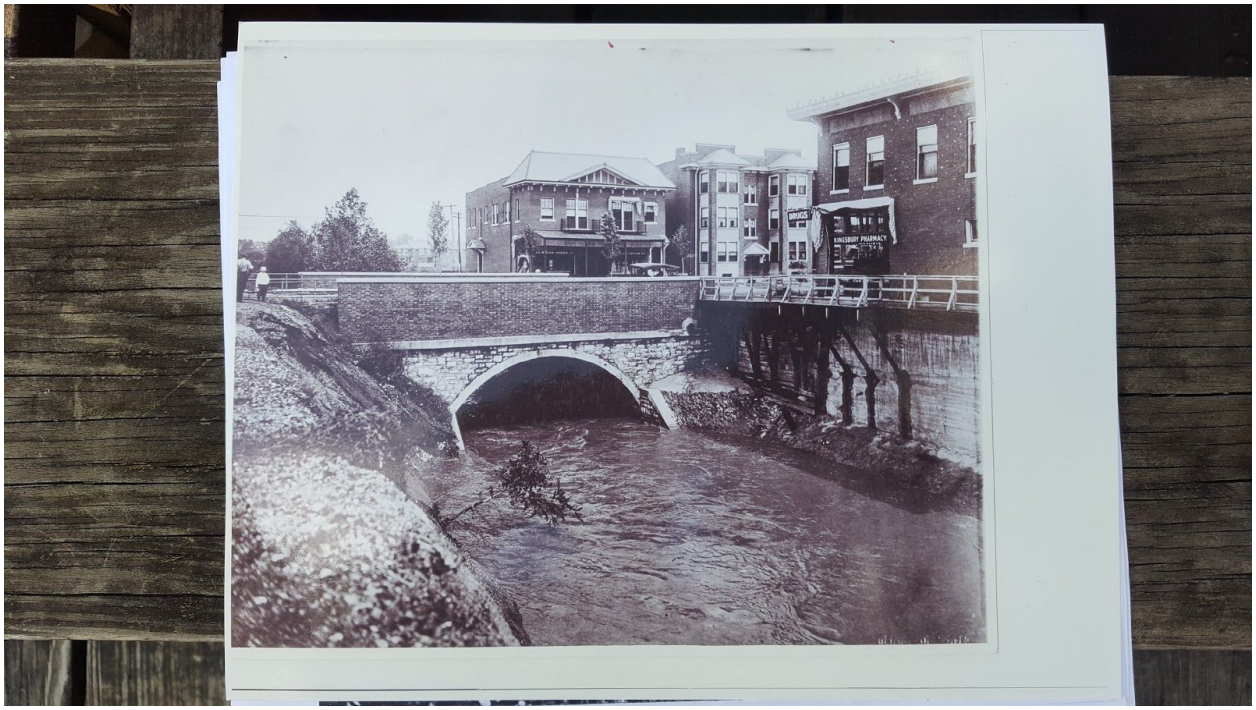
Despite the river's inconspicuous nature, my movement through the city is increasingly halted by unintentional run-ins with the des Peres. For a waterway that's largely unseen, whether encapsulated or shamefully tucked away, I find it harder and harder to ignore.

Even distance does little to lessen its hold on me. While back at school in Maine, Mark, the landlord who comes to our coffee shop daily, texts me a picture of a photograph taken in the early twentieth century. No explanation, except "Marina, this is looking north from McPherson. The bridge is Kingsbury," followed by a smiley face emoji and purple peace sign. This is a man

[76] McGuire, "The Ghost River."

who frequently wears brown Crocs and a graphic t-shirt from the children's movie 'Despicable Me' into our cafe. He's simultaneously one of the most well-versed and revered handymen in the area.

In the photo, the des Peres is still above ground. Water cuts under a stone bridge. On the corner, overlooking the river, is a well-manicured storefront. The "Kingsbury Pharmacy," as it reads, looks to be in immaculate shape, with a flowing white awning hung high above double-stacked windows. An old model-T moves down the road, and I can make out two men on the opposing side of the bridge, standing near the des Peres' grassy banks.



Mark's photo, as sent to me.

I stare at Mark's photo incessantly. Certainly taken before Horner's project, I'm not sure by whom or for what reason. Beyond the excitement that any evidence of this pre-construction period brings me, I find that the photo stirs something much deeper in me. It shows a type of river I've never imagined in St. Louis, one so seamlessly immersed in the motions of daily life.

In this city, we don't have rivers with arched bridges and onlookers in the midst of mundane errands. Of course, we don't have that because we put our river underground.

Before making it the background to my phone, I tuck the photo away and move on with my research. And then, several months later, while flipping through a Public Works Department archival collection, I come across a shot of the exact corner. This time though, there's a date, 1931. Now, there's no river or pharmacy, at least not in the "natural" way of things. Instead, a tube runs where current once swept. Most jarring is the former pharmacy. It is now a crumbling building, complete with a gaping hole on its riverfront side and sections of its interior walls falling inwards towards the river's equally torn up banks. Piles of dirt and debris cover the foreground. The building's white awning is gone, along with the carefully hung sign. The devastation is so immense it easily looks as though a tornado struck the corner. As I came to read in financial reports and correspondence between Horner and site managers, destruction of this magnitude was commonplace during the project.[77]

In this newer photo, someone has written in perfect cursive script the location: des Peres Drive and Kingsbury Ave. I know the corner; this is Mark's neighborhood, where he lives and rents apartments to dozens of university students. Now, in the same spot two empty lots face one another. As he tells me, the area still bears the effects of the culvert beneath its pavement. Mark narrates to me a deluge of problems that have come with the construction project of nearly a century prior.

[77] Ed Meyers, *Side of Partially Wrecked Building near the River Des Peres, 5960 Kingsbury Avenue.*, April 23, 1931, April 23, 1931, Missouri Historical Society.

5960 Kingsbury Avenue, partially wrecked in 1931. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, P0403.

After workers laid the tubes, the next step was to fill in all excavated ditches, a process Mark begins to describe. Getting into these finer details takes interruptions on my end, asking him to backtrack, reminding him that I'm no landlord, much less an expert in engineering. He describes to me exactly how the ground had to be filled in, through a process of compaction that included strong and fine soil. If done correctly, compacted ground will be extremely stable. Except, as Mark narrates, during the close of the des Peres project, workers rushed the project. Since the close of the project, the ground has begun to compress, causing unstable ground and sinking foundations.

Speaking of a former unit, "I owned that building for a while. The middle of that building sunk five inches in the middle," Mark said. "If you took a marble and went into an apartment and put it at the front door it would race to the middle. Washington University bought it from me and they had to jack it up. Matter of fact WashU bought two buildings on the south side of Pershing and just west of des Peres and both of them they had to jack to keep from collapsing."[78]

Problems of these sinking foundations still loom large. A few years ago, a local bakery hoped to relocate its kitchen to the neighborhood, but quickly found that heavy kitchen machinery was too much for the sinking floors. The university has since bought and sold properties, often having to halt construction for similar issues. Mark finds a certain silver lining to it all, particularly concerning sites where buildings had been demolished. "It guarantees some green space in the neighborhood," he says. "I like that." Green space just like the current site of the old rambling waterway and bridge.

By the end of our conversation, I think he's still largely unclear of where my interest has come from. "The mighty River des Peres. You tell them," he said, shaking his head and laughing.

Hearing of the long term impacts of the project, Horner continues to captivate me. I learn that Washington University has many of his papers and soon find myself amidst stacks of carefully cataloged blueprints and letters. The blueprints in particular take me aback. I'm surprised at the artistry behind them, the fine lines, the rows of calculations and measurements, down to the eighth of an inch of a particular length of steel reinforcement. But what most fascinates me are Horner's personal notes, scrawled out on tiny notepads all kept together in a

[78] Personal Interview with Mark Gorman by Marina Henke, March 22, 2019.

smaller box amidst folded topographic maps. They're all but illegible. For a man that had incredibly tight script in his engineering reports, his shorthand is horrible. I can barely make out phrases, much less words. It was on these notepads that Horner seemed to have amassed an unending list of daily notes. Phrases emerge from the chicken scratch, "5 hours to 24 hours to get 12 inches of work," "Underdrain vs well point," "Keeps cement from washing out."[79]

These notes don't illuminate anything substantial. I can't figure out when they're from, or what they're even specifically about. But I find that after flipping though more than one-hundred incomprehensible pages they stick with me, in the same way that seeing anyone's personal research does. As I came to see, Horner's work was tireless, further complicating my initial assumptions that he must have been some ill-intending engineer.

For him, the difficulty of the project extended far beyond the minutiae of eight inch steel screws or wood quality. On the economic front, the project held an incredibly small margin of error to cause fiscal catastrophe. For a city which in 2019 couldn't maintain a now infamous tourist trolley service without declaring bankruptcy by month nine, the notion that a construction project of this magnitude would go without hitch now seems improbable. I continued to look for letters of irate sensibility, of late fees and over-extended working hours. But instead, I learned that for the ten-year construction period, which came with a lofty price-tag of nearly eleven million dollars, all contractors came within half of one percent of the original estimate. Although there were several casualties from landslides and equipment mishaps, for a project in which work was mostly done by hand, disaster was largely avoided. This was a remarkable feat for any era,

[79] Wesley Horner, "Horner Personal Notes," 1931, Wesley Winans Horner Papers, Box 3, Washing University Archives.

much less almost one hundred years ago. Within the bounds of public works projects, the achievement was an impressive exception.[80]

Finally, by the onset of 1932, the project as imagined by Horner came to an end. It had been sixteen years since he had written his first proposal, initially dismissed by the public due to its untenable immensity, or in Horner's words the lack of a "progressive spirit" to yet hit the city.[81] What kept him going, whether an affection towards the river or an obsession for control, was concentrated and unending.

Newly hired contractors were eager to erase any evidence of this unrelenting excavating and dismantling of the cityscape. After the first spring following the project's completion, a local newspaper reported, "By midsummer grass will cover most of the bare clay, the lakes should be refilled, and the park will resume its pastoral appearance." Unlike the short term solution allowed by the World's Fair's shoddy wood covering, this round of work was deeply permanent. The "pastoral appearance" of the des Peres would never re-emerge. By this point, the river's identity as a natural waterway seemed inconsequential. In fact, it was better left unseen.

Despite resprouting grass and clear ponds, the decade continued to bring considerable construction on the new underground river. It was as if Horner's work had been one singular domino piece, bringing a long cascading series of projects and actions that appeared all the more dire and unavoidable. But Horner stepped away from the des Peres. At the close of the project he left employment with the city and went on to found his own engineering company. In the private sector, Horner & Shifrin completed countless engineering and public services projects, including local highway design, wastewater treatment plants, and even, as it turns out, ADA compliant

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[80] John Scott, "The Taming of River Des Peres," n.d., Copy of the Nomination to Designate the River des Peres Project as National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, Missouri Historical Society.
[81] Horner, St. Louis Puts the River des Peres Into Its Place.

curbs at my former high school. At times their work has traced directly over the path of the des Peres: in 2017 they redid the parking at the Muny Theater in Forest Park, a location that used to flood yearly.[82] I wonder how much Horner kept the des Peres in mind during these later projects.

The cascade of projects after Horner's was further fueled by the continued economic recession. Within St. Louis, continued work on the river proved a life source for many families. In fact, it provided the largest source of employment in the city during the Depression. It's a fact largely obscured from current tellings of St. Louis history, most likely due to the des Peres inconspicuous presence.

In 1933 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a program that became intricately connected to the fate of the des Peres. Enclosing the river in concrete only marked the beginning of endless permutations to be carried out by unemployed men. Bridges could be built, more concrete could be placed, leftover river bottoms ought now to be straightened and paved. FERA employed nine thousand workers through the Department of Streets and Sewers, and for most of them work revolved around continued adaptation of the des Peres. In the above ground open section, workers placed 'rip-rap,' or loose stone, on the sides of the channel. Additionally they constructed a roadway for trucks to trace the river's bottom for continued maintenance. Relief programs continued throughout the decade. For the winter of 1933, twenty-eight men cast concrete slabs to go over the narrow sanitary sewer which traced the drainage ditch.[83]

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[82] "Who We Are," Horner Shifrin, n.d., https://www.hornershifrin.com/about-us/.

[83] "The Nomination of the St. Louis Section, A.S.C.E. to Designate the River Des Peres Project as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark" (Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District, February 25, 1988), Missouri Historical Society.

Work was grueling, but for many men in the country it was also in high demand. "Toward the end of the day as the men in the pit would tire, foremen would fire a third of them and then hire a like number of men from the crowd that lined the bank of the ditch waiting for work," reported one of the foremen at the time. This cycle would continue, with a third of the workforce let go when they reached their limits. Often those waiting in line would have been workers from previous days.

Ralph Mueller, a retired civil engineer from the post-Horner era, reported on the longevity of the projects, particularly in the southern sections of the river, right up to its entry point into the Mississippi. Mueller supervised 5,000 men funded under the Work Progress Administration's (WPA), a federal agency which employed millions to complete public works projects. In St. Louis, men lay stonework on the southern portion of the des Peres, now visible to many commuters as they wind their way west on des Peres drive in the early morning. "They worked here five years, from '36 to '41," Mueller told local newspapers thirty years after the fact. "Four days a week, forty cents an hour, all through the winter with no fires or heat."

Meanwhile, in the north, University City was coming to face the harsh reality that while immense construction had taken place within city limits, their des Peres had largely been left untouched. Pressures mounted, and in 1936 the municipality, an inner-ring suburb of St. Louis, received massive funding from the WPA to continue construction upstream. In the coming years, University City added 3,400 feet of their own reinforced concrete box sewer, eventually attaching to the city's highly altered riverbed.[84]

[84] McGuire, "The Ghost River."

Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers constructing an enclosure for the river in University City, 1940. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N01825.

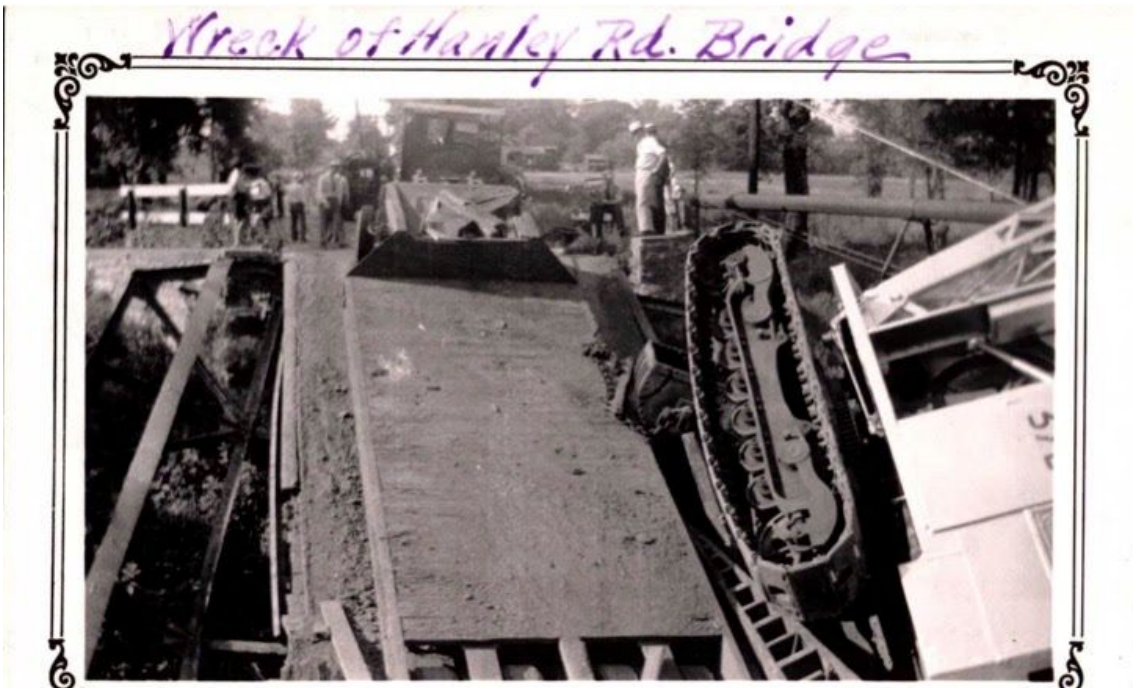
By the close of this work, residents of University City welcomed the merging of their des Peres with that of the concrete monstrosity of the middle and southern sections of St. Louis. As a University City publication happily reported, "The River des Peres has been transformed into a docile stream and has been elevated into the ranks of respectability through the combined efforts of the University City engineering department and a federal WPA grant."[85]

Within the municipality, the project kept roughly 450 men employed over eight months. They built bridges, strengthened retaining walls, and paved sections of a now far straighter river.[86] I find boxes of photos in our public library documenting this period of construction. Scanning

[85] "Federal Grant Enables U. City To Put Des Peres In Respectable Raiment," August 6, 1936, University City Historical Society.
[86] "U. City Asks $200,000 WPA Projects," n.d., University City Historical Society.

them at the public computers surrounded by high schoolers studying for the SAT, I'm continuously gripped by these scenes of neighborhood streets I know well.

In one shot, two men stare unflinchingly at the camera, shovels in hand, standing amidst a muddy river bottom. The background is full of more workmen, swinging buckets, side-stepping wooden planks. There are banks studded with trash (not looking much different from our own banks now), and also shots of a narrowed and meandering des Peres, lined with tall grasses and dogwoods. In these images, it's hard for me to understand exactly what is being done or why. This construction did not come without hiccups. Several folders contain documentation of wreckage on Hanley Boulevard, a frequently traveled street running north and south through the neighborhood. There's a shot of a bridge in mid-construction crumbling from some probable engineering misstep. A bulldozer perches tumbled over a guard rail, with crowds of men standing by with hands on their hips, staring down at the chaos. From my take almost one-hundred years later, they look paralyzed with indecision.



Courtesy of the University City Public Library

Even as I doubt the necessity of the work, the chief University City engineer of the time reported proudly on the construction. “This project is one which the administration can justifiably point to with pride,” he told the local newspaper. Speaking to the river prior to any work, he said, “the meandering stream bed, ragged and unkempt in appearance, with logs and brush here and there and an occasional huge tree falling across it, presented a picture more resembling an African jungle in places than a portion of a high class residential city.”[87]

Despite these reports, it’s hard to keep straight what and why such drastic changes were being made. Horner swore the necessity of the project was two-fold: lethal pollution and unbearable flooding. However, during the mid-twentieth century, University City’s conversations often ended at a problems of aesthetics - of a dawdling path that didn’t go in quite the right direction or in straightening and leveling of river bottoms that ought to, for whatever reason, become straight enough to drive a car across. In all the reporting on this era, it remains unclear to me of what was more driving the excitement for the time: the employment it provided an economically fragile city or this supposed transformation happening to the area’s ‘African jungle.’

Footprints from this period still largely remain. These are the sections of the des Peres I know most, cobbled together through a mish-mash of public relief projects. They are the sections of the des Peres I grew up with, sometimes scouring their banks for odd remnants of trash and checking on their status after heavy rains. We would cross one of these bridges on our way to the local pool, stopping to toss mulberries over the railings or race floating sticks if there was enough of a current. In University City, whether we liked it or not, the des Peres surrounded us.

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[87] “Federal Grant Enables U. City To Put Des Peres In Respectable Raiment.”

Because of this, I find that those I live around often know the river far more intimately than I do. At our cafe, only two blocks from the des Peres' underground path, Arnie Spirtas comes in almost daily, orders a glass of milk, a grilled cheese with tomato, and a mocha. He's eighty-seven-years-old and a proud founder of the "Spirtas Wrecking Company," one of the largest demolition providers in the region. He was born in University City in 1933, the year after Horner's initial drainage project concluded.

Arnie lives and breathes demolition, believes in it so much that one morning I overhear him offer his rabbi complimentary demolition work in support of the synagogue. "If there's any construction, I can do it. It's not giving money, but it's saving you some," he continued. "Demolition?" he says. "Nobody can do it better than we can."

Arnie was responsible for much of the demolition work done in the latter half of the twentieth century, when waves of dubious urban renewal concluded in razing thousands of buildings in largely black and impoverished areas of the city. In University City alone, he demolished more than seven-hundred units, a fact he shares proudly. His nephew, the current president of Spirtas, began a family memoir entitled, "Don't Wreck the Empire: The Prince Views the Kingdom," and Arnie tells me he has also begun work on an autobiography. His working title? "St. Louis: From the Top Down."

But before the creation of this supposed kingdom, his father worked at a junkyard. The family bounced around University City, moving from apartment to apartment, for several years living next door to where my twin sister now lives, on Leland Avenue. When I tell him of the coincidence he reacts as if we've discovered we're long lost relatives. This is the man who proudly told me he could walk around University City blind-folded, and except for the absence

of several blocks of apartments that he razed decades ago, he would remember everything. He lays his arm across the table as he talks about University City. "See my hand, I know it like the back of my hand. Better than the back of my hand."[88]

Arnie has much to say about the des Peres. He's so eager that what was supposed to be a ten or fifteen minute conversation stretches into an hour and a half. He gives me his contact information at the end of our conversation, warning me that if his wife picks up and realizes a young girl is calling for him that there may be trouble. He tells me to "just… be honest about your intentions." Arnie's eager to explain the fine details of construction work, veering at times into a surely well-meant condescension (at one point he grabs an empty cup to slowly explain the concept of diameter to me).

Well before his days of large-scale demolition, Arnie was simply a boy growing up in St. Louis. In the 1950s the des Peres was still entirely above ground in the neighborhood, running through the middle of Kingsland Avenue. The ditch was a point of congregation and place for neighborhood friends to play, as Arnie tells me, shooting rubber guns at one another from opposing sides of the banks. To them, the des Peres was simply a convenient dividing line. But, site of play or not, it wasn't something that inspired great affection. "The river was just there," Arnie told me. "It wasn't anything you bragged about."

Instead, it was typically something that got in the way. Parents warned their daughters and sons to stay away from the banks, neighbors stayed clear of buying up property too close, and people remained vigilant during heavy rains. "You were always waiting for the flood," Arnie

[88] Personal Interview of Arnie Spirtas by Marina Henke, August 29, 2019.

told me. Nothing about the des Peres was something to relish in, but instead what Arnie described was the "blister" of the city.

"Until they fixed it, that is," he says to me with a smile.

That fixing came in the form of Depression-Era construction, a hodgepodge of projects that continued through the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in University City. By the late 1960s, the section once visible from Arnie's third story apartment was put under ground as well, finally linking with the city's portion of the project.

And, as the des Peres morphed, so did Arnie, from a young boy to a twenty-five year old man eagerly making a business for himself. When he was two years older than me, he demolished his first building, a National Lead factory that sat at the convergence of the des Peres and Mississippi. As I came to realize one day while looking at a map, this was where I watched the hundreds of gulls devour fish earlier that fall.

For Arnie, St. Louis could not function without the des Peres. And the morphed form that the river found itself in was key. For this man whose life came to revolve around the discardment of staggering amounts of material, encapsulated concrete felt natural to him. In our conversation he was insistent on the necessity of this work. Pointing to his own chest, "When you do a heart bypass they take a vein out of your leg and they put it in your heart. I know because I had one done." He continued, "If they would have just stopped the des Peres, it would have been like stopping the heart. They had to take a vein and circumvent it in some way. It was essential. Just like we have veins. It was essential to St. Louis, to keep the River des Peres in action and improve it." To Arnie, this question of the construction's necessity is black and white. Culverts and concrete siding had controlled the problem of the river.

Arnie made a compelling point that day. Leaving our conversation, I found myself reevaluating so many of my steadfast beliefs in the horror that all of this concrete had brought. At least as Arnie saw it, there was a necessity to it all. I wondered how many people who cared for the des Peres really knew how the drainage system functioned. I suspected I wouldn't be the only one who might benefit from a conversation with somebody like Arnie.

But if construction through the forties and fifties was like the life-saving bypass Arnie said it was, it was one with immense complications. As had become the running theme for the des Peres, problems did not disappear over time. In 1960 University City released a community report consolidated into nearly seventy pages the many problems that still plague the river. The report does not hold back. There are mentions of loose sheets of corrugated steel, fences taking on a "grotesque rollercoaster appearance" and shallow pools of stagnant water throughout the stream's course with a distinctively "yellow-tinged milky appearance." Erosion and unchecked pollution had generated an uncontrollable rat problem, forcing homeowners and authorities to place lethal bait along the river's banks. The end of the report expressed the general state of affairs most succinctly: "the presence of the open channel of the northeast branch of the River des Peres in Kingsland Avenue constitutes the most depressing public facility deficiency in the area." In general, the sentiment feels eerily similar to those made in 1923 or the World's Fair: there's still plenty of trash and high waters.[89] Many of the same problems that haunted the des Peres in the century prior remained. Flooding continued throughout the twentieth century, albeit less destructive in those areas where the river was 25-feet beneath the ground.

[89] "The Big Ditch: Its Effect on University City, MO," Community Analysis of University City, Missouri (Planning and Traffic Division, 1966), D2457, University City Historical Society.

Typical scene of the unchannelized river by the 1940s. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N05368.

Whereas the 1930s had seen countless reports highlighting the elegance and complexity of construction on the des Peres, the following decades brought a distinctively changing narrative. First off, mentions of the river simply declined. Sinking roughly half of it underground quickly took the river out of the public eye. But beyond that, the river-like apparatus that remained was designed to be tucked away, ignored, as if it wasn't there. That, in effect, was the goal of Horner's work: to make the des Peres functional when it needed to be and invisible when it was not.

So, in absence of glowing reviews surrounding the construction, people's misgivings increasingly constituted the bulk of public conversation surrounding the river. Suddenly, countless references to the River "Despair" peppered local newspapers. Writers did not hold back on what was increasingly a virulent attitude towards the waterway. "Today the River des Peres is a river in name only," an editorial in the *Post Dispatch* read in 1967. "Its banks are dry and ugly. It assumes its natural function only when flood waters spill over from the Mississippi River."[90] Gone were crowds of eager spectators.

Both north and south, in areas encapsulated and uncovered, concerns about the river mounted. In 1952 a pilot flew a small bush-plane over the southern section of the river, emptying several tons of pine oil deodorant in a last ditch effort to control odors. Not surprisingly, the scheme was not successful.[91]

And then, amidst growing public mockery, came a new proposal in 1972 that would define the river's public perception going into the second half of the twentieth century. Hearing the plaintive hopes of locals to improve the nuisances of what was still in the south in many ways an open sewer, Mayor Al Cervantes presented the next massive project to develop the river: a recreation plan for the River des Peres. After attaining a seven-million dollar grant, the city proposed a 3.1 mile green belt along the southern section of the river. Two inflatable dams, placed at Morganford and Lansdowne avenue, would create a veritable lake, large enough to house a functioning marina and support a wide variety of watersports. The promises did not stop

[90] James Simon, "River Des Peres Is Despair Of All Trying to Improve It," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 31, 1967, Missouri Historical Society.
[91] McGuire, "The Ghost River."

there. Facilities along the water would eventually support cycling, jogging, and horseback riding. Cervantes even suggested the possibility of jet skiing.[92]

From the beginning, residents of the area heckled the plan: both as outlandishly ambitious and as posing economic insecurity to the surrounding area. Understandably, the current state of the des Peres did not leave much room for the imagination of jetting sailboats and docked rowboats.

Alongside that, racial prejudice saturated the debate, as the largely white neighborhood of South City feared that a recreation center might bring black residents, from the majority black northern enclaves of the city. During a town hall meeting, the ward's alderman at the time made a plea for civility, "Let's give the man the courtesy of being heard. After all this isn't North St. Louis, it's South St. Louis." Quickly though, a crowd member countered the sentiment "If you let this project go through you'll have North St. Louis down here" he said.[93] True to the enduring racial tensions that permeate St. Louis, it didn't take many communal stressors to bring such blatant racism to the surface. As a result of the charged discontent, the mayor dropped the plan less than a month later.[94]

Despite its brevity, of all the facts to permeate public consciousness about the des Peres, it is this proposed recreation project that has somehow made a long-lasting mark. One day at work a regular walked up to the counter with his hand outstretched. Eagerly, he slapped his phone down on the counter and said "Take a look at *that*? Have you seen *that* yet." It was a

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[92] "City to Request Funds for Recreation Park," *St. Louis Globe-Democratic*, September 6, 1972, St. L. 711, Scr. 16, p. 149, Missouri Historical Society.
[93] Carter Stith, "Heckled Over Plan for River," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 28, 1972, St. L. Clippings, p. 28, Missouri Historical Society.
[94] "Mayor Drops Proposal For River Des Peres," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 19, 1972, St. L. Clippings, p. 41, Missouri Historical Society.

photo of an old button, donning a small figure on waterskis holding onto the back of a boat. In emboldened text across the top it read, “The River des Peres Yacht Club.” The ironic campaign started in the wake of Mayor Cervantes failed proposal. Since then, it’s somehow stuck, and currently in the depths of South City, the “River des Peres Yacht Club Deli,” boasts walls studded with images similar to that of the pin.

All this is to say that come the close of the twentieth century, the des Peres had re-emerged as a nuisance and mockery of the city, maybe something closer to its 1901 counterpart, albeit with many tons of concrete mixed in.

Tensions remained between various factions who disagreed whether work on the des Peres constituted a city pride or embarrassment. But within the engineering field, the answer was easy. In 1988 the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer district submitted a several hundred page nomination for the River des Peres Drainage Project to be designated as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark. The binder, over which I poured intensely, is full of praise, extolling not just the engineering mechanics of the river project, but also the civic spirit that followed the work. There is a section solely on Horner and a section solely on the public applause that the project got in the years following its completion.

The nomination came at probably just the right time, as the des Peres continued its steady march towards both oblivion and mockery. Its designation was quickly approved, and later in the year three thousand members of the American Society of Civil Engineers convened to pay tribute to the des Peres. Fittingly, the ceremony took place at the Jefferson Memorial, the site, only seventy years prior, where water had crawled precariously up its steps. Praise for the project

constituted most of the day. An attendee shared, “What Wesley Horner did with the des Peres became the stuff of engineering textbooks.”[95]

In an honest fashion, the day’s program still spoke of the many difficulties that still faced the des Peres, of “labor-intensive maintenance” and even many of the same operational problems that still existed at the close of the past project, including further eroding banks and sewage overflow. But, on steps where water once rose, this was not a day for reckoning with the future, but instead for praising the past.

The landmark program, which began in 1964, currently maintains a list of nearly 300 designated sites. The application process is extensive: letters of support, a lengthy profile of said project, relevant articles, photographs, and a biography of the lead engineers. Appointed landmarks must represent a significant facet of civil engineering history. As the nomination criteria reads, projects must have “some uniqueness or have made some significant contribution.” Alongside the des Peres sits sites including the Erie Canal and the Grand Coulee Dam. They span from coast to coast (the Golden Gate Bridge and New York’s first subway) to across the world (Victoria Falls Bridge in Zimbabwe).[96] However, presented by the American Society of Civil Engineers, it’s largely a designation that carries weight only within the field. One would be hard pressed to find a typical civilian aware of any of these landmarks's supposedly notable status.

The reality of the award aligns with what deserves to be celebrated about the des Peres and what does not. The river certainly deserved recognition for being the first of its kind, marking a gutsy move by engineers like Horner. But although extraordinary at one moment in

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[95] McGuire, “The Ghost River.”
[96] “River Des Peres Sewage & Drainage Works | ASCE,” https://www.asce.org/project/river-des-peres-sewage---drainage-works/.

history, the impressiveness of the project has faded over time, leaving the public to gravitate more to its current flaws than past accomplishments. Importantly, what the river did not deserve recognition for was the illusion of control that Horner had promised in 1916. This, in fact, was a fallacy.

Never did that fact feel so true than during my afternoon uncovering the dead fish. I finally leave the bank as it's getting dark, quickening my pace to get back to my car in time. Farther away from the road the path cuts through a forested plot, dense with brown hues of subtle variation. It smells sweet, like honeysuckle. I come out from the trees. Two Bobcat trailers sit parked on a patch of grass, facing a bare section of pavement, covered in gravel and surrounded by pools of cloudy brown water. I can see neon orange flags demarcating some future construction: this is the constant state of the des Peres. I know that flooding from last spring had hit this area particularly hard, and it's likely that the equipment was here in response to that.

Guiding my handlebars across gravel, I suddenly see a deer standing in the clearing, or another deer that is. I'm probably a mile or so from the site of my run-in with the one from my previous summer. Equally thin, panting just as unceasingly, this one is a stag, with an impressive set of antlers. He turns to look at me as he makes his way to the area of brush from which I've just come. I wait until he dips down along the bank and is out of sight. Initially I chalk it up to both a surreal coincidence, and also a reminder of the pressing realities that animals *do* live in and around the river. Engineers could put however many pounds of concrete along its boundaries, but the des Peres was of course a river first.

But back on my bike, I turn the corner to pass a group of boys playing basketball, only to see them facing away from the court, looking out at a sports field which backs up to the concrete

court. They're shouting and pointing. I follow their gaze and see the stag I had just left minutes ago. Now though, he's running in the opposite direction, parallel to the river and heading towards Lemay Station Road, a busy intersection. He zig-zags across the field, looking for a route of escape. His motions are sharp and manic, reminding me of what animals look like moments before death.

I watch him near the street, preparing to look away quickly if things ended how I suspect they might. Sure enough, in an act of frantic panic, he bounds across the road. Cars screech to a halt. Horns blare. The whole intersection pauses, as if time has stopped. In many ways it has, or at least brought to a halt the dependable rhythms of life in a city, theoretically free of wildlife. But instead of being hit as I expected, the stag bounds diagonally across the four lanes and disappears behind a series of squat industrial buildings. It's the last I see of him.

Months away from that day, surrounded by more and more daunting an inventory of satires and critiques of the river, what feels impressive or problematic about the des Peres is harder and harder to grasp. Here is what I do know though: whatever illusion of control was built up around the river is precarious. It can be all but ruptured instantly by a bolting stag who does not abide to traffic. Ruptured by slippery silver fish, casting up on trash-laden banks. Signs of life still exist along the des Peres, and what they generally reflect is an ecosystem disastrously out of balance. That, along with still persistent flooding and the never-ending construction projects popping up along the banks, all feel like further fractures in this hopeful narrative of control that Horner and those after him promised. No landmark plaque, screwed into a monument where flood waters once lapped can erase these realities. Perfunctory recognition is nice, but I understand why it doesn't appear to be on anyone's minds these days.

Chapter Four

"In the lee of the underpass the flood scale reads,
4-30-44, topping the eight-foot mark,
But (the annals of high water notwithstanding,
nor the glaucous backwash at her mouth,
nor the muddy bucket of cumulus
spilling from the south) this afternoon
Despair is dry as a hanged man's throat.

I carry my own Despair wherever I go.
I lie midstream like a stranded branch,
snagging tatters of shagbark, hickory
white oak, catalpa and lead-grey sandwich bags,
letting time flow round me or dwindle as it will.
From time to time a rag floats free
and gives itself up to the future.
I weave the rest in my hair, a halo of debris,
a shabby diadem I nickname History." - Donald Finkel, "A Glimpse"

In the decades following the historical landmark nomination, understandings of the des Peres as a river or as a sewer only further blurred. As a result, public policy faltered, opinions diverged, water quality suffered, and flood damage only continued. Sections of the river became managed by different agencies and experienced in starkly different ways just miles apart. Management that made sense in South City could not be translated to North County. This was the des Peres of my youth and the des Peres of now. Invisible to most, destructive to some, and to a rare few something worth fighting for. Most of the time, this ambiguity generated deep ambivalence towards the river.

It is an ambivalence that the city of St. Louis also endured as time passed from its heyday as an urban destination. Come the twenty-first century, St. Louis is also a city often forgotten, sitting squarely in the middle of what has gained the name "fly over country." In fact, looking at the des Peres' slow vanishing act in the last several decades often reminds me of the same one performed by the city.

The most dramatic developments of the river continued in my neighborhood of University City, where the des Peres escaped the deluge of construction that more southern portions of the river underwent in the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1980s, University City began working with the Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) and the Army Corps of Engineers to address consistent flooding problems. These two agencies would continue to be important stakeholders in the decades to come, and, as the former mayor of University City reminded me, have since developed a particularly sour relationship with the municipality. As a means of garnering more public support, a feasibility study released in 1988 examined how to lessen flood damage by reducing bank erosion and increasing recreational opportunities along the stream.[97] Ultimately, the Army Corps was in the business of hyper-control, a legacy that has followed them nationally, from the arid lands of the West to projects much closer to home on the straightened banks of the Mississippi River.

The study marked a distinct period of convoluted and conflict-rich intervention on the des Peres: increasingly fractured and subdivided by municipality lines and bureaucratic processes. Overtime, MSD straightened certain sections of the above-ground river, added a hundred yards

[97] "The History of the River Des Peres: Timeline from 1700-2010" (River des Peres Watershed Coalition, 2010).

of rip-rap here or there, or improved collapsing concrete reinforcing walls. The days of a project as cohesive as Horner's in 1916 were long gone.

Still, during this time there was no shortage of people living around the river and its neighboring tributaries. Backyards still butted up to banks, and especially during an era where children roamed freely, avoiding the waterway was nearly impossible.

I first hear of the ways children came to move about the des Peres during this time from Tony, a regular at our cafe. Tony walks in our doors daily, at his own leisure or on breaks from the handful of jobs he holds on Delmar. Often he's still on the clock, placing an order for some store-owner down the street. Most of the time, he assumes that we have entirely committed various bartender's and hairdresser's orders to memory. "This one's for Tricia!" he'll say. "It's for Patrice!" It's always with an endearingly expectant tone.

As I've come to learn over the past several years, Tony and I have far more in common than I may have initially suspected. Like my mother and her family of eight, he grew up in Webster Groves, a southern suburb. He was in the same acting group as my aunt, both mentored by the same beloved drama teacher. During different years, they separately met at six in the morning at the steps of their local high school, acting out scenes until the first bell. However, the Webster of my mother and of Tony certainly diverged in some important aspects. A black man, Tony and his family lived in the northern section of the suburb, an enclave of the municipality where a small middle-class African-American population has thrived for years. Like much of St. Louis, Webster is sharply divided by race, a legacy of the residential red-lining which barred black families from owning or selling properties in considerable tracts of the city. Thus, individual streets are rarely integrated, and most black residents, who make up seven percent of

Webster's population of 23,000, live in these northern reaches of the suburb. Farther south, household median incomes double to nearly $113,000, and blocks are thick with deep front yards and wrap around porches.[98]

Tony knows the entirety of Webster Groves better than anyone I've met: rattling off street names and cross-avenues as if he's the local city planner. Yet now well into his fifties, Tony has now lived in University City for quite some time, where I usually see him wearing a dramatic three-piece suit and long pea coat. Occasionally he'll put on a Webster Groves High School hat, emblazoned with bright orange text across crisp black fabric. At other times, he comes in wearing bunched floral pants, corduroy vests, and plaid ties. His style is broad, and it's not hard to imagine him in a high school acting troupe. Some of our cafe patrons seem unsure of him: easily passing six feet, he cuts an imposing figure. But I can't think of a more gentle regular. He's been known to politely pop his head into our kitchen during a busy lunch rush to ask if we need help washing dishes.

Leaning back in his chair, Tony lights up as we talk about the des Peres. For him, the river and its tributary streams were a place of childhood antics. He describes highschoolers racing motorcycles down the paved bottoms of South City. He and his friends played hours of "Swamp Monster," which I gather is just a game of tag, with the use of muddy natural camouflage. It's one of the countless permutations of the very similar games of any childhood, which, myself included, we typically defend as distinctively of our own creation.

After so many seasons spent romping through the river's bottom, Tony and his pack of friends no doubt gathered a certain affection for the place, one that has clearly endured over all

[98] "Webster Groves, MO," Data USA, n.d., https://datausa.io/profile/geo/webster-groves-mo.

of these years. In their spare time the boys would patrol the creek and watch for unlawful trash dumping. Allegedly, they had the phone-number of some conservation group to call if they saw anything suspect. Despite their valiant efforts though, most of Tony's river was far from clean. I ask him about the state of it.

"It was gross," he says. "You got like a lot of sewage coming through there. The water never was blue like blue ocean water."[99]

Their adventures were always alone, with parents left far behind, often not even knowing where they had gone. "But, they hung out there when they were younger," he tells me. "That's how we knew about Shady Creek." This was the local name for the small stream that shortly runs into the des Peres once leaving Webster Groves.

He continues, "When we were kids we basically did the same thing that our parents did. Back then Shady Creek was a big creek where everybody would go down to the creek for lunch with their lunch pails. They'd be fishing."

I know this section that Tony talks about well. My aunt's house sits last on a dead-end street, overlooking a park and wooded section of Shady Creek. Years ago during spring flooding my two cousins tried to kayak down the swollen stream. The video's still on Youtube somewhere, of two shirtless high school boys forcing a boat through the narrow confines of the banks, water rushing past them. It's saturated with all the bravado of athletic adolescent boys, clearly impressed by their own antics.

It was not far from this spot that Tony and his friends played as well.

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[99] Personal Interview of Joseph Anthony Tyler by Marina Henke, August 16, 2019.

"If we were down there playing and it started to flood you know what we would do?" Tony asks me. "We would climb up out of there and sit at the top and watch the water rise up. It'd be pouring rain and we'd be sitting there getting wet. It was something to watch as kids, you know? Watching the water rise up. We'd throw logs and rip branches off and throw them in the water and tie little notes onto them."

He describes to me a day when the des Peres began flooding fast, and he pushed his friend in the river. The boy started screaming for help, terrified he was drowning.

"We said 'Hey man! The water ain't that deep! Stand up!' He stood up, and the water was just at his knee!" He could barely make out this last part of the story without breaking into a loud laughter, "He thought he was drowning!" I smile, and also can't help but think of Tony Trumbo, a black boy of the same name who had a much different fate a few suburbs to the north.

For the most part, unlike for Tony and his friends, flooding was a much more inconvenient reality for St. Louis. The same issues that debilitated the city in the early twentieth century continued to pose much of the same problems, calling into question the true success of the century's earlier works. As noted by practically any ecologist that speaks on the issue, the most pressing concern for the des Peres was not its natural banks or course, but the fact that most of the districts it runs through are made of roughly ninety percent non-permeable surfaces. Concrete bases and siding within the stream's path have done little to help the problem. When heavy rains come, water moves quickly across these paved surfaces, bringing runoff that, were it given the opportunity, might soak into the soil rather than the des Peres.

It was this era of patchworked efforts and these types of over-developed municipalities that killed Tony Trumbo in 1992. That spring season after his death, the Mississippi River

flooded to historical heights, a date and flood-line still frequently talked about during heavy rains. Indeed, local history has paid much attention to the havoc that the flooded Mississippi has brought on the city. However, what gets less of a spotlight is the results of a flooded des Peres, the vessel that holds so much of the excess flow from the country's largest waterway.

Despite this public disregard of the role of the des Peres in flooding events, the river did gain more and more attention concerning its sanitary health. Much of this was due to growing national concern about environmental degradation, marked by the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. The national act, which regulated the discharge of industrial and personal pollutants, sought an end to what had been a laissez-faire approach to pollution in the centuries prior. Far gone were the times when factory discards could be willfully thrown into open waterways (not to say that this didn't still happen frequently).

Notably, combined sewer systems found themselves in the line of fire. Public health officials' critiques weren't complicated. The once impressive practice of mixing storm and sewer water could quickly make massive amounts of rainfall and runoff impure. To add to that, most antiquated systems were designed to spill excess fluid straight into natural watercourses when their systems reached capacity. Nothing was a better case study of the faults in this technology than the des Peres. Although at their onset, these sewer systems had been an engineering feat, by the turn of the twenty-first century they had been linked to consistent flooding and public health problems.[100] In a 2007 report, the Missouri Coalition for the Environment highlighted 300 sites where the MSD illegally discharged raw sewage by way of sewer overflow systems. This wastewater found its way directly into backyards, local parks, and streets.[101]

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[100] "The History of the River Des Peres: Timeline from 1700-2010."
[101] Washington University Civil Justice Clinic, "Notice of Intent to Bring Civil Suit for Violations of the Clean Water Act," April 12, 2007, A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.

In 1994, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a 'Combined Sewer Overflow Control Policy," which forced communities to find solutions for these failing systems. Progress proved slow, marred by disagreements over the classification of what exactly the des Peres *was* now: a sanitary system? A stream? An engineering work?

One thing that was certain was that the river could no longer be dealt with in broad strokes. Different engineering projects patchworked together, across eras, across theories of sanitation and development had created a river that defied typical conventions. Perhaps most demonstrative of this predicament, as flooding and erosion issues in University City mounted, the treatment the des Peres received was far different only several miles south. In 2004, Forest Park underwent considerable renovations, centered around the natural ecology of the 1300-acre grounds, rather than the myriad of museums and recreation complexes that studded its winding streets.

Landscape architects reimagined a Forest Park complete with a running water source, worlds away from the "pockmarked landscape" full of a "series of stagnant lagoons" which an article in *Landscape Architecture* described in detail.[102] Planners recognized that this absence of functioning wetlands and running water had veered considerably from earlier hopes for the park. But they also knew that by the twenty-first century some dreams were well out of reach. Throughout Forest Park, the des Peres was submerged in concrete sewer pipes, which certainly were not going anywhere. So architects had to get creative.

What resulted was the $86 million-dollar project, bestowed the name "The River Returns." Equally funded by the public and the private non-profit organization, Forest Park

[102] George Hazel, "A River Runs Through It... Again," *The Magazine of the American Society of Landscape Architects*, February 2004, Missouri Historical Society.

Forever, landscape architects designed an artificial waterway that mimicked the des Peres' original route. Drawing from an 1874 surface drainage layout, engineers hoped that the design would give parkgoers the experience of the river as it used to be.

Designers also proposed the project as an attempt "to fix a hundred years of misinformed decision-making in an urban park." However, for the idealists in the city it wasn't enough. Even after the project was complete, people clamored for the real des Peres to be brought above the surface, dammed, and used for fishing and recreational activities.[103]

To the project's credit, the artificial waterway has undoubtedly allowed for a resurgence of wildlife. Western sections of the park have some of the only parcels of midwestern savanna in the region. There are white oaks and dogwood trees, and trickling streams weaving through forested acres. We walk my dog in this forest almost daily, in the summer throwing sticks into one of the many man-made pools that look, at first glance, entirely natural. Seven years in, and I can't say he bothers over the distinction. If I look closely, though, there's clear elements of refined control: metal grates and narrow rusting culverts.

The irony isn't hard to see. When it was impossible for the river to resurface, people suddenly wanted it back. A-hundred-years prior hastily placed wooden planks had sought to cover the des Peres. Now in these exact locations are carefully engineered wetlands, complete with schools of ducklings in the spring and wintertime fox prints pressed across snow. Engineers prided themselves on how this new river looked largely unengineered. And to its credit, the project has since brought few problems. The system is fairly straightforward to control, as it receives inputs from city water systems. There's no unruly flooding, and even if banks failed, the

[103] Jeannette Batz, "A Sewer Runs Through It," Riverfront Times, December 6, 2000, https://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/a-sewer-runs-through-it/Content?oid=2473041.

park remains so free from impervious surfaces that there's a place for overflow. It makes me wonder if really the only way to engineer a river is to create it out of nothing. At least within the bounds of Forest Park, where people most likely mistake an artificial river for a real one every day, engineers attempt to create total control, and not simply a fractured illusion of it, has succeeded.

And yet, as has become the stratified norm for the river, at this exact time only one mile north, the des Peres presented a whole host of environmental problems. University City's 'version' of the des Peres was as real as it came: still mostly absent of enclosed tubing, much less covered by a faux replica. Simultaneously, with the pressure of municipal development and run-off, this also meant it was the most unruly.

As debates circled around unlawful combined sewer overflow (CSOs) throughout the river, residents also insisted upon relief from frequently flooded homes. They pleaded to be bought out of their water-damaged properties, a process marred by slow bureaucratic momentum and a reluctance from various departments to make expensive and resource-taxing moves. As continued to be the case in many areas of the city, the des Peres was often silently central in conversations about development in the municipality.

The paper trail of this time cannot go understated. Over coffee, former University City mayor Shelly Welsch gives me a binder entitled "The History of the River des Peres in University City." Easily more than a thousand pages, there are cleanly divided subsections demarcating topics: "River des Peres Community Meeting," "Sewer Lateral Repair Program Policy," "Missouri Coalition for the Environment MSD Suit." It's simultaneously daunting and comforting to imagine another person delving this deeply into the des Peres.

Sitting down to pour over it, I don't quite know where to begin. But after dozens of pages of meticulous spreadsheets and jargon-heavy flood reports, I have at least the humility to realize I'm in over my head. What's clear to me is that responsibilities surrounding the des Peres had gotten highly unclear over the past decade. The binder displayed this debate in hundreds of permutations, packed with conversations over whose responsibility was what, and what exactly that responsibility was.

Legal battles of this variety occupied much of the municipality's attention at the turn of the twenty-first century. In April of 2007, the Missouri Coalition for the Environment filed a lawsuit against the Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) for lack of compliance with the recently enforced Clean Water Act.[104] As had been highlighted earlier in the century, the combined sewer system in the University City portions of the des Peres created frequent overflow, which meant regular discharges of human and household waste into the river. A Washington University Law School clinic took over the case, and perhaps much to the surprise of local activists, scored a major victory. The EPA ordered that MSD rectify their outdated system in the coming decades.[105]

Despite the success, however, it has been more than ten years since this ruling, and the MSD-led sewer project has only just come into execution. This glacial pace, as could be guessed, is due to the hefty price tag "Project Clear" came with, grouped into a regional sewer plan that will ultimately cost the state $4.7 billion dollars in engineering projects.[106] On a more local level,

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[104] Washington University Civil Justice Clinic, "Notice of Intent to Bring Civil Suit for Violations of the Clean Water Act," April 12, 2007, A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.
[105] "Finding of Violation and Order for Compliance" (Environmental Protection Agency, April 30, 2007), A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.
[106] Erick Trickey, "How a Sewer Will Save St. Louis," *POLITICO Magazine*, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/20/st-louis-infrastructure-sewer- tunnel-water-system-215056.

tentative plans in the coming decades include building a twenty-five-million-gallon holding tank in the northern sections of the municipality, able to hold combined overflow during flooding events. Following storms, the tank would then slowly release the combined sewage once rising waters had subsided, depositing them into the sewer line instead of the des Peres. Before this plan came to fruition though, MSD quietly put up signs throughout University City warning people of potential toxins and bacteria in their backyard stream. These were the exact signs that Matt waffled over during our trip to the des Peres last fall.

Even with countless arguments over who "owned" the des Peres, there were moments when the reality of actual flood waters soberly interrupted business as usual. In September 2008 heavy rains from Hurricane Ike brought water levels to a new high. Public outcry peaked when, as has become a storied legend in the neighborhood, an elderly couple drowned while trying to escape to their car. On that same day, twenty-six homes along this same street, Wilson Avenue, became uninhabitable.[107]

University City quickly applied for federal disaster relief, but it was clear that no singular buy-out program would eradicate the neighborhood's problem. That being said, immediate purchasing of twenty-six residences occurred over the next two years, funded by federal disaster relief funds. When I read about this for the first time, I was amazed that I had never heard about the whole ordeal, much less of Wilson Avenue itself. Soon after, I biked down the street on a summer afternoon. Sure enough, there were empty lots where houses used to stand, now gently landscaped to serve as a green space for the neighborhood. It was an ominous feeling to know

[107] Margaret Gillerman, "University City Neighborhood Unlikely to Get More Flood Buyouts," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 17, 2010, A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.

what was once there, one-story homes full of families and the lives that contained them. I wondered where the elderly couple had lived.

Despite the success of the buyouts on Wilson Avenue, the project proved only a band-aid for what was becoming a gaping wound for University City. There were many more streets that deserved similar intervention, including a unit of low-income apartments just north of Olive Boulevard. As former Mayor Welsch described it,

"People who understand this field see that [Wilson Avenue] was not the best spot. There were people in University City who were far more affected by flooding over the years who should have gotten some compensation, some relief. But, when someone dies people are very emotional, which is understandable. But that really was arguably not the best use of those funds."[108]

Mayor for eight years, Welsch knows the municipality well. She went on to name at least a dozen other street names equally or even more affected: the Hafner Court apartments, Mona Terrace residents, Groby Avenue.

The conversation between the two of us flows easily. For everything she shares I find myself having a dozen more questions. I realize she might hold some of the most institutional knowledge on the des Peres, particularly as it concerns University City. She spent much of her tenure dealing with the river in all of its forms: as public nuisance, as place of potential, as location caught in the battle between different city agencies.

Even before her mayoral term, Welsch also co-founded the River des Peres Watershed Coalition in 2002. Under her guidance, the Coalition gathered a group of devoted community

[108] Personal Interview of Shelley Welsch, interview by Marina Henke, March 9, 2020.

members who wanted to care for the des Peres as a vital natural specimen. It would be one of the only community organizations to consistently advocate for continued restoration and public policy aimed at protecting the waterway. As Welsh told me, “The river hadn’t had a champion. That was the first time the river ever had a champion.”

The Coalition is as endearingly emblematic of small non-profit organizations as they come. At dusk one day in late June, I arrived at a trailer situated in an infrequently travelled corner of the University of Missouri campus in St. Louis. Cicadas sing loudly in this northern suburb of the city. Engelholm Creek, which intersects with the des Peres right at Arnie’s demolition offices further south, runs behind the squat building.

In an email earlier that day, field ecologist Jay Fish had confirmed my invitation to the seasonal coalition steering committee meeting, providing me with not just a street address, but the GPS coordinates of his trailer in case that “better suited my navigational needs.” The trailer served as the center for UMSL’s urban ecology honors program. Under the guidance of Jay, students complete course work on watershed restoration, invasive species, and hydraulic flow.

After a series of endearingly awkward hellos, I was reminded how all ecology classrooms look vaguely similar. Jay’s trailer was no different: dozens of laminated posters on the wall of various ecosystems (which, in an effort to show biodiversity are always thickly populated with animals, proved very misleading to my understanding of population density as a child). There was the same smell of soil and the same series of vague specimens floating in amber liquid. A taxidermied owl hung from the ceiling, its wide wings outstretched across vinyl classroom tables. Topographic maps of different sites in Missouri plastered the wall.

The group convened in a horseshoe formation, pulling out laptops and thickly padded binders. It didn't take long for me to see the care they collectively held for the des Peres. As they discussed conflicts of interest within the board, Erik Karch, the president, compared their work to that of MSD: "They need to do it for their job, we do it for our watershed." Sometimes though, the passion was more subtle. When talking about an upcoming cleanup, somebody mentioned a portion of a creek in the northern neighborhood of Hanley Hills. "It's really pretty up there," Erik said quietly. They made jokes about how often people misspell the river's name, capitalizing the "D" or combining its name into one word, "Desperes."

I listened as they planned for an upcoming "Trash Bash," a city-wide event that invites teams to sign up for an afternoon of trash pick-up along the river. The biannual event usually gets dozens of groups, and this fall it would be in its thirteenth year. This past spring, my young neighbors registered as a team for the eldest's bat mitzvah service project. They told me about pulling a bike out of the mud and about the eight buried shopping carts they found. Like me at that age, they were most excited to relay the minutiae of obscurities they stumbled upon. It's not often as a child that you get such access to people's discarded treasures, and as an elementary schooler, there was something for me that always felt so oddly radical about the whole act.

Back in Jay's trailer, I saw that the Coalition was putting in great efforts to maintain local involvement. An hour into the meeting, the group spent at least twenty minutes discussing ideas for a water quality monitoring app. Nobody had the experience to build the platform, but they wasted no time in developing an ambitiously long list of ideas. Sarah, a water quality expert, wanted an alert on her phone every time a civilian saw a dead fish or trash dumping.

"I mean, of course! I would hope I would get one!" she said, when someone posed the practicality of the live feature. Allegedly, the alerts would compile onto a publicly accessible website where people could view updates on the river through an interactive map feature.

The evening wrapped up with plans for a follow-up meeting the next week to talk more specifically about a boat race being held at a nearby state park. The co-leaders for the event made sure there would be an available hitch for the canoe and that coordinators would touch base about pick-up and drop off locations. The meeting came to a close, and most people dispersed into their cars and drove away. Jay Fish and I made plans to talk further, and several stragglers expressed interest in my research, simultaneously seeming skeptical that anyone but them would actually be writing a lengthy report on the des Peres.

I drove home much more moved than I expected, touched by the trailer full of people who so wholeheartedly loved this river. I'm not reminded enough how much work is done by groups like these, wholly imperfect and a bit haphazard. It's refreshing to see eight people who don't see the river for a second as a sewer or a storm drain. Increasingly in my time spent researching, these subjects are harder and harder to track down.

And on the other hand, the Coalition's mindset does bring certain limitations. Aspects of the des Peres' get overlooked in their efforts, so wholly focused on the environmental restoration of the waterway that they may at times fail to see it as an important aspect of MSD's sanitation plan for the city. On the other hand, they probably know this better than anyone, having most likely logged the most hours along its varied banks.

And, it is these banks that they know well that continued to endure an onslaught of flood waters and industrial run off. These were inputs that did not "naturally" belong in the des Peres,

causing houses backing up to the river grave problems and continuing to carve into their properties. Yet again, these were upsets not greatly different from the concerns of a century prior.

In the case of University City, many of these homeowners most affected are black. That is not to say, though, that the des Peres itself discriminates. However, as the St. Louis of today also reflects, the des Peres is a place of stark division. Maybe more than ever, the city reflects these stark social divides, bisected by iconic streets and boulevards that demarcate areas as rich and poor, black and white. In turn, the river weaves through the city, interlaced in every pocket of St. Louis despite their respective differences from one another. Of course, the wealthy interior has found a way around the river's threats, through several tons of concrete and trucked-in steel bars that buried the river. But the other areas that it touches in its southern and northern reaches are, more than anything, simply poor. Mostly black, sometimes also working-class white, it's as blatant a case for environmental inequity than anything in the city. My own neighborhood reflects this, where houses on the northern edge of the subdivision have staggering flood insurance and become inundated by sewer overflow regularly. Even within my neighborhood, the inequity also has distinct racial dimensions. University City, so often promoting themselves as a bastion of diversity, sees the most flooding along its more concentrated black neighborhoods.[109]

This experience of economic desperation, particularly in the black community, is what comes through most clearly in public outcries concerning the river. A week before Thanksgiving in 2010, University City hosted a community meeting concerning the state of the des Peres.[110]

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[109] "University City, MO | Data USA," https://datausa.io/profile/geo/university-city-mo/#about.
[110] "River Des Peres Community Meeting," November 15, 2010, A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.

Families wrote in about two-thousand dollar flood insurance that they could not afford. One man described sixteen-inches of water in his house after a storm and his decisions years ago to never walk into his basement.

From Corbitt Avenue, a block of single story ranch homes butting up to the northern reaches of the river, a resident explained, “I am trying to send my oldest to college. I am just making it.”

Confusion still remained over the prior year’s sporadic buy-outs. “Why aren’t we included?” resident Rosalie Bowman asked. Again and again, comments disclosed a disappointment with local assistance. “We are constantly losing property, getting sick and again being pushed back,” one woman wrote. There was little levity in the messages: “My home needs to be raised 3.38 feet. In 2008 my neighbor’s car washed away.” Dozens talked about desperately needing a buy-out.

Many of these bureaucratic dead ends that these neighbors described emerged out of a looming problem for the des Peres of the modern era: what people thought it *was*. Petitioning for financial assistance often brought these issues to the forefront, articulated well by one resident at the onset of the community meeting. “The insurance company said this was not a flood but a sewer backup,” Stella Huges explained as she described attempts to get a reimbursement for her son’s water damaged music equipment. “This is an MSD issue. MSD stated it is not their problem because the house is in a floodplain. FEMA did not help because we own the house and they consider our son a tenant with no right to file a claim.”

Across agencies, city and county lines, and even neighborhoods, understandings of the des Peres's status varied greatly. This lack of consensus translated into diverging opinions on what should be done to improve it. If treated as an extension of the sewer district, the plans as outlined by the Army Corps or MSD made logical sense. Avenant Melider wrote, "I am an engineer. This is a solvable problem. The solution to the River des Peres problems should include dredging operations, in particular the stretch just upstream of Vernon Ave, behind Heman Park community center. Sediment deposits and vegetation are observed in the channel." However, Melider's solution was worlds away from what other parties within University City, or the city at large, wanted. One woman wrote a letter to the mayor's office describing her dream of the neighborhood: a thriving des Peres that would support a local farmers market and garden plots. Interspersed with the renaissance of the forgotten waterway would be a grocery co-op, a salad-dressing enterprise run by once "driftless" high school students and murals painted with Martin Luther King, Jr. quotes. I laughed as I read her email, never having seen something more emblematic of the well-intentioned virtuous spirit that sometimes oversaturated this neighborhood. Why hope for just an odorless street when you could conjure up a salad-dressing business?

During her time in office, Mayor Welsch landed perhaps somewhere in the middle of these camps, advocating both the natural embrace and mechanical control of the river. "In my opinion our priority should be purchasing homes in the floodways, creating the large wetland retaining basins in two locations, leaving the channel as is and developing green space and trails along the channel throughout our community," she said in an email correspondence with local politicians. Welsch was aware that past choices had limited their options considerably by the

twenty-first century. She concluded the email by noting, "We have to acknowledge that because of the way the river has been engineered in the past, all the flooding problems cannot be solved forever."[111]

Sure enough, all the problems of the des Peres could not be solved, and the river of several centuries prior was by this era certainly a thing of the past. Confusion around terminology only further muddied potential progress. In the lawsuit that the Missouri Coalition for the Environment filed in 2007 against MSD for unlawful expulsion of combined sewer overflow, the sewer district tried to insist that the des Peres constituted an "unclassified stream," meaning that it did not need to be held to the standards of a natural waterway.[112]

The consequences of this classification posed a bit of a catch-twenty-two. As reported in a community meeting, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources considered the des Peres an unclassified stream because it did not "maintain permanent flow nor permanent pools of water that would support aquatic life or promote recreation uses such as wading or swimming." But by those metrics, the des Peres was once a "classified" stream. Welsch spoke to me of ice-skating on the creek as a child and a friend who would jump off a hand-made tire swing into the river. These upper reaches of the des Peres had lost its standing from one construction project to another. Suddenly come the twenty-first century, by the metrics of one agency that depended on qualitative data to determine action, the des Peres was no longer even a stream.

Defining the river was not just a problem left for municipal agencies. With every conversation I have with people, I have come to realize that there's no consensus on what this thing is. As the number of conversations I have grows, this becomes the thing I'm most curious

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[111] Shelley Welsch, "River Des Peres," February 7, 2006.
[112] "Clean Rivers Healthy Community Program," A History of the River des Peres in University City 1700-2010.

to ask about. Who in fact knows what to say when I ask, "So do you think that the river is a river?"

Some are quick to see the des Peres in black and white. My coworker tells me in a thick Colombian accent, "It's bad. It's bad." To Patricia, everything about the river is lethal: the mice, the mosquitoes, even the people she swears she sees going to do "bad things" along its banks. "What can you be going to do there?" she says incredulously. "Not pray!"[113]

When I ask if she would walk along the river if it was prettier, she laughs and staunchly tells me that would never happen. In fact, she wishes the city would cover it. When I tell her that much of it is covered in other parts of the city, she's jealous of those residents. "Why'd you tell me that!" she says.

But in other cases, residents embrace so many of the complexities of the modern des Peres. A regular to the cafe, Victor sits across from me drinking his Chicory blend coffee, a roast we keep on hand only for him, who's too stubborn after so many years to adjust to a new brand. I've heard often that Victor has an affection for rivers. He uses a walking stick pulled from the banks of the Mississippi, sanded smooth and finished until it shines. When another woman at the cafe grew unsteady on her feet, Victor came in one day with a second staff in hand. She used it for an entire summer, often showing off the delicate lines carved into its side.

He's lived in St. Louis for nearly forty-five years, but as he'd be the first to tell anyone, he belongs in New Orleans, where he's from. In fact, it was through this move to the city that he developed his "thing" for rivers, as he calls it.

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[113] Personal Interview with Patricia Gantiva by Marina Henke, August 20, 2019.

"I'm from New Orleans," he informs me for maybe the fifth time since we've known each other. "Louisiana is surrounded by water. Matter of fact, Louisiana *is* water. So when I moved to St. Louis forty-six years ago I was basically sick. No water. The closest thing I could find was the Mississippi River, the Meramec River. So, rivers became my sanctuary."[114]

Victor goes to the Mississippi regularly, years ago often under orders by his wife when his job with the IRS became too stressful. He described to me watching trumpet swans and white pelicans at the vacant showers. When new to the city, the banks quickly became his place to find "peace and serenity," a phrase he must have said five times in our short conversation.

"I used to go out there with a fifth of wine. And when I got finished, my empty wine bottle used to go down the Mississippi river," he paused. "I was polluting. But the wine bottle went down the Mississippi river and all my problems and concerns went with it."

At some point his son walked in to join his father for coffee. While sitting a table away, waiting for our conversation to wrap up, he laughs at this remark of his father's, aimlessly scrolling through Facebook on his phone. Victor continues though.

"I tell people that's where I go to talk to God."

I turn the conversation towards the des Peres. As always, these big rivers get most of the airspace with talk of Missouri waterways. But I know that Victor has at least some perspectives on the matter. I first mentioned my research to him several months ago, during the middle of a busy shift. Off the cuff, I asked him what he felt about the des Peres. He immediately smiled and shook his head, "The des Peres?"

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[114] Personal Interview of Victor, interview by Marina Henke, January 14, 2020.

Victor's lived in the same house in University City since moving here: a well-kept, mainly black street, with single story ranch homes and the occasional brick bungalow. As is the case for many people in University City, he didn't have much of a choice in coming to know the river in some capacity. Moving just blocks away from the river in 1973, the des Peres quickly became the closest source of water from Victor's home.

"To me St. Louis is nothing like Louisiana, but I found that when it rains, I still go to the des Peres River to watch it fill."

I'm struck by the way he calls it the des Peres River, as if it were to the likes of the Mississippi or Missouri. Nobody does that with the des Peres, especially as its nomenclature has grown more uncertain over time.

Back home in Louisiana, Victor hunted in local swamps often, using animal tracks to trace feral pigs and deer. There's certainly no hunting at the des Peres, but that hasn't since stopped him from taking note of the clues around him. "I found it fascinating how other creatures survive here" he told me. "They come to the city to eat. Over the years I look at the des Peres river as an animal island: deers, raccoons, red fox, coyotes even."

Still, it's unclear to me whether Victor also thinks of the des Peres as one of these places to talk to God or not. "Sometimes I look at it and it makes me run to the river," he tells me. Regardless though, it's what is there, and he, like any resident of University City, interacts with it in whatever way makes sense for him. In Victor's case, it seems at least to be one of distanced care and curiosity.

This ever evolving curiosity towards the des Peres permeates the city in all kinds of ways. This past November, a friend of mine who owns a wine and cheese store, gave me a six pack of

"River des Peres White Caps," a new beer from our local 2nd Shift Brewing Company. The cans show a squalid empty channel, with dozens of cats sprawled out in piles of stagnant green water.

These are the ways that most people see the des Peres. It's a river that is the butt of jokes, a place that gets referenced as a fatal mistake of the city, or as an eye-sore on the cityscape. There are the Victors, the Coalition members, the Tonys. But most of all, there are the people who think very little of it, outside of a joke or a shake of the head. I suspect that the ambiguity of the waterway adds to this: it's easy to be ambivalent about something so vaguely defined.

That is, of course, until people are forced to confront it.

In June of this last year the des Peres began to rise. Horner had promised, way back in 1916, that his engineering project would help control the effects of seasonal flooding, and while that much can be said for the sections of river that were enclosed in cement, areas in both the north and south of the city still suffer regularly. Adding to that, flooding has begun to increase in light of warmer temperatures. This year in particular heavy rains upstream filled the Mississippi and brought a cascade of water past, and eventually up, the des Peres.

As my research continues alongside flood season, I take advantage of the possibility to see the des Peres in this state, one people had begun to compare with the record-breaking flood of 1993. I drive down along the southern section, where there are huge sandbags lining the banks, reading "BAGS USA" in blocky red, white, and blue print. They'd been made with bulldozers, a far cry from the homemade ones city residents tossed during the '93 flood. Having just moved to St. Louis, my father refers to it as the most distinct moment of civil service he's ever participated in, a probable statement from a Renaissance drama professor and one that usually embarasses the rest of his family.

By this spring afternoon, the water has nearly crested over its concrete banks. I continue along River des Peres Drive, until signs reading “Road Flooded” and “Only Local Traffic” block the road. The water within the channel flows fast, moving with the strength that I attribute to more typical rivers, ones you can canoe down or easily see from outside a plane window. The illusion does not last long though. At a bottlenecked bridge, piles of trash float over at least twenty-square-feet of water. A huge flock of starlings shriek overhead, occasionally swooping down to grab some floating scrap.

I decide to ignore the signs and continue down the road, watching the water come closer and closer to my car. Soon though, the way is entirely blocked, flooded out by the river in a way I have never seen before. I park my car at a dead-end street coming off of the main drive. There, two men board up the front stairs to a house that seems in mid-construction. Their front porches must be less than ten feet from the water’s current mark. Across the street, a man with white hair that hangs down past his shoulders comes from down the block. He’s not wearing any shoes, and exudes an oddly prophetic aura for the moment. I watch as he walks to the water’s edge, where I’m heading as well. There, he grasps both of his hands onto a stop sign, hanging aimlessly off of the metal rod the same way someone would once hang off of a railcar or trolley. He and I both look out at the odd expanse, making no recognition of the other. Water fills a ball field at the end of the block. Subtle ripples laps against the second to last row of metal bleachers.

Back on the sidewalk I kneel down to touch the water. There are clusters of minnows, unaware that they are swimming through what should be air. Circles of oil float on top of the water and pieces of plastic bob up and down. The stop lights ahead blink red, but with feet of

water covering the road, cross traffic is long gone. This is “River City Avenue.” The street sign hangs over what now really does seem like a river city.

Back on the main road, I see other people. Four teenagers sit on the north side of the bank, kicking their legs, teetering dangerously close to the water’s edge. An empty car idles next to a stretch of sand bags, its driver stepping out to take a look. A man walks his dog by the banks. Another woman takes pictures with her phone, and from across the river I saw a group of people clustered in their backyard. I get back in my car to head home, to a house far from any water’s edge, but not too far from a covered des Peres.

On my way back on River des Peres Drive I pass a city truck, with an American flag hanging off of it aside a St. Louis City flag as well. The vehicle is parked next to a propped up white tent, where dozens of extra flood bags sit. The sun is just beginning to dip below the horizon of a filled and fast flowing river. There’s crystal pink light on everything, shifting across moving water.

It occurs to me that during this flood season there is suddenly a river in this city that I’ve always thought woefully absent of one (the Mississippi remains of course, but butting up to our now vacant downtown, it doesn’t get much foot traffic). At the des Peres, though, I watch cars bend away and towards the banks, driving east and west.

Conscious of my idealizing, I remind myself that this is also a place where dead bodies are found. Years ago, a woman walked straight into the water and killed herself. During another spring flood, neighbors spotted a body floating down the river three separate times before somebody could pull it out. In 1990, a dead infant was pulled out of the banks not too far from

where I stood.[115] Thinking of them all, I feel guilty for how calm I had felt, amidst houses sitting precariously next to rising flood waters.

That being said, contradictory feelings seem to be par for the course with the des Peres. One of the last things Victor talked about during our interview was memories of his uncle, who used to take him hunting in the Louisiana swamps. Apparently he was a big talker, who spouted a constant stream of allegorical wisdoms of life as they tramped through bogwater. Their conversations ran the gamut of content: of race relations, of responsibility, of work ethic.

He relayed to me one of the most repeated lines, "If you ever kill a snake," he would tell me, "you can no longer hunt here, because that's his world. We are visiting."

In its once serpentine path, the des Peres used to be a snake of its own. And, as that snake, St. Louis did it's best to kill it too, or at least to morph it into what paved roads and densely packed backyards required. The decades that followed, and continue, are complex. It's not as though the des Peres of now singularly wreaks havoc on the city, but it certainly feels as if so many of St. Louis' problems have emerged out of the river's resistance to enclosed tubes and concrete bottom.

It's a balancing act, learning about this river. That first day at our counter, when I asked Victor about the des Peres, he kept talking for a while. He shook his head, smiled and said, "Oh. It's beautiful when it's empty and beautiful when it's full." The phrase moved me so much that I scratched it out on an order-slip as soon as he left. I know by now that you don't hear things like that often, and probably for good reason. As Victor knows, this river is not just beautiful and not just one thing. Ultimately, it's these different labels that have made it an easy thing to forget.

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[115] Batz.

Conclusion

A close to my year in St. Louis brought a return to the tattered volume of Finkel's collection. I reread it, recognizing many more references to the des Peres than a year prior, even catching certain primary sources that I too had stumbled upon. Since finding *Beyond Despair,* I'd looked through Finkel's collected papers, stored in Washington University's archives. Hoping I'd find notes for the book or even historical records I had yet to locate, I came to the library unsure of what really constituted one's lifelong "collected papers." Much of what I had hoped for I found, including original references to Moses Austin in Missouri, which helped to illuminate what seemed initially such an odd pairing. But near the end of a folder containing multiple revisions of his *Beyond Despair* manuscript, I came across a series of correspondence between Finkel and his editor.

On January 31, 1989, Finkel received a response to his manuscript from Alfred Knopf publishing (The letter is addressed to 6943 Columbia Place, which still catches me off guard, as I was born at 6906 Columbia). Finkel had worked with the prestigious publishing house before, where they had previously published collections of his poetry, including *Adequate Earth* and *The Wake of the Electron*. The letter, postmarked from the center of Manhattan, begins with pleasantries from editor Harry Ford to a client who was clearly a friend. Before giving feedback, he tells Finkel about a recent vacation to the Italian coast.

What follows, though, is a brutal impression of the collection. From the onset, Ford shares a laundry-list of problems with *Beyond Despair*, beginning with the title poem. "For me it's hard to figure out from the poem what you think you're doing," Ford writes, "so diffuse and

riddled with dead ends does it seem to me." He goes through section by section, giving a list of grievances: largely its unclarity and undefined subject. The final paragraph proves particularly cutting, "I'm sorry to say that I think this book needs a lot of your attention (which you may well have given it since you sent it to me)."[116] With that he wishes the best to Donald and his wife. Finkel responded within the week. Understandably he seemed devastated,

> *Dear Harry,*
>
> *Needless to say, I was shaken by your letter. 'Beyond Despair' is the outcome of a long and arduous process. I can understand that it seems to you as difficult to comprehend as it was for me to compose -- but, considering your patience and encouragement, I think I owe you a brief explanation as to what I had in mind in that sequence…. I know it places a burden on the innocent reader who attempts to find his way through a labyrinth of unfamiliar names and shifting chronologies.*[117]
>
> He signs it intimately. "As ever, Donald."

The correspondence continues with as equally dismal a response. Ford is unmoved by Finkel's explanation. "I think there are too many disparate things going on in it," he writes, "and most of them really don't come together in any meaningful way. It all seems quite blurry to me, and I'm far from seeing what you could possibly do to it to correct this." He urges Finkel to put an end to the project and move onto other things. "My feeling is that you ought to shelve this until such time as you can make it work," writes Ford. "It seems to me a lost cause, but I could

[116] Harry Ford, "Letter to Donald Finkel," January 31, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.
[117] Donald Finkel, "Letter to Harry Ford," February 5, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.

be wrong."[118] With that he closes the letter, including the original manuscript so that Finkel might try again with a different publisher.

Finkel did not try with a different publisher. Instead, he self-published the volume, printing only enough to distribute lightly through the city, to local bookstores and friends.

In light of this scathing review, now more than thirty years old, I have to be honest. Much of *Beyond Despair* does not make sense to me. Perhaps similarly to Harry Ford's conclusions, I'm not sure if I fully understand Finkel's connection between Moses Austin and the River des Peres, except for the fact that he seemed to have lived in Missouri for some brief period of time. Even after I've completed my research, I read through much of the collection and wonder what exactly Finkel is talking about.

But what I do know, is that Finkel saw tremendous life in the des Peres, even if it was all but a depressing and existential one. For Finkel it was a place for the belly of humanity, filled with used condoms and decaying trash. The des Peres was like the fraught life Finkel sought to navigate, as expressed poignantly in one of the closing stanzas to the collection:

> *Past hope at last, beyond, behind*
> *beneath, above Despair, we've landed*
> *here on the far side of the future,*
> *back in the radiant, dangerous,*
> *unequivocal present, beyond*
> *question, beyond belief beyond*
> *a shadow of a doubt, still travelling,*
> *a black-and-white cat for my companion,*
> *a border collie for my guide.*
>
> *There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.*[119]

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[118] Harry Ford, "Letter to Donald Finkel," February 12, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.
[119] Donald Finkel, "His Kingdom At Last," in *Beyond Despair* (St. Louis: Garlic Press, 1994).

Transporting references of the River Thames from T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland,* Finkel did not hesitate in holding the des Peres up to larger-than-life standards. For him this "River Despair" was a container of life's trials, emblematic of the creative journey that Finkel found himself on. It was a personal journey in which many people, like Ford, did not quite understand what he was doing. This last line, promising another shore, suggests a world that must keep moving in acceptance of places like the des Peres. Finkel wrote in his response to Ford that for him what tethered the collection together was themes of change. "Change," he wrote, "is the essence of life, and there's nothing to do in the end, it seems to me, but ride the current."[120]

Translating this to St. Louis, Finkel seems to be offering the conclusion that the des Peres is a welcomed fact of the city, there to stay. And it's here, despite his obtuse complexities, where I have to agree.

The des Peres is here to stay, in a very permanent way. Come the twenty-first century, there's less and less places for its banks to erode or cut new paths through the city. Twenty-foot tubing and concrete channels: these are now forever installations of the city. And in the river's permanence it has become a tapestry adept in reflecting St. Louis. In fact, as of late, it seems more appropriate than ever that the River des Peres becomes the city's river. Much of St. Louis' history is reflected in the des Peres: of racial divide, failed growth, decline, and mockery. In these ways, the des Peres and St. Louis are mirrors to one another. If the river now proves a laughing stock of the city perhaps it is because of how long St. Louis has proved a laughing

[120] Donald Finkel, "Letter to Harry Ford," February 5, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.

stock to the rest of the country. It is a role locals are used to: of being the butt of jokes or of dubious questions of “where?” or “what?” St. Louis is.

It’s a river that has gone through countless permutations, shifting its presentation in some eras subtly and in others not so, into the perverted natural specimen which it is today. As it has changed course and face, the people who interact with it are a varied assortment, revealed to me from the cast of characters which populated my year. There are those like Victor who love it, those like Patricia who could see it go, and those seventeen-year-old girls who can't even place it. And then there are those in conflict with it still, undecided whether it’s an attribute or a nuisance.

There’s a certain splendor to the des Peres, or at least I’ve come to believe so. It’s a river that holds worlds beyond the trash which it contains, hidden in the most unlikely of places: the correspondence of authors, the artwork of beer cans. And, the des Peres is not the only of its kind. Most of us have the chance to traverse our own concrete monstrosities daily: whether river or dam or interstate. To stand alongside them, in all the missteps they’ve been forced to endure, under so often the promise of improvement, can offer meditation. I’ve seen it, alongside the des Peres.

One evening last January it began to snow heavily. Few in the city had prepared for it, as for the most part, snow has become less and less pronounced in our winter season. No matter how timely it comes, it seems to catch people off guard, bringing chaos to roads and a slew of unnecessary school closures. This night was no different, and our neighborhood was oddly silent with the threat of looming road conditions.

I stepped out of my house and walked the short five minutes to the banks of the des Peres. In my neighborhood you first reach the river by way of a dead end road, the southern tail of what is a mess of winding tree-lined streets. But at the end of Yale Avenue the facade of what locals tout as our "urban forest" comes to an abrupt end. The street empties into what looks like a forgotten boat ramp (although I can never make sense of this because when would this have ever offered a feasible route?). And then, there's the des Peres. It cuts a sharp corner, leaving a steep concrete channel into what opens out to be a pebble-strewn surface. There are the occasional plastic bags and smashed beer bottles, but for the most part this small section of the river is clear.

And as I found it this evening, it was serene. A thin layer of ice had started to form along the banks. Snow built up in soft, cloud-like shapes atop wet stones. Somebody had put a small table at the end of the ramp, where now a perfect square of white powder rested. The patter of snow melting on the water's surface made the most egregious noise around. With pieces of trash buried in snow and the cold air giving reprieve from any odor, it was easy to see this spot as one of many. This looked, in such ways, like the conventional rivers of my youth, clear enough to wade in and a welcome spot for a warmer Sunday afternoon.

And simultaneously, I knew this to be where Donald Finkel would walk in the evening, obsessed with trash, and where his teenage son would get high later in the night with his friends. Downstream just a matter of minutes, Tony Trumbo drowned. Niels built homemade boats here as a child, and WPA employees lay reinforced concrete walls during the nation's greatest economic depression. Much to the dismay of parents, Arnie's rubber gun fights took place just downstream, where a paved road now crosses over a buried tunnel. They all thought of the des Peres in different ways, as do I.

Since 1703 we've thoroughly muddied the des Peres' identity in pursuit of both an aesthetic appeal and a sense of safety that does not even feel entirely reached. Construction has allowed engineers to defy certain laws of nature, but also done little to stop the cyclical forces of the seasons or of weather.

How people have responded to this contradictory landmark says much about them, entangled so with their age, their race, where they live, or what they do. During this evening snowfall, I may have seen beauty alongside the des Peres, but I no longer assume that others will as well.

Finkel also explored this inherent vagueness of the river. In the closing pages of his books he writes about a similar moment of reflection at the des Peres. So similar, in fact, that from reference in an earlier poem, I realize he was once standing on the exact same concrete ramp as I was, a place I can't imagine more than a dozen people frequent.

> *For whose use this brave alluvium,*
> *this spinly rivulet, this river of fathers,*
> *slinking through the leavings past a silted log*
> *and trusty trike, past a black plastic*
> *garbage bag thrust through the ice*
> *like a pyramid tent at the bottom of winter?*[121]

Whereas Finkel is concerned about the singular user of the river, I see the most pressing question of the des Peres to center around all of its various uses. Simply put, it's a river still very much used, offering up countless contradictory presentations of what it is or could be. Thus, this des Peres that comes to exist in so many imaginations is unique to the person, bound in a union of self and of place. Attention to this unlikely landmark offers much in the way of observation, not simply towards the environmental eras which it transverses, but the testimonies of those

[121] Finkel, "For Whose Use."

onlookers, who have fallen either in love or out of love with this concrete perplexity. The allure, then, of the des Peres becomes its multiplicity, its ability to hold within its tarnished banks versions upon versions of itself.

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Images

5960 Kingsbury Avenue, partially wrecked in 1931. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, P0403.

Children play in the River des Peres just south of Forest Park, 1890. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N28040.

Construction in 1928. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15212.

Mark Gorman's Photo, Personal Archives.

New Channel, River des Peres North of Hanley, 1935. From the Archive of the University City Public Library

Outline Map of River des Peres Drainage Channel, Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

River des Peres de Hodiamont, 1890. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N29019.

River des Peres Flood, August 1915. Looking towards Jefferson Memorial Building. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15188.

The river in Forest Park, 1904. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N16088.

Women with Bucket near Manchester Road. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N05368.

Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers constructing an enclosure for the river in University City, 1940.
Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N01825.

World's Fair Construction, 1902. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, N15483.

Wreck of Hanley Road Bridge. Courtesy of the University City Public Library.