History of Trees in Des Moines

1950's - 1960's

presented by City of Des Moines
Department of Public Works
Forestry Division

CITY OF DES MOINES
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

RESEARCH CREDITS

The research for this series of historical themes relating to Des Moines and trees in the city is limited to surveying the hard work of other people. The following sources, found at the State Library of Iowa and the State Historical Society of Iowa Research Center, were used to find this sampling of history.

- Images of America: Des Moines 1845-1920 by Craig S. McCue, 2006
- Images of America: East Village by Sarah C. Oltrogge, 2010
- Dynamic Des Moines: A History in Pictures by Allen Gardiner
- Postcard History Series: Des Moines by Craig S. McCue, 2007
- Then & Now: Des Moines by Craig S. McCue, 2012

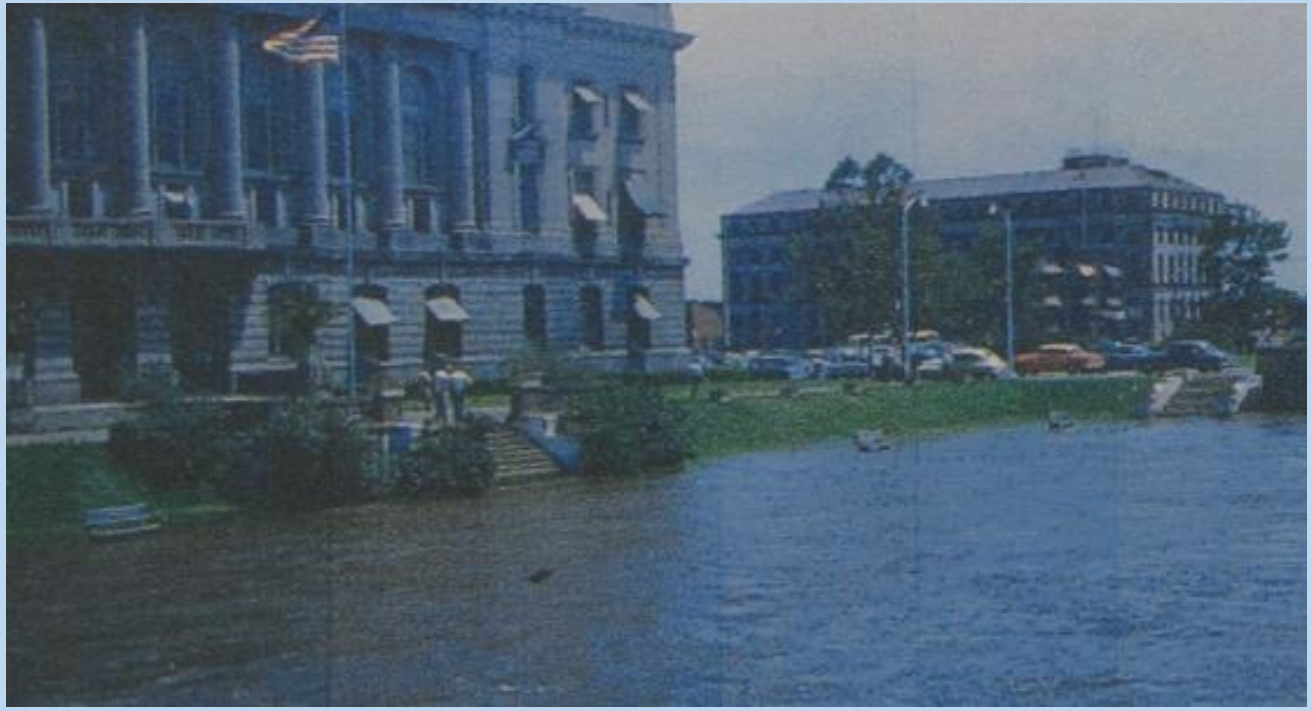
The general theme throughout this History of Trees in Des Moines, is to learn about the history of the city ‘and’ city trees. To that end, many photos have trees in them, or at least in the background.

1945: Street crew laying asphalt on E. Grand near E 14th (City Engineer, John M. Trippe). Yard trees are abundant.

New bungalows in 1949 on 55th and 56th streets between Franklin and Hickman Rd.

Post-war housing boom of 82 houses.

Today, trees make the neighborhood so much more lively and inhabitable.



Henry Klein Collection
35mm slide notebooks

20 views of flooding in Des Moines, Iowa. 1950. Photographer: Henry Klein

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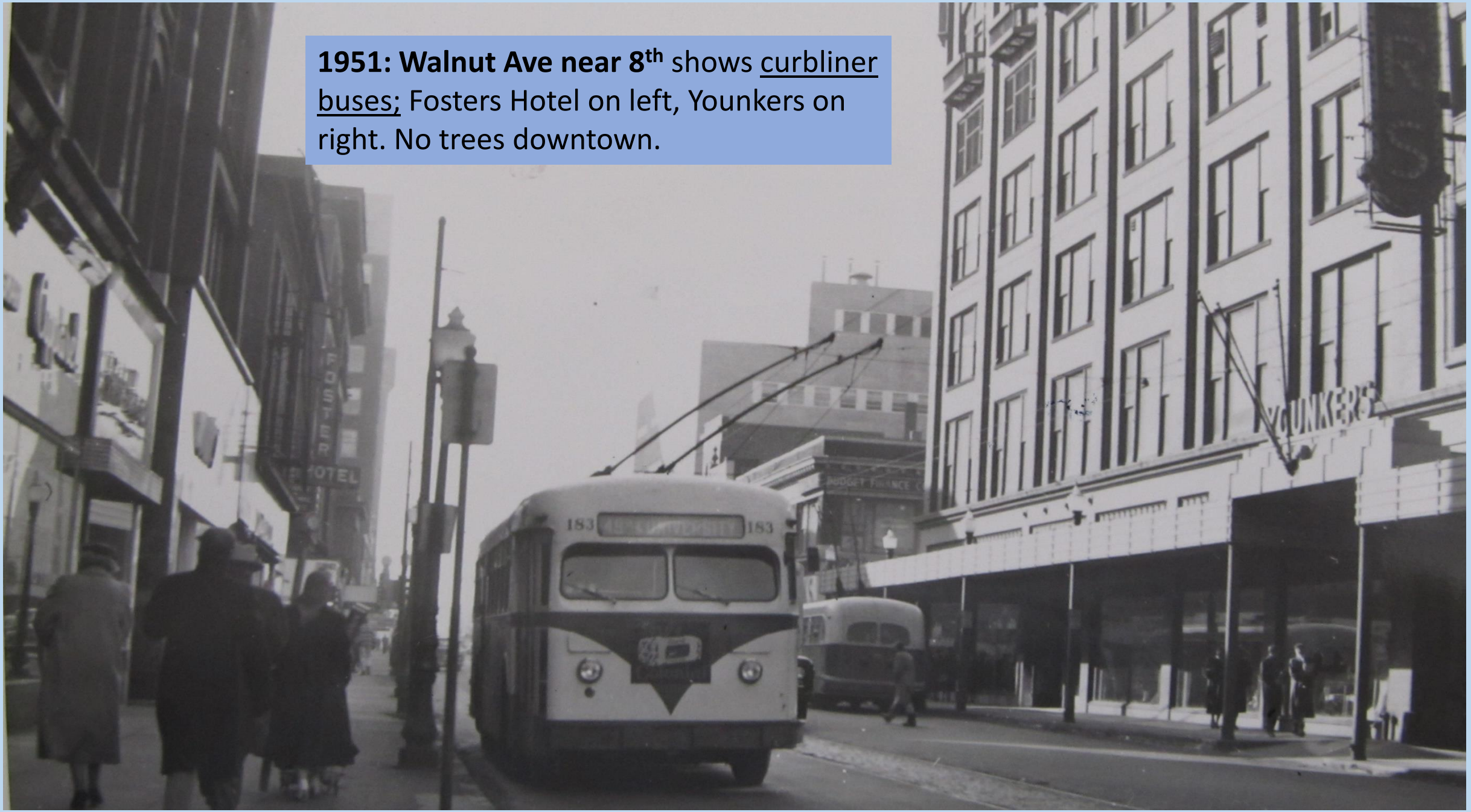
July 1950: this photo of 6th and Keosauqua Way amply demonstrates how engineers made the city car-friendly. But people? Not so much.

November 1950: Great Western Railway station under construction



1951: Walnut Ave near 8th shows curbliner buses; Fosters Hotel on left, Younkers on right. No trees downtown.

1952: Locust Ave at about 7th , looking east to Capitol. Noteworthy that at this time in city history, street trees were not considered an important element of downtown city life. Next slides show modern Locust

2017
Locust east
of 7th Ave

65 YEARS LATER…

Over decades, attitudes toward trees in the downtown have changed. Now they are seen as positives for all the environmental benefits they provide, but also because they make a downtown walkable and more livable

2017
Locust east
of E. 6th

September 1952: view on Fleur

February 1953: 6th Ave at Locust, with curbliner bus. Buildings include Carbon Coal, Lloyd Hotel, Bankers Trust, Josephs Jewelers

February 1953: E 6th between Locust and Grand

February 1953: heavy traffic on Locust. Curbliner buses lined up for rush hour.

Sidewalk issue
March 1953
View of University Ave. near 39th St.
Historical notes explained that the sidewalk sinking was due to winter temperature changes.
Note that there are plenty of front yard trees, but no ‘street’ trees between curb and sidewalk.

1954
Miniature Car Track
Riverview Amusement Park

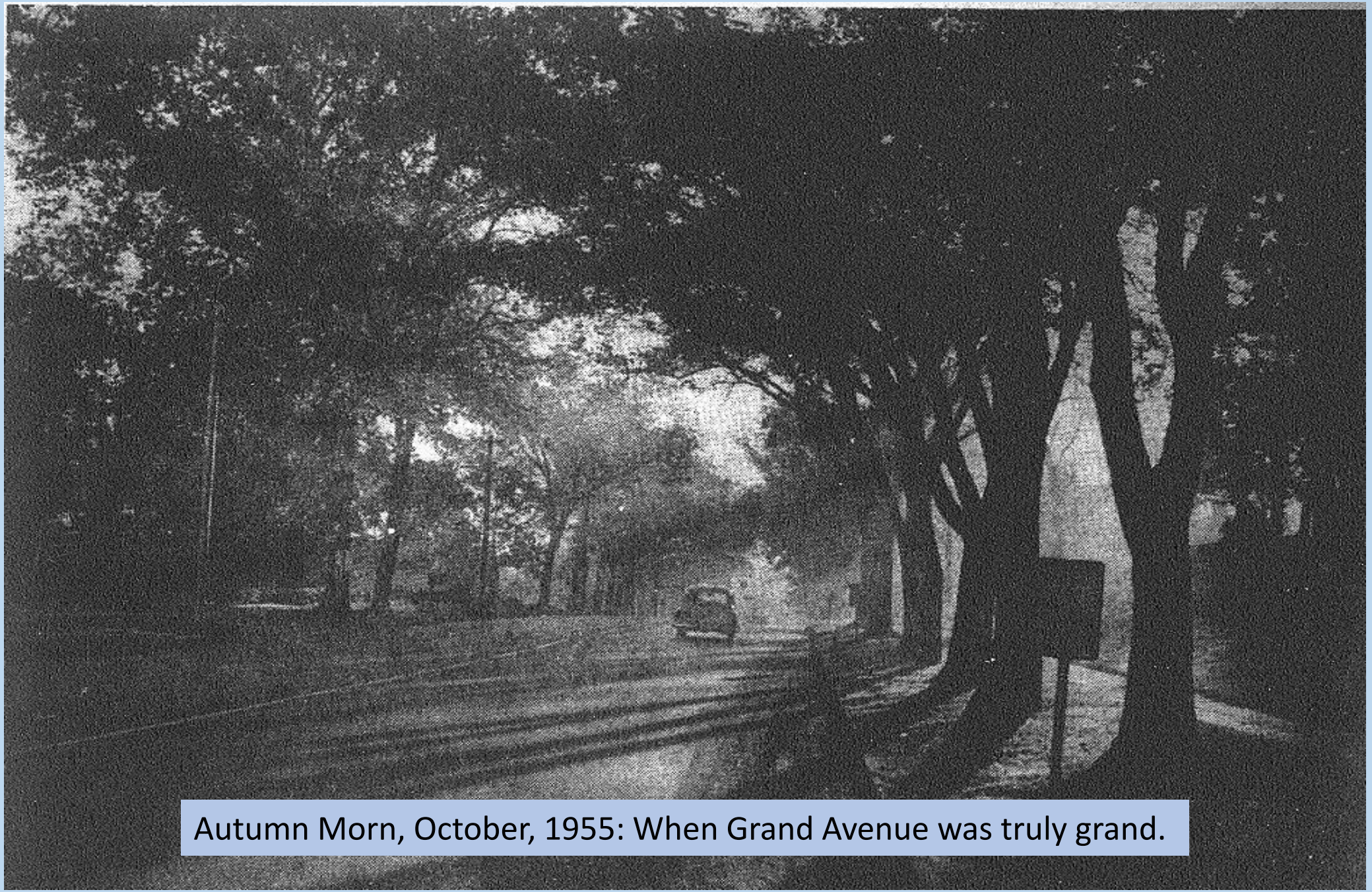
January 1955: Des Moines Parks Department, in charge of trees at that time, busy planting on e 9th north of Douglas Ave. Two problems: 1- planting large shade trees under power lines; 2- planting green ash. We now know to plant shorter ornamental trees under wires. We also know to diversify tree species so we don't lose a lot of trees to a single insect or disease, such as emerald ash borer.

April 1955: Residents of Henderson Ave, E 14th - E 15th, cleaning mud dropped by developers. Yard trees, but no street trees.

Fishing in July, 1955

Two children preparing to fish in the Birdland Park Lagoon

August 1955: Raymond Murphy , union worker, pickets parking lot of resurfacing project where non-union labor was used



Autumn Morn, October, 1955: When Grand Avenue was truly grand.

May 1956: lined up at Patricia Bake Shop during strike of bakery workers

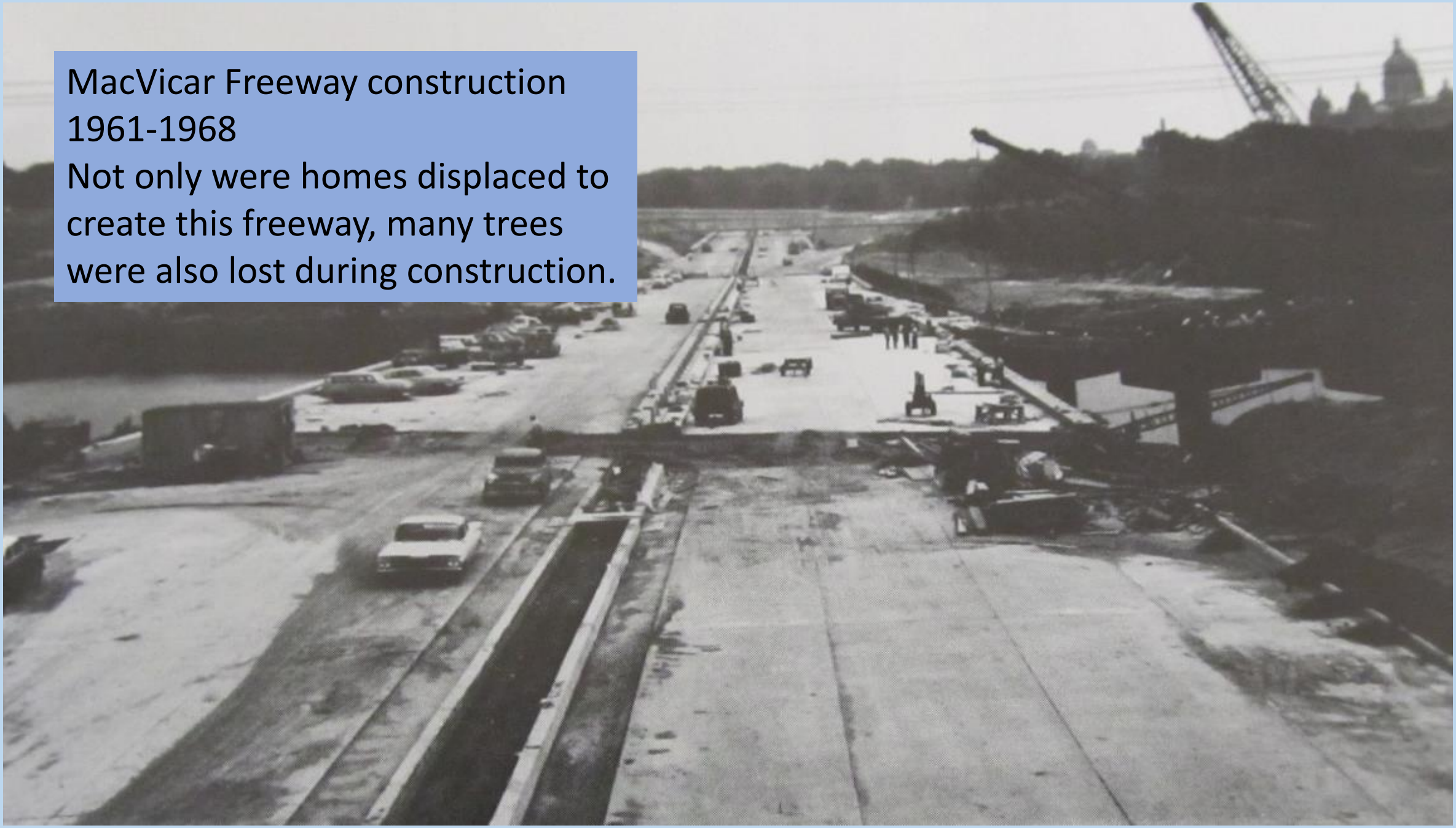
March 1957: looking east down Grand Ave from west of downtown. Dunn's Funeral Home on left, Luxeree Cleaners on right.

Tribune Staff photo of fishing on the Scott St. bridge
April 9, 1958

“Warm weather Tuesday brought dozens of fishermen to the Scott St. bridge. The fish were there too, and with worms and doughballs as bait, fishermen were having good luck. Most of the fish caught were carp about 15-20 inches long”.

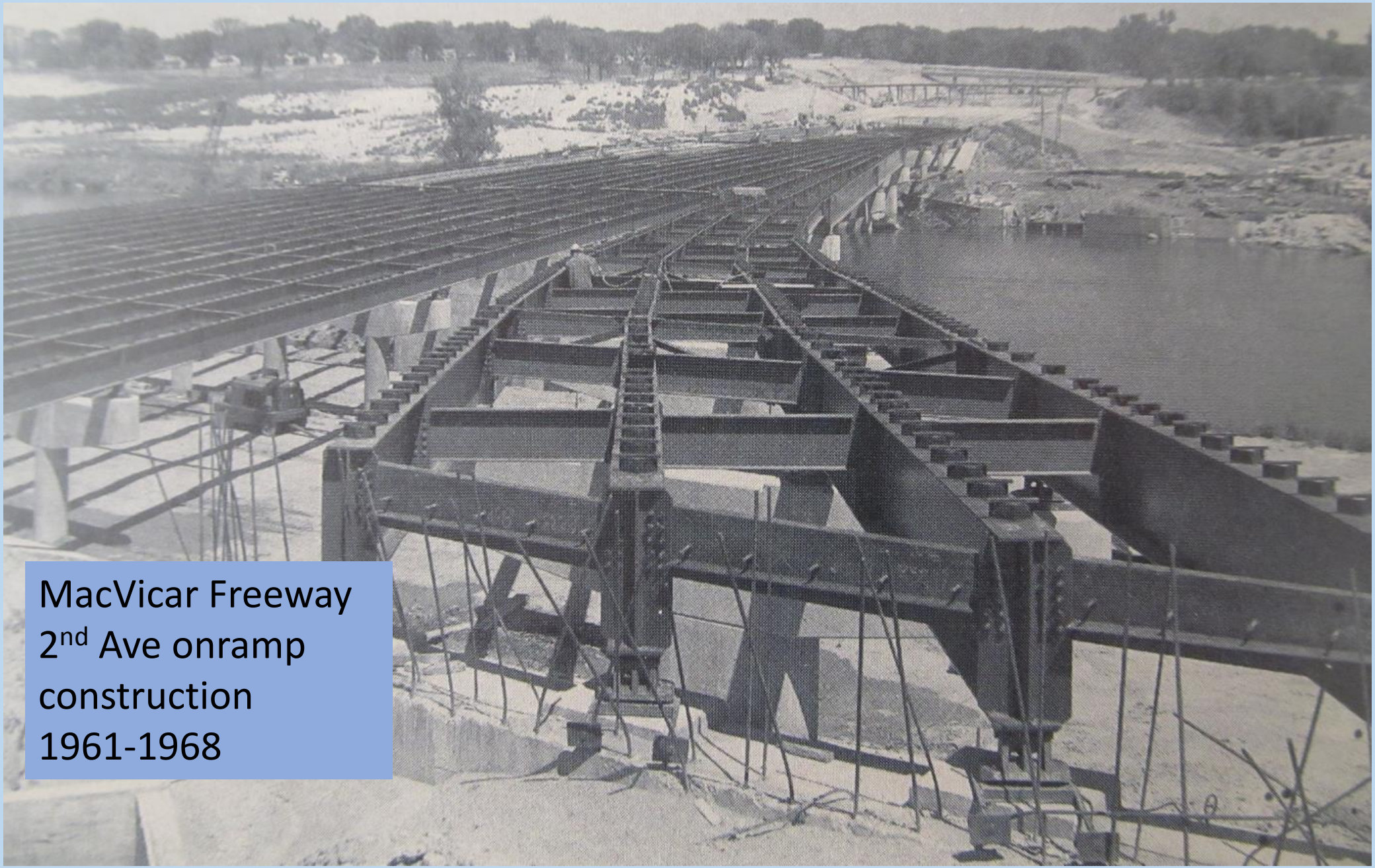
Picnic on the Street
June 26, 1959
Residents of 42nd St. between Shawnee and Madison Avenues participated in a street picnic to celebrate the paving of this stretch of their neighborhood.

Riverview Speedboat Tryout
May 10, 1960
In advance of the park opening, two new speedboat rides were tested on the waters of the lagoon

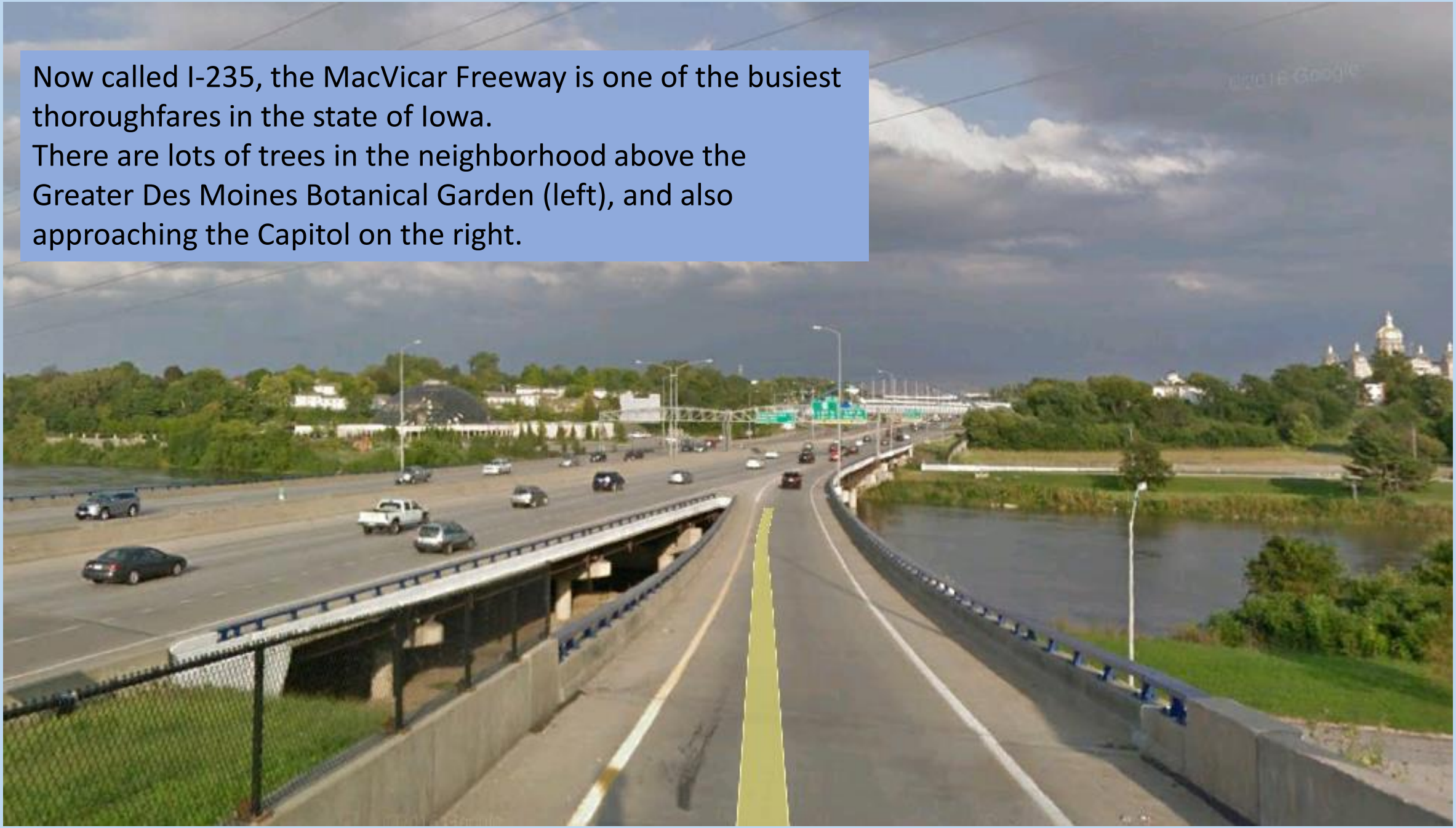


MacVicar Freeway construction 1961-1968

Not only were homes displaced to create this freeway, many trees were also lost during construction.



MacVicar Freeway
2nd Ave onramp
construction
1961-1968


Now called I-235, the MacVicar Freeway is one of the busiest thoroughfares in the state of Iowa.
There are lots of trees in the neighborhood above the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden (left), and also approaching the Capitol on the right.

1962 aerial view of city and the forest canopy, looking southeast toward downtown. Trees dot the map in the neighborhoods, but it is easy to see a clear line between tree-rich residential areas and the treeless downtown.

Skaters on Lagoon
Birdland Park
1963

July 1963: WPA workers sawing a felled elm tree at Grandview Park

Observatory Building

Building in Des Moines, Iowa

The Observatory Building, also known as the Van Ginkel Building, was a skyscraper located in downtown Des Moines, Iowa. Wikipedia

Height: 197′

Construction started: 1895

Opened: April 1, 1896

Demolished: 1937

Floor count: 13 (including 4 story tower)

Architect: Charles Edward Eastman

The **Observatory Building**, also known as the **Van Ginkel Building**,[2] was a skyscraper located in downtown Des Moines, Iowa. Standing at 197 ft tall (60 m) and heralded as "the tallest office building between Chicago and San Francisco" when opened on April 1, 1896, it was also the first skyscraper in Iowa.[1] Although it was the tallest office building, the Observatory Building was not the tallest building in Des Moines, the Iowa State Capitol, completed in 1884, was 275 ft tall (84 m).[3]

With a look considered modern for its time, the building consisted of nine stories of office space, a rooftop garden including a 600-seat venue for outdoor performances, and a four-story observation tower, the distinctive feature which also gave the building its name. Electricity and gas lighting was provided to all tenants. Access to the tower was provided to paying customers for what was at the time an almost unique view of the city. The installation of a beacon that would shine over the city nightly added further to the buildings uniqueness.[1]

From its incorporation in 1896 until 1905 the head office of the Central Life Assurance Society of the United States was located in the Observatory Building. This company is still based in Des Moines today and now known as The Aviva Life and Annuity Company[4]

The building was eventually demolished during the latter half of 1937,[1] and this location is now occupied by Capital Square Mall.[2]

Source: Wikpedia

Today the Observatory Building has been replaced by the clean silver lines and reflective glass of the Capital Square office building. In the foreground is the old Nollen Plaza, now rebuilt and renamed Cowles Commons.

Birdseye view looking east from Observatory Building

Undated: streetcar on University Line #3

Undated: view down Boston from 6th Ave. Is this STOP sign installed backwards?

July 1963
Riverview Amusement Park

Construction underway on the roller coaster

2 persons fishing Birdland Park Lagoon, possibly at sunset.
July 1963

This idyllic setting is greatly enhanced by the presence of trees.

The Saga of the Chancellor Elm at Drake University

The Chancellor Elm predated the existence of the Drake campus. One history passed down claimed that George T. Carpenter, the university's first Chancellor, climbed the tree on March 22, 1881, in search of a site for a university. Four or five men drove out to the area from Oskaloosa College, where Carpenter was the president. They tied their horse and buggy teams at a point near 24th and University, since that was where the travel surface ended at the time. Looking about the area to check the 'height of the land', one of the men (perhaps George Carpenter), climbed a small tree to look over the land. As the story goes, he said "Here we will build our university".

17 years later, Daniel W. Ohern, a member of the class of 1888, and later to become Oklahoma's state geologist, was appointed to find a suitable marker for use beneath the tree. The boulder that was brought in would later become known as "Kissing Rock".

In 1957 a July windstorm damaged the tree, which had already become progressively weaker due to a series of summer droughts.

In the 1960's the **Chancellor Elm** contracted the Dutch Elm Disease (DED). Efforts were made to treat the tree for the disease. It was also fortified with cables and concrete (the latter is never practiced any more), and its roots reinforced with nitrogen, phosphate and potash.

The battle was lost over a 10-12 year period. Finally the Chancellor Elm was cut down in the Fall of 1968, or Spring 1969.

Chancellor Elm on Drake Campus

The End of the Chancellor Elm

The photo at left is dated 9-5-1968, with other elms already removed in the foreground, and a last look at the Chancellor Elm at the rear. It would be removed either in Fall 1968 or Spring 1969.

Some liken its importance to the campus with the American legend of George Washington's cherry tree.

This was during a time when chemical treatments were slow to be developed and make their way into the marketplace. Anyone with an American elm today has a fighting chance to keep it alive with treatment, but sadly back in the 1960's – 1980's, many elms were cut down. City-wide, thousands or tens of thousands of elm trees would be lost to Dutch Elm Disease. This affected the temperature of the city for years afterward, and altered rainwater runoff patterns. As green infrastructure, trees provide excellent protection from environmental calamity.

In 1954, or close to it, this red oak began its life in the Ewing Park Children's Forest. Cut down for road widening in 2013, the City Forester counted tree rings on the trunk and stump before it left the site. Each ring represents a single year in the life of the tree, and the pins were laid out in 5 year increments.

At the time of removal, the diameter was measured 4.5' above ground at 39" trunk diameter. During its 63 years, it may have witnessed many children and their parents wandering about the forest, learning about trees and other plants.

Story from a Tree Lover born in this era:

As a kid, I wasn't a bad student but I always had one problem. I had a chronic case of spring fever. I had trouble concentrating because I would have preferred to be down by the river exploring among the tall trees. During the months it wasn't too cold, my friend John and I would head for the local river right after school. In seventh grade, John left for Colorado where there were unlimited opportunities for exploring. My wandering affliction continued through junior high and high school. I have never had an aptitude for math and this problem was made even more difficult in one math class. In this class, I had an excellent view of the timber along the river. I couldn't keep from looking out the window and day dreaming about walking among the big cottonwoods. Despite my lack of focus, I did manage to barely pass the class. In 1973 one of the largest trees along the river measured just over 18' in circumference. I have monitored that tree for the last 40 years and, despite some storm damage over the years, the tree is still alive and growing. Today, the tree has a circumference of just over 25'! The height has continued to increase as well. The height is now about 124' which makes it the tallest known cottonwood in Iowa! Also it currently ranks as the second largest cottonwood in Iowa overall. If I had it to do all over again, I would try to concentrate more on my classes. Since I can't go back, I'll never know if I could have been a better student the second time around. Even though my studies suffered, at least there was one amazing tree I managed to find due to spring fever.

Mark Rouw, Iowa Big Tree Monitor

Mark shared this part of his life story with Des Moines Forestry personnel

Mark Rouw, continued…

I started measuring big trees in 1972 or 1973. My first really big tree was a cottonwood in Hardin County that had a trunk circumference over 20’. After that find, I was hooked on hunting for big trees. In 1978 the Forestry Bureau of the Iowa DNR started our Iowa Big Tree Program. Since that time, I have recorded notes on well over a thousand Iowa big trees. I have measured hundreds of them, and a number have been designated as state champion trees. Over the years I have been lucky enough to find a few national champion trees in Iowa, including a scotch pine in Nevada, a white poplar in Onawa and two European alders in Davenport. A roundleaf serviceberry in Dubuque County may soon become a national champion.

This story is from the Iowa Arborist Association website:
http://www.iowaarboristassociation.org/people-2/mark-rouw.html

What do we learn from this short history (1950's-1960's)?

- Development of the MacVicar Freeway resulted in major loss of trees.
- A lot of ash trees were planted in this era. We now know to diversify the types of trees that we plant.
- 'Big' trees like Drake's Chancellor Elm need to play an upsized role in the management of our urban canopy, because big trees provide exponentially more benefits.
- Historic trees such as the Chancellor Elm at Drake University, justifiably receive extra attention, but all trees eventually succumb to time and gravity.