History of Trees in Des Moines

1911-1940’s

presented by City of Des Moines
Department of Public Works
Forestry Division
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.
Streetcar Strike, 1911. A conductor of the Des Moines City Railway was discharged for being ‘two fares short.’ Here, 5000 union workers assemble in front of streetcar offices to protest the lack of a full and complete hearing prior to dismissal.
Riverview Park was an important part of the history of Des Moines between 1915 and 1978. Popular rides included the Wild Mouse and the Haunted House.
Riverview Amusement Park Entrance. The park opened in 1915 on the site of a former zoological garden. Though 1915 was one of the wettest summers on record, the park still enjoyed record crowds. It was a ‘trolley park’, filling the void left when Ingersoll Park closed.
1918 Aerial View
Riverview Park
Photo by Capt. Frank Ellsworth in the Officers Reserve Program at Fort Des Moines
(donated by University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, Arkansas 8-16-1991)
Des Moines Ice Wagon. Teamsters from the Des Moines Ice Company deliver ice and distilled water to residents through horse-drawn wagons. Because postcards of horse-drawn wagons were scarce, they are highly prized by collectors.
Trolley on Locust Street Bridge. Early trolleys used an electric traction system, with power transferred via overhead wires. This was a safer linkage than the third-rail design used in many subways.
Sixth Avenue, facing south from Locust Street. Check those wonderful electric street cars. No street trees downtown at this time.
The Brown Hotel and Garage was built in 1911 at the corner of Fourth St. and Keosauqua Way in Des Moines by Ernest Warren Brown. E.W. Brown managed the hotel until his death when his son Robert A. Brown took over. The Brown Marine Museum consisted of mounted, deep-sea specimens displayed in the Brown Hotel. The collection was meant to appeal to the sportsman and featured well-known and rare game fish from around the world.

St. Augustin’s Church
Des Moines, 1928

St. Augustin’s Church
Des Moines, 2017
Historical Building, 1928
Viewed from the Capitol

Aerial view of State of Iowa
Historical Building, 2017
This photo shows the Iowa Historical Building looking north to the Capitol. Many of the photos in this history series were found in the archived records kept here by the Iowa Historical Society. The society preserves and provides access to Iowa’s historical resources through a variety of statewide programs, exhibitions and projects while serving as an advocate for Iowa’s past and connector to the future.
Soldiers Barracks, Ft. Des Moines
1928
Fixing the Coaster, Riverview Park
May 1931
Maintenance crew ‘way’ up on top, working on roller coaster
Insurance Agents Day at Riverview Park
Sept. 1935
Riding the miniature train
Shell Oil Company station
27th & Grand Avenue. Decorated for Christmas, December, 1936.
Playing in the shade
August 1936
Children playing at
Riverview Park playground
Callanan Junior High
January 1937
Flooding the athletic field in preparation for ice skating
Street widening triggers tree removal, Feb. 24, 1937
View on Sixth Avenue shows trees de-limbed for removal
Members of the Des Moines Cooperative Dairy Marketing Association lined up to enter Riverview Park for their annual picnic.
43rd and Crocker Streets
Oct. 7, 1937
A man died after falling from an automobile running board at this location
July 30, 1937
View looking south on E. 29th St. from Arthur Ave.

Comparing trees, 1937 vs. 2017
80 years apart, and likely some trees have departed and new trees have been planted
Ice Skating on the Lake
Witmer Park
Nov 1938

Crack the Whip
Ice skaters playing ‘crack the whip’ on the lake at Witmer Park
Dec. 1943
Motorbike Speedway
Riverview Park, June 1939
Ice Skating at MacRae Park
Dec 1939
Interstate Transit Lines, 1939
This new building under construction was meant to house both passengers and officials.
Trees made camping more enjoyable, and trees made Grand Ave. at the fairground more walkable on sunny days.
A modern photo of the State Fairgrounds. There are lots of ash trees on the entire fairground, including the campground.
Then and now, Drake Neighborhood Trees were as evident in 1940 as they are now. One likely difference is that in 1940, the high vase-shaped tree to the left of the building was likely an elm tree. They have all but vanished due to Dutch elm disease.

Location: looking south on 25th from University Ave.
Riverview Park
June 1940
KSO-KRNT picnic participants wait to board the railroad ride
May, 1940
Riverview Park
Guessing weight
Riverview Coaster, 1940’s. Early in the history of the park, a Jack Rabbit Coaster with a double dip section made riders feel like they were coming off the track. However, after a few years it burned down, and the replacement had eight full dips, all going to the ground. Truly a main attraction for park goers.
Riverview Park
Go Cart Speedway
June 1940
Patrons take their turn
Skating on the Lagoon
Union Park
Jan. 1941
April 1941
Custodian Bill Hammett
inspecting new elm tree
on courthouse lawn
5th and Mulberrry
Riverview Park on ‘The Chute’
June 5, 1941
These young school crossing guards were rewarded with a picnic at Riverview Park
Register and Tribune Library
September 1941: WPA workers and streetcar company paving over tracks on Ingersoll east of Harding
September 1941: streetcar derailed along Ingersoll Ave @ 53rd St (Country Club Blvd intersection)
Skating on the Street
Sept. 1941
Children waiting to roller skate on the street, next to Westminster United Presbyterian Church on Allison Ave.
May 25, 1942.
Six year old Eddie Bliquez, wearing a soldier suit, went to Burke Park to hear the band. The monument and the Gold Star Memorial Service served to explain to Eddie and the world, that WWI military personnel made sacrifices.
(Register and Tribune Library)
Shanty at 13th and University
October 1942
Possibly a temporary residence for Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers engaged in University Ave. storm sewer
The top of the building is charred by fire
October 1942: traffic moving up Keosauqua Way approaching University Ave
November 1943: boarding train at Rock Island Station
Greenwood Lagoon
Jan. 1944
Workers shovel snow from lagoon to prepare the surface for ice skating
Riverview Park, June, 1944
Young boy entering ride. This was shortly after cleanup and redecoration following a flood.
No new cars came into the yard since 1941. Trees in background likely border the Des Moines River.
Getting up Steam at Riverview Park
May 18, 1946
Engineers prepare the ‘highball express’ for duty, as passengers patiently stand by.
Register and Tribune Library
Ice Skating at Birdland Park January 1946
Des Moines Art Center, 4700 Grand Ave. Opened to the public in 1948, with a second wing added in 1968, and a third in 1985. In this photo, there were no trees in the interior courtyard.
Now, in 2017, the ash trees are threatened by EAB
A power scraper loads snow onto trucks. The snow operation involved about 215 city employees.
Likely 1947: aerial view showing floodwaters off Grand/Fleur intersection
Asphalting 9th St
Nov. 4, 1947
Between Clark & Cottage Streets
Asphalt Work on Cottage Grove
November 1948
Road improvements at 24th St and Cottage Grove Ave.
View includes a glance down Kingman Blvd
What do we learn from this short history (1911-1940’s)?

• Riverview Park was a ‘really big deal’. Not only was it full of fun activities, but trees made the environs so much more enjoyable.

• Downtown trees were almost non-existent, but residential areas continued to grow and appreciate a tree canopy.

• Street building and development were responsible for lots of tree losses, not unlike today.