



River des Peres - South of Lake

River des Peres running south of the lake in Forest Park before it was enclosed in preparation for the 1904 World's Fair. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.

ALONGSIDE DESPAIR

One poet's catalogue of an unlikely river
in St. Louis, Missouri.

ESSAY BY Marina Henke

A RIVER

Don't be mistaken. St. Louis, Missouri, is a river city. In fact, in its earlier years there was no distinguishing St. Louis from the Mississippi, a river so mammothly large its width sometimes reaches two miles across. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, life in the city stemmed from this waterfront. Steamboats lined the banks, stacked sometimes two or three deep. They carried thick beaver coats, taut buffalo hides — a textured mass of products that quickly made the city one of the more profitable commercial hubs of the country.

These boats were the “palaces” that Mark Twain described in *Life on the Mississippi*, ostensibly his love letter to the river. And his love was never more easily felt than standing on the banks of the St. Louis riverfront — he was, after all, the man who penned the line, “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.” Twain loved the city with raw vengeance.

He would have had an accurate sense of life on the ground. In the four years before the Civil War, Twain worked on a steamboat that made frequent stops in St. Louis. He saw a version of the city where boats moored at the waterfront were just as commonplace as its equally packed streets. Those docks, he said, were “tallied with the citizen's dream of what magnificence was.”

It was a dream with St. Louis as its backdrop. By the mid-nineteenth century, the city was one of the most notable places within the United States. Between 1820 and 1850 the population grew tenfold, from 10,000 to more than 100,000 residents within city bounds. Those furs had brought a wealth that remained. An American aristocracy grew, housing itself in some of the most preeminent private streets of its time: Westminster Place, Cabanne and Vandeventer. These weren't just streets lined with mansions but whole worlds inside themselves. Homes boasted taxidermied polar bears, ornate European art and even carriage houses built to duplicate French chateaus.

So, at the turn of the century, when it was time to pick the location for the World's Fair Exposition, a centennial celebration of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, St. Louis was both an obvious candidate and ingratiatory victor. For the fair's seven-month run, St. Louis *was* America, in its best and worst. It would be the site of the X-ray machine's public debut, where visitors gazed at the still-elusive private automobile. The event also encouraged a different



Teams of horses pull excavators and loaders during construction of an excavation channel for the River des Peres in Forest Park in preparation for the 1904 World's Fair. GEORGE STARK. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.



Men at work on a channel way for the River des Peres in Forest Park done for the 1904 World's Fair. GEORGE STARK. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.



Construction work on a channel way for the River des Peres in Forest Park done for the 1904 World's Fair. GEORGE STARK. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.

type of gaze, toward exhibition of Indigenous communities, curated for the mass of primarily white Americans in attendance.

But this moment of St. Louis in the spotlight would be brief. By 1904, the writing was already on the wall for a different era of the city. The exposition closed, and the nation's gaze turned away. As train tracks painted their way from east to west across the rest of the country, St. Louis' waterfront became less a crown jewel of the United States and more a relic of the past. Even Twain saw it. "St. Louis is a great and prosperous and advancing city," he wrote during one of his last stops on the waterfront, "but the river-edge of it seems dead past resurrection." And then, even more modernity arrived, with a steady crawl of interstates across the country.

A disastrous city plan in 1947 left much of the central downtown in an undeclared purgatory — huge swaths of the waterfront deemed blighted, destined to remain in various permutations of concrete landing pads until the Gateway Arch's construction in 1960.

The punches kept coming, with massive portions of the city's population leaving for newly developed suburbs, perpetually inefficient redistricting along city and county lines and redlining practices so embedded into the racist fabric of the region that the city quite literally became built to embody white superiority. By the close of the second world war, St. Louis was a place people drove through, not to.

Depictions of a city's heyday became reserved for glossy exhibits, complete with scenes of bustling downtowns and circling trolleys. I remember field trips to the history museum as a child, teachers saying to us that *this* city, our city... "Imagine it looking like this!" Even now, it's hard to imagine, with the city population recently falling below 300,000 for the first time in decades.

Simultaneously, the Mississippi's unmistakable imprint on St. Louis faded. Once you couldn't have one without the other, but by the mid-twentieth century the waterfront became an afterthought to expanding suburbs. It's a fairly common occurrence when speaking to people from out of town that I hear, "Oh really? I didn't realize the Mississippi came through here."

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



River des Peres de Hodiernont, 1890

MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.

Twain wouldn't have been far from it during his days spent on the docks. Five miles south of the riverfront, the mouth of the River des Peres meets the Mississippi's muddied shore.

During Twain's time, the Mississippi may have been the workhorse of the city, but the des Peres? It was its pride and joy. The river ran a lazy nine miles through St. Louis proper — oak groves dotted its banks, and quail, white tailed deer and elk roamed freely.

Far away enough from the developed waterfront, the des Peres was a welcome refuge. Such a refuge that on its banks in 1780, Charles Gratiot, a man who had made his fortune on those boats stacked high with beaver pelts, built a sprawling family residence. Their parcel of land was so dense with wildlife that the Gratiots soon had to construct fences to keep their property free of bison and deer.

Perhaps always the savvy businessman, Gratiot couldn't help but see an opportunity for economic gain. By the mid-nineteenth century, the family opened their grounds to the public

as the Sulfur Springs Resort. Here anyone could come to bathe in the sulfur-rich springs that stemmed off of the des Peres shores, for a price, of course.

Advertisements of a magical creek in Missouri started to fill local papers. A visitor in 1851 described their retreat to the springs: "I could not stop to rest, or drink or talk over old scenes in the chaparral, but hiked 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 wildflowers 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."

This was the des Peres, with its wildflowers and rocky banks. And so, it was no surprise when on a sunny day in June of 1872 a group of city planners gathered for a picnic on the des Peres' banks and made history. At this western edge of St. Louis they made a case for the



River des Peres running behind residences with girls standing in dry riverbed. WILLIAM G. SWEKOSKY. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.



South on DeBaliviere Avenue from Wabash Railroad toward the Jefferson Memorial Building. River des Peres flood of August 1915. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.

establishment of an urban park so large that no such comparison existed in the United States at the time. The des Peres would be the central feature of the 1,370 proposed acres.

Four years later, in 1876, Forest Park came to be. “Nature seems to have intended the spot for a park,” the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* wrote, “The gentle slopes provided a variety of scenery. Sport fish jumped in the park’s clear streams.” Children played on its banks. Men hoisted up thigh-high waders and fished in the des Peres’ current.

What’s the phrase? “Nothing gold can stay”?

Just as St. Louis took its calamitous turn, so too did the des Peres. I’ll say it plainly. This version of the river I’ve described does not exist any more.

With growth comes waste. As the city population soared in the late nineteenth century, the des Peres became a convenient dumping ground. Families tossed their household waste into the waters and factories used the

river as their de facto sewer, spilling animal discards and industrial sewage into the once-clear waters.

With the advent of the 1904 World’s Fair, the des Peres’ stench was no longer a private problem. The chief architect of the fair did not mince words as his team began preparation for the event: “The des Peres was now nothing more than a great sewer.” A sewer that, as plans were drawn up, would be running straight through the heart of the global exposition.

So in 1903 workers began to cover up the city’s dirty secret. Armed with hundreds of wooden planks, a fleet of men constructed what’s called a box sewer. It’s as straightforward as it sounds: a wooden frame built around a waterway to contain and cover it. A meandering alleyway to hide a sight and dull a smell.

It would be the first of many encapsulations, each one more ambitious than the next. Because, unsurprisingly, the box sewer did little to solve the real problem at hand for the des

Peres. This once charming creek was no longer on the outskirts of town. It was town. A map of St. Louis during this era outlines a spider-web of new roads and houses. It was a newness of angular edges. A modernizing St. Louis meant less and less soft ground for rainwater to sink into.

This now pseudo-sewer was also quickly becoming a pseudo-storm water system as rainwater ran across packed city surfaces and down the des Peres’ banks.

Flooding from the river began to ravage St. Louis. In 1915, eleven people died when 6.4 inches of water fell onto the city overnight. One woman drowned pinned beneath her bed, as storm water from the des Peres filled her house, as if it were a cup precipitously lowered into a bathtub. The deaths continued. A family of five, including three daughters. A little boy named John.

In 1916, city engineers presented a “A Report on the River des Peres Drainage Problem” to the

Board of Public Service. This new era of the des Peres certainly wasn’t helping St. Louis’ already notable backwards slide. St. Louis needed a lifeline, a radically different approach to stop the madness that was this failing river. That radically different approach came from a man named Wesley W. Horner.

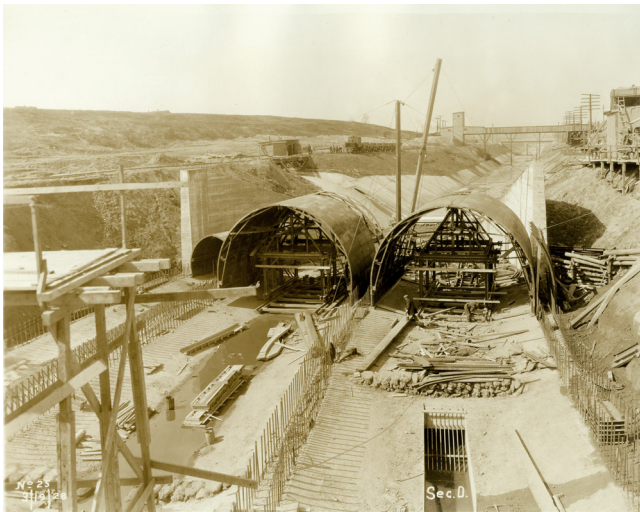
In 1919, Horner was crowned chief city engineer, a title he wore proudly. A Missouri native and a graduate of Washington University, Horner grew up playing on the banks of Midwestern rivers. He studied civil engineering, immersed in a curriculum built with the grandiose confidence that man could tame whatever it could get its hands on.

Horner set his sights on the problem of this unruly waterway. His suggestion was, in some ways, a simple one. He would bury the river in concrete.

Over the next ten years, Horner mapped out in precise detail one of the most ambitious public works projects of the century. In lieu



Shelter for pouring thirty-two foot diameter tube in Section E, No. 32 of the River des Peres Sewerage and Drainage Project (near the Jefferson Memorial Building), September 17th, 1929. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.



Mouth of double twenty-eight foot diameter tubes under construction at Manchester Road and Macklind. Completed intercept for sanitary sewer in foreground. Section D, No. 25 River des Peres Swarage and Drainage Project. March 29th, 1928. Photo & caption from the MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, St. Louis.

of rehabilitating the river, engineer would force it underground, captured in a 32 foot-wide concrete culvert for two miles before entering two 29-foot tunnels for the des Peres' most central path through the city.

If all went to plan, these tunnels would account for storm surges and move water quickly (and secretly) across the city. In its final stretch, the des Peres would resurface, still paved with a concrete bottom, before emptying into the Mississippi.

It was an enormous proposal. The suggested price tag was \$11 million, about \$165 million in 2023 standards.

Suddenly, instead of being one of the many symptoms of St. Louis' fall from grace, the des Peres offered a solution — the city would put itself on the map by a feat of unimaginable engineering. Savvy marketing followed suit. In 1923, a billboard emerged alongside Forest Park in support of the project. It read: "What other big city would have an open sewer running through a fine big park?" It was a project of grandeur, written up in architectural digests across the country, even the subject of great praise in a civil engineering report published out of Berlin.

Ultimately, the bond passed, the money found its way to Horner's team and, in the summer of 1929, history was made. That summer, dozens of St. Louisans could be found on one of the main boulevards of the city, dressed in their Sunday finest, watching the construction project unfold as weekend entertainment. "They say that more foreign cars are parked along this mammoth sewer project than you will find even at the Zoo," wrote a reporter in 1929. Where a World's Fair had reigned nearly 30 years ago, crowds flocked to watch concrete cover the city's collective embarrassment.

It's been almost 100 years since those summer days when the River des Peres had somehow, masterfully, become the promise of modernity itself.

What a different world has arrived.

I'm not naive; I know engineers aren't kept awake at night by worries of the symbolic consequences of their actions. But we can know it to be true: The most dependable reality of burying something is to shroud it in invisibility. To force its erasure.

As Horner promised, today, six miles of the des Peres do not see the light of day. In complete darkness, the river snakes its way through the most notable thoroughways of the city, its stately streets and private mansions. Even in Forest Park, the spot where fly fishers and children used to flock, the river remains underground.

In its last three miles, the des Peres is equally dystopian. Here it comes above ground — often thick with trash or dry but for a trickle of foaming water. There's the occasional rusted-out car — in its most salacious times, a dead body. Oil slicks and stray bottles shimmer on the river's surface as it unfurls into the Mississippi.

And, as it rarely is, the promise of this concrete entrapment eliminating all flooding wasn't that simple. The des Peres still floods. Often. In 2018, water nearly topped stop signs in the southern section of the city, blocks away from a Mississippi bursting at the seams. Routine spring flooding along the Mississippi Basin isn't unusual, and the des Peres readily accepts some of that overflow — it's inherent to the function of the hundreds of tributary streams stemming off the waterway. But as climate change brings a ping-ponging of extremes, from months of drought to days of unending rain, that overflow quickly overruns the des Peres' capacity, especially when that capacity has quite literally been set in stone.

Even worse is the flash flooding communities have seen along the des Peres' more northern sections, in neighborhoods just outside of city boundaries, like residential University City. In July of 2022, portions of the river ruthlessly flooded in early morning hours.

The most dependable reality of burying something is to shroud it in invisibility. To force its erasure.

Neighbors woke up to water climbing over their basement stairs, washing cars down once-dry streets and bending fences backwards like soggy pipe-cleaners. Whole streets became uninhabitable, marked by yellowed notices on front doors advising against entrance. Just as was the problem during the World's Fair, St. Louis hasn't let up on increasing its concrete footprint. With ever expanding impervious surfaces, the des Peres can't escape its legacy as a destructive nuisance. Remediation efforts continue. In 2012 the Metropolitan Sewer District launched Project Clear in response to a consent decree from the Environmental Protection Agency. The decades-long campaign promises to address the region's stubborn stormwater problems.

There's little left that is glamorous about the des Peres of today. Unlike the Mississippi, it's never two miles wide — for the most part, it's so narrow that a child could throw a stone from bank to bank.

Literature on the Mississippi could fill entire libraries, but the des Peres? It holds a sparse paper trail. Library catalogs lead to cardboard boxes of construction photos and blueprints. For every firsthand account of life by the river are a dozen scrapped sewer plans and roadway diagrams. There are tangled knots of numbers and terms — a "Monogan walking dragline," an "electric-driven Smith mixer." Those days of Sulfur Springs and tourists waxing poetic about this place are long gone, and its archive reflects the absence. Locals often only realize there's a river to worry about during flooding season. For the most part, ask residents to speak about the des Peres, and you get blank stares.

But there is one unlikely character who dwelled on the river.

A POET

In the archives of the Missouri Historical Society is a photocopied volume of a poetry collection called *Beyond Despair*. The cover of the book is an old map of the des Peres and its many tributaries, all winding their way in some imprecise choreography to the Mississippi. It's written by a man named Donald Finkel.

Finkel published the book in 1994. He was a prominent poet during the close of the twenty-first century and had an illustrious career as a working writer, until his death in 2008. He taught at the Iowa Writers Workshop and Bard College before accepting a tenured position as poet-in-residence in Washington University's English Department. He authored dozens of poetry books, including *The Wake of the Electron*, *Answer Back* and *What Matter of Beast*. Although he lived in St. Louis for most of his adult life, he and his wife frequently went back and forth to Mexico, one time on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

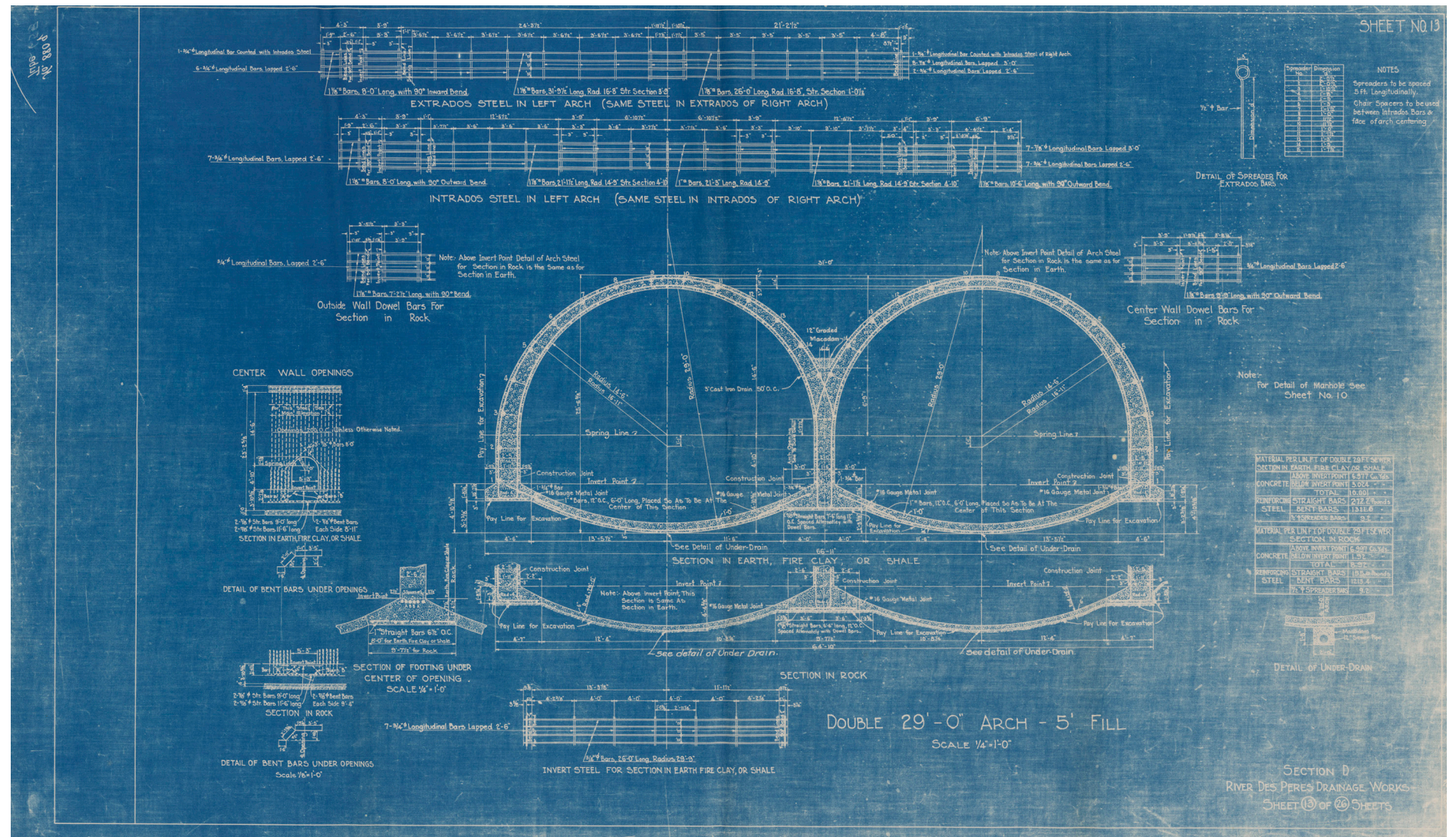
His work revolved heavily around the juxtaposition of some eccentric subject with an equally odd chapter of history. In one series he chronicled a personal trip taken to Antarctica. He wrote of old mammoth caves in Kentucky and of a sailor who disappeared at sea after notoriously faking an around-the-world trip. He was a beloved professor whose afternoon classes would lead straight into three or four hours of discussion at the local bar just off campus.

And of all things, in the summer of 1994, Finkel published a collection of ten poems about the River des Peres.

It is both brutal and beautiful and one of the most confounding pieces of literature I've ever come across. The book is tied together by the travelogues of Moses Austin, an American businessman who began early efforts to colonize Texas in the early nineteenth century. If it seems like a nonsensical match, you're not wrong.

Here is what I know.

Finkel lived next to an unusually wild rare section of the des Peres, its last mile before descending underground. It's a portion of the river that I know well; my childhood home is less than half a mile away. Slabs of concrete poke out from the muddy river bottom,



From the Wesley Winans Horner Papers, Series 3. Department of Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis.

stragglers from decades of haphazard erosion remediation projects. When the light is right, this part of the des Peres can be a mirror of earlier times with its dangling grapevine and the occasional quacking duck.

I don't mean to paint a false image, though. It's a dirty place. Ripped plastic bags hang like ornaments from that grapevine. Smashed beer bottles stud the mud. Every quarter mile or so, metal signs are bolted onto electrical poles or trees: "Warning: DO NOT PLAY, SWIM, OR FISH. Possible sewage overflow exposure to water may cause illness." There's a musty smell that hangs in the air, of stale, hot water that's starting to curl at its edges.

Finkel was obsessed with this filth. His book is no love letter to the Mississippi like Twain's. Finkel's des Peres is an ugly one. The book opens with a stanza unflinchingly reflective of his conception.

He takes us to this dirtied spot,

*past pennants of saffron plastic clattering in
the bracken,
past urine-yellow tabloids, a frozen squirrel
temporizing belly-up, clutching in its mummy
paws/
one last inedible morsel.¹*

I called Finkel's son, a reporter who lives in

Florida. "The des Peres? How did this happen?" I asked him. He told me that his father would walk his dog along the banks at night, right up to the gaping tunnel of its underground entrance. He told me that his father loved the des Peres. It's a phrase I hear so sparingly uttered about this river. It's also the first time I hear of anyone taking such walks. One of these nights makes it into the collection.

*Though the ice protests, though dark rents
race from her forepaws, the bitch
can't keep from snuffling farther
onto the crust. What lures her on?
What redolence of dog piss and garbage*

¹ Donald Finkel, "What's In A Name," in *Beyond Despair* (St. Louis: Garlic Press, 1994).



The River des Peres running fast after heavy rains in University City, Missouri. This photo was taken about 400 yards west of where the river descends underground in a tunnel built in the 1930s. On drier days, this stretch of the des Peres is where Donald Finkel would take walks in the evening, along the river's dry bottom. MARINA HENKE

*lurks in the channel, marking what passage across the ice? What calls her to this lovely rubble, this kingdom of litter, this slovenly Walden, improbable Hippocrene?*²

"I like rubble, and I've always liked rubble," Finkel wrote in a letter to a colleague. "I like things that are broken and smashed and damaged." In that way, the des Peres was the perfect subject, with its sticky smell and overturned grocery carts.

He weaves in the story of Moses Austin, a man who built wild riches in the boundlessness of the natural world, only to face a dramatic change of fortunes when the lead industry he'd wedded himself to came crashing down.

A tale of natural beauty, turned to natural

profit, turned to natural dismay. If you slow down to think of this buried river and this destitute businessman, it's no challenge to see the connection Finkel saw.

And, ultimately? It's a beautiful book. Entrancing. The type of poetry you can't look away from. I've read the collection in train cars, on airplanes, again and again in the quiet of a Midwestern winter. There's a final stanza in the second poem of the collection that quite literally takes my breath away.

*Salty slattern,
snoozing in the 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.*³

The first time I came across *Beyond Despair* was in the archives. I'd been surrounded by engineering blueprints — massive pieces of folded paper, scrawled with measurements and numbers. To suddenly see poetry was the last thing I expected. I began to read. And I began to think: what a gift, what an unparalleled reminder of the reach of good writing that this man, at this point in his career, chose to pay attention to the des Peres.

If only it had been that simple.

On the book's opening page reads the following message, "This book is published in an edition of 600 copies, 26 of which have been lettered and signed by the author 'for friends of Garlic Press.'" There's a small hand-drawn garlic clove on the page. It's irreverent and scrappy and also dissimilar from any other published work of Finkel's.

Finkel had a standing relationship with the illustrious publishing house Alfred Knopf, the powerhouse behind authors like John Updike, Toni Morrison and, one of Finkel's frequent inspirations, Albert Camus. By 1989, Knopf had already published nearly a dozen of his books. And so, when Finkel sent off his manuscript of *Beyond Despair*, it's likely he was expecting a quick and favorable reply.

But on January 31, 1989, a letter arrived in St. Louis, postmarked from the center of Manhattan. It began with pleasantries from editor Harry Ford. He tells Finkel about a recent vacation to the Italian coast — the weather, his wife, the calming chatter of professional familiarity.

And then, he offers a ruthless impression of the collection.

"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. The final paragraph proves particularly cutting: "I'm sorry to say that I think this book needs a lot of your

attention."⁴ He wishes Finkel and his wife the best and signs his name.

If ever one needed proof of just how much St. Louis' relationship with an outside audience had changed, history gives a stark example. The reaction Finkel received from his publisher was worlds away from Twain's treatment years earlier.

In 1883, James R. Osgood published Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* out of a branch of his publishing firm that would later go on to be the prestigious Houghton Mifflin. So enamored with Twain's tales of the Mississippi Valley and its many tributaries, Osgood physically joined Twain on a series of steamboat trips, to help source material and capture the book's vision. And here, a hundred years later, Harry Ford was so confounded by an account of this odd counterpart to the Mississippi he didn't even want to keep the manuscript on his desk.

From the suburbs of St. Louis, Finkel responded within the week.

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.

*As ever, Donald.*⁵

Ford is unmoved by Finkel's explanation. He writes back. "I think there are too many disparate things going on in it. 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 correct this."

He urges Finkel to put an end to the project and move onto other things. "My feeling is

² Finkel, "The Winter Journey."

³ Finkel, "A Glimpse."

⁴ Harry Ford, "Letter to Donald Finkel," January 31, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.

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

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 be wrong.”⁶ He closes the letter and includes the original manuscript so that Finkel might try again with a different publisher.

Just a few exchanges away from being the subject of a prominent poet’s collection, the des Peres lost its footing in a backwards slide familiar to its home city.

Finkel did not try a different publisher. Instead, he self-published the volume under the ironic Garlic Head Press, printing only enough to distribute lightly through the city, to local bookstores and friends. The copy I came across in the archives was one of few still in circulation, far from the cataloged literary masterpiece I thought I was discovering.

I have to be honest. Ford is in part correct. Despite being so drawn to the work, I am still confused by many portions of *Beyond Despair*, clouded with sudden references to Greek mythology or thrust into the untempered chronology that Ford critiqued.

But, there’s no mistaking it. *Beyond Despair* is ruthlessly good. I read parts of it in the way you deliver yourself to good writing — how I remember confronting Faulkner as a teenager, or how, even younger, I stared at impressionist paintings in quiet museums, knowing I surely was missing some important consideration, but knowing also that it felt right to stand there for a bit.

Finkel delivered himself to the des Peres in a way that nobody had for more than a century. He chose to stare unflinching at the river, a place that practically begs you to look away from it. But, for Finkel it was a place for the belly of humanity, filled with used condoms and rusted car parts. The des Peres wasn’t an inconvenience to drive across unknowingly. It was the place you were heading towards. He says it so clearly.

*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 traveling,
a black-and-white cat for my companion,
a border collie for my guide.*

*There is another shore, you know, upon the
other side.*⁷

You have to give Finkel some credit. Who else would imprint references of the River Thames from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* onto our buried sewer? That last line, I think of it often.

*There is another shore, you know, upon the
other side.*

I read it now with Finkel’s correspondences in mind, his stoic pleas of Ford to take the subject seriously, to linger at the des Peres. This shore on the other side, he’s asking people to let themselves be taken away.

Of course, though, how easy is it to take yourself away to a subject that has no definition? On a place that has been buried beyond recognition, stranded in some amorphous river-but-not-river classification? Ford wouldn’t have known the engineering legacy of the des Peres, but I can’t help but wonder how differently he might have approached a manuscript on the river of years prior. Perhaps that same invitation of Finkel’s, to linger amidst dog walks and rub-bish, would have had a different ending.

One evening a few winters ago, it began to snow heavily. No one had expected it. Even in Missouri’s coldest months, snow was becoming a rarity. I’m staying at my family’s house, just a stone’s throw from the river. Bundled up, I step out in the dark and walk the short five minutes to the banks of the des Peres.

In this neighborhood — my family’s and Donald Finkel’s — you first reach the river by way of a dead-end road, the southern tail of a mess of winding streets. At the end of the block, pavement empties into an old concrete boat ramp. Here the river cuts a sharp corner,

leaving a steep concrete channel for forgiving mud. There are the occasional plastic bags and smashed bottles. Years later, on an early July morning, rain water would climb these banks edges and destroy the homes I now walked past. But on this night, in the dark, it’s easy to erase those realities, of present and future.

A thin layer of ice has started to form along the banks. Snow towers on top of wet stones. This river, so tortuously warped in the past hundred years, suddenly reminds me of the conventional rivers of my youth, clear enough to wade in and a welcome spot for a warmer Sunday evening.

And, in another winter, long after the time when thoughts of the des Peres meant sulfur-rich springs or proud mentions in the architectural digests, Finkel walked here too. He leaned in when nobody else would. In the closing pages of *Beyond Despair*, Finkel writes about the very scene I stand looking out at.

*For whose use this brave alluvium,
this spindly 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?*⁸

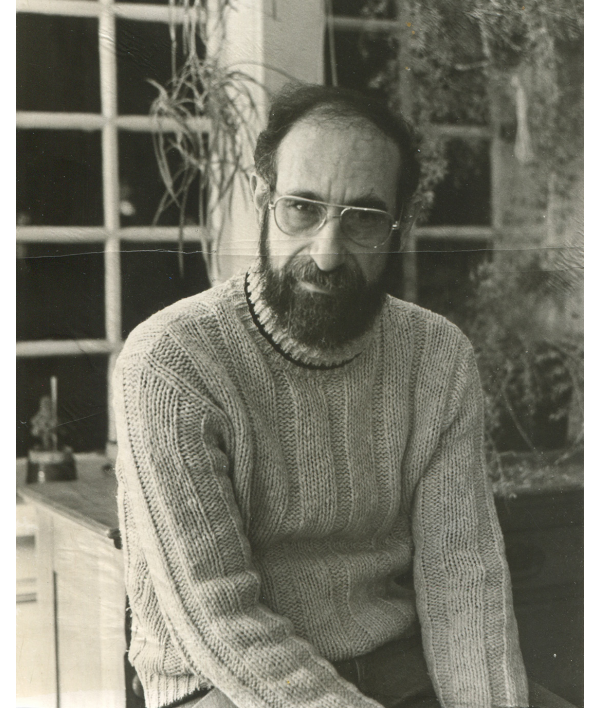
For whose use?

Quietly, in the pages of an unpopular and underread book, Finkel seems to have caught on to a fact that he devilishly, by way of rejection, kept a secret. In the twenty-first century, this city is still a river city, but maybe more suited to a different name.

The River des Peres? It’s St. Louis’ river as much as any.

And no, Finkel would not have bought this river for the \$6 million Twain claimed in 1890. It’s not that kind of river any more, much less that kind of city. But Finkel would walk on it. Nightly, with his dog, sidestepping fast food containers and beer cans.

This unlikely poet, in what has become an unlikely city, sat down to write about it all. Can we say the same for those that fled St. Louis when it began to grow weary at the edges? Can



Poet Donald Finkel. Donald Finkel Papers, Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries. TOM FINKEL.

we say the same for ourselves when we walk past our own des Peres? Think of them now: the drainage ditches that slink along our commutes, the stretches of gravel endlessly encircling highways, the ragged grass that grows on overpasses. They are in our days every day.

In this river’s concrete monstrosity, in its jagged corners and trash lined bank, Finkel realized what we chose not to: The des Peres is here to stay. That Mississippi of ours is gone, at least in the way it was. There is no more Twain coming to wax poetic. No master plan so vibrant it can unchannel the angular edges of our past choices. Instead, we have a river made even more obsolete by a crumbling logic of control.

In his closing letter to Ford, Finkel wrote, “Change is the essence of life, and there’s nothing to do in the end, it seems to me, but ride the current.”

Standing alongside the current of our muddied rivers, in all the missteps they’ve been forced to endure, often under the promise of improvement, they can offer an odd beauty. I’ve seen it alongside the des Peres. ▲

⁶ Harry Ford, “Letter to Donald Finkel,” February 12, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.

⁷ Finkel, “His Kingdom At Last.”

⁸ Finkel, “For Whose Use.”

⁹ Donald Finkel, “Letter to Harry Ford,” February 5, 1989, Donald Finkel Collected Papers, Washington University Archives.