

# A Ferocious, Horrible Thing

**M**ary E. Kirkendall knew well the fury of the Missouri River. Her great-grandparents Annie and George Hunter had farmed near Sloan, south of Sioux City and not far from the river. Eventually the couple moved a few miles away because the Missouri was slowly taking their 80 acres. "The river cut it away," according to Kirkendall. "It was cutting it back and it would only be a few years before [the farm] would all be in the river."

In 1978, Kirkendall related her own memories of the Missouri, when she and her husband, Jim, farmed near Sloan. "As late as 1952 . . . the whole town moved out because there was danger of flood. There was a possibility that the whole town would be eight feet under water. At that time we had 50 head of feeder cattle and 50 head of sheep which we had to truck up to the hills and get that out. Then the town put up a dike around the farm to try and save the town.

"My father, hard headed as he was, said, 'Never, never—I'll drink all the water that runs down Main Street.' And he wouldn't move out. As it happened, the river flooded over the other side. . . .

"I have a deathly fear of that river. I remember as a child going out there for what we called the June Rage. That river was a vicious, mean—you'd see it and it would have big eddies and whirlpools and big chunks as big as this house in it. When it was running high it would cut under the banks and big, huge trees would go in.

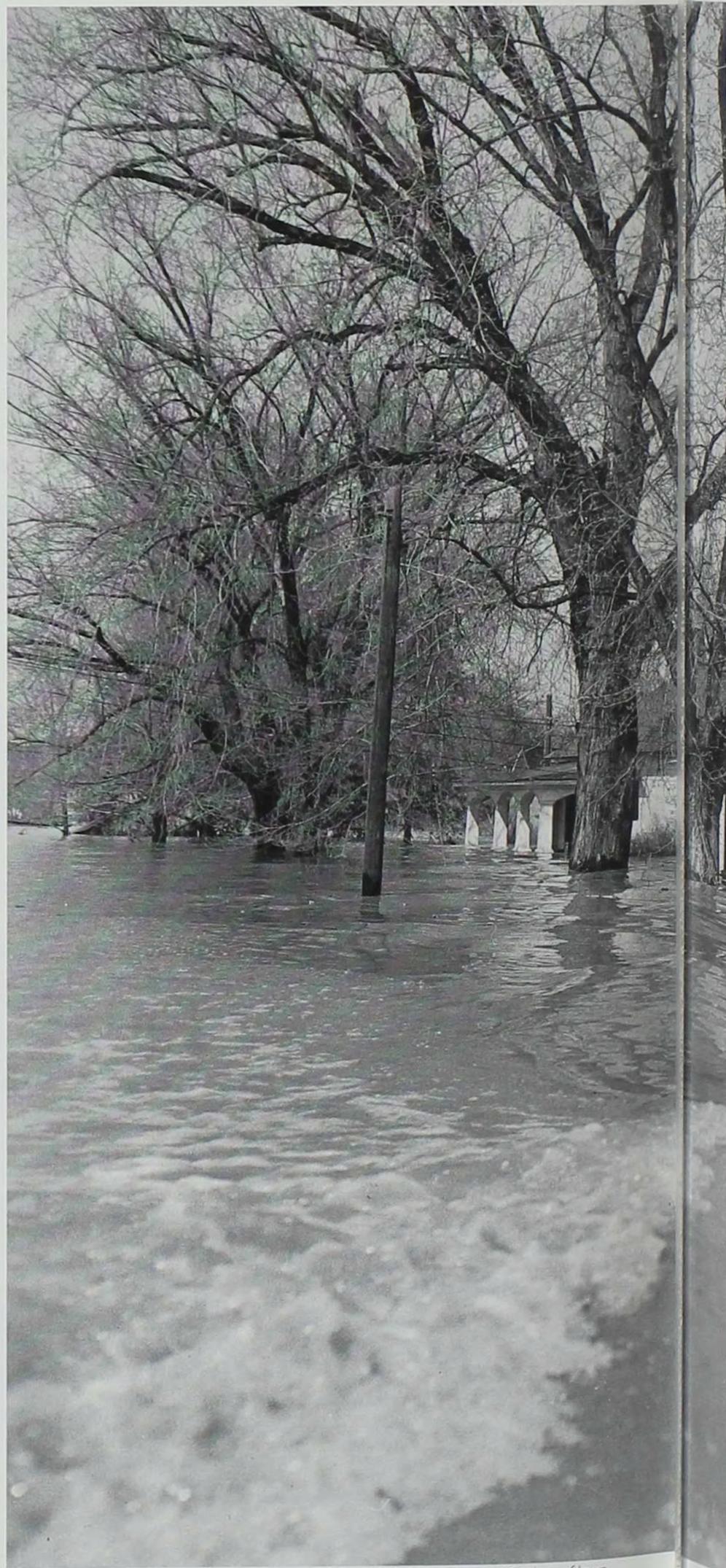
"It still is a river that demands a lot of respect but it's so much tamer now since they dammed up above and controlled the water flow. But in the spring, when all the [snow] melted, all the water that they hold up in the reservoirs now, would come down with a gush—it cut land terrifically. . . .

"The Missouri would always freeze, and in the spring we had huge ice floes that would pile way high. Then we'd have floods 'cause the water couldn't run through.

"You'd never recognize this river from what it used to be. It could be a ferocious, horrible thing."

In 1952, Missouri floodwaters bore down on farms like the Kirkendalls', towns like Sloan, and cities like Council Bluffs. The story of how Council Bluffs fought the river starts on the next page.

—The Editor



Excerpt from Mary E. Kirkendall oral history interview, 1978, State Historical Society of Iowa



Flood waters surge through Hamburg,  
Iowa, April 1952.

COUNCIL BLUFFS NON-PAREIL

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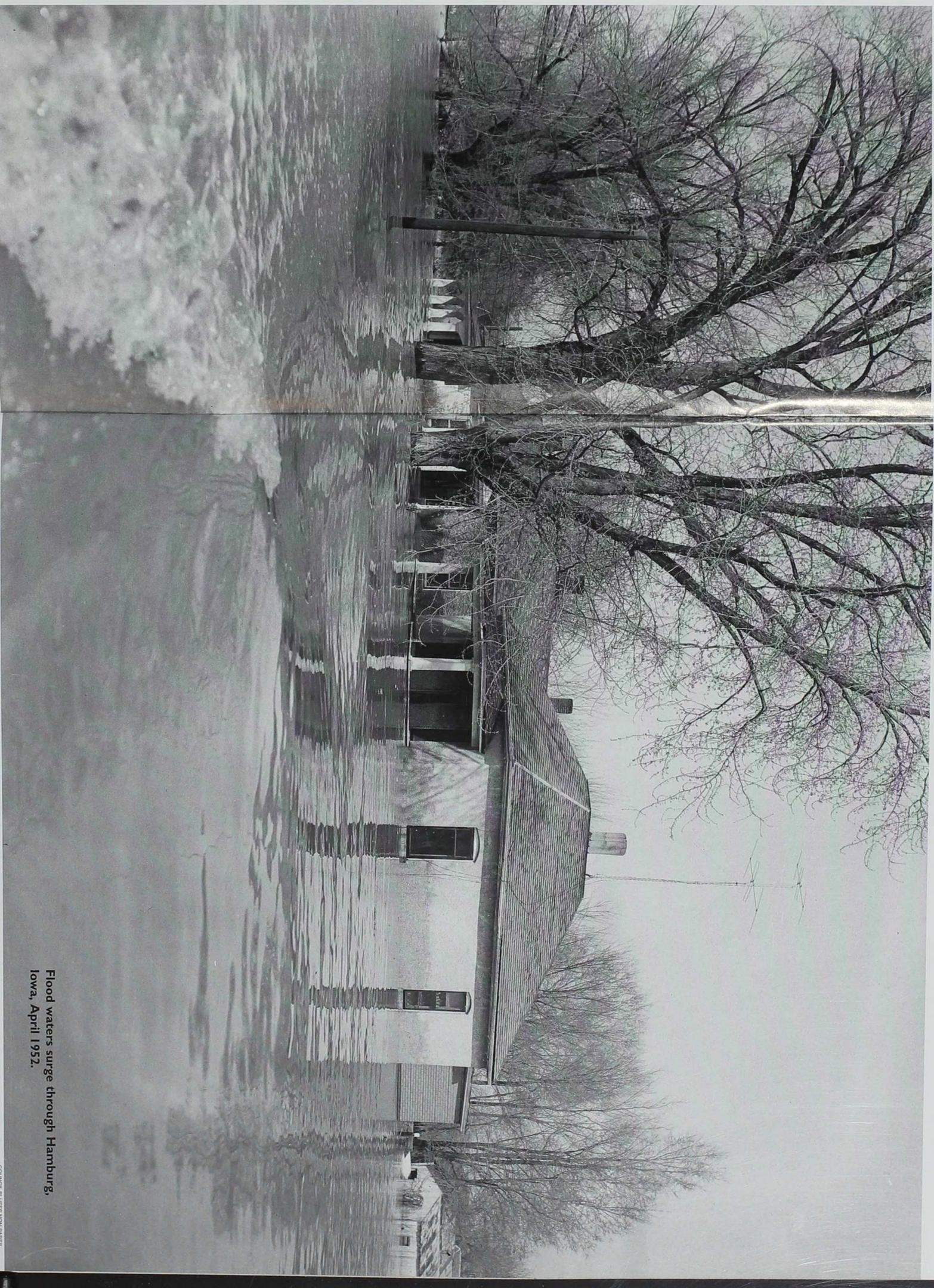
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