

Flood Time in the Eighties

The Mississippi continued on the rampage in the decade of the 1880's. At least three floods, those of 1880, 1881 and 1888, elicited widespread newspaper comment. One of these, that of 1881, developed into the most devastating flood ever to occur in October.

The Flood of 1880

The flood of 1880 occurred in June, a decade after the flood of 1870. The *Dubuque Daily Times* of June 16 noted that the Mississippi had risen more than two feet in forty-eight hours and was "still walking up like a race horse." A dispatch from LaCrosse said the Mississippi was already four inches over the high-water mark of 1870 and still was rising. "On the levee the scene was lively," the *Daily Times* recorded. "Small boats were constantly going out or coming in loaded with wood and other plunder, and store keepers were busy shoving their wares to higher quarters." The river stood at 16' 4" and lacked five feet of coming up to the 1870 high-water mark.

On June 17, 1880, the *Daily Times* noted the Mississippi had risen eight inches in ten hours, causing hundreds of cords of wood to be scattered

about or sent floating down the river. Businessmen were fearful of the impending flood damage to their merchandise.

The store rooms in the long brick building on the levee are filled with grain, and speculators are very nervous, as the water is very apt to compel them to throw their grain on a "busted" market which will be a large loss to them. It is estimated that 90,000 bushels of grain are stored in this building alone which cannot be removed without a serious loss.

With their goods in danger of irreparable damage, the firm of Hansen & Linehan "offered idlers on the levee 40 cents per hour to roll hay to the *Belle of LaCrosse*, but they refused to work and a Wisconsin crowd of raftsmen was engaged at \$1.75 per day." At eleven o'clock in the evening of June 16, the river stood at 18' 8½" at Dubuque and was within 33 inches of the high-water mark of April 22, 1870.

On June 18 the *Daily Times* forecast a stand in the river with two feet still to go before reaching the 1870 level. The next day, however, the *Times* told its readers that all hopes of a stand were unfounded as the Mississippi continued to rise at an ever-increasing rate. Word from "up river" reached Dubuque that three feet more could be expected before the flood came to a crest. "The grain and corn dealers on the levee are frantically engaged in bagging wheat and hauling out corn," the Dubuque editor observed. "The merchants are

building trestles on the floor to hold their goods, or are moving them to an upper floor." Dubuque's talented artist, Alex Simplot, was reported "making a sketch" of the flooded levee for Frank Leslie's pictorial magazine.

By noon on June 20, the water had reached within 15 inches of the 1870 high, and railroad men were reported "piling rock on their bridges" to hold them down. According to a reporter for the *Daily Times*, over one-half the houses on the flats were "filled with water" and people were swimming in knee deep water in their back yards. The sidewalks and bridges were "all held down with stones and tied to trees." Along Elm Street people were reported to have built "elevated sidewalks" from their second story windows.

The *Daily Times* of June 22 recorded sightseers "flocking" to the levee which could be approached only by skiff. Two thousand Dubuquers made the round trip to East Dubuque by ferry on Sunday. "The saloon floors were awash," the *Times* declared, "and thirsty patrons rowed in the door, up to the bar, and had their drink without getting out of their boats."

The Mississippi was said to be several inches above the 1870 mark on June 21 and still was rising. On June 23 the water was reported at a stand of nine inches above the 1870 mark but still a few inches below the 1844 mark. It stood at 22' 5" on June 22 and 22' 8" on June 24, at which

point it crested. Iowa river towns downstream from Dubuque underwent similar ravages.

The Flood of 1881

The flood of 1880 occurred during the normal June rise but soon receded. In contrast, the flood of 1881 occurred in October and was of much longer duration. On September 22, 1881, the Mississippi stood at 13 feet causing the *Dubuque Daily Times* to declare:

The river has the appearance of a flood in June. Such high water was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. Considerable property is threatened and much inconvenience experienced. On the Seventh street extension a large amount of wood, pine chiefly, is in danger, and some of it is already floating off. Work on Ryan's new building is interrupted somewhat in the laying of the stonework. Many lumber piles are under water and cellars inundated.

On October 7 the Mississippi stood at 16' 9" and two days later it was at 18' 1". On October 11 the levee was submerged but no great damage done. The Couler Creek bridge on Lake Street [now Garfield] was held down by piles of rock. Twenty-five houses between Eleventh and Seventeenth streets east of the railroad tracks were surrounded by water and their inhabitants were forced to move to the second story. For a few days the river receded but heavy rains in the north brought flood waters up over the twenty-foot level again. According to the *Daily Times*:

Fantastic stories of the flood have come in from the north. Hundreds of square miles are reported to be submerged, farmers are picking their corn from boats, and cows are belly-deep in the field, eating hay from the tops of hay cocks. Thousands of tons of hay have been destroyed and farmers are selling their cattle at any price rather than run the risk of wintering them.

From Davenport word came to Dubuque that navigation had become dangerous for rafts — one was broken up and another wrecked within twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, the water stood at one foot below the 1870 level and two feet under the 1880 level at Dubuque. Damage was less than expected, the greatest loss was due to the closing of the factories and the resulting loss of work for 1,500 men. According to the *Dubuque Daily Times*:

This terrible flood has taught Dubuque a lesson, and hereafter when putting up new buildings on the river front there will be a higher standard gauge for high water than any hitherto known.

The high water has knocked business completely. There is nothing doing in the way of carrying freight. The warehouses and landings up and down the river are drowned out, the roads are impassable, and there is no delivering of receipts by rail, owing to the switches being under water.

The *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye* warned its readers on October 4, 1881, that word from Minneapolis indicated heavy rains had prevailed throughout September and flood waters would shortly arrive in Burlington. By October 15 the

water had entered the Diamond Jo Line warehouse and only a few inches more were needed to seep into the quarters of the St. Louis & St. Paul line.

Meanwhile, Clinton had wired that the Mississippi was within two feet of its all-time high-water mark. The two saw mills in Lyons as well as the paper mill had shut down because of the fall freshet. The *Davenport Gazette* reported the river so high at that point that a strong southerly wind would "undermine" buildings along the water front while a "few inches more in the river and the remains of the old Keokuk Northern line office, at the foot of Perry Street, will make a good start for St. Louis."

Just when relief seemed in sight, renewed and continuous rainfall brought further woes to Burlington. On October 25 the *Daily Hawk-Eye* declared the swelling waters had passed the mark of June, 1880, and were the highest recorded in thirty years. Once more hope for a decline mounted as reports reached Burlington of falling water farther upstream. According to the editor:

'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished for, though there has been no cutting, crashing, grinding ice to damage property and endanger life, neither growing crops to be destroyed, an immense loss has come from the flood. Farmers, merchants, mill owners, lumbermen, steamboat men, railroad men, all have felt the misfortune attending the overflow and all will with rejoicing hail the falling of the waters.

The loss in farm crops around Burlington was truly staggering. William Fordney, who lived at the lower end of Sand Ridge, lost 120 tons of hay and 30 hogs, besides having nearly his entire farm under water. Fordney lost over \$1,000 in the 1880 flood and told the *Hawk-Eye* editor "if this kind of business is going to continue he will have to move to higher ground." In another case, Messrs. Hixson and Orr lost something over 200 tons of hay and as a consequence were compelled to sell their entire lot of 2,700 head of cattle. The same men lost 125 acres of corn in the 1880 flood.

The editor of the *Hawk-Eye* was exasperated as the 1881 flood continued to the end of October and at one point declared — THE RIVER — IT WILL NOT DOWN WORTH A CENT. Records clearly indicated that the fall flood of 1881 had surpassed the spring flood of 1880 by ten or eleven inches. On a lighter vein, the *Hawk-Eye* recorded:

The town of Port Louisa, a few miles below Muscatine, is entirely under water, the town being mostly deserted, and those remaining living in the second stories of their houses, and having communication with the outside world through the aid of boats. It was nothing unusual to see houses partly submerged in the water, having the roof ornamented with dogs, cats and chickens, which had there found refuge from the seething waters below, while at other places flags of distress were waved by persons who had sought the nearest refuge and were cut off from the land.

The *Keokuk Daily Gate City* of October 26 was equally concerned over the 1881 flood, pointing out that the Mississippi had risen "to an alarming height, on several occasions" since 1851, but "never since that time has a rise of the magnitude of the present one been recorded." Continuing, the editor declared:

The railroad tracks on this side of the river are all under water from a short distance below the elevator to a point near Buena Vista. The wagon road from Keokuk to Warsaw, on the Illinois side, is under water. The railroad shops and lumber yards, saw mills and other buildings in the lower part of the city are in the water, and a large number of men are lying idle in consequence thereof. At Alexandria the condition of affairs is truly lamentable.

The Flood of 1888

The spring flood of 1888 was one of the worst on the Upper Mississippi. On April 20th the *Dubuque Daily Times* chronicled a 17-foot stage. "The islands are all covered; the lower portion of East Dubuque being a vast lake." The editor reported, "Lower Main street is nearly underwater and the flats along the east side of the city are gradually being submerged." The next day the river reached the curbstone of the Diamond Jo boat store after a one-foot rise.

On April 22nd the river stood at 19 feet and had "reached around the low lands at the foot of Seventeenth street and invaded the flats surround-

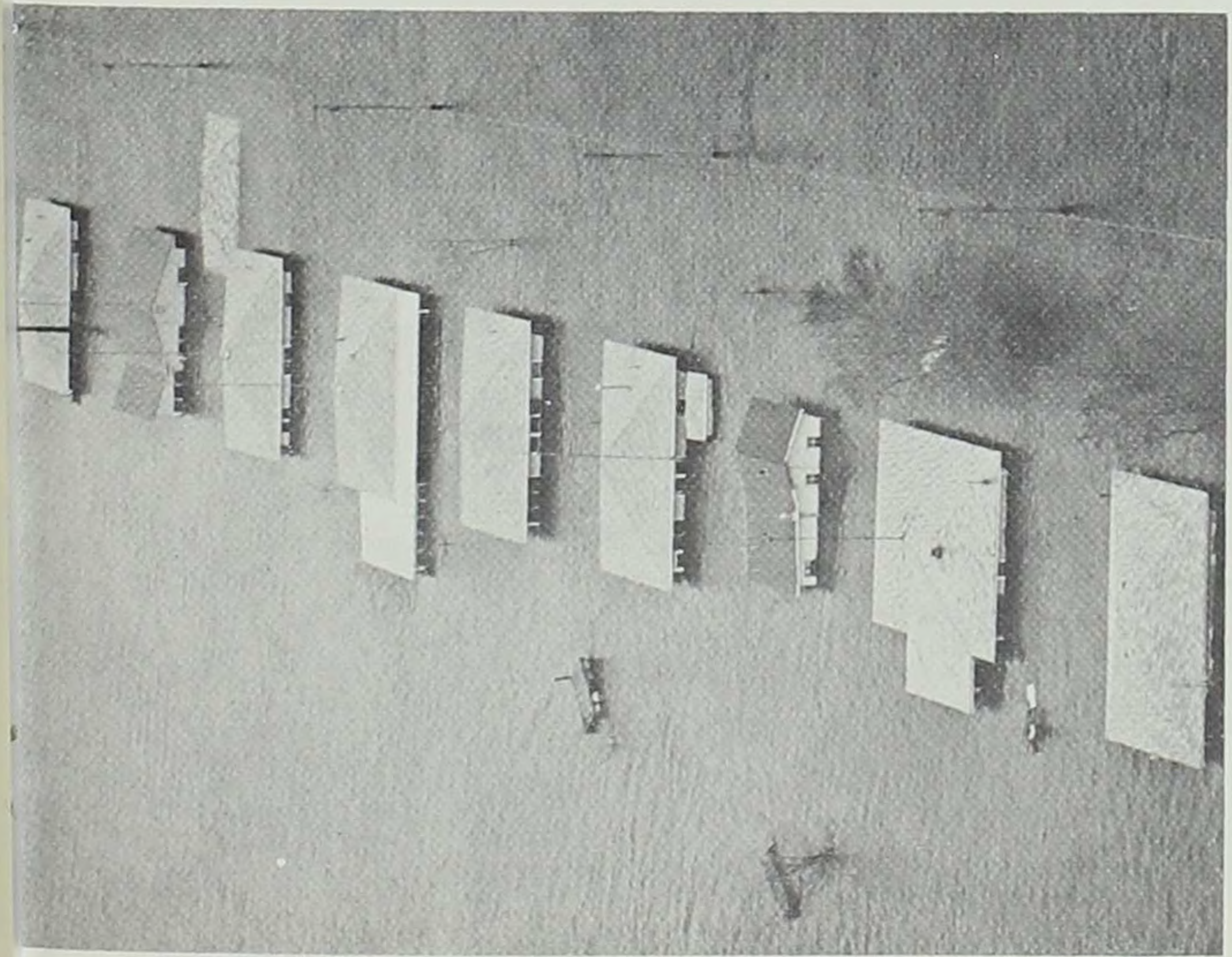
ing the round house and the works of the National Iron and Brass works" and was "gradually creeping up Couler avenue." The ferryboat *Campbell* was landing in the rear of the Julien House for conveying passengers to and from Dubuque and East Dubuque. This was the first time since 1880 that the ferry had been "compelled to make this change."

On April 24 the *Times* reported the river at 20' 1" compared with 21' 4" in October 1881 and 21' 8" in 1870. Although the 1880 flood was two feet higher the editor observed that the 1888 flood "occasions quite as much inconvenience as did the high water of that year for the reason that the low lands of the city are much more populous than they were at that time. As a result of the present flood all the sawmills and many of the factories have been compelled to suspend operations and hundreds of operatives are walking the streets today when they should be at work."

The Mississippi stood at 20.3 feet for several days but then dropped slowly, only to rise again to 20.8 feet by May 9, due to heavy rains and melting snow. This was only a scant foot below the 1880 high water mark. Business houses built platforms on which to store their goods or removed the merchandise. Many factories and lumber yards were closed, and hundreds of men were thrown out of work. People in the flats moved out of their homes and General C. H. Booth's newly-



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
Lansing, Iowa, will long remember the flood of 1965. The well-known Fish Market had fish swimming around, but not for sale.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
A few of the Guttenberg homes that were unable to make the Old Mississippi "stay way from my door."



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
Like other Iowans, residents of Guttenberg worked valiantly to stave off the devastating flood.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
Bagley, Wisconsin, across from Clayton, was not spared the ravages of the destructive flood of 1965 which encircled homes. Towns on both sides of the river were inundated.



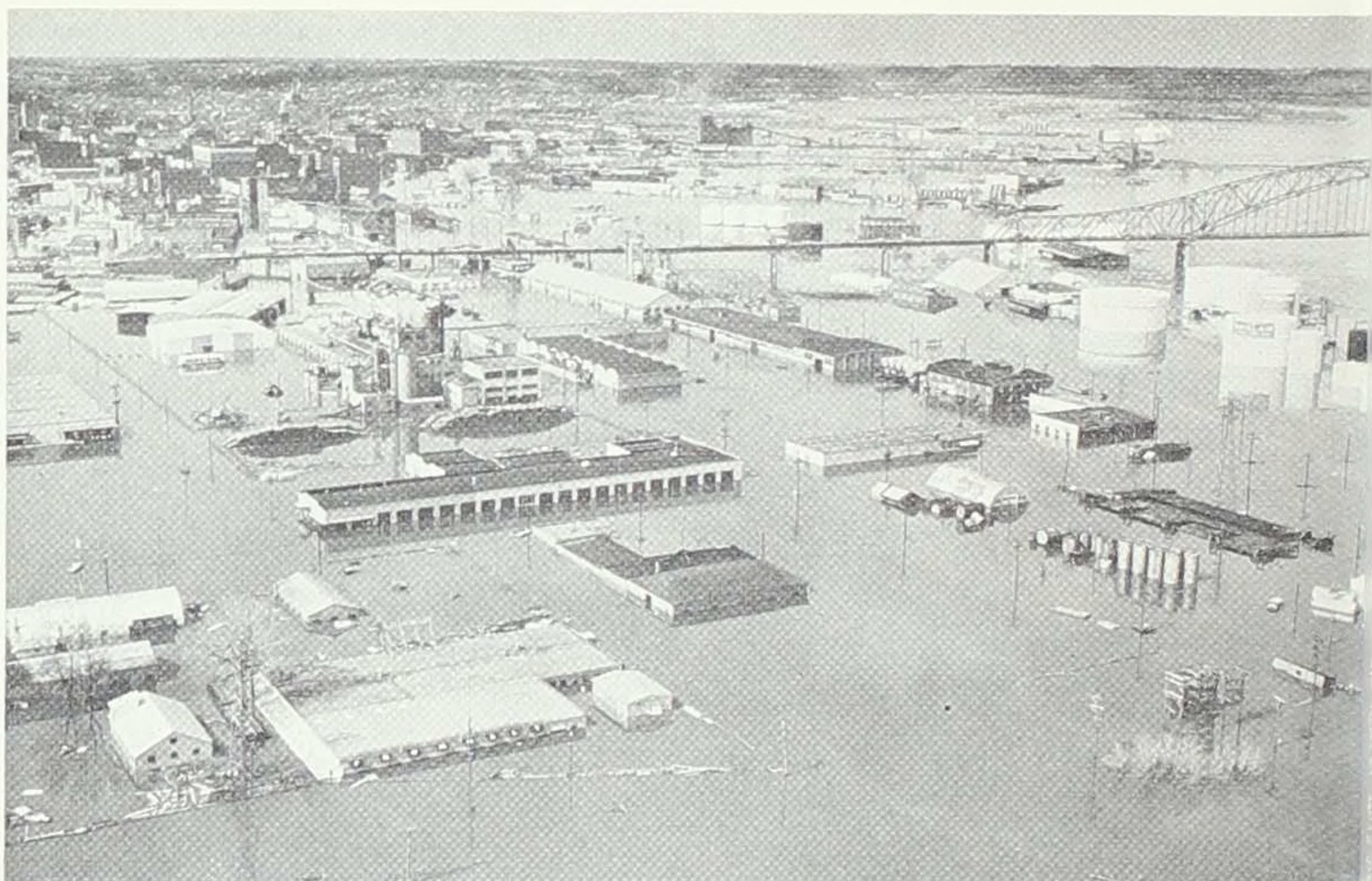
Associated Press Photo

The approach to the Julien Dubuque bridge where sandbaggers fought to keep the only highway bridge connecting Iowa with Illinois for many miles open to traffic.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo

Air view of Dubuque (looking from the SE) showing such landmarks as the Burlington and Milwaukee depots, the Canfield and Page hotels, and the Adams Company in the foreground, which successfully turned back the encircling waters.



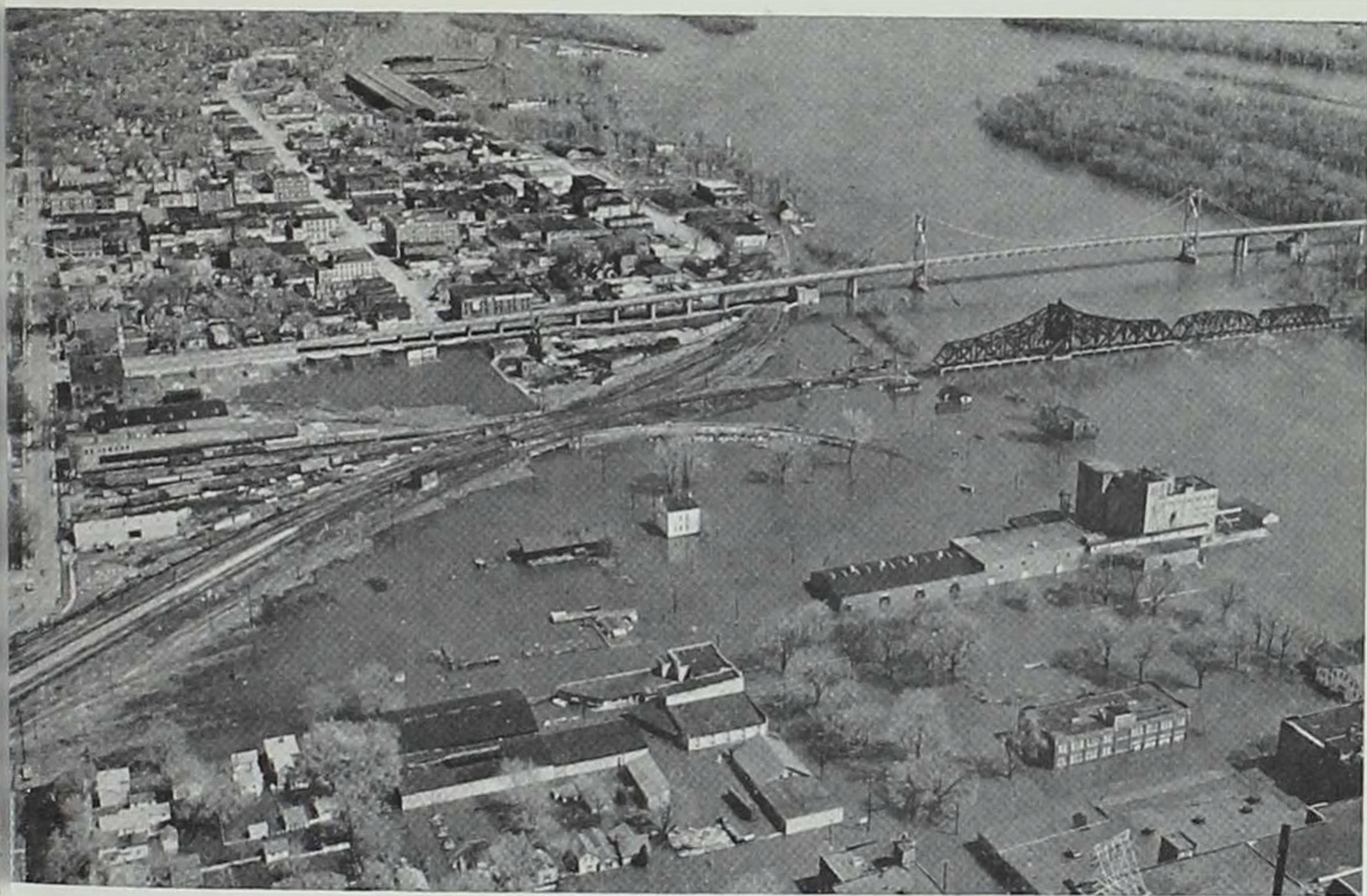
U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Birdseye view of southern section of Dubuque showing Julien Dubuque bridge, inundated harbor, and oil and molasses tanks. For more than a century this area has felt the brunt of a dozen Mississippi River floods.



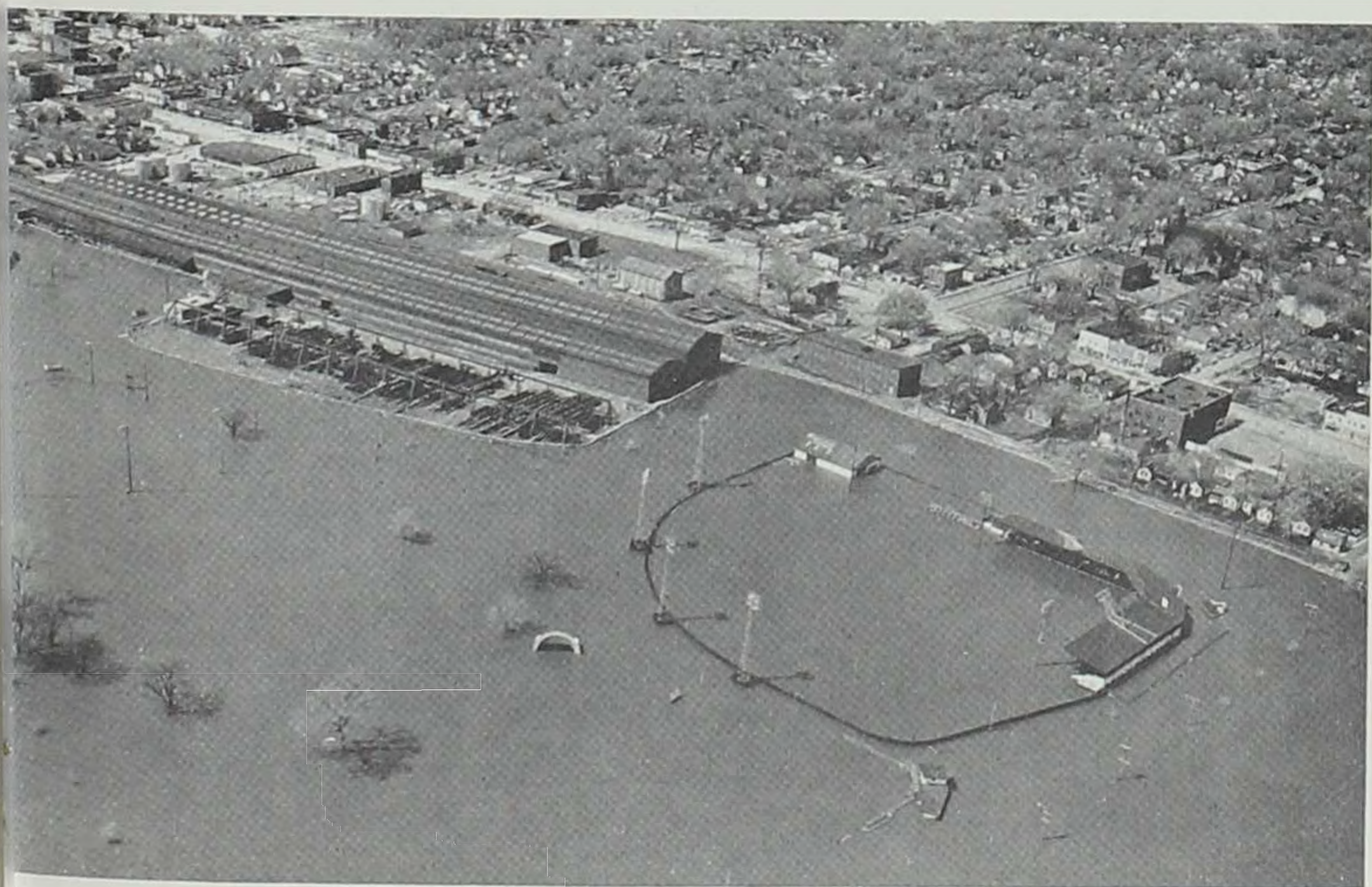
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View of flood-stricken Dubuque looking south and showing such companies as Trausch Bakery and Midland Chemical at the junction of Jones & Main streets. The river at this stage extended to Second and Locust streets.



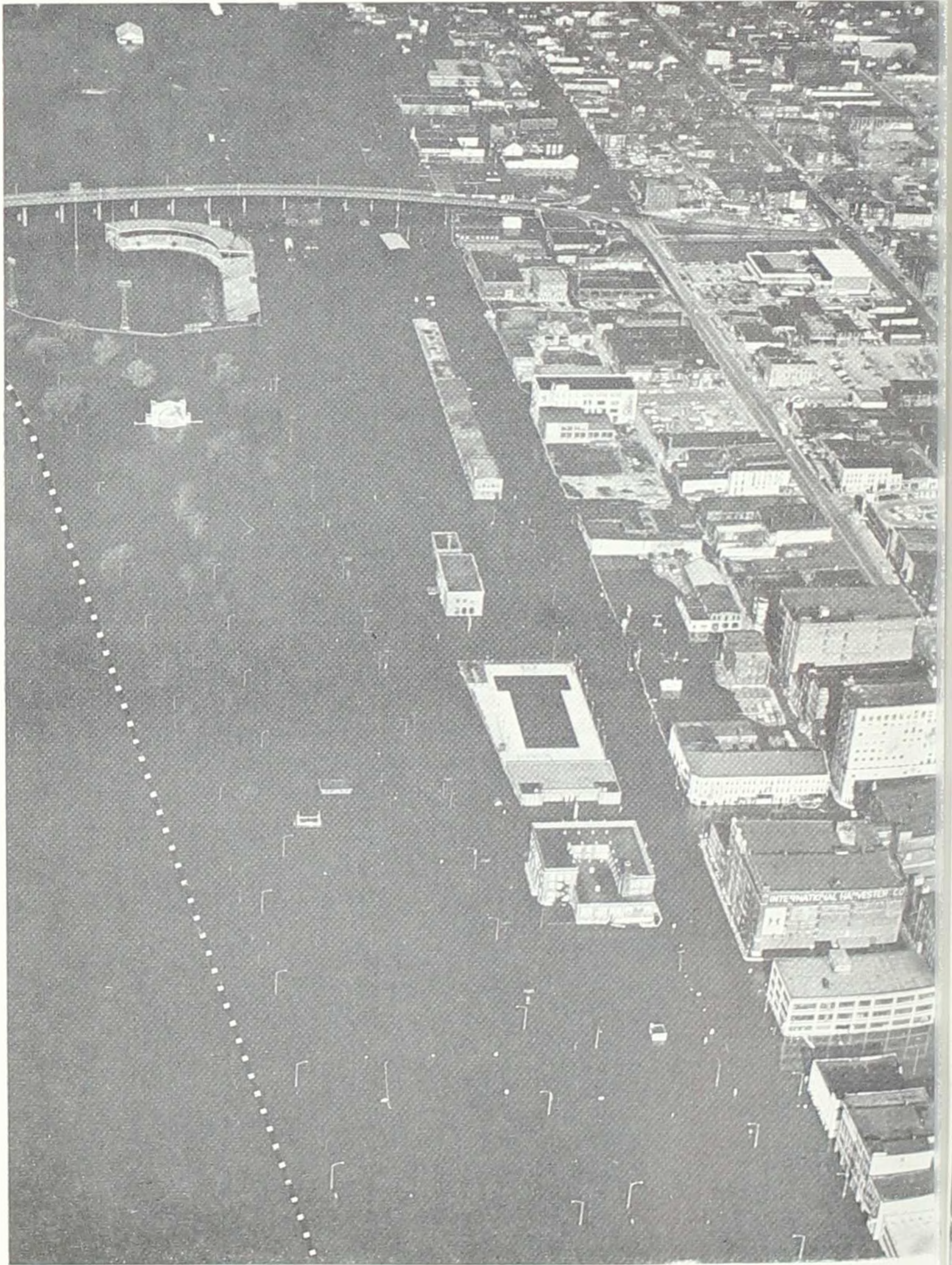
U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Clinton (looking north) fought long and hard to contain the swirling waters of the Mississippi. Lyons was completely awash and water was backed up in sewers flooding basements and cellars of Clinton.



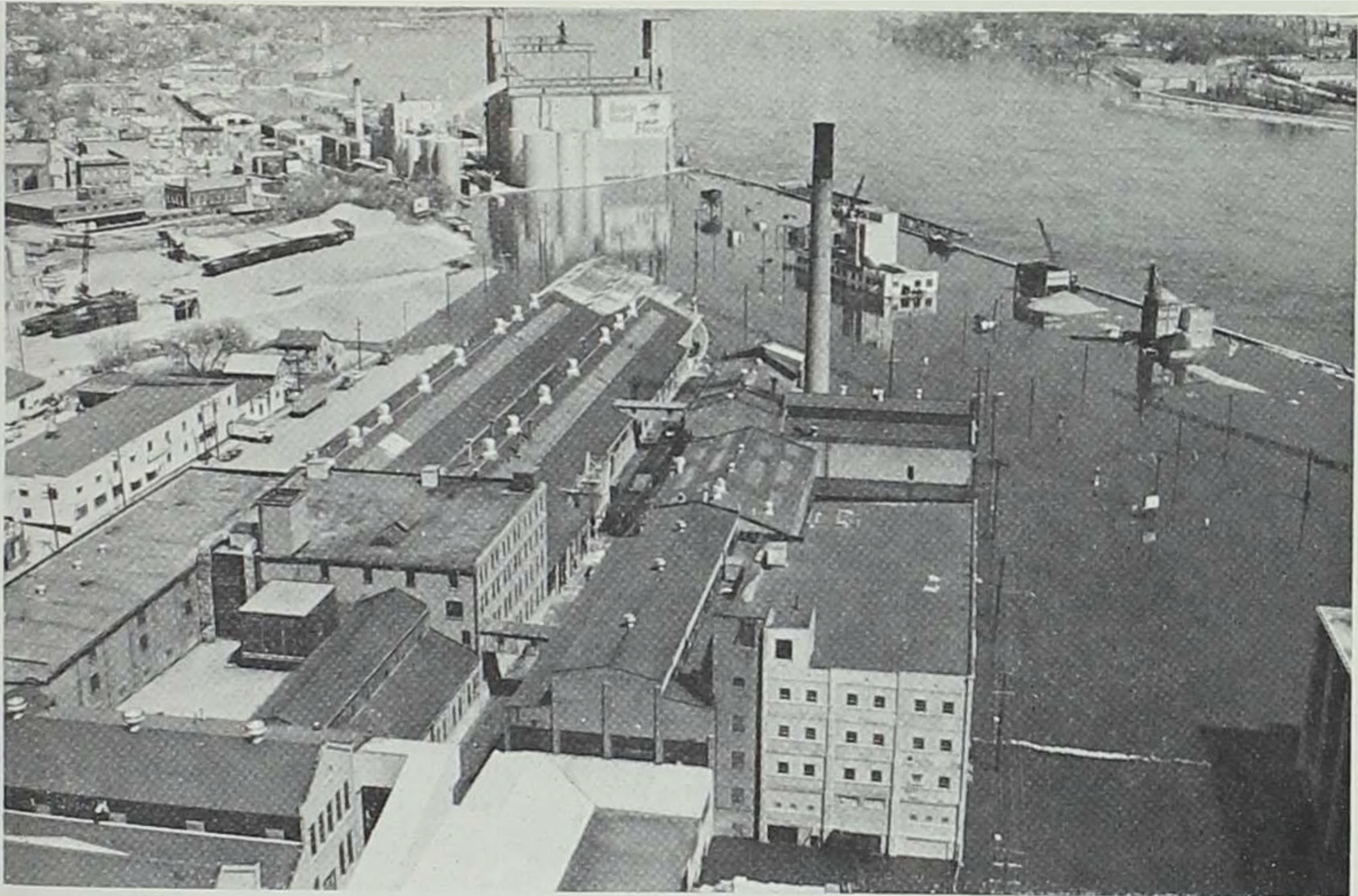
U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Another view of Clinton showing a section of the industrial area with Riverview baseball stadium and bandstand in immediate foreground. The Dubuque, Clinton, and Davenport baseball parks were completely submerged by the flood of 1965.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

Davenport, for more than a century, has battled the Mississippi along Front Street. Her failure to contain the rampaging waters in 1965 is demonstrated by the inundated baseball park, band shell, bus depot, swimming pool, and Lend-a-Hand Club. Not only were parking meters along the waterfront submerged, but her new parking ramp (lower right) was flooded, making even the top levels inaccessible until the waters receded.



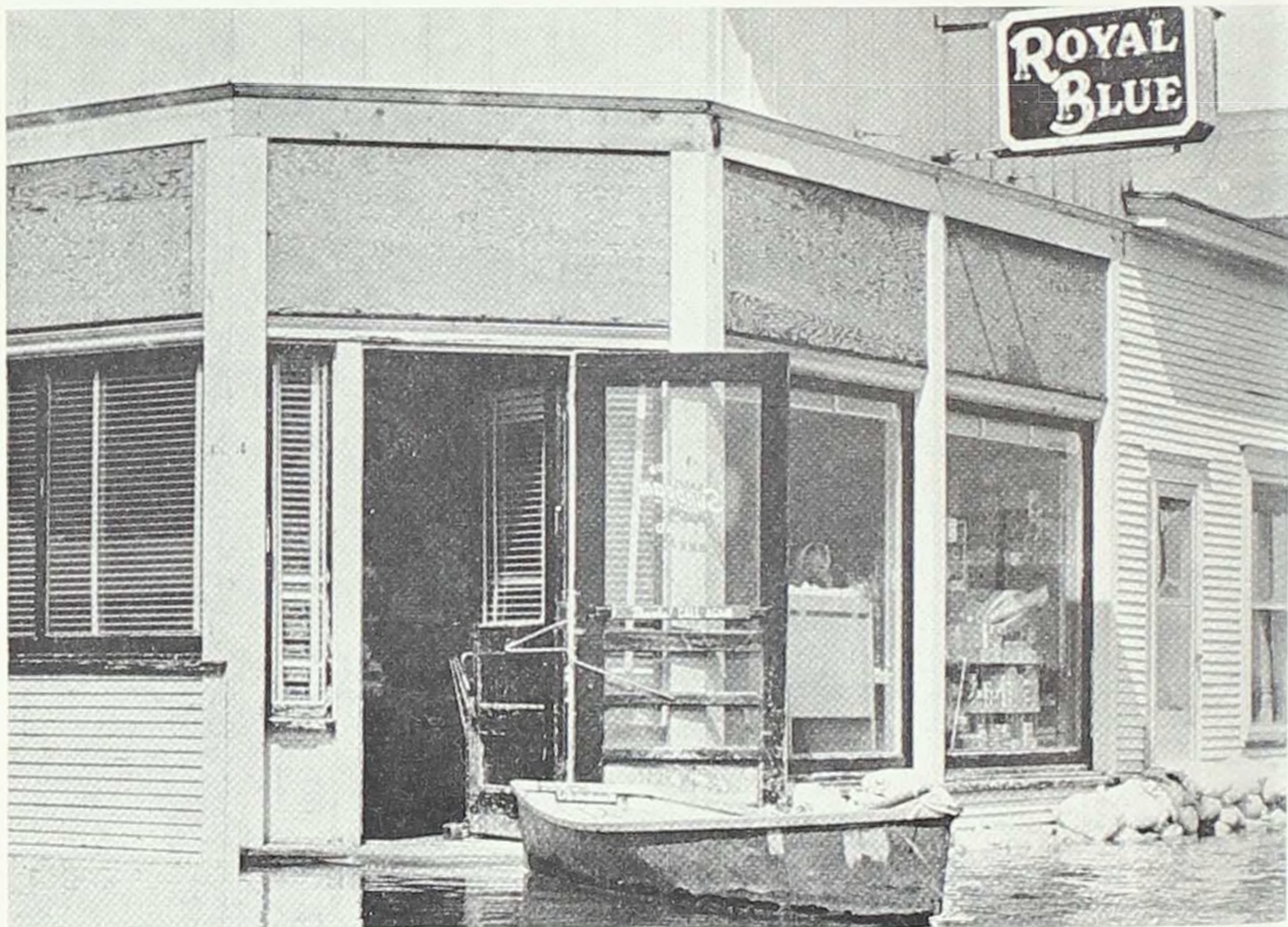
U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Davenport, looking north from the Government Bridge to the Robin Hood Mill, and showing the flooded streets and buildings.



U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Throughout the past century, the Garden Addition has been subjected to rampaging floods. The above is a clear indication of what happens when puny man dares to deny the Mississippi her prior claim to occupy her lowlands.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

The road from Davenport to Muscatine was closed to traffic for several days. The reason becomes obvious when one notes the store on Main Street in historic Buffalo, Iowa, which remained open to those fortunate enough to own a boat.



U.S. Army Engineers Photo

Looking south at Muscatine from the mouth of Mad Creek. All would have gone well at this point had not a close to 6-inch downpour swept into the dry area from the rear.



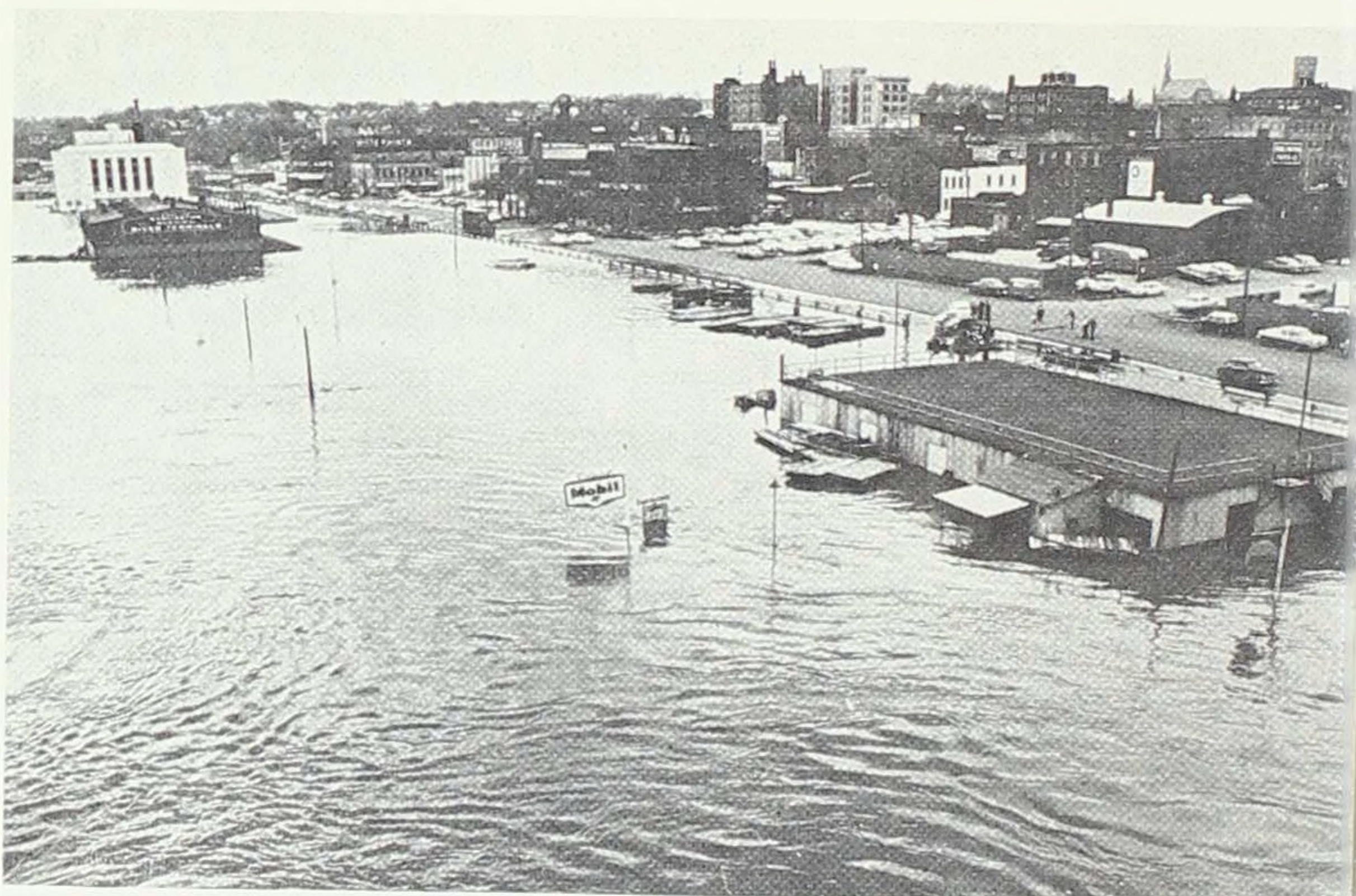
U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Thrice in the past fifteen years residents of Muscatine have witnessed this scene as flood waters invade the industrial area. View looking northeast on 2nd Street from Walnut Street.



U. S. Army Engineers Photo

Looking south along the Muscatine waterfront showing railroad tracks and parking area submerged and Highways 92 and 61 no longer in use. The river at its height reached to the outside steps of the Muscatine Hotel. The cars around the Elks Club were immobilized.



Burlington suffered less than its sister-cities but the land across the Mississippi around Gulf port, Illinois was overflowed as it has been for a score of times in more than a century.



The Iowa National Guard worked feverishly at Burlington to hold back the rampaging flood.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

The Port Hole in Lyons didn't display a welcome mat during the flood of 1965. The "Al" Fields of Bettendorf wait out the flood atop their Canal Shore Drive home.

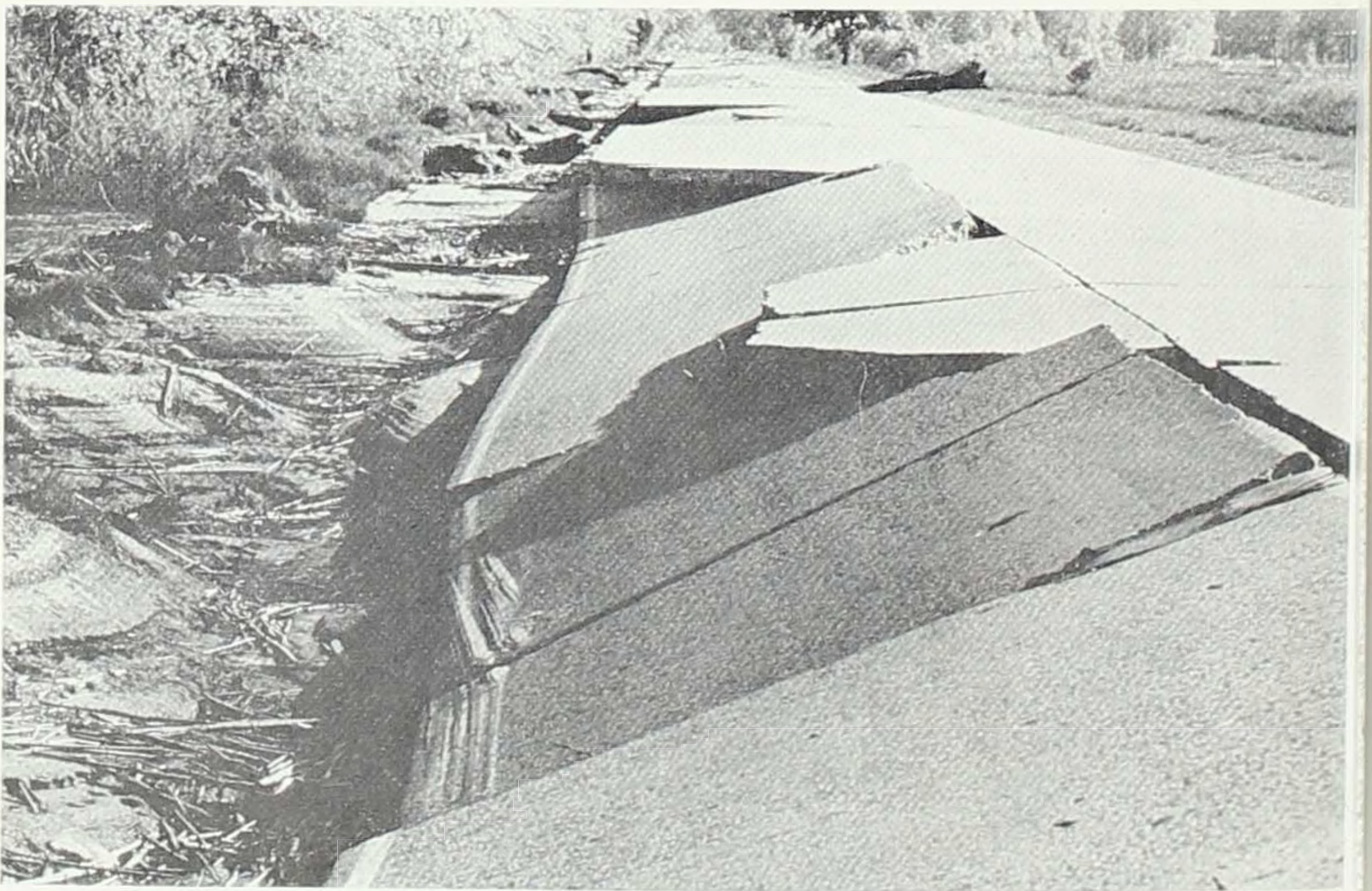


Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

Verily, the "oldest inhabitant" could not "top" the 1965 flood at Davenport.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo
Motorists had difficulty following the yellow line along the Great River Road.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo
They had even greater difficulty when Old Man River withdrew, leaving the results of his ravages open for man to behold.



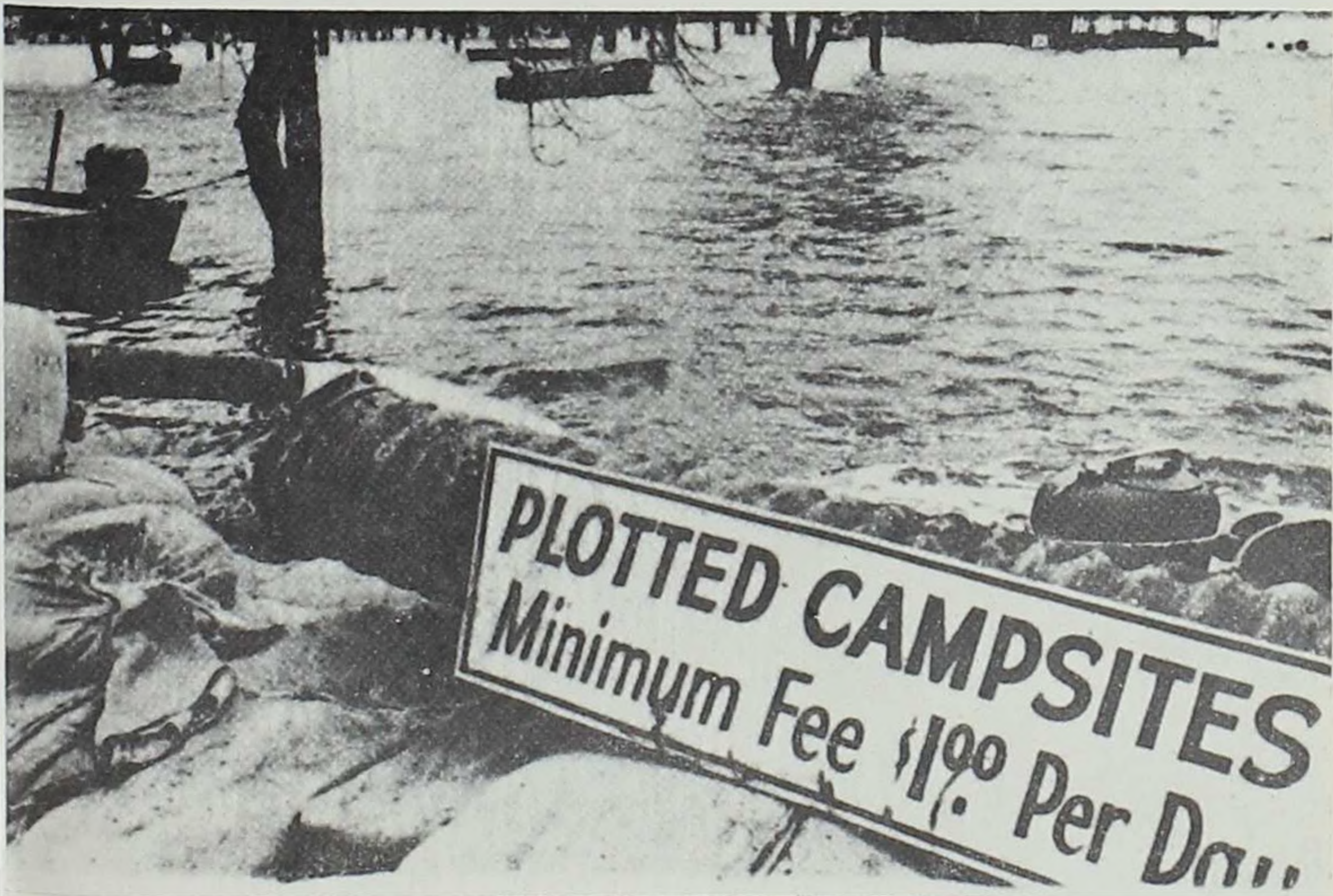
Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

The water reached the Levee Inn roof before it receded in Davenport.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

Officers were not needed to enforce this law in Davenport.

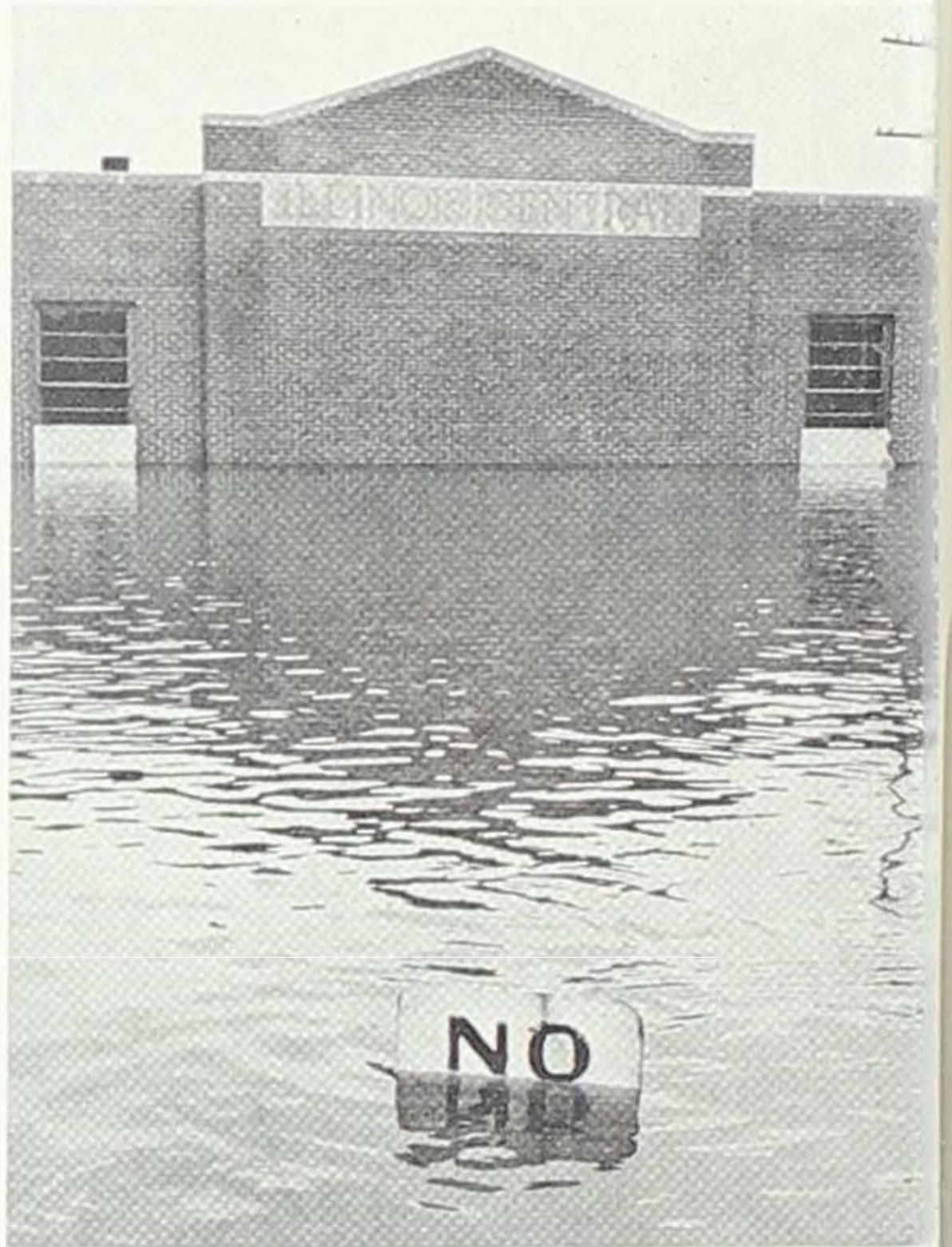


Associated Press Photo

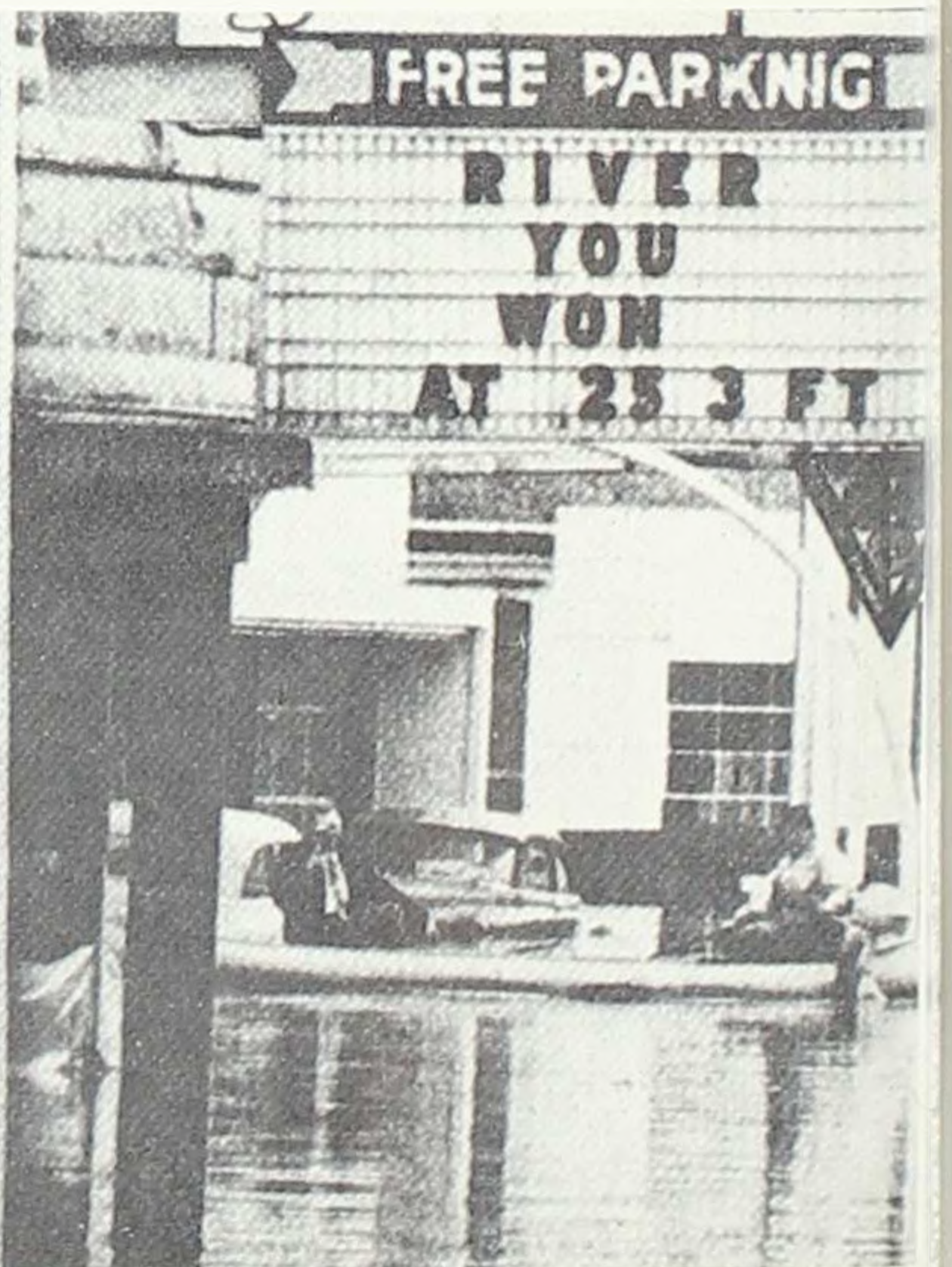
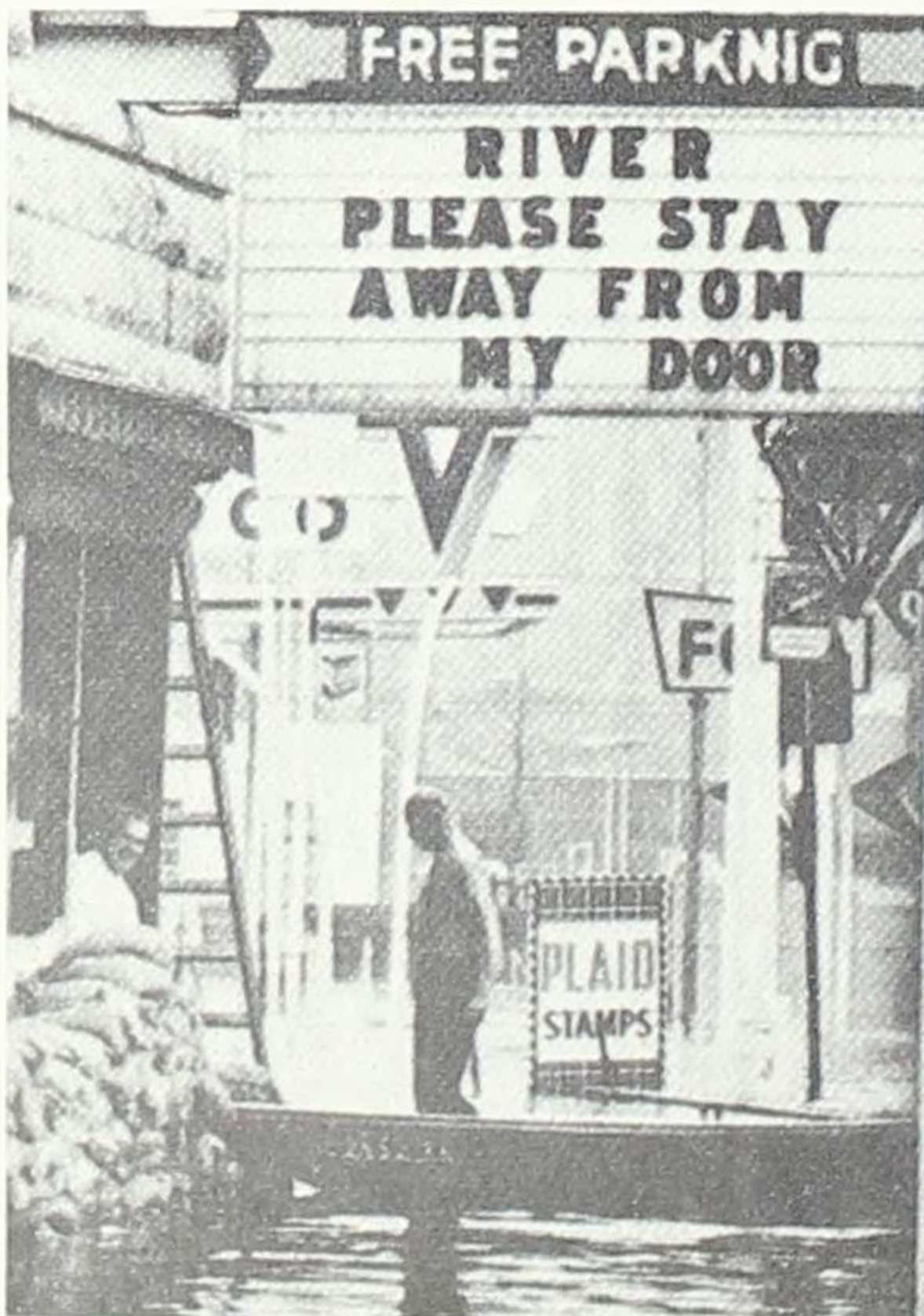
There was no business at this recreation area at Guttenberg as the flood neared its crest.



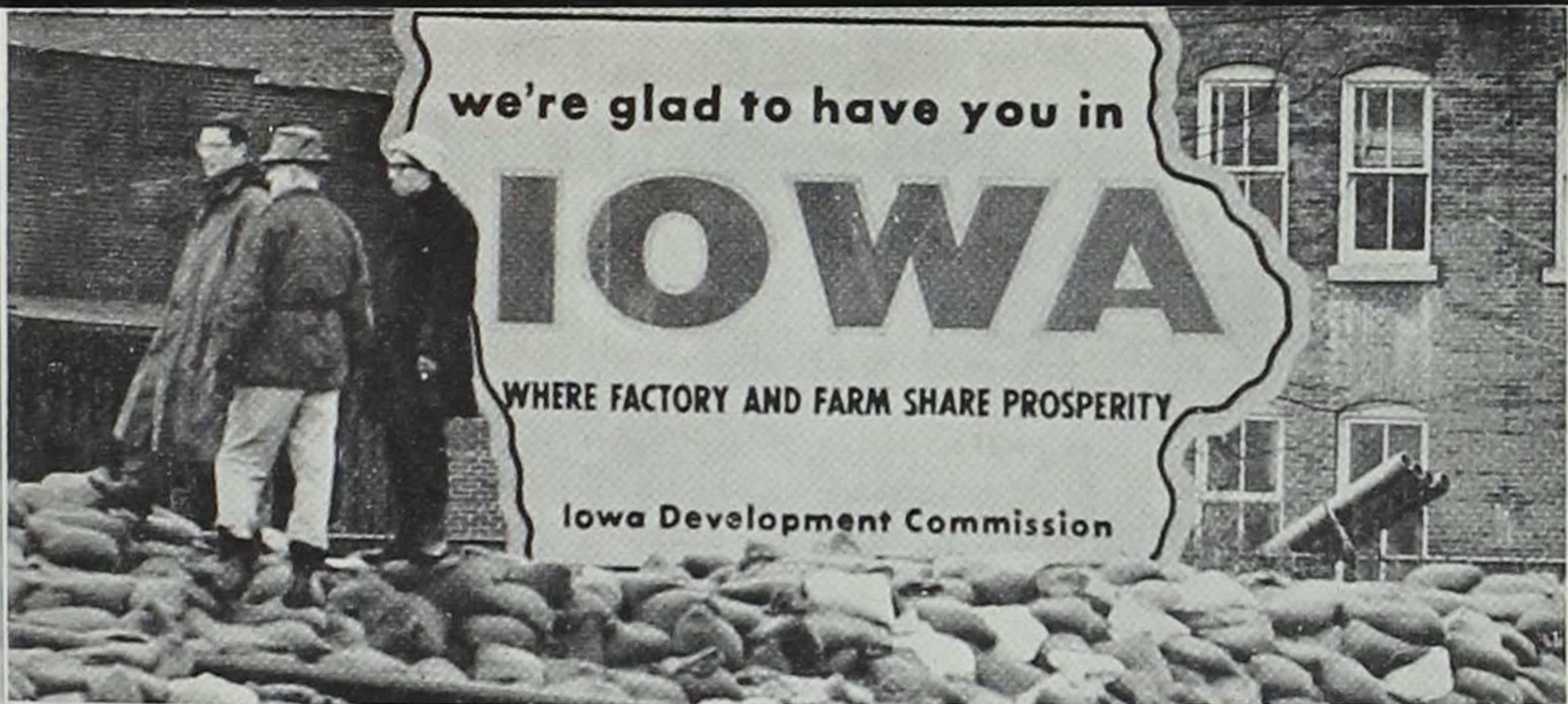
Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
 Parking in Dubuque was not easy.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
 There were "NO" Illinois Central trains out of Dubuque.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo
 The owner of this business in Dubuque did not lose his sense of humor.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo

Sandbags almost obliterate the "Welcome to Iowa" sign at Dubuque.



Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo

Some Dubuquers did not know when to quit; Noah McNamer finally leaves his Ark.

Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo

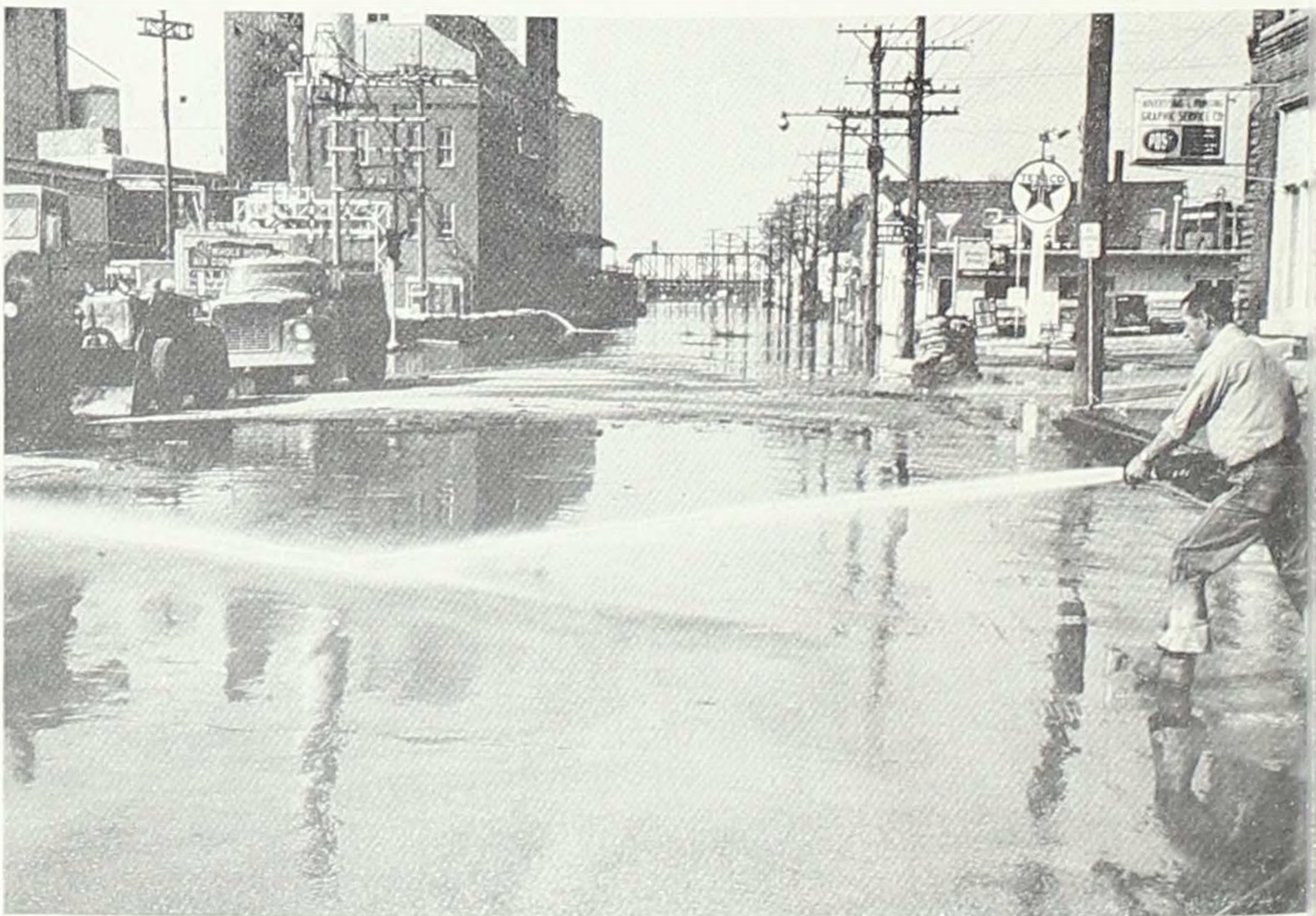
After a long fight this company did not forget to thank the Dubuquers who helped them.





Dubuque Telegraph-Herald Photo

After the flood came the cleanup—the river's "calling card" at Dubuque.



Davenport Times-Democrat Photo

It took many man-hours to clean up the mud and debris at Davenport.

built levee on Third Street was washed out. According to the *Times*:

Drift wood of every description is coming down freely, and many parties are making good wages in picking up cord wood, lumber, logs and other floating property. Many of the raft boats are lying up there being no work for them at present.

All the way from Dubuque to Keokuk the Mississippi set records or near records in 1888. The *Clinton Weekly Herald* of April 26, 1888 declared the river had been rising "continuously" since early spring. After a slight decline, the *Herald* of May 10 noted the Mississippi had reached the 17' 10" mark, the same point reached on April 26, 27, 28. All low places "in Lyons, Chancy, Fulton and East Clinton" were once more submerged and the editor suggested a "notice to quit" ought to be served on the rising waters. "Evidently the river is convalescent," the *Weekly Herald* concluded, "for it is out of its bed and running all over the country." By May 17 the *Weekly Herald* reported a stage of 20' 2" above the low water mark of 1864 or within two inches of its all-time high of 1880. The 1888 flood, lasting as it did over a long period of time, was one of the most costly in the bustling lumber town's history.

The *Muscatine Daily News* of May 14, 1888 reported a 17' 5" flood stage which "will stand as the highest on record for years, possibly for a century, as it is the highest point ever reached here of

which there is any authentic data. While this is barely an inch higher than the great rise of 1881, an inch added to that mad flood with a surface of 3 to 8 miles in width means a vast volume of water."

The same situation prevailed at Burlington where the river was within one inch of the 1881 mark on May 14. The Mississippi was from "7 to 9 miles wide," flooding bottom lands and filling Main Street basements with from 6 to 18 inches of water. The Burlington Lumber Company and the rolling mill were inundated and closed down.

At Keokuk the Mississippi crested at 19' 8". This surpassed the flood of 1881 and was only 12 inches below the great flood of 1851. After noting over several days the gradual diminution of activity, the *Keokuk Gate City* of May 18, 1888 declared:

The disastrous effect upon trade occasioned by the flood is severely felt in this city. Prices of country produce, the supply of which is daily being diminished, are advancing owing to the inability of farmers to reach the city. Hay and corn are quoted way up and products designed for the household have increased in price. Hancock and Clark county people cannot reach the city and the usual amount of trade which comes from these sections is lost to the retail merchants.

If things were bad in Keokuk, her neighbor, Alexandria, across the Des Moines River in Missouri, found herself even worse off. The *Daily*

Gate City of May 26 quoted the following eyewitness account of Alexandria by the *St. Louis Republican*:

It is an American Venice. Boats flit to and fro taking customers from mart to mart. The sturdy oarsman took the reporter up one of the principal streets. At one clothing store an enterprising clothier had removed his goods to the second story of the building and samples of his wares were hung on a wire stretched from his building to another. As the reporter passed along the merchant cried: "Come in, shentlemens! Don'd you mind the high waters. You get bargains here — great bargains!"

A little further on was a half submerged sign with the legend: "A great schooner for a nickel. Free lunch." The oarsman looked laughingly at it but kept steadily on. At a half submerged dwelling on the roof of which were a family of seven people — husband, wife and children — the boat was stopped.

"Wouldn't you like to get on dry land?" was asked.

"Oh, we don't care," they replied. "We might just as well live here as on the bluffs. The river will get down after a bit. We don't mind it."

And from the appearance of the wretched outfit, it was evident that they wouldn't mind anything so long as the quinine held out. Most of the people have fled from the city and are occupying tents on the bluffs some ten miles west of the city. Those who remain are old timers. Nothing can daunt them in the way of floods. A skiff was seen floating down a principal street and beside it was a tiny skiff safely secured, in which a babe slept peacefully. It was a novel method of going shopping, but that was the object of the lady with the babe.

The complacency, the fortitude, the stark cour-

age of these river folk has been demonstrated in every era from 1851 to 1965. Dwelling as they do along the banks of the Mighty Mississippi, they are a breed apart from most Iowans. Of simple faith and abiding trust, they might well be called the children of the Father of Waters.