Some Historical Points of Interest along the Des Moines River

- Miss Allie Wingate at Thompson's Bend on DSM River

Legend:
- Bike Trails
- Public Land
- Des Moines River
- Boat Ramp

0 0.25 0.5 1 Miles
The Meskwaki arrived from Tama by train and performed dances for the participants. The governor gave an address to nearly 20,000 participants in the celebration. The last remaining 14 acres of the Thompson property became Union Park on that day.

Banks to witness 7 steamers, 40 row boats, and 9 canoes attempt to stay in formation as they moved upstream from Center Street Dam to Union Park where Iowa's recreational boats could operate. Boat houses and bath houses lined the river banks along Thompson's Bend in the late 1800s. In July of 1896, Des Moines and Street Dam and Sixth Avenue. The area became popular for excursion steamers, canoeists, and rowers. The Center Street Dam provided a pool in which these recreational boats could operate. Boat houses and bath houses lined the river banks along Thompson's Bend in the late 1800s. In July of 1896, Des Moines and Polk County celebrated their fiftieth birthday. The Semi-centennial celebration included a land parade, boat parade and bike parade. Thousands lined the river banks to witness 7 steamers, 40 row boats, and 9 canoes attempt to stay in formation as they moved upstream from Center Street Dam to Union Park where Iowa's governor gave an address to nearly 20,000 participants in the celebration. The last remaining 14 acres of the Thompson property became Union Park on that day. The Meskwaki arrived from Tama by train and performed dances for the participants.

C) Zoo Lake/ Zoological Gardens (1889-1899)
Before this area was Riverview Park in 1915 it was the Des Moines Zoological Gardens or Zoo Lake, where lions, elephants, leopards, tigers were fenced in around a spring fed lake where a swan boat operated and row boats could be rented. Symphonies played there and it was quite the popular place for about a ten-year period. Between 1900 and 1915 it was a popular ice skating lake. As early as 1861 ice skating was being reported on the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers. Skating clubs existed, and one hardware store in Des Moines reported selling 900 pair of skates in 1871.

D) Ice House Foundation (early 1900s)
Although the building is gone, the foundation to a small ice house still exists at the base of the bluff where the river bends north just upstream of the 6th Ave Bridge. In the 1920s, “nearly every American community of more than a few thousand people boasted at least one ice house, built of double-walled wood or brick and insulated with hay and sawdust” (The Ice Harvest, 1981, Vol 61, #3, lowan, Stephen Volk). The ice industry began in the early 1800s and ended around the mid-1930s when refrigeration became affordable and dependable. By 1940 five million freezers/refrigerators had been sold, putting an end to the ice harvesting trade. Many ice houses existed along the Des Moines River. One of the largest was located just above the Center Street Dam on the east bank of the river.

E) 6th Avenue Bridge (1886-present)
The first bridge to cross the river at 6th Ave was a steel truss bridge built in 1886 and was the only way north across the river by road until 1936 when the 2nd Ave Bridge was built. It was moved to Euclid Ave when the Melan Arch Bridge (named after the Austrian engineer, Josef Melan) was constructed in 1905. Melan was a pioneer in the bridge building world, and is noted for using steel truss arches instead of rebar. The northern suburbs who pushed for the new bridge were very proud of it (many different postcard views exist) but the cost to construct the bridge was a source of contention with the city and other Des Moines residents. The bridge collapsed the day before Easter in 1965, knocking out phone service to 10,000 customers. An English Pointer named Duke helped to restore essential service right away by crossing the length of the bridge with the first telephone line attached to his collar—it was deemed unsafe for humans to cross. Northwestern Bell used Duke in an advertising campaign boasting about their ability to quickly restore service. An ad in a 1966 Life Magazine shows a photo of Duke crossing the bridge with a phone line attached to his collar. Note: as you pass under the bridge look to the south and you can still see the remnants of the original walls of the Melan Arch Bridge.

F) The George Parker Boat House and Riverside Canoe Club (early 1900s)
Recreational boating started first with row boats, and then with decked canoes, which bore more resemblance to modern day kayaks than the birch bark canoes of the fur trade era. A popular past time in Des Moines was to row upstream to one of the “beautiful spots” along the river to picnic and then return by the light of the moon. In the 1880s and 1890s excursion steamers operating on the Des Moines River transported passengers from just above the Center Street Dam to the natural areas upstream. While there was pleasure just in riding these excursion steamers, residents actually depended on them because no roads yet connected the city to places like Crocke Woods or Zoo Lake. Paddling as a recreational activity became popular after the American Canoe Association was established in 1880. Tacitus Hussey established the Des Moines Canoe Club in the early 1890s. The sport has waxed and waned over the years.

G) Street Car/ Intercarurban railroad abutments
After you pass under the 2nd Ave bridge look to the left and right to notice the original bridge abutments (humps now) for the street car line that offered access to Highland Park College students. It is drawn on an 1895 Des Moines map. It also connected to the interurban line when that was developed in the early 1900s.

H) Franklin Avenue Bath House (Natatorium)
Despite the threat of Typhoid, swimming in rivers was a popular recreational activity. Bath houses sprung up across Iowa but not necessarily because bathers demanded them. Complaints had been levied by boaters who had encountered promiscuous nude bathers of the opposite sex along the Des Moines River near Iowa’s capital city. An 1887 article in the Iowa Sate Register exclaimed the “need for a natatorium for the sake of decency, if for no other reason. Nearly every evening the river below the dam swarms with nude humanity of all grades and professions, and on Sunday it is one continuous bathing place above Prospect Park” (Iowa State Register, July 26th, 1887). These complaints led to the creation of public bath houses throughout Iowa where in some cases bathing suits were actually rented. There was a natatorium (bath house) located between Franklin and Jefferson avenues on the river for nearly 30 years starting in the late 1800s. Ashworth swimming pool opened in 1924 and was the first swimming pool established in Des Moines.

I) Thompson’s Bend & (J) Union Park
Named for Andrew McFarland Thompson, a pioneer settler who staked claim to 1400 acres in 1848 along the east side of the Des Moines River between Center Street Dam and Sixth Avenue. The area became popular for excursion steamers, canoeists, and rowers. The Center Street Dam provided a pool in which these recreational boats could operate. Boat houses and bath houses lined the river banks along Thompson’s Bend in the late 1800s. In July of 1896, Des Moines and Polk County celebrated their fiftieth birthday. The Semi-centennial celebration included a land parade, boat parade and bike parade. Thousands lined the river banks to witness 7 steamers, 40 row boats, and 9 canoes attempt to stay in formation as they moved upstream from Center Street Dam to Union Park where Iowa’s governor gave an address to nearly 20,000 participants in the celebration. The last remaining 14 acres of the Thompson property became Union Park on that day. The Meskwaki arrived from Tama by train and performed dances for the participants.