

# Jordan River downgraded to 'drainage ditch'

Folks in Bloomington may not have recognized the state engineer when he was nosing around the Indiana University campus in the summer of 1933. They certainly knew about his visit afterward, when the monthly bulletin of the Indiana Division of Public Health was distributed.

On a slow news day (Sept. 19, 1933) the Indianapolis *Star* ran a front-page story about what the state engineer found in Bloomington. His message in the bulletin was that the Jordan River was polluted. To be more precise, he described it as "a stagnated series of polluted pools."

Any of the locals could have told him that the Jordan is not at its best in the summer. (It shows off to greatest advantage during the spring monsoon season.) Nevertheless, the engineer had the nerve to make some recommendations about the river.

To begin with, the *Star* writer (who obviously didn't attend IU) took a sarcastic jab at the stream, calling it the "Jordan River which is entitled to be called a river fully as much as a rowboat is entitled to be



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

called an ocean liner." Some inquiries in the city hall had produced some other information — that the city fathers weren't particularly happy with the stream, either.

What the engineer suggested was that the city "cover the river over in a permanent structure," whatever that meant. There were those in the city administration who thought they had found a way to get the job done at no additional expense.

The *Star* explained, "At present the city has been granted an R.F.C. loan of \$428,000 with which to build a sewage disposal plant, and officials hoped to divert a part of this to covering Jordan River permanently." But there was a string attached to the

money. The city was obliged to pay back 70 percent of the federal money.

As the *Star* put it, "Now the city wants to let the R.F.C. loan go and come in under the public works plan, saving Bloomington approximately \$125,000 through the donation clause. In the meantime, Jordan River still winds across town uncovered except for a portion in the region of the city park."

For the benefit of non-IU alumni, the article explained, "The stream originates near a fraternity house row, wends through the campus past the power house and old Jordan field, through Dunn meadow and finally through the city."

Fortunately, the writer made allowances for whatever sentiments the stream had inspired in the past. "Jordan River is an object of veneration to students and alumni of the university. For more than a hundred years they have dedicated their songs to the body of water, which youngsters could and do, jump across; pageants have been staged on its banks; and for a good many years the university musical revue, was called the

'Jordan River Revue.' "

It is not known whether the engineer had any idea he was stirring up a hornet's nest as he wrote his bulletin article. He may have found it safer to bring a bodyguard to Bloomington during future visits.

Anyway, he downgraded the river or stream to, of all things, a drainage ditch. He found it to be very "unsanitary." If that wasn't insulting enough, the engineer continued, "... it is an unsightly channel, unhealthful, a discomfort and is unworthy of a university city."

Furthermore, wrote the engineer, "The bureau of sanitary engineering has recommended and requested that the inclosing and covering of this ditch in a permanent structure to be included in the general sewage and drainage improvement for the city of Bloomington."

Actually, the engineer didn't reckon on the alumni who get very sentimental when they think about that "drainage ditch." It is still there.

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