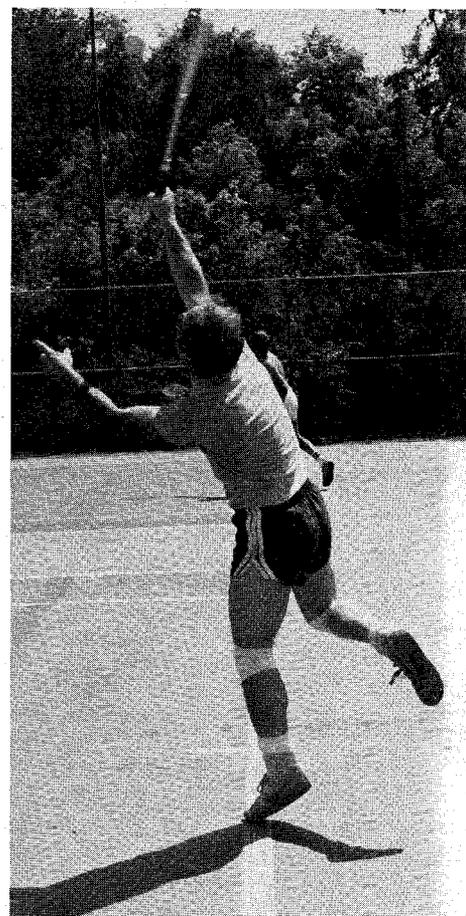
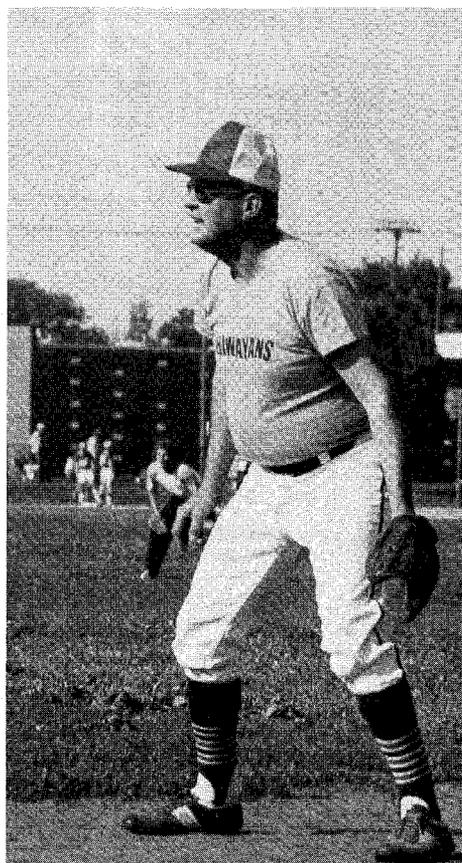


DOTscene



July/August 1982

'Father of Highway 100' Carl Graeser's legend lives on

He had a wooden leg, spoke with a German accent and traveled with a black German shepherd dog, his constant companion.

Rough and gruff and all business, he was "married to his job." While Carl Fredrick Graeser is remembered for all these things, more importantly he is recalled as a man of vision with engineering ideas decades ahead of his time.

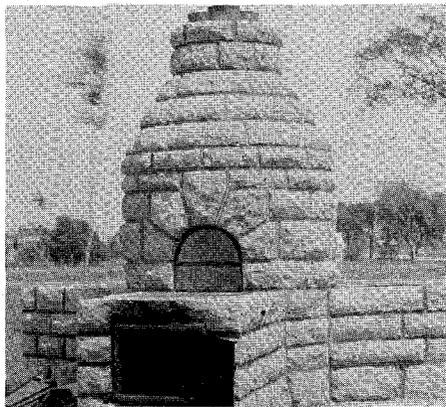
A visionary, Graeser fought for his ideas. One was a "belt line," now known as Highway 100, built much like the famous German autobahns in his homeland.

Highway 100, which is the main north/south link among six western suburbs of Minneapolis, was conceived by L. P. Zimmerman and Clyde Methven, two state engineers who felt such a highway would enable travelers to skirt around Minneapolis. However, it was Graeser who most say is the "Father of Highway 100."

The idea began in the late 1920s when Graeser tried to raise money for Highway 100 to be built, but no one would listen. According to reports, city officials didn't believe that development would occur that far west of Minneapolis. Besides, it was the Depression. But nothing would stop Graeser, who continued to campaign for funds.

The money was allocated in 1931 and Graeser's dream began to materialize. He wanted to make the highway much like the German autobahns with two lanes in each direction, divided by a center median.

There also would be large parks by the side of the road. Before the dream was finished, state officials came to view Graeser's plan. They weren't impressed and ordered him



One of the fireplaces built under the direction of Carl Graeser in the 1930s was located at Highway 100 and Excelsior Blvd. This photo was taken by Graeser in May 1939.

to eliminate the medians, because the road took too much space.

Unable to convince them of the need, Graeser had to alter the plan and remove the medians. Ironically, these center medians were added later along with lanes and bridges, so only small portions of the original Highway 100 remain today.

There are still two stone fireplaces in the park areas by Highway 100. Graeser had them built in 1933-34 in the height of the Work Projects Administration (WPA). Stonemasons earning \$57 a month made the fireplaces and grills.

Completed in 1935, with another segment added in Robbinsdale two years later, Highway 100 is a testimony to Graeser. When he saw his finished work, he said, "There will never be any charge of dishonesty or inefficiency about my road. It will last forever."

Members of the old Highway Department then housed in Hopkins bear witness to Graeser's statement.

One of his assistants and the man who succeeded him, L. P. "Pete"

Pederson, 77, lives in the Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park. He remembers his boss as a man "who lived in the right of way." He wasn't married, didn't have any hobbies or other interests than building this highway. Work, no matter what the day or hour was always on Graeser's mind, recalls Pederson, who later became Hennepin County engineer.

He remembers one midnight telephone call from Graeser asking the recipient to come into the office "to talk things over," which meant a discussion of work errors.

If getting his road built meant arguing with project engineers, Graeser did it. After an especially heated argument over design with O. L. Kipp, construction engineer, Graeser said, "Just give me \$1 million and I'll build a real belt line." This comment was recalled by Calvin Miller, who retired in 1973 after 44 years with Mn/DOT.

Yes, work was Graeser's style, no doubt about it, says Miller, who lives in Minneapolis.

Despite the hard work, the crew at the old Hopkins building had a lot of fun, too, Miller says. As a reminder to Graeser to follow a federal recommended policy of shorter working hours, someone placed the symbol for the National Recovery Administration (NRA), an eagle, on the wall behind the boss's desk. Miller says this caused Graeser to yell, "Whoever put this pigeon on the wall better take it down."

Another time jokesters set off smoke bombs in Graeser's Model T, which had him running outside and shouting, "Someone blew up my car."



Carl Graeser and some of his colleagues in the Highway Department's Hopkins Office in 1934 are from left, Rudy Johnson, Les Miller, George Harris, Frank Laska, unidentified, Jim Kennelly, Gene Neville, Bill Kopesky, William Lemke and Graeser.

Despite the jokes and Graeser's workaholic philosophy, colleagues respected him as one of the best engineers, Miller says.

"Graeser was a rugged individual and a hard man to work for," says Herbert "Herb" Bergstrom, who retired in 1976 as a bridge construction engineer. Now living in Alpine, Calif., Bergstrom agrees that Graeser was "way ahead of his time."

Why was Graeser so dedicated? Apparently no one really knows. However, Rudy Johnson, who began with Graeser in the former Highway Department in 1931, recalls some of his old boss's background. Graeser left Germany as a teenager to serve as a cabin boy on sailing ships. When he arrived in New York, he went to the German Embassy and was "bawled out" for leaving his native land, during what is believed to be early World War I.

While in New York, he met the English author Rudyard Kipling. Johnson, who lives in Minnetonka, recalls hearing stories that Kipling encouraged and helped finance Graeser's civil engineering education at Norwich University in Vermont.

From there Graeser moved westward ending up in Montana where he lost his leg in a train-switching accident. How he came to Minnesota isn't known, but Bergstrom recalls he worked in northern Minnesota and in the Twin Cities area before joining the Highway Department.

No matter where Graeser worked his dog went along. The first one was Blitz and the second Jet. According to Earl Rodgers, who also worked with Graeser, Jet even accompanied Graeser on his visits to then Commissioner of Highways

Charles M. Babcock. No one objected, Rodgers recalls, because if they did Graeser would "tell them off." Jet was treated as family by Graeser. If he had a steak dinner, so did Jet.

Work and his dog weren't Graeser's only interests, Pederson says. He recalls Graeser's interest in a woman who lived on a farm near what is today Southdale Shopping Center in Edina, but they didn't marry.

She was not forgotten, Pederson says, because after Graeser suffered a fatal heart attack March 15, 1944, his estate was left to her.

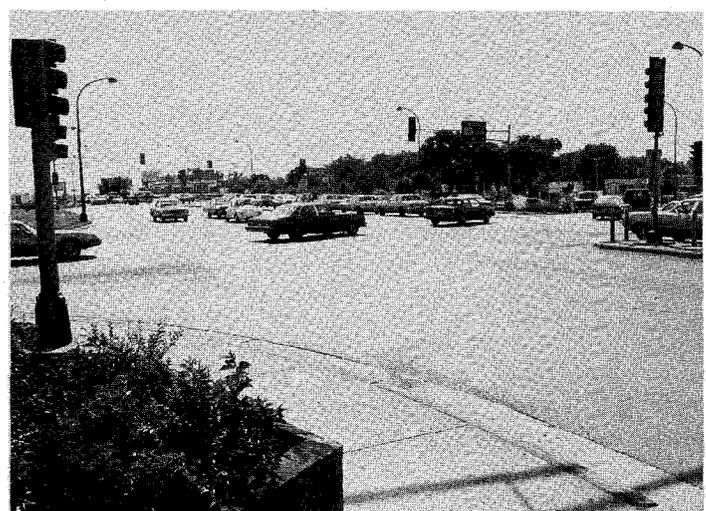
Pederson, who was one of Graeser's pallbearers, says he will never forget his old boss. "I dream about him even now."

The Carl Graeser legend lives on.

Donnie Carr



Development was just beginning in this area of Highway 100 looking west on Excelsior Boulevard in 1939.



Graeser's vision of the importance of Highway 100 is evident at this heavily used intersection of TH 100 and Excelsior Boulevard in the Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park.