

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
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**Summer, 1992**  
Volume 27, Number 2



*Members of the Junior League of St. Paul rehearsing for the 1936 Junior League Cabaret, one of the League's more entertaining fund raisers. Left to right are Mrs. John Driscoll, Molly Turner, Betty Evans, Betty Scandrett, Betty Fobes, Edith Shull, Clotilde Irvine, Mrs. Thomas Wheeler, Alice Bartles and Betty Rugg. See article on the Junior League's seventy-five years of service to the community beginning on page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

In the early 1960s, a few schools on the cutting edge of higher education began to give special attention to the issue of race relations, and the contributions of racial and ethnic groups in national and local history. By the early 1970s, the contributions of women and the lives of average citizens, aside from those in the labor movement, were also singled out as subfields deserving special focus in the curriculum. However, those fields have long been recognized by state and county historical societies as worthy of attention. When the Editorial Board set about to expand the size of *Ramsey County History* and enhance its scholarly depth and breadth, the magazine already had a tradition of articles in these fields, which we determined to continue.

This issue contains three articles which contribute to the field of women's and family history. Scheduled for future issues are two articles in the areas of minority and ethnic history: the contributions of the Mexican and Jewish American communities to the history of St. Paul, as well as an article on the High Bridge, that vital link to the West Side, a neighborhood that was home to both communities.

—Thomas C. Buckley, member of the Editorial Board

## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# Father Begged Feed for His Animals

### *Margaret Manship*

Como Zoo wasn't planned, in the beginning. It just grew, starting in the 1880s with a gift of three deer from Charles Haas of St. Paul and the Minneapolis Park Board. Then, in 1897, a site in Como Park was set aside for animals.

Two zebus, donated by James J. Hill, were added in 1900 and L. Skillman of Appleton added two red foxes. In 1901, the area was enlarged and in 1902 some deer were donated by Phil Schweitzer and some birds by Mrs. W. H. McDonald. Frank Weidenborner gave a parrot. Anonymous provided a monkey. Then, in 1915, J. J. O'Connor and Thomas Frankson gave four elk and two buffalo. Some stock was provided by the state's Fish and Game Department. In 1925, Clement Scully donated a black bear. It was kept in the discarded vault of the superintendent's house at Como.

In 1935, the remaining stock of Longfellow Zoological Gardens on Minnehaha Creek in Minneapolis was sent to Como Zoo. It consisted of 195 birds and animals and was known for its variety, quality and interest. This transfer was arranged by Fred M. Truax, superintendent of Parks and Playgrounds for St. Paul, who said this advanced St. Paul far in a single stride.

Now we had a zoo of some substance. Roy Jones, son of Robert (Fish) Jones who had operated Longfellow Gardens for many years, paid for the food for his animals but no one paid for the others, officially.

When my father, William E. McMahon, a naturalist, was hired as zookeeper in 1931, he begged feed for his animals from wholesalers, commission men, packing plants and feed companies, using their surplus or outdated merchandise. It took \$2,500 a year to care for about 100 animals.

In 1933, Theodore Wirth, superintendent of the Minneapolis Park System, sug-



*The author when she was Margaret Mary McMahon, with two other members of the household, Sniffen Snoop II and Snoopy Spot.*

When my father, William E. McMahon, a naturalist, was hired as zookeeper in 1931, he begged feed for his animals . . .



gested that a zoological society be formed to work with civic authorities. That same year, Clyde Beatty, the lion tamer, gave the city of St. Paul half-a-dozen animals that were getting too old for circus work. Later on, Senator Charles Hausler donated an alligator. By this time, many other offers had to be turned down because of lack of quarters for housing. Fred Miller, Jr., said that a zoo should always have the "royalty" of animals, such as a lion, tiger, bear and elephant, and also, of course, the court jesters, the monkeys. In addition, a

zoo should have the most interesting and famous animals and birds native to the state in which the zoo was being built. For Minnesota, these would include eagles, water birds, deer, moose, bears, hawks, beaver, raccoons and badgers.

The following year, Wirth proposed the establishment of a zoo between what is now the University's St. Paul campus and the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. It was to be built of red brick that would blend with the "farm campus" buildings. Nothing came of this, however, although to many people it seemed to be a good idea.

In 1937, W. Lamont Kaufman, who had become superintendent of parks and playgrounds for St. Paul, pointed out that St. Paul was the only large city in the country whose zoo was operated with no appropriation, and he called for public funding. In the meantime, Dad was still out begging feed and worrying about his

animals. Fred Truax suggested that with the depression gripping the country, people were preoccupied with their own problems and gave little thought to the zoo. Then a group of service clubs, the Business and Professional Men's Organization under the leadership of Joseph Downey, its president, banded together to share the cost of animal feed and to urge again the formation of a zoological society. E. W. Powell, president of the Gavel Club, a clearing house of St. Paul's service organizations, urged immediate attention to this problem.

In 1933, Dad was granted an eight month's leave of absence to superintend Frank Buck's "Bring 'em Back Alive" Jungle Camp at the Chicago World's Fair. The camp was funded by T. A. Loveland of Minneapolis. Buck was a wild animal hunter, trapper and trader who brought out East Indian animals from the Malay peninsula and Singapore. In Chicago, Buck exhibited 500 monkeys, some of each Malay species, on an island behind a moat where they could be free, yet easily seen by the public. This was a new concept, as opposed to showing animals in cages.

Buck also had a zoo of his own in Amityville, Long Island, New York, where he introduced other innovative ideas. Drawing on his work with Frank Buck, Dad brought back to St. Paul new ideas, as well as goodwill and advice from his friends in the wild animal world. The result was new interest in the zoo, and Truax called again for the formation of a zoological society.

Buck's Monkey Island also was adapted for the Como Zoo. Designed by Kaufman and my father, it was one of the first in the United States, outside of the Chicago World's Fair. Forty stonemasons, working under WPA supervision, labored for thirty days to build the 14,000-ton structure of limestone from Dayton's Bluff. The base held a hideaway "retreat" for the monkeys and the summit was topped by a fountain and waterfall. Visitors to the zoo increased greatly, as the monkeys were good showmen.

Also built with WPA labor were three rock dens for the bears. A high limestone cliff at the back, a twenty-foot deep moat at the front and an absence of bars simulated a native habitat. This, too, was a popu-



*William E. McMahon, superintendent of the Como Zoo, with friend. At right with his special pals, a lion and the dog that might have been part wolf.*



lar exhibit, especially since it included Lindy, the polar bear from Longfellow Gardens.

Next came plans for a zoo building. Designed by Charles M. Bassford, St. Paul city architect, the building was intended to look like a modern Noah's Ark. City and federal funding covered the \$60,000 cost. Labor, again, was supplied by the men of the WPA, 250 of them, who did so much during those times to enrich the city and county. Their work endures today as monuments to those men who wrought beauty and firm purpose from their fight to survive the crushing economic depression of the 1930s.

Louis Rhue of Louis Rhue, Inc., wild animal dealers for three generations, said during those years: "The upturn in the wild animal business is largely due to the WPA. Zoos all over the country have been enlarging their capacities through WPA projects and there is a demand for more animals of all sorts."

Finally, Lamont Kaufman's pleas were

heard when it was pointed out that St. Paul would have a \$60,000 zoo building but no money for feed for the animals. It was essential that an organization be set up to give both financial and moral support, if the zoo were to survive.

Carl P. Herbert, director of the city's Bureau of Municipal Research, called a meeting to study the feasibility of a zoological society. Just before the dedication of the new building, the St. Paul Zoological

Society finally was formed with F. A. Hershler as chairman. As a reward for his efforts to upgrade the zoo, Dad's title was changed from zookeeper to superintendent.

Frank Buck was asked to lay the cornerstone, which contained copies of that day's *St. Paul Daily News* and *St. Paul Dispatch*, and a history of the zoo up to that time. Assisting with the cornerstone ceremony, in addition to my father, were Truax, Bassford and Kaufman; Victor Christgau, WPA administrator for Minnesota, and K. G. Wright, the WPA's district engineer. A special guest was Carl B. Flandrick, potentate of the Osman Shrine Temple who had brought Frank Buck and his Wild Animal show to St. Paul. Scully, who had maintained his interest in the zoo since his donation of the bear in 1925, was a featured speaker.

Now the zoo grounds needed improving. A statue of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of birds and animals, was donated by the sculptor, Donald Shepard, and placed by a stream created for this purpose. The sculptor's mother, Mrs. D. C. Shepard, paid for the landscaping. Since removed to the Conservatory, the statue had won honorable mention at the Salon des Artistes Francaise in Paris.

Interesting episodes at the zoo during the trying days of the depression brightened the daily papers. Dinty Moore of the old *Daily News* was a frequent visitor who enjoyed photographing zoo animals, employees and such visitors as Frank Buck and his wild animals; Clyde Beatty, the lion tamer; Captain Miles Riley, the lion trainer; Captain and Mrs. Gilfoil and Emmanuel King, Sr., and Jr., who were entertainers at the Minnesota State Fair's animal shows; Halvor Weberg and his daughter, Loreen, who ran a train of Samoyede dogs from The Pas, Manitoba, to the Chicago World's Fair; Mr. and Mrs. Eddie Barbeau, who raced dogs from Canada to the winter sports at Brainerd; Harold Williams, who wrestled aligators; Herb Kringle, a St. Paul Parks employee whose red Kris Kringle suit was resented by the Scotch cattle.

Then there were other adventures, such as the daily tightrope-like walk to feed the animals and the Elks' contest of "Pets and Pests." One contest winner, an Elks mem-



Frank ("Bring-'Em-Back Alive") Buck with Dr. Carl R. Flandrick, potentate of the Osman Temple Shrine. Buck had brought his Wild Animal show to a Shriners' event at the civic auditorium.

Once an over-ardent suitor  
 swung his girl up in his arms  
 and held her over the  
 Monkey Island railing,  
 threatening to drop her  
 if she didn't kiss him  
 then and there.



ber, tried to borrow the zoo's timber wolf for "the wolf at the door, the biggest pest ever," an appropriate entry during those depression years. Naturally, the zoo played a major role in my young life. One of my memories is of Dad telling my mother that, "The monkeys are out and three sky pilots are coming for dinner." Three priests (Dad's "sky pilots") for dinner meant another board in the table, a larger tablecloth, cloth napkins, good dishes, polished silverware and extra chairs from the attic. It meant a quick trip to the butcher shop, a stop at the corner grocery for ice cream and somebody baking Grandma's choco-

late cake from her prize State Fair recipe.

It wasn't unusual for Dad to bring zoo visitors home for dinner. He liked people almost as well as animals. We four older children were always included at the table where we heard fascinating tales from such guests as Frank Buck and Clyde Beatty. One of our most entertaining guests was Harold Williams, who had brought his wrestling aligators, Galump the Grappler and Sphinx the Annihilator, to the Twin Cities for the Northwest Sportsmen's Show.

As we awaited our "sky pilots," we wondered if the zoo staff would get the monkeys back on Monkey Island before dinner. It depended on how recently the monkeys had had their last fling. If this was just a lark and not a bid for freedom, they might be persuaded rather easily to return to the island.

Those monkeys were a cunning and agile lot. They delighted in swinging from tree tops and chattering to their keepers whenever they came down from the trees to run along the railings in the park or climb up the outsides of the cages of the

less fortunate locked-up wild life. Rhesus monkeys were particularly entertaining. While Monkey Island was a great improvement over the old-fashioned cages, the monkeys still relished an afternoon, even a week, of an expansion of their territory. On one of their excursions, they had a royal good time taking the clothespins out of a neighboring woman's freshly hung wash and pelting her with apples they stole from her tree.

The zoo crew liked variety, too. Once an over-ardent suitor swung his girl up in his arms and held her over the Monkey Island railing, threatening to drop her if she didn't kiss him then and there. He lost his balance and they both fell into the moat. A ladder was put down, the fellow and his girl were brought up and, while the zookeepers were laughing as he pleaded with his grim-faced girl, the monkeys also scampered up the ladder and away!

Other episodes come to mind. One hot day, a dog jumped the railing and went swimming in the moat. Then he found that he could neither climb up the sheer wall nor jump that high. He couldn't land on the island because the monkeys fought him off with great hostility, biting and grabbing at him. The zookeepers lowered a ladder to rescue the exhausted dog and the monkeys were on the loose again.

When Frank Buck brought his Wild Animal show to a Shriners' event at the civic auditorium, he used quite a few monkeys who promptly escaped and spent two weeks in the auditorium's superstructure. They finally came down when they got hungry enough.

In the meantime, three baboons were put on Monkey Island to see how they would fare. They fared so well that they became kings of the island. When the monkeys returned, the baboons apparently viewed the situation as unpleasant. They swam to shore, climbed a dangling hose that had been used to flush the rocks, headed pellmell for the zoohouse and climbed into an empty cage. So much for baboons on Monkey Island.

Itchy the Chimp loved the attention of visitors and would pose for their cameras as long as the film held out. Sooner or later someone would try to feed him through the bars. Itchy would grab their hands and hang on tight. Then he'd loosen his grip



*McMahon with one of the monkeys.*

with one hand, grab their glasses, run into the center cage and gleefully toss whatever he found there at his astonished visitors.

Other animals in the zoo had their share of fun, too. Once WPA worker Josep Pfeffer was hoisting materials to the roof with a rope when the rope became entangled with the bars of the leopard cage. The leopard pulled the rope into the cage with his paws and held on tightly with his teeth and claws. Finally succeeding in untying the rope, Pfeffer found himself holding on tightly as, suddenly let loose, the rope sent him flying. Thrown by a leopard.

Lindy the polar bear, who had come with the Longfellow Gardens stock, would take his bowling ball and, sinking to the bottom of the moat, simply disappear under the water. After giving the folks time to worry about him and call the keepers, he'd nonchalantly rise to the surface and float on his back, the bowling ball resting on his stomach.

Anyone who came to St. Paul and was associated with animals would contact the zookeepers, who shared their interests.

Except one. And he originated here. In order to advertise one of the animal shows, the newspapers needed a provocative picture. Someone persuaded a man they met at the zoo to put on a sarong skirt and a skullcap my Mother sewed up, don sandals, wrap himself in a woolen Indian blanket and huddle in the basement beside a hot furnace. This was our "Malayan" wild animal captor enduring a Minnesota winter. He made a greater hit than anyone else connected with the show, kept an aloof silence and had absolutely no interest whatever in animals, wild or otherwise. He had no interest in us, either, when he sat at the dinner table in his "native" getup. He'd been putting on such a good act that he half believed in it himself.

There were other visitors. Several dog teams stopped for overnight lodging. We children happily anticipated the promised rides behind the sled dogs. We were cautioned that the dogs were not pets, and this put us even more in awe of them as we admired their strength and dignity.

When Eddie Barbeau and his wife came down from Alaska, they gave Dad a fur parka, mukluks and a massive dog they swore was half wolf. Dad dressed every morning that winter in his parka and mukluks, put the heavy chain and collar on the dog, took one end of the chain in his fur mittened hands and went off to the zoo, the dog running a good six feet ahead of him as Dad leaned backwards at a 75 degree angle and strained at the leash.

One night, over Mother's objections, Dad attached the dog's chain to the dining room radiator. Mother was scared to death of "that wolf" who bared his teeth and give her his gray-eyed steely look whenever she came near him. In fact, he tolerated no one but Dad. That evening, he didn't want to be tied to the radiator so he gave a tremendous lunge and tore it right out of the wall, breaking the water pipes. That did it, as far as Mother was concerned. The dog was banished to the zoo.

Mother had infinite patience, but she had her limitations. In those days, the zoo didn't have a veterinarian, so Mother got all the baby animals who needed specialized care. We often couldn't have an oven supper because the oven was cradling a basket with baby horned owls or a sick Rhesus monkey or a tiny jungle cat. Some



*Friends of the family and entertainers at the Minnesota State Fair's animal shows in 1934. Left to right are Captain Gilfoil, Emmanuel King, Jr., McMahon, Emmanuel King, Sr., and Mrs. Gilfoil.*

of her most troublesome patients were the darling white baby owls who had to be fed with a toothpick every four hours. Mother was a nurse and didn't mind sharing her skills, but sometimes she was irked at not being able to use her oven.

The babies she didn't relish, however, were the little lions Dad brought home one Christmas. They were too big for the oven, so Mother put them out in the garage. After midnight on New Year's Eve, Dad took their party guests out to see the "kittens," who by this time were feeling perky. The guests told everyone about the "man-eating lions" Dad had in his garage and our yard was immediately off limits to all the neighborhood children until spring. Their mothers wouldn't listen when we told them the lions had gone back to the zoo.

But it was the monkeys Dad kept bringing home that Mother resented the most. We'd spy Dad coming down the street and call out, "Here comes Dad with a monkey on his shoulder." He would trot jauntily up to the house, the monkey clinging to his hair and excitedly surveying the gathering neighborhood children. He never seemed to notice the tight lipped woman at the door and the busy children hastily spreading newspapers all over the floors inside. Ex-

In those days, the zoo didn't have a veterinarian, so Mother got all the baby animals who needed specialized care.



cited monkeys lose control and make messes. Dad never cared about that, it didn't bother him a bit, but Mother it bothered a lot.

Some of Dad's creatures were birds. I remember Blackie the Crow. He had a broken wing and spent considerable time at our house. Mother would feed him his breakfast, then call us children. I can still hear her exasperated tone of voice: "Margaret, get up!" After Blackie went back to the zoo, Mother and I visited him one day. At the sound of Mother's voice, he said as plain as day in an exasperated tone, "Margaret, get up!"

On the other hand, Dad had a parrot that never said a word and as a consequence, was traded for a de-scented skunk the public found more interesting. It was a standing joke to tease visitors with him. He was

really a friendly critter, but no one wanted to get close enough to find that out. They thought Dad was a brave man to make friends with a skunk.

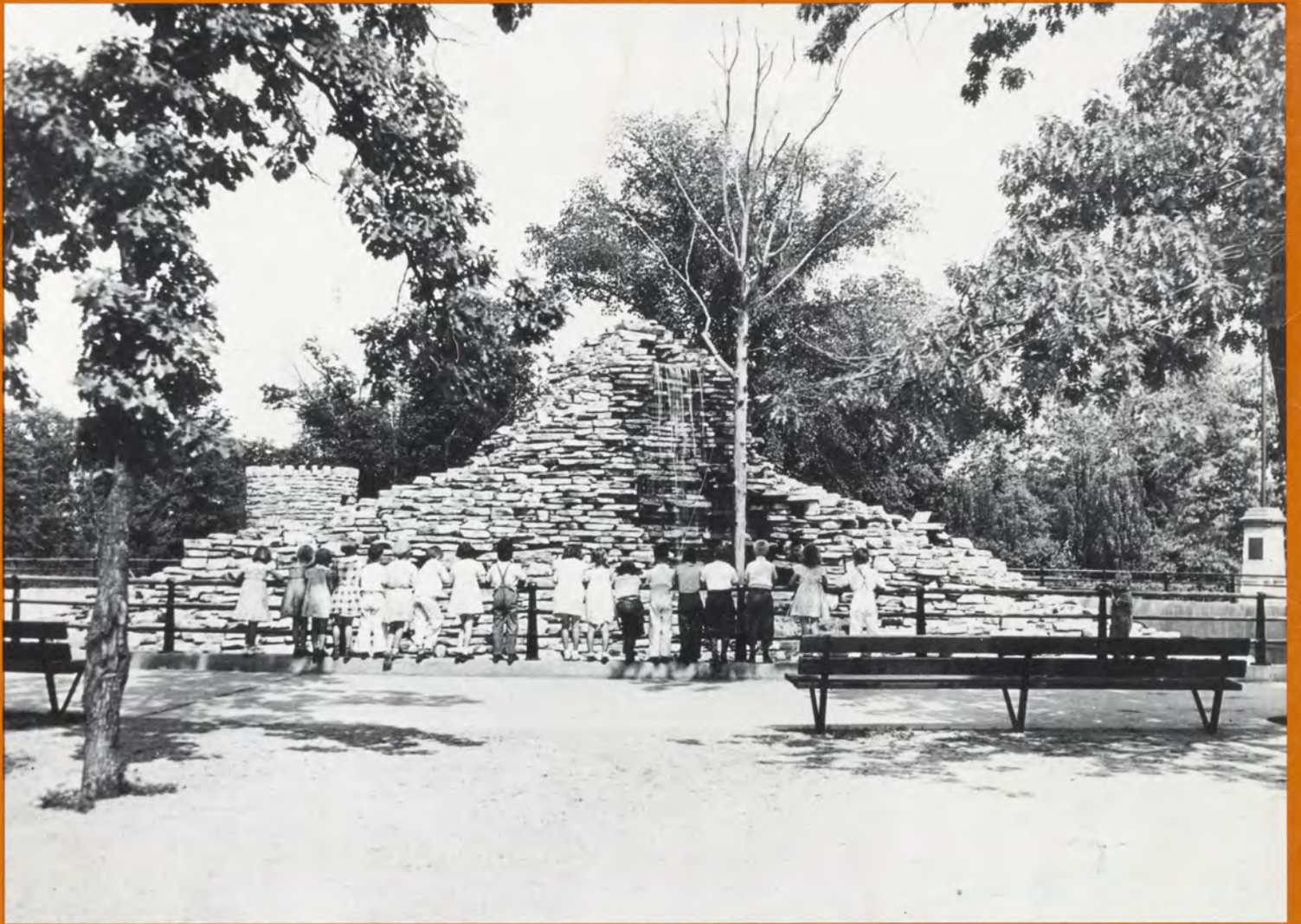
One Christmas, Herb Kringle dressed up as his erstwhile relative, Kris. He made quite a hit with the children and said he had the time of his life tramping around the perimeter of the pen with the reindeer, buffalo, elk, Scotch cattle and other large animals. This was a wonderful public relations stunt until the cattle gave him the bum's rush. Some of his red suit remained behind on their horns when he went over the fence. Fortunately, there were no children about to be disillusioned, but the zoo personnel nearly choked laughing.

Before Como Zoo had a zoohouse, the animals that couldn't take the Minnesota winter were kept in the back of the Como Conservatory, a cozy, albeit smelly, and different world from the summer zoo cages. There was more of an attachment between the caretakers, animals, greenhouse folks, park police who stopped by occasionally and drop-in visitors. It was like an extended family. Mother often went down there and, if she wasn't wary, came away with bloody ankles. Blackie, who was allowed the run of the place, would dart out from under a cage, give Mother's legs a quick peck, and disappear into one of the cages. He didn't do it to anybody else, so Mother took it as a compliment that Blackie recognized her. As Dad said, "You really can't expect much more of a crow."

The only animals Dad wouldn't let us near were the bears. Even though the bear cubs look endearing, he said, you could never trust a bear. He was adamant, so we hardly even looked at a bear.

All in all, Dad's zoo years were good for us all and brought us many friends, animal and human. But about those "sky pilots": They were visitors from San Diego who spent the evening telling us about their wonderful zoo. We returned the favor, telling them about Como Zoo from an insider's point of view. It was an evening to remember and it added several colorful pages to Dad's growing scrapbook of life.

*Margaret Manship grew up in the Como neighborhood of St. Paul. She wrote this article originally for a COMPAS program.*



Visitors lining the railing at Monkey Island, the Como Zoo's enduringly popular attraction. This photograph was taken around 1940. See the article on *Growing Up in St. Paul*, beginning on page 16.

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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