

The Manchester Zoo and the Flood of 1936

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Ice-filled Piscataquog River rushes over Second Street Bridge, 1936 – The ice floe within the raging Piscataquog River threatens all in its path including the Manchester Zoo on Bass Island. The animal cages and exhibit structures can be seen in the distant background behind the Herman E. Netsch Blacksmithing shop at 344 Second Street. Photo courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association.

In March of 1936, heavy snow, followed by sudden warming rains, set in motion a devastating flood like no other in the city's history as the angry waters of the Merrimack and Piscataquog Rivers swept through neighborhoods along their banks, isolating friends and family members from those on higher ground. While thousands of people were able to flee their homes to safety, hundreds of other residents on Bass Island were not so fortunate. These residents, the main attractions of the tiny, yet magnificent Manchester Zoo which included lions, tigers, monkeys, giraffes, and exotic birds, all perished in the frigid flood waters and ice floe that ripped across the defenseless three-acre island.

The Manchester Zoo, the endeavor of longtime Manchester resident Leandre Charbonneau, was located at 310 Second Street and opened to the public on July 8, 1933. The zoo was managed by Henry Baillergeron, who could be found roaming the grounds with a monkey perched on his shoulder as he monitored the day-to-day activities. The zoo boasted one of the largest collections of wild and domestic animals in the region enjoyed by both young and old. A large ring located at the center of the zoo campus

provided space for trainer, V.H. Walker and his assistant, Boyd Arquette, to train the wild animals for performances. Adults paid just 20 cents and children 10 cents for admission to the city's newest attraction.

According to Francis Gros Louis, a frequent visitor of the small zoo and a nephew of Mr. Baillergeron, there were 386 different species on site that traveled straight from the wilds of Africa and India to Bass Island for training and display. Mr. Louis, who now resides in Leesburg, Virginia, recalls how the zoo had a profound effect on him as a child and many others, providing hours of escape and wonderment as they gazed upon these exotic species and their feats. Of greater effect, however, was the catastrophic final act which came to a heartbreaking conclusion on March 21, 1936.

As the flood waters of both the Piscataquog and Merrimack Rivers descended upon Manchester on March 19th, thousands of terrified local residents along the banks fled their homes with the assistance of the National Guard, Manchester Police and Fire Departments and several organizations across the city including the American Red Cross, American Legion, and Boy Scouts. Animal trainers Walker and Arquette, braved the punishing currents, risking their own lives, to save the caged animals. Over a series of several hours, they hoisted animals including bears and leopards to the tops of their cages and out of the icy water. Before long the trainers themselves became trapped on top of one zoo building, clinging precariously to the roof as large ice floe began to rip the structures from their foundations and downstream to the Merrimack.

In an interview with The Leader, a local Manchester newspaper at the time, Mr. Walker stated that he and his pal [Arquette] worked all night in a desperate effort to save the lives of the animals and in doing so found themselves imprisoned by the flood for four and a half hours. As they watched building after building give way under the stress they figured it was only a matter of time until they would go careening down the river atop the building. Inspectors Walter Suosso and Joseph Pouliot of the Manchester Police Department made several unsuccessful attempts to rescue the two, barely escaping with their own lives. Ultimately, two local heroes, Jules Chapdelaine and Arthur Carreau of

50 Cleveland Street, navigated the vicious torrent by boat, saving both the trainer and his assistant. The remaining zoo denizens all tragically perished in their watery graves, except a six year old, 300 pound black bear named Chubby. He was found floating in the water on a chunk of ice and had to be persuaded by Walker to swim behind a row boat, up an exterior fire escape and into a second floor window of the former Sibulkin Shoe Factory at 317 Second Street.

Meanwhile, the Merrimack River rose to unprecedented heights, rising 17.1 feet over the Amoskeag Dam at the peak of this deluge. Houses along the banks and bridges spanning the waterway were pummeled with ice and debris. Large sections of the Suncook Railroad Bridge crashed into the Amoskeag Bridge while enormous 55,000 gallon oil tanks, ripped from their moorings on the island below the dam, slammed into the Granite Street Bridge.



Granite Street Bridge During 1936 Flood – Tensions would rise along with the flood waters of the mighty Merrimack River as both oil tanks from the island below the Amoskeag Dam slam into the Granite Street Bridge. The platforms for the oil tanks can still be seen today from I-293 amidst the overgrowth of the island. Photograph courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association.

According to a report from the United States Department of the Interior entitled The Floods of March 1936, despite the estimated 500,000 sand bags used to reinforce the Amoskeag Dam (which remained mostly unscathed), the Amoskeag Mills were severely damaged due to a peculiarity of the river channel which forced the flood to crest the dam three feet higher on the left side than the right. A monument in one of the mills marked

the peak stages of floods since 1895; the crest of the 1936 flood was 13.5 feet higher than any flood previously recorded. Also at the flood peak, from 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. on March 20th, more than 64 million gallons of water per minute poured over the dam. By comparison, this would be twice the average flow that rushes over the mighty Niagara Falls today.

Four of the seven bridges across the Merrimack were lost downstream in three days. This severed the city in half, temporarily separating friends and family on one side of the river from the other. One month later, on April 21st, it would take funding commitments from the Federal Government of \$347,515 and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen for another \$229,185 just to replace the McGregor Bridge.

Months passed before order was restored in Manchester. Over 1,500 residents were left homeless during the March floods, property damage along both rivers reached an estimated \$1,800,000, and many family homesteads and cherished businesses, such as the Manchester Zoo, were lost forever. Though not the first zoo in the city – that distinction belongs to the Stark Zoo located at the corner of South Main and Milford



Photo courtesy of Richard Duckoff

Streets in the late 1800's and believed to be one of the first zoos in the State of New Hampshire – Charbonneau's exotic collection was certainly a painful subplot in one of New Hampshire's worst natural disasters and the last zoo to ever open its gates in the Queen City.