

Preface

In 1925 when he was 39, William Mann accepted the directorship of the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. At that time the zoo possessed "1,619 animals, representing 517 species." Mann's Ph.D. from Harvard, his former employment with the federal government as an entomologist, and his animal collecting trips around the world suggested that he would do a good job of managing and expanding this collection.¹ Although the National Zoo was among the nation's most prestigious zoos, it was not particularly well-funded, and from the start Mann's ambitious plans were curtailed by the reality that he would have to run the zoo on a very small budget, one that would not allow him to purchase, say, a gorilla. By the late 1920s, public zoos across the nation faced reduced operational budgets, and many desperately needed more than just maintenance. They required new exhibits and buildings. The National Zoo was no different, and it struggled to get adequate funding from the District of Columbia, which had other, perhaps more pressing, services to support. Mann did secure a special Congressional appropriation for the construction of a new reptile house before the stock market crash of 1929, but his zoo needed additional capital improvements. Mann dreamed of building new, barless animal enclosures, but after the District had appropriated funds for the police, fire department, and schools, he found there was never "enough money for the zoo."² Ironically, for Mann and nearly every other zoo in the country, the Great Depression proved to be a savior.

Thanks to a series of federal work relief programs initiated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt — the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Civil Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the Public Works Administration — the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., actually expanded during the 1930s. With funding from these agencies, Mann was

able to add an elephant house, a new wing to the bird house, a small mammals house, a zoo restaurant, and assorted shops and garages. Relief artists ensured that these structures were not just functional, but also beautifully adorned. Mann called each of the new buildings "the finest of its kind (I think) anywhere." Construction at the zoo was essentially ongoing until 1941. Lucile Mann, his wife, and an unpaid employee of the zoo, recalled that "the only time Bill really got a lot of money was during the [Great] Depression." The money kept Mann so busy overseeing construction and planning the next phases, that not until 1937 did he find the time to venture out on a collecting expedition to populate the new spaces.³

William Mann's experience at the National Zoo paralleled that of other zoo directors around the country in many, although not all, of its details. Like other zoo directors, Mann joined the zoo world during the roaring twenties, a decade in which scores of new zoos were established across the United States. There was a popular enthusiasm for zoos, and on paper it appeared that post-war America was becoming zoo rich. In reality, local governments found it difficult to support more than modest menageries, small collections of animals housed in temporary or inadequate cages. Zoo directors around the nation hoped and pleaded for money to expand their facilities and improve the welfare of the animals in their care, often without success. For them, as for Mann, the Great Depression and the arrival of New Deal work relief programs provided the opportunity to go on a building spree and, at a deeper level, to expand the public mission of zoos.

The fact of New Deal construction has been mentioned in passing by various students of America's zoos, and some single-zoo histories have included chapters on the era, but there has been no scholarly work devoted solely to studying how the American zoo community was transformed during the Great Depression.⁴ Moreover, the stories of zoo professionals from this era have been obscured by a literature that tends to "dismiss [them] and their achievements as irrelevant" to the modern zoo's preoccupation with conservation and animal welfare.⁵ This book seeks to fill that gap by considering a range of questions about the place of zoos in American culture and politics during the 1920s and 1930s. How, exactly, did zoo proponents convince local politicians and federal bureaucrats to direct relief money toward zoos? How did they defend such appropriations from critics? What did they do about animals they could no longer afford to feed? How did they get new animals when others died? How did the public view and use zoos? What kind of people ran zoos, and how was their profession affected by the Depression? What happened to zoos and their animals when America entered World War II and the New Deal programs came to an end? Did the New Deal leave a lasting mark on America's zoo landscape, or was its influence temporary? In considering

these questions, we explore the nexus of culture, history, and politics of zoos across the country during this period.

We begin with the story of physical construction undertaken during the Depression. The vast majority of American zoos were public institutions funded by local government. Local parks departments typically ran city zoos, devoting a portion of the parks budget to their upkeep. Despite the ambitious dreams of their boosters, most city zoos were little more than collections of animals set in the middle of wide-open parks. Only a few elite institutions such as the Bronx Zoo, the Philadelphia Zoo, and the St. Louis Zoo had large, master-planned grounds with substantial permanent exhibits, but even some of these were in need of repair or under construction. Other major cities such as San Francisco and New Orleans had only modest zoos. After the election of FDR, the availability of relief labor through New Deal programs transformed the zoo landscape. Cash-starved communities turned to the federal government to either build new zoos, fix failing infrastructure, or complete projects started in the 1920s. Nearly every zoo in the United States took advantage of New Deal relief labor programs, and at least a score of entirely new zoos were constructed. It is no exaggeration to say that the 1930s were a golden age of zoo construction.

The physical transformation came during a period in which the zoo profession was itself changing. Chapter Two examines the professionalization of zoo directors and employees. Under the leadership of a few directors, a national zoo association was formed in 1924, and its members — many young and college educated — worked to promote a scientific, educational, and conservation mission for all zoos. This mission was already deeply established at a few elite institutions such as the Bronx Zoo, but the New Deal helped spread this agenda across the nation as new zoo directors made creative use of New Deal resources to build research laboratories, hire educators, and promote conservation messages. Guided by their national association, zoo directors worked to get local civil service boards to classify zoo employees differently from other city workers, giving them a professional status to match their specialized skills. To fill their new zoos, some directors tapped into a network of wealthy Americans who owned large yachts and could take curators on free collecting trips around the world and write off the trip as a scientific expedition for tax purposes. Even in the absence of such elite connections, zoos relied on an ever-growing trade network made possible by the development of a national community. The increasingly elite zoo professionals, however, did not lose touch with the public.

It is easy to imagine that zoos would receive very little public support during an economic depression. Why, in the context of massive unemployment and pressing social needs, should taxpayer money be spent on zoos and

their animals? Indeed, vague reports that zoo animals were killed and eaten by starving citizens have made their way into some accounts of the Depression's horrible effects.⁶ In Chapter Three we unpack the counterintuitive fact that public and political support for zoos was actually quite high. True, angry citizens did write to local newspapers questioning the wisdom of spending money on animals rather than on destitute humans. Others wanted to know why federal or local money was appropriated for zoos rather than for other cultural institutions such as libraries or art museums. But, consistently, politicians backed zoo projects on the grounds that zoos provided wholesome recreational and educational opportunities for average Americans dispirited by the Depression. Although zoos might have been run by an increasingly elite group of professionals, their appeal crossed all class lines. Politicians, eager to cater to the "everyman," found it easy to champion zoos. Civic pride and self-interest played a role too, as city boosters argued that a good zoo would attract tourists and their dollars. And, since federal relief projects employed local citizens, zoo improvements put people to work. Some proponents even used the fear of idle unemployed to argue that zoos could prevent crime by getting people off the streets. Only the cranks and Scrooges, it seemed, wanted to deny the people their right to a bit of free relaxation and entertainment.

Crowds flocked to zoos in record numbers, and among their most popular exhibits were the Reptile Houses. These "houses of horror" — as newspapers like to sensationalize them — appeared in many city zoos, thanks to New Deal funding, and they perfectly satisfied the general public as well as the growing ranks of herpetologists on zoo staffs. A fair number of zoo directors and curators, including the famous Marlin Perkins, had collected snakes as youngsters and specialized in herpetological studies. Their training, along with the fact that snakes were relatively inexpensive to keep, led them to develop impressive reptile collections. A number of reptile curators became national authorities on snakes, writing for both specialists and the general public, and providing a steady flow of snake stories to newspapers. In addition to publishing scientific information about reptiles, these curators worked to protect snakes from wanton human destruction and people from snakebites. Prior to the 1920s, there was no effective treatment for venomous snakebites in America, so herpetologists engaged in a public health campaign to educate Americans about how to identify and avoid venomous snakes. They also joined forces with a Brazilian scientist, university professors, a pharmaceutical company, and military personnel to develop a national antivenin network. Reptile houses and their curators played key roles in this network both by supplying raw venom and also by distributing antivenin to snake bite victims.

In a period of significant economic distress for humans, the welfare of captive exotic animals was defended and improved by zoo directors, as we

explore in Chapter Five. New and bigger exhibits funded by the New Deal enabled animals to live in safer and healthier spaces. "Animal welfare," however, meant something different in the 1930s than it does to today's animal rights activists. At a fundamental level, an adequate diet was a measure of welfare, so directors protected their animals from the ravages of budget cuts by planting gardens, acquiring surplus produce from local farmers and markets, and running on-site slaughter houses to process horses and other animals donated by or bought from local humane societies. Directors also spent a lot of time defending zoo animals from being poisoned, taunted, and even shot by ignorant or malicious visitors. They joined forces with humane societies to lobby local politicians for physical improvements. In short, the New Deal dramatically improved the lives of exotic animals in zoos around the United States.

In our final chapter, we explore the end of the New Deal and its legacy for America's zoos. The United States' entry in World War II curtailed FDR's work relief programs, temporarily ended collecting expeditions abroad, and imposed a new set of hardships. The Manns first felt the gathering war's effects on their 1940 collecting trip to Liberia, which was complicated by Germany's aggression in Europe; for a while, they were not sure they would be able to return to the United States. When they returned, New Deal building programs were shut down, and many animal keepers joined the military. At the National Zoo, a new veterinarian was drafted, and even Mann spent three months in the South Pacific as a "technical observer" for the quartermaster corps.⁷ Attendance dropped off too as gasoline rationing limited Americans' recreational driving.⁸ These and similar effects were felt at zoos across the nation. Although the Depression ended and the war was soon won, the 1940s were not easy on zoos. Even new zoos wore out quickly, and few local governments could afford to maintain them properly; thus, by the war's end, many exhibits were a decade old and beginning to need repairs. Moreover, changing standards of animal welfare meant that some of the most "modern" exhibits of the 1930s were judged to be wholly inadequate only a few decades later. Zoo budgets stagnated or declined, and by the time of Mann's retirement in 1958, even the National Zoo was beginning to explore non-governmental sources of support. By the 1970s, a fair number of zoos were on the brink of closure. This time, however, no federal program emerged to save them. Instead, a new era of private-public partnerships generated the capital needed to restore and expand the New Deal zoos. Today, the legacy of the New Deal is still evident — in lovingly restored and remodeled buildings, in art, and in the leadership of zoo professionals whose careers were made possible by a massive government investment during a single decade so long ago.

We examine this period largely through archival material drawn from

across the United States. We do not pretend to offer a comprehensive analysis of *every* zoo affected by the New Deal; this is not a quantitative study.⁹ Moreover, we have given little space to some of the zoos (e.g., Toledo, Detroit, or Chicago's Brookfield) whose New Deal history has been covered in other books. Instead, we have tried to focus on zoos whose experiences speak well to the patterns of change felt across America during this time. Our zoos represent the geographic diversity of zoos affected by the New Deal, as well as the diversity of local political conditions. Our evidence comes from archival collections at the Smithsonian, the University of New Orleans, the New Orleans Public Library, the New York Public Library, the New York Park Parks Department Library, the New York City Municipal Archives, the Staten Island Zoo Archives, the Dallas Municipal Archives, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of St. Louis (Missouri), the Seattle Municipal Archives, the Woodland Park Zoo Archives, and other locations. We also use newspaper accounts, memoirs, contemporary scholarly works, and government documents. We hope that our book will contribute to conversations and further research about the role of zoos in our culture, as well as about the legacy of the New Deal.