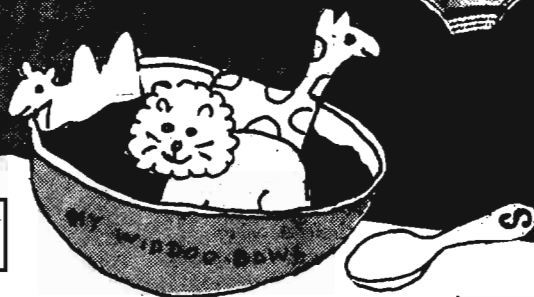I had "Animal Crackers in My Soup," but you've got

A DONKEY
IN YOUR WHAT?

The group of mayors was touring the water quality-control facility at a municipal reservoir. Their tour guide, a young engineer, repeatedly extolled the virtues of the equipment they were about to see. They entered the operations room and beheld an entire wall of gauges, dials, lights, and buzzers, all sensing the pulse of the hundreds of acres of water outside the building. Fully a dozen technicians moved purposefully back and forth among the dials and gauges, stopping to record their readings on the forms attached to their clipboards.

"Gentlemen," intoned the proud tour guide, "this facility and its equipment represent the absolute state of the art in municipal water supply quality control. From this one room, staffed by only 12 men per shift, the health of over eight million people is guarded against disease. From here we monitor numerous hazards. We scan the salinity, the coliform level, and the chlorine concentration. We check for algae growth and a host of industrial contaminants and agricultural pollutants. To put it succinctly, we're on top of it."

Following a polite round of applause and a few parting oohs and aahs, the mayors headed back to their bus for the return to their hotel, convinced to a man that they would request funds for a similar facility in their next budget.

As they walked across the dam, they saw a sight that caused their jaws to drop. There, lying on the shore of the reservoir, half in and half out of the water, was the bloated carcass of a dead donkey. It had not affected the salinity; nor had it made any contribution to the algae concentration; and so, it had gone undetected despite "the absolute state of the art" in sophisticated equipment.

The story, of course, is apocryphal, but it illustrates a lesson which, while always important, becomes increasingly so in the age of computers and staff meetings.

A host of "bugs" raise their ugly little heads when machine processing intervenes in the feedback process.

All over this agency are managers who scan performance-oriented printouts with a frequency ranging from daily to monthly. They rely heavily on the reports they review to give them what they need in order to fulfill their role. Many will not discover, until a "dead donkey" of some sort shows up in their shop, that statistics, as useful as they can be, are not meant to be the end-all. Their purpose is to indicate, hint, or suggest that a problem *might* exist. They may highlight a known problem or aid a manager in distinguishing between a symptom and an underlying cause. At that point the computerized report has done as much as it can ever do.

The other pitfall comes about when an individual rises within an organization to the level at which the role is to manage *managers* (as opposed to a first-line supervisor, who manages the people who actually perform the tasks). Meeting with subordinates then becomes the primary mechanism through which the manager acquires data on the system for which he is responsible.

Heaven help the manager whose knowledge of his organization is limited to that provided in staff meetings by subordinates who, in turn, rely too heavily on statistics. That constitutes double jeopardy.

The cure for "managerial myopia" is prevention. For every half-hour spent reviewing statistics, a like period should be devoted to visiting part or all of your empire. It prevents "dead donkeys" in your reservoir.