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As a Chicago youth, he enjoyed watching Bullwinkle J. Moose, Rocky the Flying Squirrel, Cookie Monster and other cartoon icons on television.

But for years, Mark Wagner also saw those characters as giant, helium-filled balloons in holiday parades throughout the year.

“I grew up with all of them. Happy times,” said Wagner of Oak Park.

For the second year, Wagner will be a balloon handler in the 77th annual Thanksgiving Day Parade on Chicago’s State Street.

In 2009, Wagner walked Underdog -- Shoeshine Boy’s alter-ego -- between downtown skyscrapers and waving crowds.

Stepping off around Congress Parkway at 8 a.m., the parade features several balloon characters that volunteers such as Wagner anchor by holding onto them with ropes. About 400,000 people are expected to watch the parade.

He said about 30 handlers are assigned to each of the polyurethane personalities; this year they include Curious George, Madeline, Fred Flintstone and Yogi Bear.

“It’s great to see all the kids bundled up along the parade route, a great traditional family event,” he said.

“These balloons are many stories high, and they take a lot of teamwork to control,” said Wagner, an account executive for a trade show company.

“For parade-watchers, an interesting maneuver to witness, Wagner said, was guiding the floating figures underneath el tracks at Van Buren.

PHOTO GALLERY

- Parading smiles for 77 years

“The guys in the back of the balloon pull down on their ropes so it goes completely horizontal to the street,” he said.

“It’s quite a sight.”

On Saturday, Wagner will be rehearsing with other handlers on the front lawn of the Museum of Science & Industry in Chicago.

And what if high November winds gust through downtown Chicago, blowing the mini-blimps asunder?

“That’s a good question. I don’t know what we’d do. It’s never happened,” Wagner said.

More than 100 parade units will march in the festive three-hour parade.

Actress and Chicagoo Jennifer Beals is the grand marshal of the parade, which includes a performance of the Joffrey Ballet.

The Proviso East High School band from Maywood also will perform.

Chicago’s popular parade was called the Christmas Caravan in the 1930s when people’s spirits needed a boost during the Great Depression.