

# Cats

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THE TRADITIONS OF THE RUSSIAN BLUE

## LEST WE FORGET

AMONG PRIMITIVE peoples with little or nothing in the way of a written language the history of the tribes was passed down through constant repetition around the campfires or in traditional songs and stories. In this way what was actually a reasonably factual recital of actual events was transmuted into legend and fairytales so that in later generations the stories were dismissed as interesting but apocryphal. The basic truths which might have been winnowed out by careful study were often overlooked, yet they lay there waiting to be rediscovered. Quite often such facts can hold great significance for later generations.

### THE FOUNDATIONS OF FOLKLORE

Let me give a "for instance" of what I mean. I well remember a story told to a small group in informal circumstances by a minister justly famed in his own church and elsewhere as an orator and a scholar. He was raised in a devout home and destined for the ministry from his early days. Following the pattern of least resistance he became a minister as a matter of course although his own true interests lay in other fields. There were grave doubts in his mind as to the validity of the Bible stories on which he had been raised. Being of a scientific and skeptical turn of mind he examined these stories with a critical eye from the point of view of their inherent credibility and probability, found them wanting and, in time, discovered that he had completely lost his faith so that his conscience forced him out of any active work in his church. He then turned to teaching and archeology which had always interested him. Opportunities

arose for him to take part in some of the outstanding archeological research then going on in major digs in Egypt. There he saw with his own eyes good concrete evidence that the stories of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt which he had always dismissed as myths might have been based on actual events. It was found that the brickwork in areas scholars believed to be the ones referred to in the Bible were divided into strata composed of wholly different materials and with marked divergency in structural soundness.

The topmost layers were flimsy and crumbling and gave evidence of having been built of "bricks made without straw." As the digging progressed it was found that each succeeding layer uncovered was composed of bricks of increasingly better quality. This, to him, gave enough verification of the stories he had dismissed as pure folklore telling us of the ever-strengthening oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians until finally they had been forced to scrounge their own materials as well as make and lay the bricks to build the walls. As summer followed summer he found more and more evidence that, while the stories might have altered with time and transmission by word of mouth from one generation to another, they had been based on at least a nugget of truth, truth which could not be and should not be ignored. These rediscoveries of a past which had been buried for thousands of years so altered his thinking that it changed the whole course of his life and gave it meaning in his own eyes.

### THE FANCY'S ORAL BACKGROUND

The past is never truly dead and always has an impact on the present,

in the cat fancy as elsewhere. Knowledge and lore of the cat was passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth and each new generation treasured the knowledge, considered it a trust, added to it from its own experiences and then passed it on to the newcomers of the fancy in an unbroken chain. Because of this tendency many of the standards were all too sketchy. There were facts so completely accepted in the minds of all the active breeders that the necessity for preserving them by stating them in print spelled out in minute detail as guideposts for the future never occurred to these people. If one mentioned that a certain characteristic of a breed was not a part of the written standard, the answer was apt to be "Why, *everyone* knows that!" Obviously "everyone" was not born with this knowledge, some of it quite esoteric, and, lacking a place to learn it, the chain was sometimes broken unintentionally. Sometimes the experienced breeder considered some relevant fact to be so basic in nature that it never entered his mind that a younger person might not be aware of it and so he failed to mention it. One of the afflictions with which serious cat-breeders have always had to cope has been a lack of proper educational and authoritative literature on the subject. Nowhere were they afforded opportunity to study in depth the history and progress of the various breeds, the mistakes which had been made along the way and which should be avoided by others coming after, the goal toward which the pioneers in each breed were working, all the multitudinous details and knowledge which were unavailable unless one were so lucky as to interest a knowledgeable oldtimer enough to have him open up and talk freely. Even then only the most discerning of the novices listened with sufficient care to learn the lessons well and so they often passed on half-truths and downright falsities as fact. The early cat fancy had much in common with primitive tribes and, as with them, much useful knowledge and fact little by little was forgotten or overlaid with myth and legend and foolish old wives' tales which distorted the basic truths still there to be gleaned by a dedicated investigator.

Up until the very recent past the cat fancy was a rather leisurely activity. There was time and to spare for learning, time enough to pass on the secrets known to the oldster who was reluctant to part with them until he was ready to retire and there was no further advantage to him in keeping this knowledge to himself. The shows were quiet and comfortable, as much social event as competition, with leisure

aplenty for reminiscing about the old days and what had been learned years ago from knowledgeable oldtimers of a still older era. Now the pace has quickened, the competition is keener, the dedication to the cat and the fancy for their own sake rather than personal aggrandizement is falling by the wayside, usurped by the modern philosophy of "me first" and "Devil take the hindmost." Yes, there was intense rivalry in the old days too, but it was in its way merely a formality, the part of the "game" which gave it added interest as a small stake on the table makes a poker game more interesting. People took great delight in keeping their "secrets" of breeding, grooming and history from their own friendly rivals, yet with great good nature they did disclose all this knowledge to the promising newcomer. The discerning novices were quick to recognize how valuable this help was and they drank it in, grateful for the generosity with which it was made available to them. These were, in essence, the children of the old tribes around the campfires learning by rote from the lips of their elders the wisdom of the tribe.

Today we have all been made uncomfortably aware that no one over thirty knows anything or is to be trusted. Only the young have any wisdom and when their elders, out of their vast store of experience gained through many painful and fruitful years, try to help them, they are dismissed pityingly as "hasbeens." It is small wonder that the pipeline of knowledge from

by Jane S. Martinke

generation to generation has become clogged and broken and no longer flows freely as it once did. The result is that valuable and useful information is being forgotten and may well pass from the scene, perhaps to be rediscovered years from now, perhaps to be lost forever.

#### LOSING OUR HERITAGE

Conceivably some of this old history and folklore is no longer relevant in today's fancy and is not worth the space it would take to record it. It may be that it is now only quaint and outdated, but it served people well in its day and might again. Remember the desperate searches going on in other fields. Pharmaceutical researchers are working their way through the folk remedies of the primitive peoples of the world in an effort to regain for the benefit of mankind some of that age-old wisdom passed down from father to son and mother to daughter before the knowledge is lost to us forever. Language

specialists are taking their tape recorders into the fastnesses of isolated mountain areas of this country where Elizabethan and Georgian English has been preserved in its original form to this day, but which will not be able to survive much longer as communication of the modern world binds us closer together. More tape recorders are being taken into Southern communities cut off from the mainstream of progress in the hope of recovering some of the old spirituals in their pure original form. Even something so recent as pure jazz is in danger of being lost in its first forms and is now being diligently sought out from the almost forgotten musicians who originated it before they leave this earth taking their music forms with them. In every field historians are at work seeking out knowledge for its own sake in the sure awareness that the past is only prologue and there may be valuable lessons to be learned from it. It seems to me that the time has come to set down on paper some of the lore, myths, old wives' tales and genuine fact as they were told to me from my childhood on. Perhaps it will help us to know where we are going if we know more about where we have been.

#### THE RUSSIAN REVISIONISTS

Part of this lengthy philosophical preamble has been occasioned by some of the things I have read and heard recently about the Russian Blue, particularly its coat, which are so completely foreign to the breed as its first admirers knew it and wanted it to be that we might well be discussing a different cat entirely. Specifically, my attention has been caught by references to the "double coat" of the Russian Blue. I find myself staring in disbelief.

I do not know what type of coat the original Russian Blue had, and obviously there will be afforded me no opportunity to see and study such a coat. However, and for what it is worth, the original Russian Blue was considered by its breeders, rightly or wrongly, to be a single-coated cat with unique characteristics which set it apart completely and, they thought, forever from any other cat. Its coat was referred to as "plush." Its resemblance to the old-fashioned textile known as plush was due, they believed, to the fact that its entire coat was one equal length, very silky and fine, dense beyond belief, and growing at right angles to the skin. Like the chinchilla—the animal, not the color—this coat was so thick and impenetrable that it was difficult to separate it enough to see the skin under it and each hair was supported by the surrounding hairs to stand upright. When the fingers were run through it, the marks left appeared

dark and it did not spring back into place. All of you have seen the same effect when fingers are run through the pile of certain types of carpet. It is not possible to achieve this precise effect with the coat of any other breed.

Surprise and dissatisfaction are often expressed today by Russian Blue breeders over the standards which state that the lighter and more lavender shades of blue are preferred, for they feel that this does not allow for sufficient contrast between the ground color and the silver tipping which is a feature of this breed. They would understand this better if they were more fully aware of the original type of Russian Blue. Because the coat was so thick that it stood erect, with each hair the same length and crowded against the next one, these cats gave the appearance of being a pale silvery or lavender blue for *only* the solid silver tipping on every hair (not merely guard hairs, since this was felt to be a single-coated cat) could be seen normally. Only when the fur was disturbed could the darker color underlying the tipping be seen. Therefore, in the eyes of the people of that day a cat which was not a pale shade of blue simply did not have the requisite amount of tipping and so was lacking an essential characteristic of the breed. This belief found its way into the standard, but without any explanation for its being there.

Unfortunately in other countries other breeds were crossed with the Russian Blue—blue Domestic Shorthair and Siamese primarily. Obviously this could not be anything but detrimental to the unique coat of the true Russian Blue. Then, in an effort to regain the plushness which had been lost, in some quarters Chartreuse (yes, there is such a breed and has been for several centuries as a matter of recorded fact) was bred into the line. The true single plush coat with its fantastic density became a rarity and, as has always been the way of the cat fancy, standards began to alter little by little to fit the cats it was easier to breed. Because of all the different outcrosses and the strongly different opinions of the breeders as to what constitutes a good Russian Blue, it was not uncommon, at one time, if a class of twelve was presented in a showing, to have them look like at least six to eight different breeds and it was hard to imagine that these cats were, presumably, being bred to a common standard. Many of them could have been judged as realistically in the Domestic Shorthair classes as in their own.

#### THE RETURN TO TRADITION

To the eternal credit of the Russian

(Continued on page 46)

**SIAMESE—Starts page 44**

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**TRADITION** Starts page 10

Blue breeders of today, they are now making a determined effort to work together toward a common goal and in a very short space of time the results of this dedicated work are becoming apparent in the show ring. Now when a Russian Blue is held up one no longer, at least in most parts of the country, has to wonder what breed it might be and consult the catalog or judge's book to be certain, and they are appearing more and more often in the top finals of the shows and with justice.

Probably in time even the original coat type could be regained by selective breeding, but only if there is knowledge of what the original type of coat actually was. This knowledge has almost been lost even now and in a few more years could be gone forever. Whether the present breeders would feel that a return to this type of coat is either desirable or, if desirable, worth the effort it would take to achieve it, is a matter which only they can decide, but it was unique and very, very beautiful.

The old-timers, in the interest of accuracy rather than public relations, used to describe the Russian Blue as "cobra-headed." If one visualizes the head of a cobra raised ready to strike, one realizes that the simile is very apt. The top head was flat to the point of being almost concave. The ears were set well down the side of the head. The face was broad across the eyes and there was a very distinctive shape to the muzzle—that is, if a snake can be said to have a muzzle. This imagery also clearly depicts the unbroken graceful sweep of the line in profile from the tip of the nose back over the head to the shoulders. One can understand and sympathize with the reluctance of the later breeders to have their dearly loved breed compared to a snake in view of the general feelings about snakes, that much maligned creature which has a beauty of its own. The simile was eventually dropped and from then on the newcomer found himself confused about the precise head shape wanted for a good Russian Blue.

This breed, and only this breed, has extremely high shoulders with narrow blades placed so close together that, ideally, it should be almost impossible to insert one's finger between them. When the cat is sitting upright this shoulder structure creates a silhouette which is distinctively Russian Blue and very stylized in appearance. These facts were never clearly spelled out in the standards for the same old reason—"Everyone knows that." Well, maybe

they once did but they do not always know it today and the form of this cat which sets it apart and makes it so elegant could, in time, be lost completely if more searching descriptions are not spelled out, if not in the standards which are more useful if kept reasonably brief, at least somewhere in the literature to serve as a guideline for future breeders.

The old-timers felt too that the narrow oval paw was a "must" for this breed and that a round paw or one with too-thick pawpads bespoke a crossing with Domestic Shorthair. Today, perhaps of necessity, the standards call instead for the paw to be "small, slightly rounded."

There was one further characteristic of this cat which the oldsters believed was necessary in the purebred specimen of high quality which is not contained in the standards, undoubtedly for a very pragmatic reason. The entire mouth was to be dark, in the minds of these old-timers, and areas of pink were considered to be a flaw, but who wants to be forced to open a mouth sufficiently wide and for a long enough period of time to explore the entire surface area.

It is interesting that one of the old wives' tales of the so-called "Maltese" cat named this same characteristic. It is interesting to speculate that the cat once known as Maltese, which was very different from the average blue Domestic Shorthair, may actually have been traceable back to the island of Malta to whose shores it may have come from Russia, so that the Russian Blue, the Archangel Cat and the Maltese Cat may have been one and the same. It is notable that the cat believed to be "Maltese" never had a white hair, had a very dense plushy coat unlike that of the domestic cat, and brilliant green eyes.

These are some of the things I have learned about Russian Blues of the past over a lifetime by sitting at the feet of my elders and betters and listening with both ears out as though on antennas. I wish now I had listened even harder, but, alas, youth rarely has sufficient patience. I pass them on to you for what they are worth. They may have relevance. They may not. At least let us not lose sight entirely of the things our predecessors believed even if only as a matter of curiosity not for practical adaptation and application.

From time to time as the spirit moves me and as almost forgotten memories of lessons learned long ago rise to the surface of what passes these days for my mind, I will be returning to this subject in connection with other breeds. I doubt that it will be next month.

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