

THE CAT OF THE HOUSE

Part I, "Pluto" and "Plato"



*Pat Koupal and Barbara, with "Kitty"
El Cerrito cottage, 1951*

Over the years, we've shared our home with a variety of furry, four-pawed creatures. Always, cats. I don't know why we gravitated toward cats, and not dogs; probably the fact that we've always been suburbanites was the determining factor. Even though the developers of some of the tract housing we've lived had a fondness for names like "Desoto Park Estates" we quickly discovered that a 70-foot wide, 100-foot deep lot was actually *not* an "estate" and too small to comfortably share with a dog. Cats were always willing to make do with our houses and yards, and if they found our "estate" yard too confining, why, they just went right over the fence!

Since our married life has spanned more than half a century, how we regarded the household cat has changed considerably through the years. Glenn and I grew up in the era when cats had some utilitarian purpose: they kept the mice out of the grain in the barn, or out of the storeroom and were expected to earn their keep and provide most of their own dinner--vermin. A barn cat could count on getting some warm milk squirted at their mouth directly from the cow, and they were extremely proficient at getting every single drop, too. My parents probably provided a dish of milk from the refrigerator for our cats, some table scraps, and after that, the cat came up with the rest of its entrees. In our youth, no one actually went out and bought a cat (or a dog, for that matter). There were always more than could find

homes, especially if you lived on the outskirts of a city, as I did. We were the dumping ground for all the unwanted pets of Portland, Oregon.

So, when Glenn and I had been married a few months and finally had a little rented cottage to call home in El Cerrito, it wasn't long until a gray kitty showed up for adoption. A sweet little cat, she and I soon had something in common--we were both pregnant! Once our babies arrived, we had little time for each other, and besides, Glenn soon graduated from Cal and we were off to his first job some forty miles away in Livermore, Calif. It never occurred to us that the cat should come along--I think that was part of the general attitude about cats then--no need to take one along, another would soon appear on your doorstep. I think this cat simply became part of the deal for the next young student couple renting Mrs. Kitchen's little cottage, "one bedroom, bath, kitchen, living room and cat" might be how the "for rent" ad would read.



*Mark & "Pluto"
at Canoga Park home, 1956*

No cats showed up on our doorstep in Livermore, and after a couple years, we moved to Los Angeles. By now, we had two-year-old Mark, and Karen was due in a few months. We thought Mark would enjoy a kitten and answered an ad for free kittens, returning with not one, but two little black cats--one plump and one so slim, it could have passed for an Egyptian cat. Glenn dubbed them "Pluto" and "Plato" and they furnished hours of entertainment for all three of us. (Remember, we didn't have TV then). Watching two kittens grow up was a lesson in sibling rivalry. Pluto continued to look like the feline version of a football tackle while Plato stayed slim--and perhaps a bit dim. It always seemed to

be Plato who would innocently walk by the couch, unaware that his brother was crouched above him, and just waiting to drop his hefty body upon little, unsuspecting Plato. Since this game was repeated daily, you would have thought Plato would have learned to look up once in awhile, but maybe that wasn't in the game rules.

We agreed that two cats were way more fun than one--until the day that poor little Plato suddenly got very, very sick and soon died in my arms. We rushed Pluto to the vet (our attitude toward cats was already softening, you see) who said both kittens had feline distemper--usually fatal without vaccination. Pluto got his shot, and survived, growing into a handsome, glossy and still plump cat. He was a good buddy for Mark, and hardy enough to take the loving of a toddler.

Karen arrived that fall, we moved into our first home bought on the GI Bill--with nothing down, and not very much a month, and now we were just about the average American family of the early 1950's--two children, and one cat, living in the suburbs. Pluto was not expected to keep vermin out of barns or storerooms, and canned cat food was beginning to appear on the supermarket shelves. He also learned that small children were a good source of cadged food, and on the nights when liver was on the menu, it was a good idea to stay close to Barbara's chair. I hated liver, but felt all caring housewives must feed it to their families at least once a week. Still, I wasn't above slipping most of mine to the cat. A win-win situation for the two of us.

Still a mobile family, after a couple years in Los Angeles, Glenn was transferred to Phoenix. At the time, we thought it would be difficult to take Pluto with us, as we would have to find a place to rent for a few months. So we found him a new home.