

The Choate Lines

Janet Marr's recollections of a meeting with the woman who helped the Maine Coon to become the state's official cat

LIDA TARBOX CHOATE LIVES ON THE ROCKY MAINE coast, south of the popular tourist areas of Boothbay Harbor and Freeport.

Called Lida's Cattery, she does not believe in line breeding and she does not ship her cats. So, if you want one, you'd best pack your bags and head for the great State of Maine. Lida keeps a closed cattery and does not do stud service but she has placed cats in every state in the mainland USA as well as Switzerland. Her goal in breeding is to breed a full-faced cat, one that resembles the barn cats she had as a girl growing up in Biddeford Pool. In her eighties now, she is still breeding and caring for her foundation cats.

Lida told me that the Pilgrims, of whom she is a descendant, brought over their British Shorthair cats on the 'Mayflower' which became the indigenous cats of New England. Later, 'Captain Coon', a sea captain, who travelled the seaports along the Maine and New England coast, had Old Fashioned Persian Cats. These Persians bred with the British Shorthair to produce the Maine Coon cats. That is how the name Coon cats came to be, as they were referred to as 'Coon's Cats'.

Lida stated that some of these cats were bred to Angora cats but they were too fine boned to be called Maine Coons. During the Revolutionary War, many of the Loyalists who owed 'double-pawed' (polydactyl) cats moved to New Brunswick, Canada, in protest, taking their cats with them. Lida went on to state that

the double-pawed cats survived the tough Maine winters better than the smaller footed cats. The extra toes acted like a snowshoe to help them travel over the snowdrifts on their trek from house to barn.

Lida still has double-pawed cats in her cattery. When breeding double-pawed cats, one of the parents must be double-pawed. It does not increase the likelihood of getting double-pawed kittens, if both the parents are double-pawed, nor does it create a cat which is crippled.

In 1975, the same year she was named Insurance Woman of the Year, Lida lobbied successfully to have the Maine Coon cat named as the official State Cat. Today, the Maine Coon cat is the State Cat and the honey bee is the State Bug! Lida takes little credit for this achievement and is quite humble about her accomplishments. She is a native 'Mainer' or as we Mainers like to be known, 'Mainiack'. Lida is a warm and wonderful woman of the independent New England Farmer heritage.

After I read my pedigrees to her, she remembered the ancestors of my cats and still has some with her, describing them as huge cats which liked to ride on your shoulders. She also said that they had wonderful dispositions which were carried on in their kittens. They are easily taught tricks, especially the art of retrieving objects or 'Fetch'. Lida noted that Ch Captains Mate Miss Molly was an extremely beautiful animal, Podie the Coon was very large and Captain Ron Coon was double pawed.

I was fortunate to be able to buy two cats from the Choate lines. Misha Peersmans (Belgium) and I have been working these cats into our own cattery lines. They are all examples of Two-Line Crosses, since we have mixed Heidi Ho lines with the Choate line. I love it when Misha describes with as having 'good character'. My kitten buyers will attest to this.

Janet Marr acknowledges the help of Lida Choate's daughter, Glen Ellen Wroth, on the Choate Lines article.