

MAINE



Lida Jarky Choate

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COON CAT

The Maine Coon Cat

A definition from the Dell Encyclopedia of Cats by Barbara Hazen....

“Maine Coon Cat: Also called Maine Cat or Coon Cat, this is a big, solid-looking, long-furred cat whose origins are open to speculation. One story tells that the Maine Coon cats are all descendents of the cats brought over by a Captain Coon in the early days of American history.”

To qualify for a Maine Coon, it has to be like the above, and either born in the State of Maine or be able to trace its ancestry to the State of Maine .

The Maine Coon cat is the only true American cat. It is an offspring of the hardy shorthaired cat brought in by the early settlers breeding with Captain Coon's longhaired cats. The first longhaired kittens to appear in a litter of kittens were called Coon's kittens.

The story which I have written begins when Captain Coon was a cabin boy named Tom Coon before he had earned the distinction of being Captain of an English sailing vessel. His love for the longhaired cat continued over his many years of sailing the seas.

The picture on the front is the Tarbox farm home on the Pool Road , Biddeford , Maine taken about 1916. This is where I was born and spent my childhood. The Tarbox barn was where Tom Coon's mother cat and kittens found a home. The barn was constructed with hand-hewn beams and wooden pegs. To the right of the big barn doors in the same building was a tie-up. This was a room where the cows were kept when they were not in the pasture. The heat from the cattle kept this room very warm and this was a favorite place for the cats. The cows were milked in this tie-up.

In the main barn were haylofts for the storage for hay for the winter months. When I was growing up, our farm barn was a living home for the farm animals. This farm was sold in 1946, and is no longer used as farm property.

The Origin of the Maine Coon Cat

By Lida E. Choate

Papa would say to me, “so you love Coon Cats and Kittens. I do too. Do you know how the first Coon Cat and Kittens got into our barn?” Of course I said, “No, but I want to know.”

Our barn was the home of many Maine Coon Cats and Kittens. The special mother or kitten was the Money or Lucky Cat or Kitten. She would have large patches of orange and black on her back and white on her underside. Her face would be one-half deep orange and one-half black, we would call it a blaze. Her nose would be a delightful pink and her under chin and front paws would be the whitest white: The fur would flow like a judge’s ascot. Her eyes, reflecting a know-it-all expression, were like deep pools of amber.

So many times I have watched my father milking a cow sitting on the milk stool and the steady rhythmic zing of milk striking the pail with the force of a bullet. With each educated pull of the udder, his head would press against the cow’s flank, almost like a caress. Sitting directly to his left and back of the cow forming a line would be a Coon Money Cat, the mother with her half grown Coon Kittens, looking like statues watching him intently as my father milked cow after cow. Every so often with a move that was deftly made, he would aim the mild at the waiting cats faces, yes. Then they would take a few minutes for groom-up time, and sit and wait until it was their turn again. The cow would be completely milked and stripped in about five minutes. Then, papa would move to the next cow, and the cats would move with him. My father milked like a machine with no protest from the cow, and that is an art, my friend. I might add that I learned to milk a cow when I was so young that I believed I was born know how to milk a cow.

I am going to turn back many years and tell you about how the first Maine Coon cat and her kittens came to our barn. My father’s grandmother told him that her mother was Mary Haley, but everybody called her Molly, and her father was Jonathan Tarbox. Molly’s parents owned the adjoining Haley farm. The Tarbox farm and the Haley farm are both beautiful homes today. The Haley house has had many stories written about it, talks of early Indian encounters.

Jonathan and Molly walked through the fields picking mayflowers, lady slippers, and violets which grew in abundance. They would always end up their jaunts by going back to Jonathan's house. They would seek out Jonathan's father and inquire of him if there were any new kittens in the barn. If there were, his father would take Jonathan and Molly to where the kittens were, and he would explain, "now these are newborn kittens. They will not open their eyes for about ten days, they will be fully dependent on their mother for about six weeks. Do not disturb them because the mother cat will hide them from us". Jonathan and Molly agreed to keep it a secret.

At the foot of the Tarbox farm there is a body of water known as "The Pool." This is from the Saco River and the Atlantic Ocean out for six hours it leaves a vast area of calm flats, but when the tide is in The Pool is very deep. This is where Captain Richard Vines along with thirty-two men in the winter of 1616 and 1617 built a log cabin on Leighton's Point adjoining the now Haley farm, and spend the winter s an experiment to see if they could survive the severe winter. Their vessel, in which their supplies were kept, was anchored in The Pool. At this period, our adventurers had no English neighbors nearer than Jamestown , Virginia . This was four years before the landing of the Mayflower at Plymouth . There is today a monument erected just off the Pool Road in memory of their bravery. Captain Richard Vines along with others was engaged in transporting colonists to this coast.

As my father went on with his story, according to his grandmother, an American sailing vessel, the Glen Laurie, whose captain was Enoch snow from Provincetown , was heading for the Maine coast with its cargo to trade with the settlers. This ship had a young English cabin boy on it; he had shipped-on in England. His name was Tom Coon. The sailors called him Boy Coon. Besides his galley duties, he was detailed to look after the captain's cat. Now Tom Coon was trying to find a solution to what he considered a big problem. In one of the ports, which the ship had put into, it was Tom Coon's job to add more cats to the ship supply. These cats lived on the wharf. They should be rugged cats, ready to tackle and rat and win the battle. While Tom was catching these wharf cats, the sailors would be visiting the taverns. Many times Tom would be frightened when the sailors rowed back to the ship. Sometimes it would be several hours waiting until the decided to return to the shop. So, Tom would check all of the cats carefully and watch them stalk and kill

the big wharf rats, then he would try to catch the best cats. Tom Coon was waiting and watching. While sitting on an old plank, he felt a nudge. Tom looked around, and the most beautiful small, black, orange and white, long-haired cat put her head into his hand, looked up into his face, and mewed.

Tom Coon was thinking fast. He just had to have this beautiful cat. But how? Then he thought, I'll hide her in my cabin. His cabin was just big enough for his bunk with a drawer under it for his possessions. A bible his mother had given him was carefully wrapped in his well-laundered shirt along with his Sunday suit. He also had a footlocker at the foot of his bunk. Tom Coon just had to sneak this beautiful long-haired cat onto the ship and into his cabin. It would be a great risk. The cat had snuggled into his arms and was purring. So, Tom Coon caught some large ship cats, put them carefully into sacks, and buttoned his pretty cat under his coat. It was late when the sailors returned and they were too boisterous to notice. They put Tom Coon into the dory with his gunnysacks. Tom Coon got his special cat into his cabin. He carried part of his meal and anything else that he could find from the galley into his cabin for the cat. He had never been so happy since he shipped on this vessel. At night he would cradle his beautiful cat in his arms and think while he listened to her steady, melodious purr. As the days passed, he kept his secret, but he noticed that his precious cat was making a nest in his footlocker.

One morning when he got up, his cat was not curled up in her usual place on his bunk. Tom almost panicked with fear that he had lost his cat, so he first checked his footlocker. There was his beautiful cat with three wee wee baby kittens plying their tiny paws into her stomach, nursing the mother cat. Tom was overjoyed, but it complicated the situation. He had to think of something. He had never had a responsibility like this before. Tom Coon's mind was working overtime. His beautiful cat with kittens so small he could cradle one in his hand and completely enclose it... Tom put this tiny bundle of fur close to his cheek. He was living, for the moment, in ecstasy. He would dream he would someday be a ship's captain, and all his ship cats would be beautiful longhaired cats. He would go inland from the wharves and get the best cats. Many of his dreams turned out to be true. Then he would have to return to his current problem. One kitten was the most beautiful deep orange with a pink nose and white neck and bib. Then Tom Coon noticed that his kitten had extra toes on all four white feet. Upon checking the silver colored one

and the one marked just like her mommy, they all had extra toes. He didn't know if this was good or bad for the kittens, but Tom had other problems for the moment. Caring for the mother cat and keeping the kittens alive came first. Mother cat helped in every way she could. As the ship pitched and rolled, she cradled her babies close to her to form a buffer between the side of the footlocker and herself. She was so proud, and would put her paw into Tom Coon's hand to try to reassure him that things would be all right.

Tom Coon was extra careful to do everything just right in the galley to keep the cook happy, and to keep the captain's cat well fed and cared for. Still, Tom Coon had to come up with a plan. He finally decided to go directly to the captain and ask for his help. This was a great decision. He was so fearful that the captain would be angry and possibly take drastic actions toward his beautiful cat and her kittens. The time must be right. His plan must be well prepared. So, each night he would rehearse it with his beautiful mother cat and her babies. With a wee baby kitten cradled in one hand and running his fingers lovingly along the mother cat's back, he would tell her of his plan. She would open and shut her eyes as if nodding her complete approval, and with all kinds of ideas chasing around in his head he would fall asleep.

The weeks passed quickly and the kittens were now rolling over and playing with one another, still in the footlocker. They were always listening for Tom Coon to appear. He would pick each kitten up, press it to his cheek tenderly and carefully, and whisper to it, "you dear, dear little babe. I just have to get a home for you. The best home in the whole world, where you will get plenty of good, rich cow's milk, all you want to eat, and a warm place to live with someone who will love you just like I love you." The kitten tucked in his hand would look directly into his eyes seeming to say, "you will, Tom Coon, you will," and Tom Coon would say aloud, "I will, I will." My mother used to tell me, "Where there is a will, there is a way."

So Tom Coon decided that tomorrow would be the day he would go to Captain Snow with his big problem. When he awakened, he was excited and his heart was pounding. He said a prayer asking God's guidance and help. This was Sunday, and on the Glen Laurie Sunday was a special day. Captain Snow held services, which the sailors were welcome to attend.

Tom Coon sat silently in the corner until Captain Snow had finished reading from the Bible and announced, "Here endeth the services," then repeated the benediction. Tom Coon prayed for God's help and walked up to the captain. In his most mature voice he said, "Captain Snow?" Captain Snow replied, "Yes, Tom Coon?" Then Tom said, "I need your help." Captain Snow said, "I am ready to help you, what is your problem?" Then Tom Coon poured out his whole story, how he had stowed his beautiful cat in his cabin, and about her kittens born in his footlocker.

As Tom Coon talked he was so engrossed that he hardly noticed that Captain Enoch Snow, who was looking down on him, was such a giant of a man. He was about six feet three inches tall, his kind face was lined as if etched by the salt sea spray, and his brown eyes were like bottomless pools that seemed to penetrate into the very soul of mankind.

When Tom Coon had finished, Captain Enoch Snow gently laid his large hand on Tom Coon's shoulder and softly said, "it's OK, Tom Coon. You see, in a couple of weeks we will be sailing into Winter Harbor ; that is in Biddeford Pool, Maine . Maine is a new state. It used to be part of Massachusetts , but in 1820 Maine became a state. In 1639, all territory as we know Maine today was given over by a Royal charter to Sir Ferdinand Gorges. The wording of the charter reads that this land shall forever be called the Province and Country of Maine , and not by any other name whatsoever. That was the first time that Maine was ever officially used anywhere."

Captain Snow continued, "where this pool makes up it borders farm property owned by Joseph Tarbox, and he is a friend. He has a big warm barn and the mows are stacked with new mown hay and the tie-up has many cows. They have a son Jonathan who is about your age. We will lay over for a week or two so we can replenish our stock of supplies at the Cutts store at Biddeford Pool. I will leave you with the Tarbox family while we trade down the coast and pick you up when we return." Tom Coon was so happy that he almost cried with joy.

So Captain Snow helped Tom Coon transport his mother cat and her kittens to the Tarbox Barn. The mother cat and kittens seemed so pleased to have the freedom of the big barn to romp and hunt in. Tom Coon told Jonathan and Molly all about getting his cat in the most minute detail. Well, these cats were called Coon Cats and Coon Kittens for Tom Coon. The orange kitten

and the silver kitten were boy kittens. Jonathan called them Tom and Tommy, and I sometimes wonder if that is why a boy cat is called a Tom cat today.

Well, my father went on to tell me that Tom Coon gave his beautiful cat and her kittens to Jonathan. For many years Tom Coon came back to visit with the Tarbox family, and he was the captain of many ships over the years.

Captain Coon always brought with him a longhaired kitten as a gift for Jonathan and Molly who were married and had a son Joseph who was Papa's grandfather. Well, do you know Papa said, "as Tom and Tommy Coon cats visited the neighboring farms and long-haired kittens were born, these long-haired kittens were called Coon Kittens for Tom Coon. The three colored Coon Kittens or Coon Cats became a much-desired kitten or cat, so much that the farmers would trade a bag of grain or a bag of vegetables to get a three colored Coon Kitten or Cat. So, they were called Money Kittens or cats. Then, as time went on, the barn with the three colored Coon Cat in it seemed to bring the farmer luck, so they were also called lucky Coon Cats." That still seems to be true today.

As my father talked on, my child's mind saw a picture of Tom Coon giving his beautiful long-haired cat and her three kittens to him, and the Coon Cat and her three half-grown kittens sitting waiting for a zip of milk were the coon cat and Coon Kittens he was telling me about. Now while I am telling you this, Papa's story of the Maine Coon Cat and Kittens, he told it to me sixty years ago. And, while I am reminiscing, sitting watching me is my Maine Coon Cat, a beautiful large orange male with a bright pink nose and a flowing white bib, with large double paws. He must be a descendant of the Tom Coon Kittens born on the Glen Laurie.

Pine Point , Maine

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