



# Thoughts on History

 **October 2018**  
**The Halloween Issue: equal time for cats\***

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**\*Because August was about dogs.**

## The Mystery of the Cat:

How did cats get from this



to this?



*and how 's the job security?*



### Why We Say: “It’s Raining Cats and Dogs”

No one knows, but there’s a surprising amount of discussion about this saying. Speculations include:

☛ It’s raining so loud it could drown out the noise of a cat and dog fight. In past times, most households had several cats and several dogs. That could mean a lot of noise.

☛ In the time of thatched roofs rodents, therefore cats, therefore dogs, spent much of their time in/on the thatch. Thatch becomes slippery when it’s wet and they would slide off. Hmm.

☛ In crowded cities, a heavy rainfall would stir up the unlovely contents of drainage ditches, including the dead bodies of cats and dogs that been on the streets. Likely... but yuk.

☛ Here’s a very long stretch, but interesting: witches were thought to chase storms, flying so fast that their cat familiars could slip off their broomsticks. Similarly, the Norse god of storms was associated with wolves and dogs.

Take your choice. I like the first one. Or, just say it’s raining pitchforks instead. Thank you to Sue for this interesting question.



“It is very inconvenient habit of kittens that, whatever you say to them they always purr.”

Lewis Carroll author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

### Sad Little Kittens

The charm of a bunch of kittens is undeniable and is certainly part of cats’ overall appeal. But statistically, economically, and especially humanely, proliferation of kittens (and puppies) is a real, very sad problem.

At the age of six months, a healthy female cat can on the average start bearing and bringing to maturity 10 kittens per year. Her daughters—on average, 4-5 kittens are female—will do the same unless spayed. Only about 35% of female cats are spayed. So, grandma cat not only has, let’s say, 3 daughters producing 30 kittens each year, but she herself is still producing kittens (that makes it 40 per year) and will for many years. With grandkittens and great-grandkittens and great-great—you get the idea—producing offspring, her single line in a 10-year period can produce a staggering number of cats: over 57,000.\* Where will all those cats go? How will they live?

Currently, U.S. shelters take in more than 7 million companion animals per year, of which about half are cats. Of those 3.5 million cats, only about 100,000 are strays who are reunited with their owners. Through amazing efforts by shelters, about one and a half million cats are placed in homes each year. About a million and a half of the cats/kittens that are not placed are euthanized. And dogs/puppies are in the same situation. It’s hard to look at all those online views of cats and dogs being beautiful, cute, interesting, cuddly, clever or funny and then think about that.

Because of disease control, better nutrition and more sheltered lives, pets today have a much higher survival rate than earlier, but their ability to reproduce so successfully works against them.

Responsible pet ownership includes spaying, neutering, supporting those who help these poor critters and adopting shelter animals as your pets. The shelters are full of wonderful pets needing homes.

*I’m stepping down off my soapbox now.*

\*<https://calculate-this.com/420000-kittens-unspayed-cat-kitten-calculator>. (I did not check this math)

## The Evolution of the Cat

It's hard to date the development of the domestic cat because the skeletons of wild and domesticated cats are almost identical. The latest speculation is that the domestic cat we know today in all her varied furs and forms originated in the Middle East's Fertile Crescent as many as 12,000 years ago. This date coincides with (and probably derives from) the first farming societies, who would have primarily been growing grain. Where there is stored grain there will be rodents, and cats, those talented predators, quickly found a hunters' bonanza in the granaries. Humans appreciated their damage control and cats eventually were welcomed into houses and into people's lives. *Science* study authors call this "one of the more successful 'biological experiments' ever undertaken."

*Felids* (members of the cat family, from lions to today's fuzziest kitty) are thought to all have one common ancestor that differentiated through evolution about 15 million years ago. The ancestors of our domestic cats came from Africa and the Middle East. Those from the African line adapted more easily to sharing lives with humans. For a long time, both domesticated and the smaller wild cats were hard to tell apart, but over time characteristic markings developed in each case. It's thought, for instance, that today's "tabby" markings date back to the Ottoman Empire.

North America has five native wild cats: the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), the lynx (*Felis lynx*), the ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*), the mountain lion (*Felis concolor*) and the jaguar (*Panthera onca*). The bobcat is the most widely known wild cat in North America. Domestic cats arrived in the Americas with

European settlers and settled in very successfully, despite setbacks (see the next page). In the United States, cats are the most popular house pet, with about 90 million domesticated cats in around 34 percent of U.S. homes.

Hey...we were there first!



That's true. Dogs linked up with humans around 5,000 years earlier than cats. Dogs fit almost naturally into the nomadic lifestyle of early humans. They were helpful to hunters and benefitted from the scraps and leavings of the hunt. At the time, grain was gathered wild, not stored in quantity. Cats joined the human scene with the onset of intentional farming and grain storage.

## Cats in the Colonies

In early colonial days, there was no question whether colonists would bring cats along: because of their help in controlling rats and mice, cats went where people went. Like all animals and people then, cats had their jobs and were relied upon to do it. They weren't mentioned much in written annals of the Virginia colonies. The only records that I could find stated that cats, along with horses, dogs, and mice, were eaten for survival during the "Starving Time," the winter of 1609-10 (and no doubt in subsequent lean times).

In Jamestown's Starving Time, colonists did what they could to stay alive.

*[N]othing was spared to mainteyne Lyfe and to doe those things w[hi]ch seame incredible.... having fed upon horses and other beasts as long as they lasted, we were glad to make shift with vermin, as dogs, cats and mice."*

— George Percy, President, Council of Jamestown, about 1610





## Just a Witch and her Cat

Witches are of course among the mainstays of Halloween legends and themes, and with witches come their familiars, especially black cats. If you walk down the aisle of any store that sells Halloween treats or decorations, you're sure to see at least a few black cat images. How did cats get caught up in this?

In Ancient Egypt cats were closely tied to the gods. Mafdet (justice), Bastet (fertility) and Sekmet (power) were often portrayed as cat heads on human bodies.

As happens during cultural takeovers, the Greeks applied traits of the Egyptian goddesses to their own goddess Artemis.

Then Roman goddess, Diana, also became linked to cats. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Diana turns into a cat while hiding in Egypt.

Some historians say that as Christianity strengthened it integrated traits of popular gods (as we see with the combining of Christian and pagan holidays), but diminished the power of popular goddesses. In early Christian Roman culture, cats for a while were linked to the Virgin Mary (the innocent, supportive woman), but over time came to be associated instead with witches (the experienced, threatening woman). As the role of familiars to witches became more defined in the common lore, cats became the familiars of choice. It made sense: almost every household had several cats.

There also are many theories regarding why witches were especially thought of as older women. One is that women tend to be the preservers of tradition and old women could inconveniently preserve some old customs not aligned with current beliefs. Add a toad or a cat to represent the evil influence of a demon, make that broom that's always in her hand magical, and you have the full set: a witch, her familiar, and her broomstick.

In the Ipswich Witch Trial of 1878 Daniel Spofford was accused by a fellow Christian Scientist of attempting to harm her through "mesmeric powers." He was brought to trial and the charges were dismissed by the judge. It's believed this case was really about an ongoing disagreement between Spofford and Christian Science leaders. This is the last known witchcraft trial in the U.S.



Early Egyptians held cats in great regard and had many of their cats mummified, such as these on display in the London Museum.

By the mid thirteen hundreds cats were firmly tied to witchcraft in the popular mind. The onset of the Black Death caused a panic which led to a fervent witch hunt and mass killing of cats because of their presumed association with witches. Cat populations in cities were nearly wiped out. Ironically, this aided the spread of the plague, as there were no cats to keep down the rodent population and the plague was spread by bites from fleas carried on rodents.



A familiar, or familiar spirit, was supposedly given to a witch by the devil to assist her or him in evil doing.

### Witch Hunts

During the early middle ages, efforts toward enlightenment included trying to wipe out belief in witchcraft. In 785 AD, the influential Council of Paderburn made even believing in witches illegal. This law was later confirmed and enacted by Charlemagne, who sought to enlighten the common culture. It's interesting to note that the Spanish Inquisition did not concern itself with witchcraft except for regarding belief in witches as heresy.

Martin Luther believed in witches as active agents for evil and preached against letting them live. King James I of England, for whom Jamestown was named, also believed in witchcraft and actively persecuted suspected witches. During the terrible conflicts of the Reformation, belief in witchcraft surged and thousands of people across Europe were tried and punished, often executed, as witches.

Witch hunts took place across New England from 1647 to 1663, with more than 80 people accused and tried and 13 women and 2 men executed for witchcraft. In a resurgence of the hysteria during 1692 and 93, authorities in Salem MA accused and tried over 200 people of witchcraft and executed 19.



This 16<sup>th</sup> Century woodcut represents a witch feeding her familiars.



“The Love Potion,” a witch with her black cat familiar, by Evelyn de Morgan (1855-1919).

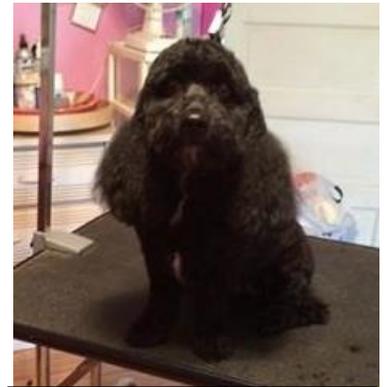
## The Luck (or not) of the Black Cat

In America, black cats are considered bad luck. In England, they’re considered good luck. In Japan, black cats are considered lucky, and a single woman with a cat is thought to be a better marriage prospect than one without a cat. In Scotland, a black cat showing up on your doorstep is thought of as a good omen.

Some studies disagree that black dog/cat syndrome is real today but say it reflects the higher number of black cats and dogs taken into shelters compared to other colors. Thirty percent of dogs and thirty-three percent of cats taken into shelters are black.

Whether black cats are lucky for people or not, in American animal shelters their color is not considered lucky for them. Many of the people who operate these shelters are convinced of what’s known as “black dog (or cat) syndrome:” a greater difficulty finding homes for black cats and dogs than lighter ones.

Black dog/cat syndrome is often blamed on cultural hangovers from old superstitions about witches’ familiars and hellhounds. These fears are carried forward today in stories, movies and television. There’s another, modern twist to the problem, though, which is also a media issue. These days, animals being considered for adoption often are first seen as



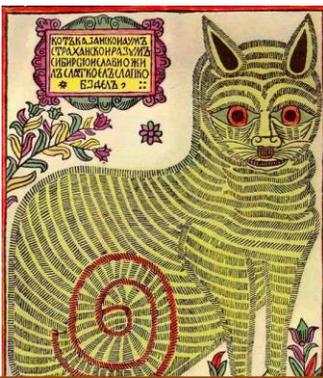
Is there a dog in this photo?

photographs, and black cats and dogs are notoriously hard to photograph well. They often come out looking dusty and unhealthy or just incomprehensible. Sites on-line offer coaching and ideas for shelter staff or volunteers to get better photos of their dark colored critters. Tips include photographing them out of direct sunlight, maybe with brightly colored bandanas to set off their features. Shelters also try to put light colored bedding in the cages of black pets to make them more noticeable.

## Cats with Careers

### The Cats of Kazan

Cats have been part of Russia’s famous Hermitage Museum in the Winter Palace of St. Petersburg since around 1795, when rodents had become a real problem. Empress Elizabeth ordered that 30 cats be sent to St. Petersburg from Kazan, a town famous for its aggressive mousers. At the time of Catherine the Great, there were said to be 300 cats working at the Winter Palace. Today, 70 cats of all breeds, mostly mixed, live in the basement of the Hermitage and help control rodents. None are descended from the Kazan cats, who had been neutered.



“Cat of Kazan,” an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Lubok (popular Russian print).

### Dick Whittington’s Cat

The story goes that orphaned and poor, young Dick Whittington went to London, where he’d heard the streets were paved with gold. He nearly starved there until a merchant gave him room



and board in exchange for scullery work. Dick owned one penny which he used to buy a cat, since his garret room was overrun with mice. The cat cleared up the room quickly. When the merchant had a ship going to the East, he offered each of his staff a chance to send one item for sale on the ship. Dick only had the cat, so he sent her. She was so impressive a mouser that she sold for a huge sum in the east and Dick became wealthy, married the merchant’s daughter and was twice elected Mayor of London. (more Cat trivia on p. 7)

## The King of the Cats

This folk tale shows up in many forms. It was first written down, as far as we know, by William Baldwin in 1553, entitled “Beware the Cat.” The first part, which is re-told here, links to First Century Greek tales about the death of Pan. An Irish version appears in Yeats’ *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) and American one in Stephen Vincent Benet’s 1929 short story.

### The Prince of Cats

In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo’s friend Mercutio calls Tybalt, Juliet’s cousin, “More than Prince of Cats,” simultaneously mocking him and acknowledging him as a dangerous and skillful dualist. The insult is a pun on Tybalt’s name that comes from the fable “Reynard the Fox,” in which the cat, named Tibert, is called the Prince of Cats, who is easily deceived and grievously injured by the fox.

Later, Tybalt kills Mercutio in a fight.



Surrealist painter Balthus named this 1935 self-portrait “Le roi des chat”

One particularly cold and windy night Alma waited for her husband, the sexton, who was late coming home. She had built up the fire and their little cottage was snug and smelled nicely of the stew warming on the hob. Their cat was curled up by the fire, keeping one eye open for any rodent that might dare to break into his peace.

“Well, Streaky Tom,” said Alma, “what do you suppose is keeping Edmund away so long on a bitter night? Perhaps he had more graves to dig than he expected.” The big cat flicked his ear but said nothing. That was his way.

Alma had drifted off to sleep in her chair when the door burst open, and a strong gust of wind pushed her husband and several dead leaves into the house. She started up from her sleep and saw that he was white as a sheet and trembling violently. “What has happened?”

He staggered to the hearth, dropping into his chair and asking for ale. He downed a cup, regained some color and could speak, though his hands still shook. He rubbed them across his face as if to wake himself. “I must find someone right away. It’s very important. His name is Tom Tildrum. Do you know of him? The most amazing thing has happened, and I don’t dare be slow.”

Alma thought. “Well, I know Tom Wilson, of course, but no, not any Tom Tildrum. I’m sure I’ve never heard that name.” Streaky Tom flicked one ear but didn’t move. She looked at her husband closely. “What has happened?”

The sexton drew a deep breath. “At dusk this evening, I had one grave left to finish. I was down in the hole squaring the corners and trying to be done before dark. Then, from a distance, I heard the strangest sound: many cats meowing all at once. Then the meowing would stop, then start again. I peeked over the edge of the grave and saw seven cats walking toward me, all on their hind legs. Six carried a little coffin with a crown atop it. The seventh, a big gray tabby, led them. They meowed together in slow time as if they were singing a dirge. I’ve never heard such a thing.”

Alma hadn’t either and she wondered if he’d been tipping on the job. “Dear Husband, I...”

“Not now. Let me finish, then we must decide what to do. From that grave I watched them come nearer and nearer, until finally they marched past me. I thought they didn’t see me, but they stopped, and the gray tabby turned. He walked to the grave’s edge, looked me right in the eyes and said plain as day, ‘Tell Tom Tildrum that Old Toidro is dead.’

“I didn’t know what to say. The gray cat said it again, still staring into my eyes. ‘Tell Tom Tildrum that Old Toidro is dead. Do not fail.’ Then he turned, and the procession marched on, meowing their dirge together. I came home in the dark as fast as I could, and now I don’t know what to...”

“Edmund, look at Streaky Tom!”

Their cat was sitting up very straight, puffing out his sides importantly. He looked at them both and said, clearly, “Tom Tildrum is *my* name. Old Toidro has died, so now I’m King of the Cats!” He jumped across the fire and up the chimney and was never seen again.



It’s said that when William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) learned that English writer Algernon Swinburne (1839-1909) had died, he told his sister, “Now I’m King of the Cats.”



*Why we say:*  
**“Grinning  
Like a  
Cheshire  
Cat”**

It’s said that in the 1400s Cheshire County, England was notorious for poachers raiding its forests until a new Warden, a man named Caterling, took over. He was focused, merciless and clever at catching poachers and he loved to watch them hanged. He would walk away from the gibbet with a big grin on his face. It’s thought that “grinning like Cheshire Caterling” shortened to “grinning like a Cheshire Cat” over the years. Anyway, that’s one story. The expression was in common use for centuries, and Lewis Carroll made it immortal in his *Alice* books, especially boosted by the etched images of Sir John Tenniel.

### **Salaried Cats**

1868, the British Post Office successfully put three cats on its budget at 4 pence each per week for rodent control. As decades passed, British Post Offices overall were encouraged to keep cats. The pay increased and in 1953 the House of Commons made sure the cats had adequate maternity benefits. As of 1983, three post offices in London still had cats. A tom named Kojak, at £1.80 a week, was one of the best-paid cats ever.



*So long until  
January. I hope  
you’ll have  
wonderful holidays  
and a cozy early  
winter! -Carolyn  
Osborne*

### **Hemingway’s ‘Mitten’ Kittens**

In the 1930’s Ernest Hemingway was given a female white kitten. Snowflake was polydactyl, having six toes on each foot—considered extra lucky. Hemingway, a true cat lover, kept the “poly”, or “mitten” cats from Snowflake, naming them for celebrities. Today, his Key West home is a museum whose grounds house 50-60 cats, about half of whom have extra toes, and all of whom carry the polydactyl gene. Key West is now famous for polys.



“Hairy Truman” on Hemingway’s table.



### **Sources**

All graphics are from Google Images unless otherwise identified.

**Page 1:** Header graphic: from *River Landscape in the Late Afternoon* (1663) by Adriaen Van de Velt, Source: [www/the-athæneum.org](http://www/the-athæneum.org).

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Dick Whittington and His Cat, w/ illustration:

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**Page 6:**

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**Page 7:** Grin Like a Cheshire Cat: Web Garrison, *Why You Say it* (1992), Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, p. 106 p. 52

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