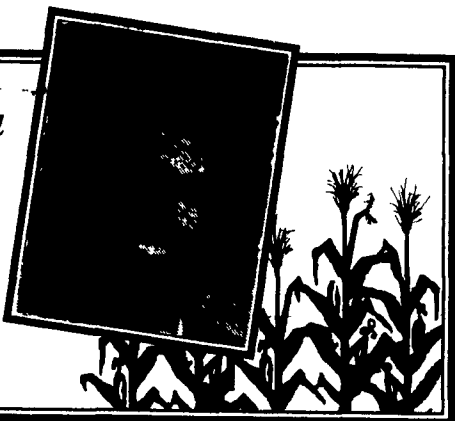


On Being a Farm Wife
(and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



"C'mon, Monk. C'mon out."
During the warm months, our housecat spends much of her time outdoors, watching birds from the back porch, lounging in a spot of sunlight, often trekking behind me to the garden.
But when the outside temperature drops below about 70 degrees, this aging, pudgy, black-and-white feline claims the fuzzy blanket on the couch as her domain, pretty much parking herself there for the duration. She abandons her cho-

sen spot for cat food and litter box stops, an occasional round of chase-the-yarn and any opportunity to snag a spot in a willing lap. At least once a day, unless the weather is absolutely horrible, she gets put outside a least briefly-like it or not-in an effort to prevent her from becoming a total couch-potato pussycat.
As much as Monk dislikes cold, wet, and snowy weather, she disdains other animals even more. So, one evening last week, when she paraded to the base-

ment, as we carried in wood for the stove, and poked her head around the open door, I coaxed her to come outside for a bit in the fresh air.
"C'mon Monk, there aren't any other cats out here." Meeooww. The low sound came from off to the side of the porch.
"Wanna' bet?" asked The Farmer.
From a shadowy corner of the porch, under the picnic table, emerged the dark form of another cat. Monk shrank behind the door and disappeared up the steps.
"Midnight, where have you been? I didn't see you all day."
Midnight is the stray that we coaxed to the yard one Sunday evening in late summer, after hearing his loud crying from the weedy overgrowth of the asparagus patch. And not only did he gobble up catfood, milk-and the homemade bologna we used as the convincing argument to trust us but he pleased to be pet-

ted. Not held, thank you. Just petted and stroked, while he rolled on his back in obvious pleasure.
We've always been pushovers for black cats. This nearly-grown youngster had the potential to be a beauty, though gaunt and scuffed up when he arrived. Under his right eye was an ugly wound, likely the result of battling some feisty quarry on the cat food chain.
In the ensuing months, sort of truce of toleration has been struck among the animals which claim rights to our yard. Midnight's cardboard box fitted with an old quilted shirt is now in the distant, dark corner of the porch, sheltered from a neighbor's pair of curious dogs that often check out his food dish. If the pups get too pesky, he just climbs high up in the woodshed, out of sight and reach, which no doubt irritates the cat-chasing pair.
The ribs-showing, wounded

Midnight is now sleek, well-muscled and solid under his shining black coat, with no signs of former injury. And he has become trusting enough that he almost waits to be held, though he still prefers to roll over on his back and have his soft, satiny underbelly rubbed.
But neither inside or outside cat will yet tolerate the other. Monk might go outside if Midnight's not around. His presence is, probably, a good excuse to slink back to the fuzzy warmth of her blanket. And if she does show up, he high-tails it off the porch.
"Here kitty, kitty, kitty," I called a few evenings later, returning from the barn after dark. Midnight had not been around all day, again.
A very faint "meow" answered, then ripping around the side of the house came...a big furry, orange cat.

An orange cat? Where did that come from? Though orange cats are not our farm favorites, this one was a beauty, fat, furry and appearing tame, but cautious. The sound of a handful of catfood pouring into a ceramic dish was enough to bring him to my ankles and begin purring as he sampled the handout.
No sign of Midnight and Monk had fled upstairs, seeking safe refuge on our couch blanket.
With all these cats about, why does our basement reek with the smell of a dead mouse somewhere in the wall?



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