

On Being a Farm Wife
(and other hazards)
Joyce Bupp



A shaft of sunlight streams through the opened back door, splashing its glow across the kitchen floor, highlighting the dust and barn dirt which gathers, even as I sweep similar debris out the front door.

Stretched to her length in the sunshine-spot is Monk, our senior-citizen housecat, snoozing the morning away in the warmth. Usually the closed doors prevent Monk from enjoying one of her favorite comfort zones. But when the weather is mild, the sun floods the back porch, and the woodstove is well stoked, I prop open the inside back door so the sunshine can beam in through the storm door glass.

That shaft of sunlight is not only welcomed for this cheerfulness, but also because Monk is enticed to snooze somewhere other than whatever chair I'm trying to use. If I have paper work strewn across the kitchen table, she wants the cushioned kitchen chair. If I'm working at the computer, she wants the cushioned office chairs. We wage this chair-ownership power struggle endlessly, this cat and I.

But she'll abandon all soft, cushioned furniture to sprawl across the sun-warmed floor when the wintry sunbeams pour in. Of course, then I trip over her.

On the other hand, if the

stove is burning low and the house chilly, old Monk will lay claim to one of the floor vents directing the heat upstairs front the woodstove. While that maneuver keeps her toasty, it effectively blocks the warm air from its intended purpose.

Of all domestic critters, cats are about the most clever and creative in finding select creature comfort zones. The barn cats are equally adept with this instinct.

Midnight, the black stray who adopted us and now owns the back porch, wisely found warmer quarters when the temperatures dropped toward the single digits, he snagged squatter's rights to the concrete-walled understorey of the heifer's feed trough, a proverbial snug-as-a-bug-in-a-rug spot for cats.

Numerous mother cats over the years have used this spacious, warm, hidden quarters as a nursery. Fat mice sometimes visit the feed and hay inches away, and fresh milk and cat food supplies are provided regularly. A couple of conveniently poked holes made to repair water leaks offer Midnight limited entrance, and make it easy to keep potential, but unwanted, cat roommates at bay.

Meanwhile, our native feline barn felines favor the haymow overhead, with plentiful nooks and crannies in which to curl up in secluded darkness. At feeding time, they appear from all directions, yawning and stretching like they've been snoozing since the last feeding. Which they probably have.

Except for Diamond (a loveable calico with a black diamond-shaped marking) who makes herself at home in any and all of these places, on constant alert to what's happening. Every morning she leaps up to the four-foot-high windowsill at the calf barn sink while I'm filling calf bottles, to peer through the glass and deliver an eye-level guilt trip that I still haven't fed her.

For half-pint-cat Miss Calico and her sidekick, Pest, nothing beats the dairy barn utility room for comfort on a cold morning. Motors from the milking system and milk cooling compressors keep the small room warm on even bitter days. Snagging the top of the hot water heat for a nap is an additional plus for these two White

Miss Calico is one of our premier mousers and can do just about whatever she wants, her affinity for leaving muddy footprints on the barn desk records sometimes earns her a trip back up to the calf barn.

Some of the cows, likewise, are skilled at snagging the cushiest bedding areas. They seek out the thickest straw or sawdust of fodder, though differences might not be discernible to us. In fact, some of the girls always manage to keep themselves relatively neat and their udders reasonably clean and dry, while a few in the herd inevitably look like (hog farmers, forgive me) pigs.

Newborn baby calves in the boxstalls instinctively know to curl up in the softest, driest corner. And often their older cousins will stand in their individual pens, patiently waiting for fresh bedding, then flop down almost before it hits the bedding pack.

All critters need, and seek out, certain comforts.

Like people, though, some are just better at it than others.

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