

## Reporter's notebook



Grace R. Dove

Last year was my first catless Christmas since I moved to the Back Mountain in 1974. This year would have been my second, if it hadn't been for a good friend and a kitten named Frances Slocum.

When my friend, Renee, asked me to help her daughter, Brianne, with a history research project, neither of us realized that one of its spinoffs would be a home for one of their cat's kittens.

As Renee, Brianne and I sat in their living room discussing the history project, Mom-cat slipped into the room for a quick look-see and a break from her two-week-old litter.

Brianne brought the kittens to me and I immediately fell in love with a little gray ball of fur, the smallest and the only dark one in the litter.

"If you don't find a home for this one, I might be interested," I said.

Later, Renee asked me what I wanted to call my kitten.

Since Brianne was researching Frances Slocum, the kitten inherited that good heroine's name. Somehow it seemed appropriate, even humorous, considering the fact that my Lenape ancestors took the rap for kidnapping poor little Frances.

Frances the fuzzleball moved into my life November 27. Her name soon, evolved into Francie, then Fancy, after the Reba McEntyre song.

## The cat who played with trains and other stories

Fancy is the image of my first cat, Sascha, a beautiful gray torbie with markings similar to a gray tabby splashed with apricot patches.

Like Sascha, little Fancy will probably be the kind of cat you handle with welder's gloves, especially if you're our family veterinarian. Old Sascha had a set of razor-sharp claws which would have made Eddie Scissorhands jealous.

As Fancy taught our beagle, Buddy, that he is no longer the boss four-legged in the house, I told my husband some Sascha stories which he had never heard.

Sascha had been four when I married Matt.

Sascha's first Christmas with my first husband and me was the beginning of her lifetime hate relationship with him, thanks to his strange sense of humor and an old train set.

When we set up the train, a venerable old Lionel O-27 with a magnetized engine and electrified third rail, on the platform in the living room, Sascha couldn't resist trying to play train wreck.

No matter what she did, the engine's magnetized wheels stuck to the track. Swat. Pounce. Glare.

Finally she plopped down on the track in disgust, the little patch of bare skin underneath her tail touching the electrified rail just as His Majesty turned on the transformer.

"Not funny!" said Sascha, levitating a good six feet in the air.

I finally set up a small H-O set on the platform for both of us to play trains every afternoon when I came in from work.

Sascha would wait for the train to hit just the right spot, then cause a massive H-O pileup.

She also learned to pull the min-lights from the tree when we were-

n't looking and play hockey with them on our hardwood floors.

It was great fun hearing Daddy say Very Bad Words when he stepped on one with bare feet or spent hours tracing strings of lights to replace bulbs.

The next year we switched to screw-in lights, which Sascha never figured out.

Our second cat, Bandit, who arrived when Sascha was four, was a climber. Basically majoring in curtains, she could never resist a couple of runs up the Christmas tree every year.

TIM-BER-R-R!

I learned to tie the tree to the wall.

Both venerable Old Lady Cats have gone home to the Great Catnip Field in the Sky, Sascha in 1988 and Bandit in 1993, leaving me cat-less for the first time in my adult life.

Christmas can be pretty dull when your decorating plans no longer revolve around outsmarting a feline or two.

And it can be pretty quiet when you no longer have someone to purr you to sleep every night.

In my Christmas column last year, I had shared the legend of why tabby cats have an "M" in the middle of their foreheads, and had wished my readers the one holiday blessing I didn't have - the comforting song of a wise old purr-person to chase away the cold and the loneliness.

Thanks to Renee, Brianne and a kitten named Frances Slocum, that wish has now come true for me.

Fancy, a.k.a. Frances Slocum, purrs me to sleep every night and happily swats the glass angels on the small tree on my stereo when I'm not home. Life just doesn't get any better.

## As I was saying



Jack Hilsner

In a few more days that bearded guy in the red suit will pass out presents to one and all. The ones for us seniors are mostly "ho-hum" but those for our grandchildren are more like "Ho-Boyl"...make that read "TOYS!" No, not clothes. Clothes aren't presents. Clothes are clothes!

In doing research for this special column I interviewed a few toy managers. One, who declined to be named, said his November was very, very good, and his December looked even better. He said his hottest toy, one which needed no discounting because it flew off the shelves, was something called the "Mighty Morphine Power Ranger." I asked if they need batteries and he said no. "What do they do?" I asked next. He snickered and replied, "Nothing." Hmmm.

Another manager agreed with the first one on the hottest toy. I sensed a trend. Then, in keeping with my paper's penchant for local flavor, I asked if he hired extra help at this time of year, and if any of them were from the Back Mountain. He answered yes to both, so I asked if I could have some names. "No," he replied. "That's against our headquarters policy - you'll have to call our ad agency."

Oh no I won't. So on to the Valley's biggie, Toys 'R Us, which has five outlets in Connecticut, 17 in NJ and 21 in NY; can't find a figure on PA but it must be

## This year's hottest new toys

humongous.

At this monster of a store there is a slogan hanging over all the checkout cash registers: "WE PROMISE TO OPEN UP ANOTHER REGISTER IF THERE ARE MORE THAN 3 PEOPLE IN LINE" but I didn't wait around to check the checkout (I must be on a roll) and headed for manager Steve Jacobs, who has three children who think he owns the store. I learned normally their staff numbers 45 but during this season it swells to 130, too many from the Back Mountain to list.

Jacobs said his November was so-so, December picked up but no one will know anything until all the numbers are in and crunched. He did however agree with the other two managers about the hot Power Rangers.

I told him I couldn't understand how a toy costing from \$5.99 to \$79 that doesn't do anything special could be such a hot seller. Steve simply told me to watch the Fox network at 4:30 in the afternoon, which is prime time to kids, and I would soon understand. I suppose they plug the stupid things, and of course I understand now. Never underestimate the influence of the tube.

Further research disclosed that some ordinary teenagers were chosen (I do not know how) to save the world from evil aliens. They became special Power Morphines, calling on spirits of ancient dinosaurs and summoning power from the Zords (not sure who they are) but will they be strong enough to save us from destruction? (Jeez, I sure hope so.)

Now to be fair about these rip-offs, some of the deluxe models turn into rocket launchers, can deliver karate chops and emit a soft glow for use as a bedside lamp (you think I am making all this up, don't you?) so let's pass them up. We'll also have to pass up all the simulated computers

and learning aids the next three aisles over (the ones with 800 trivia questions and 1,000 Biblical quotes) and look at a marketing jungle almost as big as those silly robots (and no, I didn't see any Teenage Ninja Turtles this year) so that gets us to-at last-DOLLS!

Before we discuss the leader this year and the favorite of most any year (Yes! Barbie) look at those awful Cabbage Patch Kids, now with 15 types, still selling like crazy and each uglier than the next. And - you won't believe this one at all - it's a doll called "My Bundle Baby" (needs batteries) which you place under your blouse and touch a switch so it can let you experience the symptoms of a "REAL LIVE" baby-to be inside you. (I didn't want to come right out and say preggie.) The box reads, and I kid you not, "HEAR HER HEART BEAT! FEEL HER FEET KICK!" Hey, is this real marketing or what?

And for the tops...Barbie. She now costs from \$9.99 to \$127.99. The former gets you a basic doll with flexible arms and legs; the latter is three feet tall and could easily dwarf its owner. In an inspired burst of variations, Barbie also comes in a Porsche (in a big box with the Porsche) or a beach buggy, or a motor home, a boat, on a horse, on rollerblades, in a hair salon, in the kitchen, a pizza parlor, bathroom, bedroom...awright already! You get the idea. And we are out of space. Believe me, I could go on and on. There are ten more aisles left!

In closing, I have to say I am of two minds about this toy stuff...the selecting, the buying, the wrapping, the un-wrapping that morning and you know the rest...on one hand I am glad it is all behind me.

On the other hand, I'd give anything to do it all over again!

## A Case for Conservation



Alene N. Case

Remember the old joke about the lady who was watching soldiers march in a parade? She smiled with pride and said to those standing near her, "Everyone's out of step but my Johnny." We laugh, but we turn to see that we are now "Johnny." Yes, with the passage of GATT, we look more out of step than ever before. The United States is the only country in the world (as far as I know) not using the metric system of measurement.

Our refusal to change to the International System of Units is bound to cost us in many ways. Who wants to do business with people who still measure grain in bushels, gasoline in gallons, and land area in acres? Part of the problem of forestry in the northwest stems from the fact that whole logs are shipped to Japan - the wood products industry will not make doors that fit the houses in Japan. Foreign car manufacturers must go to a lot of trouble to make odometers that read in miles so that Americans can buy them. Tourists - whether American or foreign - must learn a whole new language when they travel. And, worst of all, we do not understand science in large part because scientists use terms like milligrams per liter or degrees Celsius or kilometers per hour.

## The metric system: easy, logical and very necessary

In 1790, the same year that the metric system was being developed in France, Thomas Jefferson suggested to our Congress that we adopt a decimal measurement system. Thirty years later, John Quincy Adams, then Secretary of State, proposed adoption of the metric system. In 1875, the United States was one of 17 countries in the world to sign the Treaty of the Meter, which established the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. The United States Army and Marine Corps have been using the system for decades. And in 1975, our government passed a law encouraging a voluntary changeover (Great Britain had switched in the mid-1960s).

I am not at all sure why Americans have this collective mental block against the metric system, but I am sure that we should recover from it as soon as possible. Judging from my observations while living in Nova Scotia during Canada's metric conversion in the mid '70s, it is not nearly as difficult as you might think. The secret is to switch one thing at a time. In Canada, they began with the weather report. All temperatures were reported in degrees Fahrenheit and then degrees Celsius. After a few months of that, they switched to reporting the degrees Celsius first. Then, at a previously specified time, they gave all temperature readings in degrees Celsius only. By then, we all knew that if it was 15 degrees outside we needed only a light jacket and if it was predicted to be 0 degrees we could expect frost.

The next major conversion was to kilometers to measure distance while driving. The same sort of strategy was used. All distance

signs gave both miles and kilometers for a period of time and then the mileage signs disappeared. Then, there was a gradual conversion to metric measures of weight and volume: gasoline was sold by the liter instead of the imperial gallon; sugar came in two kilogram bags instead of five pound bags; soda was packaged in two liter bottles (we do that one already, etc. The most serious difficulty I could see was that consumers sometimes ended up paying more for things - the store would charge the same amount for two kilograms (4.4 pounds) of sugar as they had previously charged for five pounds. But, by the time we moved back to "the states" in 1978, Canada had gone metric.

Once the United States changes to the metric system, no one in the whole world will ever have to calculate laborious conversions again. The metric system is really quite simple - all conversions involve moving the decimal place to the left or to the right. Calculators are no longer necessary. If you want to convert yards to miles, you will need at least a pencil and paper. But if you want to know how many meters are in a kilometer, you simply multiply by 1000 or move the decimal point three places to the right. Certainly, there will be problems using recipe books or building houses for several years. But, the advantage of long-term efficiency will make it well worth the effort. This is one change that will be advantageous to business people, scientists, tourists, and students. Let's get in step with the rest of the world.

## Toys 'R' always with us, and have been

What was the first toy? Very probably a ball. They have found ancient stone balls in caves. Are they toys or weapons? Hard to tell, but many would like to think - toy. Whichever, they are Stone Age artifacts.

Some "pull-along" carts have been found dating to 2600 B.C., and bird whistles and rattles showed up in Jerusalem from about 1000 B.C. The Romans had glass marbles. Balls are mentioned in the Bible. And in China, children played with kites and put paper dresses on dolls.

In the 12th century, toy knights and board games appeared in England. Miniature cross-bows came from Germany. There were hoops, tops, skip ropes, stilts and always balls, of all sizes and kinds.

In 1787 a woman named Maria Edgeworth suggested that children be taught to use their hands, and toy shops should carry miniature carpenter tools, complete with nails, screws and bits of wood. Smart lady!

In the 1800s there were dolls, little tea sets, jump ropes, jacks and metal toys of all types on wheels, to be pushed by hand.

Windups came later, racers especially. There were puppets, lead soldiers and the first board games. And, let's not forget trains. And footballs, bats and baseballs, and hockey sticks.

In the early 1900s board games really came into their own, and have never died down. Chess, Parcheesi, Carom, Monopoly, checkers and dominoes. A variation of checkers called Chinese Checkers became popular. It used marbles instead of the familiar flat round pieces. The original still remained the big favorite.

Craft toys finally became a big rage...most every boy had an Erector set. Some had more than one, and made bigger structures. Some had Meccano instead of Erector, and today the two are one company - sets are called Mecanno Erector. Lucky boys had Chemcraft Sets. (Invisible ink! Paper that changed color! Stuff that smelled!) And magic sets. And microscopes.

Lincoln Logs were around, not so popular then, not so popular today. Dominoes became transformed...they now "glow in the dark" and are sold in huge

quantities for setting up intricate formations to be knocked down in a "chain reaction," hardly their original intention!

Lego construction sets are still around but with countless imitators. In fact, just about anything which becomes reasonably popular can count on a horde of me-tooos close on its heels.

And jig-saw puzzles! They were found in every home, and during the depression neighbors would exchange puzzles instead of buying more. Today game pioneer Milton Bradley still makes the old flat kind, but also a style in three-dimensions which result in some surprisingly life-like sculpture. Washington's Capitol building is available in 3-D for only \$29.95 and looks as though it would be fun to build.

But what of the future? What does the crystal ball show for kids in the year 2000, and beyond? Will there be Martian Checkers? Jupiter Jacks? No way to know. But a safe bet would be a little ball to bounce against the spaceship wall!

By Jack Hilsner

## Thanks! Woman thanks witnesses who responded to plea

Editor: I would like to thank all those who responded to my letter in this paper seeking witnesses to an

accident Oct. 1 on Pioneer Avenue. I appreciate your alertness and concern.

Merry Christmas. Gladys H. Wood Shavertown

## Library news

### Holiday greetings from the library staff

By NANCY KOZEMCHAK

The staff of the Back Mountain Memorial Library, Martha, Nancy, Marilyn, Scott, Jane, Millie, Barbara, Anna, Kyle, Jessica and Joe, would like to wish the library patrons, friends and neighbors a very Merry Christmas with love, joy, peace and happiness.

The library will be closed December 24, 25, 26 for the Christmas holiday and December 31, January 1 and 2 for the New Year holiday. We will open at 9:30 a.m. on January 3 to begin the new year of 1995.

The 1995 Entertainment Book is still available at the library. The book is packed with savings on dining, movies, local sports and attractions, hotels and travel, plus much more. The book includes a membership card, local services and a master index, all for \$30.

The 20th edition of the Dine-A-Mate book is also available at the library for \$25. It is the area's

most popular dining, recreation and travel program. It offers hundreds of specials from the dining, recreation and entertainment services.

New books at the library: "The Sins of The Wolf" by Anne Perry is a novel that paints a portrait of secret evil among the rich and powerful in another venerable city - historic Edinburgh, the 'Athens of the North'. A prominent Edinburgh family seeks a young woman with nursing experience to accompany Mrs. Mary Farraline, an elderly lady with delicate (but not critical) health, on a short trip to London. The only medical duty is to see that the charming patient doesn't neglect to take her heart medicine.

"The Glory" by Herman Wouk rejoins the epic journey of the story of Israel in a most compelling work. From the euphoric aftermath of that stunning victory in 1967, through the harrow-

ing battles of the Yom Kippur War, the heroic Entebbe rescue, the historic Camp David Accords and finally the celebration of 40 years of independence and the opening of the road to peace, Wouk immerses us in the bloody battles, the devastating defeats, the elusive victories. He plunges us into the lives and loves of men and women.

"On the Edge" by Elizabeth Drew is sub-titled, The Clinton Presidency. It is the first inside, full-spectrum report of the presidency. Since he came to office, Clinton has been hard to read - ambitious and uncertain, looking toward the future and hounded by the past. From the first days, this author has been speaking with and learning from the President's top advisers, key Cabinet officers, and well-placed members of Congress, as she has watched - up close, behind the scenes - as plans are hammered out, policies set and problems confronted.

GIFTS WITH style

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