

News from Nan

NAN'S WRITINGS

NAN'S REMINISCENCES: PETS

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This post is part of a series of reminiscences that Nan (born 1906) wrote about her childhood in Minden City, Michigan. Most of the pieces were written sometime between 1990 and 1995.

In the following reminiscences ("Bunny," "Cats," "Dogs," and "Fowl"), Nan describes some of the Riedel family pets.

Bunny

We always had animals living with us, and they arrived in various ways. One was a living legend, and the way of her coming was this: It must have been about 1920 — or perhaps 1919 — that Paul, who was about seven, had measles. His pattern with diseases was that if he fell ill with anything, he would be sicker than anyone else who had it. But he would bounce back, and once the recovery began, he got over it faster than anyone else. So it was with the measles. He had a very high fever and was probably delirious, and even the measles blotches were abnormally dark. Mother said one might call his illness "black measles," rather than red.

I had it next and remember quite well, the onset, the breaking out, being isolated in a dimly lighted room, the fever and thirst, studying the wallpaper pattern for imaginary creatures for entertainment; we weren't allowed to read, and there was no radio as yet.

So when Easter came, we were just recovering from a moderately bad time. It was like our parents to do something especially nice for us to compensate. So Dad combed the countryside and came home with Bunny, a beautiful Belgian hare.

Naturally, the Easter Rabbit paid her usual visit, and early Easter morning we were told the Easter Bunny had been there. Had been?! Here was this beautiful creature, hopping around the house, and our excited cries nearly raised the roof!

"Mama! Mama! The Easter Bunny is here!"

Paul gave her a hard day. Every little while he herded her into a corner and commanded that she lay an egg, and someone had to slip an egg into the corner for his garnering so that she could go free.

Imagine how you would feel if the Easter Rabbit chose your house for her home! She was a never-ending joy, and I still think tenderly of her.

She followed us all around the house and came when I called. When Dad got up in the morning and started tending fires, she followed him out when he took out the ashes, and back in when he brought wood or water. If he went to the basement for coal, Bunny lippity-lipped behind him, and if the "fruit room" door were open, she found a carrot or perhaps even a potato or an apple to carry upstairs for her own breakfast. She knew where foods were kept, and in the evening if she hankered for a cookie or a bit of cake, one might hear a plate clank against a crock in the pantry. She lifted the plate with her clever nose, reached in and got her bit, and pulled out, letting the plate fall back on the crock. We knew the sound: Bunny had her dessert.

She also felt entitlement to the furniture. There were fewer easy chairs than now, but we had one that was called a Morris chair. It had a hinged back and a device for holding the back at various angles. When Dad sat in it, there was a space behind him, and Bunny discovered that it was a very soft, warm, cozy hidey-hole. Then she found she wanted room to stretch, and to Dad's amusement she began pushing him, making a grunting sound that said, "Move over! Bunny needs stretching room!"

We also had a cat at the time, and the cat and Bunny chased each other. Landing on the ends of scatter rugs on the polished floor, they could slide good distances, leaving the house looking very much "lived-in."

Cats

We nearly always had cats: I remember up to eight (two mothers with three kittens each).

One early cat resident was a calico called Daisy, who paid her rent by being very tolerant of a baby's attention. Paul was then only a toddler and loved her hard, but she never harmed him.

Cats used to be put out at night, and I suppose the barn was warm. One of my very earliest memories is of going out there to see puppies, and when we first moved there, it was a barn with horses in it, instead of the garage it became later.

But Daisy knew the house was warmer, and she found that the curve of the stairway provided a cozy corner, dark and concealing. Poor Daisy! She gave herself away! She snored! She could be heard all over the house and was quickly found and put out at bedtime.

Mother cats that are nursing kittens get the same claustrophobic feeling that human mothers sometimes feel in the early days when Mama is on demand constantly. One of our cats hid her kittens in the coal bin, and when it was time to show them to the family, she brought them to me!

It was early morning and I was still in bed, when suddenly this loud kitten-crying was filling the air — and coming nearer! I sat up and looked around, and there she was, with a nice big kitten held by the back of its neck. Before I could say anything, she jumped on the bed and laid it beside me. And there was my mother! “She brought it to me,” I explained, delighted! “Well,” said Mother, “I wondered where she was taking it! All right, for a little while.” And I got to cuddle the new baby while its mother got some rest. What an entrancing honor!

Another time, in the other house next to the bank, another cat also hid her litter in the coal bin. Mother decided on a beautiful warm spring day that the kittens should be out for air, and she brought them to the back yard, where I was playing on the back steps. Mehitabel did not at all approve of her family being so exposed. She also had plans for an outing of her own. So she began edging up the driveway, looking first at me and then at the kittens. It was all very plain: “Watch them for me until I get back.” “All right,” I told her, “I understand.” And she went away and left me, feeling highly honored, on duty.

Mehitabel was a rather strange case. For some reason we had not had a cat for some time when I was teaching in Rochester [about 1931]. So I went to the Detroit Humane Society, and Mehitabel chose me. She leaped out of her cage into my arms. When I got home to Minden, I put the box containing Mehitabel on the kitchen table, where she caused the box to do gyrations. “It’s alive!” said Mother. Anything alive pleased Mother. So Mehitabel was “in,” odd duck though she was.

She must have been in a spinster’s house. She streaked for the basement at the sight of any man, including Dad or Paul, but even less did she like any male not of the family. She would not touch real milk, but only drank evaporated milk. She loved corn, fresh or canned, and if we brought corn from the garden, she would chew through the shucks to reach the kernels and nibble them. She also liked fresh tomatoes.

One thing she liked that Mother denied her absolutely: a freshly ironed white tablecloth looked to her just the place to sit. As she was jet black, it was a good study in contrasts — or might have been! I think we had Mehitabel the only time I was ever a little uneasy of a thunderstorm. She used to lie on my bed, and that night a storm broke after I had gone to bed. The lightning flashes were vicious stabs, and the thunder was like a monster cat with the house in its grasp. It was shaking the house as a cat shakes a mouse, and directly over my bed! Mehitabel lay at my feet with her big eyes firmly fixed on me. Suddenly, I felt victimized! I was scared! It was almost as bad as “The Fall of the House of Usher”! For probably the only time in my life, I made the cat go away!

Dogs

Mother would have agreed with James Herriott about the wisdom of creatures. She told of a little dog they had that had had puppies. Mother had gone to look in the kennel and had found that the puppies had been born, but one was dead. She took the dead one and laid it on the lawn while she attended to something in the kitchen. Glancing out the window, she saw the mother drag the puppy back into the kennel.

"Poor thing," she thought, "She doesn't know it's dead."

But when she was ready to go out again, she was surprised to find the puppy back where she had left it. Her thought then was that the mother knew, but she was just not ready to give it up. She had to love it a little before she could let it go.

I also remember being inundated by a flood of puppies at our neighbor's when I was a toddler. All those tongues washing me! I was enchanted! I did love little creatures — animals and birds — and of course, human babies! I still do.

Fowl



Anna Schreiter Riedel at the cottage with her hens



Anna Schreiter Riedel feeding her hens

It is a wonder that Mother ever raised fowl for the family table, loving the little downy cheeps as she did. Every spring she bought baby chicks and baby ducklings, and until the farmer in her took over in pride at the good sturdy fryer-size meals ready at hand, she enjoyed fussing over them and making pets of them.

The ducklings had a tiny artificial lake in the back yard. Mother deplored their "mussiness," but we all enjoyed their fun.

One afternoon at the cottage the sky suddenly turned black and the rain came down in torrents. Mother prepared to rush home to rescue her babies. I thought this seemed silly: didn't ducks love water? "Oh, no," she quickly educated me. If ducklings are with their mother, the mother covers them against the slashing rain. If they couldn't find cover, they could easily drown.

One year at the cottage we had two broody ducks, which we called Alice and Lulu. The young gander was Jimmy, and he seemed quite proud of his harem when Alice and Lulu made nests side by side and raised twin families. Every morning they led the little ones to the creek, and it was a beautiful sight to see the babies dropping into the water and taking up the strong swimming stroke set by the mother.

One day a little one was very late in joining the line, and it was as good as a Disney film to hear him yelling at the top of his lungs, while he practically "swam standing" to give more power to his strokes. It was dangerous to be behind; it was dangerous to yell like that! There were ermine about, and they would even pull the baby chicks and ducklings from under a sitting mother, cutting the little throats and drinking the blood. One year they killed all our young rabbits.

(Rabbit was one "crop" that we were unable to harvest. Mother had someone else kill them, for she could not, nor could any of us. All the rabbits had names, and you can't eat a friend you have called by name.)

The most exotic fowl Mother ever had in her hen yard were wild pheasants, and those she raised to return to the wild, not for home consumption. I was teaching in Rochester, Michigan [about 1931], and we heard about someone who was raising pheasants for the cause of conservation. I was able to locate the place and to obtain a "setting" of eggs, with the understanding that they were to be returned to nature, to a parcel of land posted against hunting, so that they could increase. We posted the cottage acres and the woods on the Bay City-Forestville road that belonged to the Riedel and Schreiter grandparents.

Pheasant chicks are completely captivating. Their peeping is elusively subdued, and you can feel as though you are playing hide and seek with shadows. The chick food was hard-boiled egg yolk, chopped. When they heard knife against plate, the coaxing call began. It was such fun to feed those babies!

One of the most beautiful experiences of my life was to share the release of the pheasant babies. Very early in the cool of the morning we drove to Forestville and took the cage to a spot midway between

woods and open meadow.

How could such tiny things fend for themselves alone?

Dad opened the crate. They scuttled out with a sidewise gait designed to protect them from overhead attack. And to the tender music of that soft call, they ran off, keeping to the shadows.

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