

WILLY, THE FERAL CAT

By LaVarr B. Webb

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According to the scriptures, Deborah means “a bee.” Deborah of old was a judge in Israel when that great nation sinned against the Lord and His commandments and fell under the domination of the Canaanites.

As a busy bee, Deborah, herself, went forth into battle and saved Israel.

The children of Israel, I am sure, cried, “Long live Deborah,” so as long as people read the *Old Testament*, righteous Deborah will continue to live.

Deborah Weiss, also a busy bee, probably will not have to go forth to do battle with a bronze sword and shield as Deborah of old had to do, but, even now, there is a war being fought, a war between good and evil.

At this time, Deborah Weiss has chosen to fight evil with the sword and shield of righteousness. I congratulate her and pray it will always be so.

Granddad Webb

When I first met Willy, he had no name. He was a feral cat. Feral means fierce, wild, and untamed, and a feral cat is descended from domestic cats, cats that may have once been little children’s pets, but that had strayed from home or been abandoned.

Willy was born on Rim Rock Ranch which is up North Creek, near Zion Park, in Southern Utah. When I moved onto the ranch as its new owner, I found a family of feral cats living in the great, weathered wood barn. When I went to the barn to milk the cows and to feed the cows, horses, and pigs, I would sometimes see the father of the family, a big, ugly, mottled yellow and white tom. He had large, shredded ears, ears that had been ripped and torn in many shrieking, yowling cat fights.

I would see him, every once in a while slipping ahead of me through an open barn door, or crouched on a beam high above my head. Yellow eyes gleaming and a knotted tail twitching. He looked like a miniature Siberian Tiger, and as I looked into his burning eyes, I felt slight vestiges of fear and a little bit quivery. I was glad, though wild, he was just a cat, not the great tiger he resembled.

The dam, the mother, had once been white, but she crawled under dirty barn floors and through dusty sagebrush until her fur was a dismal gray, and she always looked like she needed a good, soapy bath, but I knew she probably hated water, and would bite, scratch, and gouge anyone who touched her.

There were five kittens, three of them snowy white like their mother once had been, and two that were mottled yellow and white like their father, but one of the white kittens had a very black nose, perky ears, and a tail that formed a near perfect curve up over his back. Because he was so cute, curious, and almost friendly, I decided I would try to tame him. I need to note that I didn’t find out the kitten with the black nose was a male until he was full grown and decided to be my friend.

WILLY AT HOME

The feral cat family lived under the wooden floor of the tack room. A tack room is where, even now, ranchers, farmers, and other horsemen keep harnesses, saddles, bridles, blankets, and other horse gear. Sometime in the past, a big knot had broken away from a floor board, and the cats used the hole, where the knot had been, for a door to cover their cozy home.

I liked to have the cats in the barn, because they kept the mice and pack rats under control. The pack rats, looking like small bright eyed, short eared, long tailed rabbits, were especially troublesome. They not only ate the grain put out for the ranch animals and chickens, but they also carried away anything bright and shiny. Usually they replaced what they stole with a gift of their own. I have had them steal pounds and pounds of nails and replace them with a box full of pine cones.

I once moved a pile of lumber, and underneath the pile, I found a neat stack of pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters, more than five dollars worth. That was the only time I was grateful to pack rats. With the pack rat savings, I took my family to a movie, and bought them all popcorn and rootbeer.

Because the ranch house was made of logs and was about a hundred years old, it had many secret entrances that the pack rats delighted in using, and they must have been pilfering coins from off night stands for many years.

If we failed to clean up the kitchen counters and table tops, they would swipe anything else they could carry. One Christmas, they played the Grinch, and stole every ornament from off the Christmas tree. Those pack rats usually tried to make it a fair trade. There were, generally neat piles of pebbles, almond and apricot shells, or even some of our own nails, left in exchange. Once I stick my hand into my partly opened tool box, and felt the bite of something very, very sharp. I threw the lid back, and found all of my sockets gone. In their place was a pile of spiney chola cactus balls. When I had blindly put my hand in the box, it was like grabbing a porcupine by the tail.

No, I didn't like pack rats, and I was happy to have the cat family in my barn. In fact, I was so happy, I started to leave a large bowl of warm milk on the floor of the milk shed every night and morning. Within a few weeks, night and morning I saw the cats, including the old tom, out in the middle of the corral, sitting on the haunches, licking their chops, waiting for me to leave the milk shed.

Sometimes, before I took the milk to the house, I would stand back and watch them. The white kitten with the black nose was the bravest. He scampered right into the shed and up to the bowl, where he immediately started to lap up milk. Although the other kittens were more cautious, they wouldn't be far behind, then mom would pick her way across the corral, carefully survey the shed and finally push her way between her children, and begin to drink.

I never did see the tom go into the shed. I think he waited until he heard the corral gate slam shut, and when he would, I'm sure, get his share of the warm milk.

There is what has been called a food chain in nature. In that food chain, one organism preys upon another, one organism becomes the food for another. This serves two purposes; the one purpose, of course, is sustenance. The organism and its offspring must have food or starve to death. The other purpose is population control.

Organisms without enemies soon reach the point where their particular ecological niche will not support them. They eat all of the food, and in the process destroy the niche and themselves.

Mice and rats eat grains, grasses, and insects, plus all of the cake and cookies they can steal. Cats, foxes, and bobcats eat mice, rats, and wild rabbits, plus, in the small case of the foxes and wild cats, any small domestic animals including cats, tame rabbits, as well as chickens, ducks, and geese. Eagles and coyotes pry on all small animals, even domestic cats.

As the kittens grew, one by one they disappeared. By adulthood, only the white kitten with the black nose, and his mom and pop were all that were left. I think bob cats or coyotes got them, or eagles swooped down and carried them away.

However, I continue to put milk fresh from the cow, but the warm milk didn't make those feral cats tame. They still avoided me. Although the white cat with the black nose would sometimes sit and watch me as I worked around the corral and in the barn, he would not let me near him. If I tried to approach him, he would drop through the hole in the tackroom floor, or slop under a fence and away, or jump up the stacked bales of hay and disappear into a secret hide-a-way.

A FERAL CAT BECOMES MY FRIEND

One day, as I was walking to one of the upper fields to change the irrigation water, I heard the pleading yowl of a suffering cat. The cry came from a clump of willows at the edge of the first field.

I walked into the willows and found the white cat, with the black nose, caught in a small animal trap. The trap had gaping jaws, and was so designed that if an animal stepped on the pan in the center of it, the jaws would spring up and clamp around the animal's leg.

The trap was attached to a chair with in turn was fastened to a steel peg driven into the ground. One of my boys, trying to catch a gopher or a fruit and nut stealing squirrel, had set the trap.

The cat saw me pushing through the willows, and he yowled his plaintive cry again. As I kneeled beside him, I said, "Oh, you poor thing. That trap wasn't meant for you. I hope your leg is not broken."

I tentatively put out my hand, half expecting him to snarl, spit, and scratch, but he did none of those things. He didn't even shrink away from me as most animals would do, so holding him so he couldn't run away, I pushed down the springs of the trap, setting him free. Then I picked him up, cradled him in my arms, stroked him with my free hand, and crooned, "You poor kitten, I'm very, very sorry. I'll take you home and see about your leg."

I took him into the house, and held him on my lap, while my wife checked the injured leg, anointed it with a healing salve, and bandaged it. She said the leg was not broken, however the skin was lacerated, but the wounds would heal in a few days.

I took the cat to the barn, thinking I would turn him loose in that familiar place. I put him on a bale of hay, but the white cat, with the black nose did not seem to want to leave me. He held his injured leg up, arched his back under my hand, looked up at me and meowed. Though I didn't know how long he had been in the trap, I thought he was probably hungry and thirsty, so I told him, "I'll take you back to the house, and give you a bowl of milk."

I did so, taking cold milk out of gas refrigerator. He didn't mind the milk being cold, and lapped up a large bowl full.

While he was drinking, I told my wife, "I am going to name him Willy," and within a few weeks he answered to my call of "Willy!" He was no longer a feral cat. He was my good friend.

WILLY MEETS A DISTANT COUSIN

Willy became a house cat, and chose the corner of the living room couch for his particular domain. If, however, I sat on the couch, he would leave his corner, climb up on my shoulder, lick my ear with his raspy tongue, and purr. Sometimes I would have to take him off my shoulder because his tongue licking became obnoxious.

He also had the habit of flexing the toes on all four feet, and his claws would dig into my shoulder. I am sure he didn't mean to hurt me, but was just trying to be friendly. However, a fluffball of a cat sitting on one's shoulder, licking an ear, digging needle like claws into one's flesh, and purring like a buzz saw, is really a little bit more than one can take.

One evening, Willy was lounging in his corner of the couch, and I noticed him look to the top of some book shelves on the other side of the room. I followed his gaze and saw an animal, dressed up like a masked robber, surveying everyone in the room. He was a small animal, not much larger than Willy, but slim and brown, with a dark mask over his eyes. He had a long slender tail, ringed with black every inch or so. He actually looked like a skinny raccoon. It was a ring-tailed cat, technically known as a cacomistle. Actually the ring-tail is not a cat, but is a relative of the raccoon.

Generally, ring-tailed cats are very shy, and move rapidly. They are hard to observe, but this one let Willy and the family study him for several minutes before he disappeared up into the attic. Willy wasn't a bit afraid of him. Like me, he just sat there and watched.

The next evening, the ring-tail was back, so I decided to leave bits of meat and bread on top of the bookcase to entice him to visit us often. He came every morning for a month or more. Eventually he took food from out of my fingers.

He was a curious fellow, and would peer out over the bookcase, ears straight up, big eyes masked, but bright and alert, and his slender body and long tail made him look like he was at least three feet long. When he reached for the food, he would stretch out over the bookcase, half dangling, but claws securely anchoring him to the woodwork. And Willy watched him night after night, never nervous, never bothering him, but probably wondering, "What kind of cat is that?"

WILLY MEETS A REAL COUSIN

After Willy became a pet rather than a feral cat, he followed me wherever I went. At first he just pitter-pattered along behind me, but then he started to cry, short, quick, agitated meows. When I stopped, he would stand on his hind legs and stretch up my leg as far as he could reach, and he would meow and meow.

I knew, then, he wanted me to carry him. When I picked him up, he would crawl up my shoulder, and perch there, comfortable, watching the wonderful world flow by.

I was willing to carry him on short trips to the barn, or even out into the garden, but when I had to go to the head of the ditch to turn the water down, or to wade out into wet fields to make sure they were getting covered, he was a pest, so I would generally lock him in the house before I left.

Then the rascal became wise, and didn't make his presence known until we were too far away from the house for me to take him back.

One day I was going up to the north-east end of the ranch, right on the boundary of Zion Park, to mend a gate. I had cattle grazing in the Park, but some of them found

fields of alfalfa and corn more enticing than the shrubs and grasses of the Park, so it took a strong fence and gate to keep them where they were supposed to be.

I was hiking up trail, about mile from the house and a half mile from the fence and the Park boundary. I heard an irritating “meow, meow” behind; I looked back, and there was Willy trotting as fast as his short legs would take him. I stopped, waited for him. I called him a rascal and a baby, then picked him up.

As I again started on my way, he licked my ear, and I wanted to put him down and make him walk. If he had been a dog, I would have sent him home, but I didn’t know how to send a cat home.

When I got to the gate that needed repairs, I put Willy in the shade of a juniper tree, and went to work. The gate had wooden bars that had rotted over the years, and that had become too short for the opening. All the cattle had to do was rub up against them, and they would fall down. So, I had to cut more bars.

I found some juniper trees with long straight limbs, and with my ax, cut them down. After they were trimmed, I carried them to the gate.

I started to fit them between the uprights, which were actually four juniper posts, two on each side, stuck in the ground, with wires, wound between them that supported the bars, but Willy came up to me, and meowed, asking me to pick him up. I, talking as if the cat could understand, said, “Willy, I can’t pick you up now. I have work to do.” He ignored me, and stretched his body up my leg, meowing, trying to tell me, perhaps that we were in trouble.

Then I heard stones rattling, and I looked into the Park just as a bobcat came bounding up out of the creek. He had probably been drinking when something frightened him. He turned up the trail, and headed right for the gate where I and Willy were standing. Willy saw the bobcat coming. His hair fluffed out, and my hair stood on end, then climbed up my pant leg, across my chest, and up on my shoulder.

He hissed and screamed like a feral cat, but the bobcat kept coming. That bobcat, with his slanted eyes, long, tough whiskers, and short, bobbed tail, looked fierce and mean. I decided the best thing for Willy and myself was to get out of his way, and we did.

The bobcat, about as big as a middle sized dog, paid little attention to us once we got out of his way. He continued to lope up the trail until he disappeared around a bend. It took Willy fifteen minutes to return to normal size, and to quit yowling and spitting. That was one cousin he didn’t want to meet, all alone, at any time.

WILLY MEETS A COUSIN WITH GREAT, BIG TEETH

The place where the ranch took its water out of North Creek was up on the Park boundary. The brush, rock, and dirt dam that diverted the water, had been placed where the canyon narrowed to a width of about two hundred feet, and where a small, level, bench-like, strip of dirt and rock, left by a flood perhaps thousands of years ago, met the canyon floor. The bench was tucked up against a solid gray wall of Shinerump Sandstone.

That formation had once been the bottom of an enormous fresh water lake. Sand, pebbles, and even tree trunks, carried by great, ancient rivers, had settled on the bottom of the lake, and when the lake dried up, an adhesive chemical from the waters of encroaching oceans, settled around the sand, pebbles, and tree trunks, then heat and pressure turned the sand, pebbles, and tree trunks into very, very hard rock.

To walk over and around the Shinerump Sandstone, was an adventure in itself, because the pebbles that eroded out of the formation were mostly quartzite, a hard, glass-like material, of every color—pink, purple, white, gray, brown, and black. The pebbles had been buffed by abrasive sands until they were about one inch in size, and as smooth as polished marble. The tree trunks, that had been turned into petrified wood, were also very hard, and pink, gray, and black in color.

Where the petrified wood had eroded out of Shinerump formation, it looked like a crazy Paul Bunyon had been at work, because petrified chips of wood lay everywhere.

In some areas, the trunks of the great trees, some four feet in diameter lay as if they had just fallen, but they were now hard, hard rock, and some of the interiors of the trunks were layered with pure, crystal, diamond-like quartz, some clear, some pink, and some black.

When I viewed those bejeweled chunks of petrified wood for the first time, I thought I had stumbled upon Mother Nature's jewelry case.

A ditch to carry creek water, had been cut, sometimes in the past, across the bench and down the canyon to the thirsty fields and orchards below. There was a path that ran on top of the bank of the ditch, and the ditch and the path made many sharp turns around the abutments of the Shinerump.

A variety of trees, shrubs, ferns, and grasses turned the bench into a cool park-like retreat, and it wasn't unusual to find rattlesnakes, blow snakes, racers, and king snakes stretched across the path, enjoying the damp shade.

All kinds of animals used the path. Mule deer grazed in the cool shade. Mountain lions, or cougars, stalked the mule deer. Rabbits raced along the path, and bobcats chased the rabbits. Coyotes, foxes, skunks, weasels, and porcupines used the path as a highway to get where they wanted to go.

Early one summer morning, I had to go to the head of the ditch to turn in more water. I didn't see Willy when I left the house, so I thought I could get up to the dam, turn the water into the ditch, and get back to the house before he missed me. I was crossing the last field when he came trotting up behind me, meowing and complaining like I had deliberately gone off and left him.

I kept walking, shovel on my shoulder, but Willy wanted to take his place on the other shoulder, so after he had trotted, complained and cried for several hundred yards, I stopped and picked him up. He immediately climbed upon my left shoulder, gave me a lick on the ear, and then turned so that he could see where we were going, rather than where we had been.

We followed the ditch, skirting around the great Shinerump abutments. The last one poked out like the corner of a house. As I circled it, I came face to face with one of Willy's largest cousins. There, posed, one paw in the air, ready to take another step toward us, was the biggest mountain lion I had ever seen.

He was as surprised as I was. He pulled his lips up into a terrible snarl, and I thought, "I've had it, he is going to jump me." But, Willy let out a yowl, turned, jumped off my shoulder, and was gone. The mountain lion, perhaps frightened by Willy's yowl, turned and with great bounding leaps, raced up the canyon. I had a very frightened, little, white cat, with a black nose, racing for the safety of home, and a very startled, tawny, giant cat, with ivory daggers for teeth, racing for the safety of mountain peaks.

I ran out into the open canyon, and watched the lion climb up a steep trail that appropriately led to the top of Cougar Mountain. I turned more water into the ditch, walked back to the house, and found Willy curled up in his corner of the couch. I am sure he was happy being a hose cat, rather than a feral cat, and I was also sure, he did not want to meet any of his big, toothy, feral cousins.