

The Cat Pioneers



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The Cat Pioneers

The dark was deep on hill and vale
And I inclined to snore
When I responded to a hail
Outside my cabin door,
And in there stalked from outer gloom
A stately Thomas cat
As black as Wind Cave's deepest room,
With jaunty white cravat.

I bowed and, all impressed to see
His grooming sleek as silk,
With Western hospitality
Offered a drink - of milk.
He licked his chops with mien demure
And then the silence broke.
(I may have dozed, and yet I'm sure
That lordly Thomas spoke.)

"Your garb, sir, and your rude life here
In this sequestered heaven
Are like those of a pioneer
Of Eighteen Seventy-Seven.
That year of cats! That year of fame!
Of deathless memory!
When fifty cats to Deadwood came
From old Bismarck, D.T.

Ah, they were cats who feared no fate,
Cats of adventurous blood,
Real Western cats who'd emigrate
Through hardships, fight and flood,
Steamboating cats who voyaged far
To reach that river port
And trim and swagger cats of war
Who served about the fort.

Four hundred miles by plan and slope
They rode through dust and heat,
And gristly scraps of antelope
Were all they got to eat,
Yet with a pluck that did not cease,
That kept aloft each tail,
They bravely risked nine lives apiece,
Along the Black Hills trail.

When Deadwood town at last they made
 Their welcome was not cold.
Ten dollars each for them was paid
 In glittering dust of gold,
And they were drafted to afford
 The homesick miners cheer
Or guard the grocer's precious hoard
 Bull-freighted out from Pierre.

One talented young tiger tom
 Whose voice could charm the moon
Forgot the teachings of his mom
 And worked in a saloon.
There with a dissipated bunch
 Who swilled their midnight grogs,
He lapped up Tom and Jerry punch
 Till he went to the dogs.

But most soon won an honored place
 And raised the social tone
By that serene and subtle grace
 Peculiarly our own.
And swiftly grew their family trees.
 For cats believed and dealt
In large and frequent families
 Long before Roosevelt.

The hairy miner on a spree,
 Full of remorse and beer,
Gazed at a kitten on his knee
 And shed a scalding tear,
Then vowed to quit the maddening cup
 And mend his ragged life
And get a shave and straighten up
 And send and fetch his wife.

Thus were the wild Hills gentled, sir;
 The wanderers ceased to roam,
And round a cat's contented purr
 Built many a happy home,
And soon the Black Hills nights were gay
 With cattish carolings
From clothesline posts up Spearfish way
 To fences in Hot springs.

No more important episode
 Marked all those early years
Than that historic wagonloan
 Of feline pioneers,
For though the horse and dog were prized
 And praised for this and that,
Who made the Black Hills civilized?
 The cat, my friend, the cat!

I am the old breed down to date
 For in that wagon's straw
Rode my great-great-great-great-great-
 Great-great-great-grandmaw and paw.
Those Rovers I'm descended from
 And their blood rules me yet,
For though I am a gentle tom
 I'll be no household pet.

Along beneath the mystic dark
 I raid the pack rat's den
And range the woods of Custer park
 And shun the haunts of men,
So, pardner, you and I are peers
 And ere I leave you now,
We'll give three cheers for pioneers.
 Meeyow! Meeyow! Meeyow!"

Badger Clark
Skylines and Woodsmoke, 1935

Introduction

South Dakota's first poet laureate, Badger Clark, grew up in 1890's Deadwood, just two decades after the last great gold rush in America. By his day the streets were no longer a muddy quagmire, and the wooden shacks hastily thrown up in the heat of gold fever had been replaced with respectable - and hopefully fireproof - brick buildings. Still, there were charter members of the pioneer fraternity among the town's inhabitants who gladly related stories of the "bad old days" to eager young listeners who had missed all the fun. The poem relates a charming tale of historic Deadwood, but it seems that the story we have just heard is only one of many versions. Badger Clark knew better than most that yarns have a tendency to become embellished over the years. When describing the purported relationship between Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickock in Roderick Peattie's *The Black Hills*, he stated - perhaps somewhat ruefully - that "Just what kind of people they were, and what they were to each other doesn't matter. They are legends, and nobody worries about the factual details of a legend."¹

Perhaps the truth of the matter is therefore irrelevant, but as a historian I felt compelled to at least try to sort out the facts. Discrepancies that I encountered relate to the reason for the enterprise, the name of the freighter, the date, and even the origin of those cat pioneers.

Some accounts list Charlie Utter, the indomitable Deadwood pioneer and pal of Wild Bill Hickock, as the wagonmaster. The fact that he was a freighter by trade, lends

¹ Roderick Peattie. *The Black Hills*. (New York, 1935) p. 19

some credence to this scenario, though there seems to be no evidence one way or the other.

Cheyenne, Wyoming claims that the cats came from there, not Bismarck, as the poem relates. The city's website identifies the freighter as one Phatty Thompson but lists the year as 1887. An interesting twist from the folks at the Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce: the cats arrived on the Deadwood Stage!²

The April 2006 issue of *Deadwood Magazine* has the date a year earlier than does Badger Clark = 1876³ and even goes so far as crediting the episode for spawning the word "cathouse" - while acknowledging the total lack of proof for such an assertion.

The Dean of Black Hills historians, Watson Parker, doesn't mention the year but does identify Cheyenne as the point of origin and Phatty Thompson as the enterprising freighter.⁴

A September 3, 1879 obituary contradicts all of the above: "Alexander Davidson, of Denver, Col, died Aug. 24. Mr. D. will be remembered as the man who, during the fall of 1876, brought a load of cats from Denver to this place."⁵

In light of these discrepancies, it seems likely that the great cat migration of Badger Clark's poem occurred on several occasions and at the hands of more than one entrepreneur. But there is little doubt that *somebody* brought cats to Deadwood during the gold rush years, made a profit, and changed the history of the town.

² *Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage*. www.cheyenne.org

³ Dustin D. Floyd. *Busted!* *Deadwood Magazine*, May 2006.

⁴ Watson Parker. *Deadwood, the Golden Years*. (Lincoln, NE. 1981) p. 95.

⁵ Black Hills Daily Times. P. 4, Col. 2.

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During Deadwood's salad days, just about anything that could be had in the states was also available in Deadwood Gulch - for a price. With shipments of 150,000 pounds of freight bound for a single merchant in one day in 1878 (and over a million pounds delivered that same week)⁶ one would think there might have been room for a few cats. Such was apparently not the case however. Feverish gold miners had no use for families, let alone pets, and didn't plan to stay anyway after making their big strike. But whether home-sickness or a local rat infestation were the deciding factors, the need for cats soon came to the fore. With shipments from Cheyenne taking anywhere from twenty to thirty days,⁷ this was obviously a job for some wildcat freighter who could travel light and fast.

Unfortunately, solitary wagons setting out for the Hills from *any* direction in the summer of 1876 were subject to Indian attack, and most independents found it prudent to cool their heels in a likely staging area until enough wagons had accumulated to provide protection. This makes it unlikely that a lone wagonload of cats journeying to the Hills could have succeeded before the fall of 1876, when more miners were flowing out of the hills than into it. This date is corroborated by a nearly unimpeachable source: Deadwood's first sheriff.

Seth Bullock's account of Deadwood in 1876 places the arrival of a "spring

⁶ Irma Klock. *All Roads Lead to Deadwood*. (Lead, SD. 1979) p. 9.

⁷ Agnes Wright Spring. *The Cheyenne and Deadwood Stage Routes*. (Lincoln, NE. 1948) p. 172.

wagon load of house cats” in October of that year. He identifies the freighter only as a “speculator from Cheyenne” who charged \$15 to \$25 apiece on the first crate-load of cats, but suffered the loss of the remaining cargo when an obvious cat-lover liberated those still awaiting the auction block.⁸

However uncommon this event must have been, it was not recorded in the local paper until long after the fact. The first mention came in the June 11, 1877 issue of the *Black Hills Daily Times*, when a letter to the editor suggested importing some cats. I quote the letter and the editor’s response in full because the writing style is so delightfully florid, and the libel laws apparently quite forgiving in those days:

“We have sometimes wondered why some enterprising, speculative individual had not yet thought of importing a load of cats to the Black Hills. An ordinary freight wagon could be partitioned off so as to carry with ease and safety two hundred cats. These cats could be obtained with little or no cost in any of the towns along the Missouri river, and they would find a ready market here at an average price of ten dollars each. The man who has the sagacity and nerve to bring a load of cats into the Black Hills can lay claim to having struck a rich feline lode. Champion.

“Mr. Champion you are behind the times. That enterprising individual imported a load of cats last fall, that were auctioned here to the highest bidder on Main Street. You say these cats could be procured in any town along the Missouri river. Ah, you have friends there in the cat trade, have you? Why not say that they could be procured in Denver, San Francisco, or New York? It is evident sir, that you have a corner on these cats, or else you have an interest in some boot-jack manufactory.”⁹

Less than two months later, the Times reported that “there is a fellow on the road

⁸ Seth Bullock. “An Account of Deadwood and the Northern Black Hills in 1876”. (Pierre, 1962) p 357.

⁹ Black Hills Daily Times. June 11, 1877. P. 1, Col. 3.

to Deadwood with a load of cats.”¹⁰

But there is more to this story than meets the eye. The purported “letter to the editor”, was apparently a reprint from the Black Hills *Champion* (published for about six months in 1877 by Sioux City newspaperman and early Black Hills booster, Charles Collins)¹¹ and the response was a chance to take a dig at the competition’s ignorance.

Collins got the last laugh, however. The August 6, 1877 edition of his own paper, trumpeted his successful campaign to attract cats with the following announcement,

“Mr. Tuller, of Sioux City, having read the CHAMPION article on the scarcity of cats in the Black Hills, and the speculations to be derived by importing them here, has loaded up one hundred of them of all ages, sizes and quality, and is now on his way here. Another party in Cheyenne also acted on our suggestion, and is bringing in a load. There’ll be music in the air, and cat-er waul in hair when these feline marauding free lunchers arrive here.”¹²

By September 14th of 1877 the cat population had apparently grown sufficiently to merit a headline in the paper referring to the “Mew-sic by the Band”. Alas, only the tantalizing headline remains of this issue so we are left to merely ponder the content of the article.

Perhaps a clue is included in Watson Parker’s delightful telling of the story:

“...Phatty betook himself to Cheyenne, built a crate on his wagon, and let

¹⁰ Black Hills Daily Times. August 1, 1877. P. 4, Col. 1

¹¹ Thadd Turner. <http://www.oldwestalive.com/id32.html>
Bob Lee. Gold - Gals - Guns - Guts. (Deadwood. 1976) p. 61.

¹² Black Hills Champion. August 6, 1877. P. 1, Col. 4

it be known among the boys of the city that he would pay twenty-five cents for cats in sound and merchantable condition. He got eighty-two of them, miaowing and caterwauling, and set out for the Hills. All went well until he got past Hill City, where, on the first crossing of Spring Creek, the wagon tipped over and the cats escaped, but kindly prospectors assisted Phatty in recapturing them in return for a cat or two for themselves. When he got the load to Deadwood, he sold the animals to the merchants and dancehall girls for a ten dollar minimum, with fine Maltese cats going as high as twenty-five dollars. Stories that he trained a sextet of tomcats to sit on a fence and yodel by feeding them Swiss cheese were invented by George W. Stokes. Phatty's success, however, aroused much jealousy in the community, and after his first day's business some rascal liberated his remaining stock of cats, and they were never recovered."¹³

Ellis T. Peirce in Brown and Willard's *Black Hills Trails* adds that in their zeal the boys of Cheyenne had confiscated at least one beloved family pet, with predictable results. When the cat's owner discovered her loss, she sent her husband, a hulking German brewer, to reclaim him. Phatty, apparently a good sized specimen himself, claimed to have paid for the cat fair and square and the two seemed bent on coming to blows when passers-by interfered. According to Peirce, the matter was settled when "a compromise was made whereby the German got his wife's pet and Phatty was out the purchase price."

Apparently there was a similar cat shortage during the California gold rush.

According to the Mount Shasta history website:

"a cat could be had for \$6. The price of cats says a great deal about the abundance of vermin. Mice and rats ate into profits ---literally--- and carried disease. A cat was a blessing in such a place, and kittens were frequent imports from the Eastern states, sometimes travelling (sic) by rail so long that they were

¹³ Parker. P. 95

nearly grown when they were finally sold.”¹⁴

Further proof of the importance of cats to early-day Deadwood appeared in the January 25, 1878 paper, in this tongue-in-cheek piece headlined “Corner on Cats”

“The prevalence of cats in the city of Deadwood, and the scarcity of the feline tribe has caused the latter to be much in demand, especially among our warehouse men and merchants. It is reported that the agent of N.S.S. &T. Co. not having the fear of man or God before his eyes, added a fine specimen of the tribe to his already large stock on hand. The aforesaid feline in this case happened to belong to a lady well known in theatrical circles, who after searching for many days for her lost Thomas in vain, was informed this morning that it was in the possession of the aforesaid gentleman.

“She immediately hied her to his office and demanded her pet, but the soft impeachment was denied, and she went mournfully away, thinking to herself the biblical quotation, “All men are liars.”¹⁵

A followup article was less bantering: “The company estimates that the mice, before the advent of the cats, destroyed from ten to twenty dollars worth of goods per day.”¹⁶

Reports of cat shipments continued to appear throughout the gold rush period.

“The proprietors of the Big Horn store have a batch of little kittens, and they have already promised about two hundred of their customers each one of them, and now they don’t know exactly what to do. There are only half-a-dozen kittens and two hundred owners, but Mr. Goldberg intends to get out of his dilemma by having the promised parties draw lots for them. The drawing will take place Saturday.”¹⁷

¹⁴ http://www.siskiyouhistory.org/1875_story2.html. Siskiyou County Sesquicentennial Committee. Mount Shasta, California

¹⁵ Black Hills Daily Times. January 25, 1878. P. 4, Col. 2.

¹⁶ Black Hills Daily Times. January 30, 1878. P. 4, Col. 1.

¹⁷ Black Hills Daily Times. April 4, 1878. P. 1, Col. 4

I am inclined to believe that Jake Goldberg acquired his felines the old fashioned way rather than imported in crates, because a later newspaper notice (1880) stated,

“The enterprising firm of Mattheisen & Goldberg, yesterday received a new invoice of cats. As soon as they get their first sight, the holiday of the playful mouse will come to an abrupt terminus.”¹⁸

In January of 1878 a newspaper announcement read: “A couple of thoroughbred Maltese cats were among the freight on the Bismarck stage last night.”¹⁹ Perhaps these felines were too high-toned for the rough and ready miners of Deadwood Gulch. Two weeks later they were still needing new homes. “A choice lot of cats at the Bismarck office. For age, size and color, call on the agent”.²⁰

Could these have been the subject of Badger Clark’s poem? It’s the wrong year, but they did come from Bismarck. Or perhaps the cowboy poet was merely exercising a bit of poetic license, since “eight” is hard to rhyme with “heaven”.

In any case, there seems to be no question that cats played a role in early-day Deadwood. But it had been many years between the time Badger first heard the story and when he set it down on paper, and longer still since the event took place. Other chroniclers of Deadwood’s early days also suffered from the distance of time - and memory - in relating historic events.

So whether they came from Bismarck, Sioux City, Cheyenne or Denver, and whether the freighter was Alexander Davidson or Phatty Thompson, or some unnamed

¹⁸ Black Hills Daily Times. August 26, 1880. P. 4, Col. 2

¹⁹ Black Hills Daily Times. January 24, 1878. P. 4, Col. 1.

²⁰ Black Hills Daily Times. February 4, 1878. P. 4. Col 1.

hero, the demand was met - on more than one occasion - and thus provided a service to early pioneers in Deadwood Gulch. But they also furnished a beguiling anecdote to add to the rich lore of Deadwood's gold rush heritage.

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