

# Ava's Cats

by Alice Poling Good



sketch by Kalon Baughan, the author's grandson

*Those of you who have had any experience at all with kids who love animals will identify with this story by guest columnist Alice Poling Good.*

I looked down the long lane as I huddled over the kitchen sink. Dark grey clouds hovered and reflected in the puddles. I know why the Indians called this area “the great black swamp.” The ridge was the only trail they could follow in the area as the rest is a muddy mire, even today. There is no more sun getting through now than when the maple and tall beech stood in their primeval forest.

Why had Paul and I come to this godforsaken farm? Oh yes, we thought it the best place to raise our children. Here we could more easily teach them through nature the cherished values of life we had learned in early years, and we could have our beloved animals freely.

The kitchen door banged open. There stood Ava, now a charming young woman but still more like her father than any of our three children.

I thought again she should have been a boy; she now looked the part. Her dad's old battered Stetson was pulled down on her head, a discarded brown rain jacket hugged her shoulders and her cherished gum boots of long past 4-H days dripped on the linoleum. Her head lowered, she peered into a tenderly held bundle. Raising her moist brown eyes to me, she said in a trembling voice, “Look, Mom, I found it in the barn.” She carefully pulled away a bit of the old gunnysack. There, snuggled in her arms, lay a bedraggled, half-grown kitten. And in Ava's eyes, I saw a struggle to accept the inevitable.

Ava was born to us late in life, two years after we had come to ArtAnnA Farm at Van Wert, Ohio. She quickly responded to the sights and sounds of country living. With help from our two teenagers and her adoring parents, she learned early to mimic the sounds of all the animals, much to the delight of her audience. Before she walked, she would perch in the saddle in front of her dad, on Rose, our Arabian mare. They rode the pastures together, checking first the springing heifers, then cows with calves and the bulls. They waded the creek, they saw scurrying squirrels in the hickory orchard as well as groundhogs and rabbits scampering off into the distance.

She tumbled with Jacque, the big Labrador retriever. We introduced her to the first and each successive baby Suffolk lamb. She saw the new calves put through the chutes and tattooed and watched while the sick received medication with the boiling gun and the hypodermic needle.

Of all the farm creatures, she loved kittens most. Endeavors failed to keep her from taming and cuddling these unsanitary animals. She'd catch a wild and elusive barn cat and make it her special companion.

Because she was so often scratched and bitten, Dr. Jarvis dourly warned us of cat-bite fever and worms. We had made a special ruling: Farm animals were to live in the barn. But when it came to cats, the current favorite slept in the doll bed, wore doll clothes, ruined a corner of the new carpet and shared Ava's food. It snuggled under a coat or into a big apron pocket, unknown to anyone except its benefactor.

After a number of forbidden trips from barn to house, the currently favored kitten soon found its way across the drive. Sweeping it into her arms, she'd say, “I didn't get the kitten. It came to the house all by itself.”

A number of these cherished pets met disaster as unsuspecting drivers entered the barnyard. If an adult discovered the little form, he would carry it to the woods for burial. Less pain ensued than if Ava had found it first. We tried to comfort her with such statements as, “Accidents will happen,” or “Mike couldn't help it”. Others would say, “We're glad it wasn't you”, or “All creatures must die”.

One bright summer day, our child, a strong petite tomboy of four, stood in the doorway. Solemn-faced tears rolled down her cheeks. With a grubby brown hand, she pushed the hair back from her face. In the other hand, she cradled a covered bundle.

I took one look at her and said, “Ava Kay, what is wrong?”

In a quivery voice, she sobbed, “Someone hit my kitty with a car and it's dead. Daddy said we'll have a funeral. He asked you to get me a box.”

I went to the back porch. From my store of hoardings I retrieved a shoe box big enough to hold a kitten. Also from the collection, I gave her a little blue silk scarf. The box made a lovely casket for her beautiful grey pet, its tiny paws resting peacefully on the . . . Quiet tears streamed down her cheeks. She turned to go to her daddy with her burden.

I stepped outside the back door. There at the edge of the barn yard marched Paul in shirt sleeves and gum boots, Stetson cocked back on his head and a shovel over his shoulder. Ava followed close behind, head up, with the shoe box in her arms. Two voices sang, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” **A**