Origin of the cat

CATS

rapid reader

The history of and the possible origin of the cat of today's hearth is probed.

by Henry H. Sheldon



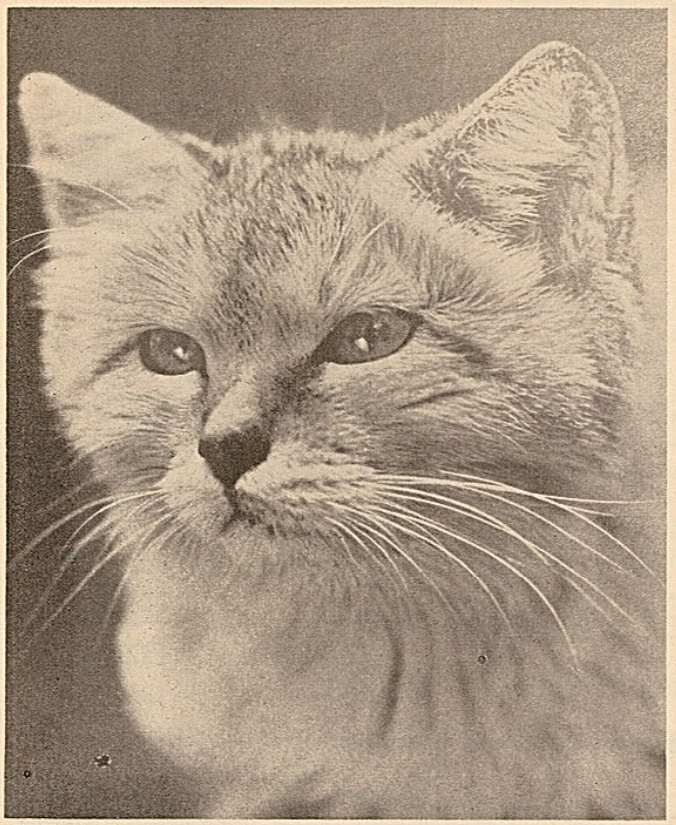
This is a question to stump the experts. And even science is baffled to name the exact species from which the cat descended. For that matter, there are few of our animal species whose ancestry can be traced by the scientist, who is usually confronted with large gaps in the chain of evolution. Even homo sapiens keeps the anthropologists guessing in their quest to find the exact answer to man's beginning.

Some writers claim that the domestic cat is not a descendant of the wildcat. They believe this because every time attempts have been made to crossbreed wild and domestic cats the results have been disappointing. The domestic cat can be mated to the wildcat of the jungle, with the Asiatic cat, and even with the lynx; but the offspring of these different "marriages" usually die very young, and have never been able to produce offspring themselves.

This is all very clear and factual up to a point, but certainly does not justify the assumption that our domestic cat could have evolved by some spiritual magic rather than by the way that all domestic animals have come to be; descendants of feral ancestry. Writers of this kind of reasoning have not taken into account the untold thousands of generations which have succeeded since puss was developed from the jungle cat. A great deal can happen to a species as it is subjected to thousands of years of geologic changes. It often takes Mother Nature a long time to make a mountain out of a molehill. For example, she was about forty million years in the development of the horse, one of the few animals whose anatomical characteristics have held true to identify it as far back as evidence reveals. It began a tiny equine about the size of a fox which had four toes, and its habitat was the jungle. The environment changed with the ages, and likewise the horse changed, though the tooth pattern, which chiefly identified, was never lost, nor was the seed for its continued existence.

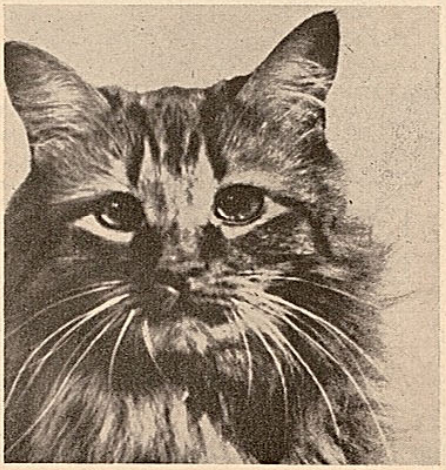
Since man threw away his club and started using his brain, he has made considerable progress toward domesticating various animal species. He favored the lithe and flexuous grace of the cat and lured it from the jungle to his hearth. Eventually

(Please turn the page.)



Photograph upper left-hand corner, a full grown bobcat.

Photograph at left depicts the rare, wild, dune cat of the Karakum and Pattakum deserts.



Tamed for centuries, the cat pictured at right is quite like his wild brothers.

The Museum of Aquarium & Pet History

Continued from preceding page . . . .

Origin

the cat was to become in great esteem with the Egyptians, who loved, idolized, and even worshipped it in the form of a goddess, the goddess Pasht, which had the head of a cat and a woman's body. The Egyptians embalmed their cats at death.

Some time later, as man's intellect expanded to the extent that he gained the knowledge of what constituted a species, he began to experiment with the breeding of the various animals which he had domesticated. In recent **times his** play with genetics has resulted in the production of some amazing breeds, which in most instances have been developed to the improvement, in one way or another, of the species. By the method of selective breeding, broadly speaking, man can tie a knot in a pig's tail, shorten its head, lengthen its body, and girdle it with a pretty band of white. In another way he has created from the mink mutant a variety of pastel shades to satisfy the whim of milady and her ever changing fashions in fur.

Thus today the domestic cat has been changed as a product of man's ingenuity. I do not mean that he has developed new species. The interior of the cat and its skeletal makeup are changed only by the influence of nature. Man has simply given the cat a new coat; a Persian coat, a Siamese coat, an "Ancora," Maltese, and the sacred cat of Burma, that gorgeous one wearing white gloves on its paws. There are cats with eyes like turquoise, and some like gold; some brighter than topaz, and another with the green glint of emeralds. This is not all; it is just to name a few of the outstanding breeds which quite certainly have originated from some fine species of the jungle.

To satisfy the skeptics, the original species of the jungle could have long since passed to extinction, which could be the answer to why the offspring of a mating with the domestic cat and the jungle cat of today might be incapable of reproduction.

The fabulous cat, like its origin, is inscrutable. ★



Look like a domestic shorthair? It isn't! Pictured above is the wildcat of Central Europe. It is probably a progenitor, far removed, of our tabby cat.



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