

A BURMESE IS A BURMESE IS A BURMESE . . .

Charlotte Smiley

Transported from the mysterious Far East, to the exotic San Francisco apartment of the late Dr. Joseph G. Thompson, quite an exotic in his own right, came little Wong Mau, "Mother Eve" to probably 90% of the Burmese in the United States today. All still trace to her, even though some newer Burmese blood has since been introduced.

Dr. Thompson was a Navy Medical Officer. He spent a great deal of time with scientific expeditions to remote places, and had a reputation with Biologists through his work on marine fauna. Upon retirement from the Navy, he became a successful practicing psychiatrist in San Francisco. The fact that he had a reputation for certain striking eccentricities such as slave bracelets, haori coats, etc., was largely a method of self advertising at a time when the "couch" of the psychiatrist was not the well known panacea that it is today.

It is said that Dr. Thompson obtained Wong Mau from Frank "Bring 'em Back Alive" Buck, famous wild animal collector, and that the cat was an exhibit at a native carnival in Rangoon. (The late Billie Gerst, who took over Dr. Thompson's stock at his death, also told of seeing a pair in an Indian exhibit at the Chicago Exposition in the '30's). Early breeders believed that Wong Mau was a "sport", or a Siamese mutation. It is now believed that she had been stolen from a remote temple, and was indeed the little "Rajah" cat described by Major Finch in his article in Cats Magazine in the January 1948 issue.

According to Major Finch, who also brought a Burmese to the States, a little female called "Simbuni," Malay word meaning Mysterious, the presumption that the Burmese, or "Rajah" as it is called in the native temples is not a known breed is distinctly in error.

Major Finch was an Army Officer stationed in the China-Burma-India Theatre during World War II. During this time, he visited Buddhist temples in Prome and Mandalay, and saw the most beautiful Burmese cats in the world. In each case they were the personal pets of the head priest or abbot, and were referred to as "the Rajahs." To each Rajah was assigned a young student priest, whose duty it was to see that every whim and fancy was indulged. In his conversations with the old priests, he was assured that the Rajah, or Burmese, was an accepted Royal pet long before the Siamese cat honored the Court of Siam. They were treasured by the old Burmese Kings, and in the Royal Palace they also were treated as Royalty.

One of the interesting beliefs held by the Rajah fanciers in Burma is that Siamese developed from an Albino Burmese pair imported from Burma. According to Major Finch, this belief in Burma was universal with those who were familiar with the two breeds, including the owners of the Burmese sire and dam of Simbuni, on whose estate the Major had been a guest. This is an interesting switch from the theory sometimes advanced that the Burmese is a "brown" Siamese.

Apparently there is no record of descendants of Simbuni, but it is an entirely different story with Dr. Thompson's Wong Mau. Of necessity, she was bred to the nearest Malay cat type available, a Siamese male.

At the time of her acquisition, Wong Mau was thought to be a pure bred Burmese. One of her parents must have been a true breeding Burmese, according to Mendelian theory. Descriptions and photographs of Wong Mau supplied by Billie Gerst indicate that she was a rather small cat, fine boned, but with

a more compact body than that of a Siamese, with shorter tail, a rounded short muzzled head, with greater width between rounded eyes. Her ears were large and erect. She showed no muzzle pinch. She appears in her pictures as a dainty, oriental looking cat, with neither the cobbliness of a Domestic Short Hair, nor with the exaggerated length and raciness of a Siamese. There is a diversity of opinion regarding her eye color, some say golden, others indicate a turquoise. Some mention a locket, in other reports it has been skipped, if it existed. All agree that she had darker brown points (legs, tail, ears and mask) than her body color. Photographs indicate the dark points, proving little Wong Mau a Siamese-Burmese hybrid.

From Wong Mau's first mating, two types of kittens resulted, one typical Siamese in every respect, the other type thought to be Burmese, as they were replicas of Wong Mau, dark brown in color, with dark points, and were sold as such at fancy prices. Needless to say, they did not breed true. When one of these brown pointed offspring was mated back to his dam, three types of kittens resulted, some Siamese, some brown with points and some solid brown, with little or no contrast in ears, tail, feet or mask. When these solid brown cats were mated together, only solid brown kittens resulted.

For a completely abbreviated genetical explanation, it can be said that a Burmese carries only brown genes, and a Burmese mated to a Burmese can reproduce only Burmese offspring — a solid brown cat. We know that if we mate a Siamese to a Siamese we always get Siamese kittens. It is equally true in the case of the pure-bred Burmese — like begets like.

Possibly no cat has created such controversies, nor had so many learned biologists and geneticists analyzing and experimenting with its genetical composition. Its status as a breed, not as a new breed, but as the restoration of a breed, as we now know, are set forth in the Journal of Heredity, (Organ of the American Genetic Association) Washington, D. C. Vol. XXXIV No. 4 (April, 1943), entitled "Genetics of the Burmese Cat." Authors are Joseph G. Thompson, Virginia C. Cobb, Clyde E. Keller and Madeleine Dmytryk. Briefly, after innumerable experiments, it was determined and recognized that the Burmese belonged to a hitherto unknown true breeding variety. In 1934 it was proposed to the Cat Fanciers Association that the Burmese be recognized as a new breed for Show purposes. In 1936 they were eligible for registration in the Stud Book. But, despite the evidence submitted by noted authorities, as to the true status of the Burmese as a true-breeding, separate cat variety, there were some breeders who maintained that it was essential that Siamese blood be re-introduced every three years — the reason for this statement being rather obscure — at least in the light of modern Burmese breeding programs. Naturally CFA could not countenance such procedure, and in the ensuing controversy, the Burmese were denied the privilege of registration. It was not until 1953 that the Burmese were reinstated, and again acceptable for registration.

Possibly it was the best thing that could have happened, as it forced right thinking breeders to set and maintain high standards. No one who purchases a pair of Burmese today will be confronted with the shock of hybrid kittens, the natural concomitant of the "Siamese re-introduction" myth.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion in the minds of the ordinary breeder as to just what constitutes a Breed. Zoologists classify animal life in minute detail, but suffice to say in the final analysis all known kinds of beasts are divided into Species and Sub-Species. In nature, these ordinarily interbreed more or less freely.

Those who have made no special study of animal life are inclined to confuse the natural **Species** with the domesticated **Breed**. Some of the disparaging remarks directed toward Burmese by fanciers of longer domestically cultivated varieties would lead one to believe that their own breed of cat preceded Noah out of the Ark. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Even the origin of our other domestic animals is veiled in the obscurity of antiquity, subject to diverse theories. The origin of the cat is clouded with the maximum in obscurity, mystery as well as superstition.

Much evidence has been accumulated to prove that several wild Species have gone into the making of our present domesticated cats. No typical "Best in Show" Persian in ancient days swept into the Palace of the Shah — no BOC Abyssinian stopped at the Nile for a drink before resuming its pedestal in Amon-Ra's temple, no Show type Russian Blue galloped over the snowy Russian steppes.

Many times new Burmese breeders have been heard to say that they would like to go to the Orient and return with a "native" Burmese cat. According to experts, familiar with Far Eastern psychology, the native "breeder" is a violent individualist, and did he have an archtype Burmese, would be utterly dissatisfied until he had produced an animal that differed from all other Burmese, aiming for individual peculiarities that his animals possessed, resembling no others.

This characteristic could account for the fact that few Burmese cats which have been imported are identical, other than in a general way. Point of origin, body and eye color are usually the same, but not always. This also explains in part why none of more recent imports owned by show-minded exhibitors have ever entered their animals in shows, nor have they ever been placed on exhibition, even though they would be a maximum attraction to so many.

When the word Breed is used by the naturalist, it refers to a large group of animals possessing to a recognizable degree similarity in type, size and color. The selections is presumably natural, influenced by environment and nutrition. Naturalists have catalogued thirty-five breeds of Cats: innumerable varieties.

When the Cat Fancier refers to a Breed, it is as applied to highly restricted, controlled breeding, as specified by the Show Rules of the Cat Fanciers Association. Our present Show Cats, be they Long Hair, or Short Hair, reflect the painstaking, selective breeding programs of countless, hard working breeders, who have given unstintingly of time and money to achieve a continuing increase in perfection. The Burmese cat is no exception — Burmese breeders are perhaps more dedicated than most to the improvement and advancement of the Burmese — particularly in view of their earlier set back.

CFA had the first good Burmese Standard, one that called for a cat far different from a brown Siamese type. Show Rules indicate exactly what is required. Rounded head, chest and eyes, of a golden hue, the deeper the color the better. Any trace of blue would rightly disqualify — and the almond shape and slant, so desirable in Siamese, is a fault. The profile shows an indentation. The body is dainty, but compact. When light shines directly into a Burmese eye, a turquoise color is reflected. With Siamese there is a red glow. In judging Burmese classes, a judge should be particularly careful to be sure that direct sun or artificial light is not distorting good golden eye color. According to Dr. Duval Jaros, breeder of both Siamese and Burmese, and one of the Bay area's distinguished eye specialists, there is still another difference in the Burmese eye as compared to that of the Siamese. Burmese have the

C.F.A. YEAR BOOK, 1958

ability to see out of the side, or corner of the eye, a faculty which the Siamese does not have. This probably accounts for the Burmese exceptional alertness.

In color, the Burmese is a rich, warm, seal brown, with a glistening shine like that of slipper satin. There is no color resemblance to the dull, blackish brown of earlier specimens. Peggy Ball, from whose Regal Cattery stem many of the All American winners today, believed this unattractive color, with its lack of warmth, was due to insufficient Burmese to Burmese breeding. Certainly it is a color very seldom seen in Burmese classes today. An extraordinary "velvet coat" mentioned by early Burmese fanciers seems to be lost. Presumably it would resemble in texture and length the quality of imported English "Rex" coated cats — without the curl. Major Finch, however, did not believe that this velvet coat was part of the genetic inheritance of the Burmese.

The Burmese is a small cat. Some have claimed that the breed is subject to "dwarfism." According to the Finch article, it is stated that the native Burmese are the smallest cats in the world. Modern breeders are likely to agree. Burmese are again appearing as smaller cats.

The disposition of the Burmese is so superlative that there be no "odious" comparisons. Quiet, gentle, playful, loving, companionable, intelligent, gorgeously decorative, inherently non-destructive, fearless, "almost" obedient, they are the real sociable extroverts of the cat family.

Their main requirement, actually a must — is your affection.
