



Florence Wildes, 1920-2008

Forever Remembered

By Rosemary Aney

I got to know Florence Wildes about 3 years ago when I started going to “the farm”, a piece of property that Florence had donated to the Carl W. Nelson Animal Shelter.

Florence was 85 years old when I met her. She fed and cared for the cats that lived at the farm so I would often run into her as I worked around the property. At first I think she was a bit suspicious of me. Maybe she thought I would take the cats, or worse, have them disposed of. Discarded and left homeless by thoughtless people, many of the cats had medical issues: fleas, intestinal parasites, eye infections. She watched as I treated them with medication and some TLC, and I believe she started to trust me after that.

Florence and I quickly formed a friendship based on our fierce love for the cats. Her arthritis caused her to sit and rest a lot, so we would sit and visit, mostly about cats, whenever I was at the farm. She would always thank me for helping her, but we both knew in our hearts that it was not about her, and it was not about me, it was about the cats that needed us both.

Florence was already very frail when I met her. Barely weighing 100 pounds, she had severe arthritis of the spine, and though she did her best for the cats, a trip to the vet with a heavy cat carrier was more than she could manage. I would gently suggest that a certain cat needed to see a vet, and offer to take it for her. If the cat was adoptable, I would ask her permission to find it a home after it was healthy again. She was always happy when we placed a cat, knowing that its life would be much better in a home than on the farm. The adoptive family sometimes sent me

pictures of the cat in its new home, and I would share them with Florence. There we would sit, like 2 proud parents beaming at a high school graduation picture, knowing we had done all we could to give the cat a better life.

One day Florence showed me her elaborate feeding ritual. “Just in case I turn up my toes”, she said. Florence said that most people would think that she was just a “silly old cat lady”, but she knew that I understood her need to offer the best to her friends and was not embarrassed to tell me about the special “soup” she prepared for them, the special treat that “Mama Kitty” got, or the milk that was placed in strategic spots in the barn,. I understood her. She understood me. Our common love for the cats was the bond that brought us, and held us, together. Our nearly 30-year age difference did not matter. We were soul mates. Two unlikely comrades, united in our own small battle against the suffering.

Wind, rain, snow, and sub-zero temperatures could not keep Florence from caring for her cats. Florence grew even more frail as time passed, and it became more and more difficult for her to care for them. When winter blew in, the shelter did what it could to help by plowing a path to the shed where the cats lived, and shoveling the sidewalk to keep it free of ice.

I knew Florence was growing weaker when she allowed me to get things out of the house for her so she would not have to make the agonizing climb up the steps into the house. As she grew visibly weaker, she repeatedly asked me to take care of the cats if “I turn up my toes”. Of course, I promised.

I visited Florence when she was ill, and it struck me that for the first time Florence was totally helpless and dependant on the doctors and nurses to care for her, just as hundreds of helpless animals had depended on her in her lifetime. Florence never turned her back on any living creature that needed help, and there are many, many animals that have had a better life because of her.

The cats still wait for her to turn up the drive, honking her horn to announce dinnertime. If you go there about the time that Florence usually did, you will see them watching for her, than quickly disappear in disappointment when they realize it is not her. We have set up a feeding schedule and shelter volunteers make sure they have food and water every day. It is not the smorgasbord that she lovingly prepared, but it will sustain them. They miss her. I miss her.

Shelter members will forever remember Florence as a lady with a heart of gold, and a determination to help all living creatures. She believed the world would be a better place if only we try to make a difference. She made a difference in my life. I hope I made a difference in hers. Her legacy will live on in the work that the Carl W. Nelson Animal Shelter does for Juneau County’s forgotten animals.

Many pet lovers are familiar with a story called ‘The Rainbow Bridge’, a touching story that gives pet lovers the hope that they will meet their departed pets again. I like to think that Florence is at the bridge right now, reunited with Doris, Tillie, Sweetie Pie, Stubby, and all the others. Goodbye friend, take good care of them.