

Free Preview
Blackie and the Long Beach Milling Company

Being a milling company there were thousands of sacks of wheat, barley, corn and oats stacked in the huge warehouse. One might guess that all this grain would bring rats and mice galore and naturally we populated the warehouse with cats by the dozens to take care of this situation. These cats entertained us all, and lovingly fed milk by the warehousemen who felt the felines needed a supplement to their rodent diet.

In September 1939, the company experienced a horrific fire in the middle of the night. It centered in the warehouse and the fire department had a hard time soaking mountains of flaming sacks of grain. It made a horrible mess and a terrible smell. Finally, after two weeks of insurance company red tape, we were allowed to begin cleaning up. I must admit the smell of sour, wet grain nearly did me in.

The night of the fire every cat left. Blackie was the only cat that had the courage to return. Some may have sneaked back and decided they could not stand such a smelly place, not knowing as we did that time eventually would change things. But they never came back. From then on, every cat and kitten was related to Blackie and she ruled the warehouse like a queen. No strange male cat was ever allowed in the place. She made her visits to the outside world when and where she pleased but she did not permit any friends into the warehouse.

As the years passed, the warehouse gradually became well populated with Blackie's progeny. Blackie was a stern but protective mother. When clients brought in dogs to the store attached to the warehouse, Blackie made sure they kept away from any kittens. Three times she attacked a dog and Tom picked up the veterinary bill for the dog. After one last big bill, Tom forbid Blackie coming into the store section of the plant. Everyone kept an eye out to see that she wouldn't attack any more dogs.

I felt it wrong that the kittens would never know what a dog looked like and decided to do something about it. I got a toy dog we used to display dog collars and sweaters, and took it back to the warehouse to show Blackie's latest batch of kittens. The kittens were playing around their pans of milk and water, but Blackie was nowhere to be seen. The kittens were interested in the toy dog and to make it seem more real, I started to bark. It didn't bother the kittens but it brought Blackie down from the balcony hissing. With uncanny precision she landed exactly upon the back of the toy dog and they both fell over into a pan of nearby milk. Blackie soon realized the dog was not real after she dug her claws into its side. She gave me an indignant look as she regally lifted herself out of the pan of milk. She sat there dripping milk as well as indignation. She was so angry with me I couldn't help but laugh. My laughter brought others to the scene who also began to laugh. One workman was so bowled over with hysterical laughter, after seeing the milk sodden Blackie and the look on her face, that he rolled over and over on a stack of sacked wheat with such a belly laugh I can hear it to this day!

When I had sufficiently recovered, I picked up the display dog and left Blackie in a fury which possessed her for several days. It is a wonder she ever forgave me but as time went on we became friends again. One day she came into the office and announced that she was about to give birth once again. She started by jumping onto my desk with a "meow, meow, meow." Then went over to my brother-in-law Oscar's desk and gave Oscar the same bit of cat talk. Then she proceeded to Tom's desk, and Tom turned to me and said, "Ivy, this is the day. She's telling us. Keep an eye on her." It was her day and I knew she wanted me to know she counted on me for

help if she needed it. I knew then that she had completely forgiven me for the horrible joke I had played on her.

Each new batch of kittens had to be trained to catch rats as well as mice. One morning Oscar's grandson came to the office with his mother and I thought he would enjoy seeing Blackie. I took the young lad out to find her. There she was at one end of the open drain pipe seeing to it that three kittens sharpened their claws before their rat catching lesson began. As we watched, one kitten was sent through the drain pipe while two other sharp clawed kittens waited at the other end. With Blackie beside them no rat would get away.

One morning Blackie came in and found Tom standing at the water cooler with a cup of water. She was evidently sure in her cat mind that anything Tom would be drinking must be something she'd relish and she stood at his feet begging and begging. Tom kept telling her she wouldn't want it but she wasn't convinced. She left him, went outside and before Tom had left the water cooler, she returned with a big fat rat and laid it at his feet. Well, if he wouldn't give it to her, she'd pay for it!

As the years passed, Blackie became more and more loved, a part of our milling company family. One morning my brother-in-law Oscar Morris and Ray Hubbard came in with the mail from the post office. They anxiously asked where Blackie was. No one had seen her. This was strange. She was usually around, greeting the truck drivers and warehouse and milling men by 8:30 in the morning. Oscar said he was afraid it was Blackie he saw lying in the middle of Willow Street. Complete silence reigned. I was ready to cry. One milling man looked out the window so none would see his tears. It was a horrible shock to all of us. Two of the workmen walked down to Willow and retrieved her body. She was gently returned to her realm and quietly buried. She was dreadfully missed.

Tom operated the company for 57 years and employed many including Oscar Morris, who married our sister Helen in 1912. In 1954 Tom had elective surgery, but didn't recover from the operation. Cause of death was listed as lobar pneumonia. I am sure those that had already passed on, and Blackie, were waiting on the other side to greet him.