

Flocks of Kittens and Litters of Chicks: Interspecies Adoption in New York, 1880-1920

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On July 7, 1899, the *Avon Herald* reported "a singular instance of a hen adopting kittens" on a farm in the small town of Avon in Livingston County, New York.¹ There was, however, one error in the report: it was not a "singular instance." Just six months earlier, in the same town, another hen on another farm also adopted a litter of barn kittens and that incident received similar treatment in the local press.² In fact, by 1899, reports of interspecies adoptions were common throughout New York State and across the country. This was in large part due to the post-Darwinian revolution of the late 19th century that drastically changed how people viewed animals; for the first time, the idea that animals had human-like emotions, family structures, and sentience became widespread. People also began to use animals as metaphors and parables of their own human ideals and morality. Stories of animals adopting the young of other species reflected and romanticized new cultural attitudes about human motherhood, adoption, and family. New York is an ideal focus for this study because it was a cultural epicenter and had a wide range of both urban and rural farms on which instances of interspecies parenting were observed.

In her book *Pets in America: A History*, Katherine Grier explains how a "domestic ethic of kindness" emerged in the 19th century that radically changed human

¹ *Avon Herald*, July 7, 1899, fultonhistory.com.

² *Monroe County Mail*, January 19, 1899, pg.5,

<http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn88074547/1899-01-19/ed-1/seq-5/>.

and human-animal relationships.³ As early as the 1820s, popular parenting advice writers advocated that kindness was the most important characteristic that mothers should teach their children. Principle among the ways to achieve ideal domestic kindness was to discourage cruelty to animals. Proponents of the ethic of kindness argued that animals were capable of feeling emotion and even adhering to codes of morality, an idea that gained even more traction after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.⁴ Therefore, people deemed their idealized middle-class family values to be a product of nature, not human culture. As a result, pet-keeping increased in the late 19th century and people regarded their pets as part of their family unit, normalizing the idea of interspecies blended families.

These ideas persisted into the 20th century and writers went so far as to imply that animals experienced purer feelings of familial devotion than humans, particularly in regards to motherhood. In his 1909 anti-cruelty school textbook, Edwin K. Whitehead wrote of animal mothers, "It is very much like our families- just how much we do not know. We know the dog mother loves her puppies, which are her babies, like a human mother; that she will freeze, burn, starve, thirst, fight and die for them with a fondness, courage, sacrifice and devotion not all human mothers are capable of."⁵ In this regard, animal parenting served as a role model for mothers.

The rise of interspecies parenting narratives also reflects shifting attitudes towards adoption. In newspaper coverage of these stories, the words "adoption" and "fostering"

³ Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2006), 164.

⁴ Grier, *Pets in America*, 165-166.

⁵ Edwin K. Whitehead, *Dumb Animals and How To Treat Them: A Text Book for Use in the Public Schools* (E.K. Whitehead, 1909): 99.

are typically used to describe the animals' arrangements. In the 19th century, adoption was largely an informal process. Most orphaned or abandoned children were placed with other relatives or in orphanages. Even though Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption legislation in 1851, adoption was still considered a risky option for both children and adoptive families.⁶ New Yorker Charles Loring Brace pioneered his "orphan trains" which shipped as many as 250,000 children to the Midwest from 1853 to 1929, but his was a radical and unique solution to the issue. Some families did become more accepting of adoption by the end of the 19th century, however, as the domestic ethic of kindness continued to be a model for family life and "families in this period became increasingly conceptualized as emotional rather than economic units."⁷ Adoption also served as an option to fill the "empty cradles" of those unable to have children.⁸

Despite the growing acceptance of adoption, families were generally unwilling to accept children of different races or classes into their homes. Conversely, difference was the main point of fascination in stories of interspecies parenting. Most of the popular reports of animals adopting the young of other species feature animals on opposite ends of the predator/prey spectrum: hens adopting kittens or dogs adopting baby chicks, for example. Friendship or tolerance between predator and prey species was noteworthy even if it did not result in the formation of a recognizable family structure. For example,

⁶ Ellen Herman, *Kinship By Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 21-22.

⁷ Susan L. Porter, "A Good Home: Indenture and Adoption in Nineteenth-Century Orphanages," in *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Wayne E. Carp (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 27.

⁸ Porter, "A Good Home," 28.

photographer William D. Hassler took two photographs of the family tabby cat, Reddy, posing peacefully with guinea pigs.⁹



Stories like these were newsworthy because they seemed unnatural and remarkable. Traditionally, a cat in the hen house had been an unwanted sight that resulted in the deaths of many cats.¹⁰ However, as people began to impose their ideas of kindness on unusual animal pairings, the narrative expanded to accommodate other explanations of animal behavior. They served as further testament that animals could experience a purer form of familial love than most humans could achieve.

Many reports of interspecies parenting capitalized on the public's curiosity and displayed a P.T. Barnum-like flair for exaggeration and sensationalism. While the average newspaper blurb noted that a mother raising the young of another species was unusual, some coverage was melodramatic. The *Marion Enterprise* reported, "Dr. Richards has a hen that broods kittens. This is the latest departure from the ordinary; it

⁹ "Reddy the cat and two unidentified guinea pigs, Astoria, Queens, July 1910" (2 images), courtesy New-York Historical Society, obtained from nyheritage.org.

¹⁰ For example, the *Newark Courier* gleefully reported, "A cat chicken thief paid the penalty of her nine lives on Saturday. It took 2 dogs, 3 men and a shot gun to finish the poultry loving feline." *Newark Courier*, July 26, 1894, pg. 2, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn85026906/1894-07-26/ed-1/seq-2/>. The *Long-Islander* joked, "A very amusing gun, cat and chicken story came to our ears this week... Chicken fancier had ended the existence of several felines by the use of leaden pills, it is supposed that this pussy is among the number." *Long-Islander*, June 1, 1900, pg. 2, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031119/1900-06-01/ed-1/seq-2/>.

comes the nearest to a theological miracle of any occurrence we ever witnessed" and questioned "if the hen purrs."¹¹ In 1911, despite many other stories to prove otherwise, a reporter from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote, "One frequently hears of hens mothering ducklings, or a cat caring for puppies or of a dog fostering kittens, but who ever heard of a hen mothering a little kitten?"¹² Also in 1911, American amusement park owners fought to outbid one another for the rights to display a famous French "Hatching Cat," who had a propensity for hatching eggs. The cat eventually passed through New York after a stint at the Palisades Amusement Park in New Jersey.¹³

Innate Maternal Desire

The language used in reports of interspecies parenting stories directly reflected changing family values, particularly as they pertained to motherhood. One of the main narrative themes of these stories was the strength of innate maternal devotion. There are rare mentions of male animals adopting the young of another species, but the majority of the narratives deal only with mothers.¹⁴ In his 1879 book, *Mind In The Lower Animals In Health and Disease*, W. Lauder Lindsay devoted an entire chapter to explaining animal foster parenting between species. Lindsay outlined several reasons for the phenomenon,

¹¹ *Marion Enterprise*, August 15, 1885, pg. 3, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn88074107/1885-08-15/ed-1/seq-3/>.

¹² "Hen Mothers a Kitten," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 21, 1911, pg. 1, bkyln.newspapers.com. This is a factually ridiculous statement since the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* had been published stories on this topic since as early as 1856.

¹³ The story of the French hatching cat even inspired the name of a popular animal history blog, *The Hatching Cat*. "The French Hatching Cat of the Palisades Amusement Park," *The Hatching Cat* (blog), February 23, 2013, <http://hatchingcatnyc.com/2013/02/23/french-hatching-cat-palisades-park/>.

¹⁴ For example, Tricks, a collie from Newburg, NY had a habit of waiting for the neighbors chicks to walk around the yard, "then with a quick sweep of his paw he pulled the little bird through the fence and taking it into his mouth carried it gently into the house. "Chickens Adopted By Collie," *Pokeepsie Evening Enterprise*, August 23, 1911, pg. 7, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn90066261/1911-08-23/ed-1/seq-7/>.

but he claimed, "the most common of these circumstances is the non-gratification of the imperious maternal instinct- the same cause that leads so many spinsters of certain age to console their idleness with pet dogs, cats or birds, or so many childless couples to adopt children in order to gratify their parental longings and inherit their wealth."¹⁵

Newspaper accounts of animal foster or adoptive mothers closely mirrors Lindsay's theory. An East Hampton hen was described as a "spinster" who could only fulfill her maternal desire by adopting kittens.¹⁶ Hens cared for kittens as if they were chicks and some were reported to try to teach their new brood how to scratch for bugs and worms, although their grub was always refused.¹⁷ A Hempsted, NY fireman owned a fox terrier with a maternal instinct "developed to a very high degree" that led the dog to adopt four chicks. The dog protected the chicks, cared for them like puppies, and let the chicks crawl all over her.¹⁸ Some adoptive animal mothers were reported to go to greater lengths to achieve motherhood. A Brooklyn cat displayed a fondness for sitting on eggs and had already hatched four peeps of chicks. When the chicks emerged from their shells, the cat cared for them "as affectionately as if they were orthodox kittens."¹⁹

¹⁵ W. Lauder Lindsay, *Mind In The Lower Animals In Health and Disease* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1879): 482.

¹⁶ "Hen Mothers Kittens," *East Hampton Star*, June 15, 1923, fultonhistory.com.

¹⁷ "Kittens Hatched Under Hen?," *Long-Islander*, April 17, 1914, pg.1, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031119/1914-04-17/ed-1/seq-1/>. Reports of malnourishment of kittens adopted by hens was common, as were reports of hens' confusion at their "chicks" not accepting insects to eat. Poughkeepsie hen's adopted kittens were reported to be a little underfed and over-warmed underneath the hen's wings, but generally ok. "Hen Mothers Two Kittens," *Pokeepsie Evening Enterprise*, October 4, 1915, pg. 3, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn90066261/1915-10-04/ed-1/seq-3/>.

¹⁸ *South Side Messenger*, May 23, 1913, pg. 1, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn96083504/1913-05-23/ed-1/seq-1/>.

¹⁹ "Hatched by a Cat," *Knowersville Enterprise*, October 10, 1885, pg. 1, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031264/1885-10-10/ed-1/seq-1/>.

Some adoptive mothers overzealously acted on their maternal urges, often kidnapping babies or battling the young's birth mother for custody. A hen in Glen Cove, NY continuously drove her two kittens' mother away.²⁰ A Middle Grove, NY hen maintained control of her adopted litter of kittens despite their mother's disapproval.²¹ A battle of wills occurred between an Auburn, NY cat and hen over kittens and the "result was a division of the spoils. The cat ran away with one of the kittens while the hen remained in possession of the other two."²²

Other animals' overwhelming care led to human intervention and the removal of their adopted young. A young boy in Old Field, NY declared that his was "the splendorous hen that ever was to have kittens," but the smothering, excessive attention she paid to her brood led the farmer to remove them from her care.²³ Similarly, a Coffin's Summit, NY hen attacked the person who removed her kitten from her, showing "every sign of displeasure."²⁴

Interspecies Co-Parenting

While many interspecies adoptions led to conflict between the birth and adoptive mothers, others resulted in harmonious instances of interspecies co-parenting. A Louisville, NY hen brooded the farm tabby's kittens while the cat sat brooding her eggs.²⁵

²⁰ *Suffolk County News*, July 3, 1908, pg. 6, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031477/1908-07-03/ed-1/seq-6/>.

²¹ "Hen Mothers Kittens," *Saratogian*, July 15, 1920, pg. 10, fultonhistory.com.

²² "A Hen's Care of Kittens," *Adirondack News*, July 8, 1899, pg. 2, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn87070345/1899-07-08/ed-1/seq-2/>.

²³ *Long Island Traveler*, June 5, 1873, pg. 2, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031476/1873-06-05/ed-1/seq-2/>.

²⁴ *Franklin Gazette*, July 26, 1878, pg. 1, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031574/1878-07-26/ed-1/seq-1/>.

²⁵ *Ogdensburg Journal*, July 5, 1879, pg. 3, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn85054113/1879-07-05/ed-1/seq-3/>.

Another hybrid family of a hen, mother cat, and four kittens lived together, sharing the same nest.²⁶ Similar stories were also reported across the state, including the tale of the mother cat who raised her kittens cooperatively, finding "peace" with the hens.²⁷ A series of images from Great Neck, NY show a Wyandotte hen co-mothering seven bull terrier puppies with their canine mother.²⁸ Two of the images show only the hen and the puppies, but the third shows the canine mother nursing the puppies while the hen sits calmly right next to her.



²⁶ *Portville Review*, July 23, 1914, pg. 5, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn86034918/1914-07-23/ed-1/seq-5/>. A similar tale of cooperative parenting came out of Goshen, NY nine years later. "Cat's Strange Whim," *Troy Times*, November 9, 1923, pg. 17, fultonhistory.com.

²⁷ *Suffolk County News*, October 7, 1893, pg. 3, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031477/1893-10-07/ed-1/seq-3/>.

²⁸ "Wyandotte Hen Mothering Seven Bull Terrier Puppies" (3 images), courtesy Great Neck Library Local History Collection, obtained from nyheritage.org.



Tales of the close relationships forged through interspecies parenting became so popular that some people began to confuse the limits of biological reproduction. A New York dime showman supposedly tried to buy a "cat chicken" born to a Maltese cat in Prescott, Arizona. The alleged hybrid creature had a "cat's head, wings instead of fore feet, and feathers for a tail; it laps milk, will eat oats, and exhibits all the traits of both a cat and chicken; it even crows."²⁹ Narratives of the close relationships between hens and cats had become so common that a kitten with serious birth defects could be semi-convincingly presented in a sideshow as the offspring of two completely different species. These blurred biological lines also became easy fodder for jokes. A 1906 joke, titled "The Cat Had Chickens," read:

"The old housekeeper met the master at the door on his arrival home.
'If you please, sir,' she said, 'the cat has had chickens.'
'Nonsense, Mary,' laughed he. 'You mean kittens. Cats don't have chickens.'
'Was them chickens or kittens as you brought home last night?' asked the old woman.

'Why, they were chickens, of course.'
'Just so sir,' replied Mary, with a twinkle. 'We'll the cat's had 'em!'"³⁰

²⁹ *Plattsburgh Daily Press*, November 25, 1896, pg. 1, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031094/1896-11-25/ed-1/seq-1/>.

³⁰ "The Cat Had Chickens," *Medina Register*, November 22, 1906, pg. 4, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn88074109/1906-11-22/ed-1/seq-4/>.

The joke plays on the disbelief that many people had upon encountering instances of interspecies relationships, but delivers a twist with the punch line.

Interspecies Parenting as Mourning or Charity

According to Lindsay's *Mind in the Lower Animals*, an animal's overdeveloped maternal longing was most frequently caused by the loss of her own young and, therefore, a "necessity of gratifying her bereaved maternal instinct."³¹ In 1856, a Maspeth, NY hen's eggs were smashed by a rogue cow in the barn, and she thus had "the misfortune to have her maternal hopes destroyed." She abducted the house cat's new kittens, only allowing their feline mother to feed them. The newspaper opined that this would only be a temporary fix because her furry "chicks" would assert their independence and cause her more sorrow."³² Cats whose kittens were drowned by humans as a means of feline population control were also reported to find surrogates to replace their lost young. A Chazy, NY cat "transferred her affections to a brood of young chickens to which she gives her undivided attention, much to the consternation of the mother hen."³³ Similarly, a Heuvelton, NY cat mothered a chick until it accidentally smothered in a blanket a human placed it in. The cat reportedly grieved the loss of her adopted child, like her own.³⁴

In other cases, Lindsay wrote, "the bringing up of the young of other species or genera is involuntary or non-voluntary; or at least there is not spontaneous selection,

³¹ W. Lauder Lindsay, *Mind In The Lower Animals In Health and Disease* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1879): 483.

³² *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 30, 1856, pg. 3, bklyn.newspapers.com.

³³ "Cat Mothers Chickens," *Essex County Republican*, May 12, 1911, pg. 3, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031741/1911-05-12/ed-1/seq-3/>.

³⁴ *The Ogdensburg Advance and St. Lawrence Weekly Democrat*, June 11, 1903, pg. 5, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031423/1903-06-11/ed-1/seq-5/>.

either of the maternal office, or of the objects of affection; for instance, where young are deserted, orphaned and cast upon the care of sometimes an unwitting foster-mother."³⁵ Zip, an Athens, NY farm dog adopted Plymouth Rock chicks whose mother was killed. The dog reportedly performed "the duties of the mother as well as it is possible for a canine to do. The first night Zip piloted the young brood into the woodshed and curled up in a basket in one corner of the building while the brood of seven huddled between the paws of the terrier."³⁶ Similarly, a Lockport, NY hen mothered five baby kittens abandoned by their mother."³⁷

The Cultural Applications of Interspecies Adoption

Ultimately, stories of interspecies parenting and collaboration were more than mere oddities. They served as reinforcements for desired attitudes about family and women's roles. Mothers had the burden of protecting the family unit and teaching the next generation to be kind. While newspaper reports had a diverse readership in regards to gender and age, they were likely often shared with children. Interspecies parenting was the basis of a short children's story published in 1910. In the fictional bedtime story, Mrs. Cat overhears her owner's plans to drown four of her five new kittens, sparing only the cute black and white one. In a bid to save her kittens, Mrs. Cat carries them one by one to a hen's nest in a shed loft. When the owner arrives with his gunny sack, he finds only the kitten they were going to spare anyway. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hen found the four kittens and warmed them with her wings. When Mrs. Hen went to roost, Mrs. Cat went

³⁵ W. Lauder Lindsay, *Mind In The Lower Animals In Health and Disease* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1879): 483-4.

³⁶ "Dog Mothers The Chicks," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 18, 1901, pg. 4, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031151/1901-08-18/ed-1/seq-4/>.

³⁷ "Hen Mothers Kittens," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 6, 1925, pg. 13, fultonhistory.com.

to the nest to feed her babies. Under their dual care, the kittens grew larger and left the nest. When the owners saw the playful, grown kittens, they were unable to drown them. The story ends with the narrator telling his daughter that her cat was one of those saved kittens.³⁸ This fictional account reinforced and exaggerated the family values that people extrapolated from interspecies parenting and made it an explicit morality tale.

It is impossible to determine if the acceptance of interspecies adoption narratives had any impact on attitudes towards human adoption. Certainly, it normalized stories of non-traditional families, but despite the progress made in animal welfare and science, there were still limits to how much of themselves people saw in other animals. The domestic ethic of kindness taught mothers to strive for family harmony and adoption supporters advocated for open-mindedness, but these goals were easier discussed than achieved. Despite their status as "lower animals," hens, cats, dogs, and other animals who adopted the young of other species were achieving more than humans could at that point. This further confirmed some people's suspicions that animals experienced purer emotions than humans, and thus, for all of humans' self-perceived superiority, there were some ways that "our dumb animals" were better.

³⁸ "Daddy's Bedtime Story," *Union-Gazette*, March 26, 1910, pg. 4, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn88074365/1910-03-26/ed-1/seq-4/>.

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Ogdensburg Journal
Plattsburgh Daily Press
Pokeepsie Evening Enterprise
Portville Review
South Side Messenger
Suffolk County News
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Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Photographs:

"Reddy the cat and two unidentified guinea pigs, Astoria, Queens, July 1910" (2 images).
courtesy New-York Historical Society. New York Heritage, nyheritage.org.

"Wyandotte Hen Mothering Seven Bull Terrier Puppies" (3 images). Great Neck Library
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