

EXTRAORDINARY PETS

Story and Photographs
by Nancy Bertoncej

Talent and unique personalities among characteristics that make pets special to their owners

Rain shimmered candle-like on the country road. Lightning lit up the sky like slivers of moonlight. I spotted him in the shadows. I stopped the car and picked up the kitten that appeared to be part-Siamese.

A few months later, the local community theater, Brazosport Center Stages, held auditions for *Bell, Book, and Candle*. They needed actors and a cat.

My kitten appeared to possess star quality. I grew up in California so I should recognize a star when I see one.

Madyson, my 8-year-old granddaughter, the kitten, and I traveled to the audition.

I assured the producer, who didn't know anything about cats, that the kitten was gentle. Unfortunately at that moment someone yelled, "Look, he has his claws out."

I gazed heavenward for a response. I said, "Well, any animal would have its claws out if Madyson was holding it."

The casting people danced around with flashlights and clapping hands to give the appearance of a live performance. The kitten acted regal and alert. "We have Pyewacket," the producer informed me.

After many weeks of rehearsal the play opened. Individual photos of the actors and a large photo of the cat adorned the lobby wall.

Actors and Pyewacket waited their turn to go on stage in the green room. The green room and the stage were far apart. When a monitor alerted us that it was our time, I raced down the hall and handed the kitten to the actress who played the witch. Pyewacket, wired by such a dramatic stage entrance, bit the actress to show his displeasure! Quickly, the crew provided me with a chair and a cat kennel by the stage entrance.

In the film version of *Bell, Book, and Candle*, the cat belongs to a witch and looks evil. Pyewacket is mis-cast because he's usually friendly. In fact, during a performance he licked an actor who got too close!



Left: Nancy Bertoncelj's kitten, Pyewacket.
Above: Jimi Hummel's ferrets.
Right: Nanette Daniels' Papillon puppy, Bella.

At the end of the play, the actors didn't want to carry Pyewacket on stage for a curtain call! They didn't want to be upstaged by a cat. I carried the cat.

Bella

Papillon is French for butterfly. Nanette Daniels spotted a Papillon puppy on *Dog, the Bounty Hunter*. The petite puppy enchanted Nanette with its large, butterfly-like ears. A few weeks later, she bought one. Madyson, her 9-year-old daughter, named the puppy Bella—after the character in the best-selling *Twilight* novels by Stephenie Meyer.

Bella is taking her second session in obedience training at Petsmart. "They are very, very intelligent. The breed is pricey, and few to a litter. They are rare. I've seen only five to 10 come into Petsmart," says Brittany Quimby, a pet training instructor.

Bella met a large German shepherd before class. She growled at the dog. She is smaller than the family cat, but doesn't act like it. The shepherd looked around but couldn't find her. When he did see her, he

got a puzzled look on his face as if to say what is that?

Papillon dogs are good with children and cats. Bella enjoys riding on 5-year-old Chase Daniels' battery-operated 4-wheeler. She rides on the front, paws draped over, and ears flopping in the breeze. Bella likes to play with the family cat who would rather sleep.

Papillons are one of the oldest breeds of dogs. Bella's lineage can be traced back through the works of Italian paintings between the 13th and 15th century. The small dogs can be recognized in the famous paintings of Tiziano Vicelli.

Ferrets

Squeals of delight reverberate throughout the Brazoria County Library when Gail and Jimi Hummel introduce their ferrets at the children's summer program. Volunteers dance out wearing ferrets like fur collars.

Emma Lou O'Bannon, children's librarian, says that the children love the live ferret show. Many are

not familiar with ferrets. They enjoy the way the Hummels present the ferrets.

Ferrets have been domesticated for 2,500 years. Originally they were used to hunt rabbits. For centuries they helped control the rodent population in homes and barns throughout Europe. During the Revolutionary War, ferrets were used on American ships to kill rats and mice. "Today they are just pampered pets," Jimi says.

Ferrets appear in works of art. Leonardo da Vinci painted "Lady with an Ermine". The animal in the picture has the features of a ferret. A portrait of Queen Elizabeth I shows her with a pet ferret. "She liked to give albino ferrets to visiting heads of state. Because of her preference for albinos, they almost lost the sable coloring," Jimi says.

Jimi's ferrets come in all colors and sizes. Typically ferrets are sable (dark brown), butterscotch (light brown), champagne (cream), cinnamon (reddish), silver (white with black guard hairs), and albino (white with red eyes). "Sable and albino ferrets are the most common. Silver is more common than champagne or cinnamon," Jimi says. She holds up the male and female ferrets and points out that the males are larger.

The ferrets chase each other and play with their toys in their playpen to the delight of the children. Tired ferrets like to sleep in hammocks or sleeping bags. They sleep a lot.

Jimi shows the children how to cut the ferret's toe



Chase and Bella like to ride the four-wheeler together

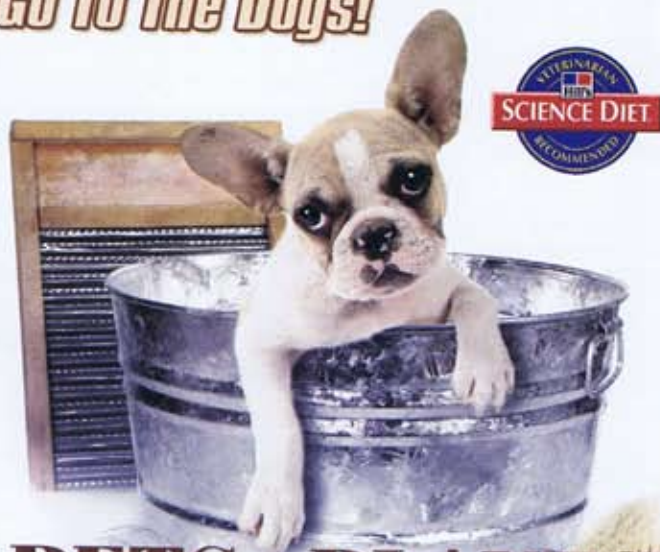
nails and clean their ears. She puts a drop of Feer-eTone on their belly and they are so busy licking it that they forget what she's doing

"Ferrets live between six and nine years. Their usual life span is about seven years. The oldest ferret we had was a little albino girl who lived almost ten years," Jimi says.

It's important to find a veterinarian who treats ferrets—not all do. They need yearly check ups, vaccinations for distemper, and rabies as well as flea and heart worm preventive medicine.

At the end of the presentation, the children are invited to pet the ferrets and ask questions. ▲

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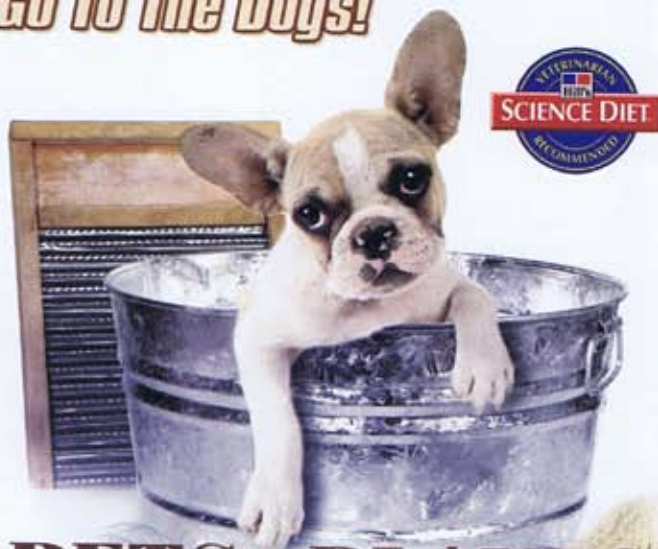
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