

Dennis



the Cat

By Ed Eline

Sometime in the middle of June, 1952, a runner entered the industrial compound at the Idaho State Penitentiary, a box clutched under one arm with unusual firmness. He quickly headed around the edge of the wall towards a pre-arranged rendezvous at the rear of the license plate factory. There he met another prisoner. With a quick, furtive look around the box changed hands and the men parted.

Thus began the prison career of a cat named Dennis. He was in the box -- a highly unlawful bit of undersized tom cat, all feet and eyes and wiggly tail, one silver chest patch relieving a frizzy black coat.

Tradition has it that Dennis was born at the prison chicken farm, the illegitimate son of a pair of untamed mouse catchers who made that spot their home. Tradition also has it that his birthdate was May 30 -- Memorial Day. But that is only legend. The rest of his story is a matter of public record.

The prisoner who was the recipient of the box-containing-kitten was a young man just beginning a life term for armed

robbery, jail break and other misbehavior in Idaho's Magic Valley. With considerably more criminal cunning than he had displayed before prison, he secreted the kitten away in the cavernous license plate building. With even more conniving, he began the every-day chore of purloining choice bits of meats from the butcher shop in the kitchen basement. In odd moments he showered the kitten with maternal affection. When he wound up serving a long stretch in the prison hole for bad behavior in other areas, the care of Dennis fell to another young man, another long-termer.

Between the pair of them, they saw to it that Dennis didn't miss a meal -- or an afternoon romp -- for a long, long time.

And so he grew, as prison cats do, into a lordly creature with gleaming coat and perpetually dull claws -- a socialite exercising upper-class selectivity of association. And the wraps were taken off. Dennis was no longer an illegal kitten. Even the old guard captain looked the other way.

But then Dennis knew his place --

and he assigned everyone around him a place as well. From the very first he chose his prison pals from among the long termers. It took a year or more to get to know him -- and that meant the felon was no "fish."

He mellowed a good deal as he grew older, and permitted nearly everyone to stroke his fur. But even then he maintained an observable liking for men serving a long sentence. When, for example, he jumped on a table in the loafing room and planted his big feet in the center of a chess game, it was a sure bet that at least one of the players had been around the prison for a long time.

There was one particularly lean span in his prison career. That came about when the prisoner who had been feeding him was transferred to a trusty detail, and no one else thought to carry him food. For a time his coat grew shaggy, and he was even reduced to chasing mice and birds. Then another lifer, this one assigned to the inmate barber-shop, discovered Dennis's plight and took over the providing chores. With a diet of milk and raw eggs purloined from the bakery, and choice cuts of beef from the butcher shop, he was returned to glowing health. From that day on he made his home in the barbershop, with occasional forays to the boiler room on bitter winter nights.

His life resembled that of a thousand other cats in a thousand other

prisons, with this exception: no cat in penal history ever claimed ownership of a prison more completely. The joint was his, and no one ever thought differently. Croquet games paused when he crossed the lawn. Even the guards opened doors for him when he signaled his intention to leave -- or enter -- a building. His rations were part of the main line orders, without fail. He lived the good life. He died peacefully.

On the evening of May 30, 1968 -- sixteen years to the day from the date of his birth, if the story is true -- he crawled up on the counter in the barber-shop and mewed a protest of discomfort. The lifer who had tended him for more than five years made him a soft bed of towels and a torn blanket, then stroked the old cat's still gleaming coat until it fell asleep. The next morning when the barbers opened the shop, they found him dead.

With a ceremony that would have done credit to a small town mayor, the old cat was laid to rest in a grave hewed out of a lawn he had considered his own personal property. A concrete slab was poured atop the grave; a stainless steel plaque engraved in the machine shop tells his story.

For several days a steady procession of hardened convicts "went around behind the building to see Dennis's grave."

Not a single person associated with the prison has been heard to laugh about the elaborate burial or grave stone.

