

**A Biography of and Interview About
Louis J. Camuti, DVM
Class of 1920, New York University New York State Veterinary College
Author: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus***

He Dignified the Cat

Known simply as *the cat doctor*, Dr. Louis J. Camuti was the first veterinarian to devote his practice solely to feline medicine. For many years, he prowled the streets of New York City bringing health and vigor to cats, and peace of mind to their occasionally arrogant, frequently affluent, usually demanding—but always grateful—owners.

Born of Italian immigrants on August 30, 1893, young Louis was raised in a Manhattan, New York home where the word *tired* was simply not allowed. This work ethic was imprinted on him from an early age and served him well in his later years when he would see patients well into the evenings, often seven days a week.



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Mrs. Daniels holding caricature of Dr. Camuti with his feline patients and his car (license CAT) 12/7/07

Young Louis's affection and respect for cats developed at an early age. Suffering from typhoid fever, he had been bed-ridden for weeks, requiring assistance from his mother for even the simplest care. During one particularly hectic day, Mamma Camuti inadvertently left a pot of food on the stove when she went to the neighbor's apartment. The pot stoked fire and the house was enveloped in smoke. According to family lore, Louis's little kitty jumped onto his bed and kept him conscious and his face free of smoke until his mother returned. In later life, the grand cat doctor referred to this life-saving incident as an epiphany to serve cats as his life mission.

Camuti took advantage of the free tuition offered by Cornell University and completed his bachelor's degree in 1916. World War I interrupted his education when he enlisted in the 1st Cavalry New York National Guard. He progressed through several ranks, finally being discharged as a Second Lieutenant, Remount Section, QMC-USA.¹

Rather than return to Cornell in rural upstate New York to pursue his dream of becoming a veterinarian, Camuti enrolled in New York University's Veterinary College, one of the few remaining urban veterinary colleges.² He received his DVM in 1920 and married his childhood sweetheart, Alessandra V. Landi, the daughter of the prominent Italian sculptor.³

¹ He remained in the National Guard until 1946, when he was transferred to the reserves as a Lieutenant-Colonel.

² New York University New York State Veterinary College (1913-22; 71 graduates); reference AVMA directory 2009.

³ Fidardo Landi, who had immigrated from Italy in 1901.

Dr. Camuti opened a veterinary office on Broad Street in Mount Vernon, just north of New York City.⁴ This was a convulsive period of transition for veterinary medicine as the horse—until then, the chief justification for veterinary employment—had been replaced by the automobile. Many veterinarians were forced to either leave the profession or move to rural areas to establish general practices. A handful of pet-oriented veterinary clinics started to appear in the metropolitan New York area, but more attention was paid to dogs than to cats.

Though the necessity to put food on the table for his growing family required that Dr. Camuti treat all kinds of pets during his first few years of practice, he was gradually able to orient his growing practice towards cats. He opened a second clinic at 1020 Park Avenue in New York, and moved between his Westchester office in the mornings and the Manhattan office in the afternoons and evenings.

In the mid 1940s, Dr. Camuti began a regular ambulatory practice. He had always been willing to see cats in their homes and apartments because many of his clients were single career people or childless couples, often without personal cars. The challenge of transporting a cat to a veterinary clinic in a taxi, or by walking, was sometimes a deterrent to owners seeking veterinary care. Dr. Camuti also felt that observing the patient in its home environment eased the cat's anxiety and permitted better diagnostic evaluation.

Treating cats in apartments had its challenges, however. Camuti's patients were sometimes clairvoyant, anticipating his footsteps on the stairs or in the elevator. They would scurry under a bed or in other places that required a hunt by both veterinarian and client. Commenting on what he occasionally discovered under a client's bed while reaching for a cat, Camuti once opined that he knew "*the rear parts of many people better than they know their front parts*".⁵

Because parking was difficult in Manhattan, Mrs. Camuti would usually accompany her husband, remaining with the car in case it had to be moved while he was seeing a patient. Referred to as the *fire hydrant girl* because of her illegal parking habits, she would occupy her time reading and writing letters to her children, while her husband was attending to his patients.

As Camuti's fame spread, he attracted many celebrity clients, including Olivia de Havilland, James Mason, Imogene Coca and Tallulah Bankhead. He was a great storyteller, but also a good listener, and his clients simply adored him. Though he was occasionally asked to travel overseas as the personal veterinarian while a client was vacationing in Europe or South America, he always declined, feeling that prolonged absence from his regular clientele would not be responsible.

Dr. Camuti was more the quintessential family feline doctor than an academic, though for several years he wrote a monthly column in the veterinary journal, *Feline Practice*. He also co-authored two insightful and humorous books on his life as a cat veterinarian. The first,

⁴ In Westchester County.

⁵ Gannett Westchester Newspaper (Mount Vernon), February 28, 1981.

*Park Avenue Vet*⁶, was published in 1962. The second was aptly named, *All My Patients Are under the Bed*.⁷ For aspiring veterinary students who read his books in their youth, Camuti became the *James Harriot* of feline medicine.

Dr. Camuti's daughter, Mrs. Nina Danielsen, described her father's legacy as follows:

"I think Dad dignified the feline persona. Until his arrival as a veterinarian, cats were mousers ... something of nuisance value, to be replaced when needed, rather than to be loved or cared for.

"Dad came along with his own natural love for the felines and he gave dignity to them. When he started to circulate more and more around Manhattan with writers and radio and television personalities, I noticed that his appearances started to almost snowball respect for cats."⁸

Dr. Camuti had a cardiac pacemaker installed in February 1981. Rather than take the requisite recuperative time after his discharge from the hospital, the 87-year-old veterinarian was back on the road treating his patients less than one week later. With his wife by his side, he had a fatal heart attack at 9:30 pm a week later on the Major Deegan Expressway.

Cards and tributes arrived from all over the world. The country's first "cat doctor" was laid to rest, and his coveted license plate "CAT" was reassigned.

His work was never reassigned, however, for he was unique: a special veterinarian, serving cats in a truly unique manner during a transitional period in their long history of living with people.

⁶ *Park Avenue Vet*, by Louis J. Camuti and Lloyd Alexander, Holt, Rinehard and Winston, Inc., New York (1962).

⁷ *All My Patients are Under the Bed*, by Louis J. Camuti, with Marilyn and Haskel Frankel, Simon and Schuster, New York (1980).

⁸ Nina Danielsen, personal interview 2007.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Louis J. Camuti, DVM
Interviewee: Mrs. Nina Danielsen, daughter of Dr. Camuti
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: December 7, 2007
Location: Hightstown, New Jersey



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Mrs. Nina Danielsen with photo of Dr. and Mrs. Camuti 12/07/07

Interviewer's Note:

I had occasionally heard of Dr. Camuti's legacy because his name was attached to the consultation service of the Cornell Feline Health Center. However, it was not until I met Ms. Elizabeth Evers, a former neighbor of the Camuti family, that I became aware of the magnitude of his legacy and his transformative impact on the veterinary care of cats. Elizabeth kindly arranged for me to visit Dr. Camuti's daughter, Ms. Nina Danielsen, an elegant and gracious woman who lives in Hightstown, New Jersey. Nina's endearing description of how her father transformed the way by which we view cats and their health, is a marvelous tribute to a man who was simply known as "the cat doctor". (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Smith:

I am Donald Smith from Cornell University and we are here to celebrate the life and times of Dr. Louis Camuti who graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor's degree in 1916 and then went on to complete his veterinary education at New York University from which he graduated in 1920.¹

¹ New York University New York State Veterinary College (1913-22; 71 graduates); reference AVMA directory 2009.

Nina Danielsen is the daughter of Dr. Camuti. I am grateful that we are able to have this interview because it allows us to look at a one of the truly world-famous veterinarians, a person who, in many peoples' minds, started the whole realm of feline medicine, and especially the house-call practice in New York City.

Nina, please talk about your father, and what drove him to his great interest in cats and also how he came to America, how your mother came to America.

Mrs. Danielsen:

My grandfather Camuti believed in democracy and came to America in 1902 (I believe it was St. Patrick's Day) and established business in New York City—in Manhattan—where they lived in the early years. He encouraged his children to be educated. My father used the work ethic as the backbone of his whole life: patriotism, integrity, and one never said "tired", never. Nothing was too much for him. He loved his work and his practice, and it showed over the years. It never receded, never.

My grandfather Landi, my mother's father, came over from Italy in 1901 alone. He was an established sculptor, recipient of the "Prix de Rome" in sculpture. He had been invited to do a monument of President McKinley, who was assassinated that same year. Since that was canceled, several prominent sculptors in New York City and in the country encouraged him to stay because there was so much work available.

Grandpa Landi died in the flu epidemic of 1918. He was sick 24 hours and in his early fifties passed away. It was tragic as he was at the height of his career.

Dr. Smith:

How did your father start practice and tell us how he became interested in feline medicine?

Mrs. Danielsen:

When he was a young boy in this country, he was saved by his cat from suffocating. He had typhoid fever and his mother had left a small pot on the stove when she went to a neighbor to borrow something. It started to smoke and the cat jumped on my father's bed and licked his face to keep him awake and breathing. My grandmother came home and discovered it. Dad always attributed his life to that little kitty.

Dr. Smith:

He had a practice in Mt. Vernon, and also in New York City.

Mrs. Danielsen:

Yes, he had a practice in New York City in Manhattan, and also in Mount Vernon for a number of years, and then confined his practice to Manhattan.

Dr. Smith:

How did he become involved in going to peoples' apartments to treat cats as opposed to them coming to him?

Mrs. Danielsen:

It's sort of a natural thing in a big city. A lot of landlords don't allow dogs and, therefore, career people, or any person, would have cats. They come home late and their cat doesn't have to be walked, and [their popularity grew]. That's what happened with his practice, plus his own love of the felines.

Dr. Smith:

...And your mother?

Mrs. Danielsen:

Mother was Dad's right hand "man". Once in a while she'd even take to prescribing, and if Dad wasn't sure she was saying the right thing when he came home, he'd find out. She was his absolute *Gal Friday* in every respect. She helped him with his bills and his messages and helped his live-in help clean the hospital when they had a hospital. Everything had to be very sterile and pristine.

In the days before answering machines, Dad had hired an answering service. They would call Mother and give her all the messages from clients, and she'd write them down on little slips of paper and pin them all over her chest. There might sometimes be maybe ten or twelve of them and she'd take them off and read them to Dad as they came up.

She would also be his companion in the car. When parking was difficult in Manhattan, then she could move the car because she was a driver. That helped Dad because, though he tried hiring people, no one wanted his hours.

He felt that the cats did much better in their own homes. Even after surgery, that's where they should be, so that they could wake up in their own environment. His biggest problem wasn't operating on the cats, it was resuscitating the owners. They'd pass out if they happened to be nearby.

But not everyone could have those hours. You know, he started in the late afternoon and he covered the five boroughs of New York, including Queens and Brooklyn. I met a scientist—a physicist—from one of the universities on Long Island. His wife was a writer. Mr. and Mrs. Sayer called Dad and they said, "We live in Brooklyn, any problem with that?" And Dad said, "I think *you* have a problem to think that I can't go to Brooklyn." It was as simple as that. It was never too much trouble."

Dr. Smith:

After your father did pass away, you received many letters and tributes to him.

Mrs. Danielsen:

Oh yes, from all over the world. We got mail and tributes, and my mother received so many phone calls. The tributes were tremendous and we were very flattered.

I was living in New Jersey [when Dad died] and I did not know about the accident that happened about 9:30 at night on the Major Deegan Highway.

This was February. The previous October he had fallen down the stairs and had broken his arm so that may have contributed to his heart problems, though he had had a heart attack and heart block previously.

They'd keep him in the hospital and the doctors attending him knew his personality and wouldn't show up for three weeks at the hospital. My father would send them telegrams from the hospital bed, "If you don't come to see me and release me, I will release myself."

He had visitors. Two sisters sneaked one or two cats in under their fur coats and it wasn't until the nurse discovered disposable syringes in the waste basket that they knew something was amiss.

Dr. Smith:

He looked after large cats occasionally?

Mrs. Daniels:

Yes, every once in a while, especially in Greenwich Village, he'd have some odd member of the cat family like an ocelot or a baby tiger and they wouldn't tell him ahead of time. They'd say, "We have a young cat." And where was the cat when he'd enter? It would be on a ledge over the doorway, ready to pounce.

Dr. Smith:

What was the Depression like in terms of having an impact on his development as a veterinarian and on the economy?

Mrs. Daniels:

It was very difficult. People had no money to pay and a lot of them would pay other bills before they'd pay the veterinary bill. Thanks to my mother's prowess with budgeting, we got through. We economized. We never ate inferior food and the animals were never shorted of fresh food, even fresh meat. There was no skimping there. We managed to get through by very careful spending.

Dr. Smith:

Modesty aside, as you look back over the years, how do you think your father changed our societal understanding of the cat?

Mrs. Daniels:

I think Dad dignified the feline persona. As I have often told people, up until then cats were either mousers that were a convenience on pieces of property or even in apartments. But they were something one might kick down the stairs without giving it a second thought—nuisance value. Dad came along with his own natural love for the felines and he gave dignity to them.

When he started to circulate more and more around Manhattan with writers and radio and television personalities, I noticed myself that his appearances on radio and television started to almost snowball respect for the felines. You began to see references to cats in books, children's

books, articles. In other words, they were seeking Dad out, not so much just for Dad himself, but for the animals that he represented. The fact that he was a good raconteur added to it.

He didn't want any fame for himself. He wanted dignity for the cat. He saw the cat as a therapeutic creature for shut-ins, lonely people, career people. He saw the role the cat played; that was very important.

Dr. Smith:

Did cats enhance his life? Did cats fulfill something in his life that otherwise he would not have had? Did they help to make him a whole person?

Mrs. Danielsen:

It's difficult to say that. I would assume so. I think that all of our lives are enhanced by some association. It's for the betterment of not only the animals, but the human spirit. It enriches us.

He had one client who would not get out of bed, would refuse to get out of bed. Dad called me one night and said, "Your cat just had kittens. Could we have one for a client of mine? I think it will get her out of bed if she has something to love and care for. Put a pretty little ribbon on it and just a dab of perfume and I'll come and get it". So that's what we did and my children were so happy to donate one of their kittens. He took it to this woman and it got her out of bed. She started to get out of bed every day and move around; she had something to love.

And then he had a psychiatrist who had a warehouse next to her office and it was full of cats that she cared for medically. When she had a client with depression, she would tell them to go next door, choose a cat. You take that home and your life is going to change.

You know, we were not a family of kissing animals, this mouth-to-mouth business and this oohing and aahing. We didn't allow our cats on the table. We didn't have them in bed. That was a no-no. In other words, animals had their place, but you must respect their place and you NEVER, EVER, EVER think of harming an animal, never, no, no. You don't kick them down the stairs, you don't hit them, you don't beat them. It was a very quiet, loving type of relationship we had with our animals.

Dr. Smith:

This has been really marvelous. I thought your summation of his life was just remarkable; you obviously loved him dearly.

Mrs. Danielsen:

I did, I did. He was a very remarkable man. As I say, if I had to personify the words integrity, patriot, professional. Humbly, I would say it's my Dad, yes, and my mother by his side. She made it all possible.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you very much.

Mrs. Danielsen:

You're welcome.