

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Louis J. Camuti, the First Feline Veterinarian: He Dignified the Cat

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

May 28, 2013

Known simply as the cat doctor, Dr. Louis J. Camuti was the first veterinarian to devote his practice solely to feline medicine.

Born of Italian immigrants in 1893, young Louis was raised in New York City, in a home where, his daughter told me during my 2007 interview, the word “tired” was simply not allowed.¹ This work ethic, imprinted on him from an early age, served him well in later years when he would see patients well into the evenings, often seven days a week.

Young Louis’s affection and respect for cats also developed at an early age. Suffering from typhoid fever, he had been bedridden for weeks, requiring assistance from his mother for even the simplest care. According to family lore, his mother inadvertently left a pot of food on the stove one day when she went to the neighbor’s apartment. The pot stoked fire and the house was enveloped in smoke. Louis’s little kitty jumped onto his bed and, weaving back and forth over his head, 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.²

Camuti took advantage of the free tuition offered to New York residents by the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University³ 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.⁴ Rather than return to Cornell to pursue his dream of becoming a veterinarian, he enrolled in one of New York City’s veterinary colleges and received his DVM in 1920.⁵

Dr. Camuti opened a veterinary office on Broad Street in Mount Vernon, just north of New York City. 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of transition for veterinary medicine as the horse—until then, the chief justification for veterinary employment—had been replaced by the automobile.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.⁶

In the mid-1940s, Dr. Camuti started an ambulatory practice and began to use the clinics less often. 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.⁷

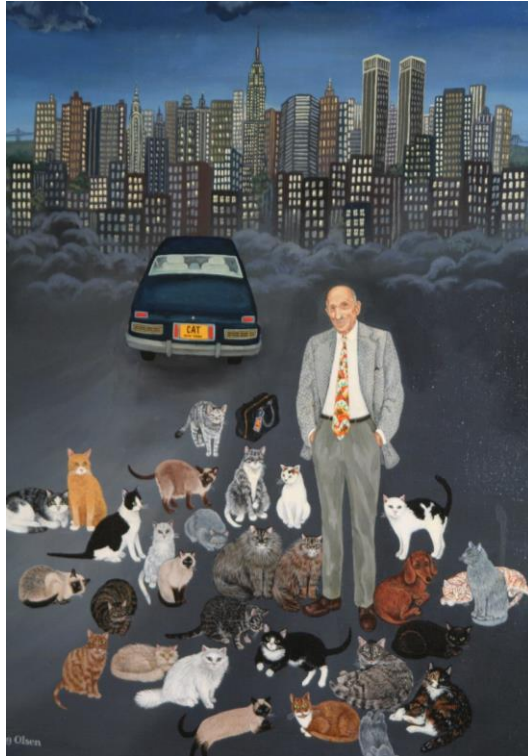
Treating cats in apartments had its challenges, however. According to his daughter, Camuti's patients were sometimes clairvoyant, anticipating his footsteps on the stairs or in the elevator. They would scurry under a bed or in other places that required a hunt by both veterinarian and client. Commenting on what he occasionally discovered under a client's bed while reaching for a cat, Camuti once opined jokingly that "[I knew] *the rear parts of many people better than they know their front parts.*"⁸

Because parking was difficult in Manhattan, Camuti's wife, Alessandra, 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, Alessandra would occupy her time reading and writing letters to her children, while her husband was attending to his patients.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.^{11,12} For aspiring veterinary students who read his books in their youth, Camuti became the James Herriot of feline medicine.

Dr. Camuti served as a member of the Advisory Council for the Feline Health Center at Cornell University¹³ alongside such renowned, and then much younger, feline specialists as Jean Holzworth, Barbara Stein and Fred Scott.¹⁴



*Caricature of Dr. Camuti with an assembly of his beloved patients.
His car with the license plate, "CAT" and the skyline of Manhattan are in the background.
(Photo by the author, 2007)*

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 Alessandra 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.¹⁵

Dr. Jane Brunt, feline practitioner and Executive Director of The CATalyst Council,¹⁶ recently lauded Dr. Camuti's pioneering efforts in feline health, including his cat- and client-focused consultation practices.¹⁷



Jane Brunt DVM, Executive Director of The CATalyst Council
Photo provided by Dr. Brunt, 2013

“Fifty years ago, Dr. Camuti practiced what we now know and preach by being the consummate cat-friendly cat doctor. It is especially interesting that he understood the transport barrier for cats getting veterinary services, and that is still an issue today despite extensive, sometimes expensive, market research to validate it. There are more cats and more veterinarians today, and we need more of the ‘Dr. Camuti-style’ communication and care. CATalyst Council exists to encourage that kind of care, and if he were with us today, I’m confident he’d be a leader, a true CATalysta, in that nationwide coalition where all cats are valued and cared for as pets.”

Dr. Camuti’s daughter, Nina Danielsen, had a deep and personal knowledge of her father’s work and she described his legacy with pride.¹⁸

“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.”



Mrs. Nina Danielsen, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Camuti, holding a portrait of her parents.
(Photo by the author, 2007)

¹ Danielsen, Nina (retired). Interview at her Highstown, New Jersey, retirement home with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2007 Dec 7. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14197>

² *Ibid.*

³ The New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University was founded in 1904. It is now the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at Cornell University.

⁴ Camuti progressed through several ranks, finally being discharged as a Second Lieutenant, Remount Section, QMC-USA (Reference ¹ above).

⁵ New York University New York State Veterinary College, which closed in 1922.

⁶ Danielsen, Nina, *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gannett Westchester Newspaper (Mount Vernon). 1981 Feb 28.

⁹ Danielsen, Nina. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Camuti, Louis J, Lloyd Alexander. Park Avenue Vet. Deutsch, 1962.

¹² Camuti, Louis J. All My Patients are Under the Bed. The Memoirs of a Cat Doctor. Simon and Schuster, 1980, with Marilyn and Haskel Frankel.

¹³ As a perpetual tribute to Dr. Camuti, the Cornell Feline Health Center established the **Dr. Louis J. Camuti Memorial Feline Consultation Service**, staffed by consulting veterinarians, to provide cat owners with advice based on the most current information available on feline health care.

¹⁴ Scott, Fredric W DVM, PhD (Professor emeritus Cornell University). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013 May 22.

¹⁵ Danielsen, Nina. *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The CATalyst Council is a coalition of veterinarians and animal health and care experts who are committed to improving the level of feline health. <http://www.catalystcouncil.org/>.

¹⁷ Brunt, Jane E. DVM (Feline practitioner in Baltimore and Cordova, MD, Executive Director of The Catalyst Council). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013 May 22.

¹⁸ Danielsen, Nina. *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

Feline veterinarian
History of Veterinary Medicine
Louis J. Camuti
New York University New York State Veterinary College
Cornell University
All My Patients are Under the Bed
Park Avenue Vet
Nina Danielsen
Fredric W. Scott
Jane E. Brunt
CATalyst Council
Feline Health Center at Cornell University

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.