

Feline Fragments 9 (2006)

(page checked February 2026)

Cats belonging to Jimmy Doolittle and Alexander Alekhine

Jimmy Doolittle

James H. ('Jimmy') Doolittle was one of America's most famous aviation pioneers, especially in the years between the two world wars, and one of the outstanding flyers of the twentieth century. He had a distinguished record during WW2 in the United States Army Air Force, reaching the rank of Lt-General.

This early photograph with his mother Rosa and the family cat was taken in Nome, Alaska, where the family lived for a time, and dates from around 1908. Doolittle died in 1993 aged 96. A good biography can be found at [Wikipedia](#).

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*James H. Doolittle Scrapbooks,
National Air and Space Museum,
Smithsonian Institution (SI 2002-995)*



Alekhine had a cat . . .

Alexander Alekhine (1892–1946) was a highly regarded chess grand master and also wrote widely about chess. Born in Moscow, he became a naturalised Frenchman in 1927, shortly before the world championships that year. He became the fourth world chess champion (more information about Alekhine at [Wikipedia](#)).

Alekhine had a cat that, naturally, he named **Chess**. He used to get the cat to walk over the board before he played games. One of his opponents, subsequently defeated, was quoted as saying, 'When I saw that damn cat, I knew I was in trouble!' Alekhine and his cat have

appeared on postage stamps from a couple of countries, such as the one at left.

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(2008+)

Koko the gorilla, and her pet kitten **All Ball**

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Koko (full name Hanabi-Ko, Japanese for 'Fireworks Child', because she was born on 4 July) was a female gorilla born in San Francisco Zoo in 1971. She was a rather sickly youngster and was 'adopted' by Dr Frances Patterson (known as Penny) who, having encountered a similar project involving a chimpanzee, decided to teach the gorilla American Sign Language — a project that became her life's work. By 1985 Koko had a vocabulary of some 500 words and used over 100 different ones each day.

Just before her 12th birthday — she always had a party — Penny asked Koko what she would like as a gift; she replied 'cat'. That wasn't too surprising; she had had stories read to her for years, and her favourites were *Puss in Boots* and *Three Little Kittens*. Cat picture books were her favourites, other than ones with pictures of gorillas. A sturdy toy cat was ordered, but didn't arrive in time, so was saved for Christmas. But when it was given to Koko she didn't like it at all and refused to have anything to do with it. She wanted a real cat — a pet.

About six months later three kittens were brought in, having been abandoned by their mother and raised by a Cairn terrier dog. They were shown to Koko and her preference was for a tailless tabby — possibly because gorillas don't have tails either. After another visit a few days later the preference was confirmed and the kitten, after staying overnight, became a permanent resident of Penny's quarters, which were quite close to Koko's enclosure. While living with Penny, the kitten was taken to visit the gorilla each evening; and Koko named him **All Ball**. Later he began to visit Koko on his own, and despite Penny's apprehension and the fact that All Ball could be quite aggressive, Koko was always gentle with him and seemed to love him despite his unruly nature. 'Koko love Ball,' she signed. She treated him as her baby, carrying him on her back as she would a gorilla baby, combing and petting him and keeping him clean. She tried to teach him gorilla games, but All Ball didn't understand them; nevertheless he received plenty of warmth, affection and attention.



One foggy morning in December 1984 All Ball was run over by a car and died instantly, having escaped from the gorilla enclosure; he was only a few months old. Koko was told straight away that she wouldn't see him again, and was distressed. News of the tragedy spread quickly, and thousands of people sent letters, cards, photos and pictures. Everyone felt that Koko should have a new kitten, ideally for the approaching Christmas.

That proved much more difficult than expected, as not many kittens were around in winter, especially Manx ones, which is what Koko had indicated she would like again. Eventually a breeder of Manx cats heard about the quest and called around his contacts until he located a litter in Southern California. There was a further delay, but eventually the kitten was ready and was delivered one day in March 1985. He was a red tabby; red is Koko's favourite colour and she was delighted with him! She named him **Lipstick** (*below left*). I don't know how long Lipstick was with Koko or what became of him, but at some point there was a third kitten called **Smoky** (*below right*).



From 1976 Koko had a companion of her own species, called Michael, two years younger and like a brother to her; sadly he died in April 2000 from a cardiovascular disease common in male gorillas. A third gorilla, Ndume, was obtained by the Gorilla Foundation in 1991 and was a potential partner for Koko, although currently they lived in separate enclosures. To help in the preservation of gorillas, a reserve was planned in West Maui, Hawaii, on land set aside in 1996, so that Koko and her friends could move to a location with a climate similar to their natural habitat and free from the risk of poaching and human encroachment. However, funds to purchase the land and set up the reserve were still lacking by 2013.

Update

It seems that the plan to move Koko to Hawaii never materialised. She remained at the Gorilla Foundation reserve near Santa Cruz, California, and in June 2018 she died there in her sleep at the age of

46. She had mastered well over 1000 words in sign language, and understood many more – but despite a number of efforts to provide her with a mate she never achieved her greatest wish, which was to become s mother. She was buried next to her companion Michael in the Foundation’s reserve at Woodside, California. There’s a comprehensive account of her life [here](#) (June 2018 – archived copy). Ndume survived her.

Note: Koko was not the first gorilla to have a feline pet. **Toto** (1931–1968) was a gorilla adopted and raised very much like a human child. Mrs A. Maria Hoyt adopted the baby female gorilla, which had been orphaned by a hunt in French Equatorial Africa in 1931. Mrs Hoyt moved to Cuba to provide a more tropical home for Toto. At the age of four or five, Toto adopted a kitten named **Principe**, carrying the kitten with her everywhere.

The account of Koko is summarised from Koko's Kitten by Dr Francine Patterson, with photos by Dr Ronald H. Cohn, published by Scholastic Inc. in 1985.