

Room 8

Californian school cat remembered to this day

(2009)

(page checked February 2026)

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Featuring / Miscellany 17 and
18.

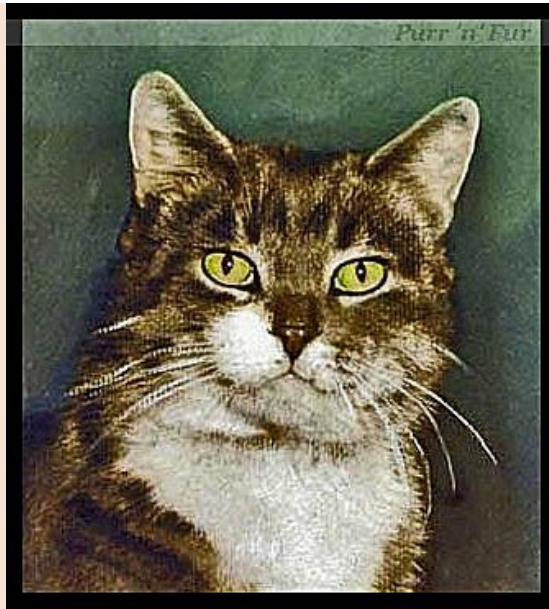


The cat at the centre of this story will probably be unknown to most people, but in his day he was as well-known as [Dewey](#) and [Socks](#) of more recent times; he was described as 'arguably the most famous cat in America' — and he's still fondly remembered in his local area. He went by the unlikely name of **Room 8**.



The cat arrives

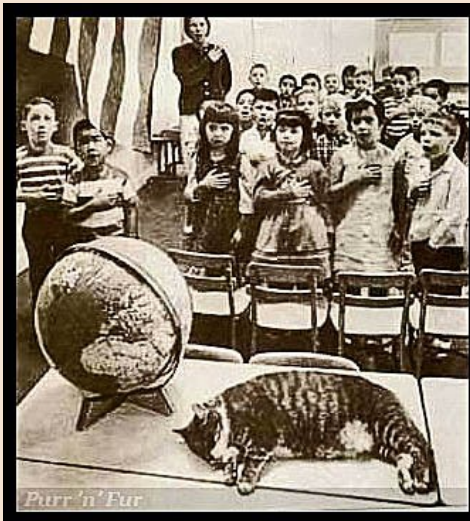
The Elysian Heights Elementary School is in Echo Park, a district of Los Angeles, California, only some 3 miles (5 km) from the city centre. One school day in 1952 a large but rather thin, short-haired, grey-striped tabby cat turned up and wandered into a sixth-grade (Year 6) classroom, where he jumped up, walked on desks in a friendly manner and was welcomed by the children. The teacher wasn't so sure about allowing him to be there, but when the children pointed out how skinny he was she agreed they could give him some milk. They then went out for their break (recess); when they got back, the cat was asleep on a desk, and some of the children's lunchboxes had been opened and the contents scattered around! Later he followed them into lunch; they shared some of their food with him, and he ate and ate. After another sleep he got up, crossed the playground and left through the gate. They weren't expecting to see him again.

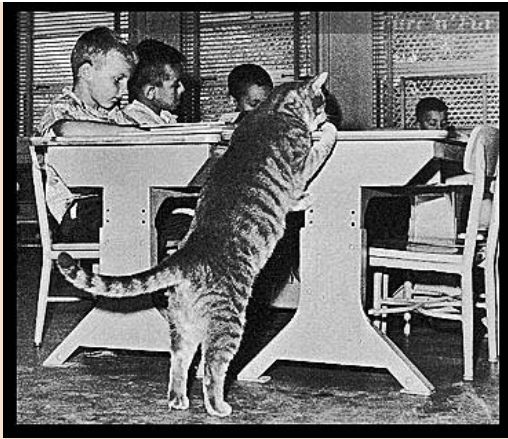


with head Beverly Mason

Naming

But he was back next morning, following the children into their classroom, and as time went by a routine was established. Overcoming initial teacher concerns, the cat was adopted by the children — but he lacked a name. One of them suggested, 'Why don't we call him "Room 8"?' — that being the classroom he liked to frequent — so 'Room 8' he became. He eventually became official school mascot and was usually to be found patrolling the corridors or sleeping on a desk. He often went into lunch with the children; although they weren't supposed to feed him they did, of course, and he became quite plump. Later a pupil from sixth grade would be appointed 'cat feeder' each year, and that was regarded as the most important student position in the school. Room 8's formal feeding took place in the teachers' room, so the cat feeder was privileged to enter this sanctum! The school also had a strict rule: 'Don't bother the cat.' If he did interfere too much with classroom activities, he would be gently relocated by a 'cat remover'.





Fame spreads

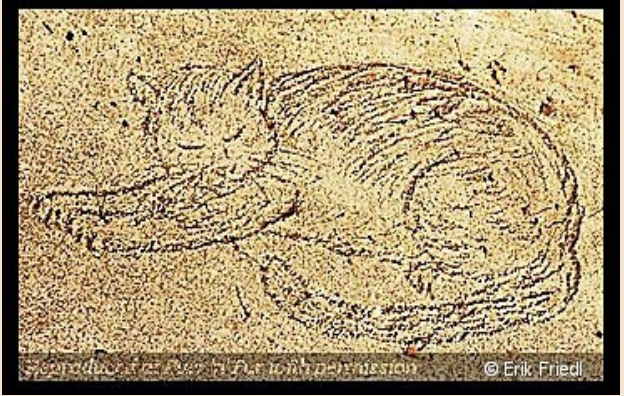
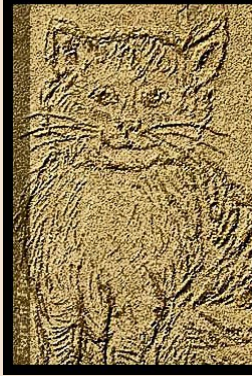
No one knew where Room 8 went at night or during school holidays, but it's thought he probably slept in the nearby hills. The head teacher at the time, who was a great friend and supporter of the cat and later co-authored a book about him (*see below*), found out that he'd been born in 1947, making him about 5 when he first came to the school, and that he was a neighbourhood animal who had been ill-treated at his home, so it seems likely that he just moved out — or maybe he had a second home. But the remarkable thing was that every September he would be back, right on schedule, for the start of the new school year.



To the pupils he was just a normal part of school life, but as time went by the local news media picked up his story. Room 8's fame spread beyond Echo Park, and even beyond Los Angeles. He made personal appearances with head Beverly Mason at local cat shows and community groups, and was made an honorary member of various organisations. In late 1962 *Look* magazine ran a three-page spread on him. His biographical book was published in 1966 (and went through six printings); there was an article about him the following year in a national publication for elementary-school pupils; and in 1968, not long before he died, he was featured in part of a television documentary.

Media interest

Former teachers recall many visits to the classroom by TV, radio and newspaper people. In 1964 the cameras rolled as Room 8's paw-prints were embedded in wet cement in front of the school. Caretaker (custodian) Sam Ross, one of the cat's greatest friends there, gently encouraged him as he walked across the cement with head and tail held high. Though much worn by footsteps and the passage of time, the prints and accompanying inscription, *Room 8 — School Cat*, survive still today. Each year he joined the sixth-grade children for their class photograph, and the honour of holding him went to that year's cat feeder.



Beverly Mason is at front centre, holding Room 8, while custodian Sam Ross is 3rd from right at back

Fan mail

At the height of his fame this famous feline received plenty of fan mail, at one time approaching 100 letters a day! A more usual figure was 30 or so in a month; even letters addressed to simply 'Room 8, Los Angeles, California' or 'The Cat, Los Angeles, California' were delivered correctly. In total approximately 10,000 letters were received in his lifetime, from nearly every state and several foreign countries. The fifth- and sixth-grade children became 'cat secretaries', answering each piece of mail by hand and signing it with a rubber-stamp paw-print. Much of the profit from the publication of the book went to meeting postage costs; there was no e-mail in the 1960s. Some letters contained donations in money, and this was used to buy books for the school library.



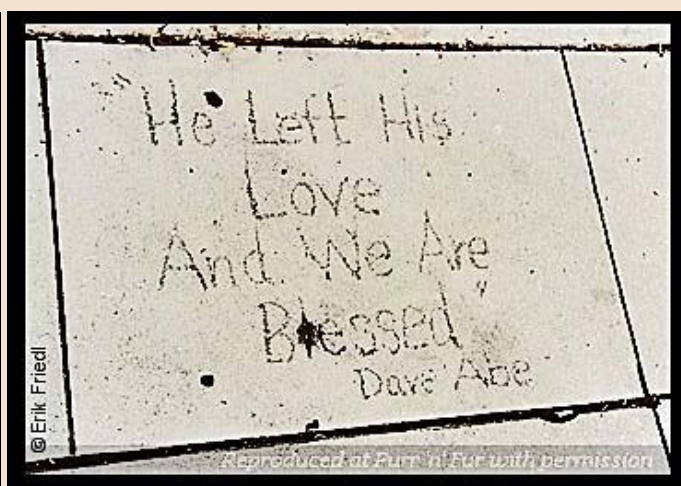
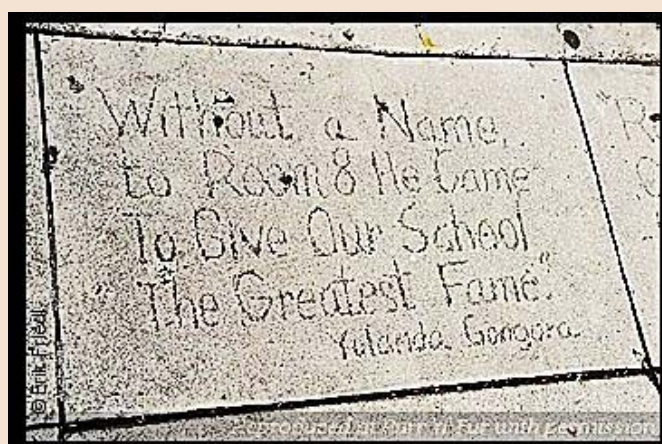
The children here are named (from left) as Beatrice Pita, Lori Wong, Kevin Gilchrist and David Pierce

Health problems

As Room 8 aged, there were some health issues. He made his annual visit to the vet, accompanied always by Sam Ross, but he started to lose teeth; then he was injured in a cat fight late in 1963. More seriously, just over a year later he contracted pneumonia and nearly died, but he was treated successfully at the Lockhart Animal Hospital in Hollywood and eventually recovered. With increasing age he began to accept hospitality from friends and neighbours near the school at nights and when school was not in session. The Nakano family, in particular, gave him shelter and looked after him; Sam Ross would carry him across the street to make sure he crossed it safely and reached their house. Not that he always stayed there! — sometimes flashlight teams had to be organised to go and find him at night, usually visiting a neighbour or napping in someone's garden. He increasingly liked attention from people as he became older.

Room 8 dies

In 1968 a summer school was held at Elysian Heights for the first time for some years. Room 8 attended faithfully every day until he became too ill and had to be taken to the hospital. He died on 13 August 1968 of kidney failure, as happens so often with older cats. He was 21, and in his lifetime had become an important and much loved part of the school and the community at large.



Some of the tributes made by the children in memory of Room 8 are still outside the school today.
A gallery showing the full collection of tributes can be seen at [Flickr](#).

This famous cat gained a three-column obituary — apparently quite rare — and photo in the *Los Angeles Times*, and his passing was noted by various other publications, including the *Christian Science Monitor*. He was buried in the presence of a small number of people (school was out for the summer, or doubtless there would have been many more) at the Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park at Calabasas, with the Nakano family laying a wreath of roses and carnations on his grave. They said he used to love sniffing the flowers in their garden, and those were his favourites. Later a fine monument was erected at the site and can be seen to this day (*below*).



Legacy

Room 8's memory survives, too, not least among the many children — now long since adults — who enjoyed his company during the 16 years or so he was at the school. In the November following his death a 'Room 8 bed fund' was set up at the local orthopaedic hospital, with children from the school making the first donations. Although it no longer exists, the fund brought in 10,000 US dollars, which was a considerable sum at the time. One thing that does continue today is the [Room 8 Memorial Cat Foundation](#) (*still operating in 2026*), started in 1972 in Pasadena and now moved to Riverside; it's a no-kill shelter supported by donations. There was a drive and petition started in 1969 to have Room 8 honoured on a postage stamp by the US Postal Service, but the goal wasn't achieved, although he did feature on a private stamp issued by Pet Pride in the 1970s (*left below*).



A former pupil of Elysian Heights who attended the school in the 1970s, after Room 8's time, says that a lot of fan mail for the cat was still being received then. The children themselves replied to many of those letters, and she remarks, 'If you attended Elysian Heights for any length of time, you learned how to write a letter!' Beverly Mason was still the principal — and there were two cats that roamed the school, as well as the occasional dog brought from someone's home. In addition there was an animal pen next to the playground, with a pony, goats, sheep and chickens, and it was the responsibility of the sixth-graders to take care of those animals. The writer says she was so happy when she finally became a sixth-grader and had the job of caring for the animals; it was such a great thing to have, just three miles from the centre of downtown Los Angeles.

Today

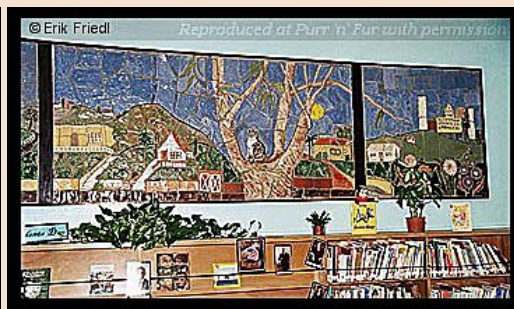
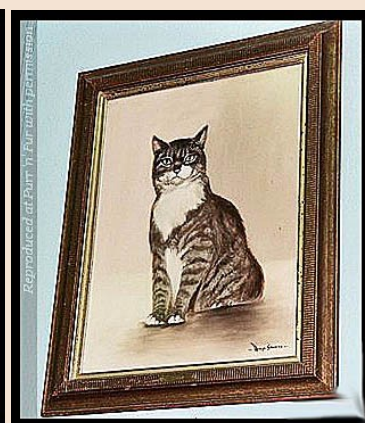
More than sixty years on, the Elysian Heights School still recalls Room 8 with affection and maintains several mementoes of him. A painting hangs in the school office, and two paintings in the hall next to a larger version of his memorial medallion. He forms the centrepiece of a mosaic mural in the library, there is another mural on the side of the auditorium, and his likeness adorns the outside of a classroom building. The school proudly announces its famous feline with foot-high letters on Echo Park Avenue at its junction with Baxter Street: 'Elysian Heights School. Home of Room 8. School Cat 1952–1968'.

And each year, first- and second-grade pupils have the book about the former school cat read to them by their teachers. What a great way to honour and remember him!

The book, now hard to find, is entitled simply A Cat Called Room 8, and was written by Beverly Mason and Virginia Finley, with illustrations by Valerie Martin; it was published in 1966 by Putnam's, New York (no ISBN).

For the photographs of the school and Room 8 mementoes taken in early 2009, we are greatly indebted to Erik Friedl, Los Angeles-based photographer and film maker. You can see some of Erik's work at [YouTube](#).

In 2025 a book was published by the Los Angeles Public Library, written by Brenda Rees and containing some 200 black-and-white photos of Room 8's school life taken by Richard Hewett. I felt the photos could have been edited a little to give more contrast, but it's an interesting collection. ISBN 979-8-9993575-1-9.



Further reading

For more information and photos, see a long, comprehensive and entertaining article at [Explore Historic California](#) (*archived copy, but images don't load*) by former Elysian Heights pupil Roger Vargo, who has also kindly provided the image of the reverse of Room 8's headstone.

The school itself also has a [tribute page](#) to Room 8 (*archived copy*).

Short videos, added 2018):

<https://vimeo.com/97292154> ; <https://vimeo.com/97394544>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtaN7DTAc5c> (about the Cat Foundation)



*In this photo, kindly sent by David Pierce, are (l. to r. from back):
Carmen Acosta, principal Beverly Mason, Chris Friedholm, Virginia Finley;
3rd grade teacher Valerie Martin (holding Room 8), Lori Wong,
Beatrice Pita.*

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