

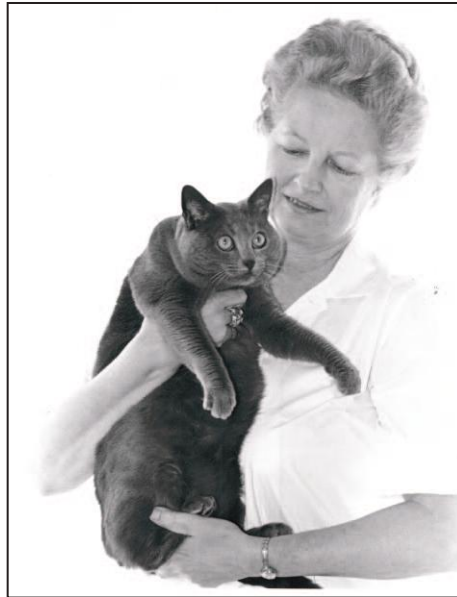
# Helen Gamon's Legacy

## Remembering Helen in Chartreux History

By Orca Starbuck

In the summer of 1970, Helen and John Gamon made a trip to Europe to visit old friends. While in France, Helen mentioned to John her interest in the Chartreux breed. She had read about the Chartreux in Fernand Mery's book, *The Life, History and Magic of the Cat*, which she had given to John as a Christmas present in December 1969.

At that time, there were only a handful of breeders of Chartreux in all of France, and Helen and John began their search unaware of just how rare the Chartreux breed was at the time. They searched for three weeks without success. When they had almost given up their search, John was browsing at a newsstand and happened to find a small advertisement for Chartreux kittens in the back of a magazine. They immediately called the breeder to find out if she had a kitten available, and were thrilled at her reply: "Yes, one female, aged four months"! Through great luck, the Gamons had found Suzanne and Louis Bastide, owners of the best Chartreux in France of 1967, Michou de Fernine.



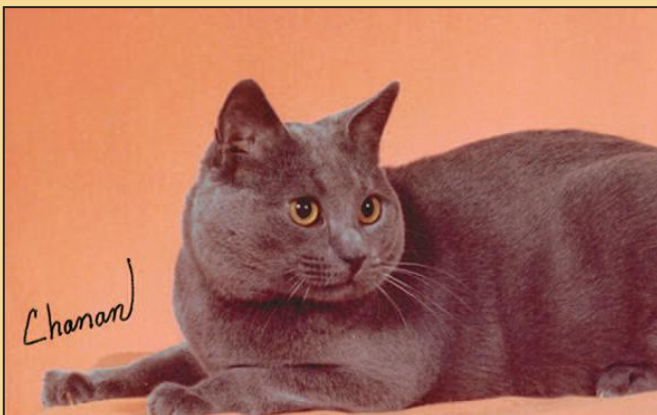
Helen Gamon with Taquin.

The following afternoon, they drove to the Bastides' farm in Ambert, a village in central France. Helen wrote later, "Tornade de St Pierre, at four months of age, was the most beautiful kitten we had ever seen, and at first sight we fell in love with the Chartreux. She was a handful of silver bluegray lush fur with

enormous gold eyes that looked into our hearts and said, 'Love me. I love you.'"

John then asked if there was a male available. Louis Bastide went inside the cattery, and came out with a ten day old male with eyes just about to open. The Gamons arranged a price, and since the male was too young to leave his mother, arranged for both kittens to be shipped to California when the male was old enough. Although Tornade has no descendants today, the little male, Taquin de St Pierre, was to become the father of the breed in North America and would exert a tremendous influence on our breed and bloodlines.

After returning to the US, Helen was very surprised to learn that there were no Chartreux registered at that time in the US or Canada. Breeding and showing Chartreux was going to be a bigger project than she had expected! Helen wrote to the Bastides and to her friend Robert Faivret for help finding other kittens in France and Belgium.



Gamonal Oliver, born 1978. Bred by Helen & John Gamon.



Tornade de St Pierre (left), Taquin de St Pierre (right)  
First Chartreux cats imported to North America, 1970.



*Thilda de St Marcoult as a kitten, with Helen and John's daughter, Jon-Marie Gamon.*



*Vandale de St Pierre as a young adult, "praying."*



*Gamonal kittens born in 1975.*



*Thilda de St Marcoult with litter of 6 kittens sired by Taquin, 1971. First Chartreux litter born in the US.*

Helen arranged to buy a second male, Tristan de Chantelauze, from a highly regarded breeder in France, and a second female, Thilda de St Marcoult, sired by the best Chartreux in Belgium that year.

Helen also set to work on getting the breed officially recognized in the US and Canada, and began to exhibit her Chartreux at shows beginning in October 1970. She needed an official Chartreux standard for the judges to use in the new breed classes, so she wrote to Madame Marguerite Ravel, Secretary General of the Paris Cat Club and President of FIFE. It took several months to receive a reply.

In the meantime, Helen used a breed description that had been published in a 1967 French article. The judges were favorably impressed with Helen's cats, noting how they were both attractive and quite distinct from the British Shorthair.

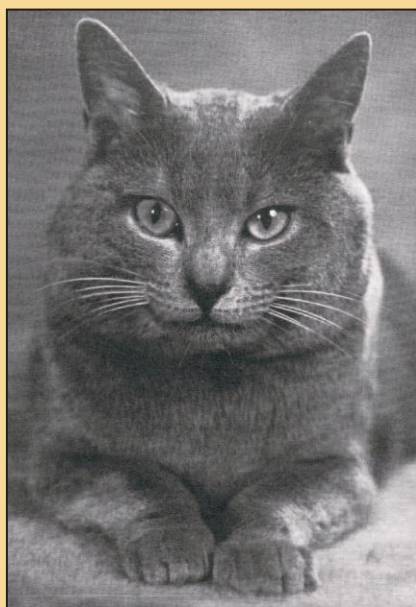
The first litter of Chartreux was born in 1971 to Taquin and Thilda. Helen actively encouraged interest from potential new breeders and exhibitors in the United States and Canada. The first breeder to buy one of Helen's kittens was Gen Scudder (Arista cattery), who took a female kitten from Helen's first litter, and

Helen began to look for a suitable male for Gen's breeding program.

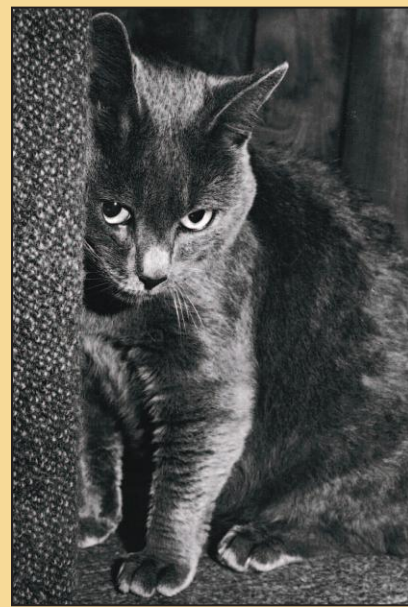
When Madame Ravel finally wrote back with information about the standard in 1971, Helen was shocked by her reply. FIFE no longer had a separate breed standard for the Chartreux, Madame Ravel informed Helen, because judges and officials from FIFE and GCCF had met three years before and agreed to combine the Chartreux and British Blue. Both were now to be registered with the same code and judged under the standard of the British Shorthair.

Now it became clear to Helen why she was having so much difficulty finding breeders who had authentic Chartreux bloodlines. Many of the breeders that she contacted had lines that were close to 50% or greater British Shorthair by pedigree, even though the cats were registered as Chartreux. Some of the breeders were also using Persian or Russian Blue as outcrosses. Helen had been extremely fortunate in stumbling on the Bastides in the summer of 1970, as these were some of the most authentic and pure Chartreux to be found in France.

There were still some breeders in France and Belgium who felt that the Chartreux should be maintained as a



*Taquin de St Pierre, pictured at 2 ½ years old.*



*Vandale de St Pierre, born 1972*

distinct breed without indiscriminate crossbreeding, and did not want to accept FIFE's ruling. In fact, at the very same time that Helen was introducing the Chartreux to North America, Jean Simonnet (Vaumichon cattery) and a few other breeders were forming a group to save the breed in France. Helen learned about their efforts because she was a member of the Paris Cat Club, and received their newsletter, *La Vie Feline*.

Simonnet had published a passionate letter to Madame Ravel in a 1971 issue of *La Vie Feline*, arguing that the Chartreux had been a distinct breed for centuries, and giving detailed references back to the eighteenth century. In this letter, Simonnet also summarized the known history of selective breeding, mentioning the Léger sisters of Belle Île.

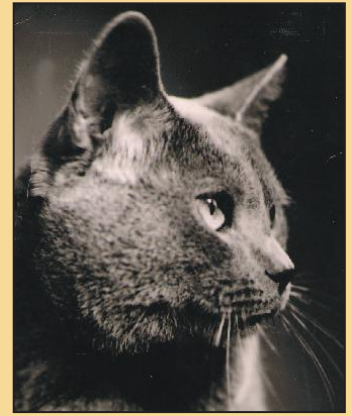
The modern history of the Chartreux began in the mid 1920s, when two sisters, Suzanne and Christine Léger (Guerveur cattery) moved to Belle Île, an island off the coast of France. They had just graduated first and second in their class from the National School of Horticulture at Versailles, and planned to make their living in farming and raising animals. Upon their arrival, the sisters were fascinated to find a large colony of blue cats living near the hospital of Le Palais, the main town on the island. Having studied the history of the natural sciences, they immediately recognized these blue cats as the Chartreux mentioned in the 18th century works of Buffon.

Impressed by the beauty, fine temperament, and robust health of these cats that

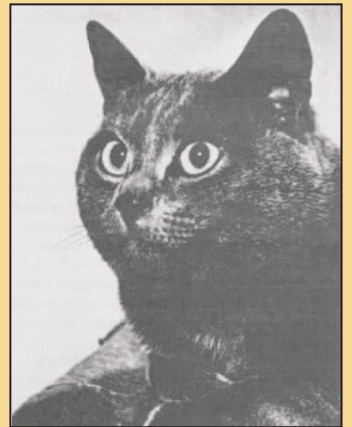
thrived in the harsh climate on the island, the sisters began to breed these cats. The first results of their breeding program did well at some of the early French shows in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1935, Suzanne Léger published an article in the French magazine *La Vie à la Campagne*, describing how she and her sister had restored this historic, native French breed. Her article included many photographs, as well as a detailed breed standard, describing the Chartreux as both powerful and elegant in type.

Another group of breeders, members of Madame Ravel's own Paris Cat Club, started breeding Chartreux in the mid 1930s. Although they may have been inspired by the success of the Léger sisters, these breeders had a different vision for the breed. For the first generation, they used a Persian crossed to a native blue cat, in order to give their line of Chartreux more impressive eye color, body mass, and heavy coat. They wrote their own breed standard, emphasizing the more massive body type of the cats from these hybrid lines, and this was the standard that prevailed when FIFE was formed in 1949.

Over the years, the Paris Cat Club breeders gradually bred out much of the Persian influence. In later generations, they used additional foundation Chartreux from the countryside, while still making occasional outcrosses to other breeds, including the Persian. In 1960, a very important cat, Jimmbo, was born from a female from the Cat Club lines bred to a male out of two foundation Chartreux; Jimmbo was to become an International



IC Jimmbo, born 1960.  
Sire of Michou de Fernine.



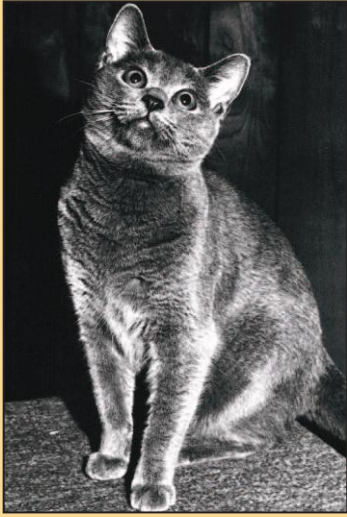
IC Michou de Fernine, born 1963.  
Sire of Taquin, Thilda, and Vandale.



Taquin de St Pierre as a young adult,  
about 1 year old.



Chartreux bred by the Léger sisters on Belle Île in the early 1930s. These cats show the breed type of the original Chartreux native to France, before a Persian outcross was used in 1936. From *La Vie à la Campagne* (French magazine), 1935.



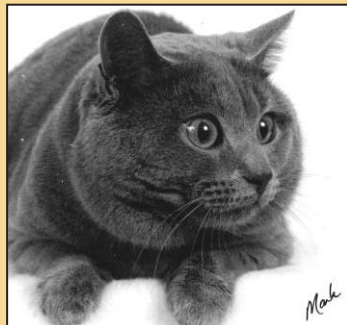
*Arista Nadia of Gamonal, born 1977  
Sired by 1973 import, Ixion de Guerveur.  
Breeder: Gen Scudder*



*Moumoune's Ombrage, born 1978  
Sire: Gamonal Noctambule  
Dam: Arista Nadia of Gamonal  
Breeder: Andrea Hawkins*



*Moumoune Trouvaille of Belleisle, born 1982  
Sire: Moumoune's Ouragan  
Dam: Bo-Wood's Orchidee of Moumoune  
Breeder: Andrea Hawkins.*



*GC Sheenahs Beauregard of Minoux, born 1986. Breeder: Shirley Rosenberg.*

Champion, and was regarded as the ideal Chartreux of his era. His son, Michou de Fernine, was owned by the Bastides, and was the sire of Helen's first two Chartreux.

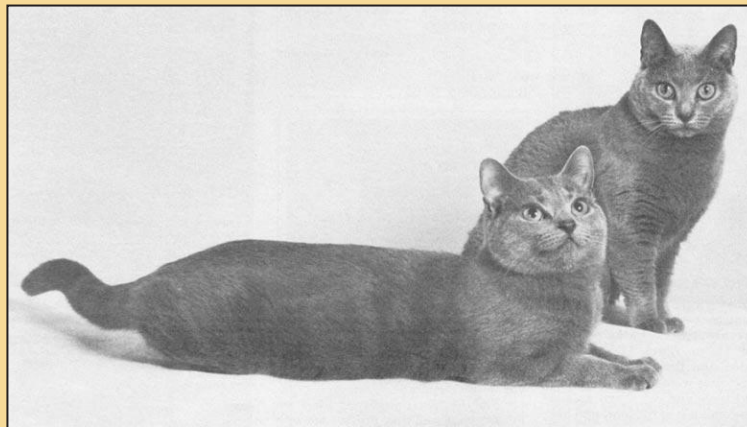
Meanwhile, the Léger sisters had continued to breed Chartreux for over 40 years on their island. Although they had exchanged stud males with other French breeders a few times in the 1950s and 1960s, the Léger sisters' bloodlines still largely represented the native French Chartreux. This made their lines very precious to Jean Simonnet and others who believed in the Chartreux as a native French breed.

Like Helen, Simonnet had bought his first female cat, Pivoine de St Pierre, from the Bastides, but as she was unsuccessful in motherhood, he then bought a female from the Léger sisters, Sidonie de Guerveur. He felt that the most authentic Chartreux were to be found by combining the Paris Cat Club lines with the cats of Belle Île.

Helen was inspired by Simonnet's obvious knowledge and passion for the breed. She began corresponding with Simonnet in 1972, hoping to get a kitten from Sidonie or another cat from the Léger sisters' lines. She also requested help from Simonnet in developing the Chartreux breed standard in the United States. In the meantime, she also arranged to purchase two more kittens from the Bastides, a male (Vandale de St Pierre), and a female (Valse de St Pierre).

In 1973, Simonnet helped Gen Scudder to import a kitten directly from Belle Île, Ixion de Guerveur, to be a stud male for Gen's breeding program. The following year, Simonnet helped Helen to import a female, Jasmine de Guerveur, as Sidonie had to be spayed. Together with the cats Helen had already imported, these cats formed the initial foundation for the Chartreux breed in the US. As more breeders became involved, several cats of Simonnet's breeding were imported (Menine and Nina du Vaumichon, and later on, Titania and Colette du Vaumichon), as well as another male from Belle Île (Pif-Paf de Guerveur), and following that, additional cats from the breeders in Simonnet's circle.

During the 1970s, breed development in North America and in France proceeded in parallel in many ways. Both the North American breeders and Simonnet's group believed strongly in the Chartreux as a native French breed with its own history. While Helen and the other North American breeders were importing cats, trying to establish the breed, and putting together a breed standard, the French breeders in Simonnet's group were selecting the few cats from authentic lines, trying to re-establish the breed, and rebuilding the breed standard. Each group had to put together a strong argument in favor of the Chartreux as a distinct historic breed with its own characteristics, while simultaneously doing the practical work of pulling together the strains of



*Moumoune's Toujours Amoureuse (left), born 1982, breeder Andrea Hawkins.  
Bo-Wood's Orchidee of Moumoune (right), born 1978, breeder Ottie Wood.*



*Chartreux Association ribbon from the CFA Foundation collection.*

Chartreux that were the least mixed with British Shorthair, and least influenced by Persian and other breeds. Each group did this by combining the best lines of the Paris Cat Club with the cats of Belle Île.

In 1977, Simonnet and Madame Ravel even asked for Helen's help in writing to FIFE in support of separating the Chartreux from the British Shorthair once and for all. At this point, the Chartreux breed was already on a firm footing in North America, with established breed standards and registration rules forbidding crossbreeding. Perhaps in some part due to Helen's help, Simonnet's group was ultimately successful, and the status of the Chartreux in France was finally assured.

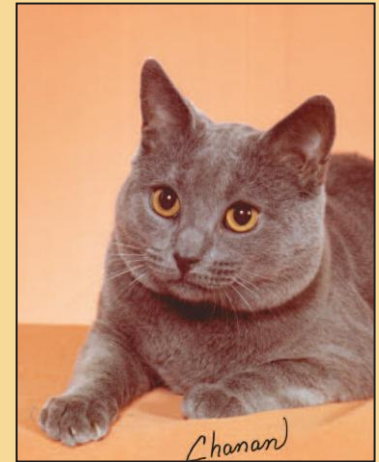
It is now fifty years since Helen first brought the Chartreux to the US, and the breed is in a much stronger position in both North America and France. In Europe, there are now hundreds of breeders, with thousands of kittens registered each year, and Chartreux regularly achieve the highest wins in competition. In North America, Chartreux have achieved many national and international wins in all associations. In CFA, the breed has now been accepted for Championship competition for over 30 years, and has had many winning cats, including 18 National Winners.

The early North American breeders, including the Gamons, did a truly remark-

able job in founding the breed here. Looking back, it is hard to imagine anything they could have done better. They imported a relatively large number of European cats from the very best bloodlines available, recruited many breeders across the United States and Canada, developed breed standards based on the old French standards and comments from Jean Simonnet, and rapidly expanded the number of Chartreux being bred and exhibited. They formed a Chartreux Association, fostering cooperation and unity among the breeders. They rapidly achieved acceptance in all registries, ensuring that the breed standards were nearly the same in all.

In 1978, Helen retired from breeding at her doctor's orders, due to a heart problem. She kept a whole male from her last litter, Gamonal Oliver, allowing other breeders to use him with their females for many years. Oliver is behind many of our Chartreux today. Helen passed away on December 15, 1993 at the age of 80.

Helen was committed to preserving this historic breed and establishing it on our continent. Her passion for the Chartreux shines through all her correspondence and writing. Our North American bloodlines owe everything to Helen and her work. Thank you, Helen! 🌸



*Gamonal Oliver, born 1978  
Sire: Gamonal Iredell  
Dam: Gamonal Istra  
Breeder: Helen & John Gamon*



*Belleisle Velours Bleu, born 1984  
Sire: Gamonal Oliver  
Dam: Moumoune Trouvaille of Belleisle  
Breeder: Penny Rice*



*Sheenah's St Tiffany, born 1982  
Breeder: Shirley Rosenberg*



*Litter of kittens bred by Suzie Tell. Born 1984  
Sire: Gamonal Oliver, Dam: Sheenah's St Tiffany  
Two of these kittens became CFA grands, GC Tellacats Volvo of Ashmanor and GC Tellacats Vulcan.*