

1/19/97

Dear Ms. Lubkin,

You asked about the paper (PRL) coauthored with my cat.

In about 1975 I had finished a paper on a proposed model for the spin exchange in solid ^3He . I felt it was of PRL significance and wrote it with that in mind. I showed it to an other member of our department and he said "yes, it's a fine paper, but they will send it right back".--reason being that I had used "we" everywhere and there was only one author. I called PRL and they said no, we'll just change the "we" to "I" everywhere. Now I understood the inexplicable use of "I" by some authors! To avoid this fate and to avoid a complete rewrite of the paper I hit upon the idea of simply adding an author. I used F.D.C. Willard for Felis Domesticus Chester Willard (my cat Chester having been sired by Willard, probably the scruffiest cat in Aspen one summer.)

Shortly thereafter a visitor to MSU asked to talk to me, and since I was available asked to talk with Willard. Everyone laughed and soon the cat was out of the bag.

Most of my colleagues thought it was a good joke but one or two felt it a bit disrespectful. One friend who was an editor did not seem too amused.

The chairman of the department was able to inflate some statistic requested by the administration by including Willard among the published authors from the Physics department.

I actually made a few reprints with "complements of the authors" and signed by myself and Willard with the help of some printers ink on his paw. I sent some to a few acquaintances, and after most interest had died down, one to an (at the time) unknown physicist at Grenoble. He later told me that at a meeting to decide who to invite to a conference someone said "why don't we invite Willard, he never gets invited anywhere." He showed the reprint and everyone agreed that it seemed to be a cat paw signature. Willard never got invited and neither did I.

A physicist when he was with NSF told me that whenever a supplicant visited and the conversation lulled he would bring out the Willard paper. I'm not sure if it helped or hindered my own grant getting efforts.

Willard was actually the sole author on another paper in the French journal La Recherche. Evidently he had learned French! Some of my collaborators were trying to write a popularized version of the spin exchange in solid ^3He . They fell to bickering about how to present the ideas so that no one was willing to sign the finished product. They simply used the pseudonym F.D.C. Willard instead.

Finally my wife could claim that she slept with both authors.

Sincerely,
J.H. Hetherington
Professor of physics
Michigan State Univ.