

The Legend of Chessie

Chessie, the corporate symbol of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, was discovered in the Sunday magazine section of *The New York Herald Tribune* in 1933 by L.C. Probert, Director of C & O's Public Relations. There she lay, snuggled in the sheets, head resting on a pillow and peacefully napping, in a reproduction etching by Viennese artist Guido Gruenwald.

Probert probably wasn't overly fond of cats, but he had a hunch that a little kitten might be a great way to advertise C & O's first all-air-conditioned car, "The George Washington." After C & O secured exclusive rights to Gruenwald's picture "The Sleepy Cat," the usual promotional campaign was undertaken, and Probert's idea was set in motion. Chessie revelled in the prevailing fuss and allowed them to use her picture along with a slogan reading, "Sleep Like a Kitten on The Chesapeake & Ohio."

Her debut came in September, 1933, when she appeared in an advertisement in *Fortune Magazine*, and, a few days later, C & O received hundreds of letters requesting a picture of the kitten. Chessie became C & O's official calendar girl in 1934. And, behind the scenes at C & O headquarters, the flurry of activity was growing to a fever pitch. Gifts and fan mail poured in from all over the world! And Chessie's popularity soared to heights a starlet would envy.

C & O decided not to disturb Chessie's image as a sleepy cat, but they added animation around her by incorporating another Gruenwald etching to give her a family. In 1935, a handsome tom-cat, appropriately named "Peake," became Chessie's "Old Man," and a calendar featuring Chessie, Peake, and their first family of two kittens was issued. Each picture was a reproduction from an original Gruenwald print. Life was good—Probert was smiling, the stockholders were smiling, Chessie was smiling...and Gruenwald was smiling!

Chessie's creator, Guido Gruenwald, was born in 1881, in Trieste. Hardship forced him to paint only as a hobby until he was 40. In all probability, Chessie and the other cats were Guido's pets at one time or another, as he loved animals and his suburban home became a haven for kittens. He died at 54.

When Chessie hit the rails each time C & O rolled through town, her image grew as familiar to America as "Mom and apple pie." Some years later, it was decided that Chessie's role as a good-will ambassador would be extended through a merchandising program. C & O asked no royalties, but only that the licensed manufacturers place on the item's tag or label a phrase stating Chessie was used with the permission of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway. 1938 saw the first Chessie item, a woman's scarf, and it sold throughout the country by the thousands. Other items were added over the years, including Chessie's Purr-fect note paper. Chessie received the ultimate compliment when babies began appearing with her name.

In 1956, when Baltimore & Ohio became affiliated with C & O, a wide-awake, blue-eyed kitten dubbed "Bessie," was added to the family. As for Chessie, she's still purr-fectly happy, working for the railroad. [Special thanks to James Willard, MD, for sending in this info from the *Cotton & Quail Antique Trail*, September, 1999]

