

Right: Although many hatcheries were owned by commercial poultry breeders, one in Iowa City was run by hobbyists. The black-and-white photos show an Iowa City hatchery operated by university literature professor Irving King and poet Ralph Littrrell. The photos depict the operation: hatching the eggs; punching holes in the shipping crates; (next page) packing the chicks; running the office; and, finally, introducing the babies to the wide, wide world.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



A sales catalog from the large-scale operation of Edwin and Leone Holmes in western Iowa.

One Chick, Two Chicks, Three Chicks More!

by Timothy Wadell

W arm weather turned a farm family's thoughts to a new growing season. For many Iowans, that meant planting acres and acres of corn and beans, or turning over the garden. But particularly for farm women and their children, this was the time to think about raising chickens. Chickens and eggs were great commodities to sell for cash or to barter for groceries, clothing, canning supplies, or store credit.

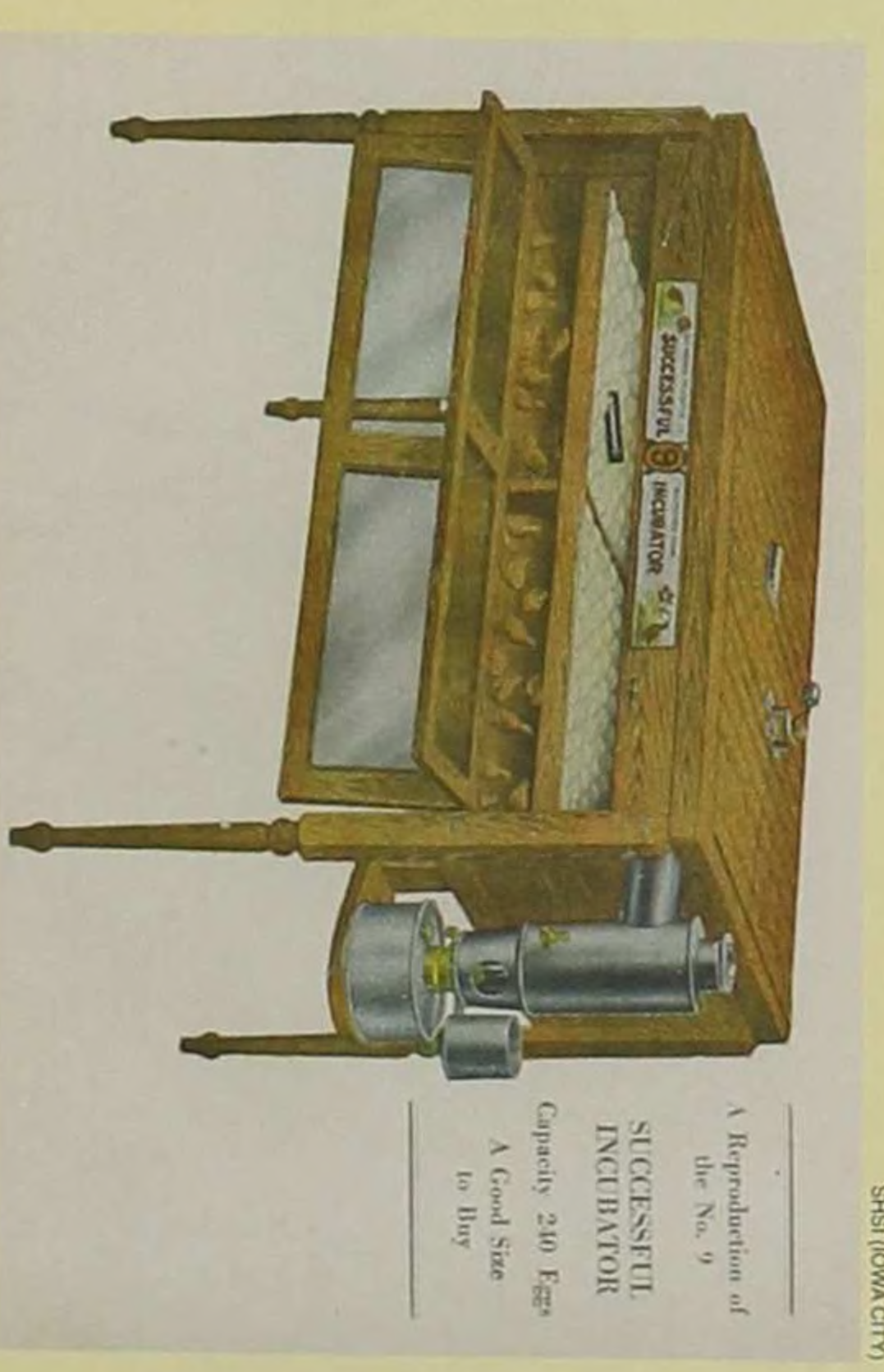
There was no question that the poultry and egg business was a wise investment, or so said the numerous publications and catalogs that reached the farm family's mailbox. "Give the poultry business half the energy and attention required by any other business or job," proclaimed Frank Foy, a breeder in Clinton, "and the profits will be as certain as night and day."

So, in the poultry business, exactly which came first? The chicken or the egg?

Either. Fertilized eggs could be ordered and then hatched in your own incubator or under heat lamps. Or you could purchase chicks or adult stock and have them shipped to you. After a few months of growth, the young males ended up as Sunday dinners and many of the young females headed for a future as laying hens.

It all began with the purchase of stock from a well-qualified, highly regarded breeder, according to the catalog for the Frank Foy Poultry Farms. "The hen that lays eggs regularly day after day, week after week, month after month can be likened to a government bond on which you receive a regular, never-failing dividend on your investment."

There were a number of large- and small-scale hatcheries in the Midwest. Clara Berry of Berry's Golden Rule Poultry Farm in Clarinda in southwestern Iowa, advised farm families to buy from members



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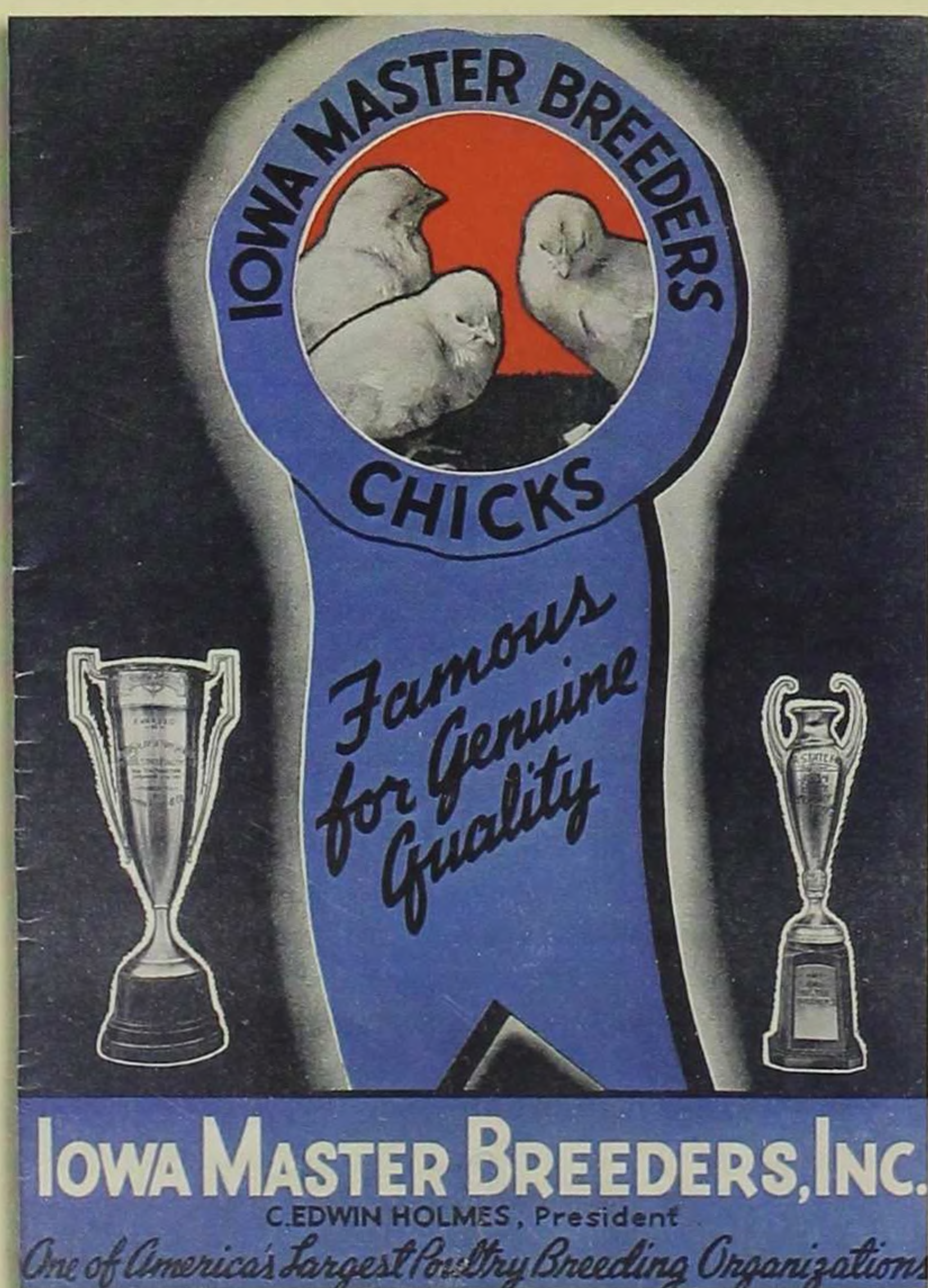
Poultry catalogs often advertised incubators like this one, as well as brooder stoves, feed hoppers, egg crates, lice killer, egg testers, and, of course, grit and grain. This ad is from the 1923 catalog of the Des Moines Incubator Company.

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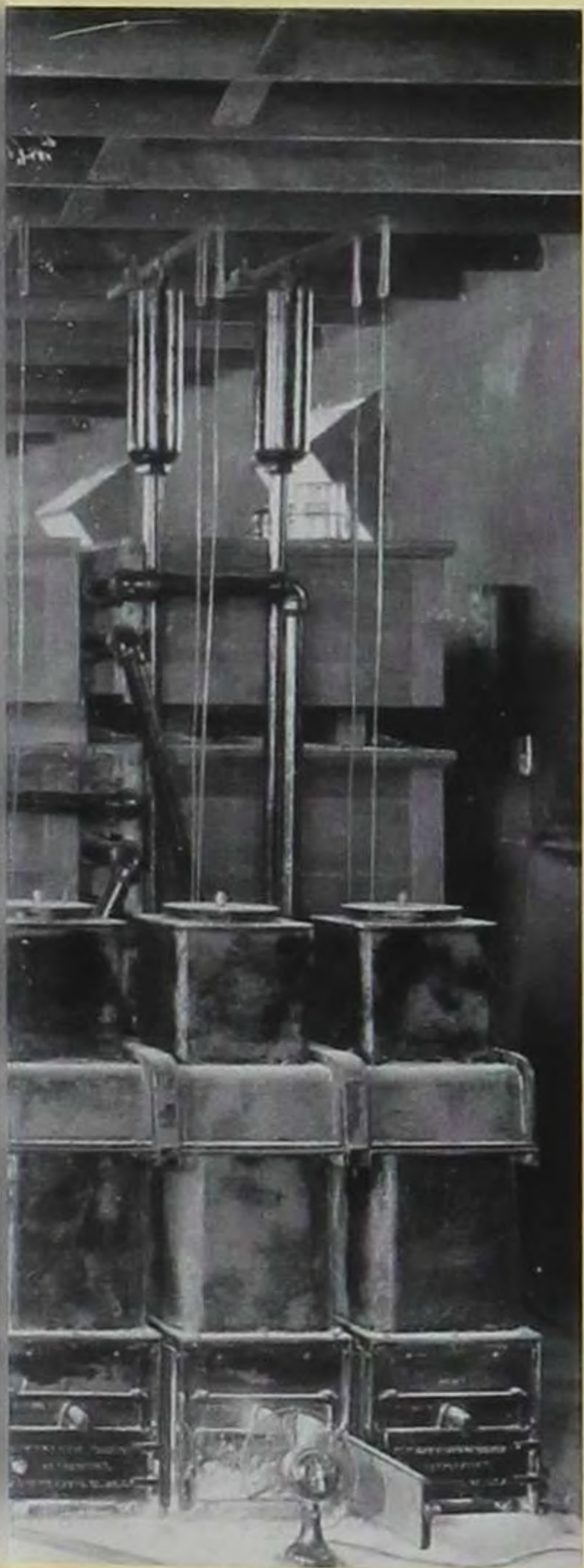
One Chick, Two

by Timothy Walch

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Chicks, Three Chicks More!

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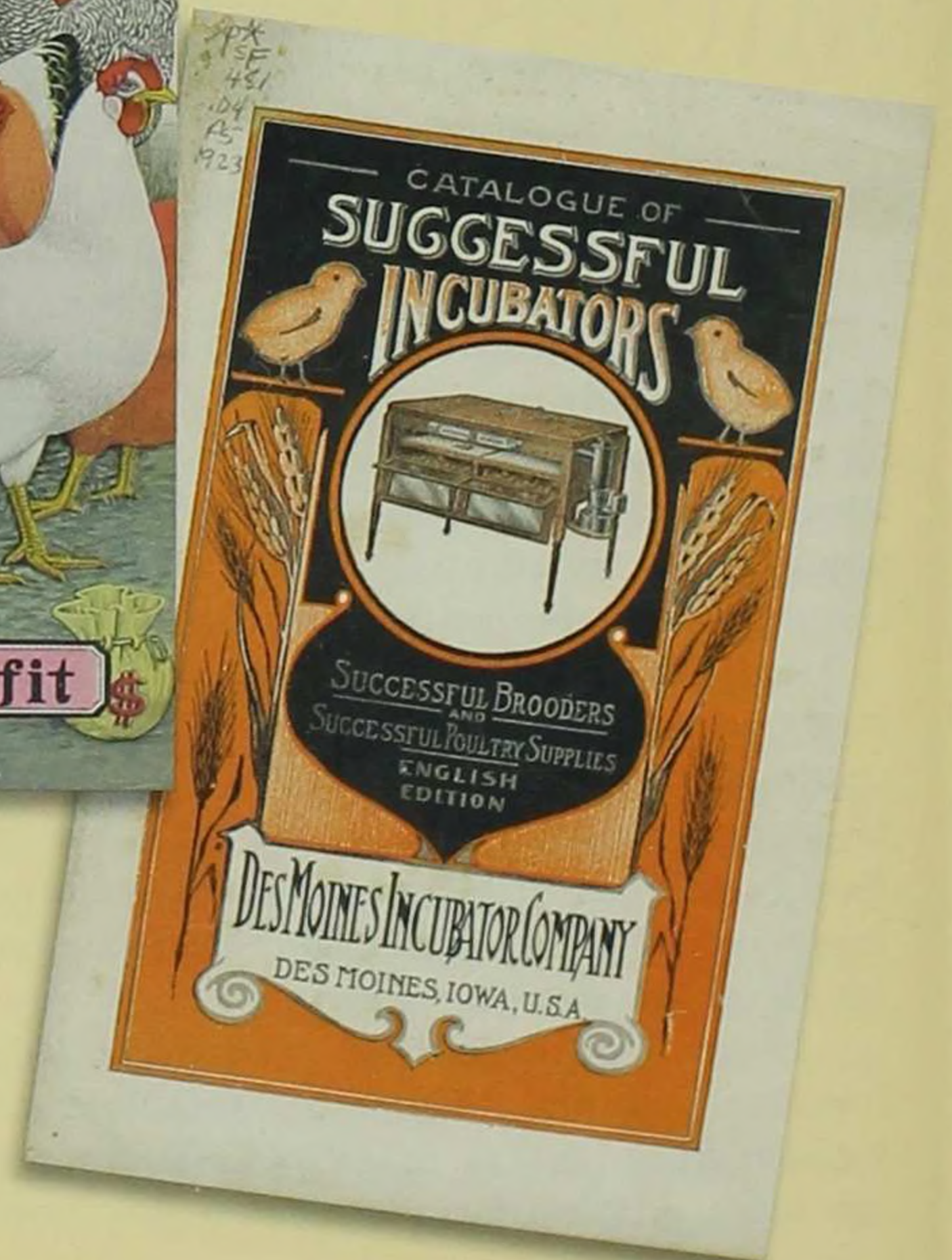
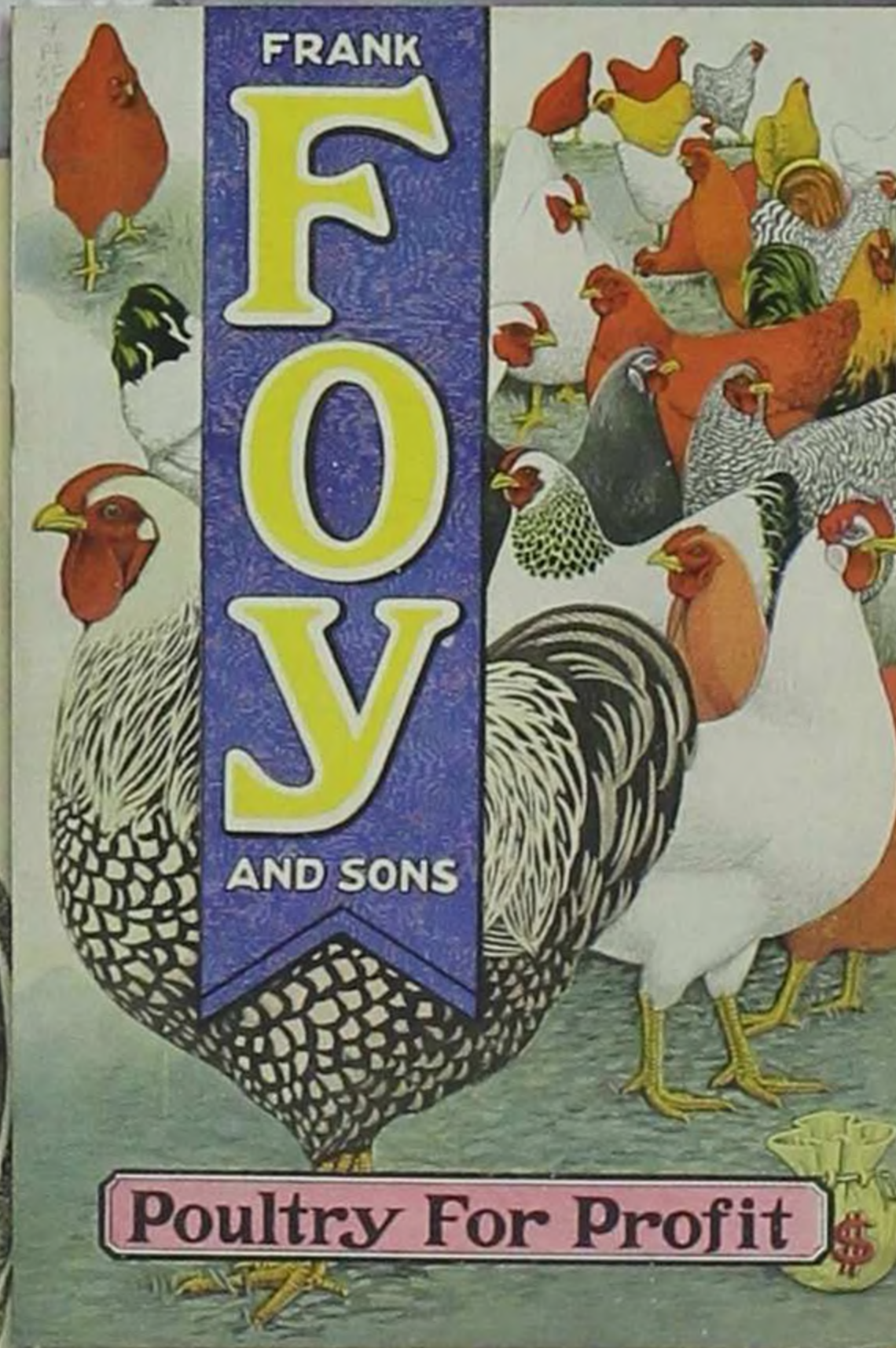
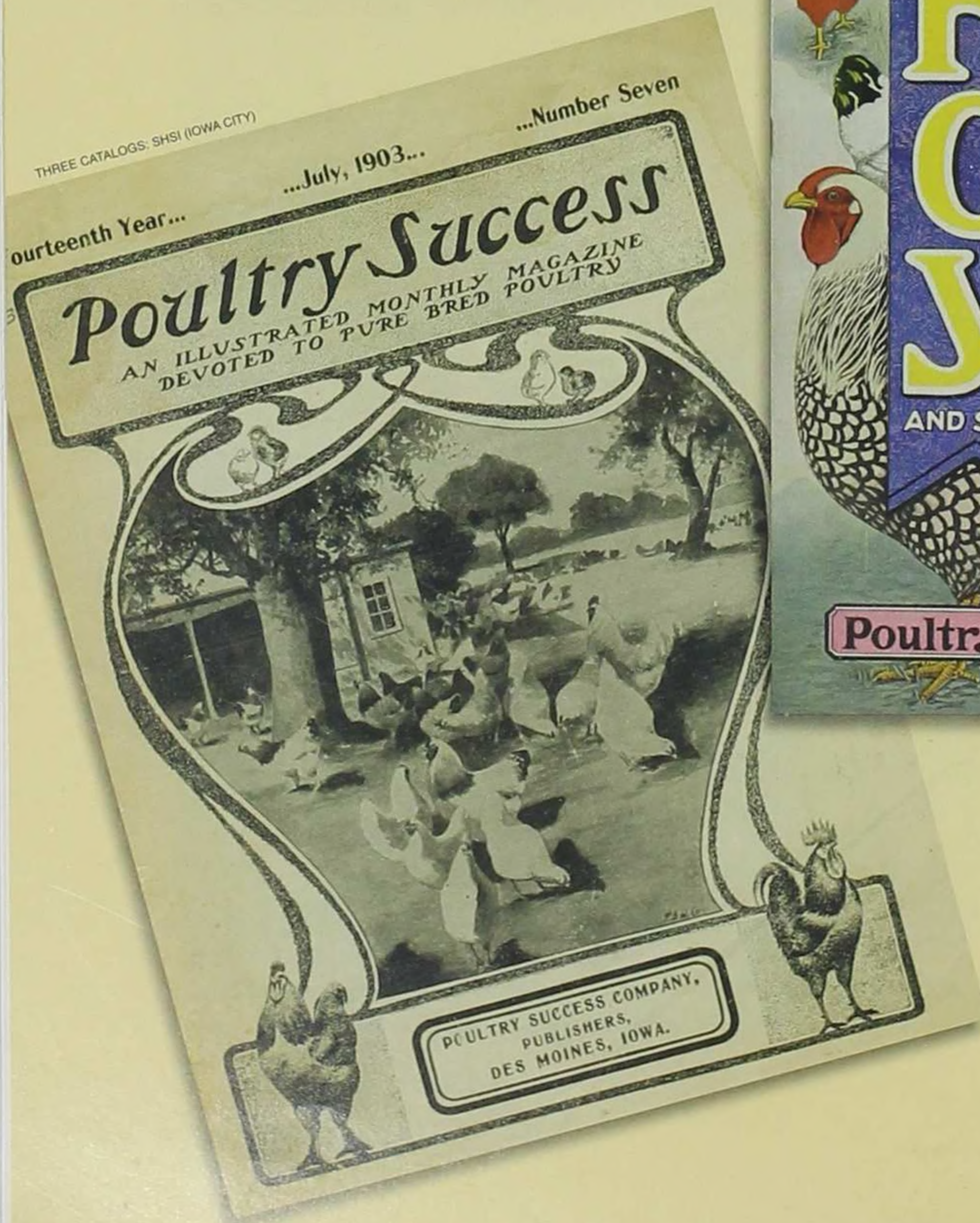
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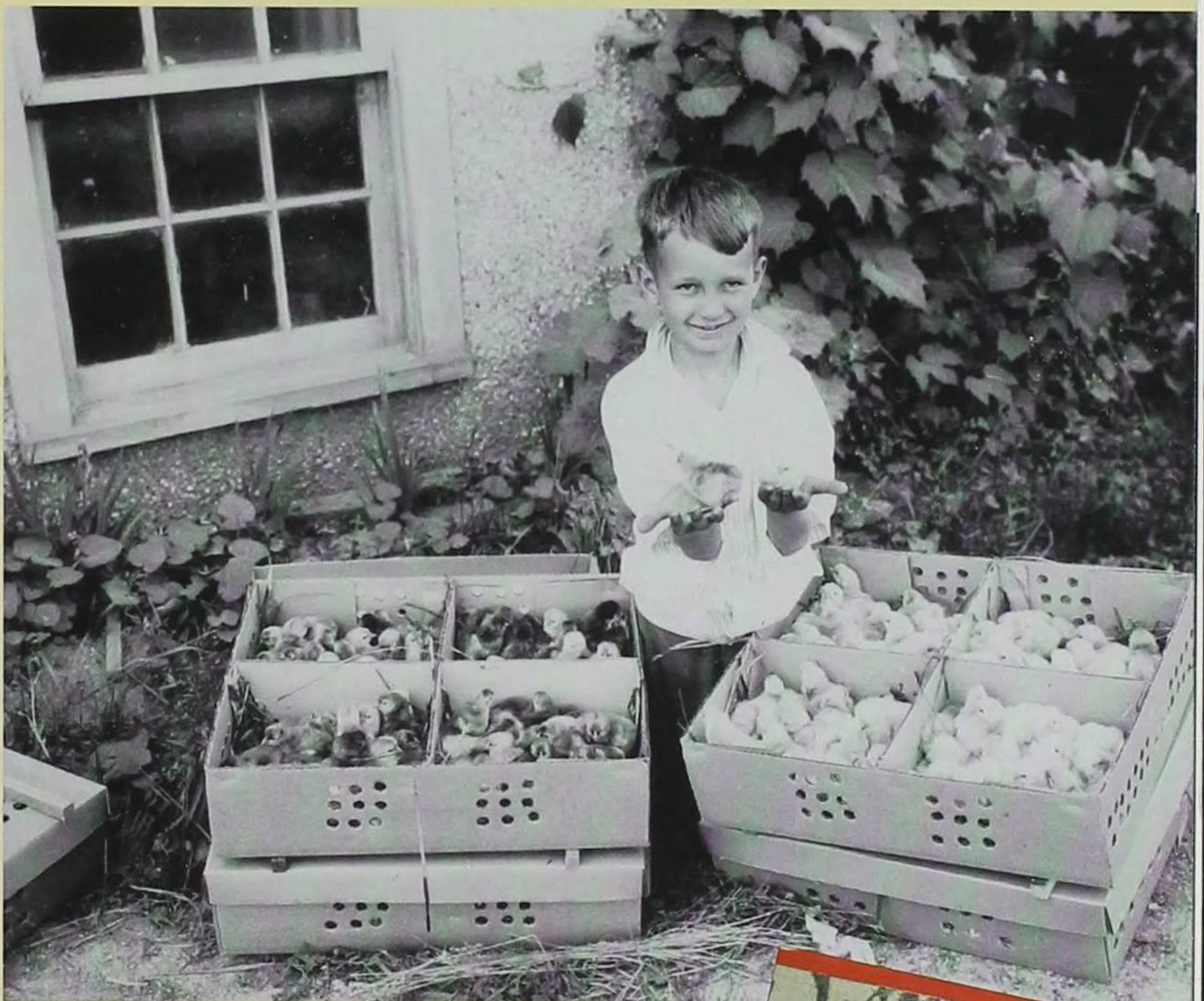
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BOTH IMAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

of the International Baby Chick Association. "We are interested in safeguarding our customers," she explained, "because we do know that there are a great many fakers in the chick business and we don't want to be classed with them."

On the same side of the state, Leone and Edwin Holmes operated Iowa Master Breeders, Inc., in Onawa. They advised buyers to do business with any of the Master Breeder hatcheries in Iowa, South Dakota, or Nebraska. Distance mattered little. A shipment of Master Breeders chicks reached President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's farm in Hyde Park in only 36 hours. Shipments to Alaska, British West Indies, and Ireland took a bit longer.

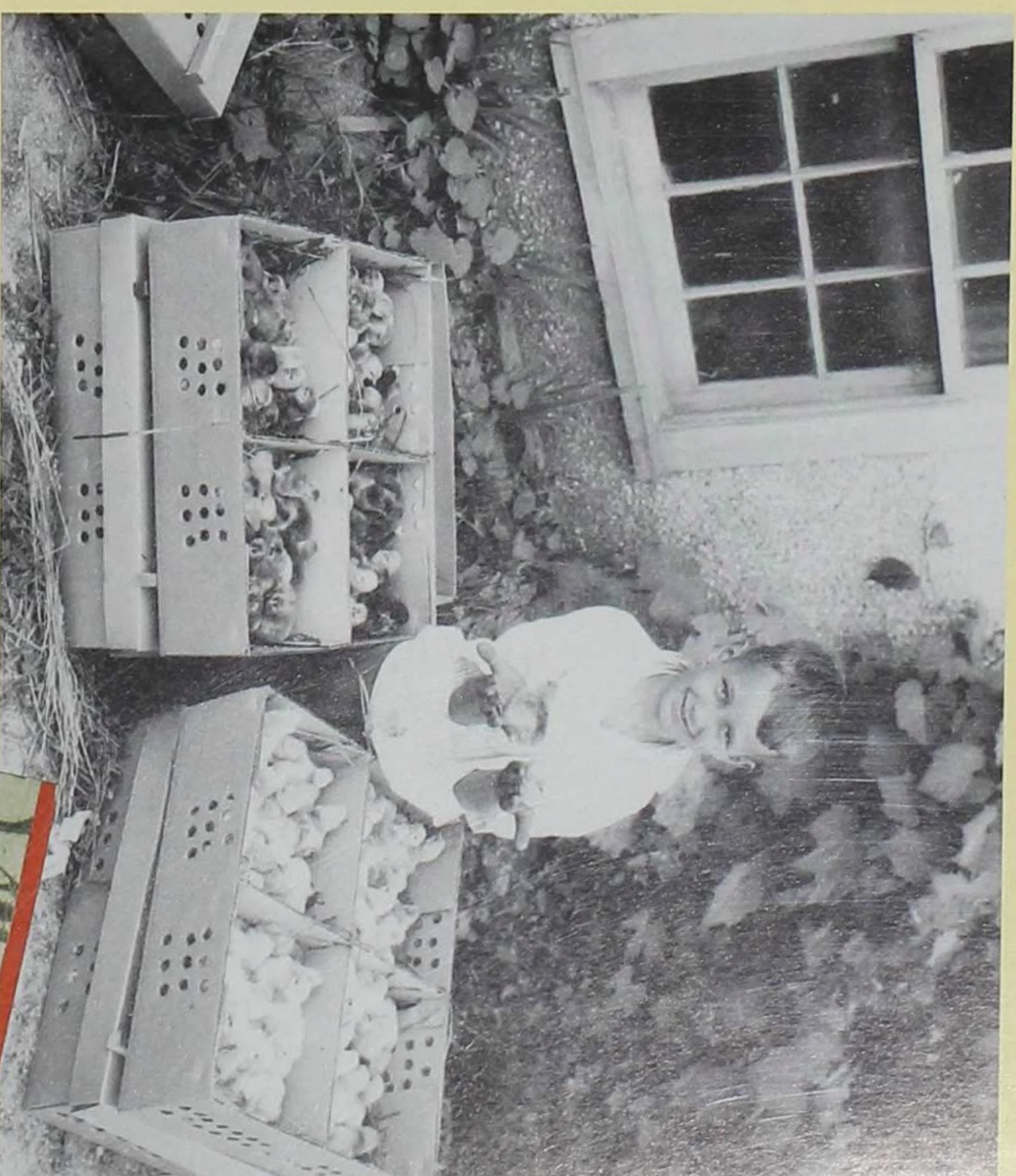
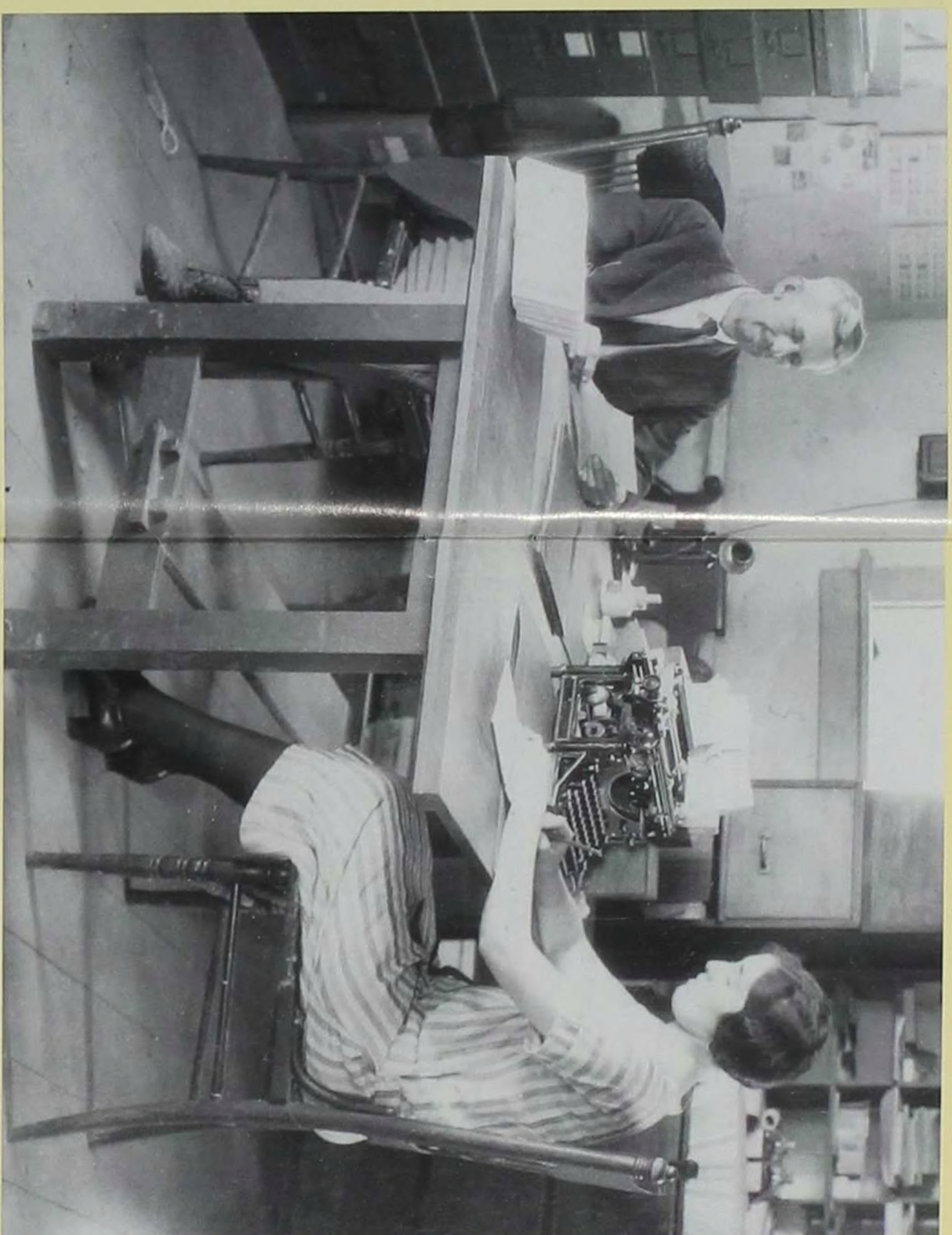
In his memoir *Childhood on the Farm*, George Kisner recalled the arrival each spring of a hundred baby chicks that his mother had ordered from a hatchery in Independence. "They came by mail in large flat



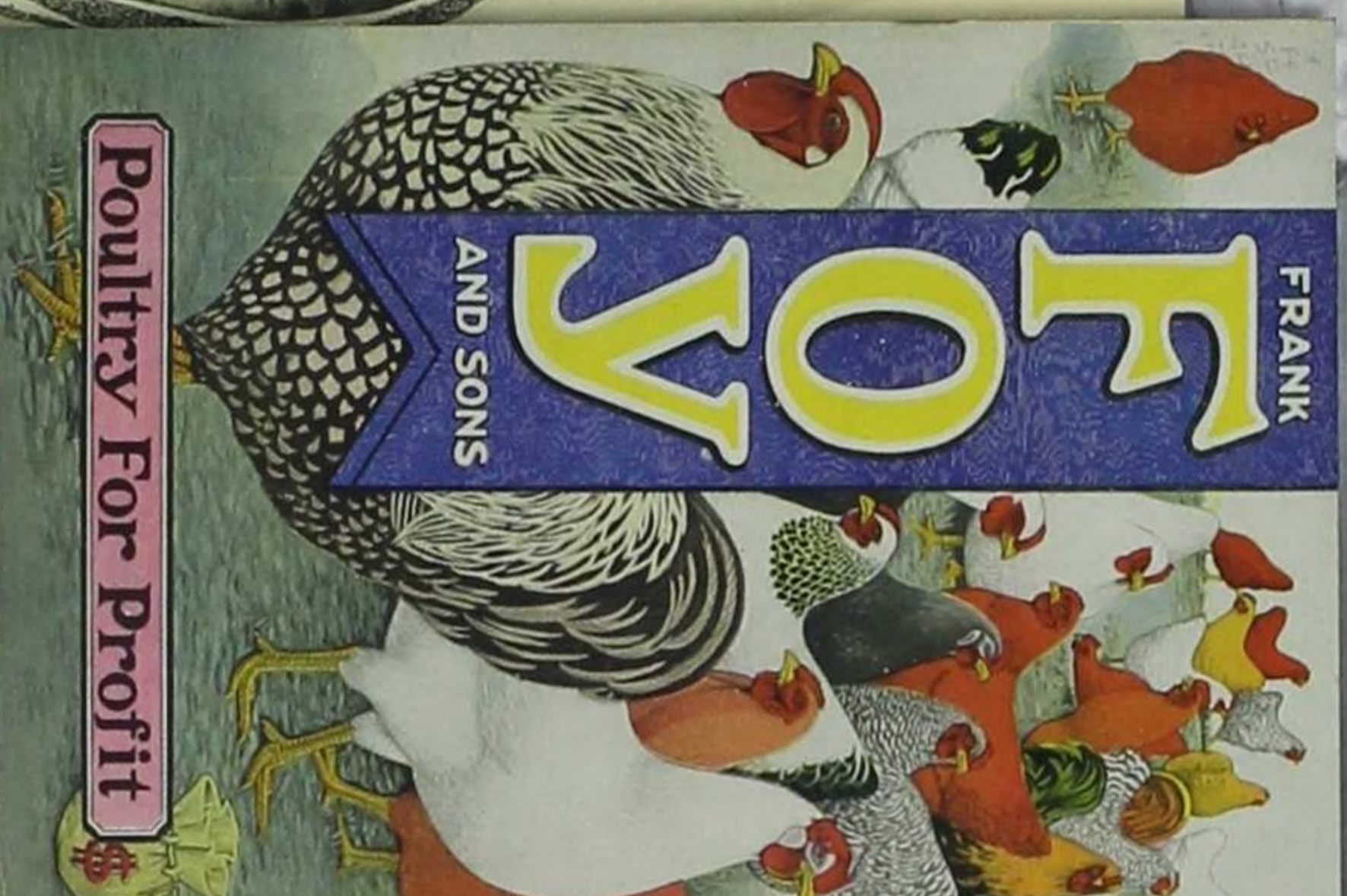
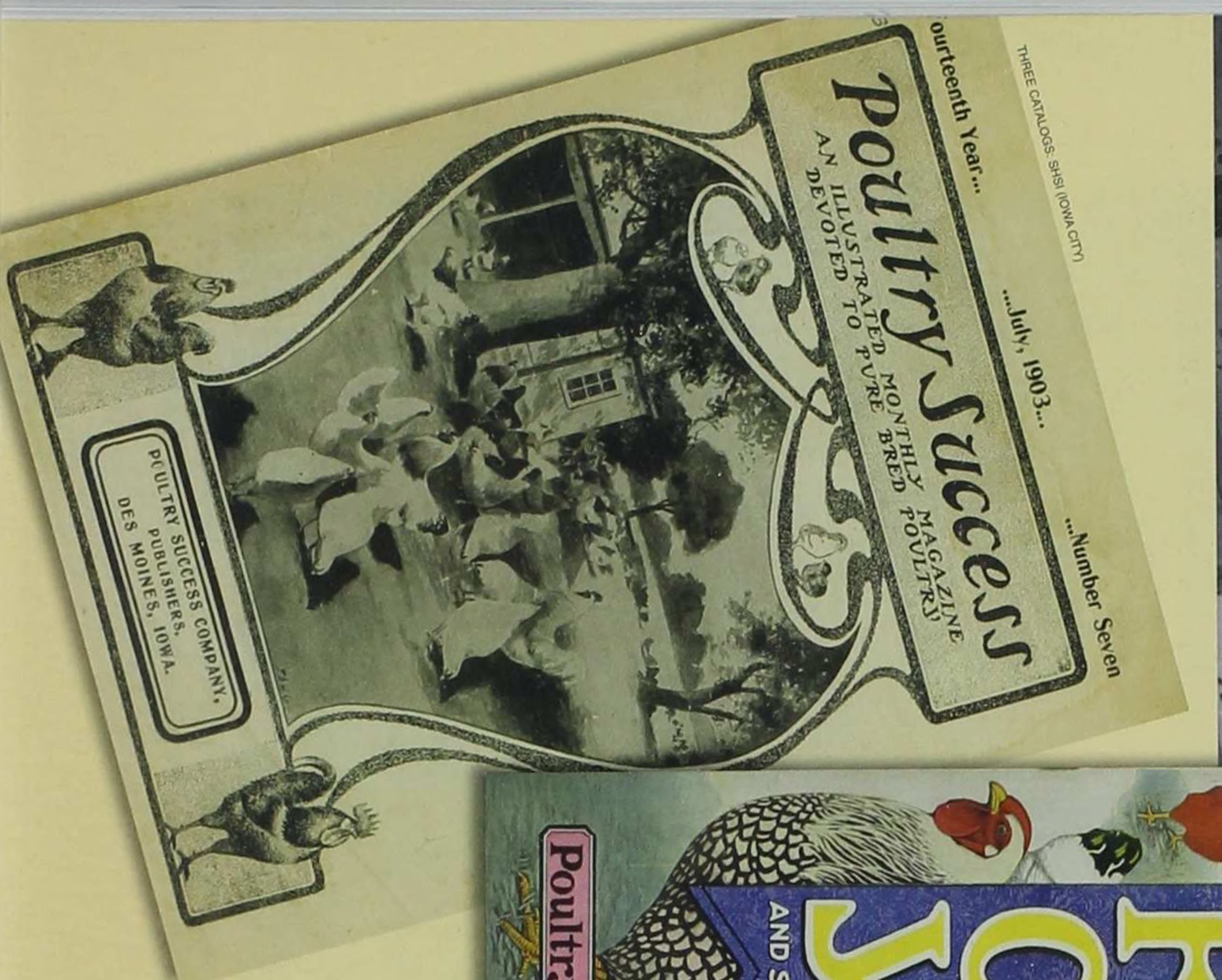
Raising poultry was a source of pride, profits, and year-round food for the farm family. The work was often undertaken by the farm women, with help from their children.



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Heaters or heat lamps were set up in brooder houses to keep newborn chicks and ducklings warm. Below: an unidentified farm woman is greeted by her flock of hens.

boxes with holes in the sides to let in air," Kisner wrote. "We picked them up at the post office and their cheeps could be heard as soon as we stepped inside."

That's when the real work began. George's mother, Ethel Rafferty Kisner, would quickly transfer the birds to the brooder house, where the temperature was kept at a constant 80 degrees. "She would carefully lift out each chick and dip its beak in water before setting it free. These were day-old chicks and had never before

eaten or drunk. The brooder house was situated close to our family house and she would go out frequently at night to check on her brood.

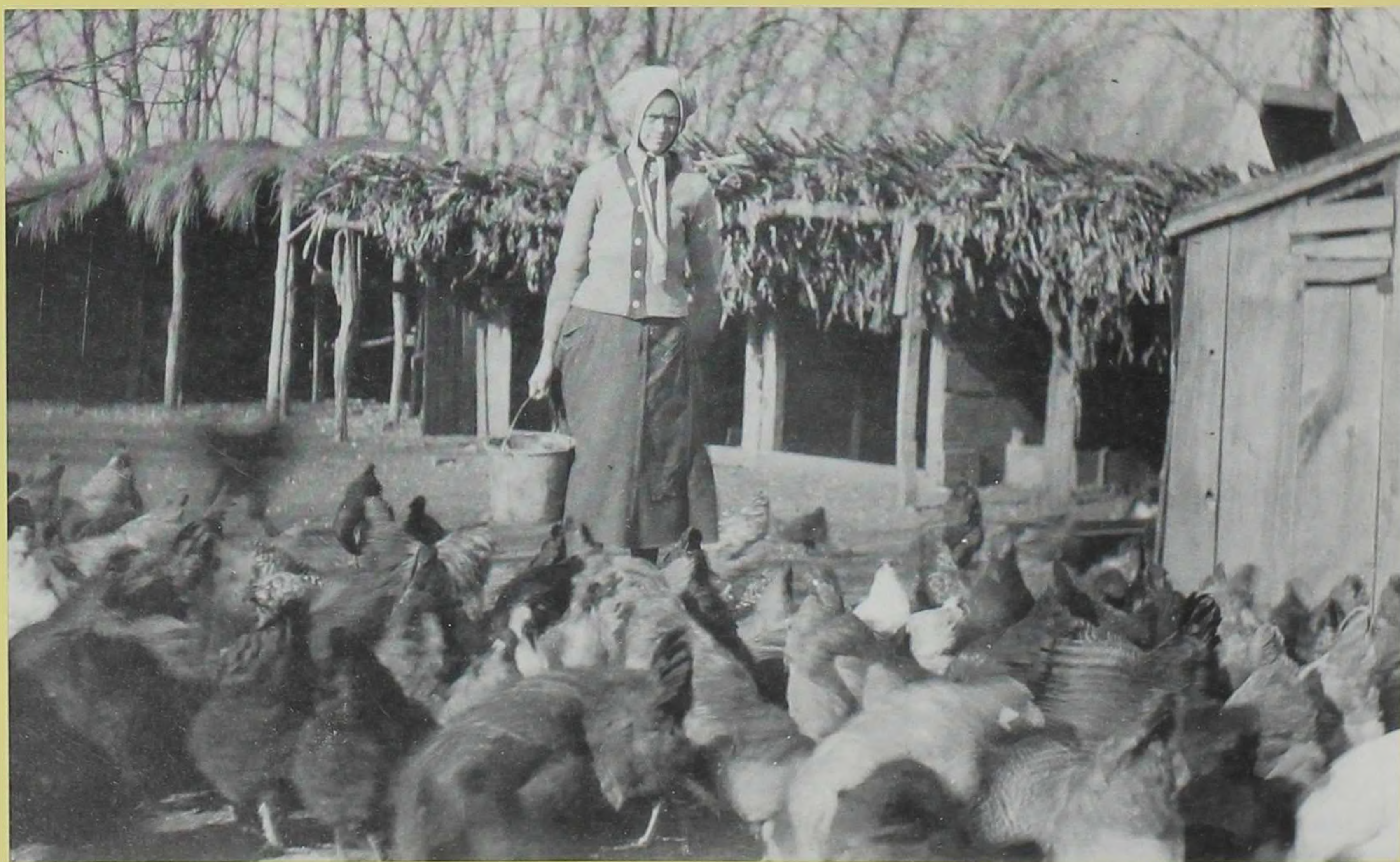
"When the chickens were about 6 to 8 weeks old, she would sell off the roosters as fryers to a place in Clear Lake, Iowa," George remembered. "By that time they would have been moved into a much larger house and roamed freely about the farmyard."

There was no question of the importance of Ethel Kisner's business. "As I look backwards," her son concluded, "it seems to me she did more to support the family with her lowly chickens than my father did with his cows and pigs." ❖

Timothy Walch volunteers at the State Historical Society of Iowa and writes frequently for this magazine.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Ethel Kisner's poultry operation is described in George Kisner, *Childhood on the Farm* (Keota, Iowa: Printers Workshop, [2006?]). In addition to the poultry catalogs shown here, the libraries of the State Historical Society of Iowa have hundreds of sales catalogs related to domestic life, agriculture, business, industry, and many other facets of American life. The information on the Iowa City hatchery shown on pages 36–39 was compiled by Tim Weitzel and appears at www.icgov.org. Search for "King-Littrell-Palmer."



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