

Jack Erwin of Henry County, Iowa, feeds chickens in this mid-20th-century photo. Helping care for poultry and collecting eggs were typical chores for farm children, as described in this reminiscence by Iowan Mary Wear Briggs.

by Mary Wear Briggs

Chasing Chickens

When I was young, in the 1920s, my mother, Nora Wear, raised chickens. She usually had a flock of more than a hundred layers, and she traded their eggs for our groceries in Willards Store in Persia, our hometown.

Chickens have proved to me to be the dumbest creatures in the barnyard. When God made chickens, he must have taken a look at his newest creative endeavor and, seeing the flat top on their heads, realized too late that he had forgotten to leave room for

the brains. So he built a bright red comb over the flat top to cover up his mistake. Chickens only know three things well: to lay eggs, to "set," and to cackle or crow according to their gender.

My sister, Loyola, didn't care for outdoor jobs, so I usually had the chore of gathering the eggs. One summer, when I was about seven or eight, my mother had what she considered a brilliant

idea of giving me a penny for every two dozen eggs I gathered. (Peon wages!) In hot weather, hens sometimes quit laying and spent relaxing times dusting their feathers in powdery holes they scratched out in the shade of the grove, or they decided to set, and didn't lay during this period. Gathering eggs for money became diligent work.

I not only gathered them in the henhouse, I had to search for them



in the barn, the crib, the hoghouse, the haystacks, or anywhere the chickens might decide to lay an egg. I collected them three times a day, so they wouldn't be out in the heat too long. Sometimes I literally plucked the egg from the hen as she laid it.

I worked out a very simple accounting system. I drew the number of eggs I gathered in sets of two dozen. As I sometimes found only two or three in a gathering period, this alleviated constant adding and gave me a pictorial view of my growing riches. I did not have a regular allowance. My father gave us each 50 or 75 cents on the Fourth of July and on church picnic day, and that was all we had.

I knew just how to bring my hand in behind the hen's wing near the tail and quickly grab the eggs before the hen could turn her head and peck my hand or arm. Even though I was cautious, some of the hens were vicious. I had many bruise blotches, where a hen had given me sharp, open pecks. The only way to retrieve the eggs when this happened was to take a stick and drive the hen from the nest. It was better not to do that, as she might then hide her eggs in the straw in the haymow, in the horses' stalls, under the crib, or down in the tall grass along the road. Then my income was lost, while she happily set on sometimes sterile eggs, or a fox or snake would find the nest. In due time, the hen would reappear in the barnyard, proudly leading only two or three baby chicks from her clutch of 18 or more eggs.

Besides the cross setting hens, I also had to skirt the big Rhode Island Red rooster. He ruled the chicken yard, strutting as proudly as a Prussian general. When he

puffed up his feathers, lowered his wings, and stuck his neck straight forward, I knew it was time to run. He would come at me like a bullet, peck my bare legs, or knock me down. Gathering eggs became a hazardous occupation!

An egg incubator stood in one of the seldom-used rooms in our house. In the spring, Mom gathered eggs that she hoped were fertile, placed them on a tray in the incubator, and lit the lamp for heat for the eggs. We helped mark each egg with an X, so we could tell that we had turned them over each day, as the hen would do on her nest. Mom sprinkled them faithfully to keep the inside membrane moist. She candled them by holding them up to a lantern. If a dark blob showed, the chick was beginning to develop. If the egg looked clear, we destroyed it.

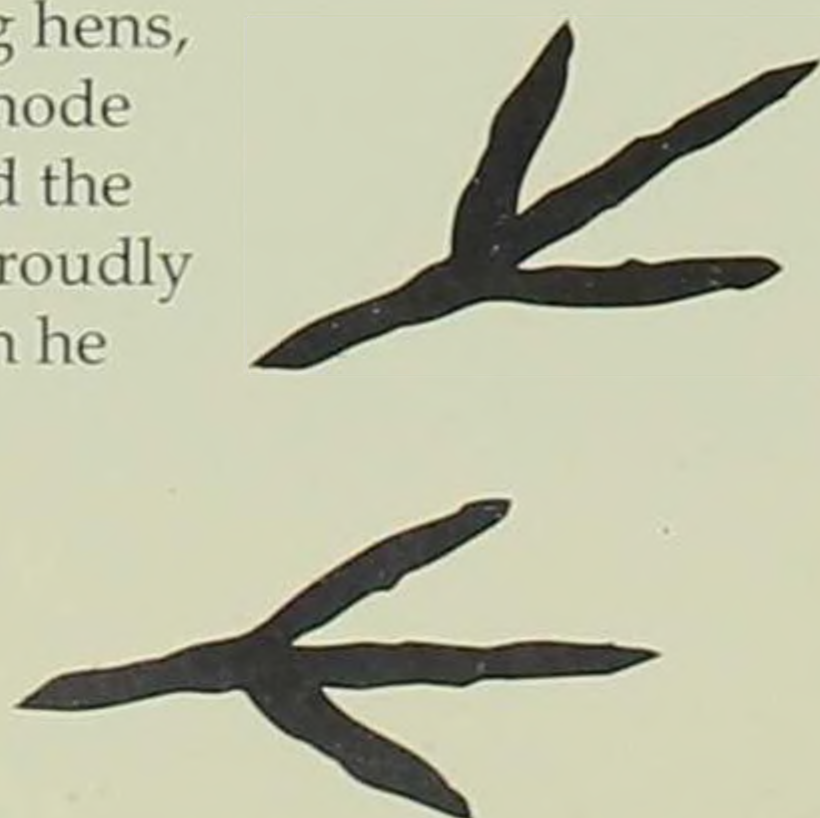
After the chickens were hatched in the incubator they were put out with setting hens interested in raising a family, usually 15 or 20 to each hen. Their protection was a small coop built of wood, set out in the north grove. Each hen had her own territory, but as the chicks grew, they were allowed to roam through the orchard gathering tidbits of bugs and worms.

Usually one or two of the weaker chicks hatched late with a crooked leg, forever bent upward, reaching for the sky. These I tried to raise. Their "night mother," a box covered with an old cloth, I kept in the washhouse. Every summer I had one or two of these

pets hopping around the front yard. I fed and watered them morning and night. They jumped on my shoulder and perched on one foot, swaying from left to right, as they took an easy ride around the yard. When we sat on the porch or steps in the evening, they sometimes jumped on my uncle's shoulder. He would knock them off, calling them "damn fool chicken!" I could tell by his half smile that he was teasing me. I had to keep them in our fenced front yard or they would be killed by the hens and roosters, who seemed to believe strongly in the survival of the fittest. Usually by late fall the chicks' poor development left them ill-suited for the cold chicken house. They weakened and died.

Chasing chickens was always a traumatic experience for me. We lived on top of a hill in southwest Iowa, with no trees to the west and south to blot out the storm clouds that rolled up. Unless we were outside playing, we didn't notice the black clouds until they were almost upon us. At times the storms came up rapidly. Mom would call out, "Mary, Loyola, come help chase in the chickens." As fast as we scurried, the storm would catch us.

Mom was of Irish stock. Her parents came over from Ireland and migrated to western Iowa to farm. They were deathly afraid of the storms and winds of the prairies. After I visited Ireland, with its mild temperatures and soft, misty rains, I came to realize why they were terrified of the heavy, boiling clouds with the sharp lightning and the loud claps of thunder. I probably acquired this panic in the face of storms from my mother, and chasing



chickens did nothing to lessen the terror.

The chicks were easier to get in out of the rain when they were smaller. My mom ran, waving her apron, yelling, "Shoo, shoo!" to the hens, desperately trying to save her only income. My sister and I followed along, gathering the little chicks in the carry-all we quickly made by holding up the front of our dresses. By then Mom would have the hen fastened inside the coop. We would place the chicks down by the coop. With a soft "cluck, cluck" from the mother hen, the chicks would scurry to the warmth under her wings.

With a storm moving in fast, sometimes the whole family would rush out to get in the chickens. We would run all over the orchard and grove and in the tall grass, finding them and trying to drive them back to the coop or brooder house. The dust swirled up from the barnyard, blinding my eyes. Thunder rumbled and cracked. The turbulent sky turned purple and black, leaving us in twilight gray. Many times hail pelted our heads, and lightning flashed and sizzled. Mom would call out, "Get to the house, quick!"

After the storm ended we would go out and pick up the wet, prostrate chickens, wrap them in towels, bring them in, and put them behind the warm, cob-burning stove. After they had warmed and

dried off, some would stand up with a "wa-a-a-k." Then we would carry them back to the brooder house. If the storm was especially intense and lasted too long, we would find them in the grass, stiff and dead. The shock of the cold and wet gave them a heart attack.

One evening, my brother, Francis, and I were home alone. We were in our early teens and fascinated by the mystery play on the family's battery-powered radio. Mom had told us to check the brooder door before dark to be sure the wind had not blown it shut during the day. It was a very hot, sultry evening, and before Francis and I noticed, it was getting dark. We dashed out to the brooder house, but too late. The three-fourths grown fryers had crowded up to the closed doors, then piled up, one on top of another, and went to sleep. I remember our frantic effort to unstack them. Some woke up and staggered away, others were so near suffocation that they lay there for a while before trying to rise. Those on the bottom were stiff and dead. I felt badly about my carelessness, because my mom always worked so hard raising the fryers to sell and for us to eat, and of course the pullets would later become our laying hens.

In the fall, we went through something similar to "chasing the chickens." After they became too large for the coops or brooder house, it was necessary to train them to go into the chicken house. They were like bewildered teenagers. They could no longer fit in the coops, but the chicken house was unfamiliar territory, ruled by the Rhode Island Red roosters and the domineering hens. So the young flock, true to their primitive instincts, took to the trees. They

would have been perfectly happy to perch there all night. But with weasels, foxes, skunks, possums, coons, and coyotes always searching for food, it was our job to climb the trees, reach out quietly, and grab the chickens by their legs. Then we carried them by their legs, their heads hanging down, while they squawked loudly all the way to the henhouse. On quiet nights we could hear our neighbors catching theirs. Chicken squawks and protests chimed in with the night noises.

By late fall the tree-sitters became fewer and fewer until usually there were only two or three fully feathered roosters holding out for their ancestral rights. For their inherent stubbornness, those were eaten as fryers for Sunday dinner. ❖

Mary Wear Briggs's writings about her childhood in Harrison County, Iowa, are part of her memoir, "My Road from Leland Grove," compiled in 1992 and donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Her essays "The Road by Home" and "Sunbonnets" appeared in earlier issues of this magazine. Briggs taught in Colorado and Iowa, before retiring in Missouri Valley, Iowa.

