

Ours was one of the many chicken farms that dotted Western Washington state in the 1950's. Long, rectangular buildings with shake roofs and screened windows, painted red and filled with white Leghorn layers pumping out white eggs, which were gathered faithfully twice a day.

My dad had come back from Europe after World War II to the farm his parents settled in 1901. His draft horse work had dried up, as the horses had been replaced by noisy, smoke-belching tractors which could plow and hay the neighbors' fields in much less time. Wanting still to "make a go of it" on the farm, he settled on raising chickens.

The first of them were Leghorns, which were the up and coming commercial breed, prodigious layers who could pay the bills. They were raised in the brooder house as chicks, 500 to 1000 at a time under the big conical steel brooders, surrounded by a protective circle of corrugated cardboard. They drank from sparkling glass gallon-size waterers, and ate their mash from big square egg flats. As pullets, they were sometimes free-ranged outdoors. I remember going out with my dad and uncles in the evening with long poles to push them out of the Fir and apple trees where they were roosting and herd them toward the little shake-roofed "colony houses" where they lived.

When this chicken-raising plan proved too labor-intensive (and probably resulted in too many losses), the chickens were confined to the long buildings mentioned above. Here they could scratch around on the dirt floor; indeed they were fed corn "scratch" in addition to their laying mash. They were more crowded, but could still express some of their chicken-ness in activities such as roosting, scratching and flying.

These were some good years for the farm, with profits, and my folks built "The Big Chicken House," a two-story building with concrete floors on the upper story. It could hold 2,000+ chickens, and dad, a carpenter himself, built enormous feed bins and an elevator to take the hundred-pound feed sacks to the second floor. As the need for more feed grew, two huge bulk tanks were installed, and a truck came to pump them full every couple of weeks.

The chicks were always purchased through the Western Farmer's Cooperative in town, and the eggs sold through the same business. The cooperative also sold us the feed and other supplies for the farm. Dad built a new "Egg House," with an egg-cleaning machine and a "cold-room" with a refrigeration unit. In addition to bulk shipping through the Co-op, we had a busy retail business with local customers who came to the farm to buy eggs. "Jumbo" eggs were 50 cents a dozen, mediums 40 cents and "checks," which had a crack or some kind of flaw, were sold for 3 dozen for a dollar. The demand for these was high. People also bought frozen stewing hens for a dollar each and sometimes "fryers," when we had the time and space for some New Hampshires or Rhode Island Reds. We had a very efficient process for butchering, from the row of killing cones to the electric scalding machine with rubber fingers and chilling tub. Each person had their job, and at the age of 9, mine was eviscerating these hens, as my small hands could fit inside and clean them out. For this I received 5 cents per chicken. I could process them whole for stewing hens, or cut them up if they were fryers.

Dad worked from before sunup to well after sundown caring for the chickens, as well as the three dairy cows we milked and the beef calves we fed with their milk. Mom spent her days in the egg house cleaning and packing eggs, handling the milk and making butter. But all that work was not enough, and egg business profits began to decline. The cooperative told my parents that in order to compete they needed to build wire cages and house the chickens in

these. This would increase the number of chickens in each building, resulting in more eggs produced. My parents bought the wire and began assembling cages for the second floor rooms in the Big Chicken House. A dozen hens, stuffed in a little cage, with an automated water trough on one side and a feed trough on the front. The sloping floor could not have been comfortable for these girls, but it ensured that the eggs would roll down to the tray in front so that they could easily be "picked." Because of the crowding, these chickens had to be de-beaked with a hot knife tool which was much like a small guillotine, and would cut off part of the top beak and sear it so that it wouldn't bleed. Otherwise these crowded hens might pick on each other in their stress, and cause damage or even death. The room full of cages was like a warehouse, a prison certainly from the chickens' standpoint. There was no scratching in the dirt, no roosting, and certainly no flying. No way for the chickens to "be a chicken."

I would hear my parents talking in hushed tones early in the morning sometimes before we kids were up. Feed costs were more than the money they were taking in. We grew and hauled our own hay for the cattle, but the grain needed for the milk cows and chickens had to be bought at the feed store. And some farmers called the "southern growers" were becoming more numerous. In Arkansas, they had many advantages. The weather made housing simpler, feed and other costs were lower and labor was cheaper. The northern farms just couldn't compete. Chicks cost more in the north, needing more heat and different housing. And eggs sales were paying less. The Co-op company store it seems, was focused more on profits than on helping their member farmers succeed. Our neighboring chicken farms began to sell off their chickens. My folks began talking about finding jobs off the farm. Whole buildings of hens were shipped off to the packing plant. My pet, Sweet Peep, was among them. No one remembered her.

The cows were sold, since no one would be at home to milk them. The new John Deere tractor my dad had been so proud of was sold, along with the plow, disc, mower, rake and baler. The outstanding feed bills were enormous, and mom would have to find a job as well. We tightened our belts and managed to hold on to the property, which had been in the family for 65 years. All the sounds that 5,000 chickens made over the course of the day were gone. The egg cleaning machine, tractor engines and cold-room compressor were silent. The feed tanks were taken down and hauled away. The farm was finished.

But the love of chickens lives on, planted in my heart perhaps by Sweet Peep. As a little chick, she had been picked on by the others until they drew blood and closed in for the kill. My mom and I rescued her, and I promptly claimed her for my own. By the age of 9 I had helped my mom care for the brooder house chicks as well as caring for many kittens and calves, and I knew how to care for this little yellow chick. My dad was learning to build the cages for our chickens at the time, and he built a little one for my chick, whom I named "Sweet Peep." I fed her and watered her and took her for walks with a feedsack string tied to her leg so she couldn't run away and get into trouble. She loved pecking at grass and pebbles and our walk became a regular daily routine. But the day came when space and smell in our utility room became an issue, and Sweet Peep had to be moved to the Big Chicken House with her flock mates. It was a sad day for me.

A few weeks later, missing her, I went into the room where the 500 white leghorns were housed and looked hopelessly at the sea of white feathers and red combs, wondering how I could ever find her. I knew she had a bald wing-elbow under her white feathers, as the skin the other chicks had damaged with their pecking had never grown feathers. But it didn't show on the outside. I stood there for a while, and looking down, I noticed a hen at my feet. Now white

Leghorns are very flighty and nervous birds, and pretty much stay clear of people, but this one was standing close to me. I reached down and she allowed me to pick her up. In hope against hope, I probed under her wing feathers. The skin was smooth and bald. It was Sweet Peep! And what a joyful reunion we had then! Carrying her I hurried to the feed room for a string. I tied it on her leg and we were out in the grass. She was so delighted to be pecking around, scratching and leading me to tasty places. After a while I had to put her back in the chicken house and go have dinner, but I knew I would look for her again. Our walk became a regular practice after that. I would go into the room after school and call "Sweet Peep!" and she would show up at my feet and allow herself to be picked up. We would wander over the farm and she would pick up little rocks and seeds and clip off pieces of grass and other choice greenery. I was heartbroken one day when I came home from school and found that all the hens in Sweet Peep's building had been shipped off. I knew what that meant. It was one of the hard lessons of the farm, but I have never experienced it without a pang.

My husband and I settled next door to the farm, and over the years we have never been without a flock of chickens. Sometimes raised for meat, but mostly for eggs. We have had Rhode Island Reds, Australorps, Wyandottes, White Rocks, Barred Rocks, New Hampshires, Light Brahmas, Delawares, Buff Orpingtons, Americaunas and others. But no flighty white Leghorns... They have been happy hens, ranging over the pastures when they can, and clucking contentedly. Some have become pets, though none quite like Sweet Peep. They have hatched chicks and turned compost, producing many dozens of various-colored eggs and fertilizing the grass wherever they go. We have had to fight off and outsmart predators such as foxes, coyotes and eagles.

But 50-some years after Sweet Peep, we are focusing on a new breed, the little Icelandic chickens, a landrace developed from a flock the Norwegians left on Iceland in the 900's. These chickens have some unique qualities. In fact, 78% of their DNA is not found in any other chicken! They come in every color, with assorted comb styles and even a variety of leg colors. They are excellent foragers, requiring less grain than other breeds, and very watchful for predators. They love working compost piles and brooding their own chicks, and have lively and interesting personalities. We have 18 of the little multi-colored fluff balls in our own utility room right now, and another 9 with a Wyandotte mamma outdoors. It will be fun to watch them grow and express their own chicken-ness. The grandkids have named several of them: Midnight, Brownie, Three Spots, Cutie Pie. One little chick needed her toes taped so that they would grow straight. Who knows, maybe there will even be another Sweet Peep among them...