

# CHICKEN FARMING

by

Charles C. Parlin, Sr.

Miriam was always fond of chickens. One of my favorite photos of her is as a little girl of about eight feeding her chickens in the backyard pen at Evanston, Illinois. When we got under way with our Pudding Island Farm at Silver Bay, New York, we decided it would be fun to have chickens so we built a chicken house and yard, and started with Rhode Island Reds. The men on the farm took care of the chickens over the winter but during the summer Miriam took full charge.

For our home in New Jersey we got an incubator, about 500-egg capacity, with a glass top and each spring we brought down hatching eggs and set them so that the batch would come off at Easter. Each day the eggs had to be rolled, as Miriam used to explain, because the mother hen always squirmed around and rolled the eggs in the nest and an incubator must simulate as near as possible a setting hen. The temperature (101°) and the humidity had to be constantly watched and rigidly controlled. Then, on about the 10th day, the eggs would be "candled." We had a shoe-box with an electric light inside and in the cover a hole shaped like, but slightly smaller than, an egg. Each egg in turn would be "candled" by putting it over this hole and one could see if an embryo was beginning to form. If so, the egg was returned to the incubator; those showing no sign of fertility would be discarded.

Easter Day was gala at our house with many youngsters (and many of their parents), their attention glued to the incubator and watching the miracle of life emerging from the shell.

Once at lunch with a wealthy client, I told about my wife's interest in chickens. He asked how we prevented inbreeding in a small flock like that, and I told him we bought a prize rooster. With apologies, he asked what such a rooster cost, and I told him about \$75. "Oh, you lucky fellow," he said "My wife is interested in race horses!"

On my trips to Europe in the late twenties and the thirties I had visited the country estate at Cormeille, outside of Paris, of William Fiske, European partner of Dillon, Read & Co. He had orchards and a beautiful flock of Light Sussex chickens which he liked to show off and

boast about. They were very good layers and also good meat; in fact, in the Paris market he got for his birds a slight premium because the fancy chefs claimed these Light Sussex were superior quality. I had sung the praise of these birds each time on returning home but Miriam and I, on our annual trip to the poultry show, were never able to find any Light Sussex exhibited. Then, in January, 1941, when I had gotten to Paris under the German occupation, I was able to go out to Cormeille with Mr. Fiske's old secretary. Mr. Fiske had died and I wanted to see if there was anything at the estate which I could salvage and bring back for the family. The big manor house was occupied by a German airforce squadron and the place was in shambles. Without oil to heat, the soldiers had used the books in the library and the furniture to make fires for warmth. The caretaker, with tears in his eyes, said the German soldiers had devoured the entire flock, not leaving even any birds for breeding; that the same thing to his knowledge, had happened to several other prize flocks of Light Sussex and that the soldiers might have extinguished the breed entirely. All this I reported in full to Miriam on my return.

A few months later, at our annual visit to the Poultry Show, what did we see but a pen of Light Sussex! The exhibitor was a fellow with a French name living in Connecticut. That week end we drove to Connecticut and found the exhibitors to be an elderly French couple living in peasant style, an incubator set in their kitchen-dining room. I told the old man about my trip to Occupied France and how the beautiful flock of Light Sussex had been annihilated and how I wanted to buy some hatching eggs to prove to my wife what wonderful birds these really were. The old fellow was obviously touched. Everyone in France knew the outstanding qualities of Light Sussex but in the U.S.A. nobody seemed to appreciate them; he was old and about finished but we were young and he wanted us to breed these fine birds and gain their recognition in the U.S.A.; he would not sell me any eggs but he would make me a gift of 100 of his best hatching eggs.

So with these we began to build up a flock. As the birds matured Miriam would personally inspect each bird, its bone structure, its feathering, the clearness of the eyes, etc. Then each fall we sent a crate of our best pullets, each identified with a leg-band number, to Agricultural Colleges—Cornell, Rutgers, Penn State—where they would be

trap-nested for a year and we would get monthly reports on each of our college-attending hens—number of eggs laid, the egg's weight, color, quality of the shell. When we got the crate back at the end of the year the hens with good records were kept for breeding and others went into the stewpot. A hen of an average farm backyard flock, fed on scraps and a little grain, produces on the average about 80 eggs per year; but with this system of selective breeding we had birds which would lay 300 eggs a year. The selection of the roosters was also important. To get the highest rating a rooster had to have produced a daughter and a granddaughter each with a record of 300 or more eggs per year.

All this took much record keeping, which Miriam meticulously did. The job of opening the incubator and wing-banding the perfect little chicks, and disposing of the less-than-perfect ones, Miriam always assigned to me. The wing-band is a small aluminum tag with a serial number which is clipped to the chick's wing with a punch. The baby chick would give a little peep and that was all. I don't think it hurt very much but this job Miriam always wished onto me. This wing-banding was important in upbreeding the flock. We would put into a small wire cage the incubator eggs from a given hen which had been fertilized by a given rooster and as I would band the chicks Miriam would enter the wing-tag number in her breeders' book. Then she could watch these chicks—how fast they feathered out, how fast they grew (important if one were to produce broilers for the market), and how soon the pullet started to lay. By analyzing the records, Miriam could make the selection of the hens and roosters to be retained for breeders. Health was important. Each fall, when the flock had been reduced down to those selected as breeders, the veterinarian would come and, drawing a drop of blood from each bird, analyze it for poultry disease. Each time, our flock received a certificate as disease-free. Miriam's idea was to develop a flock equal to Mr. Fiske's so that, after the war, she could send hatching eggs and help France reestablish her fine flocks.

We got into big production, because during the war eggs and chickens were in scarcity. At one time we had about 1,000 birds on the farm. And relatives helped. During these years we generally had a couple of school girls to help in the house each summer and a younger boy to tend the chickens. One year our nephew, Nick Davis, of Yazoo City, Mississippi, had the job; another summer Howie Sanborn, and

another summer John Sanborn. All of these boys proved to be fine, dedicated workers.

Soon, Miriam's record-keeping and careful selection began to pay off. At the colleges, where each year we sent a crate of our best hens for testing, she was setting records and getting prizes. We have a closet full of "golden" eggs and blue ribbons awarded. During World War II the Government imposed price controls and under them our hatching eggs were entitled to sell for the same price as a dozen normal eating eggs. Farmers had found that to have a chicken which would lay 300 eggs a year, as against one which would lay less than 100, would make the difference between a profit and a loss; both hens would take the same amount of equipment, feed and care. Addressed to our home, we began to get inquiries, some addressed to Parlin Poultry Farm, 123 Hillside Avenue, Englewood, N.J. One Sunday night I got a long-distance call from Pittsburgh—a black market operator who wanted 2,000 of our hatching eggs. When I tried to explain that ours was not a commercial operation and we didn't have 2,000 hatching eggs available he simply said, "Oh, come-come. Don't haggle with me. Price ceilings are nothing to me. I need those eggs and the sky is the limit. Just name your price!"

The end of my story is anti-climax. On one of my trips back to France after the war I made a study of the chicken industry and I found that the German army hadn't eaten all the birds after all because numerous flocks of Light Sussex were producing. Then we had an inquiry from an agricultural school in India and we offered to send, as a contribution, either crates of hatching eggs or boxes of day-old chicks, but for some reason they could never get the necessary import license. None of the children seemed interested in this chicken project; Miriam and I each summer traveled extensively in connection with affairs of the World Council of Churches and we allowed our chicken project to phase out.