
Chapter 2

Infancy: 1925-1941

The pressing need for a new source of agricultural income may explain why so many farmers were willing to give broilers a try, but it doesn't explain the subsequent extraordinary growth of the Peninsula's broiler industry. Those who have written about the industry over the years generally cite seven conditions present on the Delmarva Peninsula that proved crucial to this success story.

1. The relatively mild climate that kept down heating fuel costs and allowed growers to turn out chickens into fenced yards for most of the year to exercise and cool off under a shade tree. This condition meant less crowding and therefore a healthier bird. By contrast, New England's longer and harsher winters led to higher fuel bills for growers and greater confinement for chickens.
2. The sandy soil that provided good drainage for liquids in chicken manure, which helped control disease in a manner that the rocky and clay-based soils, found in many other areas of the United States, failed to do.
3. The prior experience of so many area residents with chickens through raising them either as barnyard fowl or in large flocks as commercial layers. Although raising broilers and raising layers were different activities, much of the experience gained in caring for layers was applicable in raising meat-type chickens.
4. The cheap building costs. Because so much of the Peninsula was covered by pine forests in the 1920s and 1930s, timber was easily accessible. As a result, large numbers of competing sawmills turned out inexpensive lumber that was used for building chicken houses. Often some of the largest growers, like Elwood Workman, who lived southwest of Georgetown, Delaware, kept down construction expenses by purchasing their own timber lands, owning their own sawmills, and sawing their own lumber for the construction of chicken houses.
5. The lower labor costs, which were particularly important because in the early days raising broilers was a very labor-intensive business. The Peninsula paid the lowest wages of any region near the large metropolitan markets of the northeast. In 1930, for example, Delmarva farm workers were receiving about \$2.50 per day, while in Pennsylvania it was \$3.05 and in Massachusetts it was \$3.57. Further south in such places as North Carolina, farm labor costs were only \$1.60 per day. But the long distance of these more southern states from urban markets meant that until World War II, their cheaper labor costs couldn't be translated into a competitive edge in the production of broilers.
6. The close proximity to the most important urban markets in America and the easy access provided by recent road repairs and construction, particularly in Delaware. Indeed, one observer noted that by the mid-1920s, Delaware's system of public roads, which included the DuPont Highway, was "perhaps superior to any other state." The DuPont Highway made it possible to ship chickens quickly from Baltimore Hundred and later from much of the rest of the Peninsula to Philadelphia and, most important,

Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress

to New York City. Although the back roads of the Peninsula continued to be a challenge to chicken-laden trucks, the main north/south highways served to give the Peninsula easy access to the largest concentrated poultry market in the United States.

7. The willingness of banks, hatcheries, and feed companies to provide easy credit for growers. Because there was so little turnover in the population of the Peninsula, the character and collateral of everyone was known by everyone else. Knowing intimately the people that they dealt with, lending agents were very eager to offer financial credit to most growers as long as they were of good character and had good potential for making money. In this predominantly rural society, it was a widely accepted practice to take a man's word as his bond and to grant credit when other indices might argue otherwise. Credit agencies were also encouraged by the fact

that the Peninsula was almost an island, which made it very difficult for debtors to escape their creditors. And make no mistake about it, easy credit was essential to most Peninsula growers if they were going to start up, expand, and even survive during lean years. In 1934-35, for example, 45 percent of Peninsula broiler growers used credit to buy chicks, 68 percent to buy feed, 12 percent to buy brooding equipment, 46 percent to buy fuel, and 15 percent to purchase lumber and other materials. By 1941, according to figures for Sussex County, which produced more than two-thirds of the Peninsula's broilers that year, the percentage of growers using credit had become significantly higher.

But initiatives taken by individual growers were also crucial. Raising broilers was a very risky business in which constantly fluctuating market prices could rise or fall dramatically, depending on the availability of chickens from other parts of the na-



Before trucks, horse-drawn wagons brought chickens to shipping centers from farms.

tion. A snowstorm that interrupted shipments of broilers from the Midwest to New York City or overproduction of meat-type chickens in New Jersey could cause market prices to spike or go into a free fall without warning. The willingness of imaginative and hard-working men and women to enter into this highstakes venture and then remain with it through good times and bad demonstrates that the actions of people are at least as important as other factors in explaining the success of Delmarva's broiler industry.

The capriciousness of the broiler market was a problem from the beginning. In most areas of manufacturing—automobiles, for example—management often shuts down the assembly line and lays off workers when a product glut threatens the market. When the glut disappears, the workers are called back and the assembly line starts up again. After the production schedule for raising broilers is begun, however, it can't be stopped. Once a batch of chicks is delivered from the hatchery, the birds must be seen through to maturity and sale, regardless of market conditions, or the entire investment in the batch will be lost. It was only by tinkering with the start-up time that growers could partially protect themselves from the quirky nature of the broiler market.

The first effort to outwit the market in this manner began in the mid-1920s when the Steeles and other broiler growers in the Ocean View area chose to start their birds in February. After fifteen or sixteen weeks of maturing, they would hit the market three or four weeks ahead of the late spring supply of cockerels culled from laying flocks.

At first most broiler growers in Baltimore Hundred and elsewhere were content to raise only one flock of broilers per year while simultaneously maintaining a flock of layers. By 1928, however, hundreds of poultry men had sold off their entire laying flocks and were devoting all of their energies to raising broilers. Commercial egg farms continued to be a significant part of Delmarva agriculture, but broilers were the dominant poultry bird by the early 1930s. Once free of their layers, growers moved to raising two and then three batches of broilers per year. As early as 1928, poultry farmers in New Jersey heard about the "miracle" in Delaware: meat-type chickens were being grown year-round. As a result, broilers

were now being shipped to urban markets in fall and winter as well as in spring and summer.

The first chicken raised as a broiler was the White Leghorn, the premier laying bird on most commercial egg farms on the Peninsula. But precisely because it was bred to lay eggs, the Leghorn wasn't heavy enough to be a meat-type chicken. Almost immediately growers searched for another breed, and the Barred Plymouth Rock, already sold by several hatcheries in the Georgetown, Delaware, area as both a layer and a meat-type bird, became the early favorite. In addition to the high prices that they commanded in the urban meat markets in the 1920s, Leghorns, and then Barred Plymouth Rocks, were more profitable when raised as broilers than layers because they were sold off before the dreaded "range paralysis," which decimated so many laying flocks, could strike.

As the production of Delmarva broilers increased, their market price declined from the sixty-two cents per pound, live weight, paid Cecile Steele in 1923, to only nineteen cents per pound in 1934. To make a profit in the face of declining market prices, growers had to become increasingly cost-efficient. One way to keep down costs was to raise a more disease-resistant chicken that would put on considerable weight and do it quickly. To produce a constantly improving strain of broilers to meet their needs, growers turned to the local hatcheries that were rapidly increasing in number all over the Peninsula. By 1927, for example, Delaware alone had 46.

During the early and mid-1920s hatcheries provided chicks for commercial egg farms. In subsequent years, however, most hatcheries increasingly catered to the needs of broiler growers. To meet the dramatically growing demands for broiler chicks, many hatcheries were rather careless in the pedigree of the eggs that they hatched. But some were committed to providing quality broiler chicks and selectively purchased their eggs from respected poultry breeders. A few even began to breed their own superior strains. While most hatcheries were concentrating on producing meat-type chicks by the early 1930s, a minority continued their traditional focus on hatching layer chicks. Marker's Hatchery in Dover, for example, was founded in 1934 but didn't

Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress



Charles Marker, hatchery owner in Dover, Delaware.



Hoke Palmer, first full-time University of Delaware extension poultry specialist, as he looked the first year on the job in 1925. His son, Dan Palmer, was also extension poultry specialist, serving from 1985 to 1997.

Many poultry houses and shelters on a large, snow covered poultry breeder farm in New England, a region that supplied many broiler chicks and hatchery eggs during the early expansion years of Delmarva's broiler industry.



concentrate on producing broiler chicks until 1939 when it hatched about thirty thousand per week. By 1941 approximately 96 percent of chicks hatched on Delmarva were broilers rather than layers.

The move from layers to broilers created periodic crises because broilers were sold off before they could reproduce themselves, and the local hatcheries were hard pressed to keep up with the surging demand. In 1928 Hoke Palmer, a University of Delaware poultry specialist, noted that "everybody wants chicks, but no one wants to keep the breeders that produce the hatching eggs." By 1933 it was clear to Palmer that Peninsula hatcheries were "unable to secure enough eggs to supply their orders for fall and winter broiler chicks." By the next year hatcheries were forced to import a high percentage of broiler chicks and broiler hatching eggs from beyond the Peninsula, primarily from New England.

The problem was that many local hatcheries didn't bother to make long-term plans that would provide sufficient numbers of hatching eggs for growers because the hatcheries were convinced that the rapidly expanding broiler industry would simply "blow up" in the immediate future. Moreover, most local hatcheries were unwilling to pay premium prices for high-quality hatching eggs. As a

result, it was soon clear to Delmarva growers that chicks from hatching eggs produced by New England breeding farms and hatcheries were healthier, had more vigor, and put on weight faster than chicks from local hatcheries.

By the mid-1930s it was generally conceded that the best broiler chicks came from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, and over 40 percent of the chicks and a very large percentage of the hatching eggs used in Delmarva hatcheries came from those three states. Over the next five years the percentage of New England chicks decreased somewhat, but the numbers of New England hatching eggs purchased by Delmarva hatcheries skyrocketed so that approximately 85 percent of the chicks started on the Peninsula in 1941 were either purchased or hatched from New England eggs.

New England breeders pioneered in the development of better meat-type birds, and by the early 1930s, had developed a number of crossbred broilers. The first shipment of these crossbreeds to the Peninsula reached Preston, Maryland, in 1932. By 1935 almost all Delmarva growers depended on two types of broilers: the Barred Plymouth Rock and a crossbreed known simply as the Rock Red Cross.

In the mid-1930s Baltimore Hundred in south-



Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress

eastern Sussex County continued to be the very heart of broiler country, but it was no longer the sole producer of broilers. Beginning in the late 1920s, growers of meat-type chickens began to appear in the rest of Sussex, in southern Kent County, Delaware, in Maryland's Worcester, Wicomico, Somerset, and Caroline counties, and in Virginia's Accomack County. By 1935 Accomack County was second only to Sussex in broiler production. The number of broilers produced on the Peninsula jumped from an annual figure of only about fifty thousand in 1925 to 7 million in 1934 and then to 48 million in 1941. Nationwide, Sussex was the leading broiler-producing county in the United States, and Delmarva produced an estimated 66 percent of all the nation's broilers in 1936.

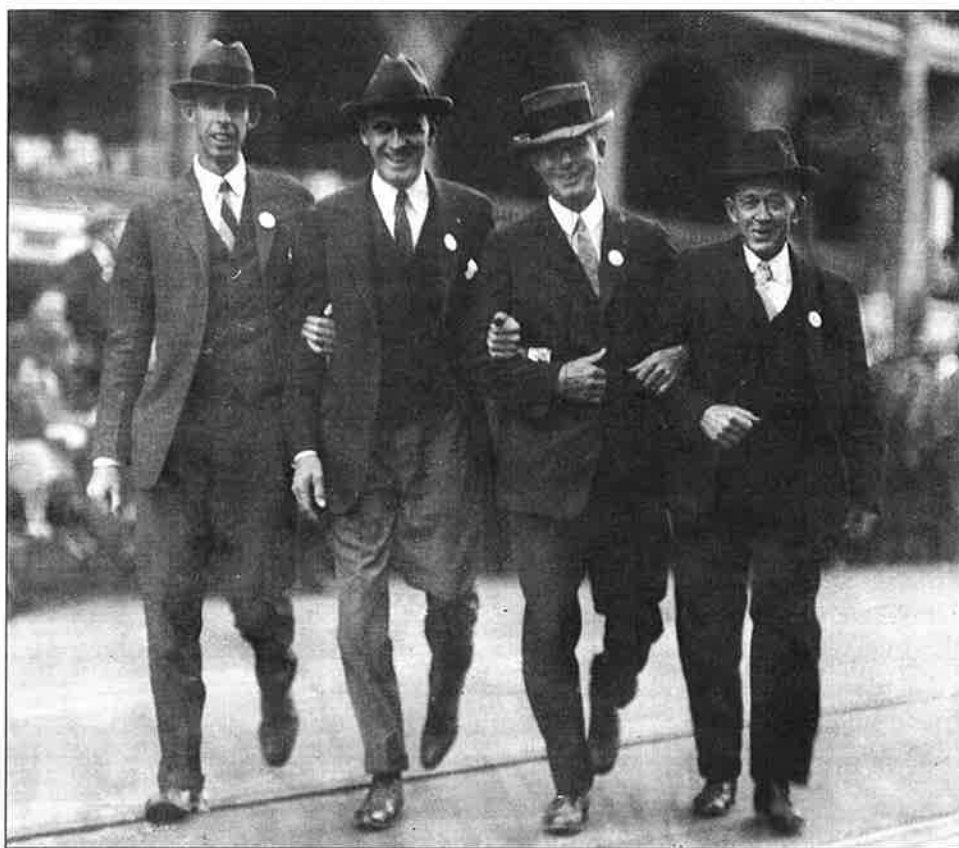
Despite the dramatic increase in their production on Delmarva, broilers remained more expensive than other meats, and most Americans who did eat chicken continued to consume culled cockerels from laying flocks or old laying hens. In 1940 the average American annually ate 124 pounds of beef, pork, and mutton combined, and only 14.1 pounds of chicken. Broilers represented just 2.1 pounds or about one-seventh of all the chicken eaten that year. Clearly the great impact of the Delmarva broiler on

American eating habits was still some decades away. Nevertheless, the foundation was now in place for an industry that eventually would make chicken the cheapest of all meats. Of more immediate importance to the Peninsula, however, was the economic impact of the fledgling broiler industry on the lives of many of its residents.

Initially almost all growers were from families who had occupied the Peninsula's rural landscape for a number of generations. Most had previously been involved in general farming or in commercial egg production. They were overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon in lineage and predominantly Methodist in religion. Raising broilers attracted them because it offered both profit and the promise of a certain agrarian autonomy. After all, raising chickens for meat offered a way to pay off the farm mortgage so that one's family might enjoy the romanticized idyllic life of Jefferson's independent yeoman farmer. Moreover, Peninsula people seemed to have a certain honesty and work ethic well suited to the industry. In 1938 Harry Pack, a New York-born poultry entrepreneur looking for investment possibilities, chose Delmarva over North Carolina after visiting both places. The reasons were quite clear: all that the Carolinians wanted to raise was "moonshine,"

The small shed-roofed chicken houses typical of the mid-1920s. Each house was heated by a coal stove. During this period until well after World War II, farmers allowed their chickens to roam outside in fenced yards where they were fed by growers, such as the family in the foreground, from feed buckets.





Hoke Palmer, University of Delaware extension poultry specialist; Malloy C. Vaughn, Sussex County agricultural agent; Ray Motney, hatchery man; Byron Pepper, hatchery man at poultry convention in Atlantic City (1925). (From the Collection of the Delaware Agricultural Museum and Village)

while the growers on the Peninsula "were like a different race...they were straight...they didn't even know any tricks."

A few "outsiders," primarily residents of northern cities, were seduced into becoming growers on the Peninsula by propaganda distributed by feed manufacturers, poultry journals, incubator companies, hatchery men, lumber dealers, and real estate firms. In a majority of cases, however, the city poultry men lost all their savings in a year or two after moving to Delmarva, and their broiler farms were "put up for some other sucker to buy."

Although blacks comprised 20 to 30 percent of the Peninsula's population and played an essential role in the early stages of the broiler industry as farm laborers and chicken catchers, rarely were they growers. This may be partly explained by the overt racism and limited black ownership of farmland that characterized the Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s.

The physical nature of the broiler farms changed dramatically from 1923 to 1940. Initially most grow-

ers built shed-roofed chicken houses, approximately 14 or 16 feet square, that depended on a coal stove for heat. Since many of the earliest broiler growers had once operated commercial egg farms, their new broiler houses closely resembled those for young layers. If growers wished to increase their capacity, they simply built new houses. When young broilers reached six weeks or so, they might be removed to a larger but now abandoned egg-laying house, formerly used for mature layers. In 1928 the first long houses were built. By 1940 most broilers on the Peninsula were raised in wooden, shed-roofed structures that might reach one thousand feet, but were more commonly half that length or less, with dirt floors usually covered by a litter of sawdust, or wood shavings, or even ground corncobs. The average grower increased his annual production from two thousand broilers in 1927, to about eight thousand in 1935, and to approximately seventeen thousand by 1943.

Growers lived in close proximity to their chicken houses so that they could keep constant watch over their flocks. Some growers owned more than one

Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress

farm and hired male and female caretakers to live on additional sites. In some cases the hired hands and their families lived above the feed storage room, in second-floor living quarters called chicken-house apartments, which were set in the middle of long chicken houses. Living very close to the broilers was mandatory because the birds needed constant surveillance. Chickens also needed growers who were, according to a book on successful broiler growing, adaptable enough to meet the daily requirements "of very nervous, temperamental animals." Those who were the best growers found in their work a satisfaction that went beyond money. As Harry Pack, who began growing broilers in the Dagsboro and Angola areas of Sussex in 1938, explained about his own addiction: "Chickens are the stupidest creatures in the world... but there's something about them. You like to see them grow."

Growing broilers was hard work, particularly in the first few weeks after the chicks arrived from the hatchery. "Chick guards," often in the form of cloth-covered wire, were used to keep the very young broilers warm by concentrating them next to the brooder stoves which individually provided enough heat for about five hundred chicks. (It was at this stage that the flock was most vulnerable to rats and other predators.) Operating and managing the coal stoves along with hauling one hundred pound bags of feed and then emptying them into wheelbarrows was considered, by some, the hardest work connected with raising broilers. While the chicks were still very young, paper was spread out around each stove and sprinkled with chicken feed. A number of water crocks were also placed around each stove.

Once the chicks grew into young broilers, they were given the run of the house and drank from



Vaccination for fowl pox at Hartly, west of Dover, Delaware, in 1931.

watering troughs and pans—many of which were homemade—in which the water level was controlled by a float valve. Chicken feed was now eaten from hand-filled five-foot-long troughs that were, at first, made out of wood. After each flock was sold, the entire chicken house had to be cleaned of droppings and the sawdust, wood shavings or ground corn cobs that made up the litter. New litter was then spread with the hope that the next batch of chicks could get off to a healthy start. Checking on ventilation was always important, particularly after some growers no longer turned their birds out into chicken yards in the late 1930s. Doors, shutters, and muslin curtains were opened or closed to keep the temperature as constant as possible and to keep out rain. Although raising broilers was demanding and time-consuming work, most growers did find two or three hours of freedom each day. That time was often used to plant, cultivate, and harvest corn and other crops.

The continued good health of each flock demanded several inspection visits a day so that any sick or dead birds could be quickly removed before the contagion would spread through the chicken house. When a particular grower lost a number of birds through disease, he generally disposed of them in a nearby woodlot. Subsequently, neighbors were alerted to the grower's immediate misfortune by circling buzzards, while below, predators feasted on the discarded chicken carcasses.

Mortality from disease was particularly high during the 1920s. In some cases 25 to 33 percent of broilers died before they were ready for market. Had disease mortality remained at this high level over the next decade, the broiler industry would not have flourished. Pullorum was a particular problem in the 1920s and was finally brought under control in the 1930s when most growers increasingly demanded chicks and hatching eggs from New England, where it was the practice in hatcheries to monitor for signs of the disease. By the beginning of the Second World War, pullorum was no longer a significant threat to Delmarva flocks, and the mortality rate from all diseases had dropped to about 11 percent. But other infections, encouraged by unsanitary brooder conditions, continued to threaten growers' profit margins.

By 1942 coccidiosis, bronchitis, laryngotracheitis, and other respiratory diseases were causing nearly 90 percent of disease losses.

Rats, foxes, skunks, raccoons, and hawks also posed a threat to chickens. A grower in southeastern Sussex summarized the problem very well when he noted that if rats and other predators can get into a broiler house, "they're like everybody else. They like chicken." David Steele, son of Cecile and Wilmer Steele, remembered rats getting into flocks and killing every other chicken. "They wouldn't eat all of them. They'd just pile them up in a heap. Sometimes you would lose one hundred in a night." Rats continued to be a problem into the late 1950s with Charles Marker of Dover, for example, losing five hundred chicks from his hatchery in one night. Dogs in general and rat terriers in particular were used to kill the rodents. Charlie Spicer, Jr., a young boy living in a chicken-house apartment near Dagsboro, Delaware, just prior to World War II, was amazed that Brownie, his family's rat-dog who was part miniature husky, loved to kill rats but "never bothered a chicken." Chickens, according to Spicer, were an easy mark for predators because they "were so dumb that they had to be chased inside when a storm came."

Even before World War II, the practice of turning out broilers into yards, where they were often easy prey for predators who could get under, through, or over the chickenwire, began to be abandoned. But chicken feed stored in bags or inadvertently scattered on the floor drew rats inside the long broiler houses of the 1930s. Because rodents ate chicken feed as well as broilers, University of Delaware and Maryland extension agents exhorted growers to "wage a campaign against rats" with poison, traps, and all other means possible. It wasn't until the transition from hand-filled feed troughs to bulk feeding, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the construction of sturdier, more predator-proof chicken houses, during those same years, that the rodent threat ceased to be a major concern.

Although the cost of chicks, heating fuel, labor, disinfectants, and electricity—by 1940 a large number of growers had electric power—often strained budgets, chicken feed was the major expense and



Charlie Spicer, Jr., hugs his family's rat-dog "Brownie." The chicken house apartment that his family lived in is on the second floor. The first floor was a feed storage room. Photo taken just before World War II near Dagsboro, Delaware.

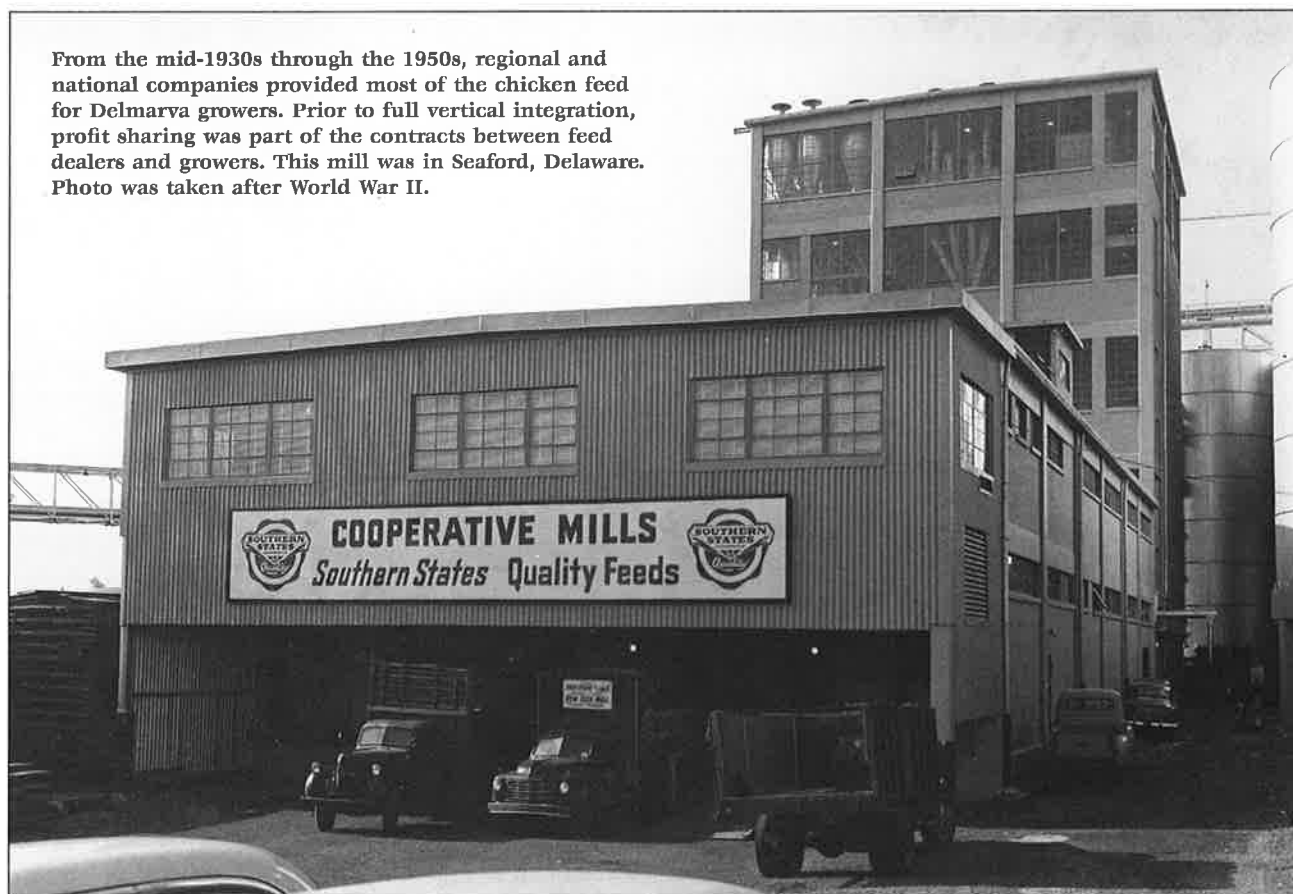
represented between 50 and 60 percent of the cost of raising broilers during the 1930s. Initially the local milling companies, which traditionally ground wheat and corn for local farmers, provided feed to broiler growers. In addition, chickens turned out into fenced yards usually scavenged on their own for insects and seeds.

But as soon as a growing feed market became more visible, giant agribusinesses, producing pre-mixed chicken feed, established dealerships throughout the Peninsula. Thanks to their ability to support nutrition-research laboratories, to buy feed grains in bulk, and to finance expensive advertising campaigns, national and regional companies like Beacon, Southern States, Pillsbury, Eastern States, and Ralston Purina gained control of most of the Peninsula's chicken feed business by the mid-1930s. During this stage in the development of the broiler industry, almost all of the ingredients for feed were brought in from outside the Peninsula. Although a

few locals, such as Cohn and Bock of Princess Anne, Maryland, continued to sell their own one hundred pound bags of broiler feed while acting as dealers for one of the corporate giants, it wasn't until World War II and the decade after that local feed companies, with their own brands, were able to mount a serious competitive challenge.

Feed companies understood that raising broilers was a family business requiring older children and wives to pitch in. More than one observer noted that women seemed to have a better aptitude than men for raising chickens. In fact, poultry veterinarian Dr. Stephen Hitchner recalls being told that when the broiler industry on the Peninsula was in its infancy, flocks were generally raised by housewives, and husbands usually referred to the activity as "her business." When the flocks began to produce solid profits, raising them now became "our business." And once the operation began to produce considerable profits, husbands referred to it as "my business."

From the mid-1930s through the 1950s, regional and national companies provided most of the chicken feed for Delmarva growers. Prior to full vertical integration, profit sharing was part of the contracts between feed dealers and growers. This mill was in Seaford, Delaware. Photo was taken after World War II.

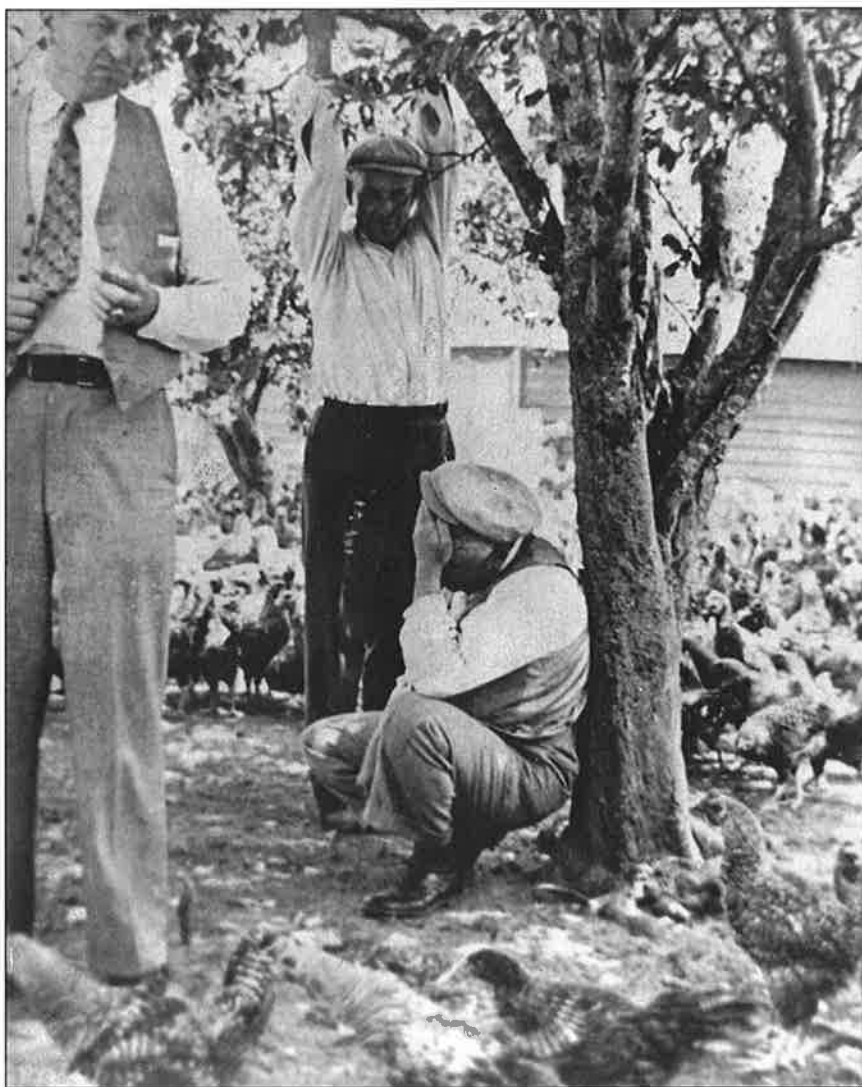


Most chores in the broiler houses that were performed by men were also performed by women. Farm wives not only fed, watered, and checked birds for disease and other problems, they also helped clean out the chicken droppings and other unsanitary residue and then scattered clean litter on the dirt floors. Because they shared in the work, women also participated in the decision-making concerning such questions as which brand of feed to buy. Understanding this, many of the local and national companies sold their chicken feed in bags with designs and patterns on them so that they could be turned into clothes by thrifty housewives. It was a common sight to county agricultural agents, as they made their way over back-country roads in the years prior to World War II, to see farm women wearing feed-bag dresses and displaying feed-bag curtains in their windows.

In 1996 John Steele Gordon pointed out, in *American Heritage*, that because of the rapid maturation

of chickens and the lack of ethical restraints concerning experiments on them, we know more about the nutrition of chickens than about the nutrition of any other domesticated animals and even human beings. In the 1930s, however, knowledge of what was best to feed broilers was still very rudimentary. Corn was always the major ingredient in chicken feed, with soybeans becoming an increasingly significant component as World War II approached. In 1940, according to one miller, "broiler feed consisted of 50 percent corn and 25 percent soybeans."

Corn had always been a very significant crop on the Peninsula. But much of Delmarva's farmland was so depleted by poor agricultural practices that fields were often allowed to lie fallow for a year or two before a new crop of corn was planted. By the late 1920s some Peninsula farmers were reporting corn harvests of only twenty to thirty bushels per acre. A continuation of these poor returns meant



Buyers visiting broiler farm in 1930s.

that eventually the Delmarva broiler industry would have to import huge amounts of expensive corn from outside the Peninsula to feed its dramatically expanding flocks. That would certainly end local efforts to produce an inexpensive meat-type chicken.

What happened next is the extraordinary story of how broiler producers used a waste product to insure the growth of a corn-dependent industry. Chicken manure, it was soon observed, had a remarkable impact on the fertility of the land. Moreover, there was a significant supply accumulating in chicken houses and in the dealers' broiler-holding facilities, which were usually barns. By the mid-1930s chicken manure was being spread on fields wherever broilers were raised, and the results were astonishing. One

farmer in Somerset County, Maryland, discovered that a field that previously produced only twenty-five bushels of corn per acre now, thanks to chicken manure, delivered eighty bushels per acre. In Sussex "corn grew about three times as much as before." This dramatic increase in corn production, caused by the liberal application of chicken manure and subsequently aided by the introduction of a hybrid seed corn, would accelerate during subsequent decades and eventually enable the Peninsula to produce most of the corn needed to feed its ever-expanding numbers of broilers. As one observer pointed out, "the Peninsula's broiler

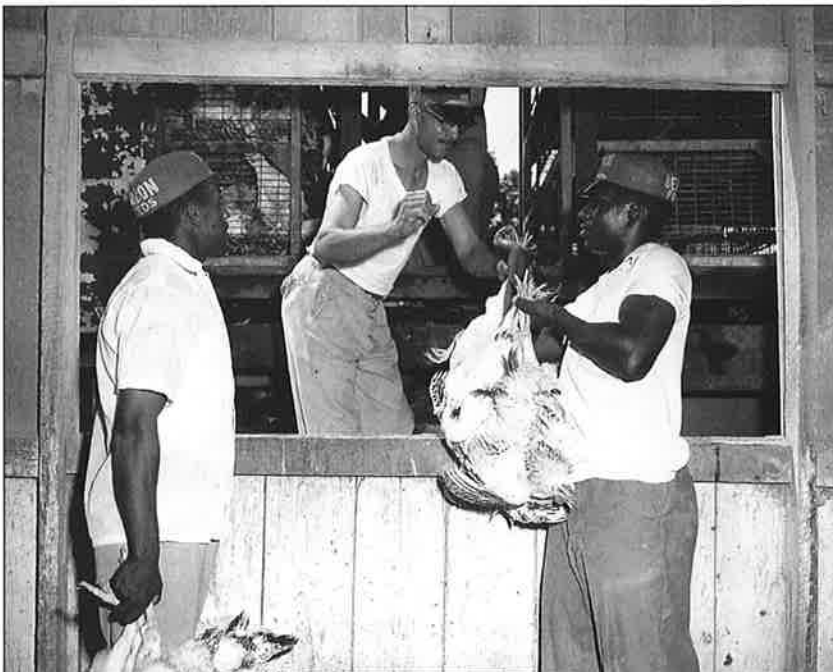
business was really built on the backs of the corn farmers."

Thanks to research and experimentation on broiler feed, there was some very modest progress in feed efficiency. In 1923 it took 4.7 pounds of feed to produce one pound of broiler meat while by 1941 only 4.2 pounds of feed was needed to do the same job. Although this was not spectacular progress, it was enough to convince J. McKenny Willis of Easton, Maryland, of the importance of hiring a high priced nutritionist to advise him on his own grain mix when he decided to become an independent feed dealer in 1940. Overall, improved breeds and better nutrition led to faster growing and heavier broilers. In 1927 the average Delmarva broiler went



Chicken catcher hands birds to co-workers who will place them in cages on the truck parked next to the chicken house in 1957.

Chicken catchers at work before small tractors were used to move cages inside chicken houses.



Loading broilers in cages on a truck in the 1950s.

to market at 16 weeks weighing 2.5 pounds. In 1941, however, it was marketed after only 12 weeks weighing 2.9 pounds.

When growers were ready to move their broilers, they notified poultry buyers who would then visit the farm, examine the flock, offer a price per pound, and then leave. Sometimes only one buyer would visit, at other times three or four might show to make a bid.

The grower would accept the best offer and would make arrangements with the winning buyer for the pick-up and weighing of his chickens. Initially a batch of broilers was sold "lumpus" or "clean house," which meant that the buyer bid for the entire flock including sick and otherwise inferior birds. By the 1930s, "lumpus" was joined by "knots out," which meant that the bid only included the healthy birds in the lot.

Once his bid was accepted, the buyer or dealer would check the broiler market. If the price for chicken was down, he might wait as long as several weeks for the market to rise before picking up the chickens from the grower. This made the grower unhappy because, in the interim, some of his chickens would get sick and die before they could be picked up, weighed, and paid for by the buyer. Moreover, the cleaning of the chicken houses to prepare for the next flock now had to be delayed, which in turn threw off the broiler-growing schedule for the entire year. Delayed pick-ups after a bid was accepted continued to be a bone of contention between grower and buyer until the 1950s.

To help pick up the broilers, most buyers maintained a "catching crew" of black males. The crew usually, but not always, arrived late at night while the broilers were sleeping and herded the groggy birds towards one end of the chicken house where, closely clustered, they were easier to catch. Usually the catchers worked in groups of four. Two, with considerable speed and dexterity, picked up three or four birds with each hand and quickly thrust them into coops in the chicken house held open by the other two catchers. Or two catchers might remain on the back of the truck, parked close to the door of the chicken house, where they received the birds from the catchers below and put them into coops. Be-

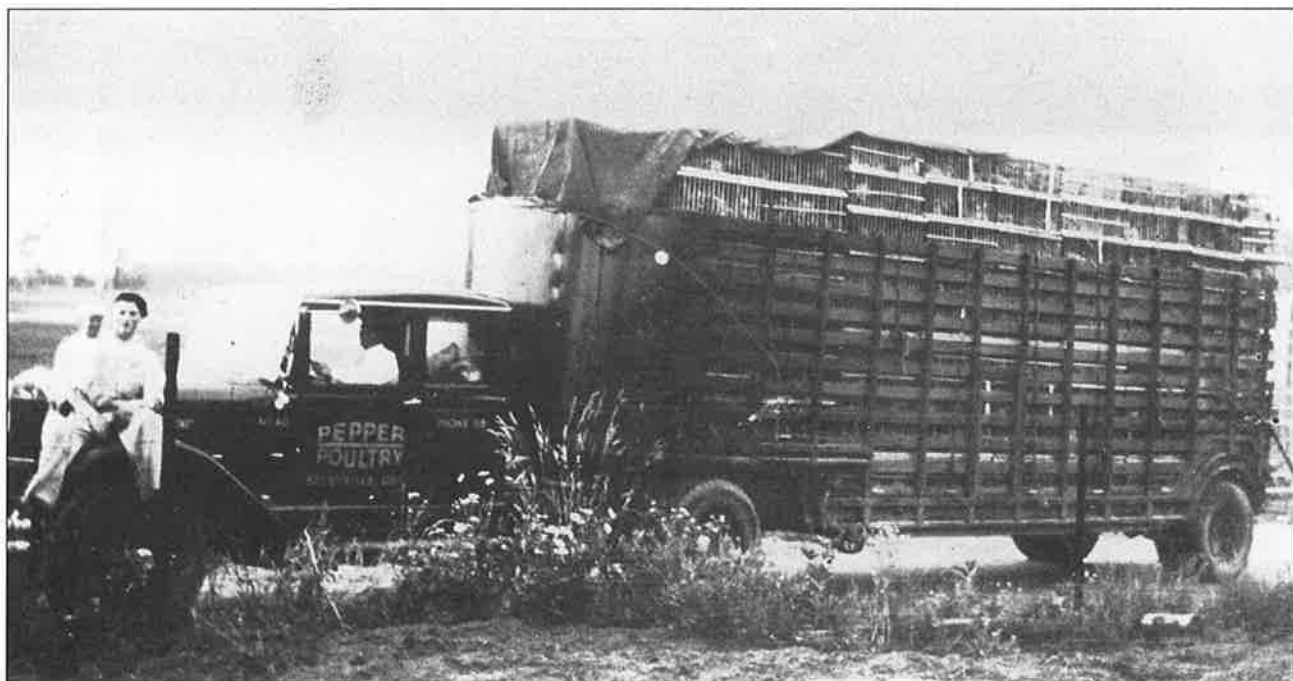
cause they got to take home all the chickens that were badly bruised or killed while being caged, the catchers were sometimes accused of deliberately maiming birds "almost wholesale."

Once the broilers were secure in the coops, they were weighed by the dealer or his representative and the specific amount of money due the grower was established. At this point the grower and the buyer were particularly alert for any "sharp practices" by the other. These might include the grower, at the last minute, feeding gravel to his chickens to artificially increase their weight—clearly Harry Pack may have exaggerated the naivete of Peninsula farmers—or the buyer tampering with the scales or with the arithmetic to cheat the grower.

Almost all of the early buyers (also called dealers or brokers) were natives of the Peninsula, owned a small fleet of trucks, and started out by shipping farm produce in the summer and live chickens in the winter to northern cities. (The railroad was rarely used to transport broilers.) It wasn't until 1928-29, however, that really large shipments of broilers moved north out of the Peninsula. Perhaps the most important early dealer was Homer Pepper of Selbyville, Delaware, who operated two trucks and a trailer in 1924. By 1929 Homer's brothers, Horace and Howard, had joined the business and it was soon known as the Pepper Poultry Company. Fourteen years later the Peppers owned fifteen trucks and were sending ten truckloads of broilers per day to northern urban markets. The trucks that they used in 1943 had three to four times the broiler-carrying capacity of the much smaller vehicles used in 1924.

In 1930 there were only six or seven broiler dealers on the entire Peninsula, but five years later there were fifty. Initially, dealers favored Philadelphia with their loads of live chickens, but by 1930 New York City was becoming an increasingly important market destination. During the mid- and late 1930s, native-born dealers were joined by "outsiders" representing New York and Philadelphia marketing firms.

After broilers were caged and then weighed at the grower's farm, they were trucked to the dealer's holding station or assembly plant, which was usually an old barn in a village like Selbyville or Dags-



Live chickens on Pepper Poultry truck in 1930s. Pepper Poultry was located in Selbyville, Delaware.

boro, Delaware, located along the crucial DuPont Highway. The trip from farm to holding station was not without peril because often the coops were piled too high, causing the top-heavy trucks, traveling over poorly maintained secondary roads, to turn over. On arrival at the holding station, the broilers were placed in batteries, which were industrially manufactured cages almost four times the size of the coops, and then fed a wet mash (mixed chicken feed). The feeding was important because on the trip north the next day the live chickens would lose weight that, if New York was the destination, could amount to as much as 5 or 6 percent. In an industry that operated with a sometime paper-thin profit margin, the weight

shrinkage on the trip north often spelled the difference between a profit and a loss.

The New York City market, which was between 180 and 220 miles from the broiler-growing areas of



Broilers in batteries were fed a wet mash prior to being shipped north during the 1930s. The goal was to cause them to put on enough weight to counteract the weight lost on the trip north.



Urban live chicken market in late 1920s or early 1930s.



Before live chickens could be marketed in New York City, they had to be transferred from three or four regular crates to a long coop like this one pictured above in the 1930s, which held seventy-five broilers.

the Peninsula, was so large and influential that it set the price that Delmarva dealers received for their chickens. In addition to being the nation's biggest urban center, New York was the most important broiler market because it contained the heaviest concentration of Jews in the United States. In 1936, for example, there were 2 million Jews in New York City, and it seemed that they all wanted chicken. That year, approximately 85 percent of all the live broilers shipped into the city were consumed by Jews.

The Jewish attraction to chicken was partly driven by religious custom and dietary laws. It was a religious requirement to observe the Jewish sabbath (Saturday) and other religious holidays by eating meat. Moreover, Jews believed that a holy day was particularly honored if a luxury meat was served. Because chicken was two and one half times more expensive than other meat in the 1930s—pork, of course, wasn't in the running—it was the ideal entree for the sabbath and other Jewish holiday meals.

Jewish dietary laws demanded the ritual killing of chickens by a *schochet* (slaughterer) who was the representative of the rabbi. This meant that the broilers had to be delivered to market in New York and to other urban centers while still alive so that the *schochet* could proceed with his work and so that other steps could be taken to make the meat kosher. West Washington Market, in lower Manhattan, was the single largest market for kosher chicken and the destination of most live broilers shipped to the city from Delmarva. The largest numbers of Peninsula broilers were trucked to New York on Wednesday so that they were at the market when Jewish housewives shopped on Thursday and Friday for the ingredients of their sabbath-day dinner.

But a new generation of Jews was coming of age in the 1930s, one that wasn't as strict in observing Jewish dietary laws. Many in this younger generation found quite acceptable the "fresh-killed" ice-packed chickens being produced by newly established processing plants that appeared outside New York in the late 1930s. The implication was clear: chickens could now be slaughtered and ice-packed on the Peninsula and still find a considerable market

in New York or in other areas of high Jewish population density.

Perhaps the first attempt at establishing a chicken processing plant on Delmarva was by Hendrich Poultry, a Swift and Company subsidiary, in Selbyville, Delaware, in 1937. The site was an old tomato cannery owned by U.S. Senator John G. Townsend, who lived in Selbyville. Evidently the plant didn't prosper and the next year, after Swift had left, Senator Townsend started his own chicken processing plant on the same site. However, the plant lost money and Senator Townsend sold his processing plant in 1939 to Homer Pepper, Helen West, and Sam Zahn, an "outsider" from New York. Using the first names of two of the owners, the new company became H & H Poultry. There may have been a few other processing plants about the same time, but they were very small and have left no extant records. The second chicken processing plant of any size was Eagle Poultry of Frankford, Delaware, founded in 1938 by Jacob "Jack" Udell, another outsider.

In 1939, Frank W. Rothman, Joseph Peigert, and Paul F. Schumacher opened Millsboro Poultry Company in a building previously owned by Atkins Cannery Company. All three came from the New York-northern New Jersey area. In 1940 Swift and Company opened a processing plant in Salisbury, Maryland, and by the end of that year, Agar Poultry began operations in Berlin, Maryland. Over the next two years, new broiler processing plants were opened in Felton, Seaford, Stockley, and Milford, Delaware, and in Pocomoke, Maryland. By May 1942, the ten Peninsula processing plants had the capacity to slaughter, dress, and ice-pack a combined total of 38 million broilers a year.

With the opening of these local processing plants, it became more and more common for broilers to be killed and dressed on the Peninsula before being shipped to northern markets. In the mid-1930s almost every Delmarva broiler was shipped live to urban markets, but by early 1942 only one-fourth of the total left the Peninsula alive. The remaining three-fourths were locally processed, with approximately 77 percent of the processed birds being



Early processing of poultry, as seen in this unidentified plant of the late 1930s, was done by hand. Absent are the conveyor lines of today.

shipped to New York City, 10 percent to Philadelphia, and 6 percent to Washington, D.C. By the beginning of World War II, New York's gentile community also began to appreciate chicken, which further contributed to an expanding New York market for "fresh-killed" ice-packed broilers. By 1941 it was increasingly apparent that traditional Jewish religious tastes no longer solely dictated the nature of the broiler market in New York City. A popular trade journal noted that the increase in the popularity of "fresh-killed" chickens "has revolutionized the former methods of poultry distribution in the great distributive markets of the East...."

The Peninsula's first processing plants (dressing plants) were very primitive and very labor-inten-

sive. Because of the limited technology available, more people worked harder to produce less. After arriving at the plant, broilers were placed in batteries and fed wet mash for one to four days in the hopes of adding weight before they were slaughtered. Cordonsal Walters remembers that, in 1938 at Eagle Poultry in Frankford, "stones" (gravel) were also fed chickens just before they were killed to add to their weight.

Killing meant that the broilers had their throats cut, were bled, and then semi-scalded to loosen feathers, which were subsequently hand-picked. Feather-picking was by far the most labor-intensive part of the process. Because owners of the Peninsula plants were often new to the field in the late 1930s

and therefore not wedded to more traditional processing techniques, they were open to the latest technology that was just beginning to revolutionize the slaughter and preparation of broilers. In 1938, for example, the short-lived Townsend plant in Selbyville used a drum with rubber fingers developed by Sunlag, Inc., of Philadelphia "to pick the whole chicken."

By 1941 in most of the Peninsula's processing plants the birds were hung on an overhead conveyor line after they were killed. Next they were semi-scalded, rough-picked with mechanical pickers, waxed, and then the wax was removed to take away the finer feathers. Finally the broilers' skins were singed for any remaining feathers and residual food was removed from their crops. The viscera were left in the carcasses and the heads and feet were also left attached. The birds were then iced, placed in barrels, and loaded on trucks so that they would be in New York or Philadelphia within 24 hours after they were killed. Defeathering, but not removing the head, feet, or viscera, produced a broiler for market that was fittingly called "New York-dressed." Milton Rabinowitz of Paramount Poultry of Harbeson, Delaware, maintained that because its viscera wasn't removed in the processing plant, "New York-dressed" was a better-tasting bird than the eviscerated chicken of today. (The viscera of New York-dressed chickens were removed by housewives prior to cooking.)

By 1941 many farmers noticed that a remarkable transformation had taken place in their lives. Prior to the birth of the broiler industry, farming on Delmarva was an arduous, sometimes tedious way of life that generated little income. No matter how hard a farmer worked the area's played-out soil, he and his family usually experienced a hand-to-mouth existence that generated little hope for the years ahead. But now, thanks to the broiler, there were profits to be made and that in turn created a new sense of optimism about the future. Orville Layfield of Dagsboro, Delaware, decided to grow broilers in the late 1930s because "people who did so were making money." Art Challman of near Georgetown, Delaware, remembers that "we made money like we could only dream." Some euphoric growers told

Challman that compared to farming as it used to be, growing broilers "isn't making money, it's having it given to you."

Not everyone, of course, was an economic winner. The volatile nature of the broiler market, with its daily price fluctuations, meant considerable losses for some as well as sizeable gains for others. Most Delmarva farmers and businessmen were by nature very cautious when it came to making financial commitments that might get them into long-term debt. When faced with the opportunities and risks presented by the broiler industry, many were too cautious to make a total commitment. Rather, they hedged their bets by continuing to grow truck crops, corn, and other grains while raising a flock or two of broilers in the winter months.

Willis Hancock of Worcester County, Maryland, remembers that on his family's farm during the 1930s, "broilers were only a sidelight of the main farm operation, tomatoes continued as the main crop." East of Millsboro, Sylvester Harmon's father started raising broilers in 1932 when he built a long house that held five thousand chickens. The results led to "some prosperity," which allowed the elder Harmon to buy a tractor and then a truck. But he continued to plant traditional crops and refused to build a second chicken house.

There were others, however, who were risk-takers. One example was Elwood Workman



Elwood Workman, Georgetown, Delaware, broiler grower in 1930s and 1940s, as he looked as a young man.

of near Georgetown, Delaware, who grew corn and kept a few layers near his farmhouse, which, like those of his neighbors, lacked electricity until the late 1930s. He used mules to plow and cultivate his fields and to do hauling and other heavy work on his 120-acre farm. In the mid-1930s Workman began to grow broilers and soon made them his primary



An annual event during the early growth of the poultry industry, the Delaware State Poultry Show at the Milford Fire Hall, Milford, Delaware in 1929. Show was sponsored by the Delaware State Poultry Association.

source of income. He built a number of chicken houses and, by 1941, had increased his capacity to two hundred thousand broilers at a time. The profits from his broilers enabled Workman to expand his land holdings to five hundred acres just prior to World War II and to buy expensive farm equipment such as one of the first rubber-tired tractors in Sussex County.

In 1941, however, events were unfolding far beyond the familiar environs of the Peninsula and the New York City chicken markets that would dramatically alter the lives of those who worked in Delmarva's broiler industry.