

50,000 Chickens

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 hair and sometimes even on the ground near the chickens. Nor do the ladies with chickens keep their egg money, like my grandmother did, in cracked Mason jars.
 Today, the ladies with the chickens keep their money in

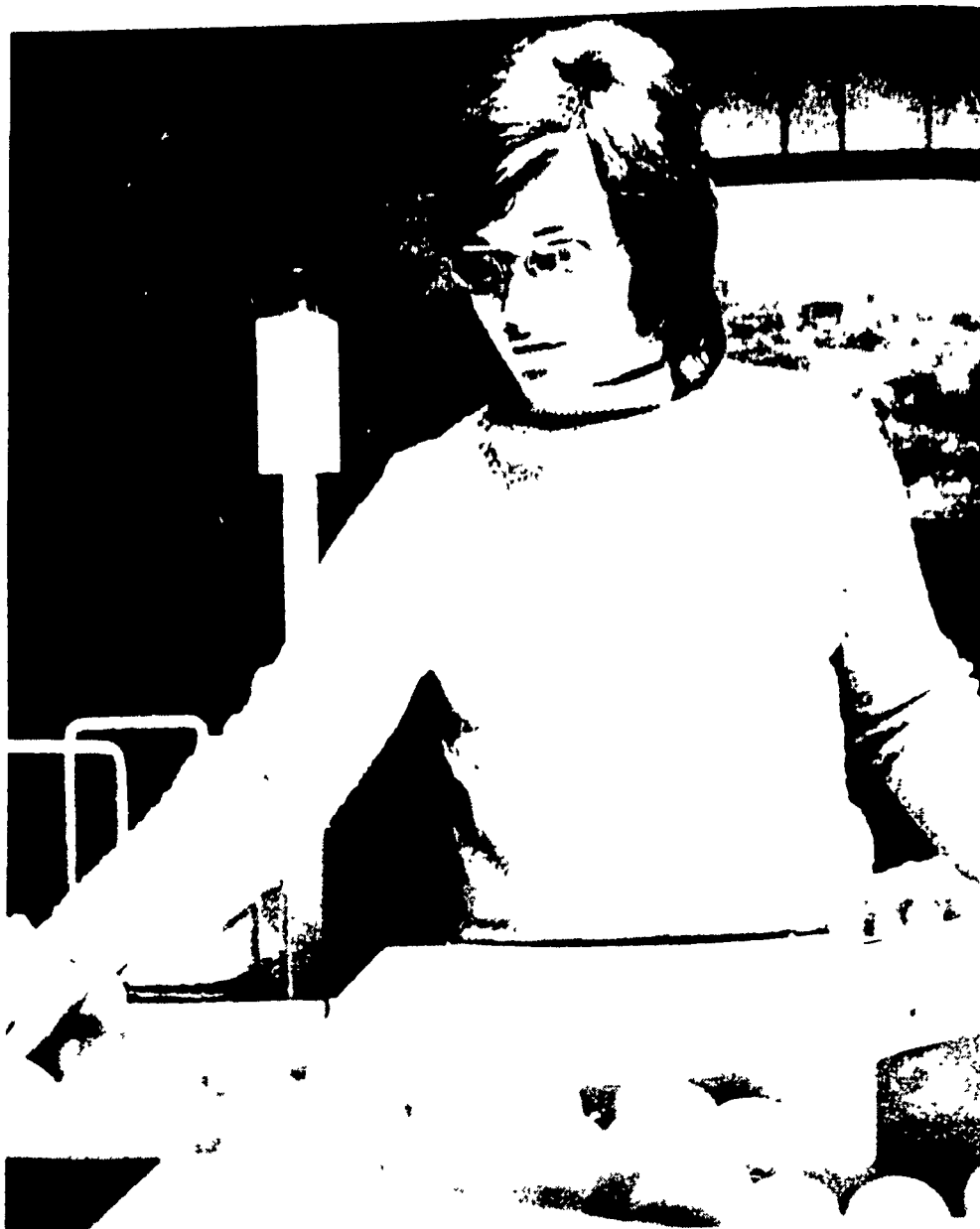
the bank, and they have white chickens. And they don't keep a small flock. They might, in fact, keep as many as 50,000 layers, like Norma Frey.
 Norma does tend 50,000 layers, and she does it single-handedly except for Craig Frey, her husband's cousin

and hired hand, who helps her every day with the packing chore.

Norma manages the triple-deck caged layer operation for her brother, Donald, owner of Hershey Equipment Co., in New Holland. "This used to be a floor house," Norma recalled when Lancaster Farming paid her a visit one recent morning. "Then we only had 12,000 layers. When we switched over, a few months ago, we brought in four times as many birds, but the work really takes just about the same amount of time. And it's a lot easier." As she spoke, Norma was working at a table full of eggs, most of which went all the way from the chicken to the refrigerated cooler without once being touched by human hands.

Every morning from 8:30 to 10:30, Norma's at the packer, watching the eggs go through at the rate of 50 cases per hour. In the afternoon, she's there from 2:30 to 3:30 again, picking out the cracks, watching for trouble, keeping the machine flowing smoothly. Under her watchful eye, the mechanical marvel packs up to 40,000 eggs a day.

Conveyed gently from the cages by a moving belt that runs the length of the building, the eggs go onto a moving ladder to be lifted one flight up onto the belt of the packer. There, they're fed automatically onto rollers, grasped gently by metal fingers and placed into flats. The flats leave the packer, go onto another belt, where they're stacked, by hand, by Craig. The flats are placed onto wheeled dollies and moved into a cooled storage room for pickup the next morning by a driver from Victor F. Weaver, Inc.



Norma Frey keeps a watchful eye on the mechanical packer that enables her to just about single-handedly care for 50,000 layers. The

laying house is a highly-automated unit built and owned by her brother Donald Hershey, owner of Hershey Equipment Co., New Holland.

Before she got into the egg business, Norma was a secretary for an orthopedic surgeon, and wore a white uniform to work every day for eight years. Then, three years ago, she went to work for her brother. "I grew up on a farm, and my husband,

Dave, is a farmer, and I just like this work better than being in an office all day," Norma said. "I'm here about seven every day. I walk through the cages to see if anything's wrong. I check the water meters to see how much the birds are drinking,

and get set up for packing. I like the schedule and being on my own. My brother buys the feed and the birds, and he pays the bills, but I'm responsible for the day-to-day operations."

The Hershey layer operation isn't a one-of-a-

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