

Hysterical fowl: not a funny story

BY SHEILA MILLER

LANCASTER — For any farmer who has witnessed a house full of hysterical birds, it's a depressing sort of thing, commented H. B. Graves, animal behaviorist at Penn State.

Graves was one of the key speakers at the Lancaster County Farm and Home Center last Thursday. The evenings topics centered around the poultry industry, management and marketing.

"There's no one solution for the problem of hysteria, which can occur in almost any breed of birds," Graves stated.

However, he noted that animal behaviorists have recognized in the animal kingdom that activity is inversely related to size. Therefore, the lighter birds would tend to be more nervous and prone to hysteria, than would the heavier breeds.

Graves also stated that researchers, in their attempts to unravel the hysteria puzzle, have not been able to confirm, across the board, that an increase in temperature in hot weather lends to increased fowl hysteria, although this may hold true for individual flocks.

He commented that if 6 to 8 per cent of the flock show

signs of extreme nervousness it was found that 8 per cent of those birds that were then caged on wire later became hysterical, while only 1 per cent of those birds kept on litter because victims of hysteria.

He pointed out that this tendency for wire-raised birds to become hysterical may be related to the birds not being able to ingest their own feces, among other things.

Fowl hysteria cannot be directly correlated to flock size, Graves said. "More than half of the flocks that were studied and eventually became hysterical, were judged to be very nervous by their owners, whether in a flock of 1200 to 10,000," he said.

Fowl hysteria in the poultry industry seems to be the greatest or highest in frequency in Denmark, according to Graves. This higher occurrence of hysteria he attributed to the fact that the animal welfare agency of that country does not allow animals to be kept in cages. Therefore, the birds are housed on wire floors. "That's something to think about," the animal behaviorist said.

So what causes the phenomena of hysteria in poultry? According to Graves, it can be likened to

an over-worked executive on the brink of a nervous breakdown because the boss is asking for more production, while the production keeps dropping.

A combination of over-all stress in high producing flocks, high temperatures, bright lights which cast deep, dark shadows, poor or non-working ventilation, large numbers of birds on wire floors—these factors working together may trigger an outbreak of hysteria.

"All of these things can be irritating to a birds that's walking a tight-rope," Graves commented.

The thing that most characterizes hysteria, apart from the fact that the birds are extremely excited, is that the birds tend to fly at regular intervals, anywhere from two to twenty-five minutes. The time between hysteria outbreaks is characteristic of each individual flock. Graves noted that during the intervals, the birds may be clucking and appearing quite normal, but as the time nears it seems like the birds are all standing around waiting to hit the ceiling, then they all take off flying.

Once a flock becomes hysterical, it's easy to pick out the birds just by their appearances. They are



Speaking at last week's seminar on poultry management and marketing were, from left, H.B. Graves, professor, Penn State; Fred D. Pontz, vice-president of marketing, Pennfield Farms Chicken; and William Patterson, general manager, egg division, Weaver's Quality Eggs, Inc.

denuded of their feathers. This feather loss is noticed first on the backs of the birds, where they fly on a heap and begin scratching each other.

This loss of feathers may lead to feather picking, where the birds begin to peck each others feathers out. This type of behavior is generally noticed just prior to full-bloom hysteria. Feather picking may eventually lead to can-

nibalism if in their pecking, the birds begin to draw blood.

Where the flock is in the state of hysteria for days or weeks, there is a high rate of mortality.

Graves recommended that one of the things a poultry farmer can do to lessen the risk of hysteria is to add perches and nests to the housing scheme.

This third dimension is something like reinventing

the tree for the domestic cousins of the jungle fowl, (from which the domesticated poultry is derived) where the natural habitat allows the jungle cousins to take flight to protective trees. This escape for the birds relieves some of the stress on the flock and lets the birds get up and out of the way.

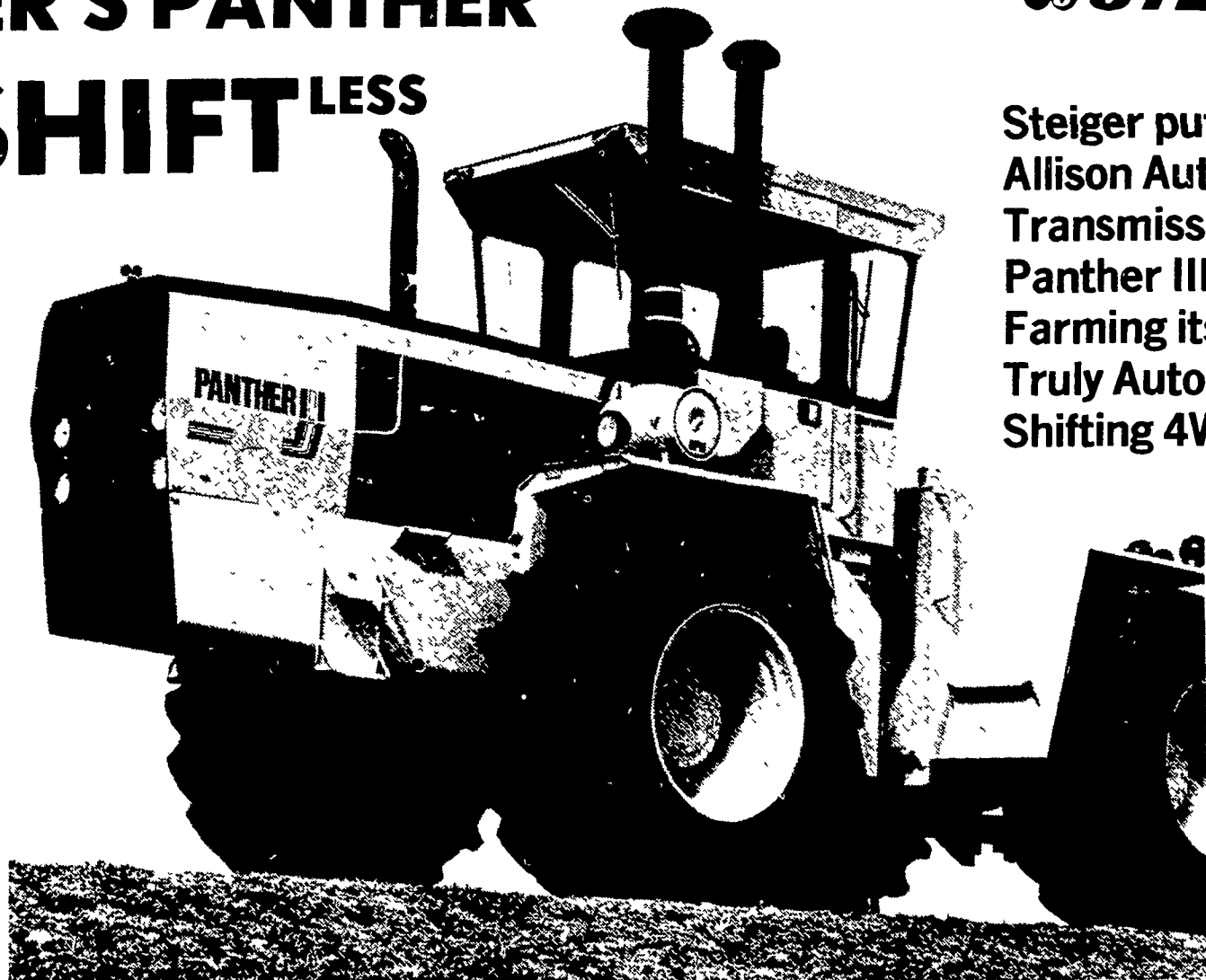
Graves said that genetics

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