

Recalling the birth of the broiler industry

FELTON, Del. — J Edward McIlvaine was halfway through high school the year the broiler industry was born. That was back in 1923, the year Mrs. Wilmer Steele of Ocean View, Del., decided to sell her entire flock of spring chickens for meat, rather than keeping the pullets for her laying flock.

That historic decision triggered a chain of events that revolutionized poultry production in the U.S. It's also the reason for Delaware's present multi-million dollar share of the broiler business. That was 57 years ago. With each year that passes, it's harder to find someone who remembers how it all began.

But Ed McIlvaine, who was honored recently for more than 40 years of service to the Delaware Poultry Improvement Association, remembers quite vividly. One of DPIA's founding members, he's served as its president, vice president chairman of locals and for

the past 20 years as its treasurer.

While Mrs. Steele was raising that first flock of meat birds, he was a teenager busy dividing his time between chores on the family grain farm near Stockley and school in Georgetown, covering the five miles in-between in a horse-drawn wagon. But by the time he graduated two years later, he was already supplying hatching eggs to the infant industry. Since then, most of his life has been involved with broilers and the people who grow them.

A heart attack last July forced him to retire after 38 years as manager of breeder flocks at Townsend's, Inc., Delaware's biggest integrated broiler company. But this experience has hardly clipped his wings. At 72 he's just a busy as ever — collecting photographs and objects to document the early history of the poultry industry. These will be on

display when the state's new farm museum in Dover finally opens its doors, hopefully sometime later this year.

In the beginning, he recalls, there wasn't any year-round broiler production. The only time you got broilers or "fryers" was in the spring. The rest of the time you settled for an occasional tough stewing hen.

Chickens back then were usually the farm wife's responsibility, he says. Like their neighbors, his mother kept a small flock of Barred Rocks — a popular, black and grey speckled all-purpose breed. The eggs they laid gave her something to use in trade on her weekly trips to the local country store.

Early each spring she would set a batch of eggs under a "broody hen" or two. The pullets that hatched out were added to the laying flock to replace old hens due to be retired to the stew pot.

The young cockerels were fattened up and eaten if you had any extra fryers or "springers," as they were also called, you might sell these in town. Some were even shipped live by railroad express up to Philadelphia. But until Mrs. Steele sold her entire replacement flock this way, nobody realized what a profitable venture this could be.

McIlvaine says the idea of raising chickens for meat rather than eggs came along just in time to save a lot of Delmarva farmers from financial disaster.

Three things happened in the early 1920's that seriously threatened previous sources of local farm income. The first was range paralysis — a disease that attacked the commercial flocks of White Leghorns used in table egg production on some farms. The second was the failure of a profitable strawberry industry as plants were wiped out by a virus called red stele disease. The third was a decline in the area's seafood industry, largely due to failure of the oyster harvest on Delaware Bay.

Salvation from all three disasters came, most

unexpectedly, from the barnyard flocks of Mrs. Steele and others. Within a few years there were small independent broiler operations all over Sussex county.

To raise all these broilers chicks were needed. So pretty soon some farmers were operating hatcheries. These, of course, needed good fertile eggs, lots of them.

It didn't take much to realize that it was far more profitable to sell eggs to one of these hatcheries than it was to trade them for a "credit slip" at the country store. Before he was out of high school, Ed McIlvaine and his family were producing hatching eggs instead.

His first flock was pretty small — only about 300-400 hens. But as time went on he added more housing until he had 1500 hens, one of the largest breeder flocks around. At first they delivered the eggs to the hatchery themselves in the family's Model T Ford. Later, a hatchery truck made the rounds, collecting eggs from his and other farms.

Care of the chickens was still largely the job of the wife and other family members, he recalls. Because they were out working the land, he and other farmers didn't have time to feed the hens and gather eggs.

The rapid growth of broiler production on the peninsula meant good business for local grain farmers like himself at the start, before the advent of commercial feeds. He remembers mixing feed for his own flock with a shovel, using grain by-products from a nearby water-powered grist mills, scraps from a meat rendering plant, and oats grown on the farm.

Later, in the 30's and 40's, commercial feeds were shipped down the peninsula by rail. The mash and chick feed was bagged at first in plain white sacks bearing the company's trademark, and then in colorful printed cotton that could be used to make aprons and other things for the home.

That's about the time they started processing broilers on the peninsula, rather than shipping them live to East Coast markets. The first ones were simply killed and plucked — in the so-called "New York" style. They were processed in plants left over from a by-then defunct tomato industry. Sussex county was dotted with these old canneries, he says.

Besides raising grain and hatching eggs, McIlvaine also worked briefly for the State Board of Agriculture in the 30's, taking blood samples from hens in breeding flocks around the state in a program aimed at eliminating pullorum, an egg-transmitted disease which took a heavy toll of young broiler chicks.

"If that program hadn't been successful," he says, "the broiler industry could never have survived."

(Turn to Page D26)



Retired poultryman Ed McIlvaine recalls he was a teenager driving a horse and wagon to school during the year Delaware's broiler industry was born.



Ed McIlvaine helps set up exhibit on early broiler industry that will be on display when Delaware's farm museum in Dover opens its doors—hopefully later this year.

See your nearest
SPERRY NEW HOLLAND

Dealer for
Dependable Equipment and Dependable Service:

Airville, PA

Airville Farm Service
Airville, PA
717-862-3358

Alexandria, PA

Clapper Farm Equipment
Star Route
814-669-4465

Annville, PA

B H M Farm Equipment, Inc
R D 1
717-867-2211

Beavertown, PA

Ben H Walter
Beavertown, PA
717-658-7024

Bernville, PA

Stanley A Klopp, Inc
Bernville, PA
215 488-1510

Biglerville, PA

Nelson Farm Supply, Inc
Biglerville, PA
717-677-8144

Carlisle, PA

Paul Shovers, Inc
35 East Willow Street
717-243-2686

Catawissa, PA

Abraczinskas Farm
Equipment, Inc
R D 1
717-356-2323

Chambersburg, PA

Clugston Implement, Inc
R D 1
717-263 4103

Chester Springs, PA

Nevin N Myer & Sons, Inc
Chester Springs, PA
215 827-7414

Davidsburg, PA

George N Gross, Inc
R D 2, Dover, PA
717-292-1673

Elizabethtown, PA

Messick Farm
Equipment, Inc
Rt 283 Rheem's Exit
717-367-1319

Gettysburg, PA

Yingling Implements
R D 9
717-359-4848

Halifax, PA

Sweigard Bros
R D 3, Box 13
717 896-3414

Hanover, PA

Sheets Bros, Inc
Carlisle Street
717 632-3660

Honey Brook, PA

Dependable Motor Co
East Main Street
215 273-3131
215 273-3737

Honey Grove, PA

Norman D Clark & Son, Inc
Honey Grove, PA
717-734-3682

Hughesville, PA

Farnsworth Farm
Supplies, Inc
103 Cemetery Street
717-584 2106

Lancaster, PA

L H Brubaker, Inc
350 Strasburg Pike
717 397 5179

Lebanon, PA

Evergreen Tractor Co., Inc
30 Evergreen Road
717-272 4641

Lritz, PA

Roy A Brubaker
700 Woodcrest Avenue
717 626 7766

Loysville, PA

Paul Shovers, Inc
Loysville, PA
717-789-3117

Lynnport, PA

Kermit K Kistler, Inc
Lynnport, PA
215 298-2011

McEwensville, PA

Don's Service Shop
Box 97
717 538-1362

Mill Hall, PA

Paul A Dotterer
R D 1
717-726 3471

New Holland, PA

A B C Groff, Inc
110 South Railroad
717-354-4191

Oley, PA

A J Noss & Son, Inc
R D 2
215 987-6257

Palm, PA

Wentz Farm Supplies, Inc
Rt 29
215 679 7164

Pitman, PA

Marlin W Schreffler
Pitman, PA
717 648 1120

Quarryville, PA

C E Wiley & Son, Inc
101 South Lime Street
717-786-2895

Reedsville, PA

Big Valley Sales & Service,
Inc
P O Box 548
717 667-3944

Ringtown, PA

Ringtown Farm Equipment
Ringtown, PA
717-889-3184

Silverdale, PA

I G Sales
Box 149
215-257 5135

Tamaqua, PA

Charles S Snyder, Inc
R D 3
717 386 5945

West Chester, PA

M S Yearsley & Son
114-116 East Market Street
215-696 2990

West Grove, PA

S G Lewis & Son, Inc
R D 2, Box 66
215 869 2214

Churchville, MD

Walter G Coale, Inc
2849 53 Churchville Rd
301 734 7722

Rising Sun, MD

Ag Ind Equipment Co Inc
R D 2, Route 273 East
301-398 6132
301 658 5568

Woodstown, NJ

Owen Supply Co
Broad Street & East Avenue
609 769 0308