

Acres of geese greet visitors to Willow Hill Hatchery

BY PAT KAUFFMAN

RICHLAND — "As inflation gets worse, our business gets better. Business is very good right now," Fred Wright said. He was referring to the family owned and run Willow Hill Poultry Hatchery here.

"People buy poultry when times get tough. They can't afford vacations and must find their recreation at home. So they turn to hobbies like raising fancy poultry. I guess they feel they'll at least have something they can eat," he continued. And if his barometer of economics is working, the economy is in trouble. For according to Fred, business is up 59 percent this year over last, and last year it was up 50 percent over the year before. The total increase over 2 years ago is 100-125 per cent. Currently they are hatching 137,000 eggs per batch.

Fred and his wife Marge have been raising the poultry on their farm for about 13 years. What began as a hobby has mushroomed into a business that keeps them running long days and short nights. While Fred was raised on a farm, Marge was not, and in fact she was an English teacher. Currently though, Marge finds her days filled with egg collecting and account work handling the 25-30 orders she receives per day.

During his college days, Fred worked dressing poultry and managing a hatchery in Maine Armed with a B.A. degree in History, he worked away from home for a period of time. The present operation has grown from a hobby Fred resumed — working with incubating eggs. And since then business has grown through ads in national back-to-earth magazines and lately, word of mouth.

Visitors to the farm are confronted with acres of geese. The birds are housed in large lots each complete with its own pond. Shelter in winter and when nesting consists of low open sheds.

The Wrights have the art of raising these birds down to a science. Marge says, "We used to have a problem with the goose eggs being too tough to crack. We were losing too many goslings that couldn't peck their way out. We consulted Owen Keene at Penn State and he helped develop a ration that controlled the calcium intake of the birds.

The feed very carefully balances trace minerals and vitamins. For instance, it increases the macin for the birds 19 percent. Obtaining a feed company to mix the feed was another hurdle the Wrights encountered. Here again, Keene came to the rescue by formulating a ration that achieved the proper balance by using a combination of standard premixes. While the feed did not change the fertility or quality of the eggs' interior, it took care of the shell problem and thus greatly increased hatchability. Wright explained that the amount of calcium given to a caged layer would be far too great for a bird which is grazing. In addition, while



One of the management techniques Fred relies on is the use of existing buildings for as many of the farm projects as possible.

chickens and other non-waterfowl lay nearly year round, waterfowl (geese) are seasonal layers, and therefore the excess calcium is stored by their bodies and creates the tough eggs.

The Wrights try to limit the geese to a spring laying period. During the fall and winter the birds are fed shell corn in addition to their grazing. About 3 weeks prior to the desired laying period, the special formula is fed. They explained that if the birds lay in the fall, the number of eggs layed in spring drops. And spring, they noted, is the time of peak demand for the goslings. Sometimes the geese don't perform according to schedule. Marge notes the goose who sat on her nest through fair weather and foul, neck deep in snow.

While the scene at feeding and collecting times can resemble noisy chaos, it is part of a well organized system. Each bird bears a leg-band which is color-coded for the year she was placed. Most peak in production at 3 years, and the birds are culled when they reach their fifth year.

The Wrights keep 600 hens for production at all times, and ganders are placed with the heavier birds at the ratio of 1 gander to every 5 hens.

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Jeff and Carrie, 5, stand near the sign which greets visitors to the farm.



Peafowl are a relatively new addition to the farm. Here 8 year-old Jeff poses with some of the birds.

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