



## At Longenecker's Hatchery:

# Both the chicken and the egg come first

BY JACK HUBLEY

**ELIZABETHTOWN** — There was a time, back in 1919, when Clayton Longenecker probably managed to fit all of his eggs in one basket. That was the year that the founder of the Elizabethtown Poultry Farm moved his business from the opposite end of town to its present Market St. location just east of Elizabethtown and set up shop with his 2,500 laying hens.

"Believe it or not, where we're sitting right now, used to be a chicken house," chuckles Longenecker's vice president, John Martin, as he glances around the well-manicured conference room.

It's hard to imagine a few hundred leghorns clucking and scratching in what has become the firm's modern office facilities. Nevertheless, this is where it all began, says company president, John G. Longenecker, as he reflects upon the past 65 years that have seen Longenecker's Hatchery, Inc., evolve into the state's largest independent broiler producing hatchery, with a yearly production of nearly 60 million broiler chicks.

Oddly enough, the "broiler" as such, did not even exist until more than a decade after Longenecker first opened his doors for business.

"At that time cockerels were the only 'broilers' they had, and no actual broiler chicks were available until the early '30's," explains John Longenecker, noting that modern poultry and egg production bears little resemblance

to its early 20th century counterpart.

"Throughout the 1920's you only hatched your chicks from March till the end of June, and the chickens were all grown out on the ground," recalls Longenecker. "Eggs just didn't hatch well in the winter, and hatchability really improved after the hens got out and ate a little grass."

"In the early 1930's they developed a dual-purpose bird that was a better layer and had better meat qualities," Longenecker continues, "but it was actually the late '30's and early '40's before a fast-growing broiler chick was developed."

And it was about this time that the elder Longenecker's son, John, joined the firm, coming into the business in 1946 and assuming ownership two years later.

"We were involved with broiler chicks on a small scale throughout this period, but it was the early 1950's when we really started getting into the broiler business," Longenecker says, "and back then 2,000 to 3,000 birds was a big order for me."

Company growth continued at a steady pace with the addition of a 40-by-80-foot wing being built in 1960. Business continued to expand, permitting the addition of a second wing in 1972, along with 12 "Big J" incubators that boosted the company's hatching capacity by 933,000 eggs.

Finally in 1977, Longenecker's entered into a bold new venture with Victor F. Weaver, Inc., of



John and Elizabeth Longenecker display photos of the original Longenecker facility founded by John's father Clayton N. Longenecker in 1919.

New Holland, and the L&W Hatchery was built three miles from Longenecker's location. Then in 1980 a back wing was added to this new facility.

"The good thing about the L&W Hatchery is that we built in the potential for growth right from the start," says John Martin. "This hatchery is built so that at some time we could go to a million birds a week."

Adding this hatching potential to the 550,000-bird-per-week capacity of the original Longenecker facility, gives the company a potential yearly output in excess of 60 million birds. Actual production remains about 15 percent below this level, however, largely due to two events that transpired in 1983.

First came the loss of one of Longenecker's major customers, who had accounted for about 25 percent of the company's sales.

"We did find some other customers and some export business to offset the loss," says Martin, "but we still haven't recovered all of the lost business. The problem in this business is that you're working on a six to nine-month lead time in breeder placements," Martin explains, "so when this happened, we still had to work through this period to find customers for all our production."

And on the heels of this setback came the avian flu epidemic in the fall of the same year. Longenecker's and L&W found themselves affected by the influenza blight in two ways: first, the depopulation of some of their breeder flocks within the zone reduced the supply of available broiler eggs, and second, with both hatcheries themselves lying within the quarantine zone, sales of broiler chicks were restricted.

In an effort to decrease their vulnerability, the hatcheries placed all of their breeding stock outside the quarantine zone between November, 1983, and January 1984.

"By doing this, it lessened the risk of having our breeding stock affected by A.I., and we were then able to secure hatching eggs in order to meet our requirement," explains Longenecker.

Longenecker's owns all of their breeders, contracting with local farms to raise them beginning at

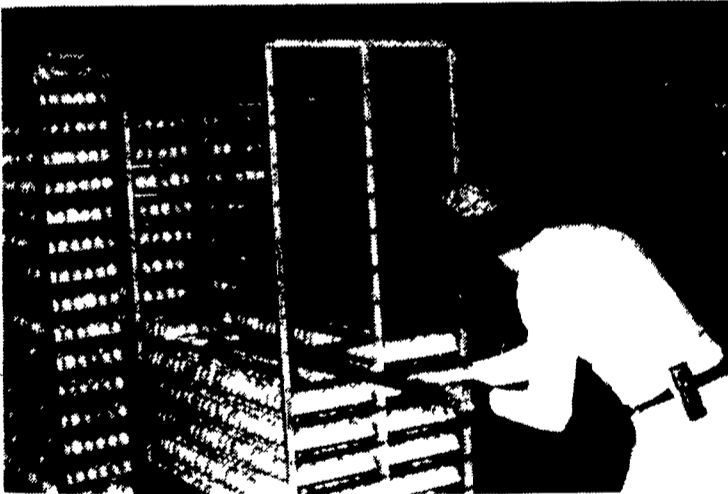
one day of age. The hens are in production for 38 weeks, and each one produces about 125 broiler chicks.

Though a fast-growing broiler is one of the keys to success in this industry, producers continue to ride the fence between maximum meat and egg production.

"The more they develop a bird to grow faster, the more difficult it is to get eggs out of that chicken," says Longenecker, pointing out why both the chicken and the egg must come first to the broiler industryman.

Nevertheless, the quest for fast growing chickens continues as consumer demand for prepared foods increases. The demand for whole frying chickens began to wane in the 1970's, as households with two working parents began to gravitate to the convenience of prepared foods and fast food restaurants. At present, about 20 percent of all broilers grown find their way into prepared food packages in one form or another and the trend is likely to gain

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After hatching eggs arrive from the farm on specially built farm racks, Dale Hilsher transfers them to the incubator racks. In only six minutes, 4,320 eggs are ready for the incubator.



First stop for eggs five to seven days old is the "setter" incubator, where eggs are rotated hourly. On the 18th day, eggs are transferred to incubators called "hatchers" where more room is provided to allow chicks to exit egg shell successfully. Above is John Brubaker, manager of the L&W Hatchery, with a tray full of eggs in a "hatcher".



Bob Fellenbaum displays the transformation that takes place in hatchers on day 21. Each hatcher holds 10,000 eggs, with 125 eggs per tray.



Chicks hatched at L&W first travel to center table called sexing ring where pullets (females) and cockerels are separated. Pullets then travel to left table and cockerels to right for Marek's disease vaccination.