

# Vernon Ross Promotes Incredible, Edible Eggs All Year Long

BY SALLY BAIR

Lancaster Co. Correspondent  
HARRISBURG — May is Egg Month, and for Vernon Ross that means a concentrated effort to do what he does all year long — promote the incredible, edible egg.

Ross, a marketing specialist with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, says that eggs are one of the most perfect, natural foods we have. He points out, "Eggs have no preservatives and have all the nutrients except Vitamin C. It is one of the best foods for protein and the cost per pound hasn't changed for years."

Ross promotes eggs three ways — as an Agriculture Department employee, as the "Omelet King," and as "The Bird," a huge feathered mascot for the egg industry. He performs each role with the enthusiasm of a man who loves his work, and says frankly, "It's the most gratifying job I've ever had."

Eggs have suffered their share of bad press, but Ross believes the single most influential factor in the declining consumption of eggs is the fact that so many women are working outside the home. "We have lost the art of eating a good breakfast. We live in a different age. My mother never worked and we always had a super breakfast in the morning."

Nothing how important breakfast is, Ross says, "Breakfast is brain food. Teachers have told me that they can't teach children who haven't eaten breakfast because they are out of energy by 9 or 10:00 a.m."

Ross, speaking as the Omelet King, decries the excuse of lack of time in the morning, pointing out that it takes just 40 seconds to make his famous omelet, using 2 eggs and 2 tablespoons of water. Furthermore, with the proliferation of microwave ovens, the ease of preparing eggs for breakfast has been cut to 20 seconds.

To change breakfast habits, Ross, working closely with the Pennsylvania Egg Marketing Board, has developed a pilot project for schools, which will be fully underway in September.

Focal point for the breakfast and school program is "The Bird," a bright, fun, eye-catching mascot. The Bird will visit schools and will provide nutritional information along with an "Egg Eater Club" membership card, a book marker and a pin which reads "I love eggs." Coloring contests will be

part of The Bird's visits, and winners will get a T-shirt.

The Bird will distribute breakfast charts, on which children can place a red star if they eat eggs, a blue for any other prepared breakfast, and a green for cold cereal. Ross thinks this will help get children on the right track for breakfast. The Bird will also have information for mothers.

Ross says, "Teachers love the idea. It will be very entertaining and it doesn't cost school districts a penny." Word of mouth will spread the program, and the goal is to reach two schools a week.

The next year there will be a follow up with book covers, which say, "I still love eggs."

The Bird, formerly known as V.I. Peep, has been making appearances for about two years. As the man behind the bird, Ross loves people's reaction to the costumed bird. The Bird never speaks and was trained by the Pittsburgh Pirates' mascot.

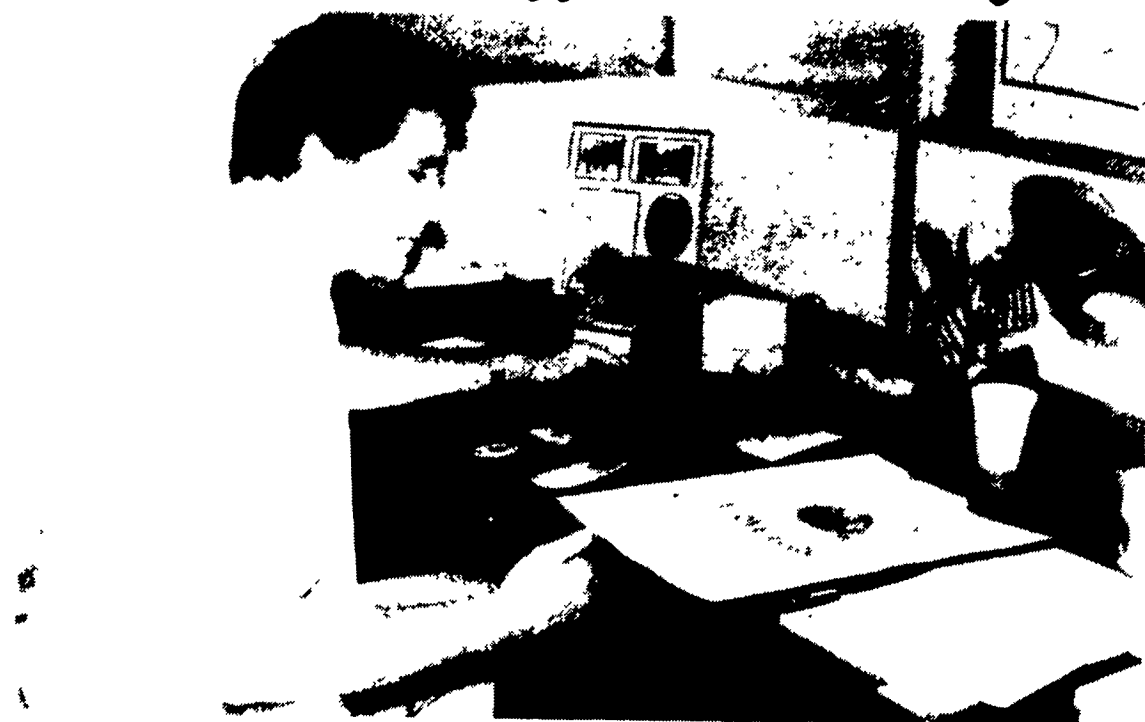
Ross has appeared throughout the state as The Bird, and even attended the Easter Egg Hunt at the White House. There he was enthusiastically received by the terminally ill children. One child gave Ross his egg, autographed by the president, and said, "Thanks for making the kids happy." It is comments like these that keep Ross going strong.

The Bird likes to go to parades, agricultural events and other activities, but Ross admits that he can make only about half the appearances he has requests for.

Ross says that egg producers are the first commodity group to concentrate on school age children who are at "an impressionable age."

In the two-pronged approach of promotion, Ross also makes appearances as the omelet king. He said most people think of having eggs as "scrambled" or "dippy" and the french name omelet sounds different. But an omelet can be made in 40 seconds, and can be eaten for any meal of the day.

The most important part of the omelet is using the correct pan, according to Ross. Silverstone or teflon must be used over a very high, intense heat. "It should never take more than one minute, and it must be made with wholesome butter, which is just beginning to brown." After adding the egg mixture, Ross says the pan should be tilted and the cooked part pushed into the middle. At this point it is ready to fill.



The Bird plays a big part in promoting eggs in Pennsylvania and here the man behind the costume looks over some of the materials which will feature this friendly, feathery mascot.

He adds that an omelet can be "the garbage dump of the ice box," noting that broccoli, cream cheese, hamburger, ham, cheese or "whatever is left over" can be used as filling. He added, "If you're right handed you fill the left side of the omelet, if you're left handed you fill the right side." After filling, he said the omelet should be folded and allowed to sit for 10 seconds.

Inevitably someone asks why he doesn't use milk for his omelets, and he answers that while milk is fine for scrambled eggs cooked over a lower heat, it shouldn't be used with the high heat for omelets. Water also makes the omelet fluffy.

Last year Ross made over 20,000 omelets as he traveled throughout the state extolling the virtues of eggs. He likes to think of his demonstrations as entertainment, and his humor helps get the message across. Last year he went to 112 banquets, and entertained 12,000 people. He has spoken to groups of up to 900, and says he gets his best reactions from large groups. He has a repertoire of 32 stories from his own life, and uses appropriate ones after sizing up the audience.

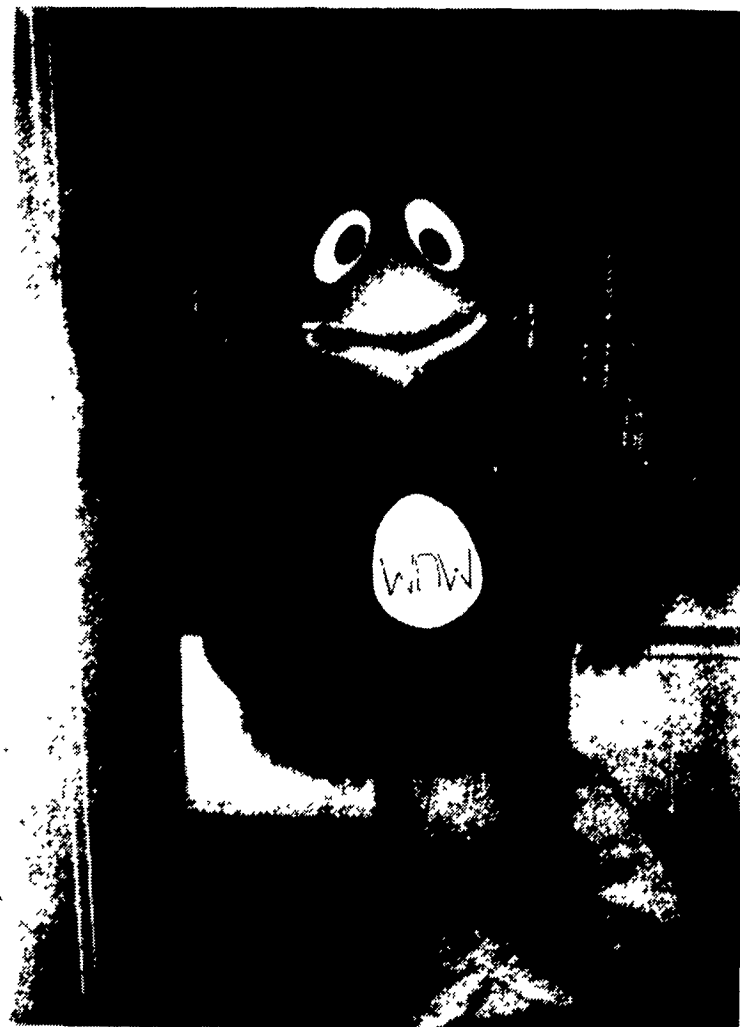
Ross states firmly that he is his own critic and completely criticizes each presentation he makes so it can be improved the next time. He also mentions that he likes to inject positive thinking into his demonstrations, and indeed, thinks of his own ability to talk to groups as his "personal victory."

It is hard to believe, but when he was elected class treasurer of his sophomore class in high school, he was unable to give an acceptance speech because of lack of self-confidence and was forced to forfeit the position. He says his shyness came from having to recite Shakespeare in an English class and having his classmates embarrass him.

Fortunately for him his father pushed Ross to conquer this problem, and he eventually took a Dale Carnegie class and joined Toastmasters. Now he easily gives his presentations with no prepared speech, and enjoys every minute of it. In fact, he admits to getting great satisfaction just from knowing that he has done the job right.

Another promotion which will be repeated this summer is the egg recipe contest, which attracted 1,600 people last year.

Money for promoting eggs comes from the producers themselves, organized as the Pennsylvania Egg Marketing Board. Ross works closely with them in developing promotional ideas and with the Poultry



The Bird is the busy mascot of the Pennsylvania Egg Marketing Board, and makes appearances throughout Pennsylvania promoting eggs. Watch for this friendly creature at parades, fairs and other events. He never speaks, but he carries a big message about the nutritional benefits of including eggs in your diet. This fall he will be the focal point of a statewide promotional effort aimed at school children.

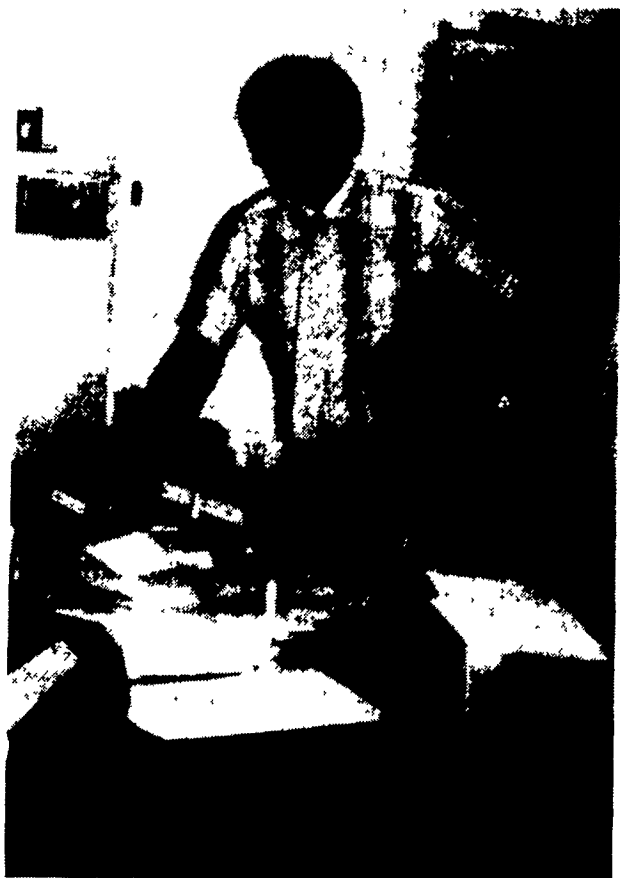
Federation. He takes a close look at other commodity promotions, always watching what is successful and what works well. He says their budget at this point is modest, and they have only begun to scratch the surface of egg promotion. He adds confidently, "We can turn around the decline in egg consumption. This job is so challenging."

Billboards across the state will promote eggs this summer with an egg in disguise and the message, "Can you recognize your favorite

breakfast food?" PEMA has also mailed 25 egg recipes to restaurants for consideration on their menus. Ross notes, "Eggs are very profitable for restaurants."

Ross said he enjoys the cooking portion of his job, and, in fact does much of the cooking at home. "It is a hobby to me," he says. He often tells audiences that the reason he looks so young is that he eats eggs every day.

(Turn to Page B4)



Vernon Ross works at promoting eggs throughout Pennsylvania, and his secretary Katherine Gruich works behind the scenes to keep schedules moving smoothly.

# Homestead Notes