

On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



Talk about frustration and futility.

Not that it was the old guinea's fault, at all. She's been guilty of nothing more than simple response to inbred stimuli, a natural inclination to do what millions of her species before have done.

And so, for the past few years, the aging Pearl guinea would seek out some hidden depression in the perennial border, demarkation line between the edge of the lawn and the beginning of the fields beyond.

There, under the protective canopy offered by clumps of gracefully arching daylilies and swaying stems of fall asters (plus a few giant, volunteer stalks of ragweed), the old mother guinea would fill her nest with hope.

Along about mid-summer's battle with the ragweed, I would generally find the nest, cradling a clutch of a few dozen cream-colored, brown speckled eggs. Sterile eggs they were, devoid of any sign of impending life, none

ever to be tediously opened by a chick pecking its way to the light of day.

Our last male guinea disappeared about four years ago.

For another year or so, there had been two females, sharing the filling of a nest of futility. Eventually, one of them flew to the great poultry pen in the sky, leaving this solitary, lonely bird. She took up keeping company with the few remaining backyard chickens, who tolerated, but never really accepted, her overtures of friendship.

Of course, that may have been due to her habit of trying to steal their chicks. Anytime a hen hatched out a few chicks, the guinea would be right there on the outskirts, trying to chase off the natural mother. She took her surrogate role quite seriously, ready to chase off any cat, dog or human intruder getting too close to the infants.

For two summers, our eldest took pity on the frustrated guinea hen, pleading that we acquire the

bird some chicks of her own to adopt. Time, memory and good intentions never quite got together, until two weeks ago. Then I moved the computer keyboard, and a ragged-edged, classified ad run by a nearby hatchery appeared on the office desk.

Just in time, too. The last hatch of the season had just taken place, so my order for a half-dozen of the tiny chicks went in right under the wire.

All six of them could have fit into the palm of my hand. Four looked like baby pheasants, in shades of browns and blacks. The other two, however, were an off-shade of white. Lavenders, they called them, a type of guinea that when mature is the color of.....well, lavender.

"Purple peeps!" laughed the youngest. "You got purple peeps?"

How to bring together the old would-be mother and these six machine-hatched chicks proved to be a formidable problem. They were certainly much too tiny to be released outside, where a veritable army of bird-loving cats reams the premises. The old guinea, used to living virtually wild, coming and going as she pleased, was not going to take lightly to relocation inside any sort of enclosure. And, suppose she wouldn't adopt them

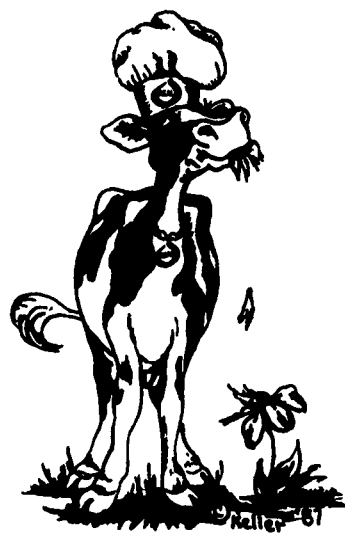
at all.

When in doubt, stall. Into a big cardboard box on the greenhouse bench went the fluffy balls of brown and "lavendar." A shop trouble light, graciously loaned by the Farmer, provided additional warmth.

Two weeks later, the largest of the chicks were testing their wings and roosting on the box edges. After retrieving one found perching on the edge of a water bucket, it seemed time to make other arrangements. A screened topper for a pickup, no longer in use by a friend, offered a temporary "bonding" pen for chicks and would-be mother hen.

A typical fairy-tale ending has the guinea spreading her wings and the chicks diving beneath in a beautiful, touching, union of spirits. In reality, the guinea is still grumbling because we've penned her, and the chicks hover together in a corner, looking bewildered.

So much for fairytale endings.



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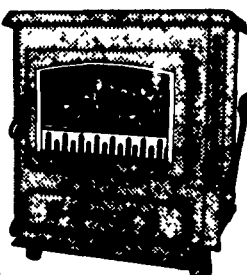
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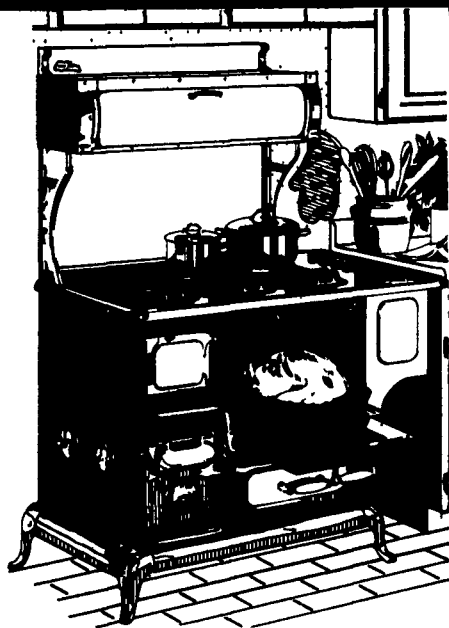


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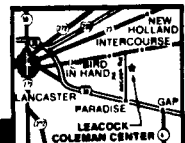
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