

After Poultry House Fire 70-Year-Old Woman Rebuilds

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
WASHINGTON BORO (Lancaster Co.) — Most people remember the Blizzard of '93 as the snow that blocked roads, cancelled school for about a week, and brought industry to a standstill.

Irene Frey remembers it as the time her chicken house burned to the ground because fire engines couldn't get through the snow drifts in time to stop the raging fire.

While most people her age would welcome relief from the daily responsibility of caring for about 17,000 broilers, Irene did not.

"I like chickens," Irene said. "Before my husband died in 1990, he asked how long before we stop raising chickens? I told him not as long as we can do it."

Irene decided that she is still quite capable of raising chickens and no fire is going to stop her from continuing her favorite job.

Before the embers cooled, she was peppering officials with questions: "How's the cement? How's the foundation? Can we rebuild?"

The service representative and building salesperson for Hershey Equipment were hesitant.

"She is one terrific lady to work

with and selling chicken houses is my job," said Carl Anthony of Hershey Equipment. "But, at her age, I thought she probably should not rebuild and I tried to discourage her. I wanted her to think of all the drawbacks."

But, for Irene, drawbacks seem nonexistent. Insurance completely reimbursed her for the price of the new building. To rebuild would add to the property value, she reasoned.

She loves chickens and prefers to work rather than retire. A nephew, Craig Frey, and Irene's son, who is a hog farmer, help with equipment repairs and with cleaning out between flocks.

Irene said that during cleaning out, she always takes care of cleaning the stoves and fans but expects cleaning up will be much less of a chore with the newer house.

"She soon had me convinced that she should rebuild," Anthony said. "But I told her if we are going to do it, we are going to do it right."

The previous chicken house was a two-story. Irene agreed that it should be replaced with a one-story house.

Although the newly-erected chicken house is small compared to

many of today's sizes, it is not lacking in up-to-date facilities. The poultry house is the new style curtain house, which can be adapted to house swine or turkeys. Thermostats are set between 83-85 degrees. If it gets hotter, the curtains open automatically and close automatically when the temperatures drop. Pan feeders are used instead of the chain feeder that was in the old chicken house.

The completely computerized operation turns on the lights at 8:30 p.m. and off at 5:30 a.m. The curtains allow enough lighting for daytime use.

Tunnel fans are used to suck out the heat. A generator line was built to include her home if electric goes off.

Since everything is automatic, Irene said, she doesn't need to do much more than pick up dead chicks and make sure everything is set properly on the computer. She walks through the chicken houses several times a day beginning at 5:30 a.m. and ending around midnight.

"I just like to walk through the house to make sure everything is OK. Then I can sleep better," she said.



What do you do when you are 70 years old, your husband is no longer living, and your chicken house burns to the ground? If you are Irene Frey, you build a new chicken house.

She also likes to sit and watch the chickens. "The more time you spend in the chicken house, the more tame the chickens become," she said.

She takes pride in the fact that the chicken catchers reported that her chickens are the tamest they ever catch.

She admits that she still has a lot to learn as far as operating the computer, but is impressed with the many capabilities of the device.

According to Anthony, the computer system is one of the best — only three others like it have been installed in the county. "Because it has the potential to be accessed by a modem anywhere in the world, the system is adaptable to many uses if Mrs. Frey decides to get out of the poultry business," he said.

Irene said that it seemed natural to her to continue farming after her husband had died because her mother had done the same on the dairy farm on which Irene had grown up.

When Irene married her husband Ralph (now deceased), they were in dairying many years before moving to the present farm where they crop farmed rented acreage and raised steers and tobacco. They also custom butchered for more than 10 years, but when the state wanted them to make lots of changes, the Freys decided to build a broiler house instead.

"From the beginning, I liked chickens better than any other of

the family members," Irene said. The Freys have five children, who are now grown and live nearby.

Irene said that she constantly updated the two-story structure, but the new building is so much more convenient than the former one.

The fire marshal was unable to pinpoint the cause of the fire, but Irene believes that it was blizzard-related with a possible electrical malfunction.

A neighbor who saw smoke coming from the poultry house called Irene to report the fire. Although the fire company is located about half a mile from the Frey farm, snow plows were unable to open the roads.

Rep. John Barley, a neighbor, used his farming equipment to open a path through the fields, which the fire engines used. By that time, everything had burned to the ground. If the roads would have been passable, Irene surmises that most of the chicken house could have been salvaged or at least the generator room.

The chickens are under contract with Charles' Poultry.

As far as hobbies go, Irene said chickens are her hobby. Another is gardening. Several of the farm's 10 acres are planted with corn, Spanish onions, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, and other vegetables.

In her spare time, Irene attends country music concerts with family members.



Carl Anthony of Hershey Equipment said that he tried to discourage Mrs. Frey from building a new chicken house, but she convinced him that it was the best decision for her. "She's a terrific lady to work with," Anthony said of Mrs. Frey whose chicken house is computer operated.



This is only part of the huge garden that Irene finds great pleasure in maintaining with the help of two married daughters who live nearby.

Homestead Notes