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How We Got Our First Chickens at the Roost

Adapting to country life should be no problem for an intelligent couple from the big city, right? Well, in most cases my wife and I were able to adapt to the idiosyncracies of the small backwoods western North Carolina town where we moved to in 1991.

The first major difficulty began when our water pump started acting up. We called a well repairman our and our water problem was easily cured. As my wife, Nancy, and I exchanged small talk with the young serviceman, I mentioned that we had an old Toyota Landcruiser that might be of use to someone who needed parts. I told him the engine had a cracked block, but everything else was salvagable. Nancy quickly told the man that we would be willing to trade the vehicle for chickens. We had a good laugh afterwards at our first attempt at the barter system.

Several weeks later we had to call out the repairman again for a another problem with the well. As he replaced the pressure tank he said that his cousin was interested in the Toyota. Several days later his cousin called me. He was ready to deal and wanted to know what kind of chickens we wanted. How was I supposed to know? I quickly covered my ignorance by saying that we wanted good layers to keep us supplied with eggs. I added that we didn't want chicks, but young chickens (I didn't know what term to use). He said that he had fifteen lined up for us. These mountain people can work fast when they really want something!

Being totally unprepared I said that we would need at least a week to build quarters for the flock. I learned later that the proper terminology was chicken coop. The conversation ended with an agreement to make the deal in a week.

Now it was panic time. Nancy and I had no idea what we would need to build. We had seen chickens on hillsides as we drove to town, but had not paid any attention to where they were housed. Most of the country yards had so many out-buildings in various stages of decrepidness that the chickens could have been living anywhere and most likely were.

First thing the next morning we headed for the Agricultural Extension Office. We are intellegent people and know where to look for information. After going through two drawers filled with ancient papers, the agent handed us a set of plans for a "movable laying house" prepared by the North Carolina State College and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Just what the doctor ordered. No more problems, right?

Just to be sure we stopped by the local library and checked out two books on homesteading. They both had chapters on raising chickens.

The rest of the day and most of that night was spent poring over the details. I have basic carpentry skills and the plans appeared to be fairly simple. A list of materials was even provided. Knowing that the prices at the the small town hardware store were exorbitate, I decided to call Dannie Buck who had a small sawmill. I had met him a few years before when I had trees removed from my woods. I called him on the telephone to see if he had any rough sawn lumber. He said to come over in the morning and he would fix me up. Before hanging up Nancy asked if he had any sawdust that she could get for her garden. Dannie replied with a deep laugh. What could that mean?

I went over the plans again before bedtime, and then again in the morning, making sure that the materials list was complete. There was frost on the groud as we headed to Dannie's. Nearing his property we immediately knew why he

laughed at the sawdust question - it was everywhere, piled forty feet high. One large area was puffing smoke from underground fires. Dannie must have had a good laugh the night before telling his wife about the crazy city slickers wanting to know if he had sawdust.

Dannie walked over to greet us. After exchanging pleasantries he asked what we needed. I handed him the materials list. I knew we were in trouble when a smile formed on his thin lips. He pushed up the brim of his Caterpillar cap "ain't got nutin' like this" he cackled.

I didn't understand - there were hugh stacks of lumber piled everywhere, nearly as high as the sawdust. "I got a couple o' two by fours" he continued, pointing at one of the larger piles. Dannie took off walking from stack to stack, his monologue mostly indecipherable. Nancy followed, vering to the left when Danny spit to the right and vise versa.

I heard him mention chestnut, a wood that is only obtained from long dead trees in the deepest woods. A blight in the 1920's wiped out the mighty giants. Jokingly I said that chestnut would make a good coop. Without hesitation he shot back, "them chickens better lay golden eggs to pay for that coop."

After a thirty minute stroll through the haphazard piles I was at a loss. Two by fours were the smallest pieces of lumber he had. Two by twelves were the average size. Dannie must have noticed my blank face, "you jus' rip some of these four by eights and frame it out, thas what I'd do." Not quite as much detail as the ag-ex plans, you must admit.

I was getting nervous. Not only did I feel like a fool, I was feeling totally incompetant. The first real project of our homestead experience and I was standing there scratching my bald spot with scenes from Green Acres flashing in the farthest recesses of my pea brain.

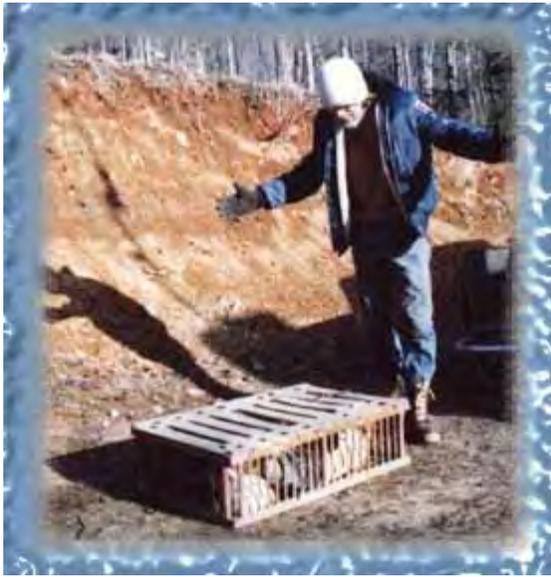
Another pick-up truck roared up the muddy drive. A good natured fellow got out, nodding to everone. Now I felt like word had gotten out and everyone was coming for the show. The guy wandered over to our new pick-up that had a fancy CB antenna on the roof. He was realing eyeballing the passenger compartment. As we headed his way he asked "ya got a telephone in tha' truck?" He sure had us pegged for city folk!

My dear wife saved the day by suggesting that maybe we should consult with my uncle who has built numerous structures on his lot next to ours. One problem is most of his materials are scrounged and you don't really know what the structures are. If he ever completes all the plans he has mentioned, the whole side of the mountain will be built-up with odd chicken coop like out-buildings..

The next day we returned to the sawmill with my uncle. Dannie wasn't there, but he had said to go ahead and help ourselves, so we began to throw in assorted pieces of rough sawn lumber into the truck. It was difficult to see how the odd pieces would ever go together to make a coop. Dannie finally showed-up and charged us \$20 for what would have been about \$500 worth of lumber at the store. Nancy, looking for hints on improving our vegetable garden, asked Danny about his plot. He said that his dirt "was so fertile that a man walking over it could grow hair on his wooden leg."

Back at the homestead we began construction in earnest. Now my uncle is a fair carpenter, but no ball o' fire when it comes to getting a project finished. He measures two or three times before making each cut and then has to think fifteen minutes about what to do next. I told him that this was not the space shuttle, but he wanted precision. After two hours with a handsaw I knew that we would not be done until mid-summer, so I broke-out the chain saw and was cutting before he could measure. He finally got the message and the walls when up in a few hours. Nancy worked as hard as my uncle and I.

After working like madmen for two days in twenty degree weather trying to get the new chicken coop built, the chickens finally arrived on Friday, January 17, 1992. At first Nancy and I didn't even know that they were in the back of David's pick-up truck. He lifted an



Ron looking in disbelief at fourteen chickens crammed into a suitcase size cage.

insulated cover and we saw a small wood cage that measured no more than two feet by three feet (the size of a small suitcase) and only one foot high. I couldn't believe that there could be fourteen chickens in the box. The coop needed the rest of the day before it would be ready for occupancy, so we put the box in Nancy's fenced compost pile. The chickens tentatively climbed out of the small cage to explore their new surroundings. A few minutes later I noticed that four of them had slipped under the chicken wire and were happily scratching around the yard. I had no sooner fixed the escape route than a fifth fowl flew over the top of the fencing. Nancy grabbed some extra wire to spread across the top.

What do we do now with five escapees? We learned after five minutes of futile chasing that the chickens were in no mood to be caught, much less get back in the compost bin. We resumed construction on the coop while keeping a watchful eye on the wandering chickens. Several times we had to stop work in order to chase them back down the hillside into the cove. The whole time my uncle was saying things like "those birds ul' be roostin' in the trees if the dogs don't get em first" and "dogs can smell them chickens for miles". Nancy was ready to shoot him.

We finished the coop about an hour before dark. Now it was time for the two city folk to move the chickens into their new quarters. I went into the compost cage first, rounding up a hen without any difficulty. Nancy followed without a problem. After moving the eight hens only the rooster remained. I had heard that roosters could really "flog" you, flapping their wings and using their spurs to inflict damage. I pressed the rooster to the ground and grabbed his legs - no problem. In ten minutes we had the nine penned chickens in the coop.



*Ron in doorway of nearly completed coop.
Note frost on ground and lumber.*

The escapees were still wandering around as if they owned the woods. I began to spread some feed in the direction of the coop hoping they would follow, but they continued roaming as they pleased. Nancy suggested catching them in the compost area. After throwing a handful of feed in, two chickens immediately walked in. They were easily caught and put in the coop, but three were headed up the hill to roost in the trees as night was falling.

I attacked one that was in a tree. I learned too late that it was a holly tree with prickly leaves. For the next fifteen minutes Nancy, Won Ton, and I chased the wayward birds through the woods. With luck and perseverance we finally rounded them up by the moonlight.

We were so proud of our accomplishment. Not only had we actually handled chickens for the first time, but we had managed to get the five escapees corralled. Not bad for a couple of Palm Beachers!



Ron with first eggs. January 1992.