

# The Chicken Story

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*A CENTURY AGO you'd eat steak and lobster when you couldn't afford chicken. Today it can cost less than the potatoes you serve with. What happened in the years between was an extraordinary marriage of technology and the market.*

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King Henri IV of France was a great king. He was also, perhaps, the world's first real politician—for in the course of his ten-year battle to secure the French throne for the Bourbon dynasty he began deliberately enlisting public opinion and even invented the political slogan to help him do so. Instinctively knowing the shortest route to his people's hearts, he told them, "I want there to be no peasant in my kingdom so poor that he is unable to have a chicken in his pot every Sunday."

Henri IV's choice of chicken to symbolize prosperity was no accident, for it had always been a dish reserved, because of its cost, for special occasions like Sunday dinner, holidays, and celebrations. And for fully three hundred years after Henri's time, nothing happened to change that. Indeed, as late as 1928 the Republican party, cribbing shamelessly, promised the American people continued prosperity and "a chicken in every pot." The Republicans, of course, did not deliver on their promises, and the Great Depression ended seventy years of Republican political dominance in this country.

IT IS IRONIC, THEN, NOT to mention instructive, that in the six-plus decades since, the free market has delivered what the politicians could not: cheap chicken. So cheap, in fact, that today the chicken you buy at the supermarket for dinner can cost less than the potatoes you intend to serve with it. How it evolved so quickly from a luxury that only the rich could regularly afford into the cheapest form of quality animal protein available makes a very American—and very capitalist—story.

But there is one major difference between the history of the modern American poultry industry and that of most other segments of the American economy. The oil industry rose under the dominance of John D. Rockefeller. The mass-market automobile was the brainchild of one genius, Henry Ford. The computer revolution of the present day has been ever increasingly influenced by William Gates and Microsoft.

The poultry industry, however, has no single, outstanding figure. Instead, hundreds if not thousands of individuals, each with, at best, only local fame and no intention aforethought, created the modern industry. Many failed and fell by the wayside; others succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. But as these individuals pursued their self-interests with hard work, insight, and the assumption of risk, they greatly benefited the economy as a whole. Collectively, they constitute a nearly perfect example of Adam Smith's invisible hand at work.

Chickens were among the last of the major domestic animals to come under the sway of man and the only one, aside from the water buffalo, to come from eastern Asia and Africa. But the chicken's impact—gastronomic, agricultural, religious, literary, economic, and even psychological—has been immense.

*Gallus gallus*, the red jungle fowl, is still common in the wooded areas of India and Southeast Asia, from the foothills of the Himalayas to Sumatra. It is the ancestor of all domestic chickens; indeed it remains conspecific with them, although a few other chickenlike birds, such as pheasants and other species of jungle fowl, probably contributed genes.

Jungle fowl live in small groups consisting of one cock and several hens. The cock is a gorgeous bird, with a fiery red head and saddle feathers. The hackles (the neck feathers) shade downward from red to yellow while the feathers of the breast and tail are an iridescent green-black. The hen is much plainer, a rusty brown, which helps conceal her during the period of incubation, for these are ground-nesting birds.

The lean, tightly muscled, and undoubtedly tough-as-rubber-bands red jungle fowl weighs only about two pounds when fully mature and was not originally domesticated for purposes of eating. Instead, two peculiar characteristics of the cock probably led to the bird's coming to live with humankind. One is his habit of crowing very loudly at the first hint of daylight, thus serving as a natural alarm clock in an agricultural community. The crowing bird is still a potent symbol of the dawn generations after most Americans last heard it.

The second habit that led to domestication is the cock's extreme and unrelenting, even unto death, aggressiveness toward other, unfamiliar males of his species. It is this characteristic that makes the sport of cockfighting so exciting, so bloody, and so freighted with masculine symbolism that it persists, indeed flourishes, in this country today despite decades of attempted legal repression.

It soon became obvious that cocks had other habits that caused human males to identify strongly with them. One, certainly, is an apparently insatiable sexual appetite that makes them paragons of virility and sexual ardor. It is no coincidence whatever that the word that denotes the male of the species *Gallus gallus* is also, in language after language, a slang expression for the male sex organ. (As you might expect, the word *rooster* was used as an early-nineteenth-century euphemism, to spare the ears of the suddenly genteel.)

Hens, for their part, quickly came to symbolize much that is maternal and feminine. People saw in the tightly structured society of chickens, among the most social of all birds, a mirror of their own species, among the most social of all mammals.

Consequently, no domestic animal other than the dog has so many symbolic connotations as the chicken does. The mammoth new *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* devotes no fewer than six pages to the word *chicken* and its compounds. *Hens, cocks, biddies, chicks*, and others take up yet more pages.

The chicken spread from India toward the West and reached Greece at the time of the Persian Wars (Greeks still call chickens "Persian birds"). By the Roman era it was common throughout Western Europe. The Romans and Greeks thought that chickens were useful as diviners of the future, and Roman military leaders would offer a flock grain before a battle. If the birds devoured it, the auguries were good. If they did not, the general often would avoid battle. During the Punic Wars, one Roman admiral was so annoyed when the chickens, perhaps seasick, refused to eat that he threw them overboard, saying, "If they will not eat, let them drink!" and attacked anyway. He lost badly.

Chickens were often carried on shipboard for reasons other than forecasting the outcome of battles, for by Roman times chickens and their eggs had come to be used for food. They made excellent shipboard livestock. They took up little space, would eat nearly anything, and provided both fresh meat and eggs to people who otherwise had to subsist on ship's biscuits and salted meat.

It is no wonder, then, that chickens arrived in the New World at very nearly the same time as Europeans. By 1609, only two years after its founding, Jamestown, Virginia, had as many as five hundred. The terrible famine in the winter of 1609-10 reduced that population to zero, or very nearly so. But once the colony was restocked from the West Indies the following spring, the chicken's place in North America was secure.

For a very long time, the Americans' husbandry of chickens was a casual affair at best, for chickens, unlike most barnyard animals, are quite self-sufficient. Often they weren't even fed or housed but made their own way by snapping up grain spilled by the other animals, along with bugs, worms, and table scraps. At night they roosted in trees, which is why in those days white-feathered chickens were unpopular, being too easily spotted by foxes, hawks, and other predators.

Traditionally it was the job of the youngest child to hunt for the eggs every day, and surplus eggs sold locally were regarded as a small source of independent income for the farm wife, her so-called egg money.

But the average hen before the twentieth century laid only about thirty eggs a year, mostly in the spring. As a result, eggs varied greatly in price depending on the season, being cheapest in the spring and quite expensive in the late fall and early winter.

Chickens for eating were most abundant in the early summer when the hatch of that year (called the spring chickens, a term that, decades after it disappeared from commerce, still connotes extreme youth) was ready for slaughter. As the year progressed, the chickens available in the marketplace became older and tougher but more flavorful.

Because of this seasonality, the price of chickens in the market also varied considerably over the course of the year. But there was another reason chicken was, even in summer, a luxury dish: The production of chickens was strictly an amateur affair with little if any structure to the commercial channels that led from millions of small farm flocks to urban markets.

As a result, ladies' magazines of the turn of the century frequently contained advice on how to substitute veal for chicken. Veal was then a drug in the market, a byproduct of an already professionalized and flourishing dairy industry that was at the time popular only with Italians and other immigrants from the Mediterranean.

The first change from the age-old way Americans husbanded chickens came in the 1830s when birds from China were imported as exotics into Britain. These so-called Cochins, which have fluffy plumage and feathered legs, caused a sensation in both the British Empire and the United States and set off a craze for breeding show chickens with extravagant features such as yards-long tail feathers and crests of feathers around the head.

Farmers began selectively breeding chickens as well, and breeds with wonderful names, like Plymouth Rock, Wyandotte, and Orpington (along with the Australian

version, the Australorp). But because there were no fixed standards, the genetic chaos ruled. Each farmer had, in effect, his own breed of chicken. So in 1873 the American Poultry Association was formed to set standards and help develop chickens that could be relied upon to breed true. The purpose of this at the time was no more than to bring order and predictability to a popular hobby, but the result was the development of genetically reliable stock that would be used in the next century to utterly transform the chicken.

By the last third of the nineteenth century, interest in poultry raising as something more than a hobby was growing quickly. The years between 1870 and 1926 saw the advent of no fewer than 350 magazines devoted to poultry. In 1880 the census counted the nation's chicken population for the first time, finding 102 million of them. By 1890 the national flock had soared to 258 million. In 1891 Cornell University became the first agricultural college to offer a formal course in poultry husbandry, and the raising of chickens began its century-long shift from a sideline of the family farm to a form of agribusiness.

There are numerous stages between the apparently permanent gleam in a rooster's eye and dinner. These are breeding, incubating, hatching, raising, slaughtering, dressing, transporting, selling, cooking, and eating. Of these ten steps, only the last is still handled the way it was at the turn of the century, and even that, at least in terms of where Americans eat chicken, has changed significantly.

The first change in traditional poultry husbandry was the introduction of commercial chicks. Before, people wanting to start a flock would either buy fertilized eggs from a local farmer and incubate them themselves (often in a warm spot on or near the kitchen stove) or buy a "trio," two hens and a cock. After the first chicks hatched, nature was allowed to take its course.

In 1873 a man named Jacob Graves patented an incubator and offered chicks two to four weeks old for sale. But it was Joseph P. Wilson of Stockton, New Jersey, who turned the raising of baby chicks into a business. In 1887, using hot water as a heat source, he built his own incubator, which could handle up to four hundred eggs at a time. By 1892 he had begun taking advantage of the fact that newborn chicks, because they absorb the remnants of the yolk just before hatching, can go without food or water for up to thirty-six hours. Wilson started shipping day-old chicks as far as Chicago by railway express.

The advantages of using artificial hatcheries were soon apparent. For one thing, this new technique allowed the supply of chickens to be smoothed out over the year to more nearly match demand. This, of course, dampened price swings. By 1918 there were two hundred fifty hatcheries in operation in this country. Only nine years later there were more than ten thousand, and more than half the baby chicks produced in the country were artificially incubated. As their numbers grew (there would be a great shakeout in the early 1930s, however), these new hatcheries competed fiercely by offering not only lower prices but also superior chickens bred to reach selling weight sooner in life, thus requiring less feed and yielding a greater profit.

This drive for the ever-quicker-growing chicken has been instrumental in turning chicken from a luxury food into an everyday affair. In 1900 a newly hatched chick required sixteen weeks to reach two pounds, large enough for frying. Southern

farmers prided themselves on having frying chickens ready for the Fourth of July. Today, chicks reach four pounds, big enough for roasting, in just seven weeks.

But until the mid-1920s the raising of chickens remained a sideline operation, run by farmers' wives. Agricultural experts in the early years of the century thought the situation would never change, because it would not be possible to compete with a system that, in effect, utilized both free labor and free food and provided millions of farmwomen with a source of independent income they would be loath to part with.

The experts, however, were looking mostly at the Midwest, the leading area of the country for egg production at that time, where the farms were large and prosperous, thanks to the area's incomparably good soil and usually benevolent weather. These farms tended to specialize in basic foodstuffs like wheat, corn, cattle, and hogs. The raising of chickens as a major crop would have been a misallocation of resources.

Other areas of the country, however, had very different economic needs. The Delmarva Peninsula, east of Chesapeake Bay, for instance, had rich, sandy, well-drained soil and a flat landscape. But its proximity to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York had made it a natural area for truck farming. And truck farming is a feast-or-famine business, peculiarly sensitive not only to the vagaries of the marketplace but to the weather as well. A steadier source of income was most welcome on the Delmarva, and it was there that the chicken business really became a business.

The first person on the peninsula to raise chickens expressly for the market rather than simply sell what exceeded domestic needs was Mrs. Wilmer Steele. She ordered 500 chicks in 1923 and sold the 387 that survived to two pounds for sixty-two cents a pound, live weight.

This produced a very handsome profit indeed. In today's money (that is, after allowing for inflation), Mrs. Steele received about five dollars a pound, wholesale, for her chickens. Not surprisingly, word of these profits spread fast. In 1925 the state of Delaware produced fifty thousand chickens for market and just the next year topped one million. By 1934 the peninsula was putting out seven million broilers a year, and production continued to soar as costs per bird declined steadily and demand rose accordingly.

Chickens in such numbers could neither be fed in the traditional way, with table scraps and leftovers from other livestock, nor hunt and peck on their own. So hundreds of companies began to produce special feeds for broilers. And the science of chicken nutrition began its explosive elaboration as they competed for customers by offering a superior product. Because chickens mature quickly and few ethical constraints have been applied to experimentation, our understanding of chicken nutrition now exceeds our grasp of that for any other domestic animal and even for humans.

In this new field, one of the first developments to have a major impact on the market price of the finished product was the introduction of vitamin D, without which calcium cannot be metabolized and rickets develops. But like all other animals, including humans, chickens need sunlight in order to synthesize vitamin D on their own.

Raising broiler chickens outdoors exposed them to the uncertainties of the weather, predators, and disease. But the adding of cod-liver oil (and later the purified vitamin itself) to chicken feed allowed chickens to be raised in large, roofed sheds where temperature, diet, and lighting could be controlled for maximum weight gain.

The results of this ever-deepening knowledge of chicken nutrition were quick in coming. The great food writer Clementine Paddleford marveled as early as 1943 that “ten years ago it took 6 ½ pounds of feed to produce one pound of broiler meat. Today four pounds of feed will do the same job.” Fifty years later it requires only about one and three-quarter pounds of feed to produce a pound of meat, a conversion ratio that would have seemed, at the turn of the century, close to that seen in the biblical miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

With the feed companies having more and more direct interest in the farmers’ success, the feed salesmen began to provide advice, not only on what and how to feed chickens but how to care for them as well. It was not a long step from feed mills providing credit and advice to feed mills contracting with farmers to raise birds that belonged to the feed mills, in exchange for a guaranteed price per pound. The separate links in the chain were beginning to join together in what economists call vertical integration.

One fundamental split, however, occurred at this time: the separation of egg farming from chicken farming. The first commercial broilers were mostly surplus Leghorns, actually bred for their egg production. Leghorns lay white eggs in great quantity but, precisely because of that fact, do not put on weight well. The Boston market, unlike the rest of the country, preferred brown eggs, and these came from heavier breeds, many with such New England-inspired names such as Rhode Island Red, New Hampshire, and Plymouth Rock.

New England hatcheries began shipping crosses of the heavy breeds, which gain weight much more rapidly than do Leghorns, to the burgeoning broiler farms on the Delmarva Peninsula and soon to other areas of the country as well. And hatcheries began breeding new crosses from heavy stock specially for rapid weight gain.

They also continued to breed champion egg layers from Leghorns and other so-called Mediterranean breeds. Again, the increase in production has been staggering. At the turn of the century, thirty eggs a year was the norm. A champion might produce fifty. By the 1930s a hen laying a hundred eggs a year was a candidate for a ribbon at the county fair. Today a hen that doesn’t lay two hundred and fifty is a candidate for the cat-food factory.

Other developments began in the 1930s that transformed not the egg—an evolutionary creation of such awesome perfection that it could hardly be improved upon—but the way eggs were farmed. Eggs, like chickens, had long been simply a byproduct of other kinds of farming, produced a few at a time by millions of flocks that seldom numbered more than fifty birds each. And because the chickens largely fended for themselves, there were few out-of-pocket expenses and so no one cared about costs. As a result, between 1910, when the federal government began keeping track of egg production and prices, and 1943 the price of a dozen eggs remained remarkably constant in real terms.

But the great depression forced millions of small farms out of existence, reducing the number of flocks, and some of the remaining farmers, seeing opportunity, began to specialize in egg production. Suddenly there were people who, in their own interest,

began to care about the cost of producing eggs and thus about the way of producing eggs: professional egg farmers. Betty Macdonald's classic memoir *The Egg and I* (as well as the equally classic movie based on it, starring Claudette Colbert, Fred Acura, and Marjorie Main) had its origins in this subtle economic shift—proof that art can arise from anything.

The first change these new egg farmers made from traditional poultry husbandry, as the broiler raisers before them had done, was to begin confining their chickens. When the birds ran free, their eggs had to be hunted for, and every day was Easter—although, to be sure, chickens tend to lay their eggs in the same places over and over again. This was labor intensive, and many eggs were overlooked, fell victim to such predators as rats and snakes, or were broken. Confinement increased egg production per bird immediately and thus ensured higher profits for farmers and lower prices for consumers.

But confinement brought its own problems. At first the birds were usually kept in houses that had dirt floors covered with wood shavings. As the manure built up, so did the incidence of disease as the chickens scratched, which chickens will do even when they are not hungry. To solve this problem, farmers began putting their chickens in houses with wire floors so that the droppings could fall through and be removed. The health of the chickens, and thus their egg production, greatly improved.

The keeping of birds in tiers of wire cages, where they could be fed, watered, and cared for more easily, soon followed. The price of a dozen eggs began a fifty-year decline. Much of that continuing decline has come from ever-increasing economies of scale as the number of egg farms has steadily dropped and the number of chickens at each farm has increased. In the 1940s an egg farm with a hundred thousand birds was considered very large. Today a farm needs ten million birds to have that status.

As a result of these enormous numbers—an egg farm with ten million birds produces well over half a million dozen eggs *per day*—even the most minor savings per egg makes major improvements to the bottom line. Just a tenth-of-a-cent drop per egg in production costs increases the daily gross profit by more than six thousand dollars, or over two million dollars per year.

Although the number of independent egg farms has drastically declined since the days Betty MacDonald wrote about, there are nonetheless still about 350 companies in the United States, and competition among them remains fierce. Much of the decreased cost that ensues from innovation, then, is necessarily passed along to the consumer as lower prices. This, in turn, requires an unceasing search for new ways to drive down costs if profits are to be maintained, just as Adam Smith predicted.

Technology, genetics and decreases in the use of manpower—the last almost always representing the most expensive economic input nowadays—have made profits possible. A state-of-the-art hen house today holds around a hundred thousand birds in tier after tier of cages stretching the length of two football fields. Water is piped in while robots dispense food every hour in carefully controlled amounts. The cages are slightly inclined so that the eggs produced roll down onto a conveyor belt and are whisked away for cleaning, grading, and packing.

Some houses are built underground to save heating and air-conditioning costs, while light, which stimulates egg production, is provided at the optimal level. About the only thing that is not automated today is the removal of dead chickens. Only about

three in ten thousand die per day in a well-regulated hen house (just about half again the human mortality rate in this country). But out of two hundred fifty thousand, that is still seventy-five dead birds a day that must be removed immediately to prevent disease.

In this wholly artificial—some would say cruel—environment, even the genes that the birds inherit have been determined by the process of artificial evolution called selective breeding. This process has been the biggest single factor in increasing egg production per bird and per pound of feed so dramatically. But the genes themselves remain unaltered for now (the new technology of genetic engineering will, without doubt, soon change that). And, unfortunately for the farmer, high egg laying and aggression are genetically linked. If you want the one, you have to take the other as well.

Aggression among the closely confined birds on a modern egg farm has been a major problem, as the birds sort out their social standings with their beaks. Other technologies have come to the rescue, however. Hatcheries now routinely remove a portion of the upper bill; this decreases the mayhem the birds can cause without reducing efficiency in feeding. In the 1950s it was discovered that red light suppressed the tendency to peck. But conditions with red light turned out to be too dark for human beings to work in. Tiny red spectacles for the chickens were tried, but although these produced amusing pictures for *Life* magazine, they proved hopelessly impractical. Recently, however, red contact lenses have been found effective.

They not only prevent pecking battles; they obviate the need for debeaking. As an unexpected bonus, red contact lenses also reduce feed consumption by 6 percent, thanks to reduced anxiety (nervous noshing, apparently, is not confined to humans) and slightly increased egg production. Altogether, red contact lenses for chickens have lowered production costs by a whopping third of a cent per egg in the flocks where they have been tested. In the highly competitive egg business, that is a veritable gusher of found money—not that competition will allow egg producers to keep much of it.

When the United States entered World War II, the Delmarva Peninsula was overwhelmingly dominant in the breeding of chickens for their meat, producing about ninety million a year, up from seven million only eight years earlier. Its nearest competitor, the state of Arkansas, produced only about eleven million. With the coming of total war, though, the peninsula's dominance of the chicken market turned out to be a liability, for the War Food Administration commandeered the entire production of the Delmarva for the use of the armed forces for the duration. As a result, the evolutionary center of the poultry industry moved south as the northeastern markets that the peninsula farmers had been serving looked elsewhere for chickens, which were never rationed formally but could be hard to find in the grocery store.

Delmarva is rich agricultural land, but the new areas for chicken production that burgeoned after the country entered World War II were marginal at best, and poultry production came as a godsend to the hard-pressed farmers. No small factor in the success of the new areas, however, was the energy and perseverance of the most important figure in the creation of the modern poultry industry, Jesse Dixon Jewell.

He was born in Gainesville, Georgia, in 1902. Gainesville is located in the northern part of the state, in the hardscrabble tag end of the Appalachian Mountains. The local



farmers tried to make a living raising cotton, but with their small holdings, hilly terrain, and poor, red clay soil, they could not compete successfully with the rich cotton lands to the south and west.

Jewell's father died when he was seven, and his mother tried to make a living running a small feed store, a business Jewell took over when he reached adulthood. In the mid-thirties, as depression devastated the American economy and a tornado nearly destroyed Gainesville, Jewell supplemented his income by going around to the local farms, buying chickens and eggs and taking them to Atlanta and other urban markets. It was a hand-to-mouth operation at first. Often he had to sell quickly what he had bought from the farmers in order to have the money in the bank to cover the checks he had written to buy them. But demand for both eggs and chickens was strong, and Jewell saw opportunity in expanding the raising of chickens in the area.

He recognized that these farmers needed nothing so much as a steady cash crop, but they lacked even the small capital required to raise chickens the modern way. When he tried to sell chicken feed to the farmers, few could afford it. So Jewell went to a feed company and made a deal to get feed on consignment. Then he went to the local bank and got a loan to buy day-old chicks.

He placed these chicks with the farmers, taking back a note secured by the chickens, and supplied the feed needed to raise them to market weight. When the chickens were ready for sale, Jewell would buy them, and he and the farmers would settle accounts.

Both the local banker and the feed companies were very skeptical at first, and the banker made a point of sending someone out to see that the chicks were really where Jewell said they were. But the system turned out to be profitable for all concerned, as it lowered the final price to the consumer and thus further increased demand.

Jewell, a classic entrepreneur, began to expand his business both horizontally, by making deals with more and more farmers, and vertically, by starting his own hatchery and processing plant. Traditionally, chickens had been sold to city wholesalers either still alive or what was termed "New York dressed"—that is, with the feathers removed but the head, feet, and innards intact. By processing the chickens at a plant and selling them ready to cook, Jewell not only reduced freight costs and spoilage; he obtained a supply of by-products that found a ready market and so increased his profits.

Chicken feet are exported in large numbers from this country to east Asia, where they are considered a delicacy. Ground-up feathers—supplying high-quality protein—are now an ingredient in animal feeds. Other bits and pieces end up in pet foods.

In 1954 J. D. Jewell, Inc., became a fully integrated poultry company when it completed its own feed mill. Other poultry companies were integrating too, and as they increased in size and expanded their markets, competition among them increased as well, with the usual result of increased efficiency, innovation, and ever lower prices. Between 1947 and 1960 broiler production in the southeastern states increased by fully 365 percent. During the same period, production per man-hour increased by 343 percent. To put it another way, while production more than quadrupled, the man-hours needed to handle that production increased by only 6 percent.

The new deal brought to American agriculture many governmental controls that regulated prices, production, and returns to farmers. The poultry industry, still in its

infancy in the 1930s, escaped this government-sponsored combination in restraint of trade. But by the 1950s the largest companies were reaching for national markets, and ferocious competition kept driving down prices. This development, a bonanza for the chicken-eating public, allowed only the most modern and efficient operations to make a profit. There began to be increased calls for a means “to stabilize production and control prices for poultry products,” according to Herman Miller, director of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Marketing Service, Poultry Division.

Naturally, the least-efficient producers were behind this movement, and it was spearheaded in Washington by Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, who called for a “nationwide, producer-controlled marketing program.” Translated from politicalese, this meant a cartel.

The Eisenhower administration was unsympathetic. But when John F. Kennedy became President in January 1961, the movement to organize the broiler industry took on fresh drive. The new Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, organized the National Broiler Stabilization Advisory Committee, made up of a wide variety of industry executives.

No clear consensus was ever reached by the committee, however. It voted nineteen to sixteen in favor of giving the Secretary of Agriculture authority to regulate the supply of hatching eggs and thus the number of chickens available for market a few months later. But of the sixteen dissenters, eight had voted against it because they wanted no regulation at all. These latter feared that, no matter how lightly the hand of government touched the industry at first, its grip would only tighten in the long run, with disastrous consequences. As one opponent explained, with country eloquence, “You can boil a frog if you put him in cold water and heat it gradually.”

Then, a vote of the nation’s turkey producers, representing an industry very similar in its history to the broiler industry, overwhelmingly turned down government involvement in the turkey market. Secretary Freeman saw the handwriting on the wall and ended the Kennedy administration’s attempts to regulate the broiler and egg industries as well. A free market in chicken and eggs continued. So, too, as a result, did falling prices, constant innovation, and the soaring of the American appetite for chicken.

Beginning in the late 1960s Frank Perdue used clever television commercials to turn chicken, once the most generic of products, into a brand name and himself into a celebrity. At the same time, Don Tyson began to make a small Arkansas poultry company started by his father into a worldwide powerhouse that today sells five million chickens a day—almost two *billion* a year.

As recently as 1960, if a shopper wanted chicken, he or she bought a chicken, often one that was still New York dressed. Today the shopper can buy a whole chicken, a cut-up chicken, chicken wings, legs, thighs, and breasts (boned or unboned), with or without skin. The shopper can buy chicken ready-cooked (nicely browned and resting in its own plastic carapace) or ready to cook, seasonings included. And, increasingly, Americans are eating chicken either away from home or in its ready-to-eat form.

Tyson now sells nearly two-thirds of its production to restaurants and take-out chains such as Boston Market or to food-processing companies like Stouffer’s.

Today we eat more chicken than we do beef, an astonishing turnabout for what was for decades a society that ate more beef, per capita, than any other in the world except the beef-obsessed Argentines. Part of the reason for that, to be sure, is increased health consciousness. But no small part is the fact that capitalism's invisible hand has turned a luxury into a commonplace.

The shopper who bought one of those 387 chickens that Mrs. Wilmer Steele first raised deliberately for market in 1923 paid well over ten dollars a pound for it in 1994 dollars. Today a shopper can buy one from Perdue, Tyson, or any of dozens of other chicken companies for less than one-tenth of that price.

That is no small accomplishment. And the thanks are due to countless, mostly nameless individuals—farmers, feed-mill owners, breeders, transporters, scientists, bankers, wholesalers, and the like—who sought only to make life a little better for themselves and made it a little better for everyone—except the chickens—in the process.