

OFFBEAT OREGON

# OSU's world-record-breaking chicken sparked a fowl feud with newspaper

BY FINN J.D. JOHN

For The Spokesman

October of 1913 was a triumphant time for Professor James Dryden, the poultry specialist at Oregon State University (or Oregon Agricultural College, as it was then called). His name was in newspapers nationwide, in glowing tribute after glowing tribute to his success.

One of his experiment-station hens, the prosaically named C-521 (later renamed Lady MacDuff), had just shattered the world record for egg production with a stunning 303 eggs in a year, breaking the 300-egg barrier for the first time ever. The highest-producing non-Oregon chicken, prior to C-521's feat, was a Canadian bird that laid 281 eggs in 12 months. This was at a time when the average chicken laid 75.

There was, however, one exception to the "glowing tribute" pattern in newspaper coverage of Dr. Dryden's work. That would be the weekly Cottage Grove Leader.

"In our opinion, Prof. Dryden is impracticable, out of harmony with the country's best and most successful poultry breeders, is discouraging the great and growing poultry industry of the state and is therefore out of place at the head of the Department of Poultry Husbandry in our great educational and experimental institution, the Oregon Agricultural College," the Leader's editor raged, in its Oct. 28 issue. "We would suggest, in conclusion, that he tender his resignation."

But the Leader's somewhat one-sided feud with Dr. Dryden had been going on for several years by then. After all, no one does something like call for the resignation of a world champion, in the very hour of his triumph, on the spur of the moment. Nor does anyone do something like that as a solitary voice. The Leader was speaking for a small but influential Oregon industry... an industry that we might call Big Chicken.

James Dryden was hired at OAC (Oregon Agricultural College) in 1907. He'd been a poultry specialist at Utah State, and had helped build the program there; now, he was given charge of the entire Poultry Husbandry department, such as it was, at



University of Oregon photos  
Poultry professor James Dryden as he appeared in the late 1910s.

OAC.

At the college, Dryden very quickly set about his quest to breed a superhen. He knew that the conventional wisdom among chicken experts was that egg laying was not a genetically transmitted characteristic. Breeding experiments at other land-grant colleges had failed to change the chickens' egg production measurably.

To Dryden, this made no sense. Some chicken breeds regularly laid 75 to 150 eggs a year, whereas the original wild chicken (the jungle fowl of India) only laid a dozen or two. Something had made leghorn and barred-rock chickens start laying 10 to 20 times as many eggs as their wild ancestors, and if that something wasn't genetics, what was it?

His theory, which he now set out to test, was that the reason for the failure of other experimenters to breed better layers was that they had been breeding for a broad array of other attributes at the same time: straighter tails, more symmetrical combs, prettier feathers, and so forth. He also noted that the previous experiments had been with purebred chickens, which raised the possibility that inbreeding might have caused the resulting chicks to be less robust. A less robust chicken will obviously lay fewer eggs.

While these experiments were going on, Dryden started printing regular bulletins for chicken keepers. These were

geared toward ordinary farmers and the few specialized poultry ranchers then in operation, and Dryden made no secret of his focus: Eggs and meat.

"To encourage the poultry industry, hundreds of poultry shows are held each year and thousands of dollars are paid in premiums and all the premiums are awarded on the basis of the American Standard of Perfection," he told a reporter on Nov. 9, 1910, according to the Medford Mail Tribune's story. "We think we are encouraging the poultry industry by paying premiums for feathers and other fancy points and for shape of body, and farmers go to the shows to purchase their breeding stock. They never suspect that the premiums indicate nothing of the egg-laying qualities of the fowl."

"I believe," he continued, "that the farm stock, the cross-breed stock (or, shall I say, the mongrel stock) have better vitality, are more fertile, are less preyed upon by diseases and produce more eggs than the average flock of purebreds. The way to develop the poultry industry is to stop advocating purebred or standard-bred fowls for the farmer. He should decide on the type of fowl to breed and forget the names of the breed."

It was these and similar remarks that brought upon Dryden the enmity of Big Chicken, and by extension the Cottage Grove Leader. Because, of course, a number of



LADY MACDUFF—THE FIRST 300-EGG HEN

Lady MacDuff, who reportedly laid 300 eggs in one year.

parties were making rather a lot of money putting on all those poultry shows and fancy-chicken contests and selling Certified Deluxe Purebred Premium Chickens to farmers.

As far as I've been able to learn, the one-sided war was launched in the Jan. 3, 1910, issue of the Leader. On the top left-hand side of the front page in that issue, under the headline "JUDGE COLLIER AFTER DRYDEN: Shows Up Fallacy of OAC Bulletins on Poultry Raising," there appears an article that basically claims Dryden was just trying to get some cheap publicity — that the OAC bulletin was the 1910s equivalent of clickbait.

The article is presented like an interview, but the entire thing after the first paragraph is one enormous quote from "Judge Collier," a poultry breeder named Harry Collier who served as contest judge for the 1909 Eugene Poultry Show.

"Men will do almost anything in order to get their names in

the papers," Collier said. "Actors have been known to 'kick' their wives in order that they might get a front-page story, and I suppose we poultrymen are sometimes guilty of the same fault."

He then goes on to say that there are so many wonderful kinds of chicken available, there's no reason to have cross-breeds or mongrel chickens, and that only a fool would take such a chance.

"Where a man has a 'dung-hill' flock of birds, it would help his flock to cross them with a purebred male, but I cannot see the advantage of crossing purebred fowls," he scoffed. "The man who advocates crossing purebreds is a poor man to advise farmers. ... The farmer has got the advantage of the chicken fancier's work. He can now buy any kind of fowl that he desires and he is very foolish to try and cross-breed the purebred when he can buy now any kind of fowl he wants."

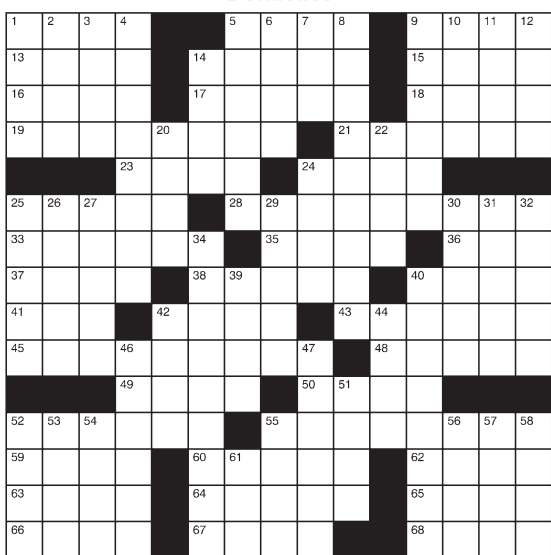
"The Judge" then finished

off with some remarkably condescending advice for the edification of those ignorant college-boy meddlers: "If OAC wants to do something for the farmer, let them impress him with the fact that he wants to build better houses for his poultry... Let them study the mortality in fowl life here in Oregon and teach the farmer how to prevent roup and kindred diseases. There is lots to be done. This trying to get notoriety by attacking some well-known principle is foolish in the extreme. It makes the college the laughingstock of those who know better and at the same time makes the poultrymen treat anything coming from the college with indifference or contempt."

Thus spake Big Chicken!  
Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, *Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon*, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: [finn@offbeatoregon.com](mailto:finn@offbeatoregon.com) or 541-357-2222.

## CROSSWORD

### Domiciles



CREATORS NEWS SERVICE

#### ACROSS

- 1 Money drawer
- 5 *Hic, \_\_\_\_, hoc*
- 9 Entreated
- 13 Semite
- 14 Wavy-patterned goods
- 15 Swiss river
- 16 Mecca pilgrimage
- 17 Like some messages
- 18 One of the Dioscuri
- 19 Home of the Sage of Emporia
- 21 Administrative bureau
- 23 Land east of the Urals
- 24 Cholesterol lowerer
- 25 Practice frugality
- 28 Tennessee home of Old Hickory
- 33 Jousting weapons
- 35 Nutritional regime
- 36 Thrash
- 37 Yen
- 38 Deadly sin
- 40 Heraldic border
- 41 Extinct flightless bird
- 42 Dink
- 43 More slippery
- 45 Washington Irving's Tarrytown home
- 48 Hersey town

#### DOWN

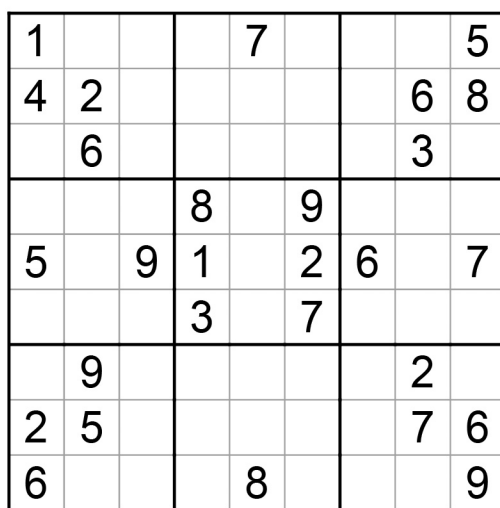
- 1 Himalayan goat
- 2 *Dies*
- 3 Star of *Shane*
- 4 Home of the 36th president
- 5 Water pipe
- 6 Assists
- 7 Before
- 8 Long Island home of Wm. Cullen Bryant
- 9 Evident
- 10 Sheer fabric
- 11 Writer Ambler
- 12 Disavow
- 14 Start of the Fourth

By Charles Preston

Answers on Page 5

## SUDOKU

Fill in the grid so every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 through 9, with no repeats.



MEDIUM

# 10

Answers on Page 5

## WEATHER

FORECAST	HIGH	LOW	
Wednesday	22	12	AM Snow Shower
Thursday	37	18	Cloudy
Friday	25	11	Partly Cloudy
Saturday	34	20	Partly Cloudy
Sunday	39	33	Partly Cloudy
Monday	43	28	Showers
Tuesday	39	25	Rain/Snow
LAST WEEK	HIGH	LOW	PRECIP
Monday, Dec. 20	45	31	.04
Tuesday, Dec. 21	43	29	0
Wednesday, Dec. 22	51	33	0
Thursday, Dec. 23	43	27	.02
Friday, Dec. 24	41	24	.01
Saturday, Dec. 25	40	22	0
Sunday, Dec. 26	31	17	.02

\* = daily record

National Weather Service broadcasts are on 162.50 mhz.

# THE REDMOND Spokesman

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