



# Well-loved chickens peck out a prominent place in modern life

Grandpa used to say non-rural Americans don't realize chickens are living beings, but think they are only neatly plastic-wrapped meat pieces in Styrofoam trays that materialize as if by magic in grocery coolers.

Pragmatic farmers, he and Grandma didn't make pets of *all* their chickens. The chopping block awaited most. There are few sights calculated to make more of an impression on a kid than a suddenly headless chicken racing across the farmyard in a preposterous postmortem dash for freedom. A valuable lesson there: Rebel or escape before the ax falls.

Grandma did have distinct favorites. She coddled a few laying hens who might have succumbed to old age were it not for the never-ending caravan of foxes, skunks, hawks and other varmints drawn to chicken coops like ants to a picnic. Fretting about the hens' well-being, observing their "Downton Abbey"-like interactions and personalities, making sure each life was as rewarding as a chicken's can be — all were integral aspects of the sport of country life. Grandma, a button or two on her worn-out shirt replaced with safety pins, standing in the warm sun with a bright-red hen tucked under one arm — a picture of mutual contentment.

Helping gather eggs was among my favorite chores, reaching into the sweet, warm straw to discover what was there. An even bigger treat was coming upon a hidden, feral nest laid by some rogue hen in the bushes or outbuildings. There's nothing to warm the hearts of boys like festering, forgotten, rotten eggs — eye-watering chemical grenades to fantasize lobbing at big bullies or Nazis.

## The Egg and us

Chickens are fashionable. Maybe they always have been, at least here in the Pacific Northwest.

*The Egg and I*, Betty MacDonald's 1945 run-away bestseller, chronicled the adventures of a novice chicken farmer on the Olympic Peninsula near Port Townsend. It is one of the first grown-up books I can recall seeing around home. But MacDonald's humor hasn't aged well, coming off as a little curdled.

"I really tried to like chickens. But I couldn't get close to the hen either physically or spiritually, and by the end of the second spring I hated everything about the chicken but the egg," she wrote. "I learned to my sorrow that baby chickens are stupid; they smell; they have to be fed, watered and looked at, at least every three hours. Their sole idea in life is to jam themselves under the brooder and get killed; stuff their little boneheads so far into their drinking fountains they drown; drink cold water and die..."

In contrast, my brother, Greg in Cheyenne, and cousin, Gordon Kley in Ferndale, Wash., quite love their flocks, gaining constant entertainment and a cornucopia of delicious bug-protein-infused eggs from their pampered ladies. They are part of a chicken renaissance



Matt Winters



Submitted Photo

**ABOVE:** Seaview chicken aficionado Nansen Malin did her best to save ailing hen Little Jane Peck. She wrote this obituary: "Jane died last night — we had a good day together. She spent time taking warm baths, went for a walk in my arms to the vet, ate her favorite mealy worms, spent time looking for bugs in the grass and I held her. It isn't easy being an urban farmer — and death is part of it. ... RIP Little Red Hen." **TOP:** Raising chickens is a long tradition on the Lower Columbia. Above, Elizabeth Nurminen Takko cares for her flock in Knappton, Wash., across the river from Astoria, in 1918. Note the fishing net hung to protect the hens from marauding hawks, eagles and owls.

in the U.S. as our generation relearns youthful pleasures and tastes. For example, a Google search for "chicken blog" turns up 74.5 million results, generated by hundreds or perhaps thousands of latter-day Betty MacDonalds recounting avian exploits. (See [tinyurl.com/Chicken-Blogs](http://tinyurl.com/Chicken-Blogs) for links to some award winners.)

For a brief time this week, the most popular article on *The New York Times* website was about chickens, reporting 276 as the average number of eggs laid per year by a hen in U.S. commercial operations. Cornell Endurance, a hen who died early in the 20th century at age 12, set a lifetime record of 1,232 eggs. In 2013, a British hen laid her last two eggs at age 17.

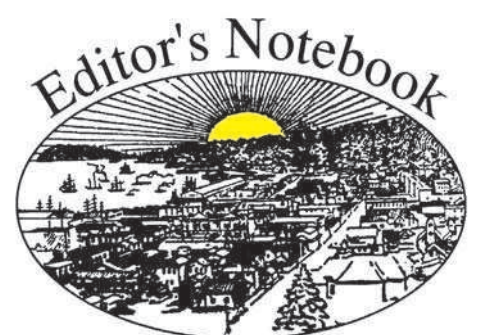
## Nan loves her girls

My favorite chicken tales come from Nan Malin of Seaview, a good friend who is a multi-faceted internet celebrity in addition to

chairing the Pacific County Republican Party. I've been following her chicken reports for the past year or so, and with many others was touched by her fruitless efforts to save an ailing hen, aided by veterinarian Catherine Lindblad Ketel.

Using the framework of an old coop donated by retired Pacific County Commissioner Bud Cuffel, Nan and her husband, Brett built, a replica in their yard of the Seaview Depot of the Ilwaco Railway & Navigation Co., and then named their hens after the village's historical women.

"The first 12 weeks they were in the house (in the entry room)," Nan told me. "I would sit and handle them while talking to them. Right away they had personality, and I let them reveal who they were before naming them. Dorothy Elliott was the first to be named. It was so obvious who Dorothy was!! We have formed a bond. Now when I go into the coop, they all want hugs. I forgot to mention, I even



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eat healthier — thinking 'would the girls want my leftovers?'"

Thanks to Brett, they have "red brocade curtains on their nesting boxes, to give a nod to the shanghaied days of Astoria," Nan said.

Like a proud mama, she has a hard time deciding which chicken story is her favorite, but offers this one:

"I received an extra chick in the box of little chirping chicks. So I raised it. I had a suspicion there was a rooster in the mix, but couldn't tell — I anxiously waited for signs. At first I thought Dorothy Elliott's outgoing personality seemed — well masculine ... but another one started to look different. ... Then we had our first big windstorm of the season, and the girls were truly frightened. I went out to the coop to check on them and say some calming words. They were about 15 weeks old. All were up on the top roost, shaking. One of them looked at me, and let out the cutest little 'cock a doodle do.' Of course, he was a rooster! He was scared, but determined to protect the girls."

Nan said he has since been rehomed at a "rooster rescue-type place in Clatskanie. We met at the KFC parking lot in Astoria for the hand-off!" Lucky for him, he came from a loving family and will never personally experience the fate of KFC's anonymous chicken throngs — roughly 1 billion a year.

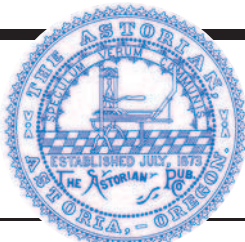
Her little flock makes Nan's life better.

"Taking care of them is a daily meditative process, it takes me away from technology, and centers me in ways I never expected. I enjoy taking little breaks in my day to check on them, and see the egg production. I do have a web cam, and if I am away, I check on them all the time. Especially at night, when they are in bed, I count them via the web cam to make sure everyone is in the coop and on the roost," Nan said. "Many people have chickens. They have read about my girls on Facebook. Including (Democratic State Sen.) Dean Takko! Now when I see politicians, we talk chickens, and it is nice to have some common ground."

Maybe owning chickens should be a requirement for serving in the Legislature or Congress — a humble way to build stronger connections between species and people.

— M.S.W.

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