

THE DOLLAR HEN
THE CLASSIC HANDBOOK OF AMERICAN
FREE-RANGE EGG FARMING

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FORMERLY POULTRYMAN AT
KANSAS EXPERIMENT STATION;
LATER IN CHARGE OF THE COMMERCIAL
POULTRY INVESTIGATION OF
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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



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The Classic Handbook of American Free-Range Egg Farming.

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Introduction to the Norton Creek Edition

Milo Hastings' *The Dollar Hen* changed my life. The book was almost 90 years old when I first read it, but it set me on the path to a successful free-range egg business. It gave me more good advice than any poultry book I've read, before or since. But Hastings was always ahead of his time.

Hastings was Poultryman at the Kansas Experiment Station in 1902, only a few years after any scientist anywhere turned his attention to practical poultry questions, but he was given no funds. He moved on to the USDA, which charged him with learning all about the commercial poultry industry as it then stood, which brought some much-needed practical information into the field.

In 1919, he wrote a classic work of science fiction, *City of Endless Night*. Because of Hastings' practical bent, the book is chillingly plausible, which isn't something you can say of most SF works of that era.

In the Twenties, Hastings was active in the physical culture movement, writing books and serving as food editor of *Physical Culture* magazine. The movement was mostly focused on the health benefits of exercise, but Hastings added a much-needed emphasis on nutrition. This was when vitamins were a new concept. Hastings was right there with both theory and practice. He wrote books on nutrition and an early work on high blood pressure.

Hastings was that rarest of creatures, the practical philosopher. He wanted to make sense of the world in a way that would be immediately useful to his readers.

When I started raising chickens on my Oregon farm in 1996, I wanted to learn about profitable free-range egg farming. I have always tried to turn my hobbies into businesses, and I saw no reason why farming should be an exception.

The modern literature I could find on poultry farming fell into three categories:

1. Professional literature for modern factory farms. This information is interesting and often useful, but is generally can't be applied directly to the problems of small farms.
2. Literature for backyarders, fanciers, and hobbyists. Though fascinating and in many cases charming, these works are generally quite useless for practical farmers. They are written by and for people with very small flocks who look forward to spending time and money on their fascinating hobby without any real expectation of profit. To the farmer, profit is what pays the mortgage, puts the kids through college, and pays for retirement (or, in my case, make a part-time contribution to these things), and any work that treats profit as an optional extra provides hazardous guidance.
3. Literature motivated by politics, a romantic view of farm life, or a fear of chemicals. I found these particularly misleading, because they tended to represent theories as facts and wishful thinking as established practices. It turns out that most of this writing is done by non-farmers, though they do not advertise this fact.

To learn something practical, I turned to the poultry literature of yesteryear, when small farms like mine were the norm, and a flock of hens figured into nearly every farm in the country. I quickly learned that the period of interest started around 1900, when practical poultry research began, and ended around 1960, when the switch to factory farming was complete.

I live close to Oregon State University, where just about every poultry book ever written can be found on the first floor of the Valley Library. However, the first dozen or so books I read were just as impractical as their modern equivalents. There have always been books written about the delights of country life by newly transplanted city folks. Ominously, many were written by people whose poultry business was in its second or third year of operation, before the owner's money or luck had been given time to run out.

In short, my search for examples of practical, unpretentious, profitable free-range egg farming was coming up empty.

Then I found *The Dollar Hen*.

Hastings was refreshingly practical, even cynical. I liked him immediately. He was the only poultry author I had found who came

right out and said that a farmer's time is too valuable to waste, and that results come not from fancy methods but from simple ones, intelligently applied.

More than that, he had investigated every aspect of the poultry industry when working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and he explained the fundamentals of how it all worked. Because fundamentals never change, this information is as useful now as it was when it was written, almost a century ago.

The book is particularly useful to today's small farmers and those who deal with them, because the problems and methods of small farmers have changed relatively little, and have more in common with those of Hastings' day than they do with today's industrialized farms.

I have edited Hastings' original work, replacing terms that have fallen out of use with modern equivalents, adding explanatory footnotes, and knocking some of the rough edges off the original edition's erratic punctuation. At no point have I changed the meaning of a single sentence.

Robert Plamondon
Blodgett, Oregon
March, 2003

Why This Book Was Written

Twenty-five years ago there were in print hundreds of complete treatises on human diseases and the practice of medicine. Notwithstanding the size of the book-shelves or the high standing of the authorities, one might have read the entire medical library of that day and still have remained in ignorance of the fact that outdoor life is a better cure for tuberculosis than the contents of a drug store. The medical professor of 1885 may have gone prematurely to his grave because of ignorance of facts which are today the property of every intelligent man.

There are today, on the book-shelves of agricultural colleges and public libraries, scores of complete works on "Poultry" and hundreds of minor writings on various phases of the industry. Let the would-be poultryman master this entire collection of literature, and he is still in ignorance of facts and principles, a knowledge of which in better-developed industries would be considered prime necessities for carrying on the business.

As a concrete illustration of the above statement, I want to point to a young man, intelligent, enterprising, industrious, and a graduate of the best known agricultural college poultry course in the country. This lad invested some \$18,000 of his own and his friends' money in a poultry plant. The plant was built and the business conducted in accordance with the plans and principles of the recognized poultry authorities. Today the young man is bravely facing the proposition of working on a salary in another business to pay back the debts of honor resulting from his attempt to apply, in practice, the teaching of our agricultural colleges and our poultry bookshelves.

The experience just related did not prove disastrous from some single item of ignorance or oversight; the difficulty was that the cost of growing and marketing the product amounted to more than the receipts from its sale. This poultry farm, like the surgeon's operation, "was successful, but the patient died."

The writer's belief in the reality of the situation as above portrayed warrants him in publishing the present volume. Whether his criticism of poultry literature is founded on fact or fancy may, five years after the copyright date of this book, be told by any unbiased observer.

I have written this book to assist in placing the poultry business on a sound scientific and economic basis. The book does not pretend to be a complete encyclopedia of information concerning poultry, but treats only of those phases of poultry production and marketing upon which the financial success of the business depends.

The reader who is looking for information concerning fancy breeds, poultry shows, patent processes, patent foods, or patent methods will be disappointed, for the object of this book is to help the poultryman to make money, not to spend it.

How To Read This Book

Unless the reader has picked up this volume out of idle curiosity, he will be one of the following individuals:

1. A farmer or would-be farmer who is interested in poultry production as a portion of the work of general farming.
2. A poultryman or would-be poultryman who wishes to make a business of producing poultry or eggs for sale as a food product or as breeding stock.
3. A person interested in poultry as a diversion and who enjoys losing a dollar on his chickens almost as well as earning one.
4. A man interested in poultry in the capacity of an editor, teacher or someone engaged as a manufacturer or dealer in merchandise the sale of which is dependent upon the welfare of the poultry industry.

To the reader of the fourth class, I have no suggestions to make save such as he will find in the suggestions made to others.

To the reader of the third class, I wish to say that if you are a shoe salesman who has spent your evenings in a Brooklyn flat, drawing up plans for a poultry plant, I have only to apologize for any interference that this book may cause with your highly fascinating amusement.

To the poultryman already in the business, or to the man who is planning to engage in the business for reasons equivalent to those which would justify his entering other occupations of the semi-technical class, such as dairying, fruit growing or the manufacture of washing machines, I wish to say it is for you that "The Dollar Hen" is primarily written.

This book does not assume you to be a graduate of a technical school, but it does bring up discussions and use methods of illustration that may be unfamiliar to many readers. That such matter is introduced is because the subject requires it; and if it is confusing to the student he will do better to master it than to dodge it. Especially would I call your attention to the diagrams used in illus-

trating various statistics. Such diagrams are technically called "curves." They may at first seem mere crooked lines, if so I suggest that you get a series of figures in which you are interested, such as the daily egg yields of your own flock or your monthly food bills, and plot a few curves of your own. After you catch on you will be surprised at the greater ease with which the true meaning of a series of figures can be recognized when this graphic method is used.

I wish to call the farmer's attention to the fact that poultry-keeping as an adjunct to general farming, especially to general farming in the Mississippi Valley, is quite a different proposition from poultry production as an independent business. Poultry-keeping as a part of farm life and farm enterprise is a thing well worth while in any section of the United States, whereas poultry-keeping, a separate occupation, requires special location and special conditions to make it profitable. I would suggest the farmer first read Chapter XVI, which is devoted to his special conditions. Later he may read the remainder of the book, but should again consult the part on farm poultry production before attempting to apply the more complicated methods to his own needs.

Chapter XVI, while written primarily for the farmer, is, because of the simplicity of its directions, the best general guide for the beginner in poultrykeeping wherever he may be.

To the reader in general, I want to say that the table of contents, a part of the book which most people never read, is in this volume so placed and so arranged that it cannot well be avoided. Read it before you begin the rest of the book, and use it then and thereafter in guiding you toward the facts that you at the time particularly want to know. Many people, in starting to read a book, find something in the first chapter which does not interest them and cast aside the work, often missing just the information they are seeking. The conspicuous arrangement of the contents is for the purpose of preventing such an occurrence in this case.

Contents

Chapter 1. Is There Money In The Poultry Business?	14
A Big Business; Growing Bigger	14
Less Ham and More Eggs	17
Who Gets the Hen Money?	18
Chapter 2. What Branch Of The Poultry Business?	21
Various Poultry Products.	21
The Duck Business	24
Squab Business Overdone	24
Turkeys Not a Commercial Success	25
Guinea Growing a New Venture	25
Geese—the Fame of Watertown	26
The Ill-omened Broiler Business.	26
South Shore Roaster	31
Too Much Competition in Fancy Poultry	32
Egg Farming the Most Certain and Profitable.	34
Chapter 3. The Poultry Producing Community	36
Established Poultry Communities	38
Developing Poultry Communities	40
Will Cooperation Work?	44
Cooperative Egg Marketing In Denmark	47
Corporation or Cooperation?	48
Chapter 4. Where To Locate	50
Some Poultry Geography	50
Chicken Climate	56
Suitable Soil	58
Marketing—Transportation	59
Availability of Water	62
A Few Statistics.	62

Chapter 5. The Dollar Hen Farm	66
The Plan of Housing	66
The Feeding System	68
Water Systems	69
Outdoor Accommodations	70
Equipment for Chick Rearing	71
Twenty-five Acre Poultry Farms	76
Five Acre Poultry Farm	84
Chapter 6. Incubation	88
Fertility of Eggs	88
The Wisdom of the Egyptians	92
Principles of incubation	94
Moisture and Evaporation	98
Ventilation—Carbon Dioxide	105
Turning Eggs	108
Cooling Eggs	109
Searching for the “Open Sesame” of Incubation	110
The Box Type of Incubator In Actual Use	112
The Future Method of Incubation	116
Chapter 7. Feeding	121
Conventional Food Chemistry	122
How the Hen Unbalances Balanced Rations	126
Chapter 8. Diseases	130
Don’t Doctor Chickens	130
The Causes of Poultry Diseases	131
Chicken-Cholera	133
Roup	134
Chicken-Pox, Gapes, Limber Neck	135
Lice and Mites	135
Chapter 9. Poultry Flesh And Poultry Fattening	138
Crate-Fattening	139
Caponizing	144

Chapter 10. Marketing Poultry Carcasses.....	147
Farm-Grown Chickens	147
The Special Poultry Plant	150
Suggestions from Other Countries	151
Cold Storage of Poultry.....	153
Drawn or Undrawn Fowls.....	154
Poultry Inspection	155
Chapter 11. Quality In Eggs	158
Grading Eggs.....	158
How Eggs Are Spoiled	160
The Loss Due to Carelessness.....	167
Requisites For the Production of High Grade Eggs	169
Chapter 12. How Eggs Are Marketed.....	170
The Country Merchant	170
The Huckster	172
The Produce Buyer	174
The City Distribution of Eggs.....	175
Cold Storage of Eggs.....	178
Preserving Eggs Out of Cold Storage	181
Improved Methods of Marketing	
Farm-Grown Eggs.....	183
The High Grade Egg Business	185
Buying Eggs By Weight	188
The Retailing of Eggs by the Producer	189
The Price of Eggs	190
Chapter 13. Breeds of Chickens	197
Breed Tests	197
The Hen's Ancestors	200
What Breed	204
Chapter 14. Practical and Scientific Breeding	206
Breeding as an Art.....	207
Scientific Theories of Breeding.....	209
Breeding for Egg Production.....	212

Chapter 15. Experiment Station Work	216
The Story of the “Big Coon”	218
Important Experimental Results at the Illinois Station	222
Experimental Bias	223
The Egg Breeding Work at the Maine Station	225
Chapter 16. Poultry On The General Farm	230
Best Breeds for the Farm.	231
Keep Only Workers.	232
Hatching Chicks With Hens	233
Incubators on the Farm	234
Rearing Chicks	236
Feeding Laying Hens.	239
Cleanliness.	241
Farm Chicken Houses	242