

THE CHICKEN FARM AT WALES STREET

Dad was always dreaming up ideas. Some worked, some did not.

It must have been during winter in 1938 that Dad decided that a surefire money-making scheme would be to buy day-old chickens in August and rear them for sale at Christmas.

It was well-known that male day-old chickens (cockerels) could be bought from a big chicken farm at North Coburg for a penny each. This firm employed specialist Japanese chicken-sexers to separate the newly-hatched female birds (pullets) from the males, which they were not interested in keeping.

As usual, Dad threw himself enthusiastically into his project which was intended to produce substantial profits to pay for the next year's holidays.

First he bought loads of second-hand timber and roofing iron from Whelans and built a skillion-roofed chicken-house halfway down the back yard on the south side. This was to be used while the chicks were small and after that they would be able to look after themselves outside.

The building was about 9 feet long by 8 feet wide with a door at the east end and a bench 3 feet wide extending full length on the north side.

Young chickens need to be kept continuously warm for the first few weeks and dad had bought a free-standing kerosene heater which looked like a small pot-bellied stove. This stood at the centre of the bench.

Most people would have thought 40 or 50 chickens would be a nice round number after allowing for the later killing and plucking of the birds in preparation for the table.

Dad bought three hundred!

They were like little bundles of yellow fluff and not much bigger than the toy birds commonly stuck on the tops of easter eggs. Three hundred fitted comfortably on the bench top.

Standard food and water dispensers were provided.

Winters in the 'thirties and 'forties were much colder than in recent years, but nobody could have anticipated the run of freezing nights that began from the time the chickens arrived. Whether the nights were clear or foggy, every morning produced a heavy white frost.

This went on week after week right through September and into October.

While the kerosene heater burnt all right it was not powerful enough to heat the whole building and the birds would crowd as close as possible to the heater, regularly climbing over and smothering each other in great yellow clumps.

Each morning Dad would go down to separate the heaps and throw out the dead bodies. Then there were others which were too far gone to be resuscitated and he had to wring their necks.

Dad knew that he had to spread the heat source over a greater area to beat the overcrowding and smothering, and one night he came home with two electric bar heaters which must have been part of a superseded machine at the Herald Office. The heaters were all-metal, each 4 feet long and about 2 inches x ¼ inch thick. They must have had electrical wiring inside and while they got very hot they remained black in colour rather than turning red.

Dad hung them in a line along the centre of the bench and about 10 inches above it. I think he then stood the kerosene heater on the floor.

There had not been any electrical power in the chicken house previously so Dad strung a length of ordinary 2-strand cloth-covered flex from the corner of our house to serve the bar heaters, breaking all the SEC regulations. When it rained, the cables should have short-circuited and burnt the house down, but Dad was lucky that time!

Soon after the heaters were installed and operating, several members of the family were admiring Dad's handiwork and the remaining chickens and I was kneeling on a stool near the edge of the bench. Suddenly I overbalanced towards the bench, stuck out my hand and grabbed a bar heater! While I was only in contact for a few seconds I got a severe burn with blisters, similar to a burn from an electric iron. Hurt like billy-oh, but eventually recovered.

The bar heaters were a great improvement, but the chickens continued to smother each other and dad continued to throw out the corpses.

It always surprised me that dad, who had such a short fuse when little things went wrong – such as accidentally hammering his thumb – could handle real disasters calmly.

The dying chickens, every night, week after week, was a real disaster.

The remaining chickens were growing very quickly and at the end of October dad fenced off the rear half of the yard with a chicken-wire fence 3 feet high. There would have been about forty chickens at this time and they went into the fenced area. All were white leghorns except for one which had been growing black feathers.

In no time the white racists decided they didn't like the one that was different and took it in turns to peck at him. After a week most of his feathers were gone and he was a sorry sight. Without feathers his legs seemed to be longer and his thighs took on the appearance of an ostrich.

One day Dad was trying to step over the wire mesh fence with a saucepan of porridge – like chook food. The fence was slightly higher than the length of his leg and he lost balance. Just then a sprightly chicken ran under the descending foot. A dreadful sight! One less chicken!

The fenced off part of the yard which had once been lawn and vegetable garden with a few fruit trees was quickly transformed into a flat smelly muddy landscape – what the spin doctors would now call 'free range'.

Early in December the remnants of the flock had been reduced to about thirty, but most of them were big, healthy birds.

Dad then swung into marketing mode – everybody in the street was offered the chance to buy one or two chooks – plucked and dressed, or live and kicking.

I was working on Saturday mornings as butcher's delivery boy for Bill Carroll. Dad suggested I might like to ask Bill's customers if they wanted to avail themselves of the chance to buy his wonderful chooks. I didn't like the idea at all. At the age of eleven I didn't think it was ethical for me to be selling food to Bill's customers, even though he didn't sell birds himself.

I only asked two or three customers if they wanted to buy chickens. One of these was Mrs Rasmussen who lived half-way between our house and the Moonee Ponds Creek which formed the boundary with Essendon at the west.

Mrs Rasmussen had dark gypsy-like skin and long black hair and was in her sixties. She lived in one of a number of small remnant farms in that area and I always delivered larger orders to her than to any other customer. She had three or four enormous black dogs and would buy great parcels of bones to feed them.

Dad told me the cost of a pair of large chooks, live, would be 7 shillings. We kids had been told from an early age how city shops knocked a penny or halfpenny off their prices when advertising to give the impression of much cheaper prices. When Mrs Rasmussen asked me what a pair of chooks would cost, I piped up "Six and elevenpence". She took a step backwards and said "You ought to be working at Myers!" But she did order a pair.

We had orders for a pair of 'dressed' chickens. I always thought this was a ridiculous term because after every feather had been plucked they looked completely undressed!

Dad announced that he was too squeamish to cut their heads off. I wasn't too keen on doing this job, but as the eldest son, I thought I had better volunteer. I got out the tomahawk we used for chopping kindling, and placed our chopping block in the middle of the remaining garden area.

I had dressed in the oldest shirt, pants and shoes that I could find, but until I came to the mechanics of the job I hadn't thought of the difficulties.

I had to hold the big strong bird just below his neck in my right hand and position the neck on the block so that I could bring the tomahawk down with my left. Unfortunately the bird wasn't very co-operative and struggled so much that I was concerned about cutting a couple of fingers off.

Eventually I struck the first blow which only partly did the job so I had to follow up with two more chops. Then the fun started.

The bird wrenched himself out of my hand and took off. Most of us know the term 'running around like headless chooks' often applied to Councillors or Politicians, but I was amazed at the speed of this one. He must have rushed crazily around the yard for

three minutes, bouncing off trees and fences, before finally collapsing. I was ready for collapse too!

I was due to repeat the job next day, but decided it was necessary to attack it more scientifically.

Mum's wire clothes line crossed the yard close to the chopping block, and I thought that if I tied the chook's legs together with a decent length of rope, tossed the end of the rope over the line and stood on it, I would be able to hoist the body on the line until all movement ceased. Easy!

I chopped away at the neck much the same as before, then grabbed the rope and hoisted. This headless chook couldn't run of course, but he did his best to fly. He fluttered his wings and struggled violently so that everything within range was spattered with blood, including me.

I resigned on the blood-stained spot.

Dad must have sold ten or twelve chooks to friends and neighbours, then a few days before Christmas he disposed of the remaining twenty or so the Hylands, a big poultry wholesaler in Melbourne.