



Stewing Hens Disappear from Groceries

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Last month your editor asked why he could not purchase a stewing hen in his local market. The answer to this lies in the type of poultry industry which has developed in Arizona. To explain this disappearance, we will describe the commercial poultry industry in Arizona, the changes which have taken place, the marketing and packaging problems for fowl as well as the demand for fowl.

The number of laying birds in commercial (one with 300 laying birds or more) poultry ranches in Arizona reached 1,129,025 in 1967. About 95 percent of these birds are concentrated in Pima, Maricopa, Pinal, and Yavapai Counties. Pima County has the largest number of birds with 48.6 percent of the State's total. Maricopa County is second with 31.6 percent, Pinal is third with 9.2 percent, and Yavapai has 6 percent.

The spectacular change in the industry is the movement toward larger flocks and fewer operations. In 1963 there were 167 commercial poultry ranches in Arizona. By 1967 there were 84, a decrease of 49.7 percent. The trend toward larger flocks is illustrated by the percent of birds in flocks 50,000 and over, which changed from 26.8 percent in 1963 to 49.6 percent in 1967. If we include birds in flocks over 30,000, we find that we had 43.4 percent in 1963 and 65.4 percent in 1967. In fact, 84.4 percent of the total birds were in flocks of 10,000 or over in 1967, and this accounts for 25 ranches.

It is clear that the poultry industry

in Arizona is a table egg producing industry. Practically the only breed of chicken found in Arizona is the white leghorn, an egg-producing type. This bird weighs 3½ to 4 pounds at the end of its laying period. The old dual-purpose bird is gone. That is, we have not found very many Rhode Island Reds, New Hampshires, Barred Plymouth Rocks, or White Plymouth Rocks in Arizona. These birds weigh 5½ to 7 pounds at the end of their laying period. They make a good stewing hen but not a very good egg laying machine. The product available for the market at the end of the laying period, therefore, is a white leghorn, 3½ to 4 pounds live weight which dresses out at approximately 60 percent. Not a very big package for the housewife's pot.

The second factor is the marketing and packaging problem. First of all, there are few poultry processors in Arizona. The local plant in Tucson, which processed and marketed fowl, is not operating at present. This leaves two processors in Phoenix which can handle the product. Poultry packing plants must depend on a steady source of birds to operate efficiently at a profit. A poultry plant can be set up to process broilers and turkeys as well as cull chickens. The broiler industry in Arizona provides less than 5 percent of the State's consumption of broilers. On the surface this is not enough broilers to allow a plant to operate at capacity other than in an intermittent manner. Thus the processing stage of the market system is under change and development. The question of "Where are the cull laying hens going?" at present

is a good one. Substantial numbers in the local Tucson area are being trucked live to Nebraska for processing into soup. In the past some of these cull birds have been trucked to California for manufactured products such as canned chicken, soup, and the like. Next, let's consider the demand for fowl. The housewife would like a stewing hen dressed out at 3½ to 4 pounds. This is possible with the dual-purpose birds. But the leghorn dresses out from 2 to 2½ pounds, thus the use for this product is a commercial one.

This week we noted an advertisement for stewing hens in the paper. The price was about 33 cents a pound. The birds were not leghorns and were shipped from Arkansas frozen in tray packs. When birds are bought when frozen and in tray packs, the price gets close to the price of broilers, which has been approximately 39 cents a pound in the Tucson area. It is difficult to know whether the price difference between broilers and fowl compensates for the extra work in preparing fowl. The experience of groceries indicates that there is a demand for fowl in Arizona, but the quantity demanded is relatively small at these prices. Fowl must be brought in already processed in economic quantities. The turnover is then relatively slow in the groceries. The solution to the laying hen disposal problem which faces the producer will involve developing regular marketing channels to manufacturers of food products containing chicken.

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