

The DUCK and the DOLLAR

SOME Stories of Poultry Raising for Profit That Recall Governor Flower and His Prophecy of a Renaissance

By EDWARD HUNGERFORD.

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THE late Roswell P. Flower—one time Governor of the State of New York—was a pretty practical sort of agriculturist. Born and raised on a farm near Theresa, in the northern part of Jefferson county, he kept a keen interest in the welfare of farmers until the end of his days. In no small way he foreshadowed the coming renaissance of Eastern farming. He saw with his far sighted eyes the coming of the day when New York State, in common with the other somewhat neglected farming districts of the North Atlantic seaboard, would be called upon to give increased measure of food to the great and growing cities that cluster close to that seaboard.

It was Governor Flower's keen delight to use the resources of his wealth in practical aid to struggling farmers. Watertown folk long ago ceased estimating the gifts that he had made during his lifetime to men who found that they were struggling almost under more than they could carry, the farm mortgages that he had taken over, only to use as kindling for his office stove.

But Mr. Flower's keenest joy was to take some north country farm, run down, perhaps, because of gross stupidity in management, and by use of a normal working capital, such as any quick witted farmer should be able to command, make that farm into a normal, money making institution. There were farms far and near about Watertown which came into new youth through the quickening influence of his aid, but when he went back to Burrville, a little hamlet six miles southeast of the county seat of Jefferson, and bought a hillside place in almost the last stages of decadence the people of the township wondered what the Governor could make of that place.

It was a cold farm, a mighty cold farm even in a land of cold farms. Limestone ledges cropped out from its steep hillside; there did not seem to be a single decent sort of growing thing that might thrive upon those acres. A little brook came dancing down over those hillside ledges, and that brook became the salvation of that Burrville farm. The Governor, using



Just Ducks

The big shed—some three or four hundred feet long and fifty feet in breadth—was a development of the Niagara Farm. One of the Curtisses discovered that it was most essential that ducks should have plenty of shade, and yet he wished to work out a bigger and a better sort of colony house and one that was far cooler, too. The big open shed, with the railroad track running its length, was the solution. Its ample roof provides shelter against sun and storm, its rooky pens run out in long stretches to the one side and the other.

You wander around that sixty-five acre poultry farm until you are well nigh footsore. You pass the woodlot and find that it is a haven for some thousands more of ducks; back of the woodlot there is more open space, and chickens—Wyandottes and Leghorns—by the thousands. One of the twenty-five farm hands who find employment all the year round upon the duck farm is going through the flock scattering feed from his basket. A sea—a surging, cackling sea—is at his heels. You must give a chicken credit for knowing meal time, at the least.

We come forward again, through the thickly populated woodlot. There is an orchard off to the right, and it is studded with white colony houses—a miniature village set there among the trees. You pass a long row of maples and more ducks come on in companies, in brigades—hundreds and thousands of them. Sometimes in those flocks you see tiny ducklings of a mottled brown, in keen contrast to the tiny yellow Pekins.

"Indian runners," says Roy Curtiss. "We're experimenting with them. They lay eggs all winter and they may prove a great investment. We're never too old to learn, you know."

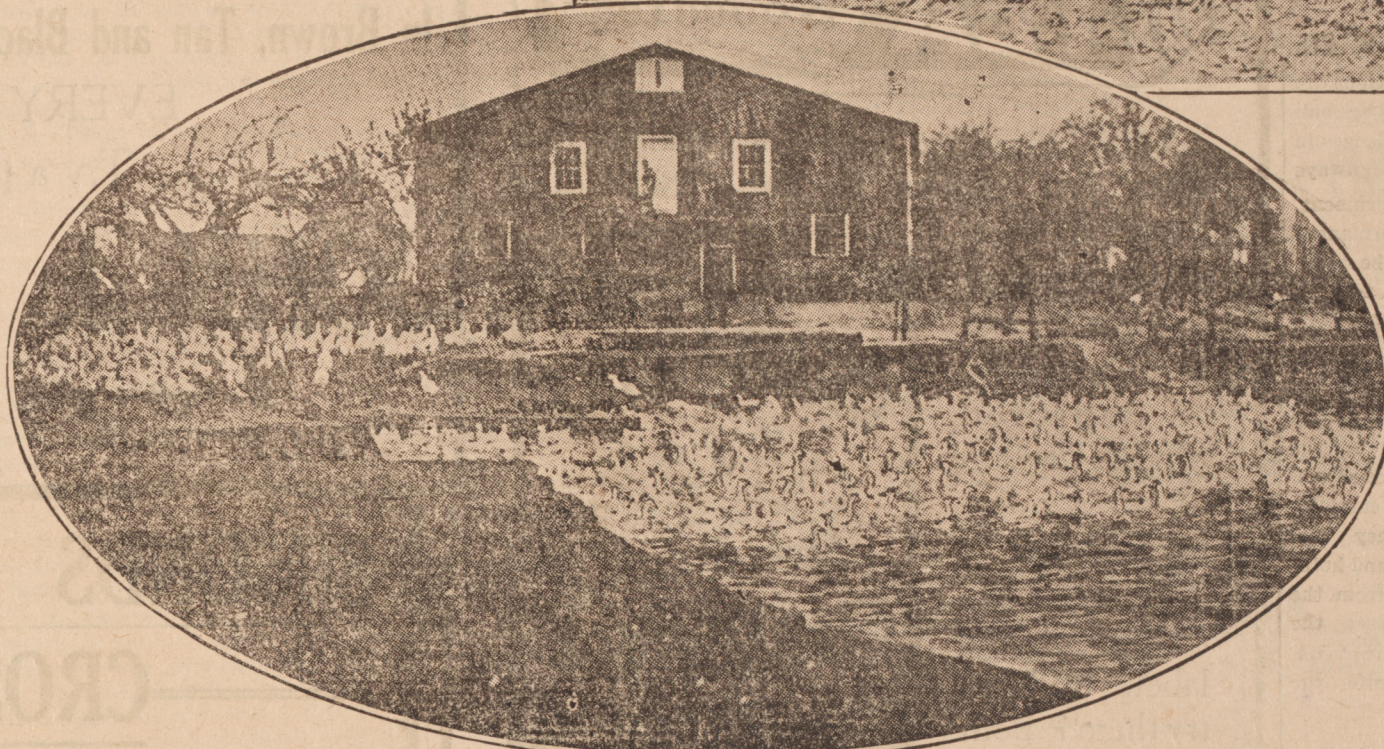
Care Is the One Thing.

The senior Curtiss smiles and tells you how once he had to rout his boys out of bed at daybreak to have them take care of their chicks. The boys had been out late on the preceding night and had overslept.

"That's the point," he urges. "People who undertake to raise poultry sometimes forget it. You have got to take care of your chickens and your ducks, and that is something of a real proposition. You've virtually got to live with them—if you do anything less you can't expect to make a success in the poultry business."

He illustrates his point by reaching down into a pen and setting a little shaver of a duckling, lying helpless upon his back in the broiling sun, squarely upon his feet once again. The duckling hurried off to join the rest of his company.

"You've got to watch them—just like that," says Mr. Curtiss. "If you don't you bring up your percentage of mortality and off go your profits—almost before you realize it."



Poultry Farm, Ransomville, N. Y.



Chickens Everywhere

Then we were sure that it was a big proposition and Jay went down for a season as a laborer on a Long Island duck farm.

"That cost money, too, but it was a good investment. The next year after he came back our balance was on the right side of the ledger. Niagara Farm seemed to be well launched. Then we began a campaign of education to make the Western New York folks eat duck. Before it began we sold a ton of the birds to a



"A Surging, Cackling Sea at His Heels"



Great White Breakers of Feathered Life Go Rolling Across the Pens

big Buffalo hotel at ten cents a pound."

"They don't go as cheap as that since folk have begun to eat and to like the juicy birds," he added.

We followed close upon his heels through the big feed elevator with its mixing machines and its cutters, all operated by the farm's power plant.

"We find the dough mixers that the big bakeries use just the thing for our duck feed," he tells you. "It assures us of an even quality."

You ask about the composition of duck feed. The senior Curtiss tells you. When he is done it seems as if an able bodied Pekin duck fattening up for a critical market would eat about anything that a man would eat, showing an especial fondness for flour and for scrap meat from the butchers' shops of half that big county.

The By-Product.

Mr. Curtiss grows reminiscent and tells you of a year when the big feed farm brought forth an unusual crop of clover. When it was threshed the boys observed that there was a large quantity of the heads and leaves left on the barn floor and that such a by-product made good poultry feed. They began to advertise it as poultry feed in the farm papers and created a demand for a growth that had before been ranked as waste. Advertising pays, and orders came in fast and furious. They gave up trying to cut the stuff with a hand cutter and turned to horse power. More orders came, and they turned from horse power to a steam engine—they began hunting around machine shops to devise special cutters that would chop

the feed to the right consistency. Then they rigged machines to sift and bag the cut clover, and when their trade in this by-product reached five or six tons a day the Curtisses felt that they had done well with a waste product.

That one thing is typical of the big farm. Everything upon that estate is typical of the best operating economy—a thing that has yet to be dinned into the ears of a good many New York State farmers. You step from the feed elevator on to the rails of a narrow gauge track.

"The Niagara Farm Traction Company," laughs one of the proprietors. There are more than a thousand feet of track, and it leads straight from the feed storehouse past a double row of colony houses through a long covered shed; from ten to twenty thousand ducks are reached directly by it. When the car goes slipping down those rails morning and night the everlasting clatter of the birds becomes crescendo. As the farmhands scatter out the feed—bushels upon bushels of it—great white breakers of feathered life go rolling across those pens.

There are lanterns every little way along that railroad track, and you grow gayly humorous—you make bold to ask if the Niagara Farm Traction Company is adopting the block system. One of the Curtisses explains.

"If we didn't hang those lanterns there and keep them lighted throughout the night this place would be give you the precise reason, but those beacon lights do serve to keep the chorus silent from dusk to dawn."

More Ducks Come Out—in Companies, in Regiments, in Brigades

a little of that plain, hard common sense that was his greatest asset, dammed that brook in three or four places and the Burrville folks began driving by the place the better to see what he was trying to do.

They saw. The dams created ponds and the ponds became the lodging place for swarms of Pekin ducks. After that the Jefferson county people said that it was a simple idea and perhaps Governor Flower did not get any too much credit for his hard common sense. He brought a poultry expert up from one of the Long Island duck farms and in a single year more than ten thousand of the plump birds went down to the city markets. North country people saw "Watertown ducks" on the menu cards of the big New York hotels and their price swelled tremendously.

If Governor Flower were still alive it is probable that his duck farm would still be adding to its laurels. But it came to hard times. There was trouble with the water supply. Most of all, the keen personal interest of a man who was developing the idea of his own brain was gone. The ponds are drained and the farm of the hillside ledges no longer sends its ducks to the city market.

The Vision of Ducks.

That Burrville farm excited greatest interest because of the ingenious use of its rippling brook. People began to see every hillside brook in the north country dammed into countless ponds for the breeding of ducks—a great industry being set forth on those stony slopes. Then there came faintly, as faint rumor always comes—a word that a successful duck grower over at Ransomville, in Niagara county, was not using duck ponds any more. He said that the ducks put on muscle by swimming around in the blained old ponds, and what folks wanted who ate ducks was not muscle but fatty meat. His theory was that a duck worked off fat by paddling all day long around a dirty pond. He put that theory into effect and to-day he claims to have the largest poultry farm in the United States. Last year it sent between fifty and sixty thousand ducks and between twenty and twenty-five thousand chickens to the city markets.

A traffic man for the big railroad system that reaches into that country got into the habit of stopping at Ransomville on his way East from Niagara Falls, keeping sharp eye on the business that was originating on a fairly active branch line. A certain citizen of Ransomville used to be hanging about the depot a good part of the time when the little local trains struggled in and out of town and the railroad picked up a nodding acquaintance with him. The certain citizen finally said that he owned a duck farm over across the road and that perhaps he would like a siding for it. Duck farms are not ordinarily siding propositions for railroads, and so, after the freight expert had listened politely to the citizen from Ransomville, he dismissed the idea from his mind.

But that citizen was insistent. He kept speaking about that siding each time the traffic man came to Ransomville, and for a time he continued to dismiss it from serious consideration. There were too many really big concerns that were demanding sidetracks from his line.

The Ransomville farmer was insistent, and one day the railroad gave greater heed to that insistence. He proposed to show the duck grower that he was backing a big proposition when he began to talk siding to a trunk line railroad corporation.

"It would cost real money," he argued.

"We can raise the money," the farmer said.

"You would have to move that grain elevator over there."

"We'll move it. We own it." "And cross that field." "You can cross it. We own that, too."

Then it developed that the simple, unassuming farmers—father and sons—owned most of that part of Ransomville, and the traffic man, his interest greatly stimulated, went into the little yellow depot and began studying the freight receipts of the Niagara farm—as they called their place. Those freight receipts told the story. The traffic man could hardly believe it. Here was a farm getting four to five cars of feed alone in the course of a week—its output in ducks and in chickens ran into high tonnage. The sidetrack was built without further delay.

You find the entrance to Niagara Farm—the place where the ducklings are taboored from their favorite sport—just across the main street of Ransomville from the railroad depot. A big grain elevator—the real cause for the starting of the big industry—marks the entrance of the farm. Inside the elevator are its offices—a metropolitan looking place, with young women stenographers and typewriters—all the frills of a really big business. The elevator itself holds tons upon tons of chicken and duck feed, and when the senior Curtiss—the man who made the railroad give him a private sidetrack—tells you once again that it was the real cause of the starting of the duck farm, you demand the story of that starting.

When the Start Came.

It comes—a little slowly at the very first. The senior Curtiss was in the flour and feed business there at Ransomville twenty years ago—the big elevator there by their siding was his storehouse—when his small boy, Roy, came to him and called his attention to the fact that the hens of the farm were being neglected. He offered to care for them if his father would furnish the feed from the storehouse and give him the eggs and chickens they did not eat in their house. The senior Curtiss quickly agreed—it was a little matter at the best—and Roy plunged in. He did not know much about poultry at the beginning, but he was willing to learn and learn he did.

Before two years were passed his father was anxious to end the bargain; the feed that the boy was using was running into sizeable quantities. The young poultryman held his father to the word of his contract. All the while he kept hard at it—raising chickens. There was a marketing proposition, too, to be taken into account and Ransomville folk to-day will tell you how Roy used to get up at two o'clock in the morning to start his long thirteen mile drive into market at Niagara Falls.

An older brother, Jay, came home from the city and found that Roy was making more money than he, and he joined in the business. So was the Niagara Farm founded.

"It was not all plain sailing even then," said W. Roy Curtiss the other day to us. He is not much of a boy now, but a man grown strong and keen and enthusiastic in the pursuit of his profitable hobby. "It was ten years before we could get quite rid of the fogs. One time we bought four hundred dollars' worth of incubators—and \$400 was some capital to us then—only to find that they were no good. They had to go on the scrap-heap and that big figure was charged hopelessly to loss."

"That was a blow when our capital was slim and its lack a constant handicap to us. When we began to raise ducks we found them a big problem. The first year that we tackled them we raised fourteen hundred and it seemed to us then that we were handling a big proposition. Perhaps we were, for we were \$400 in debt for feed at the end of that season."