



United Poultry Concerns

P.O. Box 150 Machipongo, VA 23405-0150

(757) 678-7875 www.upc-online.org

The Life of One Battery Hen

By Karen Davis, PhD

Prologue

Sound of a Battery Hen

*You can tell me: if you come by the
North door, I am in the twelfth cage
On the left-hand side of the third row
From the floor; and in that cage
I am usually the middle one of eight or six or three.
But even without directions, you'd
Discover me. We have the same pale
Comb, clipped yellow beak and white or auburn
Feathers, but as the door opens and you
Hear above the electric fan a kind of
One-word wail, I am the one
Who sounds loudest in my head.*



Photo by: Mercy for Animals, Weaver Brothers Egg Farm in Versailles, Ohio

The Incubator

Deep inside an industrial incubator filled with thousands of chick embryos, a baby hen is growing inside an egg. During the first 24 hours after her egg was laid, the chick's tiny heart started beating, and blood vessels formed that joined her to the yolk which feeds her as she floats and grows in the fluid of her encapsulated world. The baby hen has had feelings since her 21st hour of life inside the incubator, and since her 24th hour of being there, she has had eyes. By the fourth day, all of her body organs are developed, and by the sixth day, she has the face of a little bird. Her beak has grown, and with it the egg tooth she will use to break out of her shell – the shell that was formed by her mother hen's body, in a breeding facility somewhere – to protect her from harm.

The baby hen has comforting exchanges with the other embryos in the incubator, but a forlornness is felt inside each bird that passes from shell to shell. The two-way communication between themselves and a mother hen – the continuous interaction which they are genetically endowed to expect, and which they need – has not occurred. The mother hen's heartbeat is missing, and she does not respond to the embryos' calls of distress or comfort them with her soft clucks. The reverberation of something continuously running outside the eggs does not spark meaningful associations, as, for example, the crow of a rooster or the sensation of the hen shifting her eggs with her breast and her beak would comfortingly do.

Still, by the 20th day, the baby hen occupies all of her egg, except for the air cell, which she now begins to penetrate with her beak, inhaling air through her lungs for the first time. The air isn't fresh, and the baby hen rests for several hours. Then, with renewed energy, she cuts a circular line counterclockwise around the shell by striking it with her egg tooth near the large end of the egg. With this tooth, which disappears after hatching, she saws her way out of the

shell. Twelve hours later, wet and exhausted, she emerges to face the life ahead.

“As each chick emerges from its shell in the dark cave of feathers underneath its mother . . .” But this is not the baby hen’s birth experience. Start over: *“As the mother hen picks the last pieces of shell gently from her chick’s soft down . . .”* But this is not part of the baby hen’s story, either. Try again: *“As soon as all the eggs are hatched, the hungry mother hen and her brood go forth to eat, drink, scratch and explore, the baby hen running eagerly within sight and sound of her mother, surrounded by her brothers and sisters.”* In reality, none of this happens, except in memories that arise in the baby hen’s dreams as she grows and stares through the bars, in the cages that await her arrival.

The “Servicing” Area

The baby hen and her fluffy yellow companions are being wheeled down the hall in the incubator cart. When it stops, three workers remove each tray of newly hatched chicks. They toss, sort and dump the discarded shells, the half-hatched chicks, the deformed chicks and the male chicks into the trash. They smoke cigarettes between the arrival of each cart, and the tobacco fumes along with other odors and gases produce a sickish, burning sensation in the baby hen’s eyes, chest and stomach. One of her companions hops onto the edge of the tray and falls to the floor. High-pitched screeches occur as the carts, which now include hers, wheel into the next room, crushing and half crushing the fallen ones, plastering them in blood on the floor.

One by one, each chick in the tray is grabbed by a hand and pushed up against a machine blade. Now it’s the baby hen’s turn, and as her face is pushed against the blade, an agonizing crunch and pain shoots through her beak and her body causing her to flap her wings, cry out, and lose her bowels. Smoke and stench mingle, as the traumatized chicks, each with a stumped red hole in front of her face, are sprayed with something chemical, and the baby hen blanks out. She jerks awake upon feeling herself being grabbed and jammed in a cage in a dark place.

The Pullet House

Throbbing pain in her head and her beak, jostling of others around her, wires hurting her feet, air that makes her sick. The hen can never get comfortable. She cannot obey her impulse to walk and run. She is in a cage in the “pullet” house, where she and the other young hens, thousands of them, will eat mash from the trough, excrete into the manure piles, and grow until, five months later, they are moved to the layer house and into the smaller egg-laying cages. The hen and rooster who created her in the breeding facility were slaughtered while she was still in the incubator. Her brothers were suffocated at the hatchery, and she has sisters somewhere, perhaps in the same building that she’s living in.

She suffers excruciating pain when she accidentally bumps her wounded beak several times against the metal trough when she tries to eat the mash. Her body aches, her heart beats in fear, her face is disfigured, things crawl on her skin. There is no earth to bathe in. Healing, her beak develops small bulbs, called neuromas, and in time the pain almost stops, just a dull ache there, but the young hen can never preen herself properly, or eat right, although she tries, and when she and some other hens appear in a magazine picture, people who never knew her think that she and her sad companions are ugly by nature.

The Layer House

One night a hand flings her out of the pullet cage, into another cage, and wheels her to another cage. Feelings pass between herself and the other hens pressing against her, as their combs grow white and lumpy, and hang over their eyes like dough, but no words exist for these feelings, just as there is nothing in the natural evolution of hens to prepare them for this situation. When a cagemate dies and rots, the hen stands on top of her to get off the wires. Her cage is somewhere among stacks and rows of cages. She is in a universe of cages. Eggs form in her body, are expelled with difficulty, and roll away. Rats whisk through the troughs leaving pellets in the mash. They whisk in and out of

the cage bars, even brush through her feathers, which are mostly broken spines now. Flies suck stray yolks in the aisle in front of her cage, and one day the troughs are empty.

The End

Somehow the hen has managed to get her head and one spiny wing stuck between the bars of her cage, and she can't free herself. Ignorant people say that a chicken doesn't know she is going to die, but the hen knows that she is going to die. When a hand – the most brutal, cruel thing she knows – opens the cage door and pulls her backward from inside, yanking her almost in two, she shrieks as she is dropped into the bucket where other hens, oozing eggs, pieces of shells and blood await her. They absorb her into themselves, as something heavy and soft plops on top of her that moves just a little, or so she feels, in being carried away.



Photo By: Mercy for Animals

Postscript: Killing of Unwanted Chicks and Hens By the Egg Industry

By Karen Davis, PhD

“Spent” Hens

The U.S. egg industry routinely deprives hens of all food or severely restricts their rations for one to three weeks, in order to shock them into producing another cycle of eggs after a year of relentless egg laying. This practice is called forced molting. Hens deemed no longer productive (“spent”) by the egg industry are disposed of in several different ways. Because they have almost no muscle tissue compared to birds bred for meat, they have little or no economic value. As a result, these still very young birds are disposed of as cheaply as possible. Many are suffocated to death in 40-foot-long dumpsters, then trucked to rendering facilities and turned into animal feed ingredients. Others are gassed and buried dead or alive in landfills or ground up, dead or alive, in grinders. Still others are trucked to “spent fowl” slaughter plants and used in school lunch programs and other government food programs. Hens travel to slaughter in cages without food or water for hundreds of miles, frequently across state lines or into Canada, often with missing feet, legs, and wings that were left behind during catching. Hens who are still laying eggs are pasted in egg slime and pieces of shells.

Male Chicks

Along with defective and slow-hatching female chicks, the U.S. egg industry trashes 250 million male chicks as soon as they hatch because roosters don't lay eggs. Instead of being sheltered by a mother hen's wings, the newborns are ground up alive or thrown into trashcans where they slowly suffocate on top of one another, peeping pitifully as a human foot stomps them down to make room for more chicks. Some hatcheries gas the chicks with carbon dioxide (CO2). Ruth Harrison, the author of *Animal Machines* (1964), said she stopped supporting CO2 gassing of chicks after subjecting herself to inhalation of various gas concentrations. She said, "In my opinion, it is no better than the old practice of filling up a dustbin with them and letting them suffocate" (*New Scientist*, 5/19/90).

No federal laws protect chickens in the United States. They are excluded from the Animal Welfare Act and from the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act.

Karen Davis, PhD is the founder and president of United Poultry Concerns, a nonprofit organization that promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl. She is the author of *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry*; *a Home for Henny*; *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality*; and *Instead of Chicken, Instead of Turkey: a Poultryless "Poultry" Potpourri* (a cookbook). Karen's next book, *The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale: A Case for Comparing Atrocities* (Lantern Books, 2005), includes the above essay "The Life of One Battery Hen," which first appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of the *AV Magazine*, a publication of the American Antivivisection Society (www.aavs.org).

United Poultry Concerns is a nonprofit organization that addresses the treatment of domestic fowl in food production, science, education, entertainment, and human companionship situations and promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of chickens and other domesticated fowl. www.upc-online.org.



United Poultry Concerns

P.O. Box 150 Machipongo, VA 23405-0150

(757) 678-7875 www.upc-online.org