

COOP CO-OP, BAWK BAWK-BAWK.
Eggs and Community Developing Together.

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By Susan Ager

Keeping chickens isn't what it used to be.

It used to be common. If you didn't keep chickens, you rarely ate eggs. Now, keeping chickens is prohibited in many cities and suburbs—considered an offense to neighbors—although recently some towns have reconsidered and are allowing a handful of chickens per yard.

Unlike cats, chickens demand daily attention. Leave them for two days and they'll peck each other and even destroy their own eggs. But staying home every day is not popular in the 21st century. Also unpopular these days: cleaning. To be blunt, chickens are filthier than teenagers, and refuse to clean up after themselves. In the face of those challenges, buying a dozen supermarket eggs produced by hens you never have to meet seems a bargain.

Ignoring all 21st-century reason, however, a flock of neighbors on the same dirt road near Thompsonville has begun keeping chickens. Together. They call themselves "The Homestead Coop Co-op." They share the expenses, the chores and the shovels, and they share the profits, also known as eggs. These are more colorful than supermarket eggs. And they have yolks as yellow and almost as big as school buses. They are yolks the way yolks used to be.

This is neighborliness the way it used to be.

The People

There are seven neighbors in all, ranging from 6 to 74 years old.

Peggy Case is at the top of the pecking order. She and her life partner, Jeanne Peters, own 35 acres. She and Jeanne got the idea to start a coop co-op after they retired up north three years ago. "We wanted to raise chickens, but we also wanted to build community," says Peggy, who is 68, in the living room of their home, with most of the co-op members gathered round. "That was our real goal here, and these are our neighbors. When you have a community, all things can be shared, and no one has to feel trapped."

Matt Heffron and Wendy Foss live next door, yet too far away to see Peggy and Jeanne's home. Matt, 43, is tall, resourceful and smart. An online student who is often home, he was a key player in building the coop from scrap lumber and recycled windows and doors. He also helps write and organize the co-op's blog—TheCoopCoop.blogspot.com.

Wendy, at 45, is likewise resourceful, and experienced with daily duties. She grew up raising chickens for meat. Recently, she served as cook on the Tall Ship Manitou, based in Traverse City, preparing meals for up to 35 people a day—including the crew and the schooner's bed-and-breakfast guests—on a wood-burning stove. That means she knows what to do with eggs. Often, she says, "We eat breakfast for dinner now."

chickencoop3Next door to them, and closest to civilization—that is, the paved road—live Frank Pracher, his wife Jennifer Mitchell, and their 6-year-old boy, Keith. Jennifer, 35, probably would have had nothing to do with the coop except that it is far from their home, where she can't smell or hear it. She works full time as an accountant for the Benzie Central Schools. Her husband, Frank, 34, is limber and nimble, with clipped red hair. He home schools their son, and works part time at a hardware store.

Frank has grown fond of the chickens. So has young Keith, who treats them as friends who need his help. Says Frank, "We've decided this is better than pets. But we wanted Keith to be part of something bigger, to learn that there are times when you have to go down and feed the chickens even when you don't want to."

Of the seven co-op members, only Wendy knew anything about keeping chickens. Matt, who once lived in Key West where thousands of chickens roam free, knew only that they made noise and messes.

The Hens

In the beginning, last July, there were 26, including one rooster whom Peggy named Pete, after Pete Seeger, "in the hopes he would be gentle." He was not. In late spring, after he terrorized Jeanne and scared Keith and plucked feathers off a few of his paramours, the co-op voted to send him away.

Three hens have died of unknown causes and were buried in the woods because nobody was ready to eat them. One vanished during an early spring outing to forage in the woods and compost heaps. She was perhaps the victim of a hawk. Remaining are eight varieties of heirloom hens that Peggy can recite off the top of her head, "because I count the girls every night." They include fluffy Buff Orpingtons, the color of straw; salt-and-pepper Barred Rocks; and glossy black Australorps, who lay speckled brown eggs. Eggs laid by three multi-colored Araucanas are prized most of all, simply for their blue-green color.

Only a handful have names. Thelma and Louise are the black Australorps. And Esmerelda is an Araucana who was badly pecked by her coop sisters early on, and was kept for a month's recovery in a wire enclosure in the garage, dropping one egg a day onto the straw-padded concrete.

The Process

Baby chicks were acquired in July, for two dollars each, from JK Feeds in Buckley. They were a day old, the size and weight of the eggs they'd just climbed out of. Peggy and Jeanne tended

them for weeks in a blue plastic kiddie pool in their basement. As they grew, Peggy gently nagged her neighbors to get the coop built: "The chicks are growing up!" Finally, by mid-August, the young hens and Pete the rooster moved into their coop.

Six big old spruce trees had been cut from the land. Trenches were dug two feet deep so underground chicken wire would deter predators like weasel and mink. The neighbors used scrap lumber and insulation, a recycled door and window, and a few new bits to construct an elegant coop. Even Jeanne, at 74, is proud to say while showing off the inside of the coop: "I cut those roosts, I want you to know. I went out in the woods and found them on the ground." They are two saplings, stripped and cut and mounted horizontally for the hens to sit on. "It turns out," says Peggy, "that we all had some skills that were useful, and I learned how to use a Skilsaw."

Since then, tending the chickens has involved keeping their feed and water troughs full, shoveling out the poop straw once a week or so, spreading fresh straw and—the best part—gathering eggs.

The first eggs were found on November 4, almost four months after the chicks arrived. By April 1, they had produced 483 eggs, or more than 40 dozen. It's not uncommon for the group to gather three dozen eggs in two days. Says Matt, "Most of our eggs are large to extra-large, weighing a little over two ounces. It's pretty amazing that a five-pound hen can produce a pound of output every eight days." Proportionally, he says, a human being would have to produce the weight of both arms and most of a leg, without losing any body weight.

Peggy and Jeanne gather eggs several times a day when they're home. When they're away, which is often, the others visit morning, noon and night, with Matt and Wendy opening the coop in the morning so the hens can wander their outdoor pen, and Frank, Jennifer and Keith coaxing them back in at night. In nice weather, they're allowed to roam in the nearby woods, foraging for insects, each hen following her whims. Their human keepers must watch, however, for hawks, coyotes... just about anything will snatch a chicken. Young Keith loves to feed his friends corncobs, greens, scratch and other treats. And when I ask what it's like to slide his small hand beneath nesting hens to find eggs beneath them, his eyes light up and he says, "Sometimes they're very warm."

The Payoff

The rules aren't strict, but each family is now allowed two dozen eggs each week, plus or minus whatever they do or don't need. Excess eggs are sold for \$2.50 a dozen to family and friends. Eggs have also been bartered for beer, carpentry work and simple affection. Matt has even advertised extra eggs on his Facebook page.

Money from egg sales goes into the Egg Jar, a glass cookie jar in Peggy and Jeanne's kitchen, which is Egg Central. In their fridge go any eggs that anyone finds on their visits to the coop. On their table is a clipboard with detailed, precise records of each day's production, profits and losses (which sometimes include eggs broken or badly pecked.)

The Egg Jar's cash pays for feed—\$12.50 per 50-pound bag, which lasts two weeks—and other smaller needs. "We are meeting our expenses," says Peggy proudly, "with more than \$20 left over each month." And it's all on the honor system. "Of course!" says Peggy. "It works because we trust each other."

That trust and a resulting affection are the biggest payoffs of the Homestead Coop Co-op's project. They know each others' phone numbers by heart. They know each others' schedules. They've had a pot-luck dinner together. They're sharing magazine subscriptions. And last winter, Matt cleared Peggy and Jeanne's driveway religiously with his snowblower, so access to the coop was easy.

Says Wendy: "We talk every day. It's the chickens that prompt the conversations, which then, like foraging hens, wander farther."

Says Matt of the whole project: "It isn't nearly as disgusting as I'd feared."

Says Jennifer, who was dubious at first: "I enjoy taking walks and stopping by to feed the chickens special treats, bread or greens, and watching them come running for their snacks."

Says Peggy: "I've learned that my neighbors are generous, humorous, caring and intelligent people. There are so many ways we can and will strengthen each other."

Say the girls: "Bawk bawk, bawk-bawk-bawk."

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