RHODE ISLAND RED—A RISING POULTRY BREED

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Officially Recognized Less than Ten Years Ago, It Is Fast Gaining in Favor

The average American poultry keeper needs fowls that combine the qualities of good laying and good meat production and that are hardy. He doesn't want Leghorns, because Leghorns make poor roasters, nor Cochins, since they amount to little as layers. The Orpingtons, big, handsome birds, have white skin and legs, whereas the fixed American market demand is for yellow. The flesh of the Plymouth Rock, which is an excellent winter layer, is of coarse texture, and Rock hens go broody too hard and too often. Wyandottes don't give quite enough eggs, and those that they do give are irregular in color and shape.

In fact, the absolutely perfect combination fowl has not appeared; there is always some fault in evidence, or some quality lacking. I think that the breed which comes nearest, so far, to the general-purpose ideal is one that not so long ago was despised, but that now is rising to wide popularity: the Rhode Island Reds. The Reds are first of all utility birds; that the best specimens make fine showbirds has been fortunate, but their strongest appeal, and greatest value, is to the average poultryman who wants to get from his chickens a fair meat-and-egg profit, and perhaps a bit of fun and an occasional sale at a fancy price in the showroom.

Officially, they are less than ten years old. The Single Combs, which were the earlier of the two varieties to be recognized by the Standard of Perfection, were not admitted until 1904, and prior to that time Reds were comparatively little known outside of Rhode Island and the eastern part of Massachusetts. Farmers of that section, and especially of the Little Compton district in Rhode Island, were their originators.

The first crosses, dating back to the fifties, were of red males, brought from the East in sailing vessels, upon scrub females, the theory being that the brilliant color indicated vitality. Probably some of these males were Shanghais and Javas, and certainly some were Malays. Considerably later, Brown Leghorn blood was introduced to improve the laying, always a main point in the eyes of the practical Rhode Islanders. Gradually the dominant color of the old red males spread over the flocks, but neither
it nor a definite shape was bred for very systematically; the strongest birds and the good layers were used for breeding, and the long shape and harmonious color of to-day's Reds, though partly due to the recent good work of fanciers, are fundamentally the products of utility qualities and not results of efforts toward an arbitrary ideal.

When Red fanciers began to get together about ten years ago, the breed-standard which they agreed upon had been virtually framed for them by the breed they wished to push. The logical Red was of medium weight and active; long, wide and deep in shape—the generous layer and meat producer; in color red, with black points, and over the plumage of the male the lustrous sheen inherited from the Malay. But a large proportion of Reds were inclined to be more or less illogical. They did not "breed true." The widely different elements in their make-up conflicted and as a result gave many short and off-colored chickens.

How They Won Their Way

There were few specimens of exhibition quality, and though showbirds are of little importance in the market poultryman's flock, they are the best of advertisements for a breed. It has been by building up, through line-breeding, strains capable of yielding exhibition birds and by persistent exhibiting that Red fanciers have performed their greatest service. A breed whose supporters were so enthusiastic must amount to something, thought the poultrymen, and they began to give the Reds a fair chance, which was all they needed. One no longer hears them hailed, derisively, as "dunghill birds."

The most significant fact to many about Red history is that at the beginning, and for a long time thereafter, outbreeding was practiced; that is, there was no mating of closely related specimens, but many different blood-lines were gradually fused. As there had been no degeneration, the fanciers had a firm foundation of vitality to work upon when they started to improve shape and color; and—a point which is of more lasting importance—abundant vitality is present in the large utility flocks.

The Red hen is seldom a poor layer, or sterile. The chicks are sturdy and easy to raise. The young stock grows rapidly and develops a very small proportion of runty or deformed birds, though there are still many culls, from the fancier's point of view. The males are remarkably vigorous and often potent; frequently the influence of a sire can be traced through several generations by some inherited peculiarity which his descendants almost invariably possess. Vigor obtains equally in the two varieties; the difference is merely in the comb. Possibly the Rose Combs are a little neater looking and the Single Combs a trifle more even in color.

Granting the value of an outbred ancestry, the Reds would not have become so effective if some of the lines which contributed to their making had not been especially good. The blood of the Cornish fowls, which are famous as table birds, is at least one-third Malay, and doubtless to the Malay strain is due much of the Reds' table excellence. Judging from my own experience, this excellence can scarcely be exaggerated. For a number of years I have sold Red broilers and roasters to a critical retail trade and never had a complaint, though none of them was specially fattened, but all were taken directly from the yards.

The best fowl I ever carved was a yearling Red cock which had been shown twice as a cockeral and used for a season in the pens. He had a tremendous keel of meat and was as tender as a soft roaster. Occasionally, when pressed for a roaster, I have furnished a two-year-old Red hen and escaped without injury. The flesh is somewhat looser than that of the Cornish and the breast fuller. The standard weights are a pound less, throughout, than Plymouth Rock weights, and the same, except in pullets, as those for Wyandottes.

Care should be taken to use for breeding only fowls that are as heavy as the Standard requires, since the tendency is, in an active breed, for the birds to run light. To reduce the weights for Reds would be to put them in a class with
the Mediterraneans, which are egg-machines and little else. While in their present form they are general-purpose fowls and not recognized egg-machines, they have supplanted the Leghorns on many egg farms, because not only can they be counted on to lay heavily, but they can be disposed of to advantage in the market at any stage, from broilers to two-year-olds, whereas surplus Leghorns cannot be profitably marketed except as small broilers.

Wherever white-shelled eggs are at a premium, as in the district which supplies New York City, Leghorns or birds of that type will continue to be used on large plants, but profit in eggs is a matter for close calculation, and where brown-shelled eggs are in demand, the extra profit to be derived from roasters, capons and good-sized broilers gives the Reds an advantage.

They get much of their laying capacity from the Brown Leghorn cross, but do not mature so early as to lose in vitality. My March and April hatched pullets begin to lay at from five and a half to six months, continue through the autumn and early winter, generally take a short vacation in January, then lay until well on into the summer, with occasional short fits of broodiness. I have had some that insisted on laying through the moult. The eggs are of a good size from the beginning, but yearlings lay larger eggs than pullets and are better to breed from.

As to frequency, while an occasional Red hen lays two hundred eggs a year, that number should not be expected. At this stage of poultry development, the two-hundred-egg hen is rather a freak than a logical product, and I do not know of any responsible poultryman who claims to have a large flock, of any breed, that averages any such output, per bird. I don't mean that such a flock is an impossibility, or that two- or even three-hundred-egg hens may not become quite common in the future, for in considering this matter it should be remembered that the domestic hen, as we now have her, is very largely an artificial product. The jungle fowl, from which she is descended, laid at the most only a couple of dozen eggs per year—one litter ordinarily, a second if the first was destroyed.

The prolific layer is the result of skillful breeding through the centuries, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that further improvement will be made, just as it is probable that we shall learn more about artificial incubation and brooding. He who maintains that egg production has reached its limit is by way of being a back number in a progressive age, as is the poultryman, still irritatingly in our
midst, who sniffs at incubators. Nevertheless progress, to date, has given us the "phenomenal" layer only as an exception. For the flock of to-day, a hundred and fifty eggs per year for pullets and a hundred and forty for hens is a fine average. Reds will accomplish this, with careful breeding and proper care.

The most noticeable thing about their laying is its reliability; they are always "on the job," and I once had six pullets which, in very unfavorable conditions, laid a hundred and nine eggs in twenty-one days. On account of press of other work, these pullets were ill-housed and more or less neglected generally, but nothing could stop them.

Faults for the Fanciers

The faults usually attributed to Reds have mostly to do with the fancy side. The claims are made that even now they do not breed reasonably true to color and that the hens fade. The latter of these two charges is a perfectly true bill; the hens do fade badly and are likely to assume a lighter color with each successive moult. But all colored feathers fade more or less with age. Buff breeds offend quite as much in this respect as red ones, and people who rule out the Reds have their hands full, for they must also rule out the Buff Rocks, Buff Orpingtons, Buff Wyandottes, and Buff Leghorns, a fairly large order. Experienced breeders simply accept a certain amount of fading as inevitable and are properly thankful when they possess a few birds that hold their color beyond the first year.

With regard to the other charge, I don't think that, allowing always for the leeway which must be given in color to a new breed, the Reds now breed less truly than other parti-colored fowls. The objection is usually raised by prejudiced people, by unskillful breeders, or by the novice who expects to get from a hundred eggs at least fifty birds of exhibition quality. The imagination of the novice has been heated by glowing advertisements, and when he hatches chicks of which five per cent have down on the legs, and seventy-five per cent develop into birds unfit for the showroom, he is highly indignant and writes a series of violent letters to the breeder who sold him the eggs and who may not have been one of the hothouse advertisers.

He doesn't know that the breeder, hothouse or not, would have considered himself extremely lucky if, having kept and incubated those eggs, he had obtained from them two really fine exhibition birds. Fanciers have a saying, which applies to any breed: "It's pretty hard to get a good bird."

Misunderstandings between buyer and seller are bound to occur now and then, but they are unfortunate, and especially so in the case of a new breed which needs only a fair and unprejudiced trial. It seems a pity that there should have been any extravagant Red advertising, for extravagant claims and prices do more harm than good in the long run. It is doubtful, for example, if any setting of eggs, Red or otherwise, is worth fifty dollars, except possibly to a millionaire fancier who is willing to take at that price a very long chance of hatching a winner. Eggs for hatching are always a gamble, because on the way to the purchaser they are subject to rough handling and changes of temperature and in the purchaser's incubator or under his hen to the possibility of being spoiled or broken.

The buying of grown stock is an entirely different matter; the seller can describe to the buyer exactly what can be furnished for a certain price, and the buyer will get value for his money, with a minimum of risk. Fifty dollars is not too much to pay for a Red cockerel capable of winning at a good show, for the exhibitor of such a bird will get his money's worth from the advertising which the winning gives him; and a good breeding male is worth from three to fifteen dollars, though sometimes it is hard to make a prospective buyer appreciate the fact.

Last winter an old farmer came to my yards to buy a Red male. He said that his Reds were running down in size and he thought it was time to bring in fresh blood; pointing to an eight-pound cockerel, he asked what I would take for him. I told him five dollars. Extracting a one-dollar bill,
he held it out and said: "Here's what he's worth, son."

A dollar was the ordinary price paid for a rooster in his vicinity, and it was impossible for him to see that the big, healthy cockerel, bred through many generations from carefully selected up-to-weight birds, would put enough meat into his flock to repay him a dozen times over, in hard cash, for the extra expenditure. His mental squint was full brother to the one which leads antiquated cattle owners to breed their cows to scrub bulls. Fortunately the type is less common than it used to be; the majority of poultry buyers now admit that a bird with the skill and experience of the specialist behind it ought to command a price somewhat in excess of its meat value if put on the block. I suppose it is the spirit of gambling latent in all human nature that allows a man to pay thirty or forty dollars for a setting of eggs, on the strength of a flashy advertisement, when he wouldn't think of paying such a sum for a pair of birds that were actually worth it.

Undoubtedly the best plan for the buyer of Reds, whether he desire fancy or purely utility birds, is to purchase grown stock from a reputable breeder, and the time to buy is in the autumn, before the breeder is put to the expense of housing his flock for the winter. Prices are about one-third less in the fall than in the spring, when birds for breeding are in greatest demand. But at no season will a dollar do much more than a dollar's work.

"Please make me a price on six R. I. Red pullets and a cockerel. I want them for winter layers, but they must be A1, as I want to show them at our fair, which comes October 1." This letter is of a familiar type. What the writer wants is a pen of birds with exhibition qualities, for the price of layers. He doesn't state his limit, but after some correspondence it will probably prove to be about fifteen dollars. Consequently he gets good layers, which, however, do not win at his fair.

Red pullets at two dollars apiece are not showbirds, but they should be up to weight, moderately even in color, and capable of producing in their turn, when properly mated, birds as good as themselves. The last quality gives them their greatest superiority over scrubs, because scrubs can't be counted on to produce anything at all. Our buyer, with his six pullets and his three-dollar mated cockerel, has exactly what he paid for, the foundation for an excellent utility flock. Had he put his fifteen dollars, in the spring, into eggs—say forty-five eggs
at five dollars per setting—he might ultimately have got more birds and better ones, but the chances would have been against him.

If one must buy eggs, it is best to put into them no more money than one is perfectly willing to lose. Then one will feel no great disappointment if an absent-minded express messenger cooks the eggs over a car radiator, or can properly rejoice if they escape injury and a record bunch of chicks hatches. Red eggs have been known to produce a good percentage of strong chicks after a journey from New York to Alaska.

The housing of Reds is not a hard problem, as poultry-housing problems go. They do well in almost any sort of conditions, from free range to moderate confinement, and will even endure the close quarters imposed by some of the backyard "systems." I think they are at their best in open-front houses, with scratching sheds for winter and generous yards for clear weather.

Coddling is bad for them, as they are very hardy; given plenty of exercise, they continue to lay merrily through a zero snap that puts Leghorns out of business. At such times they want deep litter to scratch in and good ventilation without drafts. In summer, they need shade, fresh earth to work in, and protection from lice. Growing stock should of course be allowed abundant room.

Hardy, good layers, good table birds; yes, the Reds come pretty close to meeting the average poultryman's requirements. They have the added advantage of being at their best extremely handsome fowls. An exhibition Red cockerel, in full feather and ready for the judge, is a bird to delight the fancier's eye and to attract the attention of the visitor to the showroom. An even prettier sight, perhaps, is a flock of Reds working out of doors, with the afternoon sunlight flashing on their brilliant plumage; any poultryman can appreciate it, especially when he is carrying a full egg-basket.