



CHICKENS: EVER FAITHFUL THROUGHOUT HISTORY

2009

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Gilford resident, Nate Smith, shown here as a boy, holds Henny Penny, one of his family's chickens. Smith's father always had chickens on his farm and usually kept a flock of approximately 100 birds. Today, Nate Smith and his wife, Carolyn, work hard each year to continue the family's long tradition of farming by running Smith Farm Stand in Gilford.

Chickens have faithfully followed humans through history beginning approximately 10,000 years ago in Vietnam, making it one of the first domesticated animals. From that point on, chickens have scratched their way into our history books, and now there are more chickens on earth than any other type of bird.

Throughout, they have provided us with both eggs and meat; eggs being the primary reason for keeping chickens until the 1950s, when, due to the new concept of refrigeration, our country readily took to the idea of having ready-to-cook broilers available for family menus. Up until that time, a meal featuring chicken as the main course was reserved for special occasions only.

Gilford, no different than any other town in New Hampshire, has been home to many chickens, which for the most part spent their life being part of a small backyard flock or family farm.

Long-time residents can look back thirty years or so and remember Gilford's own large chicken farm, Sunny Slope, owned and operated by the Robertson family. The farm housed approximately 37,000 chickens at any given time and was a popular place for locals to buy the eggs they needed. The Robertsons sold their farm in 1987, and Gilford's well-known chicken farm became history.

Today, small flocks of chickens are again popping up in more and more backyards throughout town. Fifty years ago, a small flock might contain 100 birds or more; now a half dozen birds might be just the right amount of chickens for a typical family.

When we paint a picture of a classic farm in our minds, chickens are perhaps the first animal placed into the scene. The desire to move to the country and start a rural life, which includes raising a few chickens, continues to haunt so many of us. It isn't surprising considering the start-up costs for chickens are relatively low and the space required to keep a few chickens is not great; their housing can be very simple. There are a wide variety of common and rare breeds to choose from, including the wonderful breed, the New Hampshire Red, named for our great state.



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Most no longer hatch chicks from eggs that come from laying hens. Rather, chicks are typically ordered in the springtime from large commercial hatcheries and are then shipped at a day old. Instead of baby chicks running along the ground beside mother hen, they are mostly raised indoors under heat lamps until they are large enough and have enough feathers to keep them warm if the weather outside turns chilly.

Hens begin laying eggs around the age of four months, and will usually lay an egg a day. Egg production drops off around 18 months; however, many hens continue laying into their senior years. With an average lifespan of 5 to 12 years, keeping a few laying hens around is always a sound investment.

In these times, we have the added luxury of enjoying chickens as pets. Due to the growing popularity of these birds, they earned the status of America's favorite pet a few years ago.

It's no wonder. Anyone who keeps chickens ends up watching them, probably a little too much. Their behavior is endlessly fascinating, and at times, eerily human. The saying, "a bunch of cackling hens" takes on new meaning when watching a group of hens roaming through a backyard garden.

If the free-range chicken population increased, the need for pesticide usage would naturally go down. These birds live to eat and will gleefully devour vast amounts of the pests and weeds we currently spray for, such as: Japanese beetles, grubs, slugs, caterpillars, black flies, ticks, and mosquitoes. Dandelion plants and clover also disappear at a rapid rate when chickens move through an area. Let's not forget that composted chicken manure offers a great boost to the plants in any garden.

The popularity of chickens has varied throughout history, but they have always been with us and hopefully always will be. Along with offering us food, they now offer modern man something natural to watch – and a delightful opportunity to slow down and smell the roses.

Gilford's Thompson-Ames Historical Society welcomes stories of local history. To contact the Society, e-mail: www.thomames@metrocast.net . Be sure to check their website at: www.gilfordhistoricalsociety.org for upcoming programs and events.