



I'm standing with a feed salesman in the midst of a flock of our turkeys ready for market. We aimed to do our part when the government requested a turkey dinner for every soldier at the holidays during World War II.

Turkey Tales

By Ethel Weehunt

There are many stories that could be associated with turkeys—humorous, hazardous, lengthy, short, believable and unbelievable. I began growing the Pilgrims' choice in 1938 with three hens and a gobbler, and ended my turkey years by marketing 5,000 birds in 1952.

During World War II, the government asked for a turkey dinner for every man in the service at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The market was good. When the war ended, so did the profitable turkey market. During those years, I received a whole education from my experiences raising turkeys.

The encyclopedia tells us that the turkey, that celebrated game bird that is glorified at Thanksgiving and Christmas, received its name from English traders who traded with the country Turkey.

Honduras and the Yucatan are home to a brilliantly colored variety of turkey. Here in the tablelands east

of the Rockies, and in old Mexico, one can see flocks of wild, so-called "Mexican turkeys," with feathers of brown, black and yellowish hues. The birds' appearance is brightened by red folds of skin on the neck. On the tom, this skin becomes redder when he is excited, or in a scrapping mood.

While these turkeys have been domesticated, there are yet many wild flocks, which afford turkey hunting as a monitored, seasonal sport. Indeed, on this farm, I see wild turkeys.

Strange to say, contrary to general rule, the wild turkey has degenerated under the care of mankind. Perhaps it is from a lack of natural foods, such as grass seeds, insects (they love grasshoppers) and fruit (haws, wild plums, persimmons, and small nuts).

When we took out a load of feed for the cattle, we always carried a bucket of shelled corn. Soon

the turkeys were meeting our truck, anticipating the corn. The turkeys would lurk in the woods until we left, then come out to enjoy the repast.

Chapter One: The Beginning

"I'm going to a farm sale this afternoon," George said. "Wanna go?"

I should have gone. I might have prevented George from bringing home that gobbler and those three hen turkeys.

When I saw them, they were still sacked, their feet tied. "But what will I do with them?" I wondered aloud.

"Oh, just sort of follow the hens around," he replied nonchalantly. "Watch them, get the eggs, and when the hen goes to brooding, give her eggs back to her."

I listened, slightly distracted. "But the baby—what of Wilma?"

"Can't you make a backpack, let baby go with you, and play Indian?"

I tried it once. Baby did not like the bushes. "Mama, go," she wailed. She lost her bonnet.

I watched the turkey hen as she elegantly pulled the heads of grass seeds between her bill, snooped daintily here and there, and finally commenced to moving sticks, fallen leaves and dry grass about as she dusted out a hole suitable for setting. My presence and Wilma's wailing did not seem to faze her as she fashioned a nest—or so I thought, until she gave me a penetrating look that plainly said, "Well, you are still spying!" and then walked away. I left, too. It was all so silly out there in the woods. Wilma was unhappy, the turkey was unhappy, and certainly I was unhappy.

At supertime, George cheerfully asked, "And how many turkey eggs did you gather?"

"None," I answered coolly.

After that, we decided to let the turkeys browse about and do as they pleased. At the end of the growing season, there were four young turkeys, all hens. Now we had a total of seven hens and a tom.

George built a pen. We confined the flock from Feb. 1–May 15, by which time there were 49

poults. (Turkey hens make two layings, averaging 20 eggs in a season.)

I subscribed to *Turkey World*. I read agricultural magazines, learning all I could about the care, costs and the incredible profit potential of raising the "holiday" bird. I was particularly impressed by a new, broad-breasted bronze turkey, which had been developed by a California grower.

Fall came—selling time. I booked a profit of \$156, even though I kept 30 hens and five toms.

Ever since I had left my childhood home, I had wanted a piano. George was somewhat dismayed when I announced my intentions for the turkey money. "We can sell those 35 birds in that pen," he said. "Get some cows."

But after we had talked about the cattle project, we decided that we weren't quite ready to swing that yet.

Chapter Two: Advancement Into Dangerous Water

In the third year of raising turkeys, we built brooder house No. 1. We ordered a dozen eggs from the California grower: \$40 for a dozen broad-breasted bronze eggs—such extravagance. And such disappointment when only three of the

wonder eggs hatched.

Eventually, however, by carefully nurturing every egg—and said eggs' descendants—I was growing turkeys that brought a 10-cent-per-pound bonus from a fancy café.

Well, you know greed will master you. If I had some help and more turkeys, we could buy more land. That's what I told George.

He saw the facts. Gene entered the scene. He was a diligent, dependable worker, if generally a bit tipsy on Mondays. Gene understood the need for good sanitation, proper nutrition and wire floors if one wanted to be successful with turkeys.

We were now turkey growers—in the business of profit and loss. But no matter what precautions one may practice, there will be tearful scenes of accidents and sickness.

Experience finally taught me not to take chances.



Poults at our farm.

Still, there was no end to the unexpected occurrences. Four of our 11 brooders were set up in an old four-room house. George and I, concerned about feeding the best brand of turkey ration, set up a test. Each of the four rooms had inner doors, so it was easy to separate the poults into groups of 300 in each room. Two groups were to be fed Purina brand, two Nutrena. The progress and growth of the poults would prove the efficiency of the feeds.

When they weren't in school, Wilma and Leonard worked together to help feed and water the poults. But they were not so interested in the feeding experiment as George and I were, and as they cared for the four bunches, it was tempting to leave all the doors open. The young turkeys enjoyed a high old time mixing as they visited all the rooms. And it amused our two youthful workers greatly when they saw George and me earnestly studying the progress of the poults, once more behind closed doors, and making remarks like "I believe the bone growth of the Purina is strongest," or "They show more feather sheen; I'm for the Nutrena."

Had we read the ingredients on the side of each feed sack, we would have learned that both companies sold a similar ration. But I guess we couldn't read!

Chapter Three: Keep Your Cool

Hazards and humorous days are yours if you dare to venture into the unpredictable realm of producing these feast-day fowls. You will find yourself performing physical and mental feats that are never mentioned in turkey-raising guidebooks. My advice: Just keep your cool, and you can conquer all obstacles.

These are a few of the obstacles I experienced during the 20 years (1932–1952) when I raised turkeys: I watched a turkey hen in the woods daintily pick up fallen leaves and lay them, one by one, over her precious, cream-colored, brown-speckled eggs. When the eggs were completely concealed from coyotes, possums, snakes and other marauders, she stole silently away. ...

Eggs meant to be delivered to the hatchery for incubation arrived later. These eggs were stored beneath the house. It was my responsibility to crawl through a manhole every day and turn each egg. (If they are not turned, they lose their fertility.)

Once when I had squirmed under the house, I looked up to see a moccasin snake. I abhor snakes. I am afraid of them! When that snake saw me, it coiled, prepared to strike, as it waited for my next move. And my next move was to get out—fast!

I kept a hoe nearby in case such an event occurred. Cork, the best turkey dog on the place, must have known it was dangerous for me to crawl under the house; why else was he hanging around?

When he saw me pick up the hoe and heard me say "snake," his suspicions were verified. He wanted through that manhole! "No, Cork! Wait!" He stood tense and alert, waiting.

Water moccasin snakes are poisonous. That space beneath the floor was too confining for Cork to work safely. But now the intruder had moved near the manhole. Cork whined, eager for action. "Wait, Cork, wait," I commanded.

Slowly the moccasin emerged, then coiled. I banged the ground with the hoe to entice it to strike. As the moccasin struck, Cork sank his teeth behind its head.

After some hard shaking, it was all over. I praised Cork to the skies and went about my business of turning the eggs.

New turkey chicks are in the brooder houses, instinctively calling for their mother. Their bills have been dipped in water. They discover the wide cover of the brooder, where the thermostatically controlled thermometer shows 95 degrees. Some sprawl on the hardware-cloth floor, asleep—little fluffs of mixed yellow and brown. To think that within six months they will be sitting on someone's table, nicely roasted a crisp brown and stuffed with bread crumbs ...

Wilma, noting my sad expression, says, "Mama, they're OK." ...

The poults now have feathers—frying size. In the closeness of the brooder house, they are restless. An empty bucket stands near the closed screen door. One poult jumps into the bucket, then another, then another. The bucket is full.

When I arrive, I turn over the bucket and find 21 limp poults—smothered. I learn a lesson: Never leave an empty bucket in a brooder house.

A turkey's instinct for survival is to hover. A low-flying plane or a hawk will cause grown turkeys to stampede and pile up and smother. I have

seen it happen. ...

George came in and said, "Across the creek and up on the hill there is a good stand of Japanese clover."

"So?"

"Let's drive the turkeys over there," he said. "They need green stuff." Knowing his proclivity for the new and unusual, I hesitated, but capitulated.

George, a helper, Wilma (age 7), Leonard (age 5) and I, armed with long switches with a white rag tied to the end, set forth. But the half-grown turkeys were not of a notion to leave their indoor home.

After much chasing and cajoling, we finally got the reluctant birds out and on the ground. But the youngsters had never touched ground before, and they wanted the security of the brooder.

Finally, with all hands working at driving and Corkie guarding the brooder house, the turkeys caught the idea. They weren't too difficult to drive. Corkie joined us and kept the wanderers bunched. To me, it was a funny sight—two children, three grown-ups and one dog driving a bunch of middle-sized turkeys across a field.

We reached the marvelous clover patch. "Made

it," George boasted. But the turkeys had no interest in the clover. They did not know it was to be eaten. They stood around in groups and complained loudly.

"Let's go," George said. "They'll find it." Wilma and Leonard didn't have to be coaxed. I was tired, and I am sure they were, too.

"Keep them all together," George admonished our helper, Hicks. It seemed to me that Hicks paled a bit, but perhaps it was my imagination.

Some of the turkeys followed us back. Corkie had to drag them out from beneath their beloved home. The children took them from Cork and put them where they could fill up on their chosen food—commercial poult grower.

The poults left on the green scattered. The children and I spent the rest of the day hunting them, unhappy and lost as they were, then returning them to the brooder house.

I could go on and on with my "turkey tales." But to end, I will ask those of you who have read about my trials and tribulations: Why did my tears flow when I watched the loaded trucks, resounding with the calls of caged birds, drive away? Sold! ❖

