

THE STORY of OLSON'S POULTRY, Inc.

Let me introduce you to George Olson, owner of the business, along with his two sons, Blaine & Carl.

George's parents came from Sweden. His father Nils Olson saw an ad in the Swedish newspaper, asking young men to come to America and work in the coal mines---they needed lots of workers. He was 19 at the time, and had joined the Navy, as jobs were so scarce. He managed to borrow a few dollars for boat passage, and headed for "the promised Land USA". The ad said jobs were plentiful at Lexington, Missouri---so he located there.



He immediately was employed, but the hours were long (10 hrs. per day) and the work back breaking.....He had already been seriously dating a girl in Sweden, and one he was working, sent for her to come, and be married. This was in 1893, and she found work as a housekeeper in St. Louis. Within eleven years they had 3 boys and 2 girls. Dad was the first born, and thus most responsible.

Tuberculosis was common at that time, and both parents contracted the dreaded disease. By 10 years old, both his mother had died, leaving the 5 children. Youngest was 1 yr old, and oldest 10. His father was left with this situation. They had no relatives in America, so Mr. Olson had to put them in a Children's Home In St. Louis. Three different families took Dad , but only for very short periods. He finally landed in Victoria, MO. A retired minister had a small farm, and thought a small boy could do some chores, so took Dad in. By September and time for Dad to start school, the minister decided to 'send him back to the Children's Home. Before the minister could get all the paper work completed----school had started a few days.

Dad was small for his age, so probably really wasn't able to do the amount of work wanted. Only a few days attending, (as fate would have it) Maude McKee was in the same grade as Dad, and noticed the timid little boy, standing off to himself. Feeling sorry for him, she went over and found that he was an orphan, soon to be sent back again. This struck a place in Maude's heart. Her sister (4 years older) talked about the problem, as they walked the mile home after school let out. The two of them came up with the idea (plan). They would ask their parents to 'take him in" . Their Father told them they already had 5 mouths to feed, and wouldn't want another one to care for.....Maude was so moved for the little boy's plight, she spoke up. " Pappa, if you will let him stay, he can have half of my food. "this was emotional enough, Pappa relented and that's how George and Maude eventually fell in love and married. Thus became my background.

Now---this is where CHICKENS enter the picture. Dad needed work of course, and a couple of St. Louis business men (one owned a Confectionary, the other a Hotel.) also owned a ten acre fruit farm, about a mile away. They used this as a retreat from the big city.

Word around the area was they needed hired help, so Dad checked it out. Sure enough, in fact they moved into the farm house and began caring for a large number of peach & apple trees.

By the end of the first years working the trees and gathering the fruit, Dad decided that he had ample time to increase the income from the farm by raising some chickens. Both the hotel and confectionary could use all the eggs in St. Louis. The more Dad thought about it, the stronger he felt it a good idea.

The next visit to the farm by the owners, Dad approached them with his idea. After a few minutes explaining his plans, they asked Dad---“George, how many hens to you want to keep?”.....you would need to know my Dad to understand---he already had everything worked out in his mind. He could hall used railroad box car lumber that was being replace by new, at the shops in De Soto. It was free for the hauling. (At present the lumber was just scrap, so they were just burning it) Dad was a fair carpenter already, and would build the the chicken house (with the help of a hired man helper. So he blurted out 1,100 !.....This about floored the owners, but after Dad talked some more, he was able to convince them it would work-----it did-----and Dad has been in the chicken business, one way or another, ever since.



He stayed there at “High Point Farm” as it was called, for nine years, but the work expected of Mom was too much for her and she began having heart rhythm problems. Dad had to quit , and moved into De Soto. In De Soto he borrowed enough money to buy a small ten acre, a mile from town. He worked at the Shoe Factory, the Mo. Pacific RR Shops, and the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co, in Crystal City.

Working with chickens has always been ‘part of Dad’. He wrote to Missouri University Agriculture Dept, asking for plans for Poultry houses. They shortly sent him plans (blueprints) and Dad hired local carpenters to build a 30’ x 30’ Missouri type house. (I hate to say it, but the new chicken house, with all new lumber was better looking and the windows fit tighter, than the house we were living in.)It would hold 300 laying hens.



I just came across these pictures – Dec. 2009

Two 30 x 30 chicken houses at home place on Boyd Street.

Left house Dad & Mom built – each house held 300 White Leghorn hens

Soon it was time for Dad to build another chicken house, like the first one----so that moved him up to 600 laying hens.

By now the local Dixie Feed Store was looking for a manager Dad was already buying so much chicken feed, they offered him the job of Manager, a salaried position.....



Another five years as feed store manager, George was offered the position of managing the local chicken hatchery, called Funk's Hatchery, right in town. Dr. E. M. Funk of the Mo University, Columbia, MO had met Dad several times at Poultry Meetings at various locations. Dad was eager to learn the newest and best methods for raising chickens.



This interested George, and it was 1940. My brother was off to Chicago, to Alexien Bros Hospital learning to be male nurse. I would graduate in May, so would be ready to help with the hatchery work.. With this job, came living quarters right next to the hatchery. That came rent free.

The reason the job was available was that Mr. Funk's brother Everett, had been running the hatchery, but didn't like being tied down so close; and wanted to move back to the family farm and raise beef cattle, in Ellington, MO. Thus, we became the new managers.

George (Dad) was already used to hatching chicks, as he had operated a kerosene incubator the years he was at High Point Farm. True, the incubators we would be operating were a whole lot larger, each of which held 100,000 eggs.



Robbins incubators hold 30,000 eggs each – Hatch 10,000 chicks per week in Spring



Dad Olson viewing one side of incubator, with 15,000 eggs on a rotating rack. 1950

What we did not know, or was aware of, the sales of baby chicks was not nearly enough for us to make a living. Fortunately Dad had already become acquainted with many local farmers, whose wife's nearly always had a flock of chickens-----from 50 to 300. (The called this HER money!)so Dad would use every chance he had to go visit the farmers and sell them chickens, instead of many who ordered from Sears, Roebuck & Co. This was a profitable method of sales----as Dad was quite successful in securing orders.

Within 3 years time, we had built the business until we made a deal with Mr. Funk to purchase it for ourselves.....Naturally we wanted to change the name, so Carl's wife came up with something clever.....Olson's *Chipper* Chicks. (We kept that name until we decided to incorporate, for insurance reasons. We then became Olson's Poultry, Inc.



ENTRANCE to OLSON'S POULTRY, INC

BACK VIEW & OTHER BUILDINGS

One of the first things we had to do, when we took over the hatchery was to go out from farm to farm and get farmers to agree to sell us hatching eggs---we of course offered a premium price per dozen. This arrangement was a bit more complex than one would think. The Poultry industry required that each hen we use eggs from had to have a individual blood sample drawn, mixed with a liquid called blue antigen. Each hen must be caught and a drop of blood stirred with the antigen, on a white marble slate. If they were a carrier of Pullorum (a diarrhea) they must be removed from the flock. We got special bred roosters, not related to the hens---to assure strong, healthy baby chicks. Blaine was required to attend a week's course at the University of Missouri in training. (He won a special awards plaque for his excellent performance.)



At the peak of our sales of baby chicks, we were hatching 10,000 chicks each week. WE even had a customer in Fayette, Arkansas fly in to the local small airport and load up 100 boxes of one hundred day old chicks---and an hour later be unloading them in buildings already prepared for raising them to 3 lbs. (frying size). Not only were we delivering chick by air---but shipping them Parcel Post My brother and I took turns hauling via special built insulated van, the large orders of 500 locally, and 1,000 to Arkansas and even Smiley, Texas..

**(Yes, we worked long hours in the poultry business----
and it was 7 day a week job. But there were three years when
baby chicks were in demand for raising in Arkansas.
Those were the good days!**

I have been writing about the forming of the hatchery business----but the “business” was the work load involved in operating it. I have talked about getting the hatching egg supply from local farmers, and their wives.....With the increase in chick sales, it became apparent we needed a larger supply with more control. This of course required owning the hens themselves. Fortunately for us, the largest poultry farm was just at the edge of town, and was retiring. Thus our need was soon solved. He had been keeping 1500 hens in two long buildings. One was 150 feet long x 20 feet wide , the other only 100 feet long. It also had 6 10' x 10; brooder houses, to start the baby chicks in. Thus it almost made a custom place already built for us. (Incidentally, he and his son owned the airplane landing strip, that we would later be using to send chicks to Arkansas.)

It solved one problem, but increased our work load. We now had to care for the large flock of laying hens we would need of our hatching egg supply (have you ever thought of gathering about 1200 eggs every day, Sundays, Holidays,every day? Not only did they have to be gathered 3 times a day, but washed! (We had a open top egg washer that held a basket of about 50 eggs at a wash. This really helped with this task. The farm was about 2 miles from the hatchery, to transport the eggs.

Having this amount of eggs, daily, presented another problem. What do you do with the extra eggs, not needed for hatching chicks?Only answer we could come up with was to retail them to local grocery markets---especially the two supermarkets. One more labor requirement. The eggs still had to be washed, candled, and put in cardboard cartons. To get the stores to agree, we had to deliver and keep them in refrigerated shelves. The grocer received a small fee for providing the space. At this point, we needed more employees-----we truly were a BUSINESS place.

By the year 2000, since we were selling DeKalb Hybrid chickens, we took on DeKalb Hybrid seed corn as well. While we sold chickens to farmers-----why not sell them seed corn at the same time. Here's a picture of my brother, Carl. Boxes of baby chicks via parcel post.



We remained in business until the whole chicken industry changed methods of operation. Large companies like Purina Feed, and Tyson Poultry took over the whole business. They sold the feed, hatched the chickens, raised frying chickens for table use---by the thousands. They simply put the small hatcheries like us out of business. (In 1940 there were 90 chicken hatcheries---just in Missouri. By 2005, there were only 3)

This ends the saga of OLSON'S POULTRY, INC.

p.s. I am Blaine 93, (my brother died 6 years ago) I have worked at a hardware store In Crystal City, and NAPA Auto Parts in De Soto, until I was 75. I then took on a part time job as maintenance man for the De Soto Public Library, until I was 85. Now I spend 2 to 3 hours daily at the computer. God has been good to me!

HOPE YOU ENJOYED OUR HISTORY