

Chicken duty

My great-grandmother raised chickens most of her life. One of my fondest childhood memories comes from a box full of chirping baby chicks found in her kitchen. Left in the sturdy brown box that the mailman had delivered, she kept the new hatchlings warm by keeping them near the oven. When they were old enough, she put them in the yard and had a large coop for their safety.

While she was accustomed to the nuances of raising hens and roosters, their care is not something I learned much about. Recently, that changed. My brother and sister-in-law took a trip out of state to visit her family, so my husband, Bill, and I offered to help out at the farm. Thankfully, there were no cows, horses, or goats to be fed, just a few cats and two dozen or more chickens at the coop.

What I hadn't expected was how large some of the roosters would be. One came up to my knee. He was a handsome multi-colored fellow with feathers spattered with shades of brown and grey, along with a very large red comb he wore like a crown. And he had a royal attitude as well. Thankfully, he never threatened me, but I was wary.

There were others, however, who made their personalities known. One beautiful red hen would not leave the nesting box. I couldn't get her to budge. In fact, after the third day of not a blink or a nod, I was convinced she was dead.

I told my brother I did not sign up for dead chicken removal, so he lined up one of the men who helps him at the farm to come by and get the carcass. The next morning, Bill went along to gather eggs and chided me, "Bobbie, that chicken's not dead, she winked at me."

I can only imagine the rounds of laughter my brother had, knowing I couldn't tell a dead chicken from a live one. That was the day I let the brood out into the yard so they could peck around for the day. The sun was bright, but it was bone-chilling cold. In

Hometown Ramblings

By Bobbie Smith Bryant



Photo provided

To those not used to taking care of chickens, it can be quite surprising to find that some roosters are large enough to reach the height of your knee.

the late afternoon, I dutifully returned to put them back in the pen. What an ordeal. My brother said they would be ready to go in, and some of them were. However, at least half a dozen refused.

It suddenly became a game of hide-and-seek. And these chickens were professionals. I spotted one lurking behind a trash bin. There were two nestled under a nearby piece of equipment. And a few hardy souls were up in the rafters of the adjoining run-in shed. I first tried to corral the yard birds but each time I thought I had them cornered, they scattered.

Frustrated, I grabbed a rake and shook it toward the roosting clutch, trying to get them to budge. A few did, but most just flew from pillar to post. It was in the low 20's so it didn't take me long to give up on their fowl play and leave them to their demise.

The next morning, concerned they had been eaten by coyotes, I arrived early. What a mess. Buckets were strowed about, their water bowl was upside down and farm implements were tossed – it looked like a crime scene. Even the barn

cat was crying that his domain had been upended.

This time, they were ready to go in their pen. All but one marched in like they owned the place. That ole gal would have nothing to do with me. She is likely still outside the pen, fluffing her feathers, standing her ground.

On the last day of our care, the entire crew were clustered at the door when I arrived, demanding their freedom. I refused to open it, certain I'd never get them rounded up again. One of the pretty ones I'd call a Rhode Island Red was so indignant that she kept pecking my shoe. I'm not talking about a love peck. It was the first time I'd been attacked, and she got my attention.

So if anyone asks how the chicken duty went, the answer is simple: the chickens clearly ran the place. I tried to keep order, but by the end of the week, it was evident who ruled the roost, and it wasn't me.

Bobbie Smith Bryant is a native of Calloway County. Find more of her writing at Bobbiesmithbryant.com.

