

Poultry Chat

By H. E. Vialoux, Charleswood

Following our talk on "artificial incubation" last month, I will now take up the good old-fashioned way of hatching—"natural incubation." I must confess I much prefer this method of hatching, providing the poultryman or woman has a rational way of treating the hens before they become broody, so they can be easily handled at any time. Nothing can be more awkward and "cussed" than a sitting hen when frightened and untrained. A balking hen can provoke a saint, and many good settings of eggs are broken up by ignorant folk trying to force an old hen to sit when she does not want to. April and May are the ideal hatching months when nature's methods are employed. Have a colony house, or a box stall, or granary, any out-house, in fact, set apart for the use of the broody hens; see that the house is clean, and either make nests in tiers from a 12-foot board, 12 inches wide, or save the boxes from the grocery and utilize them for nests. The average grocery box makes an excellent nest. Place a sod in the bottom of the box and cover with litter, shaping the nest a little. Then put in a couple of eggs. Try as far as possible to get a number of hens sitting at once. As they become broody place them in these quiet nests after dark, handling them in a gentle way. In a couple of days the most cranky hen will become used to her nest, and will get off and feed in the morning and return to her box. When several hens are trained, as it were, select 11 to 13 eggs of good shape and smooth shell, the fresher the better, and slip them under the birds. Sometimes when a bird seems restless, 'tis well to cover her over for 24 hours. Always have a regular feeding time once a day—11 a.m. does nicely. Hard grain, grit, water and a dust bath containing insect powder should be put in the house. After 20 minutes the hens should be ready to go back on their nests for another 24 hours. Broody hens should always be well dusted with insect powder before incubation commences, and once each week for the 21 days. I have attended to 15 or 20 hens in a couple of houses, or sheds, in a few minutes by this method, and invariably secure splendid results, providing the eggs are fresh and fertile. The breeding pen should be mated up ten days or two weeks before the eggs are needed, always selecting a lusty, vigorous male mated to 12 or 15 females. The pick of the flock, of course, should form the breeding pen. Choose the hen of good size and shape and color, and note her egg-laying qualities. Trap-nesting, no doubt, is the ideal method of finding the best layers, but an observant person can pick out the best layers also in an ordinary flock.

Should a bird break some eggs in her nest, as a heavy bird is apt to do, remove the good eggs and wash them in lukewarm water. Put in some fresh litter before replacing them. When six or seven days of incubation have passed, quietly remove the eggs and test them in the usual way. Save the infertiles to feed to the young chicks. In early spring considerable doubling up will be necessary; give 13 fertile eggs to each hen and fresh eggs to a couple of the biddies whose nests you have robbed. One testing out of eggs is sufficient when set under hens, though some keepers advocate a second testing at the end of the second week. Always keep a good look out for mites and lice. A restless sitter is usually infested with some kind of vermin. There is no need to worry if you see that the broody hens have got mixed on their nests. No harm will result as long as each setting of eggs has an incubator on the job.

When the 21 days is about up, leave the hens severely alone; often they will not leave the nest at all for a couple of days. A cover can be slipped over the nest then to prevent any chilling of the eggs and save the wee chicks from falling over the edge of the box or nest. If the chicks hatch slowly, as they will do in cold weather in an unheated house, slip your hand under the mother and remove the egg shells that are taking up room. Leave the chicks in peace for some hours, 24 perhaps, until they are "nest ripe" and strong, then remove to a roomy, clean coop, which has been treated to a coat of whitewash or paint,

inside especially; at least, see the coop is disinfected. When the tender green grass appears, I prefer coops without a bottom in them, but, in cool spring weather a floor is needed; this can be put under the coop and a lot of fine chaff scattered on it. The mother hen is ravenous by this time for food and water, so I always feed her well before she enters the coop, then she mothers them with a chirp of satisfaction, for a day at least. By that time their tiny crops need some food in the form of bread crumbs or chick feed. I noted that at the M. A. C., St. Vital, the professor fed small chick feed only at first, and mixed with grit or sand.

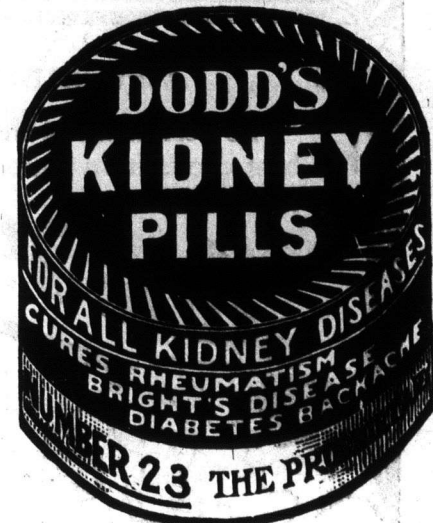
Except, in very hot weather, there is no hurry about water; give it in a couple of days. Other biddies will be ready, no doubt, to occupy the old nest vacated by the fluffy family, so clean out the box thoroughly and burn the litter; put in another fresh sod and clean material before setting another hen. Sometimes a keeper, in the spring rush for chicks, will feel tempted to double up two hatches of chicks with one mother and set the other bird with a fresh setting of eggs.



500 Baby Leghorn Chicks, outside their broom brooder house on the poultry plant of T. W. Palmer, Lake Hill, near Victoria, B.C. This is the most fascinating part of the poultry business, though requiring constant attention. What could be more interesting?

There are hens that can stand being thus imposed upon, but the practice is unwise. The mother bird gets very thin, and I have known them to die on the second clutch of eggs, from sheer exhaustion. I may say I am not cold blooded enough to ask a self-respecting hen to hatch out two families at one sitting, but I have seen it done more than once.

One correspondent recently asked about hatching turkey eggs in an incubator. Certainly it can be done; in fact, turkey eggs will hatch better in an incubator than duck eggs, in my experience, but the raising of the poults by artificial methods is the problem! I do not believe it can be done without great loss. Young turks must be mothered by turkey hens or, at least, by a common hen, in whose care young poults do well. The turkey is a wild, untamed creature; a most timid bird at best. A brooder is death to the small fry. Turkeys usually hatch better when they are allowed to make their own nests. We used to put an old barrel filled with straw in a fence corner or by a straw stack, and mistress turkey looking for a nest would spy it out, take to it like a duck to water, and lay her 13 or 15 eggs in it quite happily. At other times she was not to be fooled, and would steal her nest away in the



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