

Those Long Days



Memories surface, like relics from dry fields; shake off the dirt and there, you have rusted old days. I think this view is from June 1953. When she took this picture, Mother was 31. I was 2, maybe she took me out there with her, maybe I was there to see this view.

My boyhood was years away but I can see it here. The house was the first house on the place, and behind those walls were the original logs. The house was built over a spring, and I remember the water flowing in a trough in the basement floor and then out and down to the pond. Snakes were frequent in there, sometimes copperheads got in. Sometimes there were copperhead hunts in the weedy pit around the cellar door, men and boys, shovels and hoes. The pond is just visible at the left; the small trees seen there in '53 grew to be fine weeping willows draping the pond. I used to watch my father perform autopsies on chickens in that back porch there; I still have his poultry books and the dissecting scissors. Beyond the fields to the west are the woods I played in (still do, yes). And there at the turn in the lane beside the house is the big catalpa, not yet great but mature and full, a landmark tree. Not much seen here in 1953 is seen here now: the catalpa, the pond, the woods, me.



He wants me to help clean up a junk pile down next to the new pond at the edge of the woods. Should be nice easy work. We'll save our strength for Monday to clean out the chicken house.

Mother, May 2, 1959

The stretch of woods was a scruffy place, long before our time it was the place to drop stuff and get it out of the way and out of sight. There are old dumps in there where ancient bottles and jars are still turned up by a year's rains, freezes and thaws. There used to be a lot of rusty barbed wire among the trees, well away from the present field line – we pulled it out whenever we found it but even now we come across a few strands now and then. We buried chickens out here in pits if there was high mortality; I'd get sent out to shovel them over. (If only a few dead, they just went in the burn barrel.)

A few yards into the woods, this old trough has lain here for as long as I can remember. No way to know if it was intended to be here or if it was just dropped here when no longer needed. It's made of several steel drums, cut in half top to bottom, then the halves fixed end to end. Half lids left on the drums at the end complete the trough. Whenever it was set here, it was never moved again and it has not even changed much. Now it's a landscape feature, like the lane, or the piles of rocks in the brush at the edge of the fields.



Chickens are going out slowly but surely. All the pullets went Sunday night and some more cockerels so half the house is empty. More cockerels will go ... will be so glad to see the last of them. They're so mean. Pullets were the most beautiful we've raised. Averaged over 6 lbs. Cockerels are about 10 lb average. We got 32 cents a lb. for the pullets and 30 cents for the cockerels. They grade them at the dressing plant.

Mother, March 21, 1961

This is a clipboard of feed formulas propped in a cut-out in the barn next to where the mixer stood in the 1960s. The date is March 17, 1964. When the chicken operation was shut down in 1972 and the mixing equipment was dismantled, the clipboard just stayed propped there in its place, like an unnoticed witness. The paper is fragile now. I still look at it though, on rainy days sometimes when I'm in the barn alone.



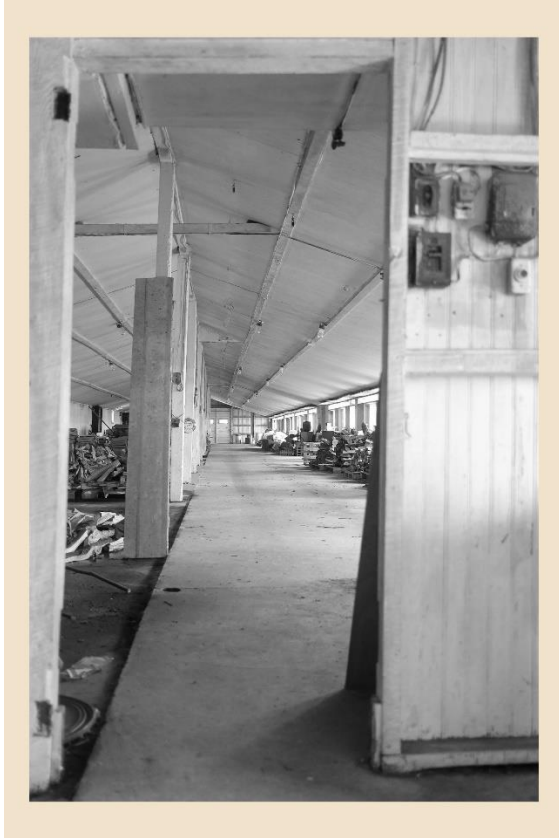
Yesterday the turkeys arrived and he was planning to sleep in the house with them ... Worked till eleven up there Fri and Sat nights and didn't get home till 6 on Sunday

Worked all afternoon in the turkey house. Helped put up fences – making partitions to split them up into 5-6 groups, and worked on the hospital cage – a lot of them get food and litter in their eyes and they stagger around with their eyes closed and don't eat or drink. It was 100 in there and the sweat just rolled off us. The fans weren't working and they didn't get them on till Sunday. Feeding isn't automatic yet of course and they're too little to reach the automatic watering system so they're a lot of work now. Next weekend want to start debeaking them – cut off the beak top with scissors so they don't peck. We hardly slept Sat night for the heat ...

This will be our worst summer. If we can just get through this, things will be better.

Mother, July 13, 1955

Sometime in the 1950s, “Bless This House” was given to mother by somebody. She nailed it up here in the chickenhouse feed room. Seventy years later, there it still is. I remember asking her once why it was there. She didn't say.



Sunday ... 5 in the morning. I went to the bathroom about then and discovered we had no water. That meant trouble so I woke him and he went down to the chickenhouse. He didn't come back so I followed him. One of the hoses for a waterer had slipped off the faucet and half the chickenhouse was flooded! We shoveled all the wet litter out. Took us till about 9 o'clock. It was dripping wet and very heavy. I stayed till 10 when everything was in order again. Then we packed a picnic supper and went to the mountains stone hunting. Went in and out all those roads where we went fossil hunting.

Mother, August 12, 1959

This house was built in 1953. The view is from the feed room; I was told that the posts down the center were logged here on the property. For a few years there were turkeys, then chickens, 8,000 pullets, day-old to 20 weeks.

Hot water pipes went down the center (the "hover"), and lines of feeder and water troughs on each side, about 180 feet down to the end, in an intricate system of troughs, cables, pulleys, and winches that was set up by my father when the house went into operation. You see the pulleys there, spaced along the ceiling.

In the 1970s, after the poultry business ended, a helper and I were told to pull down all of this and break it up as scrap. This needed to be done, but my father said it had been so hard to build it and make it work, he could not take it down himself. So we young guys should. It was only then that I really saw how hard that job that must have been; I had never thought about it before, it was all just there. So I felt like a vandal; but he had told us to tear it all down and we did.



Yesterday it took the three of us all morning to hose out the floor ... We finished scrubbing the equipment in the afternoon and the boys disinfected it before dinner. This morning spread litter in the chickenhouse and put down the waters and feeding troughs etc. Chicks arrive tomorrow morning and after he sees them unloaded and settled he'll go back to work.

The chickens were sold for 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ cents at a loss of \$36. Going to take it out of the loss kitty and spend it to have stone put on the lane.

Mother, April 9, 1956

There is so much time to see in the lower barn. The beams and posts are original, dating about 1920. When I was very small, there were still cow stalls in here, in the 1950s, along the old stone walls. In 1958 the space was converted for chickens and the wall and doorway went in then. Through the door was the feed room; the steps take you to the upper barn; the old water tank and feed bin are still there above. The gearbox and screw of the feed mixer above came down through the ceiling and oil stains are still there on the floor below. A chicken hook is mounted on the wall, the only one we still have. Signs are from a bunch of motorheads who left them in a worn-out farmhouse nearby that we bought in the 1970s. Those two old sawbucks standing there might be older than me. We have enough space in here to be a little untidy, it is true. We do straighten up once in awhile when it's raining but usually there are things outside we'd rather do.



The lane comes straight in, then turns west toward the buildings. Here at the curve, there was a big old cherry tree. It blossomed beautifully every spring and every summer we picked its cherries. You could rest there too in its shade on hot summer days. The cherry tree stood right here, on this rise just above the lane. It's so long gone now, and I don't know of any pictures, and I don't remember when it died.