

Living

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When SC Chamber was in the chicken business

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel correspondent

THERE'S AN old saying — "Be careful what you wish for — you may get it."

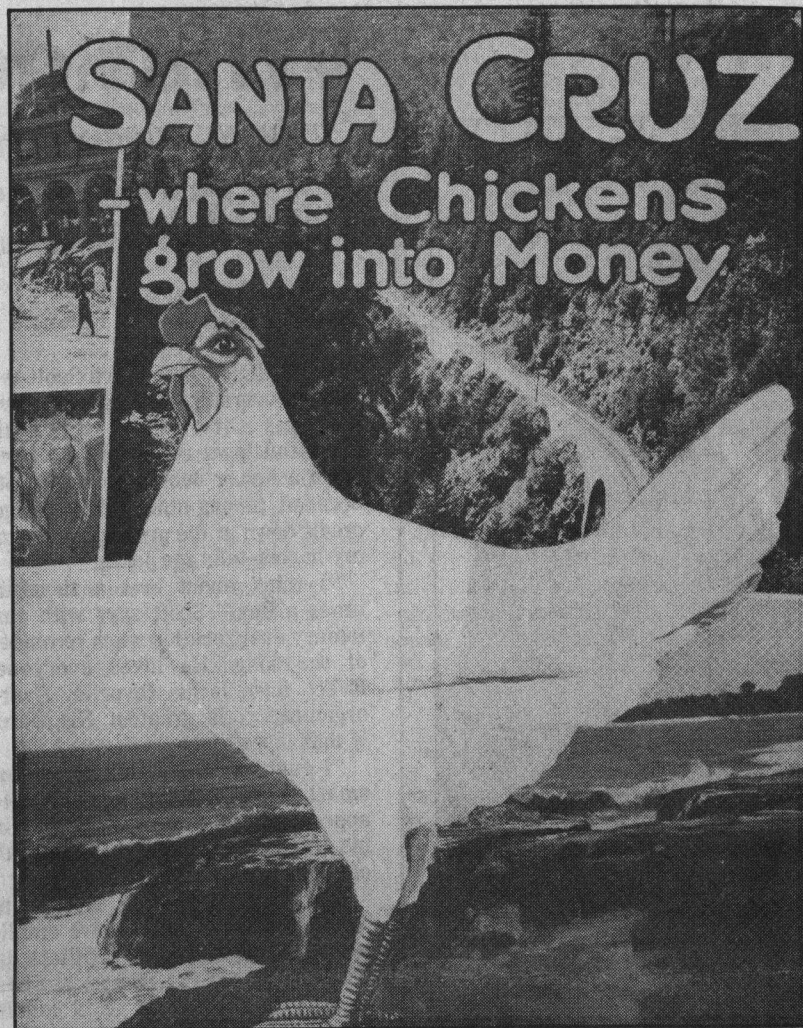
It would appear that Santa Cruz got it.

Back in the 1920s and '30s, who could foresee today's development and traffic jams? Certainly not the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, which was begging "suitable industries" to settle here and even offered "free factory sites."

"Here" at that time had a lot to do with the large, undeveloped area between Santa Cruz and Capitola. It has been known at various stages of local history for its pasturage, grain fields, bulb growing and chicken ranches.

It was pasture for the flocks and herds of Santa Cruz Mission and the Villa de Branciforte settlement in the late 1700s and early 1800s. It was covered with wide expanses of grain fields planted by Yankee settlers in the mid and late 1800s. The bulbs and chickens moved in around the turn of

Early Chamber of Commerce brochure, right, sets the bait for a business that laid the golden business egg for many years. White leghorns, below, helped earn the Live Oak area the nickname, 'Chicken Villa.'



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A glance at history

the century. We were still primarily an agricultural-lumber-lime-resort county in the 1920s and '30s.

The resort business gave rise to another saying — a local wag observed that "We roll up the sidewalks in Santa Cruz in September." That referred to the departure of the summer tourists and their welcome dollars.

In 1905, Santa Cruz City's population was 8,000 and the county residents numbered 25,000. The chickens hadn't been counted yet, but by 1906, the first commercial flocks were here. The housewife and her modest clutch of hens was on the way out. Chickens became big business. The feathered invasion was on.

The American Poultry Journal helped by running an article or two. Main points to consider in starting a chicken ranch, it pointed out, were climate, soil, water supply, drainage, markets and shipping facilities. Santa Cruz County rated almost 100 percent OK on everything.

WORD GOT around. A family could make a comfortable living off a flock of 800 to 1,000 laying hens, believe it or not. Without hiring outside help, if the whole family shared chores.

The word "cholesterol" wasn't in the dictionary yet. People ate eggs. Lots of eggs.

By 1913, there were about 100 chicken ranches in the county. That number exploded to more than 500 mom and pop poultry operations in 1921. San Francisco was the main outlet. The Poultry Producers Association handled the details. White Leghorns laid the eggs.

The market went this way: Sale of eggs brought in most money; day-old chicks rated second in financial reward; hatching eggs, third; and broilers, fourth.

The annual cash income in the county was estimated by the Chamber to be \$1,500,000.

Of course the price of eggs rose and fell: highest was about 81, lowest 33 (in 1919.) Feed was reasonable and was brought in from the state's grain growing areas.

Local acreage changed hands at a brisk rate. In 1921, there were 1,846 deeds filed. Five years later, 5,043 were recorded.

So, the lowly chicken was laying the golden egg years in Santa Cruz. One poultryman stated that he had 800 hens providing him with an annual income of \$1,500, which he said, was "more than adequate." Hard to believe? Another fellow had 1,000 laying hens that supported him, his wife and three children, whom he said went on to get their educations, too.

Another chicken farmer put it this

way: "A man of modest tastes who is willing to do his own work with the assistance of his family, will find that from 1,000 to 1,200 hens will provide his family and himself with a comfortable, satisfying living."

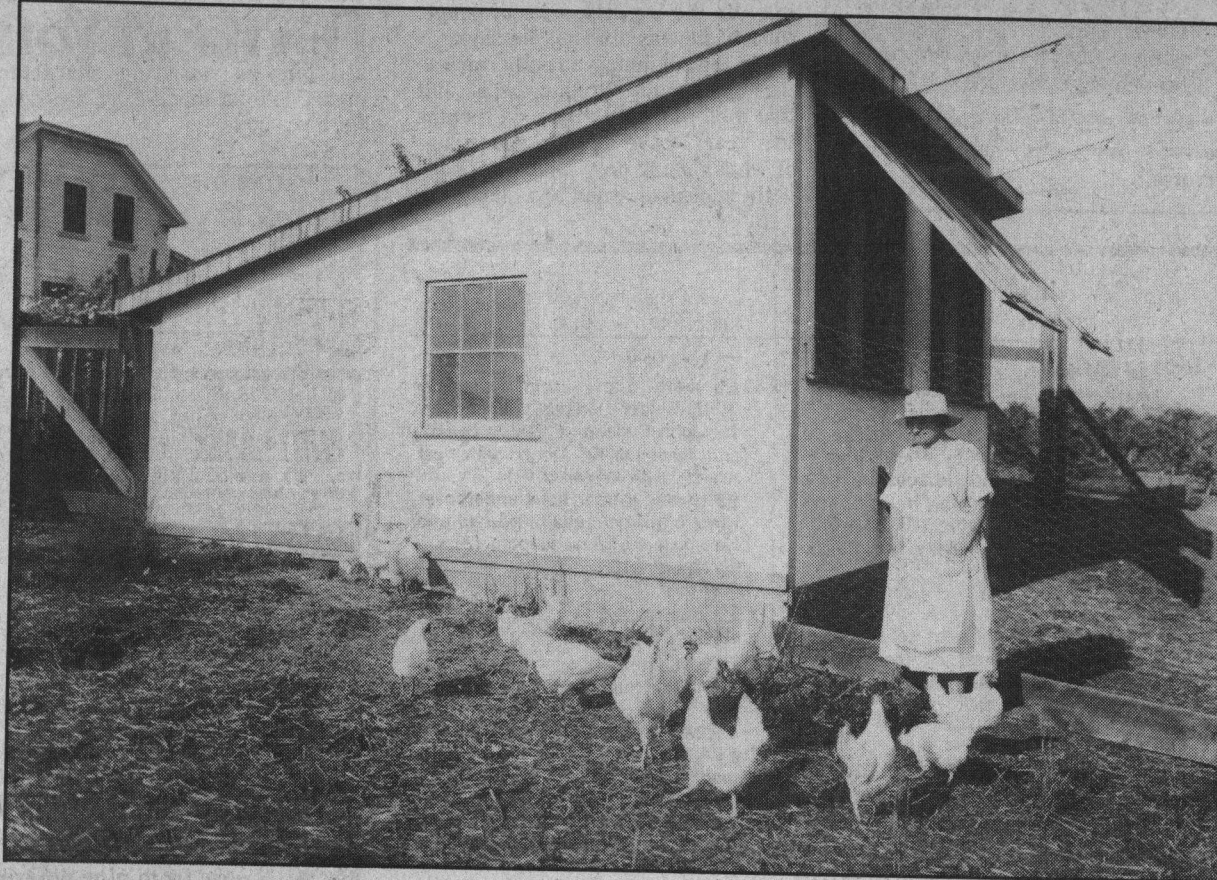
ALL VERY well, back in 1921. But how about the initial expenses? It was figured that the average poultryman in Santa Cruz needed 1,000 hens and two acres, plus hen houses and equipment, and a home for his family.

Land in the county was going for 700 to 1,000 per acre inside the city limits, and from 300 per acre up outside the city.

The tab for the poultryman's two acres with a house, hens and equipment was figured at about 7,000, according to the Chamber's figures. And he needed at least 3,500. cash to get going. It took eight months for the chickens to start producing those golden eggs that would pay off the balance due.

As early as 1918, the local Chamber with Santa Cruz Farm Bureau started the first annual Egg Laying Contest in California. By 1920, enthusiasm over poultry prospects was running so high that the Chamber pledged \$10,000 for a site and a building for contest headquarters. The building also served as an Experiment Station co-directed with experts from UC Berkeley. The late Henry Washburn was sent down from UC as the county's first Farm Advisor. Working closely in cooperation were the University Agricultural Extension Service, Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce.

There were some familiar names on the Chamber: Hinkle, Snyder, Leask, Garrett, Cardiff, Becknell, McCreary and Jeter. William Jeter was lieutenant governor of the State of California at one time.



Margaret Koch archives



The state's first Egg Laying Contest began in Santa Cruz in 1918, added incentive for the chicken business.

BY 1926 the city's population was 14,000 and the Chamber was still plugging the chicken business. A

Chamber meetings by William Jeter:

Dear hens, Kind hens, Good old hens, I say.

You have saved me many times, Save again I pray.

Last year 'twas a rug or two, Now I need a dress.

And it all depends on you, So please acquiesce.

Dear hens, Kind hens, Good old Plymouth Rocks,

Lo these many years you've kept us folks in shoes and socks.

But our shoes are wearing out, soon we'll need some more,

The larder's nearly empty too, Save us, we implore!

Dear hens, Kind hens, Good old angel birds,

Gratitude is in our hearts, much too deep for words.

Winged saints, we'll serve thee well, guard thee from all ills.

Lice and rats and skunks and such — yes you bet we will.

Written by Florence King

pamphlet was printed that stated: "The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce has nothing to sell. It is interested in having only those people come to Santa Cruz to engage in the poultry business who can be successful."

When Washburn retired in the 1950s, Farm Advisor John Melendy took over as county director for the UC Agricultural Extension service, and his specialties were poultry, livestock and 4-H.

We were still a chicken county but changes were beginning to show. The 1,000-hen mom and pop poultry businesses were struggling; they couldn't make it any more. They either had to expand and get very big, which meant hiring help, or get out of the business.

By then, not many of the oldtimers were around who remembered the "chicken poem" recited at the