

The Great Chicken Breakout

by Michael G. Miller

Professor Wyandotte of Middle State's Agribusiness Department knew that Leo Lear willingly visited the campus only to keep a close, demanding eye on the research he so astutely sponsored. Or, as at present and unwillingly, to be honored in what Lear considered a boring, time-wasting function arranged by some hopeful or grateful Middle State official to flatter him. Lear, CEO of Food Unlimited and Middle State's biggest benefactor, valued the tax write-offs and the research benefits his carefully planned donations to Middle State brought him, not the honors. But he could hardly ignore the combined ground-breaking and dedication ceremonies for the Leo Lear Addition to the Chickens Unlimited Poultry Complex, followed by a tour of the facilities themselves, and Professor Wyandotte knew it. Anything with his name attached to it Lear respected, and he had consented, if grudgingly, to giving a day of his valuable time to being honored.

Wyandotte, the moment he received Lear's brusque agreement to attend, had notified President Curtis, who had done all within his managerial vision to enhance the ceremonies, first requiring ten of his vice presidents and several other university officials to be present, then inviting members of Middle State's Reigning Board as well as several agribusiness officials and, reluctantly, two farmers. And, of course, the press. Wyandotte, as Director of the Poultry Complex, would conduct the tour of the facilities, and a rack of silver-plated shovels, with a gold-plated one for Lear, stood ready in the complex's parking lot for the largely uncalloused hands of the ground-breakers.

It was only a few minutes after the scheduled 10 a.m. starting time that the university limo, driven by the inept Vice President Swift of Transportation and Hospitality, nosed into the parking lot in front of the complex, disembarking Leo Lear to join the crowd of simpering, respectful dignitaries. With the shovels properly distributed, the gold-plated one wrested from President Curtis by the chairman of the Reigning Board, who after a whispered warning from Wyandotte passed it along to Leo Lear, the eager officials and the two uncomfortable farmers grouped themselves for the ceremony.

There was no ground near enough to the asphalt-surrounded complex to do a true groundbreaking, so the photographers on hand were asked to photograph the group, some of whom were apparently unfamiliar with the operation of a shovel, from the knees up only. The university photographer alone did so, and in the local newspapers that bothered to print the photo as filler, the group seemed unaccountably poised to vandalize a parking lot. Leo Lear, in fact, actually drove the point of his shovel well into the asphalt and flipped out a large black divot, an act carefully ignored by everyone there.

With the groundbreaking complete, the group turned to the enormous building behind them housing the chicken complex. An unceasing roar reverberated through its steel-paneled sides. "As long as three football fields and as wide as two," the promotional literature described the structure, which contained in a central area at the front a large, plush administrative unit carefully sealed both hermetically and acoustically from the rest of the complex. Through the administrative unit, one could enter a change-room for floor laborers, who used a separate entrance, and the change-room in turn gave access to the containment floor itself. For the dedicatory part of the ceremony, a pink satin ribbon was strung across the main doors, each end held nervously by a vice president. Just as President Curtis was about to begin his standard dedication speech, the delivery of which would alone have redeemed the event for him, Leo Lear with brutish indifference snapped the ribbon.

"I've got a plane to catch," he announced dismissively as he handed the scissors to President Curtis, who swallowed hard but nodded with quick understanding.

For the ceremony's grand finale, the group tour of the containment floor itself, Wyandotte became the man in charge. A founder and foremost proponent of large confinement practices for the raising of food units and the winner of Lear grants galore, confidence flooded through him, and with a barely suppressed swagger he led the group grandly through the huge main doors and into the administrative area. They proceeded down the long aisle that separated two extensive sections of office cubicles, the work stations of the large staff of secretaries, accountants and technicians who kept up with the grant applications, implementations, and disbursements. All of them looked up admiringly from computer screens as the procession filed grandly past and through the single door marked Change Room—Authorized Personnel Only.

"I know this is probably unnecessary," Wyandotte said, once the group had entered and the door closed behind them, "but since our workers have to wear these things, we've got to set a good example and do the same." Hanging by each locker was a yellow suit of some synthetic rubber-like material. "The suit proper should go on first, then the rubber boots, then the respirator, then the hood. If the boots are too small, let me know." A sudden increase in the already loud roar from behind the airtight doors leading to the floor of the complex made him raise his voice. "The suits and the rest you'll have to live with. And you should know," he added, prompted by President Curtis's nudge, "these are the same suits worn at the Transuranic Department in the Science Building before they're decontaminated and transferred to the Center for Life Form Enhancement in Biology. They're then sent over here in a recycling initiative President Curtis has instituted that saves the University over three thousand dollars each year."

President Curtis took the rehearsed compliment impassively and began trying to fit the respirator over his great shock of wiry hair. He had long ago understood that there was neither plutonium nor unknown genetically altered pathogens facing the workers at the Poultry Complex, but just ordinary germs, viruses and fungi whose combating hardly required first-class protection. Besides, just as there were millions of chickens waiting to be raised in the Poultry Complex at Middle State and everywhere else, there were nearly the same number of potential green card or illegal immigrants who would willingly work in these animal hells in worn and contaminated protective gear, or even in no protective gear at all, depending on the level of poverty and oppression their families faced back home.

"I wouldn't have minded hard hats," President Curtis mumbled, his respirator terribly askew over his face, "but this I don't know. You all right, Leo?" he called down the row of increasingly unrecognizable figures.

Lear, whose yellow suit seemed tailored for him, paused before slipping his respira-

tor on. "Let's just get this shit over with," he said without looking up. "I've got a plane to catch, remember. Which way do we go?" He slipped on the respirator, pulled the hood over it, and swaddled like some garish astronaut followed Wyandotte toward the double door to the Complex floor. The noise had grown even louder, and the Reigning Board members, the agribusiness officials, the Middle State contingent and the locals formed behind Lear and shuffled forward. Wyandotte rapped forcefully three times on one of the steel doors, waited until he heard an answering three and a loud click from the other side, then pulled it open.

"Right through here gentlemen," he said, but knew his already muffled voice from the respirator was positively obliterated by the roar that now blasted them.

The doors opened onto a raised platform with steps that led from each side five feet down to the floor of the facility. Six workers with leaf rakes as staffs had driven some two hundred chickens off the platform to make room for the dignitaries. Stretching from as far back through the dust and corrosive stench as could be seen, up to the foot of the just cleared steps where surging companies of chickens attacked from left, right and front against the rake-wielding workers, was a seething, cacophonous swirl of living things which were surely chickens but which could as easily have been maggots or the souls of the damned.

"Goddamn," Leo Lear choked from the rail around the platform, but said no more.

"Over one-hundred-fifty-thousand units." Wyandotte knew he was shouting into his respirator but pretty much aware no one could hear him. He held up the first in a series of large, numbered flash cards he'd asked Vice President Swift to prepare for him and key to his remarks. He pointed to it and swept his arm out over the chaotic din. Unable to tell if the frozen attitudes of the dignitaries were in reaction to what lay below them or to incomprehension, he gestured widely again toward the uproar and churning moil on the floor, then pointed once more at the flash card, which he noticed with a start read: Six Weeks. He shook his head exaggeratedly at the group and rolled his eyes in self-deprecation, smiling to soften the censure, though aware his expression could not be seen. He searched clumsily through the cards until he found at number five the appropriate one, but the fringes of the group had begun moving uncertainly down the manure-coated steps to the facility's floor, the workers fending off most of the scraggly, maddened chickens who were desperate to retake the steps and platform, if only for a moment of space and rest before the great mass expanded to compress them back to their carefully calculated 0.53 square feet per unit. Even the railings around the platform and the tops of the many long, automated feeders and waterers placed throughout the facility had been factored into the calculation of the experimentally established minimum area per chicken-unit, below which, for some poorly understood biological imperative, the units simply refused to eat and died.

"Wait," Wyandotte called, "just a few more figures here."

But it was futile; no one could hear. Except for the few dignitaries who had ventured slightly down the steps, the rest were riveted by the ceaseless motion and roar from the floor. The greatest tumult was around the feeders and waterers, where the general pandemonium seemed intensified as the fight for food and water endlessly persisted. Chickens piled over chickens, were carried back and forth as on a sea, scratched and fought for a few pecks at the high-protein feed composed in part of the feathers and offal from the previous batch of units raised in the facility. Sudden great fights broke out in these areas, where sustenance was forgotten in a violence beyond reason. When a particular savagery spent itself, workers, who recently had begun to patrol only in parties of four for protection, moved toward the scene to gather the dozens of carcasses

and fling them into the mobile death carts placed throughout the floor. Clouds of dust rose as from explosions and a stench like the aftermath of some great summer battlefield filled the floor and seemed even to seep through the cheap, steel-paneled walls.

Without rakes, the visiting dignitaries evoked no fear in the chickens, who by now in some number had evaded the armed workers and infiltrated to the steps, a few even to the platform. Two were trying to gain a roost on the separate shoulders of the shrieking Vice-Chair of the Reigning Board, while two more charged between the columnar legs of President Curtis and flushed simultaneously up into his crotch. One squad had ignored the steps altogether and scaled the front of the platform where Wyandotte, given up on his presentation, was with initial unconcern kicking them with a veteran's aplomb back over the side until one, then three, then six attached themselves to his offending leg.

"Here," said Wyandotte, "here," shaking his leg and then, as three more began flogging up the other leg, bending to pull them away and fling them back to the floor. More of the crazed units who had reached the rail leapt with great cackles onto Wyandotte's inviting broad back and tore and pecked at it and one another in an exquisite frenzy.

"My god," he shouted, violently trying to dislodge those still attacking his legs, then straightening up only to dump most of the chickens on his back in a maddened mob among the dignitaries behind him on the platform. "We should probably," he said, as if in a dream where he knew no one could hear him, "move back to the administrative area and . . ." But the lesser dignitaries, who through a sense of rank had hung back to give their betters the places of honor along the rails, were already pushing at the doors, which, to keep prying, unprepared visitors from viewing the filth and holocaust, had locked upon closing.

"Help!" one cried, "help!" as the others began frantically pushing from behind.

"Code Red," Wyandotte gasped, and then again, more weakly, "code red," and one of workers, assessing the situation, flung his rake aside, shoved his way up the steps through the shrieking knot of dignitaries, and struck a large red knob to the side of the door, releasing a great klaxon horn that exploded and bore down like the trumpet of the last judgment. Wildly following the worker's retreat into the now undefended left flank of the visitors, a company of suicidal chickens scrambled and flogged into the crowd just as an ever-growing number cascaded over and through the railings.

"We should get out," Wyandotte whispered, and as the weight of chickens bore him down, he saw the doors, unlocked at the initiation of Code Red, burst outward and the yellow-suited, hysterical dignitaries blast out into the change room. Before a great whiteness settled over him, Wyandotte felt a strong grip and pull on his arm that lifted him out from under the torrent of chickens pouring over the platform and through the swung-back doors and saw Leo Lear, his perfectly fitting suit unblemished, shaking his head imperturbably at him. Lear jerked his thumb toward the doors.

"This ought to be good," he said, but Wyandotte, of course, could not hear.

By now the main body of dignitaries, escorted and pursued by hundreds of chickens, had reached in full rout the far end of the change room, where the single door impeded them only momentarily.

On the other side, a scattering of secretaries and technicians had begun to move cautiously into the center aisle and a few briskly toward the main doors to the outside. Most, however, in spite of the Jehovah voice of the klaxon deep within the building and the growing noise from the change room, simply looked up quizzically from their computers toward the change-room door.

There were two great thuds against it, the first President Curtis, before it slammed back and the dignitaries hysterically burst through, chickens now overtaking them,

straight into the administrative area. For a split second the administrative staff stood paralyzed in disbelief. Then they tore into the aisle, pushing, fighting, some falling, all screaming as the outpouring from the change room clawed, leapt and trampled over the fallen. With the main aisle momentarily clogged, the flood spread laterally along the back wall of the area until the space between it and the first row of cubicles was filled; then, as though at the shot of a starter's pistol, the great tide crashed over into the first row of cubicles, filled them, then cascaded over into the next and so onward toward the main door. Reams of memos, reports, letters, printouts of all types now were swept up into the rout, and the dignitaries and hundreds of chickens leapt and flogged from cubicle to cubicle like some high-hurdle race for the demented. Partitions collapsed, cables snapped, computers were smashed and the sputtering, useless shards dragged crackling and smoking along with the frenzy.

The main doors were mercifully large enough to accommodate the frantic mob and out they flowed, the dignitaries fighting to remove the suffocating hoods and respirators and escape from the main current of the flood. The chickens, inexhaustibly, flowed on. Helping Wyandotte steadily along through the shambles of the administrative unit and the unstaunchable flood, Leo Lear continued to shake his head in amusement.

"Hope you bastards have insurance," he said to Wyandotte, who still couldn't hear him.

In all, before the fire departments and then the National Guard arrived to halt their flow and seal the outer doors, over a hundred thousand chickens escaped. Most were unable to contend with the fresh air and ample range they found or to scratch up their own food, and, within a few hours of their freedom and not far from the complex, they expired. But not all. The most legendary survivor, several days later and somehow avoiding an elaborate security system, leapt upon the live desk of a local television news set, whose commentators, neither of whom had ever seen a living chicken and whose reportage on the breakout had been slanted for rating purposes to provoke fear of feral chickens, fainted and caused the cancellation of that night's news, a news item that led the news the following night, complete with a televised tape clip of the chicken flying suddenly up to the desk, which caused the commentators, viewing it on their monitors, to faint again, once more canceling the broadcast. This might have gone on indefinitely had not the station's daily audience-survey showed that their viewers no longer cared about chicken stories and in fact were beginning to feel that the entire idea of raising chickens in Auschwitz-like conditions was a bad one. Quickly such an untenable belief was set right by the media, the Leo Lear Foundation for Truth, and Middle State's Office of Public Relations, who collectively showed that not only was confinement feeding the cutting edge of technology and therefore above criticism, but also that the price of chicken would rise and that many family farms of families making over five-million dollars a year would fail if the practice were stopped.

So the Great Chicken Breakout was apparently over. Yet some of the stalwart escapees managed to adapt, a few taken in and sheltered by families or individuals but most running wild, scattering and spreading ever outward from the Complex, to be seen darting through the woods by hunters at dawn, or perched on a school's playground swings, or crowing defiantly from atop a Kentucky Fried Chicken marquee. Such sightings of the fugitives of the Great Breakout, whether of individuals, little guerilla-like bands, or even a small domesticated flock here and there, kept its memory and spirit alive.