

Mary Lynn Morrill's Chicken: A Science Project

By Mary Lynn Morrill

A fat chicken is a splendid fowl to possess. Unless. .. And I will tell you this story about my chicken which was bought for a school science project.

We are talking about a time like 1953 when green, pink and lavender chicks could be bought for ten cents each at a local feed store in Charlotte. Who knows what kind of dye colored these fuzzy little critters. Society had not thought about that issue yet. I bought a purple chick and a little chicken feed for about fifteen cents.

Once home the chick was placed by the heater in the kitchen in dead Gristy's cage, a cage built by my Daddy out of an orange crate. Gristy was my beloved dog that got killed by a car on East Boulevard.

Since I was writing up all details of chicken behavior for a school science project I did not want to miss anything about chicken development . I really never had liked chickens much. At age four I had a good bit of interaction with a pen of them while living on Sardis Road during World War II. The chickens had nervous breakdowns - which is another story for another day. My goal, in addition to getting an A on the report I had to write, was to raise an emotionally stable, plump chicken.

Being the conscientious type, I was very faithful to the little creature. One day my brother told me the chick thought I was its mother. I never intended this to happen but it just seemed to. I documented everything in a notebook - what time it ate, how much it ate, how much it drank, how often it went to the bathroom, the consistency of its stool. I

measured its height and weighed it on the bathroom scale. I patted it and bragged on it with the best sounding clucks I could make so it would feel good about being a chicken. Since the chick liked to follow me around the house it wore little diapers I made. After about two months little purple "Lulu" was on the way to becoming a hen. Long red feathers started popping out here and there, the purple color started disappearing and my chick was not so cute anymore. All this was documented in the notebook. Incidentally, Lulu had been called "Mary Lynn's chicken" for two or three weeks, but my Mother said it would be good if it had a name, so that is why it got a name.

After a few weeks, my science project ended and I received the "A" that had been my goal. My daddy, who had been raised on a farm, said that since the project was over I must find another home for Lulu. She couldn't continue to walk around in our house. I had filed Lulu's toenails and painted them pink and bigger diapers were needed as each day passed. All this was just getting to be more than I could deal with at the age of 12. Etha, a middle aged "old maid" who ran a boarding house up the street from us, also had a hen house and said Lulu could move in there. I was apprehensive but knew it had to be. Kind Etha said I could visit Lulu anytime.

For the first week or two I would visit Lulu daily. I could sense that her affection for me lessened as each day passed. She had become quite large and quite fat and soon got to the point where she preferred her chicken friends to me. A couple of more months went by. A flyer was posted on the A & P wall saying that a "pet" show would be held at Freedom Park. Blue ribbons would be awarded with movie tickets as prizes. Pet birds and chickens were invited, along with the dogs, cats, hamsters, etc. My mother said she was sure that Lulu would win a blue ribbon. On the big "Pet Show" day I went and got Lulu out of Etha's two-story chicken house and put her in a box. She was quite large and quite heavy. My mother drove me to the park. I found the pet chicken arena and was told to take my chicken out of the box, sit down in the big circle, and wait for the judges. Lulu sat very quietly in my lap and I rubbed her just like when she lived with me. Her feet were rather large by now, the toes and nails were long and pointed and the pink polish was gone. The sun hit on her large feathers in a way that the auburn color glistened and I was sure the judge would be delighted with not only her obvious healthiness and fatness but by her poise and calm disposition - all due, of course, to her good early upbringing in the

Caldwell family that cared. About fifteen other people were sitting in the circle with their chickens. The judges arrived with blue, red, yellow, white and green ribbons. The chief judge announced that the blue ribbon winner also got ten movie tickets. I was very excited as I went to see a movie nearly every Saturday afternoon with school friends and would be most thrilled to get free tickets.

My time at the Freedom Park Pet Show had come. Lulu's time had come. The blue ribbon was going to be ours. The judge was here. He bent over to check Lulu out. She started squawking and flapping her wings. All this white powdery stuff started flying out that I had never seen before. The judge told me that I seemed to have a very nervous, high-strung hen. He said he couldn't remember when he last saw such a bad case of chicken dandruff. The ribbons were awarded. Lulu got nothing. She didn't even receive an honorable mention paper with one movie ticket. Back in the cardboard box she went.

My mother drove us home, told me that Lulu just got a little upset being with strangers and that it can happen to anybody. My mother also said that the judges should have given every participant a piece of paper for going to the trouble to be there. Always one to support her own, Mother bought a blue ribbon at some store, hung it up in the kitchen, and said in her opinion Lulu was the best of all chickens. She assured me that I had done a splendid job raising Lulu, that she was fine emotionally, that she was not nervous and that chicken dandruff is not important. Lulu went back in Etha's chicken pen and I sort of forgot about the whole thing due to all my other activities.

A short time later on Etha came down the street for a visit and said that it was time to start processing all of the chickens in the hen house of a certain age for her boarders to eat, and Lulu was that age. She said old hens are not tender and tasty, and that pen space must be available for younger chickens. I told Etha that I could not imagine cooking Lulu. She said God meant for people to eat chickens. My mother always tried to accommodate her three children in every way possible but she could not figure out what to do if Etha wouldn't keep Lulu anymore. Mr. Anthony, a short, large-bellied retired man next door who most always kept a toothpick in his mouth, said he looked after many chickens growing up and he could help me solve the problem - to bring him my chicken. I didn't know exactly what his plan might be and he was not the type that you questioned. I took Lulu to him. He was sitting in a chair in his back

yard. He laid my chicken in his lap, rubbed her head a moment with his left hand, put his right hand around her neck, gave a little forward jerk and the next thing I witnessed was Lulu's head in Mr. Anthony's hand and Lulu's body darting off without her head through the grass, soon to collapse forever. It was all so fast. I was stunned. Mr. Anthony assured me that Mother Nature intends things to be this way. He said chickens like this make good eatin'. Just wait and see he added. I was speechless.

Holding Lulu's headless carcass upside down by her feet, Mr. Anthony delivered her to my house and told my mother he had something for her to cook. Mother was rather shocked as she said her meal plan for the day did not include chicken - especially this particular chicken. The plan was soon to be changed. My mother had learned through trial and error that flexibility can make life less painful in stressful situations. She soon had the feathered body boiling in a large pot of water and after a short while emptied scalded Lulu into the kitchen sink. She pulled out Lulu's big feathers, squeezed out the little pin feathers, removed the innards, washed her well one last time and put her in the oven to cook.

Baked Lulu was soon placed in the middle of the supper table. I sat there staring at my formerly feathered "child" and tears started to flow. My mother cried a little bit too, probably tears of sympathy for me more than for Lulu. She quickly regained her composure and said serving Lulu as food for our family was probably not a good idea after all - that Etha's boarders or Mr. Anthony's grandchildren might have enjoyed this chicken more than our family did. My daddy said it was all sure ridiculous. He said a fat, good tasting hen like the one we had on the table was a great blessing when he was growing up. When he said grace that day he thanked God for the fine meal and most especially for the nourishing chicken. My brothers ate a little bit of Lulu, but didn't seem to eat any of the meal with their usual relish. No one talked much. I ate some green peas and went to my room as soon as the meal was over. Mother brought me a cream cheese and olive sandwich, my favorite, about an hour later. Lulu was never mentioned again. I never used a living creature for a science project again.