

The Portsmouth Island Incubator

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The storm of '44 killed most all of Oscar's chickens. Every household on Portsmouth Island was effected by that storm. The place is just a few feet above the high tide level anyway so there was water damage to every dwelling on the Island. Some folks faired worse than others. One family was completely without a place to live while a few only needed to repair the results of nature's wrath.

Oscar was one of the lucky ones, but you wouldn't know it by listening to him. The water had risen in his house to about a foot. Some of the furniture had watermarks on them, but there were already watermarks from many past storms. The thing that got his drawers all in a bind was that all his hens had drowned. All that was left of his poultry herd was one old tough rooster.

At this point I hope you understand that today Portsmouth Island is a desolate spot on the outer banks of North Carolina. At one time it was an important port of entry for Bath, Little Washington, New Bern, and all the little ports in the Pamlico and Albamarle Sound area. In bound sailing ships would stop to litter there cargoes to cross the bar and pick up a pilot to take the vessel on to its destination. But in 1944 the pilot trade was long dead. There was no power, telephone, TV set, school, newspaper, inside toilets, running water, refrigerators, nor any modern convenience. Only a few families still made a subsistence living on the island gardening, fowling, fishing and generally scrounging what they could from the water. Chicken was a very important part of the local diet. So Oscar was faced with a real problem.

It might seem small by today's standards but try to understand the fiercely independent

nature of the hearty breed of men and women who live in places like this. The loss of a flock of chickens is a blow to ones ability to live independently. Without the birds there is a reduction in food resources. As the food resource is reduced, and assuming there is still a need to eat, one has to get food from some where. As the stores have food, this is a good place to acquire it. Except that there was no store on the island. To order something from a store one had to row or poll a skiff about a mile out to the deep water to give the order list to the Ocracoke mail boat as it headed for the little community of Atlantic. About eight hours later one would poll or row back out to meet the mail boat again to pick up the order. Money is required to buy food. To obtain money work is necessary.

Oscar was not a lazy man. He didn't mind working. It's just that the only work on the island was helping his neighbors rebuild their homes. He couldn't take money for that. Besides, no one had money anyway. So Oscar M. Harris, Portsmouth Islander, single man, rooster owner, did the only thing he could. He invented the Portsmouth Island incubator.

He rummaged around out in his net house for materials to build the contraption. The only thing that he saw that would work was a 14-inch cheese box. It was round and about six inches deep. It had a good lid. When he saw the thing he knew it would work just fine. So back to the house he ran to take up pencil and paper to write his list for the mail boat. It read as follows:

Dear Mr. Hill,

Please put 1 doz. fertile eggs on my account and carefully place them on the boat.

Oscar - Portsmouth

He ran down to the dock in back of his house and tossed the lines off the dock then headed out to meet the mail boat that would be passing by soon. As he rounded the point of marsh at the end of his creek he could see the boat in the distance and he knew he would rendezvous just fine.

He waved at the boat then heard the cadence of her engine change and her wakes subside. The mail boat drifted gently in the morning Pamlico Sound wavelets as he polled along side the other boat.

“How ya doing this morning Harry,” he said as he handed the note over to the deck-hand. “Everybody OK over there after the storm,” he added.

“Doing good Oscar,” came the reply.

“OK then. I’ll see ya when ya get back,” Oscar said. Then the two vessels parted and drew steadily away from each other.

At 3:00 o’clock that afternoon Oscar polled back out to the rendezvous. He was a little early so he put his hand line overboard and was just pulling a nice puppy drum over the side when he caught the first glimpse of the mail boat coming back. Thirty minutes later they were side by side again.

“Here’s your eggs,” Harry said as he handed over the special cargoes.

“Thanks fellers,” Oscar said. “I’ll probably see ya in church next Sunday unless the preacher comes over here.”

When he got back to his net house Oscar carefully placed the eggs on top of some soft cedar shavings he’d swept up off the floor and placed in the cheese hoop. He cut a three inch hole in the top in just the right shape and location. He took the thing over to the hen house and sat it on the floor. Then he started calling that rooster.

“Here Jimmy. Here Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy.”

Each step Oscar took toward the old fowl, Jimmy would take enough to stay just out of reach.

“Here Jimmy. Here Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy,” Oscar continued to call in ever friendlier tones.

That bird strutted around the front and back yards about three times. Head ratcheting back and fourth. All the while he kept one eye focused on the man following behind him.

Now if you had been hiding in the marsh grass watching all this, what you would have seen was a full grown man strutting around the yard, stepping high, head ratcheting back and forth just like that old rooster in front of him.

Finally, Oscar's patients had run out. He made a lunge for Jimmy. The old rooster was quick, but not as quick as he used to be. As he fell on the ground just behind the bird Oscar was able to grab one of Jimmy's feet.

Jimmy thrashed about, wings flailing, beak pecking, but in the end Oscar kept possession of the bird. And so it was that off toward the hen house they went, Jimmy tucked up under Oscar's arm.

When he reached the hen house, he knelt down on one knee and took the lid off of the cheese hoop. The dozen fertile eggs were still safely nestled in the cedar shavings. His next move made Jimmy's coxcomb flop over on its side and turn pure white. Oscar carefully worked Jimmy's head through that hole in that cheese hoop top and carefully sat the bird down on top of those eggs. When he fixed the top back upon the box, he nailed it closed with half inch copper tacks.

During his installation upon the cheese hoop nest Jimmy, who was worn out from the chase, only had enough energy to let out a half-hearted squowwwwck, which tapered off to a very plaintiff low tone. The old rooster felt faint.

Oscar gently picked up the contraption and placed it up on one of the nesting boards in the hen house. He placed a dish of feed and another of water within reach of the bird then walked out of the chicken coop. With a great feeling of satisfaction, he turned around to double check the installation and smiled at the sight.

Now, today we would say that it all resembled a miniature flying saucer with the alien pilot's head sticking out of the craft. But, to Oscar it just looked like a good idea.

Every day he would visit that old rooster siting on those eggs. He made sure that there

was feed in the dish and water in the bowl. He talked to Jimmy and apologized for making him tend the family, but he explained how necessary it was that he do his part.

Then, one day when he went into the coop Oscar heard a peeping sound coming from the old cheese box. And then, there was more peeping until the noise could be heard outside the hen house. Everyone knows that roosters don't have lips, but Oscar was sure that Jimmy was smiling.

Oscar ran back to the net house to fetch his hammer. He dashed back to the coop and pried the top off the incubator to free Jimmy from his task. There in the cheese hop were ten little puffs of yellow peeping and looking around with little black wide open eyes. He took the top off of Jimmy and let the rooster down on the floor. The old bird seemed to jump ten inches off the floor as he ran, wings a flapping, out the door. Not a single feather was left on his roostery butt.

He ran around and around the yard looking up at the sun and seemed to be sniffing the breeze as he went. His coxcomb was red velvet now and he had regained that roostery look in his eyes. He jumped up on the garden fence and crowed like he'd never crowed before. COCK-A-DUUUUUDDLE-DAMN-DOOOOOOoooooooooooo. Yes, I think it is safe to say he was one happy cock.

Oscar smiled to himself and put some feed down on the floor for the bittys. He dumped the cedar, broken shells, and general hysteria out of the cheese hoop, replaced the top, stuck it under his arm then headed for the old net house. He figured he better keep it. You just never know when you'll need a good incubator.