



To Market, to market to buy a fat hen...

OR “A brief history on buying a bird”

This article started last year when I read in my Betty Crocker Picture Cook Book, copyright 1950, the following instructions on “How to prepare poultry for roasting:”

- “Draw, singe, and remove pin feathers.
- “Remove leg tendons (they spoil the quality of the meat in the drumstick).
- “Cut off head leaving as much neck as possible. Slit skin down back of neck and pull skin down...then cut off the neck.
- “Completely remove lungs and kidneys.
- “Wash bird inside and outside. Dry well.”

What self respecting housewife would think of bringing home a bird like this? A couple pages back two styles of chicken are described: ready-to-cook, which is what we would consider standard now; and “dressed” (“New York dressed”), which includes head and feet and is not eviscerated. The book says “your meat dealer will draw (eviscerate) and cut it for you.” I was still incredulous. Did they really sell birds that were bled and plucked only?

This summer I had a wonderful conversation with Mary Dean and her son Mark on this subject. Mark had worked as a young man in Detroit’s Eastern Market as a meat dealer. Mary is a lady with many memories. She recalled when she was a girl that her father would purchase a couple chickens from a man who came down the street selling them. The birds were still live. Her mother would take them in the back yard and proceed to turn them into dinner, step by step. That was how they bought chicken. Mark said that he dealt with “New York dressed” chickens at the Market. They would be on ice and good for several days that way. A city butcher may also have crates of chickens that a customer could pick her bird from. He would then bleed and pluck it, wrap it up and hand it to the lady to finish the work at home, exactly as described in my cook book. Mary added that that was how she bought chickens as a young wife. Add to all this the fact that the plump, modern chick-to-freezer-in-8-weeks birds are a fairly new breed development. In 1950 (and earlier) the birds would’ve been what we now call “heritage” breeds. These are not as meaty and take longer to grow, but have lots more flavor and make a much richer broth—the fabled health-restoring chicken broth. The housewife who had to remove pinfeathers and eviscerate the bird would also have a bigger job as the “heritage” birds have a lot more pinfeathers than the white broilers we deal with now. They are also much more difficult to cut into pieces for frying. Mary commented that she missed the chicken soup she used to make with those birds, “You just can’t get chickens like that any more.” I assured her such birds were still around and sent a “stewing hen” home with her. I offered to bring one to Farmer’s Market the following week that was “New York dressed” (now that I knew what that was), but she laughingly declined. Some parts of history are best left in the mists of time.

What does your grandmother remember about acquiring Roosevelt's promised "chicken in every pot?" Maybe a good story about how Thanksgiving turkeys were sold is waiting to be told. Flipping through the pages of history is one way to find things to be thankful about today!