

THE BANTAMS

By John S. Halbert

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"They're here!"

Uncle James burst through the back door into the kitchen, bringing with him a blast of cold mid-December air. My mother's face brightened as she reached up and turned off the radio atop the Frigidaire refrigerator. Lynn McMoran, the announcer on radio station WLAY had just read my letter to Santa Claus in his rich, resonant baritone voice and I was in a four-year-old kid's heaven. I could still hear my name coming out of the dark-blue Crosley receiver. Maybe Santa had actually heard my requests!

My one-year old sister, Frances, gurgled wide-eyed in her playpen and stuck her thumb into her mouth, taking in the scene. Grandma, keeping an eye on the little one, watched the family procession file out onto the back porch and through the squeaky-hinged screen door to the back yard. Everyone was anxious to see the new arrivals.

In the yard, were a half-dozen wooden-slatted boxes. Curious, I got down on my hands and knees next to one and tried to see what was inside. Cocking my ear, I could hear rustling sounds and soft murmuring coming from the inside. In the fading late afternoon light, I noticed for the first time a line of new wooden fence posts set into the ground across the far corner of the back yard. The long clothes line had been moved back to make way for the new fenced coop, even though the cleaning lady would now have to carry the laundry a bit farther to hang out the clothes to dry. The crisp, late-afternoon air carried to our nostrils the smell of the freshly-cut yellow-pine boards of the big new chicken house that now awaited its feathered tenants. "We'll keep them in the chicken house until tomorrow when the fence wire arrives!" daddy announced.

There was a sudden flurry and a squawk from one of the boxes. A reddish feather drifted out through the slats and lazily deposited itself on the ground. Uncle James picked up the box, which brought forth a louder protest from inside. Another feather or two fluttered out. In a few minutes, when all the boxes were inside the chicken house, daddy flipped up a latch and opened the lid of the first container. Three smallish chickens promptly hopped out. Before long, a dozen or so miniature pullets stalked around inside the heated hen-house. A midget rooster strutted among them, surveying his new domain.

Daddy went to the trunk of the Dodge and came back with three glass-jar water feeders that he arranged on the ground. Mother stepped up with a big pitcher of water and filled the jars, that she upturned, transforming the saucer-like tops into water troughs. At once, the chickens ran over and fought for a drinking position---it looked as if it had been a while since they had had their last fill-up.

"There you are!" Uncle James proclaimed, "your new Bantams!"

Daddy rubbed his hands together. "Yep!" he enthused, "these small fry---(*heh-heh*)---should be a better bunch than the Rhode Island Reds we had before . . . they ate too much and they trashed the old chicken coop so badly we had to tear it down and build this one."

Uncle James nodded in approval. "It sure looks nice."

"Tomorrow, we'll complete the fence and be in business!" With that, daddy pulled shut the door to let the new little hens and the rooster get acquainted with their new surroundings

The Bantams were now a going operation.

As long as I could remember, we had had chickens out back, until the old hen house finally sagged with age to where the chickens were complaining. About that time, daddy decided his Rhode Island Reds were becoming too expensive to keep, so after we had a big fried chicken feast, he tore down the coop and built this new one. The lumber yard gave him a good price on the building materials, since he was planning on buying his things there for the new house that he would soon start building at High Point. In the meantime, the Bantams could lay plenty of eggs and produce enough chicks to make it worthwhile to have them.

Even though the next day was cold and blustery, daddy and Uncle James finished the fence by noon-time and let out the chickens to wander around and get their bearings. Meantime, the rooster strutted back and forth, sizing-up the pullet prospects for his upcoming conquests. It appeared, from the look in his eyes, that we would soon have a coop-full of new chicks on the way.

Which was what happened. In the minimum of time, practically all of the little hens were nesting on an egg in preparation for motherhood. Meantime, on the back porch, daddy built a wood-framed incubator with a light bulb heater. As it turned out, all the chicks hatched within a few days of each other, which proved our rooster knew his business. For about a week, it seemed as if every time we checked the coop, another hatchling was peeping and cheeping down in the straw. As each chick broke out of its shell, it went into the lighted incubator for special feeding. In order to do so, it was necessary to distract the mother hen long enough to follow the tiny voice down into the thatch and scoop it out in a hurry. After a few tries, I learned how to shoot my hand down into the straw, grab the baby chick and snatch it away before the mother chicken could do anything about it. Fortunately for me, the chick's parent didn't give a hoot (or, in this case, a *cluck*) about her offspring after they had hatched, which made the job easier.

As we plucked each chick out of the coop for its transit to the incubator, the mother hen rapidly re-adjusted herself and began to lay egg after egg----all headed for our breakfast table and for sale to the neighbors. To their credit, Bantams were enthusiastic layers, even if their eggs were a bit smaller than those dropped off by regular-sized hens.

Bad manners proved their eventual undoing. What Bantams lacked in size they more than made up for in temper. It seemed that neither the hens nor the rooster needed any prompting to attack humans. Once, I was even pecked by a hen that ran all the way from the other side of the pen to attack me! We made it our policy to single-out for the dinner table each and every chicken that came after us. Since we always had a goodly number of chickens in the coop, there were plenty of replacements for those who went off to the frying pan in such a fashion. But after a while, following several biting episodes, I started to develop a disdain toward the midget chickens that matched their obvious animosity toward me. The unspoken question soon became: How long are we going to put up with these hateful hens and the raucous rooster?"

Things came to a head about the time we were getting ready to move to High Point. Since we wouldn't be allowed to have a chicken coop in the new neighborhood, and as the people who were going to live in the old house after we were gone said they had no interest in chickens, one-by-one, we offered up the Bantams to the frying pan and the dinner table.

Finally, we were down to the last chicken---the ill-tempered rooster. On what turned out to be his last day, when I went out to feed him, all at once he turned on me and *REALLY* pecked my forearm. In tears, I ran into the house and showed mother my gouged and bloody arm. That did

it! She set down what she was doing, marched right out to the coop, grabbed the little feathered fiend and wrung his neck on the spot.

We had him for supper that night.

A few days later, Dad tore down the chicken house

All future fryers came from the grocery store.