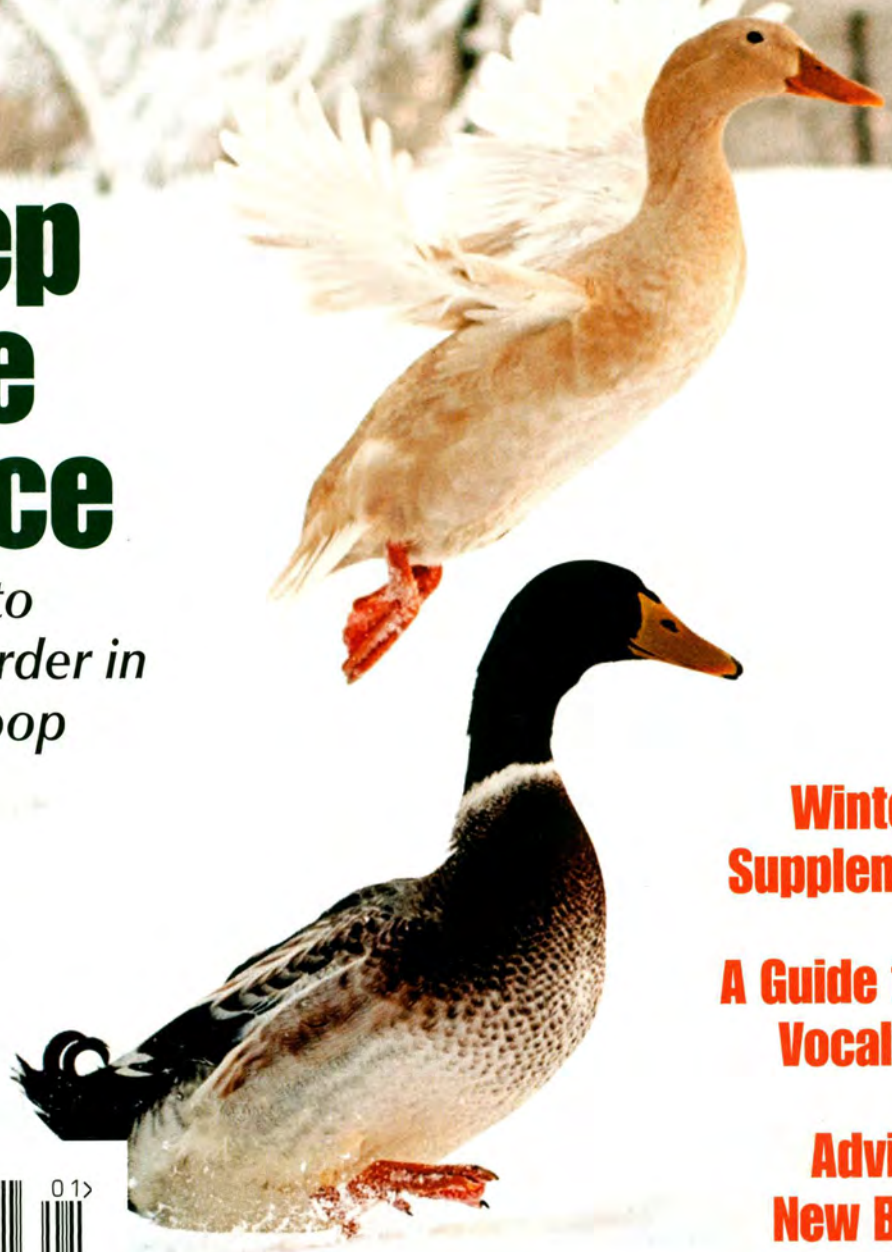
Backyard Poultry

Volume 10, Number 6
December 2015/January 2016

Dedicated to more and better small-flock poultry



Keep the Peace

How to maintain order in your coop

Winter Feed Supplement Ideas

A Guide to Chicken Vocalizations

Advice for New Breeders

$4.99US/CAN
01>
0 71896 49278 1
DISPLAY UNTIL FEB 2, 2016

$4.99 US www.backyardpoultrymag.com

STRONG FAMILY FARM
Est. 1878
"Preserving Family Farm History"

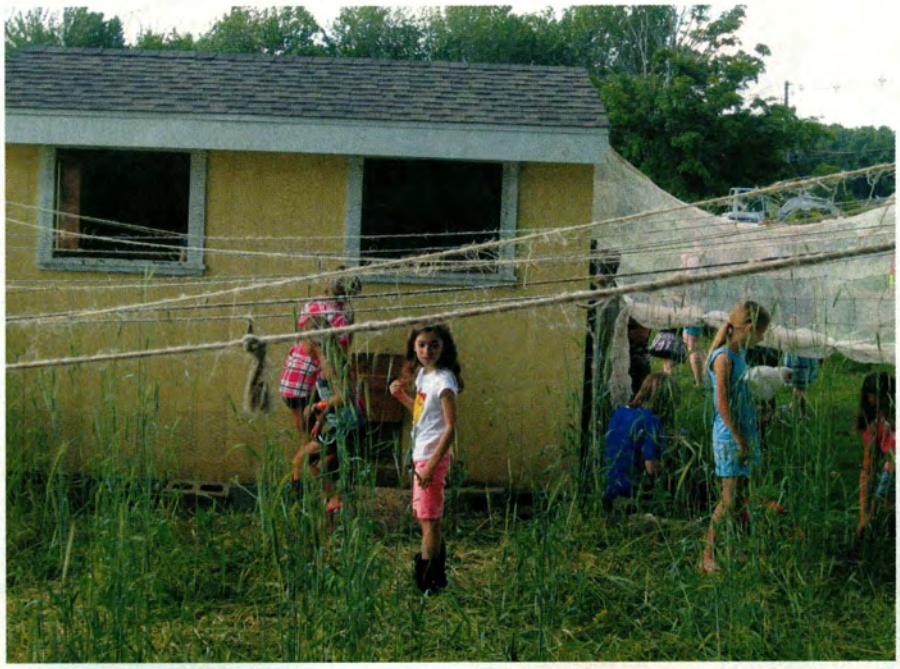
Strong, By Name And Mission

At the Strong Family Farm, Local Students Connect with Farm Life by Adopting Chickens

BY QUINN EURICH
CONNECTICUT

The barn is a sturdy 135 years old, the bales of hay are from the previous year, and the families sitting on or around them in chairs are mostly new to the Strong Family Farm's Adopt-a-Chicken program. A couple of the kids have returned again this year as volunteers, and managing the check-in station are two students from the Agricultural Education Program at Rockville High School in Connecticut, where they're required to volunteer at a nonprofit of their choice provided it deals with a type of animal husbandry or plant field. And, of course, there are this year's star attractions: two dozen pullets and one rooster, all part of a variety pack obtained from the Murray McMurray Hatchery.

In front of the group, telling a chicken joke that elicits blank stares from the smallest learners and a few groans from the adults is Humane Educator Gail Phillips-Bosshart, known to everyone as Mrs. P-B. While there's always something new to learn about chickens, on this day she's also introducing everyone to the newest residents of the farm, the homing pigeons. They've been at the farm for two weeks, and today is the day that they'll be released from their temporary home to find their permanent roosts in the farm's barn and other outbuildings.



Strong Family Farm's Chicken Adoption Program

FEE: $30 per chicken covers cost of buying and keeping the chicken from March until early October, includes 10 visitations with chicken lessons and activities.

CLASSES: Begin in May and take place on every other Wednesday. The program is one hour long. Participants learn everything about chickens from the different breeds available to daily care, how they lay their eggs, and how to stay healthy when handling the birds.

The Strong Family Farm

While the Strong family and their farm has been in Vernon, Connecticut, for more than a century, it's been only since 2014 that the farm officially became a nonprofit, whose mission is defined as a "historic agricultural education center where children, individuals, families and community groups can experience an authentic family farm environment."

Nancy Strong conceived the idea for the nonprofit when it became clear her brother, Morgan, was quitting Connecticut for farming in the warmer winters of Virginia. Creating the nonprofit was key to Nancy's plan to save the last family farm in Vernon from going the way of the other farms: to housing developments, shopping centers and busy roads.

The farm itself is almost eight acres, including a wetland, the homestead where Nancy's 94-year-old mother Geraldine still lives, a large barn that now hosts the Adopt-a-Chicken classes, a number of outbuildings, and a new chicken coop.

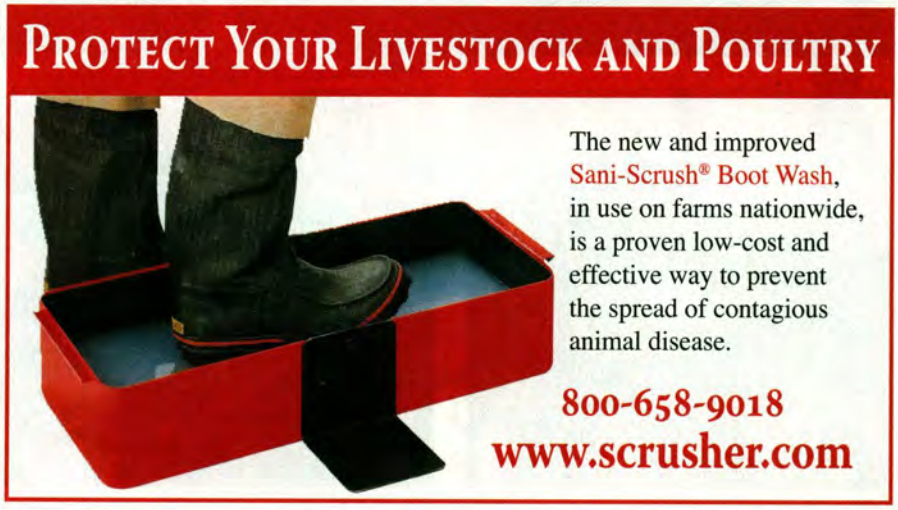
The Adopt-a-Chicken Program

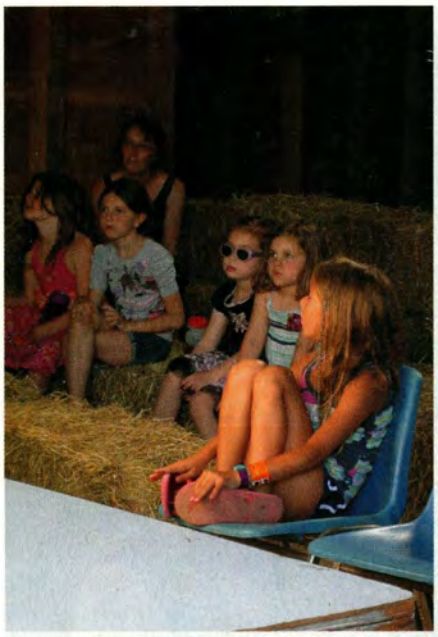
The 10-week Adopt-a-Chicken program is the brainchild of Alexis Carmicheal, who used to raise chickens on her father's land. After taking a recently born chick to her daughter's school for Show-and-Tell, she realized most of the children had no idea of the connection between the eggs they saw in the grocery store and the small bird in front of them.

When her father mentioned Nancy's plan to save her family's farm, Alexis wrote up the Adopt-a-Chicken plan and syllabus, convinced Nancy to do it, and volunteered to help make it work. Word about the adoption program got to Mrs. P-B, a Humane Educator certified by the Humane Society of the United States in Washington, DC. She sent her volunteer offer to Nancy complete with her resume.

The Adopt-a-Chicken program is a big deal at the farm. Each year for the past three years, the chicks arrive the last week of March and are officially welcomed in April with the annual Chicken Run. It's a day of running and walking featuring a ¼-mile children's race, a two-mile walk, and a 5-K road race. The farm's official Chicken mascot is on hand to help runners and walkers do their pre-race warm-ups and hand out eggs.

Throughout the festivities, the chicks are kept warm and safe in their specially





"There's total acceptance of the kids, and a lot of laughing. The short class comes first, and I always start it off with a chicken joke. Usually a bad one!" — Humane Educator Gail Phillips-Bosshart

built chicken coop. While the style of the coop is similar to chicken houses you can see at any farm, the plans for this one were taken directly from The United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers' Bulletin #574*, reprinted in January 1918.

Nancy says, "One of my cousins found a bunch of these old brochures and dropped them off at the farm. When Erich M. volunteered to get the coop built and donated as his Eagle Scout project, I passed the brochure onto him, and he took it from there."

The Adoption classes begin in May, run for two hours every other Wednesday and finish up at the end of September. The official goodbye party for the chickens takes place in early October, at the farm's annual Harvest Festival. While some of the younger children get emotional about saying goodbye to the chickens, they send them off with the a special goodbye song sung to the tune of "I've Been Working on the Rail Road." The chickens' new home is in Ludlow, Massachusetts, where they have the run of the farm and lay eggs for their new owner.

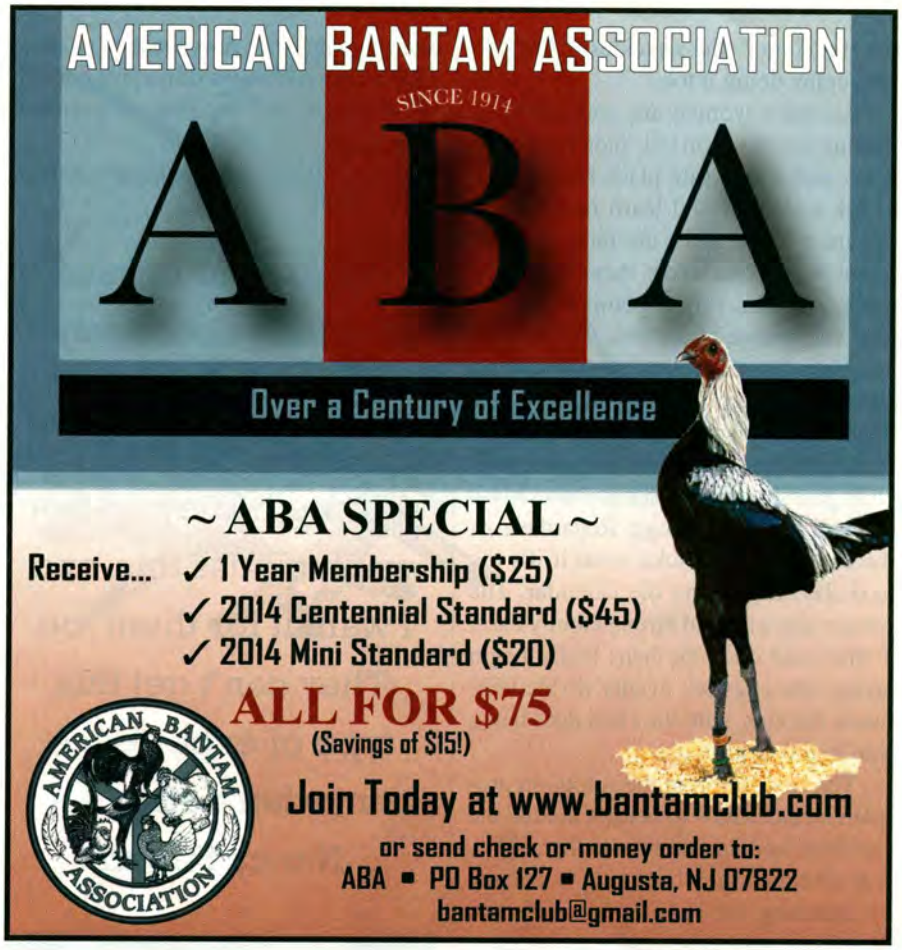
Goals Of The Adoption Program

When talking about what they want to accomplish with the Adopt-a-Chicken program, Alexis says, "For me, it's helping to connect not only the kids, but the adults as well with where their food comes from. The goal is sharing information and generating respect for what's keeping you alive. It's not to make everyone a vegetarian."

Mrs. P-B chimes in, "While that animal is alive treat it as if it's saving your life, because it is. Education is the best weapon we have to save the world."

Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens by Gail Damerow helped provide the lesson structure and inform many of the lessons, though Nancy, Mrs. P-B, and Alexis are open to using any material available to them. That includes one lesson on Biosecurity where each child gets a free coloring book from the U. S. Department of Agriculture. The lesson on the chicken's digestive system is accompanied by a detailed drawing done by youth volunteer and budding artist Emma H.

"And, it's not just learning about chickens and playing with them," says Nancy, "it's also the hands-on work of taking care of them including cleaning



out the coop." She chuckles, "And the kids enjoy doing it too."

All three women are committed to making sure the farm is a "judgment free" zone, and a very safe place for the kids to ask questions and learn new things. For most of the kids, the farm is a different world, one where they can totally relax. As Mrs. P-B explains, "There's total acceptance of the kids, and a lot of laughing. The short class comes first, and I always start it off with a chicken joke." She laughs, "Usually a bad one!"

On the first day of the program, each child guesses when one of the new chickens will lay the first egg. Regardless of the date the child picks, even if it's the next day, it goes on the calendar. The winner gets a special Strong Family Farm T-shirt, and once the hens really begin laying, the eggs are evenly divided between the kids, with the extra ones being sold in the farm store.

The first lesson of the Adoption program includes how to behave around the chickens, and how to handle them. Mrs. P-B demonstrates how not to behave by imitating the kids normal behavior of yelling, squealing, and waving arms. It's a lesson that gets repeated several times over the 20 weeks, "Because," as Nancy says, "you just can't expect kids to remember everything."

The Stars Of The Adopt-a-Chicken Program

The clear favorite of the chickens doing community service this year is the Polish pullet named Pom-Pom whose poofy, white headdress fascinates the smaller children. One little girl beamed shyly when one of the volunteers remarked that her skirt resembled Pom-Pom's feathery head. Her mother remarked, "She likes Pom-Pom the best because she's Polish just like we are."

The kids and adults interested in interacting with the chickens are allowed a few at a time to enter the fenced enclosure attached to the coop, and the flock is herded outside. The majority of the birds stick together, and as a group manage to out-race the hands reaching for them. A couple of turns around the small yard and they crowd back into the coop, where anyone who prefers to keep a safe distance from them can check them out from the doorway. Still though a handful of the chickens remain in the yard, and one wily white hen runs ahead of an older girl, before she slows down just enough to be caught and cuddled — over and over again.

Mrs. P-B says that having a variety of chickens is good for a number of reasons. "We can show how similar, but how diverse they are. Like that Naked Neck or Turken, which comes from a hot climate in Southeast Asia and India. They have less dense feathers."

She talked about the Humane Education aspect of the classes in helping the kids to understand how animals and people are more alike than they are different.

"We're always bringing in the similarities. Like when the kids first saw how different the Turken was, they laughed at it. That opened up a discussion on how being different can lead to being bullied."

> "We're here because the kids absolutely have to visit the chickens they adopted. They do not want to miss this, and I want it for them too. They can't get this type of experience anywhere else." — Nancy Strong

LEARN MORE BEFORE YOU THINK ABOUT ADOPTING

Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens by Gail Damerow

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): *Tips for Raising Healthy Backyard Flocks: Hear from the Experts*
https://goto.webcasts.com/viewer/event.jsp?ei=1052535

U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Biosecurity
www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/birdbiosecurity/

The Farm Experience

The cost of adopting a chicken is $30 to pay for the chicken, feed, fencing, the chicken lessons and other activities should it rain. Though it's one chicken per child or family, Nancy says the farm is open to anyone the adopters want to bring with them.

"If they have someone visiting them, I'm not going to tell them not to bring them along. This is about helping people connect with the farm, and what you do on a farm."

On this day, someone's grandmother came along, got comfortable under a shady tree and was reading her book, while Nancy's mother, Geraldine, was watching the activities from the porch. It was also a day when the strawberries were ripe for picking. Being able to pick whatever is in season, including the garden produce, is all part of the farm experience when you adopt a chicken. Nancy remembered one time when the Brownie troop from the nearby elementary school came to visit the chickens, "The blueberries were just coming into season, and I told them to go pick them," she said. She paused, and then continued, "Most of them had never picked a blueberry before, which I found very sad." Then she smiled, "And it brought back memories of when I was a child and bit into one that wasn't ripe. Children need these kinds of experiences."

As the program is winding down for the day, the chickens have been visited, and most of the strawberries have been picked. Everyone has seen the pigeons released, and while quite a few families are leaving, one family is just arriving.

As she's getting the three kids out of their car seats the mom explains their being late, "I know most everyone is leaving, but we came directly from swim lessons. We're here because the kids absolutely have to visit the chickens they adopted. They do not want to miss this, and I want it for them too. They can't get this type of experience anywhere else."