

“A contract was placed on the heads of Chatham chickens”

**CHATHAM'S
Historical
Heritage**

by Fred J. Vatter



The poultry industry, currently going through stressful times in Chatham County, has had a roller coaster ride over the years.

Prior to the 1920s small barnyard flocks were maintained by local farmers who used the birds for eating bugs, providing eggs for family consumption and selling some of the birds if there happened to be a market for them at any given time. Chickens were a source of a little extra income in good times, but could bring on a cash drain during bad times. There were no organized markets for poultry and the birds were sometimes bartered to local storekeepers for needed goods.

The area's clay soil limited the yields of cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, corn and wheat. Around the time of World War I the boll weevil's destruction dropped the cotton yield even more. This was a factor in causing some farmers to think about other sources of income, including raising more poultry.

By the mid 1920s organized car lot shipments of live poultry was initiated. Chatham County shipped an average of 25,865 pounds of live poultry annually between 1925 and 1930. The organization of a Farmer's Mutual Exchange in the early 1930's helped the farmer's marketing efforts.

Many chickens from Chatham were shipped live to North Carolina's seaside resorts. Unfortunately, the help at these resorts were not adept at killing and dressing the birds and therefore the dealers started performing this function locally. The dressed birds were then packed in ice and shipped not only to North Carolina's coast, but also to the northeast. This practice started an expansion of the industry and encouraged further innovation which turned poultry farming into big business.

The seeds of the remarkable growth of the industry were planted in Siler City Mills, Inc. A supervisor, Clyde L. Fore, had a B.S. degree from UNC and mixed the various ingredients of feeds to make them more nutritious. He needed a way to increase the sale of feed by reassuring the farmers that they'd have a profit when it was time to market their chickens.

Fore and W.E. Hart formed a partnership to raise broilers. They provided chicks to the farmers, provided the feed, and marketed the matured birds. Fore, with a nutritionist degree, was in a position to advise farmers on how to increase their yields. He also advised them about improving climate controls and water supplies in their chicken houses to reduce fatalities.

Some farmers were still afraid to raise chickens because of the market risks when it came time to sell. Mr. Lafayette Wrenn of Siler City Mills

came up with the idea of guaranteeing the producers a profit.

These steps were the beginning of contract farming which encouraged farmers to expand production by protecting them from the market risk. The vertically integrated feed mills would operate hatcheries. The chicks and feed would be provided to the farmers who would raise the chicks at a guaranteed price per head. Any



excess of sales proceeds over the set price, or any deficit, would accrue to the feed mill. The mill expanded the market for its products and the farmers were protected from losses.

As the number of suppliers increased, the producing farmers could choose between them and the price per head for the chickens increased. The farmers were paid according to a formula based on the efficiency of their production. The more efficient farmers were kept constantly supplied with chicks and feed, but the less efficient producers were used to a lesser extent during slow periods.

The emphasis on efficiency resulted in large chicken houses accommodating 10,000 to 15,000 birds. Feed formerly handled by the bag was handled by bulk. One man with modern equipment could handle 30,000 to 40,000

birds. Processing plants were soon handling more birds in one hour than were formerly handled in a full day.

Pilgrim's Pride and Townsend, Inc. became the two major poultry processors in Siler City and Townsend acquired the former Webster Poultry Company plant on Moncure Road in Pittsboro.

Wastewater treatment became a major problem as the poultry processing industry expanded. In 2004, Townsends, Inc. cut its operation in Pittsboro because of the wastewater pollution in nearby creeks, sending 208 jobs to Siler City.

The slowdown in the economy coupled with extremely high feed and energy costs caused Pilgrim's Pride to close its Siler City processing plant and feed mill in May 2008 putting some 830 people out of work. The plant, built in 1960 was considered old. It had been operated over the years by various entities, including Perdue Farms and Gold Kist.

Pilgrims Pride also revoked the contracts of 44 growers as of January 1, 2009. This plant closing, with the loss of jobs and tax and utility revenues has been a severe blow to Chatham and Siler City in particular.

Townsends, Inc., remains in Siler City and Pittsboro, and has a feed mill and hatchery in Chatham. Without the former textile industries for workers to fall back on, residents are hoping for Townsends' continued operation. Hopefully we can help by heeding the television commercial that admonishes us to "eat more chicken!"

Fred J. Vatter is past president of Chatham Historical Association and a Board Member.



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VOTE VOLLER

MAYOR OF PITTSBORO

**PROVEN RECORD
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Community leaders say:

"I am honored to endorse the Honorable Randolph Voller for re-election as Mayor of Pittsboro. He is bright, energetic, and sincerely interested in promoting Pittsboro, Chatham County, and the State of North Carolina. My endorsement is sincere and without reservation. Pittsboro has been on the move under his leadership, and his re-election will be the surest next step in continuing that progress."

**PAUL HARDIN, FORMER CHANCELLOR,
UNC-CHAPEL HILL**

"The issues our town faces are complex and [Voller] has the intelligence and the dedication to guide us. Support the re-election of Randy Voller."

**CATHY HOLT, CATHY HOLT YOGA,
SMALL BUSINESS OWNER**

"I was just thinking on the bus today how lucky we are to have Randy as a Mayor. He brought us the bus.... He brought us [liquor by the drink]. Thanks Randy!"

RACHEL HOFF, LIBRARIAN

Mayor Randy Voller works daily for Pittsboro to:

- improve water and sewer
- increase urban greenspace & recreational spaces
- increase economic development
- implement sound growth and sustainable development
- get diverse & affordable housing
- achieve transparent government

Early Voting/Same Day Registration Thursday, Oct. 15 – Saturday, Oct. 31

You must be registered to vote in Chatham County and live in town to vote in the Pittsboro municipal election. You can register and vote at the same time during the early voting period Oct. 15–Oct. 31 at the County Board of Elections (545-8500) in Pittsboro at 984 Thompson St.—located in the Platinum Square offices on U.S. 64 Business (East St.) across from the U.S. Post Office.

Re-elect VOLLER

Community leaders say:

"Randy Voller...believes in the principles of responsive government at the lowest possible level, quality education for all, and financial responsibility in the public domain. What's more, he's a local businessman who understands what "bottom line" means.

I can attest that [Voller] has worked hard with the Town Board and they have successfully kept a lid on Pittsboro taxes for the past four years. (In fact, the Town has lowered taxes the past two years.) He also has been a driving force on the board of the Chatham County Economic Development Corporation and is a strong advocate of the county's Interfaith Ministries."

**BRUCE C. LADD JR, CHATHAM RESIDENT
SINCE 1997**

www.randyvoller.com

P.O. Box 878, Pittsboro, NC 27312

Paid for by the Committee to Elect Randolph S. Voller