THE HAMLET FACTORY FIRE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POULTRY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in History

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Washington, DC
July 30, 2015
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation addresses the production and consumption of poultry in the United States in the twentieth century. The project combines the fields of labor and economic development with studies of food and cultural history. In examining the transition from a pastoral activity primarily concerned with egg production at the turn of the 1900s to a colossal industry that remained centered in the provinces, it explains two transitions at the center of the American diet; the growing shift from red to white meats as the primary form of protein, and the rise of processed convenience foods.

The dissertation is framed by events at the Imperial Foods poultry company in Hamlet, North Carolina where in 1991 a deadly fire claimed the lives of twenty-five workers, the majority of whom were African-American women. Unlike previous works on the poultry industry that have focused primarily upon the migration of workers in a globalized economy, this study takes a longer view of historical developments and the changing nature of consumer tastes and industrial production. I argue that Wendy’s and PepsiCo were instrumental in shaping a fast
food economy based upon slim profit margins, a rapid turnover of goods, and offering ‘value’ to customers at highly competitive prices.

When Imperial Foods was engulfed in flames the struggling company was attempting to keep pace with food processing giants who had spent the previous three decades pursuing an aggressive strategy of expansion, buy-outs, and vertical integration, creating economies of scale with which medium-sized firms could no longer compete. In the wake of the fire legislators vowed ‘never again.’ However, the modest penalties imposed by the state-run Occupational Safety and Health Administration meant the likelihood of effectively protecting poultry workers from safety violations had always been improbable. This was only one of the limitations of a regulatory system that stood in opposition to many of the key objectives of the politically more powerful United States Department of Agriculture. As the short history of Imperial Foods makes clear, by the 1990s poultry workers and even many factory owners themselves were subject to economic forces that were well beyond their control.
Acknowledgments

Over the course of seven years I have benefitted from the advice and support of a great many people. I will not have the opportunity to thank all of them in person but I will be forever grateful for the kindness and generosity that has made it possible for me to see this project to completion. It has been a test of endurance and not without many difficulties. Returning from one of my first research trips to North Carolina I picked up speed on I-95 in an attempt to beat an oncoming snow storm back to Washington. Hitting black ice and sliding down a grassy verge could have seemed like an ominous portent for the ongoing dissertation-making process. A stranger with a pickup truck helped me back on the road and the journey continued. This ultimately proved to be a more fitting symbol of what was to follow than the accident itself.

I am thankful to my committee members for their sustained support over many years. Joe McCartin must have seen some promise in an unlikely applicant from a remote corner of England in 2007 and over nearly a decade has been a source of invaluable advice and continued backing. Susan Pinkard has been similarly generous with her time and encouragement and her expert knowledge of European and culinary histories has helped me to bring additional dimensions to this study, which I would not otherwise have considered. I am also grateful to Katie Benton-Cohen for her willing assistance, shrewd observations, and insightful suggestions in the latter stages of the project.
I benefitted from the assistance of many people as I was researching in Washington, North Carolina, Georgia, and New York. Jackie Nowell and Paul Lechtenberg allowed for me to access a unique collection of resources at the United Food and Commercial Workers’ International Union. Lawrence Naumoff and Matt Turi at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and Traci Drummond and Hal Hansen at Georgia State University in Atlanta were generous with their time and provided excellent guidance in negotiating large and daunting source bases. Lane Windham kindly allowed for me to use the resources she had obtained and created when writing about poultry in Durham as a student some time ago. I was fortunate that Mike Golash from the Amalgamated Transit Union was able to help me to locate Karen Walker. Meeting and interviewing Karen was one of the highlights of my time as a doctoral student. I am grateful that she was willing to share her memories and hope that I have done justice to her brave and tireless work in the 1970s.

I would have been unable to sustain my efforts over the years without the backing of friends and colleagues. Javier Puente has stood in my corner since day one and has not only helped me to retain some semblance of sanity but has also provided many brilliant suggestions regarding how I may reconceptualize different arguments. Lawrence McMahon provided both friendship and sharp insights, besides also serving as a first rate audio technician. I interrupted Chad Frazier on innumerable occasions with questions both intellectual and grammatical and it never seemed to try his patience and he responded with both intelligence and kindness. Chris England, Tameka Porter, and their extended family generously opened their doors to me in Georgia, allowing for me to complete an important stage
of research. I was very glad to be in the same doctoral program as Alan Roe and he was not only a sounding board, but also a consistent supporter of my work throughout. Rodney and Sylvia Bollie, Zainab Amin, and Gabriel Koch have all been valued friends over the past decade and have improved my time in Washington considerably.

Finally, the loving support of family members has meant that I have been able to set out and pursue my own path with the confidence that I would never be stranded. Andy and Vi Simcox kindly provided the means to get me started in Washington when it would not otherwise have been possible. Marie and Geoff Simcox always encouraged me to pursue my interest in history. Lastly, Michael, Jackie, and Alex have been with me always. This project is dedicated to them.
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Introduction

On September 3, 1991 a non-descript one-story redbrick factory in Hamlet, North Carolina was engulfed in flames following an explosion caused by a hydraulic fuel leak. The building had been constructed for the Buttercup Ice Cream Company in the 1920s, but had been operated by Imperial Food Products since 1981, a processor that converted pre-slaughtered poultry into wings, tenders, and nuggets for a range of full service and fast-food restaurants including the Nashville-based chains Shoney’s and Wendy’s. Imperial Food Products and its founder Emmett Roe had brought a consistent source of employment to the small town, located in the Sandhills of the south-central area of the state, less than ten miles from the South Carolina border. The poultry plant had provided much-needed jobs to what was a traditional railroad community that had seen the demand for labor decline in an increasingly automated industry. As a junction on the Seaboard Coast Line, trains from Richmond and Raleigh met a fork in the line at Hamlet with the choice of heading directly South for Columbia and eventually Florida, or southwest for Atlanta, Birmingham and Montgomery. While the Seaboard had dominated the history of Hamlet for a century, after 1991 its railroading past would be obscured by an entirely new legacy.

An ill-fitting hydraulic fuel hose that was connected to a deep-fat fryer in the processing room had for days been causing problems to the company's maintenance

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staff that were once again attempting repairs early in the morning of September 3.\textsuperscript{2} Though it was believed that the line had been effectively reconnected, minutes later it broke away from its coupling, emitting hydraulic fuel at a pressure somewhere between 800 and 1,500 pounds per square inch (the water pressure in a home is generally around 50 pounds per square inch). Fuel vapor ignited, creating a fireball in the center of the building and darkening the factory with clouds of black toxic smoke in less than two minutes. As workers scrambled towards the fire exits near a trash compactor and loading area at the back of the building and in the break room they found the doors locked shut and another exit blocked by a large truck. While some kicked at the locked doors, seventeen sought refuge in a spacious cooler until help could arrive. The cooler would have protected them but for the fact that it was suffering from a faulty door that they were unable to successfully seal from the smoke. Seven others workers found that they were trapped between the inferno and a freezer with no path to a fire exit.\textsuperscript{3}

Though the break room door was quickly knocked down from the inside, and the other doors opened from the exterior, it was too late for twenty-five workers who had not been scorched by flames but inhaled a fatal volume of poisonous smoke. This included twelve trapped in the cooler, the seven adjacent to the freezer, and even three who escaped the building but did so too late. An additional fifty-four

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{2} Interview conducted by J.A. Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, September 25, 1991, NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 8.
\end{flushright}
of the one-hundred and fifteen working that day suffered injuries, some debilitating in nature, while scores were later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. While events in Hamlet received only brief national coverage with mainstream news outlets understandably more focused upon the final weeks of the Soviet Union, the fire was widely reported within North Carolina and cast a pall over the state’s poultry industry and its reputation for workplace safety for years to come.

In the wake of the disaster, Imperial Food Products, Governor James Martin, a Republican, and the Labor Department in Raleigh were all subject to scrutiny. The Labor Department monitored workplaces under the leadership of Commissioner John Brooks, a Democrat, through a state program administered independent of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, though subject to many of the same regulations. Within weeks Brooks, Martin, representatives of labor and industry, and surviving workers from Imperial were called to Washington to testify before the House Committee on Education and Labor, chaired by William Ford of Michigan. Meanwhile the renowned civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson visited Hamlet, endeavoring to offer comfort to grieving spouses, parents, and children of the twenty-five victims.4

The demographic makeup of the deceased was suggestive of a place untouched by migration and time. They were the descendants of blacks who had chosen not to join the Great Migration to the North and whites who had not

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benefited from either the New Deal order or the rise of the “New South.” Twenty-four of the twenty-five names originated in the British Isles. Of the deceased, ten were white and fifteen African-American, seven men and eighteen women. They ranged in age from twenty to sixty-three and had parented a total of fifty children, including one mother of eight, a mother of five and one of four, and five mothers and two fathers of three each. As the preponderance of blame was directed to an employer who was considered to be unscrupulous and a Labor Commissioner believed to be inept who would lose in the primary a year later, there were many vows of “never again” and the governor and general assembly committed to training and equipping more safety inspectors. Congressional Democrats pushed for OSHA reform to make it easier for whistleblowers to confidentially volunteer information on dangerous workplaces. Regional business leaders sought to characterize Imperial as an isolated outlier, and poultry processors were keen to stress that Emmett Roe was a pariah, not a part of their community. Yet rather than addressing the practice of targeting impoverished zones of rural unemployment and the increasing disempowerment of workers in the 1990s, the Republican led Safety and Health Improvement and Regulatory Reform Act of 1995, authored by North Carolina's own Rep. Cass Ballenger, transferred OSHA funding away from enforcement towards education, allowed for inspections by private third-parties, and gave businesses the option of fixing problems before facing immediate fines.

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So why did I choose to write about this macabre tale? It held an appeal to me not simply because of the substantive issues that it allowed for me to discuss but also because of the form in which I felt I could present the story. It combined my fascination with the origins of everyday objects with themes pertaining to labor within American industry, while at the same time touching on important questions that I felt historians were asking about the nature of the post-war consumer economy. Chicken processors were among the great beneficiaries of late-twentieth century changes in taste, and since 1983 the McNugget had become a mass global success story, all the while baffling consumers who were curious about its construction and content.

I also had a clear vision of the form that I wanted this story to take. I saw much to be admired in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, his detailed account of a very different crime, the Clutter murders in Holcomb, Kansas in 1959 and his exploration of the dynamics of small-town life and how a rural community responded with great discomfort to new-found notoriety. More recently historian Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice* presented a murder crime in 1920s Detroit in something of a similar manner, employing a flair for the dramatic, as he carefully withholds plot turns from the reader for maximum effect. Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* also informed my approach to studying small-town life. In Anderson’s 1919 collection of stories he presents the experiences of twelve different members of a community from their contrasting individual positions. As the kaleidoscope adjusts in each chapter we learn a little more about the interlocking relationships between different characters and the subjectivity of their understandings of events within the town. This
plurality of carefully delineated perspectives creates what is ultimately a complex picture. A multidimensional approach is similarly necessary to understand the development of the American poultry industry and chicken’s place in the nation’s diet, but also to fully comprehend events at Imperial Food Products in Hamlet.7

Writing a quarter-century later and attempting to historicize the worst accident at a poultry plant in US history is more difficult than it may initially appear. It would be too simple to attribute historical causalities for a man-made disaster and explain it as a somehow inevitable outcome. If we are to look at the perilous nature of industrialized poultry processing, I might explain, then we can come to an understanding that even if a fire had not occurred in Hamlet a disaster like it very probably would have taken place somewhere else. A tidy linear narrative would follow. This was the road to Hamlet, we might conclude. And yet, but for an ill-fitting hydraulic fuel line, there would have been no need for repairs to be made on September 3 and there would have been no explosion. Can we ascribe great historical meaning to the fatal error of one maintenance man when but for that mistake Hamlet would have remained known as just a railroad town whose workers continued to dwell in the shadows? A fire in a poultry plant was not a unique occurrence in and of itself. There had been a trash fire at Imperial Food Products in

1983; there was a fire at Tyson Foods in North Little Rock, Arkansas on June 7 of 1991 in which the plant was successfully evacuated and nobody was harmed.  

In spite of the ever-present possibility of fires taking place where there were fryers cooking at nearly 400 degrees, poultry plants were not considered high-risk environments by the standards of the US Census. By the 1980s concerns over their safety were more often over ergonomic failings rather than combustible materials; the musculoskeletal strains of repeated actions—thousands of times over—in a frigid and damp environment. While an earlier Imperial plant in Pennsylvania had been twice issued citations, an inspector had never visited the Hamlet facility. Of all the things that could have possibly gone wrong at Imperial Food Products, from a worker getting caught up and trapped in the machinery to even a fire involving waste or a cooker, a high-pressure fuel hose letting loose and spraying around fifty gallons of flammable hydraulic fluids was just about the worst-case scenario. It is hard to conceive of a more catastrophic turn of events. There had not been an industrial accident of this scale at a poultry plant in the United States up to this point and there has not been one since, though there was a terrible explosion following an ammonia leak at Baoyuanfeng Poultry in Jilin, China in 2013 during

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which 119 workers were reported to have died.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, in Jilin as in Hamlet, many escape exits were locked or obstructed, compounding the ruin.

How should historians explain disaster without being deterministic? If we are to frame events as a high-stakes game of chance then the locked doors unavoidably tilt the ledger in the direction of disaster. But even to characterize poultry production as “high-risk” would be misleading. This was a by many definitions “light manufacturing.” While the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 27 fatalities per 100,000 employees working in mining in 1992, and 24 in agriculture, forestry, and commercial fishing, the rate in manufacturing was just 4 per 100,000 employees, ranking alongside retail work and government employment.\textsuperscript{13} Yet even in this “low-risk” environment the unthinkable remained a possibility and the perception that light-manufacturing generally safe led to a lack of diligence that may not have existed in industries where danger was an immediate and ever-present companion. However it would be an interpretive error to allow this event to trigger the necessity of creating a linear narrative in order to explain a “freak” accident, as tidy and convenient as this may be.

Though the disaster may not have been an inevitable outcome, we can nonetheless derive historical meaning from a chaotic workplace in a chaotic and rapidly evolving industry. Imperial Food Products was not a microcosm of the poultry industry- it was more disorderly and badly run than the standardized and carefully planned operations of Tyson Foods, Perdue Farms, Pilgrim’s Pride, or any

\textsuperscript{13} Toscano and Windau, “Fatal work injuries: results from the 1992 national census,” p. 45.
of the other giant films that were increasingly dominating the industry at this time. However the company was subject to consistent pressures resulting from consolidation among poultry firms and a marketplace that was defined by the power of retailers, both of which were changing the way food was produced and consumed in the United States in the late twentieth century. In addition to this the fact that Imperial did not slaughter on site meant that they stood to gain an even slimmer cut of the final profit than the large vertically integrated operators, the cost of defeathered carcasses being greater than live birds. This applied considerable pressure to keep down the costs of labor and new equipment.  

It is this interconnected web of different realms and their often parallel and simultaneous developments that this dissertation seeks to address and draw together. A more traditional labor history may explain the rise and fall of a particular set of workers or a union in something resembling a chronological order. There are countless examples of such institutional studies, both good and bad, and there is much to be said for this approach. Nevertheless it is my contention that we cannot effectively understand the poultry industry and the nature of employment therein, by only examining the stories of poultry companies and their workers and then relating them to broader state actions. Crucial developments at times and within different stages of the production process combined to create the economic framework in which Imperial was operating by the 1990s.

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The modern poultry economy that reached maturity in the post-war United States was as much a product of Americans’ changing conceptions of diet, fitness, and convenience as it was the result of changes in farming practices and industrial structuring. As an increasingly health-conscious nation sought to eat lean white meats, frozen food businesses and restaurants competed to provide them in ever-greater quantities at bargain prices. In changing the very nature of the chicken itself in order to develop a bird that could be raised quickly while bearing considerable weight, food scientists and product developers found creative new ways to make this increasingly tasteless meat into tantalizing new dishes, in the process erasing many of the health advantages that poultry promised over beef and pork.\textsuperscript{15}

Between the 1950s and the 1990s American consumption of poultry tripled to a yearly average of over sixty pounds per person per annum, by the year 2000 historically surpassing pork and closing the gap with beef.\textsuperscript{16}


Poultrymen benefitted from much of the same infrastructure and distribution and retail networks as the beef industry while introducing important distinctions. With Southern farmers opting to become poultry growers in the place of traditional cash crops, industry leaders like Charles Odell Lovette, Frank Perdue, and John Tyson and his son Donald benefitted from close proximity to their suppliers as a “Broiler Belt” of high intensity chicken farming was established from Arkansas stretching through to Georgia and the Carolinas. Similarly to Mary Yeager’s depiction of the early-twentieth century beef barons, poultrymen embraced technological change and product innovation to reduce transportation and storage costs, discarding as many of the inedible components of the carcass at

Figure 1.1 Average American meat consumption, pounds per capita, 1950-2000\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 15.
the slaughterhouse as possible.¹⁸ As an industry developing in the age of interstate highways and unbound from the constraints of railroads, poultry processors operated almost exclusively through the use of the increasingly deregulated refrigerated trucking system of haulage recently described by Shane Hamilton.¹⁹ When mass-produced poultry became available it would be distributed to many of the same retailers as America’s favorite red meat, wholesalers who would provide to full service restaurants, as well as the limited range of specialty restaurants of which Kentucky Fried Chicken would become the most notable.

When beef prices would become greatly inflated in the late-1970s the poultry industry would be poised to take advantage by entering the vast network of burger joints that lined highways across the United States, enjoying the greater flexibility in terms of raising times and reproductive cycles associated with fowl when compared to cattle or even swine. In order to capture a share of this massive new outlet they would need to meet the needs of the quick service and frozen food economies though. The chicken would soar to new heights not as a premium dish but as a value meal fitting the menus of Americans’ most popular franchise restaurants like McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and Taco Bell.²⁰ Through the work of poultry

scientists like Robert C. Baker of Cornell University, a master creator of chicken based products, industry leaders moved into existing markets as well as expanding into new and expanding markets too by providing an array of snack and “finger-foods.”

The creation of a mass market for poultry came at a cost though. A restaurant sector that by the 1980s was stressing volume and affordability at the center of its appeal required an industrial partner that had the same priorities. While the quick service restaurants would keep preparation costs to a minimum through micromanaged and highly standardized tasks described in detail by anthropologist Ester Reiter, a model of operation so effective and widespread that sociologist George Ritzer would argue that a “McDonaldization of society” had taken place, they would be just as effective at ensuring that their workforce remained non-union.21 Donald Stull, Michael Broadway, Solomon Iyobosa Omo-Osagie II and


21 Ester Reiter, Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991); George Ritzer, The McDonaldization of
Monica Gisolfi have highlighted the environmental costs of the unaccounted for externalities created by industrial poultry production and their impact upon landscapes, waterways and from the Chesapeake Bay to Upcountry Georgia.\textsuperscript{22}

More recent studies have picked up the narrative of poultry processing in the 1980s and 1990s as the subject of histories of globalization, tracing migration from Mexico and Central America to Southern states within the United States. Where Leon Fink is interested in the efforts of Mayans to form labor unions in North Carolina, Kathleen C. Schwartzman argues that in the wake of NAFTA companies purposefully sought to employ immigrant workers over ready and willing Americans in an effort to undermine a wave of militancy and solidarity in the late 1980s. Rather than occupying jobs that no native-born American would take, poultrymen actively discriminated against both whites and African-Americans, in the process producing a wave of cheap exportable tariff-free chicken parts that hobbled traditional Mexican sources.\textsuperscript{23} Understandably the outstanding works by

Schwartzman, a sociologist, and Steve Striffler, an anthropologist who worked a stint in a Tyson’s plant in Arkansas, have different methodological approaches to historians.²⁴ LaGuana K. Gray’s recent volume on poultry workers in Arkansas certainly furthers our understanding of the development of the industry within that region and contains an important and detailed analysis of the impact of Latin American migration upon racial relations among front line workers.²⁵

Yet the modern American poultry industry was fifty years in the making. To reach this point, two generations of poultrymen and workers had fought to define the shape of the business. If industry leaders were anxious about militancy among workers in the 1980s, as Schwartzman argues, they were just as concerned in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Besides being located close to the sources of production—live birds lose considerable weight when transported over distances—both Southern state authorities and federal policymakers offered incentives for industrial development that have been described in detail by James C. Cobb and Bruce Schulman.²⁶ Importantly the South also offered a low-wage labor force seemingly wrought by centuries of racial divisions at a time when the militant United Packinghouse Workers of America were on the offensive within the beef

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industry, as Roger Horowitz has argued, bringing workers together along class lines.\textsuperscript{27} In chronicling the struggles of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen to organize the poultry plants in the Southeast this project explores the birth a twentieth century industry and the transformation of workplaces, animals, and ultimately food and the American diet, conjoining histories of business, labor, and the “New South.”

In chapter one we return to Hamlet in 1991 and consider the unfolding of an industrial disaster in greater detail. In spite of close connections among workers within the small North Carolina community, wages remained meager and employees were not unionized. Imperial Food Products was not a fondly thought of employer and distrust pervaded the shop floor well before the fire. After the disaster, as workers tried to make sense of a chaotic workplace that had spiraled out of control, company owner Emmett Roe and his son and director of operations Brad found themselves within the crosshairs of community ire.

To understand events of 1991 we must consider the transformation of the chicken’s role in American agriculture and the shifting economic incentives that shaped farmers behavior. The intensification of poultry farming occurred much later than was the case in the raising of cattle and swine. As late as the 1920s chickens were most often a sideline managed by farmers’ wives and children for extra cash. However as chapter two demonstrates, evolving understandings of chicken breeding, coupled with federal support for scientific agricultural development primed farmers to persist with broiler raising through the depths of

the Great Depression and meet the expectations of post-Second World War prosperity.

In the third chapter we enter the plants of Wilkesboro, North Carolina-based Holly Farms, a formative player in shaping the modern poultry industry and for a stretch the largest processor in the world. Between the 1950s and 1970s the company would introduce dynamic and innovative— even risky— production methods as it altered the vertically-integrated industry model and the way Americans purchased chicken. For all of its technological foresight, the company deployed what even by the standards of the time and the industry was a reactionary approach to human relations. Through dereliction of labor laws and the co-opting of members of its majority female African-American workforce the company instigated a series of violent episodes as it sought to beat back Amalgamated Meat Cutters Locals 525 and 272, situating women in what had typically been masculine union-breaking roles.

While Local 525 leadership had been an insurgent force in Southern poultry plants in the 1950s and 1960s, we see how its role had changed in Durham by the 1970s in chapter four. As wages stagnated at the city’s unionized Gold Kist plant, radical activists from the Progressive Labor Party challenged the Local’s paternalism from within over a five-year span in successive rounds of collective bargaining negotiations. In what may be considered a fight over the trajectory of industrial unionism, many workers proved receptive to the idea of a more direction of militant organization that spoke to their frustrations and acted upon them aggressively. As the 1970s came to a close and the long-term injuries associated
with poultry processing work started to become more apparent, for workers in Durham the future direction of their union was on the line.\textsuperscript{28}

However the modern poultry industry cannot be explain merely by considering the processing stage in the food chain. Americans’ eating habits were rapidly changing in the 1970s as more women opted to work, microwave ovens started to reach mass affordability, and the chain restaurant industry quickly evolved beyond the burger, fries, and a shake that has become a postwar staple. Chapters five and six will look at two significant areas of development that pertained to the economy for poultry: the idea of “value,” and menu and product development. In chapter five we turn to Dave Thomas and the start of the Wendy’s chain of franchised fast food restaurants. This would seem curious in a project on the modern American poultry economy, since Thomas’s chain has long been associated with the slogan “where’s the beef?” But for his early associations with Colonel Sanders, Thomas vowed for years that he would not sell chicken in his “Old Fashioned Hamburger” restaurants. Still, Thomas’s insurgent brand grew at an unparalleled rate in the 1970s in a head-on challenge to industry-leading McDonald’s. In doing so he increased Americans’ expectations when going for a meal, offering more meat for a lower rate per pound. As competitors followed suit

\textsuperscript{28} This chapter should also contribute to the literature on communism within American trade unions. While there is a wealth of different studies in which pre-McCarthyite radicalism is a central theme, there is far less to be said of the later twentieth century. Robert Korstad’s \textit{Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), also located in North Carolina, and Daniel Sidorick’s \textit{Condensed Capitalism: Campbell Soup and the Pursuit of Cheap Production in the Twentieth Century} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) are two of the most interesting examples within this discussion.
the chain restaurant industry would increasingly be focused upon cheapness and quantity. When beef prices climbed rapidly in the late-1970s Thomas would have to reconsider the menu and look to cheaper forms of meat such as chicken in order to sustain his economic model. The addition of chicken to the menus of Wendy’s confirmed the arrival of chicken as a fast food staple.

While Thomas was considering chicken sandwiches, his rivals were experimenting with more varied options, as we will see in chapter six. Since the 1960s, Cornell University poultry scientist Robert C. Baker had been looking for ways to make use of unwanted animal products from blood to chicken backs. Baker’s intent was to ameliorate world food shortages, protect the environment, and provide cheaper sources of protein by devising ways to make these products palatable and appealing to consumers. When McDonald’s introduced Chicken McNuggets in 1983 accompanied by adverts touting “McNugget Mania” the snack box, which was based on Baker’s findings, would be a runaway success. Yet as the mysterious product gained increasing notoriety, it would deviate from Baker’s original vision and over time become a symbol for an unhealthy processed food economy.

So how should this change the way we think of the disaster at Hamlet? In chapter seven we return to Imperial Food Products and learn the perspectives of ownership and management. As poultry industry consolidation accelerated through the 1980s Emmett Roe tried to expand his holdings and survive amidst his highly competitive rivals. In the absence of great economies of scale, corners were cut as Imperial fought to meet the demands of suppliers and creditors alike. In the belief
that workers were consistently stealing the product, and that insects from the outside presented a hygienic risk, doors were locked shut. More recent evidence suggests that in the wake of a costly OSHA inspection at a plant they operated in Pennsylvania, Imperial had made at least some efforts to improve precautionary measures in Hamlet, in spite of the soft approach to regulatory enforcement taken by the state North Carolina. In the light of decades of development in the poultry industry we really ought to question whether Emmett and Brad Roe, like many of their unfortunate employees, felt that by 1991 they were entangled in a system where they had little chance for success and equally slim possibilities for escaping.

It is too rudimentary to state that the fire at Imperial Food Products represents the inevitable consequence of one specific cause. An ill-equipped and often unmotivated regulatory state, the Southern approach to labor, and Americans’ commitment to “value purchasing,” and the pressure brought to bear at each step of the production process by the development of national chains of franchised restaurants were all important contributing factors. What is striking though is the extent to which all involved acted as rational agents. No one was behaving irrationally. The historically less developed Southern states had understandably realized that one of the most cost-effective ways of attracting businesses was by abstaining from doing something that other states did, that is strictly regulating and inspecting them. The Roes got a good deal on an old ice cream plant in Hamlet and there were enough people living nearby who were willing to and capable of working in light manufacturing. Even locking back doors may have represented an effective barrier to theft; the only possibility of it misfiring was if the plant was inspected or if
employees needed to escape in an emergency. Similarly many Americans were raised to believe in thrift and obtaining the best possible return on their investment. Should we attribute culpability for an accident to groups that behaved as they were taught and in a fashion consistent with the ideas of that time and place? Perhaps not, but we should at the least endeavor to understand the interconnected nature of the historical links between processors, retailers and restaurants, and consumers and their contributing role in the creation of the political economy of poultry in the twentieth century United States.
Chapter 1

Hamlet, 1991

In October, 1991 many Americans were engrossed by the scandalous revelations of Anita Hill concerning future Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas. As elderly male senators probed Hill for graphic details and assailed her character, the widely publicized proceedings provided a vivid depiction of the challenges faced by women in urban white-collar environments in the 1990s. In many ways the content of the case lifted the lid on sexual harassment in the workplace and empowered many women to seek legal action against lecherous employers, supervisors, and colleagues.¹ Just a month before many had witnessed an equally vivid depiction of a contemporary workplace in Hamlet, North Carolina. Like Hill many of these women were African-American, yet in contrast to the urbane lawyer they were rural, blue-collar in their employment, and not what mainstream America liked to think of as “articulate.” While the Hill-Thomas scandal was sensational and lived long in the memory, media interest in the fire at Imperial Food Products quickly waned, leaving only journalists and investigators from within the state. Two-time presidential candidate Jesse Jackson, who had grown up less than two-hundred miles away and attended college at North Carolina A&T, would determinedly endeavor to provide support and encouragement to the small

community and attract a national spotlight to issues of rural poverty. In spite of these best efforts, Hamlet was a story that would quickly disappear from the front pages of the national dailies, relegated to page D25 of the New York Times and page D21 of the Chicago Tribune within two days of the event.\(^2\) Though Congressman William D. Ford of Michigan would call survivors, experts, and North Carolina’s Labor Commissioner John Brooks to Washington for a hearing before the Committee on Labor and Education as part of a broader discussion on the subject of OSHA reform, the fire at Imperial Food Products would not capture public consciousness in the same way as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, or even other contemporary events like the Thomas hearings or the beating of Rodney King by officers from the Los Angeles Police Department whose acquittal led to rioting in April and May 1992.\(^3\) But for residents of remotely located Hamlet, left behind to


\(^3\) As David Von Drehle points out, there were a number of elements present in the case of the Triangle Fire that led to significant reforms in New York. Unlike the Imperial plant, the Asch Building was in one of the most populated areas of the United States. Situated in Greenwich Village the sight of white women jumping to their deaths from a ten story building created a mass public spectacle that was witnessed by many and a cause of immediate outrage and trauma in one of America’s cultural centers. The timing was also crucial. The Triangle Fire coincided with a rising tide of socialism on the East Side and anarchism within the Italian community, highlighted most recently by Jennifer Guglielmo. Organizations like the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union formed a focal point for working class radicalism in the needlework trades. It was in this context that Tammany Hall made a significant change in course, seeking to align itself with labor unions it had been fighting against just two years previously. Creating a Factory Investigating Commission in response to Triangle formed part of this agenda which was supported by three important emerging figures in New York Democratic politics: Robert Wagner, Al Smith, and Frances Perkins, who had witnessed the fire in person. Compared to North Carolina of the 1990s there was a more recent reformist
face new realities once the cameras and press had rolled on out of town, the specter of death would cast a darker shadow.

Finding Work at Imperial

Imperial Food Products had left behind an aging plant in Scranton, Pennsylvania and moved the center of its production to Hamlet in 1980, at the same time relocating the company headquarters to Atlanta.4 As one of the leading producers for family-restaurant chain Shoney’s and a series of other independent businesses, the company followed a broader southern relocation that had taken place within the poultry industry since the 1950s whereby companies had increasingly sought to benefit from a milder climate that allowed year-round broiler raising and cheaper production costs. It was estimated in 1976 that the cost per pound of broiler production in the South averaged 20.6 cents, leading the Midwest where the cost was 21.5 cents, 22.6 cents in the Northeast, and 23.7 cents in the


Imperial, like many of its peers, would fight to gain a greater share of the rapidly expanding market for poultry meat, which had been following an upward trajectory since the 1940s. Though it is difficult to determine the best metric to assess the total value of the American broiler market over time, University of North Carolina extension economist and professor R. Charles Brooks estimated that the national farm value of production had increased from $72 million in 1940 to $544 million in 1950, around $1 billion in 1960, $1.5 billion in 1970 and finally to $3.7 billion by 1978. Though Brooks does not appear to have adjusted these figures for inflation they still amount to substantial rise in value. “The image of the U.S. broiler has changed from that of a rare, Sunday dinner treat in the 1940’s to its present role of both a family budget stretcher in the meat counter at the retail foodstores and a highly popular item served by fast-food chains and restaurants,” Brooks observed. In 1950 North Carolina had ranked seventeenth in poultry production in the United States, behind ten Midwestern states and three of the North Atlantic region. Thirty years later the Tarheel State had surpassed all thirteen states and stood fourth nationally behind Arkansas, Georgia, and Alabama. Situated in what some had come to refer as the “Broiler-Belt,” the stretch of Southern states from Arkansas in

the West as far as the Atlantic coast, Imperial was geographically well situated to capitalize upon Americans’ growing demand for processed chicken parts.  

Getting a job at Imperial was pretty straightforward in spite of the above average unemployment rate in Richmond County. In September 1991 the national average stood at 6.7 percent with 6.2 percent the statewide average, but unemployment in Richmond, where Hamlet was located, had stood at 8 percent as recently as May. The per capita income among Richmond County’s 44,518 residents was $11,950, ranking sixty-seventh of one hundred counties in North Carolina, with almost half of the 23,520 jobs in some form of manufacturing. Median household income in 1990 was $21,653.  

As a point of comparison Wake County, in which Raleigh was situated, had a population nearly ten times greater at 423,380, and a median household income that was 65 percent higher at $36,222.  

In Wake County 14.6 percent of the population had failed to graduate from high school; in Richmond County the figure was 39.6 percent. Some 19.6 percent of residents of Richmond

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9 The earliest use of the term “Broiler-Belt” that I have been able to locate dates to an article from 1945: Harold Severson, “Hands Across the Plow,” Nation’s Business, February 1945; 33, 2, p. 50.


County had attended a college of some sort, but only 5.3 percent could claim to have a bachelor’s degree.\textsuperscript{12}

According to the 1980 census in which poverty rate by ethnicity was measured, at the time of Imperial’s arrival the county’s large African-American minority (around 27 percent) experienced poverty rates four times higher than Richmond’s white population. This meant one-third of the black population was categorized as poor.\textsuperscript{13} While the county population had declined by close to one thousand during the ensuing decade the black population had increased by a similar sum and made up around 29 percent of the population by 1990. Richmond’s Hispanic population remained negligible.\textsuperscript{14} Conditions had not particularly improved during the course of the 1980s with Richmond one of only twelve counties in the state that had not seen the average household income rise over the course of the decade in real terms.

\textsuperscript{14} “Census 1980, Richmond County, North Carolina, Race”; “Census 1990, Richmond County, North Carolina.”
Hamlet’s Main Street had a classic small-town aesthetic and had been listed among the National Civic League’s ten honored “All-American Cities” in 1990, alongside such locations as Abilene, Texas, Sioux City, Iowa, and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. It had even been co-opted as a movie set earlier on in 1991 for a forgettable Hollywood film called *Billy Bathgate*, which starred Dustin Hoffman and Nicole Kidman.¹⁵ One would not have to travel far beyond the Main Street before it became evident that while the poverty rate may not have quite reached the scale that existed in mountainous communities close to the western state border with Tennessee, the signs of dilapidation and privation were all-too abundant. In this vacuum of opportunities existed Imperial Food Products, supplementing CSX Transportation as one of the town’s two largest employers. “Chickens have helped keep us going here in Hamlet,” observed former-mayor Tom Smart in 1991. “The railroad is still important…but you always want a good economic mix to stay healthy,” he added.¹⁶

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CSX Transportation would employ around 1,500 when Imperial arrived in 1980 but would reduce the staff in the freight yard by nearly a thousand over the following decade. About forty percent of the jobs in Richmond County were in apparel and textile plants, producing items for Fruit of the Loom and Burlington Industries, among others.\(^{17}\) The hourly wages in the textile industry jobs could pay more than poultry but rates varied and there were not enough positions for everyone. The statewide average wage in a finishing plant for cotton goods in 1989 was $6.79. In a wrap knit fabric mill, $6.16. Yet in a knit outerwear mill the average was $5.44 and a job in hosiery would earn $5.11, comparable to the $5.13 average working chickens.\(^{18}\) The 1980s were unkind to the American domestic textile and apparel industries with the number of jobs in North Carolina falling by 10.3 percent during the course of the decade as tumbling national figures reached the lowest in fifty years.\(^{19}\)

Though Imperial Food Products may not have exactly offered a broad range of employment opportunities and there was little that could be described as “healthy” about the purveyor of chicken tenders, nuggets, and fajitas, it did present a workplace that was willing to hire women and men, black and white, with little regard for previous experience or education. Some even travelled ten miles across the border from South Carolina to work there, others came from Rockingham, the nearby county seat. Despite the high rate of unemployment and the paucity of


alternatives, the turnover of staff remained high. One of the personnel staff at Imperial explained this as being “the hazard of the industry.” For some, “the attendance policy being too tough on them, transportation, baby-sitting, another job closer to home; reasons like that.”20 The turnover of maintenance men had been particularly high for much of the 1980s. They would often be called upon to work seven days a week under management that was described as “real quick tempered.”21 Though some of the maintenance turnover was attributed to “women problems” that resulted from the long hours at work, the company seemed to acknowledge some culpability and realized that “maintenance got out of whack.” Management decided upon a strategy of “beefing things up” and increased the number of maintenance men from two to eight, scheduled days off on weekends to ameliorate their “women problems” and raised pay from $5 to $8.50.22

Line workers were considered replaceable and remained at the $5 rate. Formally there were, “no guidelines, just common sense,” when it came to sorting through applications for positions in production. Potential employees would be subject to a basic health screening to determine whether they had any pre-existing repetitive motion disorders.23 The staff member responsible for hiring line workers

20 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 1.08 p.m., North Carolina Department of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 23.
21 Ibid., p. 9.
22 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 8.54 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 65-66.
23 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food
explained. "If the references looked good and the dates were correct and all, you know, if everything jibed, so to speak, I wouldn’t go into so much reference checking as I normally would with somebody else." Some took jobs there because the company’s wages were not the lowest around, others because they were out of work. “I went to the unemployment office, all I got was Imperial,” said Ada Blanchard. “I couldn’t stand the smell of chicken, that fresh chicken and so that made me sick on the stomach, to smell that horrible smell was just terrible and I didn’t think I was gonna make it. I was wanting to give up on it but my mother told me not to, she said ‘Ada, you can do it, you can handle it,’ and I had to handle it for my children if I could feed them,” she added. Blanchard persisted in the job.

The Essentials of Work at Imperial

After an orientation that covered the basics pertaining to attendance, compensation, attire, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards, new hires would be turned over to a line leader who would show them how to operate their position. The plant contained five main areas in which line workers could be assigned, though over time they would be expected to become proficient in more than one. Slaughtered chickens would begin their journey through the plant in the trim room in which they would be reduced in size to fit the needs of specific orders. Parts would then be sent to the “marinating and mixing” or “marinating and cutting”

Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 1.08 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 5.
24 Ibid., p. 7.
rooms where they were flavored, breaded, or doused in sauce, before proceeding to the main processing room at the center of the plant. Here chicken pieces would take their shape before being fed on conveyor belts through cooking vats of vegetable oil. The final station was the packing room where workers would prepare chicken parts, now frozen, for collection or delivery. This was a relatively simple operation when compared to an abattoir in which live animals were received.

Figure 1.3 Imperial Foods Plant Floor Plan

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For a stretch of time new workers would be handed formal written guidelines outlining their employment, “until our copier broke down,” it was recalled. It was never repaired or replaced. Beyond establishing that open-toed shoes and jewelry were prohibited and other points of common sense preparation, there was no systematic training program pertaining to employee health and safety. “It was not under my job description,” observed the staff member responsible for the company orientation.27 A fire drill never took place and the plant did not contain lighted exit signs for in cases of emergency. One of the leaders in maintenance reported that no fire prevention or evacuation plans had ever passed by his department. The subject was not discussed.28

Line workers also confirmed this. “The first day on the job,” one explained to state investigators, “I was never given any instructions on what to do in the event of a fire or an emergency. No fire drills were held and I was not given any instructions on how to use a fire extinguisher.”29 She continued. “I had worked at places before that I had been shown what to do...Every other place (but Imperial).”30 It was assumed that if a fire took place someone from “the supervision or lead guys or

27 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 1.08 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 13.
28 Interview conducted by J.A. Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, September 25, 1991, NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina p. 15.
30 Ibid., p. 6.
maintenance” would handle the flames while the line workers escaped. There was an OSHA poster on the employee bulletin board, but there appears to have been little familiarity with the details of occupational safety regulations.

The personnel staff member interviewed had called the North Carolina Department of Labor and requested a booklet explaining the code, “just to have in case something came up...that I could look in it.” The book duly arrived but it did not make things much clearer. “Course, looking in it, you got to have a B.A. degree to read the darn thing,” the interviewee observed. When questioned as to whether anyone else in management had made use of the OSHA handbook, he explained that they had not because “nobody knew the book was there but me.” The questioning proceeded:

“Did you have it out where it was visible to everybody?”

“No.”

“Was there a reason for that?”

“Was there a reason for what? That I didn’t have it out?”

“Yeah, right.”

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31 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, and Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 8, 1991, commencing 9.00 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 11; Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 8.54 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, p. 31.

32 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 1.08 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, p. 6.

33 Ibid., p. 16.
“I just never used the book. I had it in my desk drawer.”34

Another member of the staff found the regulations similarly confusing. “I don’t think nobody is really aware of the rules or laws or anything like that,” he said. “You hear so many things you’ve got to have. I’ve heard so many things: the doors got to be a certain size. You got, you know, all this crap- and nobody can give you any kind of answer.” While he had not read the OSHA handbook prior to September 1991, he had “looked at one since the fire, and I couldn’t understand a whole lot of it,” he said.35 Thus, North Carolina safety laws remained in a confusing orange book resting in a desk drawer, part of what was believed to be a common sense managerial approach whereby problems were addressed as and when they arose.

In truth the possibility of an emergency evacuation hardly seems to have been considered by many. “I never really give it a thought,” one of the managerial staff told investigators. “I know that may sound a little strange. It just never crossed my mind. And I guess if it had of, I was like most of the people that were there, I was in a position where I was in enough- all the areas enough to know where all the doors were that if something did happen...you would know where to go.”36 Some workers expressed similar sentiments. When asked if they felt Imperial was a safe

34 Ibid., p. 18.
35 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 8.54 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 51-52.
36 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, and Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 8, 1991, commencing 9.00 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 42.
place to work one responded, “I thought it was before but not now.” Another commented that, “I was like everyone else before. You don’t expect stuff like this to happen.” To the same question a third merely responded “I never thought about it.”

Yet other workers, most of whom seem to have known about the locked doors, expressed clear concerns. “It is near down,” one worker observed, referring to the fatigued state of the plant. “The equipment is out of date. The structure was near down. It was near down before the fire.” A second stated that, “I always knew it wasn’t that safe. I knew there was only one way out.” A third remembered how she “was always scared I was going to fall because of water on the floor. I saw a few people who fell.” A fourth even held concerns about the doors being locked all the time. Neither raised these issues with management though. “I did not feel it would do any good,” said the third. The fourth cited a “nasty attitude toward employees,” and said that, “I was scared to ask management anything.”

On one occasion a wire was “sparking fire” on a machine they were working on in the

41 Imperial Food Products, Inc. Fire Investigation Interview Statement, North Carolina Department of Labor, September 11, 1991, 3.10 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, p. 5.
processing room and she reported it, only to be told to return to work, “that wire is not going to do anything.”

Some were more explicit in identifying Brad Roe as the cause of their reluctance to complain. Brad was the director of operations at the Hamlet plant and the son of company owner Emmett Roe. “I did not have any relationship with Brad,” said Loretta Goodwin who had worked thirteen years in a nursing home before leaving to take a job at Imperial because it paid a little more. “He is the type of person whom the two years I have been there...that if you passed him going in in the morning and speak to him, he will not speak to you. I know then that he was not nobody for me to go talk to.” Bobby Quick, another employee, said that “if you tried to make a statement to Brad, he did not want to hear it. What you said did not matter. He was running the show. If you keep making a stink, he will fire you, you know, don’t let the door hit you in the you know where.” He added: “All they cared about was the product, getting it out.” Quick attributed this to parental influence, recollecting that, “When his daddy came to the plant he was like a little puppy. I guess the daddy passed on all the laws for the plant there and he had to follow them.”

Evelyn Wall said that Brad was “one of the nastiest persons that I could ever meet up with,” and that he would “come in there and cuss your employees out

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like they’re nothing, just as if they’re a dog or something.”

Upon receiving three aprons, Gail Pouncy said that Roe told her “you better not get a damn spot on them or I’ll fire you on the spot.”

Other workers corroborated the notion that the attitude coming from the top worked its way down. “It wasn’t nice,” described Mary Bryant of her interactions with the supervisors, “because they didn’t talk to us like we were just humans, and I guess it was because of the manager, because he didn’t talk to anybody like they was humans.” Few stood up to defend the Roes and their company. “It was nice, I enjoyed it,” said Martha Goodwin after the fire, insisting that she would be willing to return. “Everybody’s got their rules and regulations,” she observed. “It looked like the average chicken plant, it wasn’t no nasty place.” Loretta Hall was a manager in the packing room and was sometimes responsible for distributing paychecks. “I’ve been over a year,” she asserted on September 4. “The management has always been very nice to me. When I called yesterday,” she continued, “Brad was very concerned about the people, he wasn’t concerned about the plant.”

Some workers harbored serious concerns about safety though. “We always said we was gonna catch hold of each other if there was a fire cause they never did fire drills or anything like that,” said Conester Player. Ruby Bullard was among the minority of white workers at the plant but felt no racial division with her colleagues in the trim room where she turned chicken breasts into strips. She had taken a

44 *Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.*
46 *Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.*
48 *Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.*
position at Imperial three years previously after working in another nearby poultry plant. Bullard remained at Imperial, “because it was hard to find a job that paid $5.50 an hour. It was better than going somewhere else to make $4.25 an hour.” She related a conversation that had taken place just months before in the workers’ break room as she sat with colleagues. “That’s something,” she said observing the exit to the outside. “That door’s been locked ever since I’ve been here. How we supposed to get out if this place catches on fire?”

September 3rd

“On the day of the fire I reported to work at 6.30AM,” began one Imperial worker. “I began operating the grader. I took a break to go to the bathroom at 8.00AM,” they continued. “When I returned from break I put my gloves on and about that time heard a sound like from igniting- ‘whoomp.’ I then saw the flames through the door to the processing room. I immediately ran to the loading dock area but found the exterior door lock- I recall about 12 people being with me at the door. The lights went out and I saw light coming from around where a truck trailer was parked up to the door. Everyone started yelling for someone to move the truck. I estimate that 10 mins. later someone moved the truck. I suffered from smoke inhalation and was hospitalized.” The author of this fire investigation account was

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a forty-four year old employee of Imperial on September 3rd 1991, and their identity remains legally protected. And yet this was far from the grizzliest experience.

The fryer in the processing room at the Hamlet plant was known to be problematic. It contained cooking oil at a temperature of 375 degrees in which breaded chicken nuggets, among other items, were cooked. The hydraulic fuel hose “was too long,” but had been “cut down to proper length for the piece of machinery it needed, it was going on,” said one of the maintenance crew.51 The previous Saturday it had worked but as the first shift left, “they had the mechanics in there working on it, and then when we came back in that Tuesday morning,”-the third-“they was working on it then and you walked in the front door you could smell the gas,” said Mary Bryant.52 “It was leaking up close to the fitting, but it wasn’t the fitting. It was a pinhole leak in the side of the tube itself or the hose itself,” said a more senior maintenance man working on the first shift.53 They removed the leaking hose. “We got back to the maintenance shop, started looking for another hose to replace it with,” he continued. “There wasn’t one that fit it,” in terms of length, so they cut a length from a new roll with a portable band saw.54 “The way I

51 Interview conducted by J.A. Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, September 25, 1991, NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 8.
52 Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.
53 Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 157.
54 Ibid., p. 158.
was taught to do it,” he explained, “you take it and wrap the duct tape around it” - where you made the cut - “so you don’t get a lot of frayed edges.”

After the ends had been attached to the new hose John Gagnon, 39, and a father of three from Hamlet, attempted to reattach it. The hydraulic fuel powered the conveyor belt that carried chicken pieces through the fryer but “kept messing up,” said Rick Lipford, another maintenance worker who was present. The three-quarter inch hose was encased in metal wire and designed to carry fluid up to a pressure of 3,000 pounds per square inch (psi). It was normally run at a pressure of 800 psi but sometimes it would be raised as high as 1,500 psi, well within the range of the equipment. It was not unknown for hydraulic fluid to leak. “I’ve seen them on anyplace where there were hydraulic lines,” said another maintenance man. “It was usually around the couplings itself where maybe they didn’t seal for some reason...but there would be drops, you know, coming out of the- around the couplings.” The witness in question had seen this two or three times over the space of two years and it had been fixed. “I didn’t even know hydraulic fuel would burn,” he added.

To avoid losing temperature the 300-gallon Stein Fryer remained turned on for what should have been a ten-minute job. “We routinely fixed it that way,” Lipford explained. “You’re shooting for as small a downtime as possible. Production

55 Ibid., p. 159.
57 Chicken Processing Plant Fires: Hamlet, North Carolina and North Little Rock, p. 4.
58 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, and Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 8, 1991, commencing 9.00 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 45-47.
is what kept every one of us here, eating and living in our houses." Another maintenance man added that, “they was quick to tell you how much money they was losing if it was shut down.” Don Bartell, a supervisor at Imperial, confirmed that “we’ve replaced hydraulic hoses before and we’ve always done it the same way.”

Yet while the question of whether the burners were running was a point of controversy in the North Carolina press, no-one but Gagnon would have known if the pilot light or the burners were running at the time that the accident occurred. The vat remained on a thermostat and automatically turned on and off from time to time to maintain temperature.

The US Fire Administration contended after its investigation that Gagnon had reconnected the repaired hose and the fuel was brought back to operating pressure. Moments later the fuel hose, located about four to six feet from the ground, broke away from the connector, releasing hydraulic fuel at somewhere between 800 and 1,500 psi. Hydraulic fuel is not classified as ‘flammable’ in the standard sense that it would be labeled as such. One of the maintenance men said that, “it showed a zero rating on the flammability on the side of the drum.” However the fuel, Chevron HD 32, was combustible, meaning while it might not ignite if exposed to a spark or naked flame, it could do so at unusually high temperatures. North Carolina

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59 Trevor and Williams, “Repairers left fryer on,” p. 9A.
60 Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 168.
61 Trevor and Williams, “Repairers left fryer on,” p. 9A.
62 Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 167.
Department of Labor investigators concluded that the flashpoint was 390 degrees Fahrenheit, similar to the temperature of the fryer.\textsuperscript{63} The Fire Administration contended that in this instance the hydraulic fuel met with the heat of the fryer, and potentially the burners, and vaporized. In a gaseous state the hydraulic fuel had a much lower ignition point than in liquid form. The addition of natural gas to the fire increased the intensity of toxic fumes that billowed from the processing room.\textsuperscript{64}

The senior maintenance man was also in the processing room, about ten feet away from John Gagnon with his back turned as he worked on an Urschel, a food cutting machine. “I heard something that...” He hesitated. “I don’t understand what the sound was, okay. It- it- it’s something I hadn’t heard before. It was just kind of a strange noise to me is all I could say.” Ranee Sandy from the North Carolina Attorney General’s office asked what it sounded like. He was familiar with just about every sound that regularly occurred in a poultry plant from compressed air to pressurized water. “I can’t explain it,” he replied. “It was a noise that caught my attention because, you know, I had been there so long that, you know, I could tell when something didn’t sound right.” He turned around. “And at that time, the fire goes “phoom” across the room, I mean just instantaneously.”\textsuperscript{65} He witnessed, “a ball of fire that come from the fryer all the way across the room from that edge of the

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., pp. 152-155.
\textsuperscript{64} Chicken Processing Plant Fires: Hamlet, North Carolina and North Little Rock, Arkansas, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{65} Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 180-181.
fryer and hit the wall.” He understood right away, “when that happened, this place was going to burn up.”

Conester Player was in the processing room at the same time as the maintenance staff. “Somebody told me to look what was going on,” she said, “and all I could see was big old balls that looked like beach balls of fire, that looked like someone was throwing it at them.” As a wall of fire cut across the processing room seven workers were trapped with no escape through the flames. While some headed towards the front door through the marinating and mixing room, others headed toward the trim room, which led to the break room. “I saw those ladies running- coming from the processing room, running, and they were just screaming and hollering,” testified Loretta Goodwin, who was stationed in the trim room. Her first thought was that, “someone had came and burglarized the place.”

Bobby Quick was in the bathroom attached to the break room when they ran in. “I really didn’t understand what they were saying.” But as he stepped out the bathroom, “smoke was coming through the door. And there was a lady standing over there trying to get an air conditioner out that was built into the wall.” Finding the break room door locked, as it always was, he started kicking at it. “I kicked it with my right leg about four times, and the smoke was getting in pretty fast, and we started to cough,” Quick said. “And as we started to cough I started praying to God. I didn’t want to die. And I just ran back to the wall in the bathroom and started

66 Ibid., p. 164.
67 *Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.*
68 Hearing on H.R. 3160, Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act, and the Fire at the Imperial Food Products Plant in Hamlet North Carolina, p. 39
running, just kicking with both my feet.” Launching his 160-pound frame full length at the lock, the door broke open.  

Others headed toward a loading area, depicted in Figure 2, only to find the door onto the street outside blocked. “There was a tractor-trailer backed up to the loading door and we couldn’t get out,” said Brenda Bailey. Sam Breeden was outside when he heard screams and saw black smoke pouring from the building. Women were trying to escape through a tiny gap in the back of the building that was blocked by a large dumpster. “Sam, help get me out,” Mattie Fairley called. Breeden dashed over and fanned smoke from Fairley who was trapped in the gap until a backhoe moved the dumpster out of the way.

Mary Bryant had undertaken a variety of jobs on the production line at Imperial from weighing chicken to running machines and she knew the factory well. As dark smoke filled the building and the lighting cut out Bryant could not find her way and like Bobby Quick and many others, started to pray. “Being there, calling for help for somebody to help me…the place is on fire, the doors are locked and you can’t get out,” she said. Recalling events nine months later she understood her survival as a tale of divine intervention. “I found myself talking and I began to pray and in this prayer I asked God to save me, don’t let me die in a place like this. As I was talking to Him, I heard someone’s voice and the voice said just follow my voice, please just follow my voice and I went to reach to where I heard the voice and

69 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
somebody held my hand and pulled me out.” She continued. “Nobody can tell me that that wasn’t God because I was praying and next thing to show me a way out and He did.” Bryant was not alone in explaining her escape as an act of deliverance. “I’ve been to Hell,” Conester Player said, but “God spared me and brought me back.” Speaking in 1993, she compared their situation with the Waco siege in which seventy-six Branch Davidians were burned to death as the ATF and FBI assaulted their compound on April 19, 1993. “I look at the people in Waco, I look at the news last night and they had these plants that was on fire and my heart cries out to these people because when you can’t do nothing for yourself and you’re bound, if there’s ever been a hell that was it.”

For some the sources of help may have been unexpected. Loretta Goodwin asserted that she had no relationship with the management of the plant at all. “When I got halfway out, I think it was my plant manager, Brad, he caught me by his right arm and slung me on the ground and told me to lay there, don’t move,” but she proceeded to cross the street away from the plant as she coughed up balls of soot. For others, help did not arrive fast enough. In the darkness and the chaos of the trim room many workers sought refuge in a large cooler. Among these was Monica McDougald who had been in the processing room shredding chicken for fajitas. McDougald was twenty-one years old and had become a mother just two months

72 Testimony by Mary Bryant, former Imperial Foods worker, June 1992. Box 31, North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project records, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill.
73 Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.
74 Hearing on H.R. 3160, Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act, and the Fire at the Imperial Food Products Plant in Hamlet North Carolina, p. 39.
before. "You couldn’t see nothing," she said. "I heard a lot of screaming." Unable to locate the exit in the trim room McDougald and a friend headed toward the light they saw coming from the cooler. There was a clear logic to seeking refuge from the smoke in the cooler for it was designed to be vacuum-sealed and its insulation provided a seemingly obvious answer to the heat of the fire.

There were problems with the cooler though. During any regular working day the traffic in and out of the cooler was considerable, “because that’s where they kept the fresh chicken, and the fresh chicken run the whole plant,” said the senior maintenance man. “So, you know, they had power jacks going in every time one of these trucks come up with the chicken to take it from the truck in, and then they was taking it from the cooler to the different rooms to be, you know, distributed out.” Power jacks were the small electric vehicles that carried pallets. “And it was open first thing in the morning, and it was one of the last things locked, because it just had constant traffic through it.” This frequent usage had taken its toll upon the door to the cooler. “It had been hit with the power jacks enough times to knock it out of shape to where you would have to readjust it and put it back up there where it would shut and open like it should,” he explained. “It was knocked out of align with the opening. That was the major problem.”

When Monica McDougald and her friend Alison Griffin made it to the cooler there were already around a dozen people in there. They were the last ones in.

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76 Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 124-125.
Workers were covering their faces attempting to protect themselves from the smoke. A man was lying at her feet in fetal position as some started to pass out. His name was Philip Dawkins, a forty-nine year old sales representative from a company called Lance snacks. He had been in the wrong place at the wrong time loading snacks into a vending machine. Griffin said to McDougald that they had to escape the cooler and they tried but the smoke was too thick. McDougald headed toward the far end of the cooler and hid under an emptied out cardboard chicken box with Elizabeth Bellamy, a forty-two year old mother of two from nearby Bennettsville, South Carolina, praying that she would escape alive. Somehow she did. When they were removed from the cooler by firefighters McDougald and two others, including Alison Griffin, were still alive. McDougald would be taken to North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill by helicopter, while Griffin was delivered in critical condition to the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte. “You don’t question the Lord’s work,” she said ten days later. “I’m still thankful for my life.”

Unable to seal the door shut, the cooler was the largest single area of fatality at Imperial with twelve deaths. The firefighter that discovered Philip Dawkins was his own son.

Emergency services only arrived after someone had run three blocks to make a call. The phones in the plant had cut out. The town’s Fire Chief David Fuller

reported receiving notification at 8.24am and reaching 40 Bridges Street just four minutes later, as calls for assistance were sent out to nearby forces in Cordova and Rockingham. Hamlet’s two full-time firemen and twenty-two of the twenty-eight man volunteer force arrived to find as many as twenty bodies prone outside the plant, three of whom were dead already.80

The all-African American volunteer firefighters in Dobbins Heights claimed that they were turned away and instructed to remain on standby three times in spite of them being the next closest force. Whereas Dobbins Heights was two miles from Hamlet, Rockingham was around seven miles away. “We could have saved more lives in that building,” lamented Chief Ernie Cannon. “I know it is because of race,” he said. “We would have gotten there within three to five minutes. We were closer than any of them.” Their force of three trucks and fifteen men were primed and ready to go. “When you are in a crisis situation you must learn to put race and prejudice aside. Fire is one color,” Cannon continued. With the Dobbins Heights force deeply affected by events, with the cousin of one of their firefighters a casualty to the disaster, the chief concluded that, “it hurt us deeply.” Hamlet’s white mayor, Abbie Covington, offered the rather weak defense that “it’s not prudent to pull every bit of your coverage out of one area. That would have left a large section of the county with no fire protection.”81

As concerns about a roof collapse mounted, firefighters found it difficult to reach all of the bodies.\textsuperscript{82} It was not until noon, three-and-a-half hours after arriving, that they removed the last body from the processing room. The fifty-four injured were dispatched to hospitals across the state of North Carolina, emergency services counted the number of deceased at twenty-five. In a small community like Hamlet the victims and survivors were closely connected not only by bonds of friendship but by kinship too. Many left behind young children. The twenty-five adults that died had been responsible for fifty offspring. \textquotedblleft It was mothers that died, that had little children,	extquotedblright said Mary Bryant. \textquotedblleft I feel for those children, you know, I think about my mother and everybody need their mother.	extquotedblright Ada Blanchard was also a survivor who had lived her whole life in Hamlet. \textquotedblleft I lost a cousin, Elaine Ratliff. Rose Wilkins, Bertha Jarrell, I mean basically all of them, Gail (Campbell) had a little boy Tony, just started to kindergarten, and Gail didn\textquoteright t live to see him get into first grade. Elaine had two small ones...Margaret Banks had two small ones...	extquotedblright\textsuperscript{83} Fifty-year old Peggy Anderson had eight children and nearly thirty grandchildren. The list went on. They were also fathers though. Maintenance man John Gagnon who had been servicing the fryer had three sons. Four of the other six men who died were also family men.\textsuperscript{84}

Residents of the small town of 6,100 quickly learned of the heavy toll of casualties. Few within the town\textquoteleft s African-American population did not know at

\textsuperscript{83} Hamlet: Out of the Ashes.
\textsuperscript{84} \textquotedblleft Tragedy in Hamlet,	extquotedblright Charlotte Observer, September 8, 1991 pp. 10A-11A.
least one person who worked at the plant. Hundreds were related to one of the victims. In the coming days the national media arrived and then abruptly moved on to the next story. The state media remained longer and asked questions of Republican Governor James Martin and long-standing Democratic Labor Commissioner John Brooks. Why had the plant never been subject to an OSHA inspection? How was it that a US Department of Agriculture inspector could be on site every day checking that poultry was produced hygienically without ever alerting authorities to serious violations of the fire code? For many, events in Hamlet exposed the underbelly of a state economy that was increasingly priding itself on thriving banking and filmmaking sectors, first-class universities, and cutting-edge research taking place at Research Triangle Park in the tri-city area of Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill. The state that had elected Jim Martin as governor, a chemistry professor with a doctorate from Princeton University, had liked to consider itself as different—more developed, more progressive than neighboring South Carolina, or the likes of Alabama and Mississippi. However, the fire at Imperial Food Products had exposed pockets of deprivation and hardship in Richmond County to match anywhere in the United States. In some ways this was another example of what journalist Rob Christensen described as “the paradox of Tar Heel politics” in his history of the same title, a state that produced strong progressives like Frank Porter Graham, briefly US Senator and long-time president of UNC, and vice-presidential contender John Edwards, and influential arch-conservatives like Jesse Helms. Yet within this complicated political dynamic

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85 Rob Christensen, The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: the Personalities, Elections, and
towns like Hamlet had escaped greater consideration and remained forgotten and forlorn.

**Championing Imperial's Victims**

After a disaster on this scale there was little prospect of a return to normal for the employees of Imperial Food Products. Though many looked for answers to broader questions of how such an accident could happen- or be allowed to happen- the more immediate challenges were more pressing. These ranged from organizing funerals for loved ones to meeting the needs of orphaned children of single parents. For all of the technocratic proposals that would emerge in the days and weeks after the fire, few Carolinians wanted to see Hamlet become some kind of an icon of the rural poverty that existed in numerous small towns across rural the South.

In the days that followed the fire a two-time presidential candidate and the country’s most widely recognized living civil rights leader became very interested in Hamlet. Jesse Jackson had strong roots in the Carolinas having been born in and attended segregated schools in Greenville, South Carolina and transferred in his sophomore year of college from the University of Illinois to the historically black North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro in 1960. Over the course of a

year following the fire he would take up the cause of the Hamlet workers and speak of the events repeatedly as he pushed for an anti-poverty agenda and workplace safety reforms across the country.

Jackson might have been the ideal person to speak to the victims of the fire in their moment of despair. As a presidential candidate he had performed consistently very strongly in the Carolinas in Democratic primaries, famously winning South Carolina in both 1984 and 1988. Though he had never won a North Carolina primary, his returns in the state were respectable in the first run and then impressive four years later. While he finished third with 25 percent behind Walter Mondale and Gary Hart in 1984, he had run a close second to Al Gore with 33 percent of the vote to Gore’s 35 percent in 1988. The 30 percent of the vote that he received in Richmond County was slightly below his statewide performance but indicated a significant base of support. Jackson’s status as a national figure, his standing as an ordained Baptist minister, and his familiarity with both the region and the struggles of impoverished rural African-Americans made him a unique ally in 1991.

Jackson’s first tour of Hamlet began eight days after the fire on September 11. He started by visiting the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte where he prayed with family members and recovering victims, both black and white. From here he proceeded to Richmond County and was greeted by a crowd of some 650 students at Hamlet Junior High School. When the twelve-year old son of one of the deceased

workers from the plant approached him he hugged the boy and assured him that things would be okay. After a visit to the East Hamlet Community Center he continued to a gathering at the charred ruins of Imperial Food Products on Bridges Street. Here he spoke to around five hundred people. “Never again must workers be trapped behind locked doors! These people would not have been killed if the law had been upheld,” Jackson declared. “Let me share with you the heaviness in my heart where people were denied to live because of government neglect,” he said.

For all the discussions that were taking place statewide about the idea of upgrading regulatory regimes, he was able to provide encouragement and solace through his vision of Christian social justice and powerful delivery that other political leaders were unable to match, including Hamlet’s own white elected officials. “I’m just trying to put it behind me,” said Renea Lefler, a twenty-three year old Imperial employee in attendance. “This is an inspiration to help me go on,” she added. As the crowd clapped and cheered he led them in chants of “save our workers” and his popular refrain of “keep hope alive!”

Jackson would return to North Carolina a month later to speak in favor of unionism in the South at the state AFL-CIO convention before continuing on to Hamlet to participate in a memorial march of hundreds. Speaking at the labor gathering he sought to frame events in Hamlet as a national issue and a historical milestone. “Hamlet is to these economic issues of workers what Selma was to the political issues of 1965,” he said. “Here, workers can find common ground and organize for common security,” he continued. He called for a ‘Southern Crusade,’ a

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movement based more on class- even if that was a word he did not use- than on race. “When the fires raged and the smoke billowed and the poison penetrated the air, it had no respect for race, sex or religion, just people,” he observed. “And that’s why people must seize this moment to move from the historic, racial battleground to economic common ground and then moral higher ground,” he added. “This is the South, the richest soil and the poorest people,” Jackson exclaimed in Hamlet later that day. “This is the South, the most working poor people.”

Promising that “we are with the Hamlet workers and we are going to come back again and again until we get their attention,” Jackson would take their message around the country in the presidential election year of 1992, even though he was not a candidate. He would create a powerful picture of working life in America, relating workers in Hamlet to sexual harassment in the white-collar workplace and the Clarence Thomas hearings, after which he had compared Anita Hill to Rosa Parks and complained that Democratic senators “were sitting there paralyzed as soon as he (Thomas) raised the issue of racism.” By the 1990s Jackson was presenting an evolving and more complicated message concerning race than he had delivered in earlier years, ostensibly appealing to poor whites to see the common struggles that they shared with poor blacks. He would bring this message to the Democratic National Convention in 1992 where, referring to the Los Angeles Riots

he observed that “unless a white man named George Holliday, with a sense of conscience and instinct...filmed the beating, and made it public, Rodney King would have been in jail accused of assaulting police officers.” In appealing to his party with a message of racial healing Jackson related the experiences of two women at Imperial, friends, one white and one black who had told him their stories. Before a national audience he recalled one of them telling him of their carpal tunnel syndrome caused by repetitive motions, an ongoing problem for poultry workers everywhere, and how unable to obtain medical care they were crippled, fired, and called a “lazy bitch.” Jackson went on, “I said ‘you are not lazy, and you are not bitch, and you are not alone and a change is coming.’” He concluded that, “if we keep Hamlet, North Carolina in our hearts, and before our eyes, we will act to empower working people, we will protect the right to organize and to strike, we will empower workers to enforce health and safety laws,” as part of “a movement for economic justice across this nation.”

Yet not everyone in Hamlet appreciated Jackson’s efforts. When workers invited Jackson to visit to speak at the town’s memorial for those who had died a year later the mayor called an emergency meeting of the local council who voted unanimously against allowing Jackson to speak. In spite of Jackson’s unquestionably strong ties to the region, the town’s chief elected official used a ploy that harkened to the 1960s by seeking to portray a visiting civil rights campaigner as an intruder.

and a disruptive force.\textsuperscript{91} “We would like to bring a sense of healing to the community, a sense of closure,” Mayor Covington stated. “We wanted to keep it on a community basis. We weren’t on the market to bring in outsiders to speak.” In response, former-workers who had organized a group known as Citizens Against Repulsive Environments (CARE) created a separate event and encouraged people not to attend the official memorial. “He’s been with us from the time the fire happened,” Imperial survivor Conester Williams observed of Jackson on behalf of CARE. “He’s raised money to help the families and victims. He’s been standing in Christ with us.”\textsuperscript{92}

Jackson fired back at Covington and the city officials, charging that, “you’d have to have the mind of a slave master to determine who is going to speak at the funeral of the slaves. The slaves at least determine who their preacher’s going to be.” He broadened his critique, arguing that, “those who were in power a year ago, who neglected what was happening at the plant, now want to be in charge of how they commemorate their negligence.”\textsuperscript{93}

As testily as Jackson responded to Covington and the acquiescence of city elders towards Imperial Food Products and its malpractices in the years leading up to September 1991, his critique was aimed at the broader political environment that existed in the United States after twelve years of Republican presidential

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\textsuperscript{91} This is not unlike the treatment of SNCC members in the Deep South, to point to one example. See: Doug McAdam, \textit{Freedom Summer} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{92} Ben Stocking, “Hamlet officials, workers split over Jackson address,” \textit{Raleigh News & Observer}, September 1, 1992, p. 1A, 7A.

\textsuperscript{93} Ben Stocking, ”Jackson likens Hamlet officials to ‘slave master’ on memorial,” \textit{Raleigh News & Observer}, September 3, 1992, p. 5B.
administrations. It was an analysis of the growing levels of income inequality, the increase in the number of Americans who were either homeless or in prison, the flat minimum wage that had remained stuck at $3.35 from 1981 until 1990, and unhealed racial wounds, highlighted by the LA Riots just months before. But for many, Hamlet was also the consequence of over a decade of deregulatory politics and relaxed oversight of industrial safety standards. Reagan had personally ridiculed the worth of Washington’s regulatory agencies and his administration had reduced on-site inspections carried out by OSHA and the Mine Safety Health Administration as early as 1982 in the face of opposition from organized labor.\footnote{“AFL-CIO criticizes OSHA on cutback,” \textit{Washington Post}, May 5, 1982, p. A3.}

The deregulatory impulse had, it seemed, percolated downwards to state governments and agencies that left quiet towns like Hamlet undisturbed.

Jackson’s critique of the causes that had precipitated events in Hamlet was both timely and astute and his championing of the Imperial Food Products employees both compassionate and seemingly very sincere. If he seized on them as a symbol of the working poor in the “New South” it was at least in part because events in Richmond County were so shockingly painful for all those closely affected. As pertinent as this critique was, however, conditions at Imperial were neither new nor unique. Imperial’s laxities were the product of the poultry industry’s successful search for cheap land and labor and a “business-friendly” governing philosophy. The modern poultry industry had been bending and even breaking rules for decades in order to build high-speed, high-output businesses that could meet the demands of a rapidly growing population. The way in which Americans produced and
consumed poultry had change enormously over the duration of the twentieth century. Imperial was the product not merely of a time, place and economic philosophy but also of a specific industry: that of mass-produced and processed chicken parts. To really understand the punishing workplaces of 1990s poultry plants like the one in Hamlet, it is necessary to obtain a greater perspective on the origins and evolution of the industry in question.
Chapter 2

The Dying Days of Farmyard Poultry

“Meat is never harmful to the normal person.”

- Robert B. Hinman, Professor of Animal Husbandry at Cornell University

“In these days of wars and rumors of wars—haven’t you ever dreamed of a place where there was peace and security, where living was not a struggle but a lasting delight,” asked the opening title of Frank Capra’s Lost Horizon in the spring of 1937. “Of course you have,” responded the following title. “So has every man since Time began. Always the same dream. Sometimes he calls it Utopia—Sometimes the Fountain of Youth—Sometimes merely ‘that little chicken farm.’”

To equate the chicken farm with destinations so fantastical may have been far-fetched but was not beyond the popular imagination. It may have been a preoccupation of Capra’s. In his motion picture of the previous year, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, the protagonist ultimately decides to commit his $20m of inheritance to buying ten-acre plots of land for small-time farmers who are struggling with the Great Depression. His offers of assistance, which are contingent upon the farmers’ productive use of the

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2 Lost Horizon, dir.: Frank Capra, Columbia Pictures, 1937. Film.
3 Frank Capra, dir., Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, Columbia Pictures, 1936. Film.
land, bear some resemblance to the famous Homestead Act of 1862 and William Sherman’s promise of forty acres and a mule to freed peoples. This was at odds with the direction of agricultural and even economic thought at the time where soil preservation and central planning were in the ascendence.

Capra’s nostalgic populist vision invoked the anguish of a rapidly urbanizing country in which traditional methods of production, and the ways of life that they involved, were being thrown into disarray. Though eighty-five percent of American farms raised poultry in 1930, Capra’s “old chicken farm” was in its final days as the national agricultural economy headed into a period of rapid transition. The profitability and relative simplicity of poultry farming meant that it was only a matter of time before it adopted the larger scale methods employed by other livestock raisers. While some of the key innovations employed within the modern poultry industry did not take place until the 1940s, a philosophical departure had taken place a decade earlier in the tumult of the Great Depression. A standardized product was required to meet increasingly consolidated grocery chain purchasers and greater uniformity in the nation’s diet. This was made possible through the ascendance of a small number of mostly American breeds that had been closely studied and promoted by USDA experiment stations. Constrained by the still limited reach and affordability of the restaurant business, dressed chickens were prepared for what remained a market dominated by meat counter salesmen and middle-class housewives. Examination of the pre-war poultry business reveals a state of conflict;

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reluctant to break from a heartfelt perception of their own history, farmers faced
difficult decisions about their future as they tried to adapt to an increasingly
national economy.

Educating Young Farmers

In 1932 J. Milton Hover and Marvin S. Pittman, professors at Michigan State
Normal College in Ypsilanti-what would later become Eastern Michigan University-
wrote Profitable Farming, a comprehensive introduction to farming for young
people in the United States. It is imbued with a sense of romanticism that belies the
time in which it was written, the agricultural depression that had existed since the
early 1920s, buoyed by the authors’ positivistic confidence in scientific solutions to
nature’s ills. Mastering the nitrogen cycle through crop rotations. Defeating the boll
weevil and the Colorado potato beetle with arsenate. Dipping wheat seed in
formaldehyde to banish fungal diseases like rust and the common bunt, also known
as stinking smut. Delaying the planting of winter crops just long enough to foil the
Hessian fly. As a part of this progressive approach to farm development they
believed that scientific education would improve the family farm, not destroy it. The
same could be said of the writers and supporters of the Smith-Lever Act, signed into
law by Woodrow Wilson in 1914 to both extend and regularize funding for the
Cooperative Extension Service through the land-grant universities.

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5 J. Milton Hover and Marvin S. Pittman, Profitable Farming (Evanston, IL: Row,
6 Harold Barger and Hans H. Landsberg, American Agriculture, 1899-1939: A Study of
Output, Employment and Productivity (New York: National Bureau of Economic
Research, 1942); David B. Danbom, The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the
If Hover and Pittman had anticipated the great changes that were going to take place in the structure of the agricultural economy in the coming years there is little indication of it. Their vision of progress is one where better-educated farmers, benefitting from the assistance of the Extension Service, adapt to mechanization and new scientific methods. They do not foresee that the collapse in farm prices of the 1920s, which they would have been very much aware of, would lead to the New Deal’s zealous interventions on behalf of the biggest producers of major crops. Nor was it apparent to all that the expensive outlays on more advanced machinery would be of the most benefit to those that could utilize these new technologies the most. This ultimately meant farmers who could march hundreds of cows through their dairy, not dozens. Farmers that could harvest acre upon acre of wheat that grew from one horizon to the other.

*Profitable Farming* was written at a moment of great historical consequence in rural America. Published in 1932, the men from Ypsilanti wrote at just about the last moment when a sincere argument could be made that there was a secure and economically viable future for small and medium sized farms that were run by families who carried out a broad range of different economic activities. A farm that was both self-sustaining and made a bit extra for market. A farm that could be passed on from one generation to another, an independent unit that survived on the basis of its merits: of the hard-working and engaged farmer, his capable wife, and

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his offspring, a unit that produced goods that were of worth which ensured its survival from one year to the next without the support of the federal government.

Of course this notion, the yeoman farmer, was as old as the United States itself. As a powerful vision it would be articulated and exploited in the coming decades but more out of a sense of nostalgia and because of its popular appeal than out of a rational belief that these units were the basic building blocks to feed a growing nation.

After 1932 arguments proposing this method of production would no longer be operating out of optimism but a sense of wistfulness and fond memories; not a rational reflection of what was succeeding and what was not. Within two years farmers would become aware of a Dust Bowl in the Southwestern plains states and the great exodus it would generate, captured in print, fiction and film. Within five years the Agricultural Adjustment Administration restructured the incentive system and encouraged farmers to plough under their own crops. Ten years later the Supreme Court upheld the state’s prosecution of Roscoe Filburn, an Ohio farmer who subsisted on the wheat he grew to feed livestock on his own farm, but who planted in excess of the quotas permissible under amendments made to the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1941.\(^7\) Nothing would ever be the same again.

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Naturally the ideal of the yeoman farmer would be resurrected time and again from the television series *Little House on the Prairie* in the 1970s, to the Farm Aid benefit concerts in the 1980s, to the images of red wooden barns that appear on the packaging of countless agricultural products. Proponents of organic food would reframe this vision decades later as purveyors of premium products to concerned, and in most cases middle-class consumers. However, as Samuel Fromartz has demonstrated, the growing popularity of organic products led to another round of industrialization and mass production through companies like WhiteWave Foods, producers of Silk Soy Milk.8

*Profitable Farming* offers some insights into the godly world of farming before the storm, at least from the perspective of two college professors. They present a holistic view of agriculture, making recommendations that relate not just to business, but that lend toward living a “better rural life.”9 In selecting and buying a farm, families should ensure that it is “located in the right sort of community.” This means that a decent school and church should be nearby. It also means good neighbors though- “intelligent, progressive citizens who are sufficiently alike in race, ideals, wealth, and religious and political principles, so that they are happy and cooperative with one another.”10 While inspecting the quality of the soil is a man’s

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9 Hover and Pittman, p. vi.
10 Ibid., p. 12.
responsibility, the farmer’s wife mustn’t allow for relocation unless it is to “a neighborhood where she could rear her children under the best of social influences.”

In Hover and Pittman's view the farm that does a bit of everything is the best at sustaining itself. This makes some economic sense. With its interests spread out it is protected from some of the vicissitudes of the market; it is at less risk from sudden increases of input costs such as feed, and manure can serve as a fertilizer, while the collapse in the value of a particular commodity is less likely to lead to ruin. But there is also the sense that when a farmer can fulfill his needs by his own hands why should he do otherwise? To illustrate an example, they recommend that a good farm should contain a woodlot. Why? A woodlot provides cheap lumber, fuel, and fence posts. What is more it makes use of marginal lands that may not be suitable for planting or grazing. Farmers would be painfully reminded in the 1930s that trees, particularly on sloped terrain, protect from gulleying and soil erosion. But there is more to it than that. “The farm woodlot lends both interest and beauty to a farm,” they explain. “A human being who finds neither interest nor beauty in growing trees is spiritually poor though he may be financially rich.” Comparative advantage and economies of scale are not of concern when a family can plant, tend, and consume.

We should treat the wistfulness of Hover and Pittman with caution. It seems incongruent with the harsh times experienced in the American farming economy during the 1920s, though their residence in Michigan may have had a part to play.

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11 Ibid., p. 13.
12 Ibid., p. 215.
The wartime economy had seen a rapid expansion of production for markets that had swiftly disappeared in 1920, precipitating a collapse in agricultural prices, particularly of large acreage crops like wheat and cotton. As a state whose agricultural economy was very much based upon growing fruit and vegetables, Michigan was partially shielded from some of the problems facing Plains and Southern states.\textsuperscript{13} Decreased demand had accompanied a fall in land values and an increase in outlays leading to rising indebtedness on farms. Unpaid debts led to foreclosures, which led to the consolidation of smaller farms into larger ones.\textsuperscript{14} It was perhaps inevitable then that this would be a time in which many young people would depart the austerity of the land in search of more prosperous urban environs.

As they were writing about this milieu, circumstances were changing and the old world of farming was starting to recede. Even so, the Secretary of Agriculture’s report to the president in 1932, the very same year, made assurances that the future of the family farm was at least “probable.” Mechanization was driving the expansion of farms with the capital to invest in Fords and John Deeres. This came at the cost of smaller bankrupted farms and through the cultivation of lands that were marginal.

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\textsuperscript{13} Milton S. Eisenhower, Arthur P. Chew, \textit{USDA Yearbook of Agriculture 1930} (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1930) pp. 721-766. As of 1930 Michigan produced the most cucumbers in the United States and was among the leading producers of a range of other truck crops including apples, peaches, grapes, pears, strawberries, peas, and potatoes. Declines in the value of truck crops were generally not as precipitous as those of arable crops.
\textsuperscript{14} See: Fitzgerald, \textit{Every Farm A Factory}, Chap. 4; Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, “The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy,” \textit{United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Information Bulletin Number 3}, June 2005, p. 5. Until 1920 the number of farms in the United States continued to increase. At this point a downward trend commenced for seventy years, which would only plateau in the 1990s. Beginning in 1910 average farm size began to increase and this trend accelerated through the middle of the century before seeing something of a reversal in the 1990s.
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and in some cases submarginal-lands that should never have been farmed.\textsuperscript{15} Mechanization, “is quite consistent with the family-sized farm, though it may make that farmer larger,” the \textit{Yearbook of Agriculture} observes somewhat uncertainly.\textsuperscript{16} “Large-scale farming as yet is a very minor thing in American agriculture,” it continues. The developments have not been spectacular, they argue. True, not spectacular, but they were nonetheless very deliberate. “By enabling the family labor supply to cover more land, power machinery tends to conserve rather than to destroy the family-farm system,” the authors contend. “Long life is probable for the family-sized farm because the nature of farming does not admit of the standardization necessary to the economical employment of large labor forces.”\textsuperscript{17}

Almost all of these assertions proved to be categorically incorrect, but it is interesting that the USDA should have been in this state of denial in 1932. Whether their forecasts were profoundly inaccurate, cynical, or a case of wishful thinking is unclear, but the fact is that the official publication of the United States government was propagating the same vision as Hover and Pittman. Both believed that the most effective way of organizing an agricultural enterprise was through the leadership of man with the assistance of his wife, rather than for it to operate along the lines of a larger business. This seems to indicate a dissonance between the USDA and the mainstream of American economic thought. In industrial production, business

\textsuperscript{15} Important studies of foreclosure crises include: John D. Hicks and Theodore Saloutos, \textit{Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951); Shover, \textit{Cornbelt Rebellion}.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 19.
owners were encouraged to increase the size of their businesses and create economies of scale. The message to farmers didn’t benefit from the same clarity. While the idea of economies of scale was certainly appreciated in theory, by the 1930s most of the best lands were either in use or legally protected from development or “improvement,” as it was sometimes called. The risk was thus that the expansion of one farm came at the expense of another, and that while the loser was probably a down-on-his-luck family farmer, the beneficiary was more likely to be a “corporate” farming company with ready access to the capital required to invest in new properties.  

In spite of the tumult faced by farmers at the time of writing, Hover and Pittman capture something of the spirit in which fowl had been raised for the preponderance of American history. Combined crop growing and animal husbandry, they write, “has come to be acknowledged as the highest type of farming.” They argue that livestock farming doesn’t just sustain farmers and families but “advances civilization” as a whole, enriching the farmer, the nation, and increasing the total quantity of human food so that “more people can live in the world than otherwise could.” Unlike any more normal economic activity, “livestock utilize plant growth not directly useful to man, transforming it into such valuable products as meat and milk and eggs and wool.” As one of the highest of human callings, animal husbandry has attracted “the best genius of the race,” who “for

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19 Hover and Pittman, p. 249.
20 Ibid., p. 252.
21 Ibid., pp. 249-251.
centuries...has struggled with the problem of increasing the efficiency and usefulness of livestock through better breeding animals.”

What is the historical understanding that supports these assertions? Once humans were primitive and limited in their means. But primitive peoples struggled without the use of domesticated animals. Horses had stumpy legs and were diminutive. Boar were uncontrollably savage and stomped around forests, trampling over humans who were stupid enough to stand in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cattle were limited as milkers and they were lean. Sheep produced modest amounts of wool and it was coarse. “The wild fowl of the jungle was a small bird, probably laying only one or two settings of eggs a year at best,” they speculate. Yet thanks to the great men of science the size of animals had been developed so that they were capable of labor and a source of meat that were not just more estimable in quantity but also amenable to the human palate. They were more productive in all areas, whether it be milk, wool, or eggs. All of this had led to the advancement of the species beyond the cave and flint axe. As much as this narrative may be imbued with false assumptions about humankind’s place in the universe, animal scientists in Europe and the United States had developed a certain mastery by the early twentieth century.

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22 Ibid., p. 254.
23 Ibid., p. 259.
25 Discussion of animal improvement had been a preoccupation of gentleman farmers for over a century and the changing nature of domestic species had been among the interests of Charles Darwin. As the nineteenth century came to a close the language of Social Darwinism took on many of the tropes commonly employed in animal husbandry. “Man is an animal,” explained Madison Grant in his famous 1916 work The Passing of the Great Race, “differing from his fellow inhabitants of the globe, not in kind but in degree of development, and an intelligent study of the
**The risks of raising hens**

The light nature of the work associated with fowl meant that, unlike say cattle or swine, the care of a small flock was often delegated to farming wives and children. The vast majority of American farms of the 1920s had chicken coops of some size, and their year-round production of eggs and the ease with which they could be slaughtered - a sharp twist of the neck - meant that they were both a popular and profitable enterprise. “One wonders whether farmers fully realize how much the so-called side lines of the farm - the chicken, the garden, the family cow, and the small orchard - really contribute to the food supply, the health, and the income of rural people,” Hover and Pittman write.²⁶ “There is no other kind of livestock from which the income is anything like so high in proportion to the investment,” they added.²⁷ Not only was the investment in infrastructure low, feed costs were low and, if hens were raised in a field, they could be relied upon to supplement their own sustenance through scavenging. One of the drawbacks of up-

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²⁶ Hover and Pittman, p. 342.
²⁷ Ibid., p. 343.
scaling poultry production and moving away from the free-range model was its wear on the land. A field or paddock could withstand the attention of a modestly sized flock; when the birds numbered in the thousands they would reduce it to nothing but dirt in a short time.

Chickens were also low risk animals compared to other common forms of livestock. In 1914 the United States was subject to one of the most serious outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in the nation’s history. Foot-and-mouth disease is a viral disease that can quickly spread among animals of cloven-hoof including cattle, swine, sheep, goats, and bison, among others. It first emerges as a fever but is normally identified by farmers from the blisters that form around the mouths and feet of livestock, who then frequently develop lameness. By the point at which a farmer discovers blisters or grounded animals it is invariably too late to avoid the infection of the entire herd. An outbreak of FMD is without doubt among the most dreaded calamities that can affect not just individual livestock farmers, but an entire industry spanning hundreds and even thousands of miles.

The outbreak of 1914 was believed to have begun in Niles, a small town in the south-western Michigan, twenty miles north of South Bend and close to the Indiana border. It may have been brought to the United States via imported merchandise from South America. This served as a satisfactory explanation. From hogs the disease readily spread to cattle. FMD could be transmitted by direct contact between animals, but also by human foot-traffic, by dogs or birds, by the use

of a barn, or transportation in infected railroad cars. Steers were sent to the Union
Stock Yards in Chicago and then dispatched by train to the east. With an incubation
period that can last up to twelve days, and the challenges of tracing the origins of
individual animals after they had passed through the world’s largest meat market,
FMD had spread far and wide by the time efforts to establish a quarantine had taken
place. While quarantining had been implemented in Europe upon FMD outbreaks in
the recent past, the frequent recurrence of the disease left both European and
American veterinarians unconvinced as to its effectiveness.\textsuperscript{29} The most effective
method was clear. “Preference must by far be given to the immediate removal of the
virus by slaughtering diseased and suspected animals than to any other measure,”
claimed Professor Remmelts of the Netherlands at the International Veterinary
Congress in London in 1914.\textsuperscript{30} The preferred method was to drive animals into a
deep trench, shoot them in the head, then cover them with quicklime.\textsuperscript{31} Farmers
have also been known to create pyres.

By the time the foot-and-mouth epizootic of 1914 had been controlled,
infected animals had been located in twenty-two different states and the District of
Columbia, revealing not only the extent to which agricultural commerce
crisscrossed the country but the centrality of Chicago as a hub in that process,
indicating one of the great limitations of having one central location through which
most livestock was routed.\textsuperscript{32} Around three-thousand six-hundred herds were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{32} See also: William Cronon, \textit{Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West} (New
\end{itemize}
slaughtered, mostly of cattle and swine, at the cost of $5.8 million, around $133 million in 2015 purchasing power.\(^{33}\)

Though immune to foot-and-mouth disease, poultry were obviously still subject to disease. While catastrophic outbreaks of FMD may have been the livestock farmer’s greatest fear, this wasn’t the most common disease among any animals, although it could clearly lead to the ruin of a farmer without sufficient insurance. Animal disease posed an ever-present risk. Yet because of their relative cheapness to obtain, to house, feed, and look after, flocks of chickens clearly involved considerably lesser investments than herds of just about any other animal.

Poultry, at this time, were in many ways a simpler proposition. Whereas a sick cow could incur expensive and prolonged veterinarian’s costs, a farmer would rarely dispense the same level of fees for poultry because birds were only worth so much. If a bird was very sick it was ultimately cheaper to destroy it than to separate it and attempt to heal it. When a farmer lost a cow he was not just losing the market value of that cow: he was also losing the sum of the food costs he had expended during the course of that animal’s lifetime. A chicken has a higher food conversion rate than a steer, meaning the proportion of feed that transfers into body weight is greater. The rate for sheep is notoriously poor. At the same time the average age at which hens went to market was younger than that of cows, meaning a less protracted period of care. “One hundred chickens are sometimes considered the

equivalent of one cow,” Hover and Pittman explained. “One cow, however, is much more likely to die than 100 chickens at one time.”

The fowl of the 1920s and 1930s would suffer lower mortality rates than four-legged livestock because they were farmed differently. Intensive farming of cattle and swine had developed earlier than would be the case with poultry. When you had a cornbelt and the primary source of food for hogs was corn, it made sense for them to be located in the same region to limit some of the costs of transporting feed across the country. Many cattle farmers settled regions where the land was poorly suited for plowing (though this didn’t stop some,) and grazing was more befitting. With great proximity to one another they would be transferred from the farm to a slaughterhouse or stock yards where they were fattened for several days before their lives ended. The means by which most fowl were traditionally raised-in small flocks with a sizable amount of land in every region of the country- meant that their preparation was not subject to the same pressures and risks as those associated with four-legged animals. By the time the intensification of the poultry industry reached the level of cattle, the way in which meat was transported and distributed would have fundamentally changed and the Union Stock Yards would be a sad shadow of the reeking, snorting, methane-ridden colossus it once was.

In the 1910s few envisioned poultry as the central feature of a farm, rather a profitable component at best. In 1919 Rob R. Slocum of the USDA’s Animal Husbandry Division wrote, “the place of poultry on the general farm must be definitely understood. It must be remembered that the poultry flock is merely one

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34 Hover and Pittman, p. 343. The first reported case of H5N1, commonly known as avian influenza, was in 1997 in Hong Kong.
of the activities with which the farmer is engaged and that he will be unable to
devote to his flock a great amount of his time.” He concluded that “the part poultry
should play, therefore, is to fit into the general farm management in such a way as to
help maintain a proper balance in farm operations and to utilize materials which are
suitable for feeding the hens but otherwise would be wasted.”35 A “poultry farm”
was still a rarity.

Categories of breed

There were three main categories of fowl raised by breeders in the early
twentieth century, those that were intended to lay eggs, those that were raised for
meat, and those that could perform both tasks proficiently. This was not unlike
cattle farming where breeds were divided into similar categories; beef cattle like the
Hereford and Aberdeen Angus, dairy cattle such as Holstein-Friesians and Jerseys,
and dual-purpose breeds like the Shorthorn.36 Where the first two categories made
up the majority of cattle in the United States, the popularity of dual-purpose
chickens far exceeded that of dual-purpose cows. Large flocks of egg breeds
remained mightily common though. The consistent egg-laying hens included birds
like the Leghorns and Minorcas, both from the Mediterranean. Birds with strong
egg-laying capacity would often have a large space between the pelvic and breast

35 USDA Yearbook of Agriculture 1919 (Washington, DC: United States Government
36 Charles S. Plumb, A Study of Farm Animals (St. Paul: Webb Book Publishing
bones, long and broad backs, and soft pliable bodies.\textsuperscript{37} Mediterranean birds normally laid white eggs, whereas American birds tended to lay brown eggs.\textsuperscript{38}

A 1918 study by the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station compared the egg-laying capacity of Leghorns, Wyandottes, Rhode Island Reds, and Plymouth Rocks, four of the most common breeds in the United States. The Leghorn demonstrated its quick egg-laying cycle and overall superior productivity in several regards. They averaged 170 eggs per bird per year, fifteen more than the next most prolific breed, which was the Plymouth Rock.\textsuperscript{39} Though known for being a bit tricky to control due to their “wild and extremely nervous dispositions,” their white eggs could be sold for a better price in certain markets and they produced them more efficiently.\textsuperscript{40} A Leghorn cost $2.19 to feed for a year, compared to $2.52 for a Plymouth Rock, producing one pound of eggs for every 3.5 pounds of feed versus 4.5 or 4.6 for the three other breeds. For $2.19 of input a farmer would receive $6.49 worth of eggs, turning an annual profit of $4.30 for each bird of the Leghorn variety. The annual profit on the Wyandottes, Rhode Island Reds and Plymouth Rocks in 1918 was substantially less at $2.92, $2.97 and $2.91 respectively.\textsuperscript{41}

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\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{37} Hover and Pittman, pp. 345-346.
    \item \textsuperscript{39} Harry R. Lewis, “Preliminary Report of the First Year (Pullet Year) of the Vineland International Egg Laying and Breeding Contest,” \textit{Hints to Poultrymen}, Vol. 6, No. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Department of Animal Husbandry, January 1918), p. 2.
    \item \textsuperscript{40} Ralston N. Hannas, “Broodiness: Its Influence and Control,” \textit{Hints to Poultrymen}, Vol. 8, No. 10 (New Brunswick, NJ: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Department of Animal Husbandry, July 1920), p. 2.
    \item \textsuperscript{41} Harry R. Lewis, “Preliminary Report of the First Year (Pullet Year) of the Vineland International Egg Laying and Breeding Contest,” p. 2.
\end{itemize}
Given the informal nature of a lot of egg trading and the numbers that were consumed at home, it was difficult to estimate the size of the overall national market for eggs but the indications are that it was an understated and rarely remarked upon economic behemoth. A 1911 USDA report contends that the total value of egg products produced in the United States was annually around $620 million. At twenty-two cents per dozen, this market, Harry M. Lamon and Charles L. Opperman

claimed, was equal in value to the hay crop of 1908.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, it eclipsed the value of the combined crops of oats and potatoes for the same year, nine times greater than the tobacco crop and equal in value to wheat.\textsuperscript{45} Should we doubt such an assertion? There were inevitably inaccuracies in the USDA’s data collection given the scale and the scope of what they were trying to measure. Their data does not account for all goods that are consumed by the farmer and his family, nor for unreported sales. Nevertheless the USDA was the largest civilian federal agency at that time, and one of the most advanced and meticulous in its data collection. Even allowing for some variance from the USDA’s figures, for Lamon and Opperman to suggest that egg production was of equal economic value to a staple crop like wheat, of which the United States was the world’s largest producer, is staggering.\textsuperscript{46}

If it is considered that the value of a dozen eggs would appreciate by over one-hundred-and-fifty percent to 57 cents in the following decade, we have some indication of the profitability of hens’ products to farmers across the United States.\textsuperscript{47} By 1930 the price had fallen back to 22 cents.\textsuperscript{48} Given the steady daily nature of egg production, compared to a crop that would harvest all in one go at a particular time of year, the logistics of delivering eggs to a country store, often the same store at

\textsuperscript{44} Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, p. 856; “The Improvement of the Farm Egg,” p. 10
\textsuperscript{45} “The Improvement of the Farm Egg,” p. 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Yearbook of Agriculture 1919, pp. 517-518. For the period 1909-1913 the United States produced an average of 687,000 bushels of wheat per year, compared to the 523,000 produced in Russia during the same period. While Russia sewed an average of 50,000 acres of wheat, compared to 47,000 in the United States, American productivity was clearly greater.
\textsuperscript{47} Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, p. 856.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 857.
which the farmer did his own grocery shopping, were really very straightforward.49

If the farmer did not trade his eggs at the country store or to a cash buyer there was
the option of selling to a travelling peddler, often referred to disparagingly as a
huckster. Hucksters were common in parts of the Midwest and Northeast where
they would develop farm-to-farm routes, offering convenience to the farmer by
visiting him directly at his place of residence, sometimes offering better prices than
wholesalers.50

The physical traits sought after in egg-layers were not as significant in
broilers, the second main category of bird. Raised primarily for meat production,
Brahmas and Cochins, birds of an Asian origin, were considered particularly
befitting a place in an oven, on a spit, and ultimately on a plate. A good broiler was
less active and energetic than an egg-layer and could gain weight quickly by turning
food into meat at an efficient rate. It was hoped that the bird could then bear that
added weight evenly across the body while maintaining a sufficient measure of
mobility. That said, “laziness” was considered more pro than con.

Strategies for fattening birds differed depending upon their ultimate
destination, and the scale of the operation. Though birds that were for local
consumption may be fattened on the farm, when they were intended for a market
that was beyond a day’s travel the finishing process would be the responsibility of
the poultry processor. Live shipment of chickens and cattle alike brought about
weight loss that left the animal too lean to sell immediately. The process of fattening

50 Ibid.,” p. 35; T. Burr Charles and Homer O. Stuart, Commercial Poultry Farming,
animals for market was centuries old, though both the methods and feed formulas had evolved over time. The general principle involved in most methods was to confine the birds to a restrictive space to limit their activity and provide them with copious quantities of ground cereals and dairy products. This could be achieved by keeping birds in a pen or a crate, but in America feeding batteries were becoming increasingly popular in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{51} These “apartments” as they were sometimes called, were seen to be a humane and efficient way of finishing chickens.\textsuperscript{52} Unlike wooden hutches, cages provided ventilation and light to the birds while cleaning was fairly straightforward. The bird was saved from darkness and stuffiness. They also presented a fairly light piece of equipment for handlers too which when mounted on wheels could be moved around to provide some measure of adaptability.

The more labor-intensive method of “cramming” was gaining in popularity though. “Chicken will continue to be stringy and tough until the cramming machine is universally adopted,” a farmer told the \textit{Los Angeles Herald} in 1906. He recognized some of the ethical issues involved. “There is one way- and it’s a cruel way- to have perfectly tender and delicious chicken. That is to pen up the birds a month before killing time, give them no exercise and feed them with a cramming machine.”\textsuperscript{53} Cramming chicken involved mounting a tube on the front of a wheelbarrow attached to a hopper filled with the farmer’s chosen recipe. In this case it was milk, fat, and ground oats. Other farmers preferred yellow corn, which affected the bird’s skin

\textsuperscript{51} Charles and Stuart, \textit{Commercial Poultry Farming}, p. 356.
\textsuperscript{52} Hinman and Harris, \textit{The Story of Meat}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Los Angeles Herald}, August 27, 1906, p. 4.
color, whereas wheat was known to produce more abdominal fat.54 The rubber tube was then inserted in the bird’s mouth and the contents of the hopper were expelled with a hand pump. “The chickens squawk and struggle. They don’t like to eat that way. In fact they loathe the very sight of the cramming machine,” the farmer continued. “But the main thing,” he concluded, was that “the birds eat the greatest possible amount of food and take the least possible amount of exercise, putting on healthy fat and developing a tender, fine grained flesh in a manner impossible to the ordinary barnyard, hustling, strenuous chicken.”55 Though this rudimentary technology was new, the basic idea was as old as the practice of animal raising itself. Through trial and error farmers had determined the most effective methods of meeting the expectations of consumers. Farmers endeavored, through feeding regimens and hands-on application, to produce birds that matched with popular conceptions of what a chicken dinner ought to be. This was the most profitable option.

Other areas of the poultry processing game remained similar to the way they had been operated in the nineteenth century. In the 1930s feathers were picked entirely by hand, a task where the central objectives were to prepare a clean bird without damaging the skin in the process. There were various methods employed within the higher-turnover processors for easing this process, though in smaller operations “dry-picking” still took place. A popular method of the time was wax-picking. After an initial rough pick of the feathers the dead bird would be dipped in melted wax and then put aside while it hardened. Once set the solidified wax could

54 Charles and Stuart, Commercial Poultry Farming, p. 357.
55 Los Angeles Herald, August 27, 1906, p. 4.
flake away taking both the pin feathers and hairs on the bird’s skin with it.\textsuperscript{56} A standard wax formula, wrote Maine’s \textit{Lewiston Evening Journal} in 1936, might contain sixty per cent paraffin, thirty-two per cent rosin, two percent lard, and then six percent of gum de mar.\textsuperscript{57}

The third category of chicken would become the most commonly employed by American farmers. This was the dual-purpose chicken. Neither the most prolific egg layer nor the most corpulent bird, indigenous breeds like the Plymouth Rock, the Rhode Island Red, and the Wyandotte nevertheless achieved impressive levels in both regards. A chicken that could steadily lay eggs and still be sold at a decent price could offset the costs of its own feed once it reached maturity. These were among the most popular breeds for American farmers. Hardier than Leghorns and more suited for colder climates, Plymouth Rocks grew to maturity quickly and could be sold as broilers after as little as eight weeks.\textsuperscript{58} If they were sold that quickly the farmer would obviously miss out on their egg production. Their commonality on farms should have complicated the debate on breeding; Plymouth Rocks were a cross-breed originally developed from two American breeds, the Black Java and the Dominique.\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{56} Hinman and Harris, \textit{The Story of Meat}, p. 156.
\bibitem{58} Plumb, \textit{A Study of Farm Animals}, p. 462.
\end{thebibliography}
**To purchase a chicken**

One of the more interesting depictions of a Plymouth Rock is in Grant Wood's nostalgic painting *Appraisal*, from 1931. Wood is most often classified as a regionalist painter and the majority of his works capture rural scenes from his home state of Iowa, the most famous of which is *American Gothic*.

![Figure 2.2 Appraisal, Grant Wood, 1931](image)

Even Wood recognized that the negotiation that is taking place in *Appraisal* between a farmer's wife and a townsman was largely a thing of the past and this was seldom how hens were traded in 1931. Yet he believed that in the wake of the Wall Street Crash, the Depression was a furtive period for a re-awakening of lost rural values. Rejecting the "urban and European philosophy of H.L. Mencken, and the provincialism of rural America depicted in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, Wood asserted that the Depression had "thrown down the Tower of Babel erected in the
years of a false prosperity." In forcing some people to return to the land it had 
“caused us to rediscover some of the old frontier virtues...it has thrown us back 
upon certain true and fundamental things which are ours to use and to exploit.”60
Like many others, Wood had hopes for how America should be reconfigured in the 
wake of the Depression. But the world he depicted in The Appraisal was already 
gone. Even while chickens at the time were still raised on family farms that were 
often modest in size, the United States of 1931 was an increasingly commercialized 
nation in which the connection between the maker of a product and its consumer 
had been largely severed.

For those that did not produce their own flocks, chicken was purchased at 
specialized butchers shops, or combination stores that included a meat department. 
It was done so on almost a daily basis given the limited capacity of most homes to 
refrigerate meats for any extended period of time, especially during warmer 
seasons. Cooking would in most cases take place on the day of purchase. An 
interesting overview of meat purchasing can be found in a short volume published 
in 1939 by Swift and Company, one of the four largest meat packing companies in 
the United States. While authors Robert B. Hinman and Robert B. Harris may well 
have been compromised due to being published by an industrial oligarch, the pithily 
titled The Story of Meat reveals many common attitudes that were present in the 
retail sector at this time. A successful meat counter, USDA surveys had found, 
“involved administrative ability, use of sufficient equipment, honest methods, 

60 Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935) Accessed: July 7, 
truthful advertising, and a personality that inspires confidence.”61 Hinman and Harris go about explaining how to create “attractive, distinctive, and inviting” front window displays and designing a store layout that encourages customers to gravitate towards the center of the store while maintaining a high level of operating efficiency.62

Yet their advice emphasizes the personal nature of the retail trade for meat as late as the 1930s. Their approach is almost entirely oriented toward selling to married women with families. While this may represent a stereotypical gender role and the unmarried population was no less requiring of meat, it probably remains safe to assume that housewives did indeed make up a significant portion of the customer base for most meat counters. Hinman and Harris stress that the best customers are those that buy a wide variety of different products and that the clever salesman will broaden his patrons’ frame of reference while retaining their loyalty. Introducing new items involved certain perils though, and retailers needed to exercise shrewdness and a measure of caution. “When a customer says in a hesitating fashion- ‘No-o-o-o,’ the man behind the counter had better beware,” they warn. If he sells her something that her family subsequently dislikes, the customer will think, “Darn that meat man of mine. He’s always selling me something I don’t really want. I’m going to another market.”63 Whereas a grocery clerk may sell a surfeit of canned goods that could be stored away in a cupboard and used later, the

61 Hinman and Harris, The Story of Meat, p. 175.
63 Ibid., pp. 186-187.
perishable nature of meats meant the customer was likely to be less forgiving of the
meat seller.64

Above all it was important for the retailer to develop a keen sense of the likes
and dislikes of a woman and her family and be able to carefully respond to feedback
on previous sales. Hinman and Harris write as men explaining female thinking and
its limitations to what is presumed to be a male audience. “Most women,” they say,
“do not consider themselves competent judges of meat quality and often buy where
they have confidence in the meat salesman.”65 Thus the meat salesman should help
her visualize the number of servings she can cook for her family and direct her to
suitable replacements when her first choice has sold out. If a customer requests
links and they have all gone already, the salesman might lead her to the appropriate
section of the display and observe, “we have some fine fresh pork sausage just in
today, Mrs. Smith,” before adding, “but unfortunately we don’t happen to have the
links.”66

The good salesman should use appetite appeal so that the woman can
envision how his meat would taste in her mouth. “One of those chickens stuffed
with dressing- baked to a turn and served with a touch of cranberry sauce- would
certainly be good, Mrs. Jones.”67 This might not make Mrs. Jones salivate. He should
“watch her face and if she doesn’t show interest,” propose a different item.68 These
were characteristics of “the salesman women like.” He greets her “in low, cheerful,

64 Ibid., p. 187.
65 Ibid., p. 191.
66 Ibid., p. 192.
67 Ibid., p. 193.
68 Ibid., p. 194.
sincere fashion.” He knows meats and knows what, and how much, her family likes. He is careful in his handling of the product, and “he finds little ways of showing her preferential treatment.”69 There is a certain inconsistency and disingenuousness here. If a salesman was to follow this advice to a tee and apply these wise words to all of his customers then they would all receive preferential treatment, at which point that treatment would be merely commonplace. It should be no surprise that the key to salesmanship rests merely in the appearance of interest and appreciation in the negotiation of the transaction.

Without firsthand accounts on the part of women relating their feelings about meat salesmen it is hard to determine if this experience was quite as patronizing as it sounds. If it was, it is doubtful it would stand in isolation as particularly noteworthy among the range of daily experiences given the patriarchal nature of American society. Having moved from metropolitan Saint Paul, Minnesota to Gopher Prairie, Carol Kennicott finds herself unable to attain the same range of goods available to her in the city. “When she did contrive to get sweetbreads at Dahl & Oleson’s Meat Market the triumph was so vast that she buzzed with excitement and admired the strong wise butcher, Mr. Dahl,” Sinclair Lewis wrote in *Main Street* in 1920.70 Interactions with salesmen in the early twentieth century were clearly contested affairs in which women took pride in their own skills in negotiating prices and assessing different goods. Tracey Deutsch argues that the rise of supermarkets where shoppers anonymously browsed and selected from shelves and coolers was

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69 Ibid., p. 195.

in part driven by retailers’ concerns about the costly and labor-intensive nature of providing patrons with personal attention.\textsuperscript{71}

While meat was certainly affordable to most but the poorest Americans the quality and cut was highly variable according to one’s budget. At “bargain days” at a market on New York’s Hester Street, Jacob Riis observed that the “great staple” in what he referred to as “Jewtown” were “frowsy-looking chickens and half-plucked geese, hung by the neck and protesting with wildly strutting feet even in death against the outrage…Half a quarter of a chicken can be bought here by those who cannot afford a whole.”\textsuperscript{72} This was 1890. By the 1910s the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 had ameliorated some of the worst excesses of animal slaughter and preparation. Cans containing food were indeed less likely to oxidize in storage or to swell out of shape with a buildup of gas than had been the case at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{73} In spite of this the basic connection between poverty and poor quality food remained fundamentally intact.

**Cooking and variety**

The preparation of meals, like the purchasing of ingredients, was largely the responsibility of mothers in the traditional family environment. The range of meat products remained mostly limited to the different cuts of the animals, with little

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further processing, with popular exceptions like sausages and ground beef. In the case of smaller animals like fowl it was most common to cook the body in its entirety as a single dish, and then to make use of leftovers in the subsequent days. *The Perry Home Cook Book*, a collection of typical American fare from 1920 presents a clear representation of this. Accompanying instructions to bake, roast, fry, or press “1 chicken,” Mrs. E.G. Jenkins of Oskaloosa, Kansas details her chicken croquettes. “After slicing all that can be sliced from a baked chicken, pick the remainder from the bones and mince fine,” she says, before adding salt and pepper, one egg, a tablespoon of mashed potatoes, and half a cup of sweet milk. Molded in cracker crumbs and rolled in a little flour the least relished parts of the bird are thus reconfigured into a tasty snack that saves on waste. Frying, it should be noted, is proposed only as a method to be applied to older chickens to make them tenderer.74

*Aunt Caroline’s Dixieland Recipes*, a collection of Southern cooking from 1922, unsurprisingly treats fried chicken with greater esteem. Though the preparations are essentially the same, Aunt Caroline’s Virginia Style Fried Chicken requires “a young tender dressed fowl.”75 Elsewhere chicken liver was saved and prepared as an entrée. *Good Housekeeping’s Book of Menus, Recipes, and Household Discoveries* recommends them cut in halves and covered in a mixture of butter, mustard,

cayenne pepper and salt. They should then be wrapped in bacon and served with sautéed bread or buttered toast.\textsuperscript{76}

In spite of the increased range of influences upon American dining from different regions, H. L. Mencken complained that they had been diminished by “the national taste for bad food.”\textsuperscript{77} Who was to blame for this? He held the English and their early influence upon the Americas to be partially responsible. “The badness of English cooking is proverbial all over the world,” he explained. “I suggest that it may be due, at least in part, to two things, the first being that the English have a Puritan


distrust of whatever is bodily pleasant, and the second that it is practically impossible to grow good food in their country.” It was not that they were unaware of what good food was. Englishmen travelled the world. Rather it was that they “prefer to be uncomfortable, and think of their preferences as heroic,” he said, and “when they are at home they take a gloomy stubborn, idiotic, delight in eating badly.”

In 1927 Mencken observed that “what ails our victualry, principally, is the depressing standardization that ails everything else American. The public cooks have all abandoned specialization, and everyone of them seems bent upon cooking as nearly as possible like all the rest. The American hotel food is as rigidly standardized as the parts of a Ford, and so is the restaurant meal.”

It is fascinating that Mencken should complain of standardization of the American diet as early as 1927. If a process of homogenization had already started to take place it had done so in the absence of a chain-restaurant industry. Chain stores were certainly on the ascendance at this time and a cause of angst to many independent retailers, and to a degree among a broader swathe of the population who were concerned that their increasing reach could lead them to behave much like monopolies. At the same time certain common products such as beef were controlled by trusts and manufactured by a small number of companies. Yet chain-restaurants were not really a feature until after World War Two. Historian Harvey Levenstein argued that a “revolution of declining expectations” took place in the

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1920s in which middle-class interest in cooking and dinner parties took second billing to “bridge, mah-jongg, dancing, and other parties.”

Even for immigrants who wished to keep the culinary traditions of the “old country” alive, the changes that were taking place in the retail business at this time would have made it increasingly difficult to do so with independent ethnic retailers that furnished specialized tastes being replaced by chain stores. Between 1900 and 1929 the number of stores operated by chains of four or more outlets in twenty-six lines of business increased from 3,300 to just over 95,000, according to an FTC report. The figures reached by the Census of Business differ slightly. Their assertion is that the number of chain stores had reached around 148,000 by 1929. At this time that only amounted to around ten percent of the one-and-a-half million retailers in the United States. There is reason to believe that chain stores had an outsized influence in food sales, compared to other areas of the retail trade. The Department of Commerce indicated that by 1929 chain stores accounted for thirty-

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81 Harvey Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 162.
82 Hasia Diner argues that the abundance offered by the United States led to the creation of new Italian-American and Jewish-American cuisines based upon the habits of elites within the immigrants’ countries of origin and religious traditions. For Diner, it is abundance as much as availability that are responsible for reforming new immigrant ethnicities centered around food. However the anecdotal nature of the study’s sources make it difficult to determine the full extent of the penury experienced in Europe by those immigrants who were not Irish. See: Diner, Hungering for America.
two percent of food sales, and by 1933 this was as high as thirty-eight percent. By 1939 the arrows were still pointing in the same direction. Of the one-hundred-and-thirty-one different chains that were made up of at least one-hundred or more stores, forty of those were in the food sector, by far the largest category of chain store.

Newer additions from overseas became mainstays of American dining alongside chicken dishes that were longer-standing in their popularity, broiled, roasted, often fried in the South, occasionally curried by the more adventurous cook. As popular as these meals were they were not affordable daily dishes for many people. For others, chicken might be a weekly treat but it did not yet occupy the commonplace position of beef or pork. Around four-hundred-and-fifty million chickens lived on farms in the United States in 1932 but that was not enough for it to be a product of mass consumption with a population of around one-hundred-and-twenty-five million humans. That was a ratio of three and a half to one. If everyone in the United States ate four chickens in 1932 the fowl population would be completely erased.

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88 *Yearbook of Agriculture 1932*, p. 848.
Turning Point: Hoover’s Inevitable Quotation, Depression, and War

It is customary for books and essays that examine the American poultry industry to at some point reference Herbert Hoover’s ill-fated election promise of “a chicken in every pot,” in the 1928 race against Democratic candidate Al Smith. Hoover was not the first figure of note to utter this sentiment.89 “I want there to be no peasant in my realm so poor that he will not have a chicken in his pot every Sunday,” said Henry IV of France, sometimes referred to as “Good King Henry,” in the late 1500s.90 Hoover had not accounted for the economic cycle, and in the years that would follow, hunkered down within the White House, he would lose his grasp of some of the realities faced by many Americans during the Depression.

“Republican prosperity...has raised living standards and lowered living costs.” That was the claim and as of 1928, it was true. In spite of what followed, his unfulfilled promise, and its extension, “a car in every backyard, to boot,” should be considered more than punch lines signifying Republican ineptitude. “A chicken for every pot” was almost a slogan of American ambition and aspiration.91 Not magically unattainable; a palace for every man and a unicorn sipping from his brook. But seemingly at the cross-section of possible and great. The car and the chicken. The creation of man, borne of his ingenuity and endeavor. The creation of God, an offering from His garden, given in His beneficence, nurtured by the hands of His

91 Payne, “A Chicken for Every Pot.”
children. One represented a twentieth-century expression of the American sense of individualism, which was always tied to mobility and the capacity to invent oneself anew. The car meant not simply speed but it served as a powerful tool in determining one’s destiny. (For that car to be located in a backyard usually required home ownership, a third towering pillar of American middle-class achievement and of just as much symbolic importance.) The other signified the good life. A meal high in quality that should be sizable enough to feed an entire family and still leave some for croquettes the following week.

Implicit in Hoover’s claim was an understanding that for his vision to become reality would mean an improvement in the methods of production equivalent to those that had transformed the auto industry over the previous two decades.\(^{92}\) Though Fordism for poultry was some way away, by the 1920s farm owners on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay were looking at ways to expand their flocks in response to a downturn in maritime fortunes in the area. In 1923 Cecile Steele of Ocean View, Delaware is reported to have been delivered five hundred chicks from the local hatchery by accident, ten times more than her original order. Rather than returning them, Steele decided to increase the number of sheds on her property and raise the birds purely for meat. Turning a good profit she continued to expand both the size of her orders and her capacity until she could house ten thousand birds by

Benefitting from a suitable climate and appropriate soil conditions, cheap supplies of lumber and labor, and close access to the lucrative urban markets of New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore, the number of commercial poultry operations on the Eastern Shore increased exponentially as the 1920s came to a close. By 1928 there were around five hundred broiler growers in Steele’s corner of southeastern Sussex County, Delaware alone.\(^9^4\)

Yet for Hoover to suggest that the United States was on the verge of ushering in a state of permanent prosperity in 1928 was misguided. There were a number of complicated factors at play in the election of that year, including prohibition and the Democratic presidential candidate’s Catholicism. Nevertheless the “Great Engineer” secured a historic victory with forty states and fifty-eight percent of the popular vote. The compelling visions of wealth and success that his campaign produced deftly tapped into the American popular imagination, selling not fantasies or dreams but goals that seemed to be within the reach of most. When promises of this kind seemed to plausibly match with observable material conditions, they would be a hallmark of many successful Republican candidacies.

We know very well how starkly 1932 contrasted with 1928. That said, poultry sales remained fairly robust throughout the Great Depression. A surplus of cheap crops allowed for liberal feeding and the supply of fowl to market remained constant. The inexpensiveness of grain meant that farmers could provide very well-


\(^9^4\) Ibid., p. 15.
finished birds and the quality of the product may well have reached historic highs. Chicken’s place in the American diet was as a premium product that was not subject to widespread daily consumption. A critical mass continued to purchase fowl and levels of demand remained durable through the 1930s. This is evidenced by the strength of sales in most major markets. Though sales of dressed poultry in Chicago trended downwards after 1931, in New York they actually increased by fifteen percent between 1927 and 1931 and remained up by nine percent on the 1927 levels in 1934. The cumulative sales in Boston and Philadelphia similarly increased by thirteen percent between 1927 and 1931, and had returned to 1927-levels by 1934.96

Between 1929 and 1932 the market price of four-legged farm animals collapsed. The average national value per head of cattle fell from $58.77 in 1929 to $39.31 in 1931 and then to $26.64 in 1932.97 Using the same measure hogs fell from $12.94 to $6.14 by 1932.98 Even sheep, which were of secondary importance in the American diet, as they are in this story, dropped from $10.59 per head to $3.40 by 1932, at which point the farmer would most likely be making a loss on the costs of the inputs required to make the animal market ready.99 With all of these forms of

95 Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, p. 32.
96 Ibid., p. 850; Milton S. Eisenhower, Arthur P. Chew, USDA Yearbook of Agriculture 1935 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1935) p. 623; United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Statistics 1938 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1938) p. 372. Receipts in gross weight in pounds: Chicago: 63.7m (1927), 71.5m (1931), 44.7m (1934); New York: 188.1m (1927), 218.9m (1931), 204.1m (1934); Boston: 53.3m (1927), 57.8m (1931), 52.7m (1934); Philadelphia: 31.8m (1927), 38.2m (1931), 32m (1934).
97 Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, p. 771.
98 Ibid., p. 785.
99 Ibid., p. 797.
livestock it is more difficult to adjust the size of a herd or flock than is the case with fowl, given the greater time the animals take to raise. While animals can always be dumped onto the market if feed costs start to spiral out of control, it can take a period of several years to recoup that number. Chickens, by contrast, allow for a greater flexibility on the part of the farmer to adjust to the conditions of the market. Though the national average would fall from 78 cents per head in 1929 to 40 cents in 1932, with Western and Midwestern markets particularly weak, inventory flexibility, lower sunk costs, and their status as a side business meant price declines were not nearly as threatening as the greater than fifty percent declines in the values of cows and pigs and the two-thirds fall in the value of sheep.\(^{100}\)

Chickens could be hatched and prepared for market more quickly than other forms of livestock. Nevertheless the small-farming structure of poultry production was ill-suited to furnish every kitchen with a broiler even if 1929 had never happened and purchasing power had soared in line with Hoover’s ambitions. Commentators would later begin to use the idea of a “broiler belt” of the most serious poultry producing states stretching from Oklahoma and Texas in the West to Georgia and the Carolinas in the East and as far north as Delaware.\(^{101}\) This did not exist as of the early-1930s though. Arkansas, North Carolina, and Georgia, among the major poultry-raising states in the post-war period, ranked twentieth, twenty-

\(^{100}\) Yearbook of Agriculture 1935, p. 621-622.
\(^{101}\) “Poultry Plant Says Strikers Are Returning,” Washington Post, March 1, 1951, p. 9; “Price Dip Hits Broiler Belt,” Baltimore Sun, October 9, 1956, p. 28. Early uses of the term tend to refer to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Delaware, the first region in the United States to introduce high-intensity poultry farming. By the 1990s the meaning of the term would expand to include Southern poultry-producing states as far west as Oklahoma. For example, see: “U.S. Rules Chickens Kept Above 26 Degrees Will Be Called ‘Fresh,’” Wall Street Journal, December 18, 1996, p. B10.
first, and twenty-second of the forty-eight states in 1930.\textsuperscript{102} Production was scattered across the country with a modest levels in many states and few having developed what we might describe as a niche. There were no areas that were engaged primarily in poultry farming, and yet chickens were raised on eight-five percent of farms.\textsuperscript{103} Most flocks numbered no more than two hundred.\textsuperscript{104} The strongest surplus producers tended to be in the Midwest and around the Great Lakes. As of 1931 the state that was home to the most chickens was Iowa, more famous for corn and pork. Iowa raised almost one fifth of the nation’s swine, around ten million animals. This number may appear modest compared to the thirty-four million chickens living in the state at the same time. But when one factors in that the average per head value of a pig in the United States was $11.36 while a chicken was worth seventy-eight cents, the relative worth of these two types of livestock within Iowa becomes clearer.\textsuperscript{105}

Herbert Hoover’s vision, or at least his campaign pitch, was one that necessarily involved mass production. This could not be achieved at one-hundred hens per farm when the number of farms was in decline. Old-fashioned farming would not do the job. But poultry farming had not yet reached the level of technological advancement present in arable farming. It was commonly observed that American agriculture suffered from over-production, that great output had driven down commodity prices and made it unprofitable to operate a farm that

\textsuperscript{102} Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, pp. 847-848.
\textsuperscript{103} Perry, Banker, and Green, Broiler farms’ organization, management, and performance, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{104} Hinman and Harris, The Story of Meat, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{105} Yearbook of Agriculture 1932, pp. 785, 847-848.
relied upon essentials like wheat, cotton, and corn. This was the underlying assumption of Franklin Roosevelt’s Department of Agriculture. The slaughter and destruction of millions of piglets would become one of the more macabre strategies of the USDA as they endeavored to protect hog farmers by destroying their stock and creating scarcity in the midst of a depression. This coincided with historic famines in the Soviet Union. In the wake of the ecological disaster that was taking place in the south-west plains states in the mid-1930s it was understood that many marginal lands would need to be taken out of production and farmers would have to do more to protect topsoils on not just a regional but a national basis. At the same time farmers were becoming increasingly aware of the need to balance the nitrogen cycle. Crops like tobacco and cotton had a long-term deleterious effect upon soil quality and if land was not left furloughed or planted with a nitrogen-depositing plant then harvest yields would gradually decline. While the perversity of destroying crops was very hard for some farmers to accept, AAA payments allowed landowners to evict sharecroppers, renovate building, upgrade machinery, and invest in new areas of production. In areas of the South and along the Mid-Atlantic Coast this meant investing in new poultry houses.\(^\text{106}\)

It was not that livestock raising came without environmental risks. It was just that the fecal contamination of water sources seemed a remote concern in the 1930s and 1940s to farmers who sought to turn their weary fields and beleaguered businesses into poultry operations. Animal manure was known to add to the

fertility of the soil. And besides that, Americans liked chicken. Europeans liked it too. When the United States belatedly entered World War Two in 1941 the speed and flexibility with which poultry could be raised and brought to market would make it a key export item in supporting the Allied powers. Taking advantage of heated sheds, improved breeding and vaccinating techniques, and efficient battery caging American farmers would take advantage of escalating food prices to expand production. While prices languished through the early thirties they stabilized at an average of 70 cent per head in 1939 before climbing to 83 cents in 1942, they rose to $1.03 by 1943 and even reached $1.21 in 1945.107

The number of chickens populating American farms increased by thirty-six percent from 418 million in 1941 to 576 million in 1944, even as feed prices shot up by sixty-percent in the same period.108 In 1942 exports skyrocketed by seven-hundred percent to twenty-four million pounds, up from three million the year before.109 As the US Army entered the market they established a procurement office in Dover, Delaware, the Delmarva Peninsula being among the most highly developed poultry raising regions in the country. Surrounded by sea, access to the peninsula could be closely monitored against black market sales while providing convenient lines of transportation to many of the major ports of the Eastern Seaboard. While the Office of Price Administration established a ceiling on the price of broilers in Delmarva in 1942 in an effort to control the government’s procurement costs, values across the South were allowed to climb, inducing more entrants into the

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108 Ibid., p. 371, 384.
109 Ibid., p. 387.
Commercial broiler production increased nationwide, but it was in the South Atlantic states that this growth was most aggressive. Whereas fifty million birds had amounted to a $25 million market in 1939, by 1943 one-hundred-and-fourty-eight million broilers returned $124 million to the region. This amounted to sixty-two percent of national output. Yet the distorting effects of wartime prices had misled American farmers a quarter century ago and increased production had let to cascading prices throughout the 1920s. Could this wartime boon translate to peacetime prosperity?

Frank Capra’s “old chicken farm” was nowhere to be seen. Nor were the methods of Hover and Pittman. In a short space of time a business that could be handled by farmers’ wives and children to provide a few extra dollars and cents had become a highly commercialized industry and a central concern for many operations throughout the Southeast. Promising an escape from the hardships of the 1920s and 1930s, the raising of poultry would change Southern agribusiness as much as it would the American diet. For a mass consumer market to exist in the United States chickens needed to be produced on tight profit margins and sold at competitive prices. It was not enough to have an increasingly sophisticated farming network alone. Efficiencies were required in the most labor-intensive phase of the production chain: the processing plant. In order to create the poultry economy of

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110 Williams, Delmarva’s Chicken Industry, p. 36.
the future sharp minds within the industry would turn their attention in the post-war years to the disassembly line, labor relations, and new product development.
Chapter 3

Violence and Innovation at Holly Farms

“We are glad to have you all on the Holly Farms team and hope you like it here. Holly Farms realizes that without the efforts of each employee who helps us to service our customers’ needs, we could not exist.”¹

- Holly Farms Employee Handbook

“I'll fire every damn body in this plant and there won't be a damn soul left but me.”

- Spencer Jennings, supervisor, Holly Farms²

“Walk into a Holly plant and you move into a unique world after you leave the eviscerating room,” Broiler Industry reported in 1968. In order for Holly Farms to be able to process sixty-thousand chickens an hour, “nearly everything had to be designed from scratch.”³ Holly Farms, established by Charles Odell Lovette in 1952, had a reputation for being on the frontline of an increasingly sophisticated industry. From one eight-thousand bird per day plant in Wilkesboro in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina, the company had grown in twenty

¹ “Holly Farms Handbook, 1968,” p. 14, Box 701, Folder 97, United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 525 (Asheville, N.C) Records, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia. (Hereafter: Local 525 Collection).
² “Statement of Daisy Allen,” Box 701, Folder 105, Local 525 Collection.
short years to become the "largest integrated processor and marketer of broiler
chickens in the world," accounting for seven percent of America's total production.⁴
Among the company's largest customers were Kentucky Fried Chicken and the
United States Department of Defense, which even shipped Holly birds as far as
military bases in West Germany.⁵ From 1961 to 1970 the US military consumed 900
million pounds of American raised poultry.⁶ When it had increased from a capacity
of eight thousand birds per day to twenty-five thousand the Wilkesboro facility had
been, for a time, the global leader in poultry output. Focusing upon Holly Farms and
its creative approaches to its breeders, product development, and its labor force,
provides a window into the origins of the modern poultry industry. In consistently
rejecting industry conventions the company bridged the gap between poultry's
earlier role as a fully intact roast dinner and its latter-day status as an abundant
convenience food. To achieve their brand of low-cost mass production Holly
management subverted gender roles by co-opting members of its primarily female
work force into what had typically been male union-busting roles, situating them as
aggressive surrogates in the face of repeated organizing drives led by the
Amalgamated Meat Cutters. Even when pursuing what was a somewhat dated
policy of violence and intimidation Holly Farms added its own creative twist.

Before Holly Farms increasingly conspicuous operation had been established,
Wilkes County was most widely known for two activities: the production of

⁴ “Holly’s quiet miracle: brands ½ billion lbs.,” Broiler Industry, October, 1975, p. 33;
⁵ “Hidden Nite- Holly Farms,” 1969, Box 701, Folder 98, Local 525 Collection.
⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Statistics 1971 (Washington,
moonshine and stock-car racing. They were not unrelated. As Daniel S. Pierce has described, it was in the transportation of illegal liquor that many early racers acquired their aptitude behind the wheel. The profits from liquor sales, in turn, were invested in, and even laundered, through racetracks. NASCAR champion and Wilkes County native Benny Parsons observed that, “there was nothing to do in the mountains of North Carolina back in the thirties, forties and fifties...You either worked at a hosiery mill, a furniture factory or you made whiskey.”

Wilkes County’s national reputation was burnished in 1950 when journalist and social critic Vance Packard described it as the “Moonshine Capital of America” in an article that paid the area few compliments. Even once poultry had taken off as a profitable economic pursuit the connections to liquor remained strong. Charlie Felts, the son of a moonshine producer, recalled in a 2011 interview that some farmers hid stills within chicken coops, the hens a convenient disguise for their primary source of income. The mountainous topography of Western Carolina had always been unsuitable for plantation agriculture and the white population of Wilkes County had remained upwards of ninety percent since stretching all the way back to 1790. In 1970 African-Americans represented just 5.1 percent of a population of 49,000.

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This was also an area of considerable deprivation. More than fifty percent of those over sixty-five lived below the poverty level compared to 24.5 percent nationwide, as did nearly one quarter of children, ten percent more than the national average. While very few people were officially registered as unemployed, educational achievements were quite sparse. Wilkes had a 28 percent high school drop out rate and only 3.8 percent of the county’s residents had made it through a four-year college degree.¹¹

Since the 1950s Holly Farms had acquired plants in Hiddenite, twenty miles south of Wilkesboro, and Monroe, which was south of Charlotte and close to the border, as well as Richmond and Temperanceville in Virginia. The company had also raised its profile across the South while reinforcing its Piedmont identity by becoming one of the first non-automotive companies to make a significant sponsorship commitment to NASCAR. As the official backer of Wilkes County’s own Junior Johnson and his Ford team, Holly Farms’ yellow and red colors were consistently on display as the company’s profile grew and its association with racing remained close for thirty years.¹²

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¹² Pierce, Real NASCAR, p. 225, 286.
Taking the Lead

In 1968 Holly Farms, then worth $20 million, had merged with cash-rich, Federal Compress and Warehouse, a Memphis-based cotton storage company that owned eighty-four warehouses and a couple of milling companies with operations spanning the South and the Midwest. Federal, now renamed simply “Federal Company,” had sold its warehouse properties to New York investors and followed its purchase of Holly with the acquisition of Halbert Incorporated of Bronson, Texas.

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a diversified poultry company that owned six subsidiaries, all in East Texas. These included three processing plants in Center, a feed-mill and a feed dealer in Nacogdoches, and a hatchery in Hemphill. The three plants in Center, Sabine Farm Products, Eastex Poultry and Chubby Chickfried Chicken, had been converted to the Holly Farms brand and stretched the company’s access to coastal markets from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Ownership of various different stages in the production process and substantial cash reserves contributed to making Holly Farms America’s leading poultry company by the mid-1970s. It’s capacity to run through 110,000 birds per hour, or 4.4 million per week, was double that of Perdue Farms, a company limited mostly to the New York market, and fifty-percent greater than Tyson Foods. The only company to come close to Holly’s scale was GoldKist, another Southern giant. Swift and Armour, historically the most famous names in American meat, were years removed from a time when they were referred to as barons, still large companies, but no longer industry leaders as their centralized processing model had been surpassed by the “rural industrialization” of red meat packers like IBP, MBPXL, and Monfort. Whereas Swift and Armour had moved livestock by rail to and from unionized urban slaughterhouses in Chicago and Omaha, IBP and the new generation of meatpackers would operated out of small towns and depend upon fragmented labor markets and interstate trucking. This

16 Haffert, William A., “How companies rate in hourly capacity,” *Broiler Industry*, March, 1976, p. 17. Incidentally, Armour and Company revived its fortunes in the 1950s through the popularity of Dial, its popular brand of soap developed from meat by-products. In 1970 Greyhound Corporation, the bus operator, purchased Armour-Dial and its headquarters departed Chicago, the city with which it was most
model provided affordable land, compliant local authorities, cheaper labor costs relating to both production and transportation, and even easier access to the new out-of-town distribution center-based system of inventory management employed by companies like Walmart.\textsuperscript{17}

The presence of Tyson’s products in supermarkets and restaurants across contemporary America may create the impression that the pre-eminent Arkansas-based firm holds the key to understanding the historical development of the modern poultry industry. This superficial observation appears to have been convincing to Christopher Leonard when he was writing \textit{The Meat Racket}, published in 2014. Leonard writes that, “there is no way to better understand the way our food is produced than to understand Tyson Foods,” adding that the company “wrote the blueprint for modern meat production.”\textsuperscript{18} The nature of Leonard’s sources indicates how he reached this erroneous conclusion. In this poorly cited account it is quite apparent that the author relied heavily upon interviews conducted with former Tyson’s employers. Though these are sources of a certain value, Leonard’s

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interviewees understandably wish to situate themselves as actors of historical importance, rather than sharing credit with innovators in the employ of rival firms like GoldKist, Perdue, and Holly Farms. Amazingly these companies do not even achieve a mention in Leonard's account.

Tyson Foods' increasingly aggressive acquisition of rival companies in the 1980s, including Holly Farms in 1989, meant that by the 1990s the company stood as the industry leader. Some of the harsh realities of the poultry industry started to reach some level of greater public attention through the work of inquisitive journalists in the 1980s and 1990s. It was during the 1980s that meat companies began to rout organized labor in a series of crushing victories. Monfort’s closure of its Greeley, Colorado, plant, only to re-open with an entirely new non-union staff, and the 1985 strike of Hormel Foods workers in Austin, Minnesota make up some of the signature moments of the de-unionization of America's slaughterhouses. Yet in reality the modern poultry industry really took shape some thirty years earlier in the 1950s. Tyson Foods was without doubt a firm of a certain prominence and an early participant in the process of vertical integration whereby poultry companies

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took control of the early stages of production, transforming Southern farmers into contracted feeders of flocks they did not own. By integrating, processors endeavored to guarantee a supply of broilers that met their capacity with birds scheduled to reach maturity in a sequence that allowed a plant to run continuously. In taking ownership of feed mills they asserted control over production costs and avoided competition with rival breeders while gaining a competitive advantage over smaller non-integrated firms who might then need to come to them for these services. All of that said, in the industry’s formative years Tyson’s acted with a certain caution, as was characteristic of most processors.

Tyson’s was not to poultry what Standard Oil was to petroleum at the turn of the century, nor what Microsoft was to computer software in the 1990s. It was not a monopoly. It was one among a number of big companies that were almost constantly aware of what their rivals were doing, companies that moved quickly to adopt innovations that were giving a competitor an edge. From the 1930s through to the 1950s scientists at agricultural colleges and within poultry businesses developed the means to mass produce standardized chickens through a canon of knowledge that spread from New England to the Delmarva peninsula, then to Georgia, Arkansas, and the Carolinas.21 Improvements in disease control and animal nutrition meant that “farm chickens evolved into chicken farming,” in the words of Gordon Sawyer, the former Executive Secretary of the Georgia Poultry Federation.22

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21 For the development of the poultry industry in the Delmarva peninsula see: William H. Williams, Delmarva’s Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress (Georgetown, DE: Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc., 1998).

To assert that one company developed the blueprint for the poultry agribusiness is to misunderstand the way in which the industry developed. Yet the examination of key actors can still be informative, and Holly Farms was most certainly close to the center of events. Was Holly Farms the most important? As popular as lists and power rankings are, I am not convinced that this is a productive question in this instance. I would assert that the Wilkesboro operation was for the best part of twenty years a greater innovative force than Tyson. This was not in essence a difference in political philosophies; rather a distinction in business strategies. Holly Farms was a restless contender, creative and resourceful as it endeavored to be more than just a key player in the poultry industry. The Lovettes sought to transform the industry on multiple levels. This was the way the company approached the two key relationships in the food chain for any agribusiness; those with farmers and with retailers. In managing farmers the company made full use of its outsized influence to place its contractors in a constant state of competition against one another. To lose in this competition was economically perilous. Meanwhile the company would radically alter the way in which chicken was bought and sold, persuading supermarkets to switch from frozen to dry-chilled meat.

There was more to Holly Farms than scale, though many of the changes made would have been impossible without sufficient size and wealth. During this purple patch of the company’s development, it was not uncommon for industry commentators to remark that, “a visitor comes away from Holly’s headquarters more than slightly dazed.”23 On another occasion Broiler Industry would observe

23 “Holly’s quiet miracle: brands ½ billion lbs.,” p. 37.
that, "it’s customary nowadays to ask “what’s new” at Holly Farms, because the nation’s largest deep-chill poultry processor has a reputation for being especially innovative in an industry known for caution.”

Some of these new inventions seemed a bit wacky at the time. This might include the 28-foot “mobile marketing center” that hit the roads in 1975. The luxury motor home was fitted with a chill cabinet that contained a display of Holly’s range of processed chicken products, including a new line of dog food products that the company was pushing at the time. "We try to think five or 10 years down the road,” claimed company president Francis Garvin, in 1979. “Holly Farms was designed to become and remain THE chicken company, and that means marketing orientation, with everything we do within the company directed to what makes and keeps our customers satisfied.” And yet Holly changed the way Americans expected to purchase poultry through its penetration of the retail trade. As of 1975 the company accounted for around 10 percent of chicken sales nationwide through its contracts with major chains like Safeway and A&P, as well as numerous others including ascendant brands like Harris-Teeter, also a North Carolina company. In total, Holly Farms claimed that its deep-chilled chicken products were present in almost four-thousand stores in the United States.

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26 “Holly’s prexy: “We plan 5-10 years ahead,”” *Broiler Industry*, October, 1979, p. 36.
Industrial Relations in a Burgeoning Industry

For much of Holly Farms’ duration as a leader of agribusiness the company was locked in battle with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workman of North America (AMC). As poultry plants increased in size and Holly expanded geographically, North Carolina-based Local 525 and the more junior Virginia-based Local 272 sought to organize and represent the largely African-American and predominantly female labor forces that worked the assembly lines. These contests between labor and business took place in the Jim Crow South in the midst of the Civil Rights era. While national organizations were laying claim to legal rights to participate in the political process and gain equal access to establishments both private and public, Holly workers went on strike attempting to appropriate economic power from their masters, the Lovette family. Of course there were a large number of work stoppages in the United States at this time. In 1957, when poultry workers and Teamsters went on strike against Holly Farms in North Carolina, there were 279 work stoppages involving at least one thousand workers.29 Nearly nine-hundred thousand workers in the United States were on strike at some point during the year. The following year, 1958, the total would reach over one-and-a-half million.30 Industrial action employed at Holly Farms does not even appear in these figures. The number of strikers was less than one thousand, the scale insufficient to register as a major work stoppage at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The strikes of Wilkesboro, Hiddenite and Winston-Salem in 1957 and

30 Ibid., p. 4.
1967, were not Pullman, Homestead, or Flint. The participants ranked in the hundreds, not the thousands.

As an industry that was coming of age in the post-war era poultry processing was freed from some of the traditional definitions of male and female work that were present in other areas of production. Whereas meatpacking maintained some of the skilled definitions of the butcher’s trade, the disassembly of poultry was largely a response to consumer demands of the 1950s and brought with it no such traditions. It had rarely been the practice for customers to purchase a steer or a hog still intact and so their transportation and sale required the careful separation of particular cuts, which were then treated differently in accordance with their value or common use. Steaks or pork chops were prepared for individual sale while less desirable cuts or lower grade meat was turned into ground beef, sausages, or even pet food. However in the case of fowl, birds had been marketed almost exclusively in the New York Dressed style until the 1950s, de-feathered and with the inedible components removed, but hanging by the feet, ice-packed, and largely intact.

The physically more diminutive size of chickens and the absence of a male-dominated profession to resist modernization leant to the perception that poultry disassembly could be effectively fulfilled by a largely female workforce in the rural South. When live birds arrived from nearby farms they were wrestled from their cages and attached to hanging hooks by their feet on an overhead conveyer rail that would lead them through the plant. The frantic nature of many of the fowl and their propensity to peck meant this was typically considered a man’s job, but from this point forth the work was largely female led. Having sometimes received a short
electric shock from a stunner the bird’s throat was slit and the blood allowed to run. Having been scalded in hot water to loosen the feathers, the bird entered a plucking machine, a narrow tunnel in which spinning cylinders of rubber fingers would strip the bird of its plumage. After being washed the inedible components were removed by hand before the different components were separated in a series of small individual operations. As of 1959 poultry plants were held to the same USDA inspection requirements that had been mandated of meatpackers by the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Passed with the support of both the poultry industry and labor, the Poultry Products Inspection Act of 1957 intended not just to protect consumers but also “to guard against infection of plant workers.”

Labor unrest occurred at Holly Farms in 1957 and 1967 as the company contravened the sense of dignity expected by its workers. This was not the product of lofty pretensions. A giblet remover or an eviscerator cleaner receiving $2.00 an hour in 1972 had to know to which class he or she belonged. As did a hanger on $2.19, or a back ripper or neck cutter on $2.25. The federal minimum wage at the time was $1.60. They were not of a fabled post-war middle-class and moments of shop floor rebellion should not obscure our overall sense of the balance of power. Most of the workers who were fiercest in their opposition to Holly Farms’ management were fired. There is at times a fine line between defiance and

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32 “Richmond plant wage rates, 1972,” Box 701, Folder 103, Local 525 Collection, pp. 1-3.
belligerence. If I should praise the most belligerent worker for their fearlessness then where does that leave she who was compliant? Sometimes to continue to return to work day after day can require as much fortitude as it does to walk out. Many did just that. It was precisely because the employees of Holly Farms understood that their work was undignified on both a social and economic level that they were receptive to collective action. When workers spontaneously walked away from the job at Winston-Salem in 1957, the behavior of foremen headed the list of grievances. Foremen were accustomed to using bad language without regard for female employees, freely entering the women’s dressing room at any time and firing anyone who answered back on the grounds that they were “sassing.” In creating a female-dominated labor force, the company had established a different set of expectations to that of a male industrial environment.

At the same time rates of pay were obviously not commensurate with the value of employees production. When workers at the Salem plant were sick for a day their wages were cut to the legal minimum of $1.00 in subsequent days. If they were as much as a minute late they were docked an hour’s pay, but were required to work the hour in question anyway. Even after more than ten years of union organizing attempts, there remained an inverse relationship between rates of pay and the level of foulness associated with a job. A refrigerator operator at Holly Farms in Richmond could receive $3.50 per hour in 1957, a welder or sheet metal worker $3.35 and a carpenter $3.00. The occupants of these jobs were exclusively

33 “Winston Holly Farms’ Workers On Strike: A Fact Sheet,” Box 701, Folder 95, Local 525 Collection.
34 Ibid.
men. By contrast a vat cleaner, a bathroom attendant, or the aforementioned giblet remover were stuck at $2.00 per hour.\textsuperscript{35} Still, of 506 workers at the plant only ten earned rates higher than $3.00 per hour and another twenty-six were paid between $2.50 and $3.00. The remaining 470 received rates of less than $2.50.\textsuperscript{36} Neither Local 525 nor Local 272 were successful in fundamentally altering the economic station of Holly Farms’ employees in North Carolina or Virginia. After the late 1950s drive had been defeated the company appeared to have defined a particularly brutal game-plan for crushing unionism involving the firing of workers who supported organizing efforts and instigating violent episodes on the shop floor and in the parking lot. However their strategy would fall short when Local 272 won a representation election in the Richmond plant in 1969. Focusing upon the travails that took place at Holly Farms between 1957 and 1973 provides us with an early view of a maturing industry that was rapidly assuming its modern form.

In the remote isolation of most Holly Farms operations we find an industry that was still finding its feet, unable to fully exploit a labor market that was not all that it was advertised as. The distinctly rural character involved in the mass production of poultry presented challenges that limited the company’s absolute control over its workforce. This forced Holly to look for methods of improving its operations through product development and leveraging farmers, in the absence of the ability to force down labor costs. Holly Farms was seduced by the appeal of the rural South as an environment in which to locate its factories. Operation Dixie had

\textsuperscript{35} “Richmond plant wage rates, 1972,” pp. 1-5.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., pp. 1-7.
fallen flat. Taft-Hartley was established. Everyone knew that “Right-to-Work”
North Carolina was a miserable state for labor organizing. Local forces of law
enforcement were supportive of business and vigilant in the face of radical and even
not-so-radical outsiders. Expenditures on pay could be low and land was cheap.
What was more, communities were wracked by racial divisions. It was a logical
calculation that these locales fell into the first of our two categories, that where
business possesses a disproportionate balance of power. Some of the assumptions
associated with the rural South proved to be correct. But not all of them.
Established in 1944, Local 525 was the statewide local of the Amalgamated Meat
Cutters, primarily concerned with slaughterhouses and grocery stores. By the
1960s they had reached a number of contract agreements with the A&P Tea
Company and Colonial Stores in the chain retail sector, red meat concerns such as
Armour, Swift, and the Jesse Jones Sausage Company, as well as a series of poultry
producers ranging in size from small and independent operations to large multi-unit
affairs like Gold Kist and Rockingham Poultry. At Rose Hill Poultry in the east of the
state they had demonstrated their willingness to engage in a sustained campaign
and absorb setbacks, suffering defeat twice before finally winning a union election
in 1964. Some of these units were very small though. In February 1966 the union
won an election in the Meat Department of an A&P store in Washington, North
Carolina by 8 to 0. One month later they lost at A&P Lumberton by 29-9, but won

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37 Barbara S. Griffin, The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of
38 Local 525 Stewardgram, June-July, 1967, p. 4. Box 696, Folder 39, Local 525
Collection.
representation at A&P Waynesville by 9 to 4.\textsuperscript{39} Between 1965 and 1966 the Local’s membership increased from 1,064 to 1,849.\textsuperscript{40} By 1969 their number stood at around 3,000 as they continued to expand in the grocery and poultry sectors, having added K-Mart Meat Departments in Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, and High Point.\textsuperscript{41} Over two decades Local 525 had proven to be persistent in its organizing efforts and difficult to run out of town.

The 1950s and 1960s proved to be successful decades for the central pillars of North Carolina industry: textiles, furniture, and cigarettes. With immigration remaining at historically low levels in the decades up to the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 and the baby-boom generation still too young to be put to work, a large surplus of unemployed rural Americans did not exist. When employees walked off the job in protest, Holly Farms had to take back some strikers in the absence of an endless supply of ready replacements. By the 1980s and 1990s poultry companies could turn to displaced immigrants from Central America to replace discontented native-born workers.\textsuperscript{42} During the early post-war years in isolated rural towns like Wilkesboro the poultry industry started to find its feet as it developed mass forms of production. In the face of the AMC’s pressure Holly Farms was forced to look beyond labor costs and innovate in other areas of the business as the company ascended to the industry’s pinnacle in the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{39} Local 525 Stewardgram, May, 1966, p. 2, Box 696, Folder 39, Local 525 Collection.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{41} Local 525 Stewardgram, April, 1969, p. 3; Local 525 Stewardgram, August, 1969, p. 1, Box 696, Folder 39, Local 525 Collection.
Managing Growers

First among the company’s priorities was taking greater control of the supply chain. The final journey from the farm to the slaughterhouse can be a stressful one for livestock as weight-loss takes place over extended travels and weeks of finishing on the part of the farmer can be gradually undone. The Union Stock Yards in Chicago consisted of acre upon acre of feeding pens in which cattle and swine would be fed until they reached an optimum weight. In building a poultry network in North Carolina the Lovette family wished to avoid these complications by cutting down the distances between the suppliers and their processing facilities. This meant that, like other poultry companies, they would seek rural locations from which they could cultivate local farmers and hopefully create a level of supply that could match the capacity of their ever-more sophisticated disassembly lines. In the post-war period the trend among poultry processors was to move toward vertical integration, taking control of the farming side of production through hired farmers. The farmers still owned their farms and a specially stipulated model of broiler shed selected by the contractor, without owning the chicks themselves. Ownership of chicks and hatcheries allowed companies to take control over which breeds were raised and thus maintain a more uniform product than they might find if they were to have to shop around. Farmers were paid to feed the chickens, maintain an optimum environment in terms of ventilation, cleanliness, and temperature, then deliver them at a sufficient weight in a timely fashion. This was an industry-wide development that was starting to take hold across the South by the late 1930s as
processors sought to control cost and profit margins at every stage of the production chain.

The demands of integrators upon their contractors to invest in new facilities and equipment in order to remain on good terms and the indebtedness that this has often required has been well documented. The usual methods of merely threatening farmers with contract invalidation for not meeting the company's terms, and the financial ruination that this normally entailed, were not quite enough for Holly Farms. The company was not sufficiently happy that the fear of bankruptcy offered quite enough incentive to the “Holly Farmers.” In the 1960s they would devise the “Zone Plan,” a sophisticated method of monitoring and promoting efficiency among its farmers. All contractors providing for the Wilkesboro plant had to be located within a fifty-mile radius. This circle emanating from the factory was then divided into eleven zones, each consisting of around 900,000 birds, which amounted to around forty-five or fifty farms. Birds were raised on eleven-week cycles, which included a two-week break during which sheds could be sanitized. Farmers within each zone would receive weekly visits from company servicemen who could troubleshoot problems and bring the assistance of pathologists if needs be.

The defining feature of the Zone Plan was a scale whereby farmers were assessed on the basis of their efficiency and then ranked against one another on a leaderboard. Their position was determined by their ability to keep costs down and

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maintain low mortality rates. The top 25 percent of farmers in each zone over an
eleven-week cycle would receive bonus payments. For the bottom 25 percent,
things could get serious quite quickly. Poor performers would receive a visit from a
poultry specialist who would advise them on ways to improve their operation and
reduce expenditures. Farmers could even be sent to company headquarters in
Wilkesboro to receive further education using the technology of the day, which
included slide shows and film projectors. On the basis of this assistance they were
epected to show an improved performance. If a farmer should appear in the
bottom quarter for a second consecutive cycle then he would be put on a trial basis
with the following batch of chicks. Upon a third-consecutive period in this lowest 25
percent the farmer would receive the punishment of exclusion for the following
cycle and his sheds would stand empty.

“Holly Farms management feels that if they hit his pocketbook, he may
straighten out,” reported C. Howard Smith. Clearly this did more than just hit the
farming family’s pocketbook. A three-month span during which a farm was absent
of economic activity could be enough to sink it if there were not other sources of
income. Some farmers would be indebted to banks for the loans required to
purchase the equipment and set up as a Holly grower. If the farmer was still
standing after an eleven-week break then he had one further chance to rank among
the top three-quarters within his zone or he was dropped as a Holly grower entirely.

“In its quest for lower production costs, Holly Farms will experiment with anything
that shows promise of success,” Smith wrote, clearly impressed at the inventiveness

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44 C. Howard Smith, “How Holly Farms grows million broilers a week,” *Broiler
of the system. “Concentration on the ‘zone plan’ applies more effective coordination of all elements of procurement, service and supervision. Holly Farms tries to keep it as simple and direct as possible,” he concluded, “and finds that it is tremendously effective compared with its previous grow-out system.”

The distinction between an absolute and relative gauge of performance is a very important one. Rather than asking farmers to meet a minimum threshold of efficiency, Holly Farms presented them with a moving target that could vary from cycle to cycle. A farmer could improve his operation month after month and still find his position in jeopardy if others located within the zone did likewise.

It is unclear to what degree Holly Farms suffered from problems with slovenly growers before the introduction of the Zone Plan. Obviously levels of skill, knowledge and commitment can vary among farmers anywhere. Generally a certain threshold is required within a market economy for a farmer to stay in business. Yet by introducing such a high level of competition among growers they pitted them against one another as rivals in a fight for survival. By seeking to generate a constant state of uncertainty among poultry farmers, while at the same time positioning the company as the provider of advice and assistance, Holly Farms pursued a strategy of divide and rule. Rather than encouraging farmers to establish connections among themselves which, who knows, could lead them to forming a cooperative and negotiating collectively, the Zone Plan sought to isolate farmers and ensure that their most important relationship was with the company itself.

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45 Ibid., pp. 38-44.
Cooperativism was not unknown in the poultry industry; Gold Kist was initially formed as a cooperative by large-scale chicken farmers.

The subcontracting of poultry was aimed to fulfill the same goals pursued by companies in many economic sectors in the second half of the twentieth century ranging from coal to steel to apparel. By ceding responsibility to contractors while maintaining legal and financial control over the terms of the operation companies like Holly Farms were able to divest themselves of the risks involved in certain stages of the production process. As farmers raised greater numbers of chicks in a confined space they risked illnesses like the Newcastle Disease Virus, transmissible between both birds and workers and potentially fatal to the flock. Similarly the liability involved in producing large quantities of fecal matter and the environmental hazards presented by chicken shed run-offs were transferred from the company to the contract farmer.

The management of the company attempted to cultivate support from the mostly white growers as allies against the union and the largely African-American workforce through “Dear Holly Farmers” letters in the late 1960s as Meat Cutters Local 272, the Virginia local, ran a successful election campaign in Richmond, the most urban of their plants. Rather than allowing farmers and workers to come to the conclusion that being hard done by the company was the common denominator,

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48 Ibid., pp. 104-105.
Holly stressed its position as an employer, a situation that most farmers were intended to relate to. In a letter of August, 1969 Richmond plant manager Frank Rhodes brought farmers up to speed with what he even acknowledged had been a “tremendous drive by the Union,” before condemning their organizing methods and vowing to fight on. “As in all Union drives, the employee and the employer are the ones that get hurt because of the wall of separation the Union builds between management and employees resulting in a distrust for one another with the Union being the only one that gains because of the collection of dues.”49 With growers all within a fifty mile radius of the processing plant they supplied to, the company was keen to develop a tightly knit sense of economic interest with its fellow landowners and establish what it saw as the dishonesty of promises made by the union with farmers and workers alike. Such letters are clearly symptomatic of the broader political alliances that had united Southern whites since Reconstruction, the cross-class bonds of the business owner and the small farmer (whose status is higher than the share-cropper or tenant farmer), both sharing in superficial racial similarities and in their antipathy towards labor.50

The Threat of Unionization

In spite of Holly Farms’ belief in its own inventiveness the company had never intended, or perhaps even expected, to lose union elections. North Carolina

was known to have a “business friendly” environment supported by the state Democratic Party. Famously describing North Carolina as a “Progressive Plutocracy” in 1949, V.O. Key observed that, “an aggressive aristocracy of manufacturing and banking...has had a tremendous stake in state policy and has not been remiss in protecting and advancing what it visualizes as its interests.”

This amounted to what Depression-era Governor Oliver Max Gardner described as the “capitalistic system liberally and fairly interpreted.” Key remarked that, “in North Carolina, as everywhere else, money talks in politics.” He went on to add that, “it has not been necessary for politicians in North Carolina to be, or to pretend to be, poor men.” If there was a Populist strain, it did not carry the balance of power and the holders of elected office were not reticent in their support of their class of patrons, forming “always the kind of government liked by the big investor, the big employer.” Key concluded that, “while investors and employers have been willing to be reasonable, they have aimed to keep control.”

This, combined with the state’s judicious investment in education and infrastructure, was North Carolina’s essential appeal and would be for the duration of the twentieth century, helping to lure the likes of Bank of America to Charlotte, and IBM to Raleigh in later years. In Wilkes County, of which Wilkesboro was the county seat, local law enforcement was broadly supportive of Holly Farms. In 1957 John Russell, at that point a representative of the international union as they were

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53 Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, p. 214.
trying to establish a local in Wilkesboro and in Winston Salem, repeatedly reported
bomb threats and even attacks upon union meetings. Notes from July 3, 1957
comment on company activities that had taken place since they engaged in an
unplanned strike on the previous June 6. The strike was precipitated by a notice
posted upon a bulletin board in the Winston Salem plant informing workers, some
of whom had worked as many as seventy-five hours that week, that they would not
be receiving overtime benefits because the company needed the money.54 The
strike lasted until October. It was contended that the company was responsible for
“prevoking (sic) of fights in plants by stooges- 2 women beaten up.” In addition to
the usual campaigns of spying and attacking the union in the press and on the radio,
at the Winston Salem plant they recorded, “stooges framed up charges of assault
with a deadly weapon against seven strikes.” The city mayor, councilmen, and
churchmen had all visited picket lines and asked strikers to return to work. Two
days after the Meat Cutters had gone on strike, the Teamsters responsible for
transporting Holly Farms chicken had struck too. This resulted in a nine million
dollar suit filed against the IBT by the company and “threats made to dynamite the
houses of Teamsters.” This seemed to be a very real threat. The union reported that
the company, or presumably “stooges” acting on its behalf, “thru dynamite at
meetings.”55

A month later on July 5, 1957, John Russell sent a telegram to the Sheriff of
Wilkes County. “Urge your office investigate dynamiting of peaceful Union Meeting

54 “Winston Holly Farms’ Workers On Strike: A Fact Sheet,” Box 701, Folder 95, Local
525 Collection.
55 “Notes, Holly Farms Poultry Co. 7/3/57”, Box 701, Folder 95, Local 525 Collection.
held by Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina on July 3rd, 1957,” it read. This telegram failed to illicit an investigation and so Russell contacted the Department of Justice in Washington. John J. Schauer, the chief of the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section, sent a disinterested response referring Russell to the Asheville office of the FBI. “The information contained in your telegram is not sufficiently detailed to enable us to determine whether a violation of a federal criminal statute is involved,” the letter reads perfunctorily.

It was not uncommon for Holly Farms to court black ministers and use them as leverage against the union. Organizer Cornelius Simmons wrote to union leadership with incredulity in reporting a dinner being held at what was in effect a segregated restaurant. “The Bowman’s Restaurant is a place where several demonstrations took place and where several were beaten, arrested and I am told at least one was shot,” he said. “And today no Black people eat at this place, yet Holly Farms is inviting the Black leaders to be their guest at this place and to further remind them of slavery they are to have lunch in the Confederate room,” he went on. Bowman’s had “a Confederate emblem on the outside near the door.” Simmons summarized that, “they think all Black Ministers and other leaders will sell their souls for a chicken leg.” In spite of the sheer absurdity of such a scene, Holly

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56 “John Russell to Sheriff of Wilkes County,” July 5, 1957, via Western Union, Box 701, Folder 95, Local 525 Collection.
57 “Warren Olney III to John Russell,” July 10, 1957, Box 701, Folder 95, Local 525 Collection.
58 “Note by Cornelius A. Simmons,” Box 701, Folder 102, Local 525 Collection. While Folder 102, in which Cornelius Simmons’ letter can be found, is titled “1970, Correspondence, Monroe,” the letter is undated and it is hard to be certain that 1970
Farms management may have persuaded some such “leaders” to adopt their point of view. Local 525 received very little support from religious organizations in their attempts to organize Holly plants, though this may have been a consequence of John Russell's reputed but unproven Communist Party membership.

That said, if James E. Lawrence is any example, workers were not really persuaded by these transparent manipulations. Lawrence wrote to the Local, probably around 1970, describing the company's efforts to find pliant leaders in the Monroe area to counter the ongoing union drive. He reported that a dinner was taking place in Wadesboro involving representatives from the NAACP, the Baptist Church, the Police Department, Smith Funeral Home, and the dry cleaners. Yet Lawrence wanted to stress that he would not be influenced by such figures as these. “Mr. Holly Farm's is trying to pull all kinds of punches on us,” he exclaimed. “But we don’t mind them, because every good fighter knows he is going to get hit soon or later with a few wild punches. Mr. Holly's only punch that has had any effect, is the one of firing some of our people,” Lawrence explained. “All others have had no or little effect.”


59 “James E. Lawrence to Local 525,” Box 701, Folder 102, Local 525 Collection.
In 1969, John Jervis, president of the Asheville Central Labor Union, was with colleagues handing out leaflets to workers outside the Wilkesboro plant when they similarly ran afoul community leaders. In writing to Governor Robert Scott, Jervis claimed that they had been careful not to obstruct any roads but they had still been followed by the Highway Patrol who had impounded their car and county and city officers had arrested two of his men and sent them to the Wilkes County Jail. These actions, “certainly did not make a good impression to the workers of Holly Farms that had sent for us to come to Wilkesboro,” Jervis wrote.60 In response to this complaint Lieutenant Jack D. Cabe of the State Highway Patrol denied that they had been tailing the union members and rejected Jervis’s depiction of the arrests. Cabe claimed that he had been riding on U.S. 421 with First Sergeant W.B. Richardson and that they had been “enroute to the Dodge House Restaurant for a meal,” when they noticed “congestion around the plant.” It was only then that they “learned that Union Members were at the Holly Farms Plant and had caused a disturbance.”61

Jervis’s remonstrations went further though. He took issue with the condition of the Civil War-era Wilkes County Jail and wrote a formal complaint to the North Carolina Department of Public Health. “In the first place the building is in a very unsanitary condition, and no modern plumbing with pigeon nests and filth piled up between the bars on the windows and the inside,” he was able to observe while waiting four hours for a bail bondsman to come to release his two men. “They were told and after talking to the people in the community...that due to the long

history of Wilkes County and the large number of persons hung in the County Seat that drifted down from the North, it was the intention of the County Officials to keep the Jail in this conditions in order to celebrate a 100 year anniversary (sic) of the building and wanted to keep it that way until that time,” Jervis went on. “It is also a disgrace in this country of our to try and remind this generation of the corruption that went on in that part of the State during those years,” he concluded, seeking to add insult to injury.\(^\text{62}\) The condition of the jail was of particular concern to Jervis given his belief that Wilkes County inmates were among those who had been enlisted at Holly Farms on the state’s work release program. The Department of Corrections assured Jervis that this was not the case and stated that anyone on work release at Holly Farms resided in other facilities. The department acknowledged that “the Holly Farms Company has been helpful and cooperative in assisting us in our Work Release Program in the Wilkes County and Union County areas,” but pointed out that, “it is in violation of work release rules for an inmate to participate in either the organizing of a union or any activities of a union already organized.”\(^\text{63}\)

This exchange indicates that there was even an anti-unionist bent to the Department of Corrections. Further correspondence with Jervis from the Department of Social Services indicates the probable veracity of his claims concerning the nineteenth-century facility. Noting that he was “aware of the unsatisfactory status of the old jail in Wilkes County,” Commissioner Clifton M. Craig explained that, “because of its condition, a new jail is being constructed in that

\(^{62}\) “J.E. Jervis to N.C. Department of Health,” September 23, 1969, Box 701, Folder 98, Local 525 Collection.

county and, according to the architect should be ready for occupancy in approximately 1 to 2 months.” With surprising frankness Craig went on. “There are numerous jails in this State which fail to meet standard legal requirements for a local confinement facility.” Due to 1967 legislation enacted by the General Assembly, the Department of Social Services was engaged in “an intensive inspection program,” then offering assistance to local governments in upgrading conditions. Recognizing what a disaster the system was, Craig asserted that “much progress is being made and I feel certain improvements will continue until all of our jails are adequate for the humane treatment of all persons placed in local confinement in this State.”

In the 1950s some companies decided to embrace welfare capitalism as a means of staving off industrial unrest. Companies like Kodak Eastman and Sears Roebuck contended that by investing in the wellbeing and aptitude of their employees they could engender a sense of security and commitment, which would encourage workers to strive for greater productivity while discouraging them from union organization. Holly Farms was not such a company. When the company was not pushing the upstanding leaders of the community to do their bidding they were pitting workers against one another on the shop floor. For all of Holly Farms’ sophisticated methods of producing and marketing chickens, their approach to labor relations was “old school”, to say the least. In 1957 Holly discharged eleven workers who had signed union cards and been active in recruiting others. Local 525

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64 “Clifton M. Craig to J.E. Jervis,” October 2, 1969, Box 701, Folder 98, Local 525 Collection.

organizer Emanuel Coutlakis filed a grievance with the National Labor Relations Board in Winston Salem and was able to force a settlement in which the ten women and one man were reinstated and issued back-pay totaling $1,840. The accounts of the ten women reveal the way the company sought to undermine debate within the workforce as they pitted a network of shop-floor confidants against allies of the union and incited violence between them.

In late June of 1957 a meeting was held of workers who had signed union cards at the home of Jennie Joines, then in her second stint at Holly Farms. Pearl Billings, also an employee but not a union member, arrived at the start of the meeting without invitation saying that, “she just came down to the meeting to see what it was all about.” She added that she had been with Bonnie Bare earlier, who was the sister of Fred Lovette, and the company paymaster. Billings was asked if she wished to join the union and declined, at which point Coutlakis asked her to leave, asserting that the gathering was an Organizing Committee meeting for union members only. She stayed a few minutes and then left Joines’ home, at which point, “Mr Coutlakis told us that in his opinion Mrs. Billings was a Company stooge sent to the meeting to spy on us,” Alma Gryder recalled. On her way out she stopped to talk to Joines’ next-door neighbor Nellie Porter, also a Holly Farms employee. Porter told Joines that Billings had “asked her why she was not up to that damn union meeting.” Joines continued. “Pearl Billings went on to tell Nellie Porter that she was

68 Ibid.
going to Fred Lovette and tell him who was at the meeting.”

Billings was not exactly a subtle spy. In order to remain above board, Coutlakis asked the workers permission to send a telegram to the company, “pointing out that we were the Union’s Committee in the plant.” This decision was agreed to and the telegram was dispatched the following morning, a Saturday.

Upon receiving this telegram Fred Lovette proceeded to post it on the company bulletin board. Life quickly started to become difficult for the committee members. On Monday the company superintendent Mack Nichols approached Margaret Elledge, who had been present at the meeting. Nichols, “told me to keep my mouth shut no matter what anybody said to me,” Elledge said. Later on, “one of the girls that had joined the union came and told me that the girls that had not joined the union was going to beat us up Tuesday morning as we went into the plant.” Alma Gryder also observed signs that trouble was brewing. Just minutes after the telegram was posted Gene Winton, a foreman, came over to her and said, “if a chicken came over there that wasn’t clean he would fire me.” This threat seemed uncalled for. “Gene, you know I do my work right,” Gryder told him. The following day Winton doubled down on his earlier remark. “Putting your name on that little card is going to cause you to lose your job,” he warned.

Later that day Gryder took a bathroom break and passed by the bulletin board where Bonnie Bare was gathered with other managers. She heard Bare warn the bosses that, “there will be a time when they get off the line that some people in

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69 “Statement: Jennie Joines,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
71 “Statement: Margaret Elledge,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
here will pitch them out of here and I don’t care how they do it they won’t get fired for doing it.” Gryder went on to explain, “later on there was a lot of fighting in the plant that was started by some people who had the approval of the Company.”

Alma Gryder did not find herself on the receiving end of any violence but the same could not be said for Carrie Johnson, Jennie Joines and Grace Gryder. “On June 24th at the 7:30 A.M. break I was sitting in the rest room talking to the girls and Jean Bullis, another worker on the line, came and started cussing me,” Johnson recalled. “I asked her what she was cussing me for. She said she heard that ‘I had said someone ought to bust you in the mouth.’ I said it wasn’t true and after she kept repeating that I did, she finally called me ‘A God damn liar’ and the fight started.”

It is not clear who had put Bullis up to attacking Carrie Johnson, but this incident seems hardly unplanned. “During the fight a company foreman named Dennis Sevette stood in the rest room door and watched the fight,” Johnson said. “He did nothing to stop it.”

Jennie Joines, who was a military wife with a husband dispatched overseas, suffered more severe recriminations. Whereas it had taken three days for them to catch up with Johnson, Joines was targeted within less than twenty-four hours. On the Saturday evening, the day the telegram was posted on the bulletin board, “two girls jumped on me in the parking lot when I started home,” Joines said. It did not end there though. “On Monday the 24th I went in to work and one of the girls tried to pick a fight with me. I did not argue with her,” Joines recalled. “That evening

73 Ibid.
74 “Statement: Carrie Johnson,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
75 Ibid.
after we got off from work she was waiting along with others. Fred Lovette, Bonnie Bare, and all the foreman in the plant stood and watched while she beat me up and did not try to stop the fight. She beat me in the face before they parted us."76 Grace Gryder would miss a day of work with a black eye but Joines’ injuries were more serious and she would decide not to return to the plant.77 “I went to the doctor,” she said. “The doctor told me he thought I had been hit with something other than a fist. He had x-rays taken and fractured bones were found.”78

Following this round of assaults the members of the Organizing Committee were called in to meet with Francis Garvin, the general manager of the company’s three plants. Representing the respectable public face of Holly Farms, Garvin acted as if the attacks had been purely spontaneous actions taken by and on behalf of workers. “Mr. Garvin asked us what the trouble was between us workers that we couldn’t get along like one big family,” Carrie Johnson reported.79 Garvin questioned them as to what they knew about the union and told them that to get what they wanted they could have just spoken to him. “You know we can’t fire you for your work because every one of you are good workers,” he told them.80 “After talking to me sometime he asked if we had it to do over again would we sign Union cards,” Johnson said. “I said I didn’t know but I guess I would.”81 Others were similarly unrepentant. “They tried to get me to sign a card withdrawing from the union,”

76 “Statement: Jennie Joines,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
77 “Emanuel Coutlakis to Louis Perloff,” September 4, 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
78 “Statement: Jennie Joines,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
79 “Statement: Carrie Johnson,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
81 “Statement: Carrie Johnson,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.
remembered Margaret Shoemaker. “I refused. Then they refused to do anything about the foremen or employees who were picking on us.”\(^{82}\) Alma Gryder told Garvin that she had joined because “we didn’t get treated fair and that the work was too hard.”\(^{83}\)

“He told us he would like to be able to go out in the plant and announce that we had agreed to drop the Union for the time being,” Gryder explained. “We told him “Nothing doing”, that we were the Committee and that we were supposed to stand up for those who want the Union and we didn’t intend to let the workers down.”\(^{84}\) On Friday 28, August, 1957,, one week after the original Committee meeting, Alma Gryder, Jennie Joines, Carrie Johnson, Nellie Porter, Grace Gryder, Margaret Shoemaker and several others were all laid off. A number of them point out that they were let go over other workers who had accumulated less seniority.

**Monroe and Richmond**

Though the company eventually settled with the eleven fired workers and re-instated them with back-pay five months later, the eradication of the entire Organizing Committee, made up of the most actively pro-union recruiters in the company, effectively ended Local 525’s efforts to establish a beachhead in Wilkesboro.\(^{85}\) Holly Farms commonly employed this approach. John Russell and

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\(^{82}\) “Statement: Margaret Shoemaker,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.

\(^{83}\) “Statement: Alma Gryder,” 1957, Box 702, Folder 111, Local 525 Collection.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

Emanuel Coutlakis would try once again over a decade later with the financial support of Patrick Gorman, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters. James E. Lawrence and his co-workers were successful in securing enough signatures at Holly Farms in Monroe to trigger an election scheduled for December 1970. “However, as you know from our experiences in Richmond and Wilkesboro,” Coutlakis wrote to Gorman, “this is a very anti-union company. The company put on a vicious campaign in Monroe against the Union in the course of which thirteen people, practically our entire committee, were fired.” These included Louisiana Robinson, in whose home the committee had been formed. Robinson was fired for chewing tobacco while working on the line, a practice that was said to be very common in the plant. While Robinson denied the charge, she also claimed that supervisors had told her she could chew as much as she wanted as long as the USDA inspector didn’t catch her. Johnsie Buchanan was fired because the company claimed she was leaving windpipes in chickens when it was her responsibility to remove them, even though it was hard to determine whether Buchanan was

86 “Emanuel Coutlakis to Patrick E. Gorman,” May 1, 1971, Box 701, Folder 103, Local 525 Collection.
87 “Holly Farms Poultry Industries, Inc., and Local 525, Meat, Food and Allied Workers Union, Amalgamated Meat Cutters & Butcher Workmen of North America, AFL-CIO. Cases Nos. 11-CA-4725, 11-CA-4295, 11-CA-4421. Memorandum Brief.” pp.1-3. Box 701, Folder 105, Local 525 Collection. “I wish to thank you very much for your support, since the termination of my job at Holly Farms Poultry Co.,” Louisiana Robinson wrote to John Russell. “Without your support I don’t see how I could have survive. You do not realize just how much you have help me. With your help I was able to get a clearer view of the Labor movement, therefore I am in better condition to help my fellow worker, and to serve my community as far as the Labor movements concerns. I realize that there is much more to learn about Labor, than I have learned, but I am determin to do what ever I can toward helping to organizeing Holly Farm.” “Louisiana Robinson to John Russell,” April 28, 1971. Box 701, Folder 103, Local 525 Collection.
responsible given that there were four women working on the same station at any time. The explanations given for Daisy Allen's discharge differed over time. Allen’s supervisor initially asserted that he had fired her for using profanity before later settling on “chronic tardiness.” Allen had been very active in handing out union leaflets to colleagues and placing them on car windshields, which once again led to conflict with other employees. “I reported some threats made against me by another worker, Mary Lee Featherson, to one of the supervisors, and he said Mary Lee could say anything to me she wanted to say,” Allen recalled.

Coutlakis filed eighteen charges against Holly Farms in the lead-up to the election for unfair labor practices during the campaign. When he filed a further charge on December 1, 1970, the Labor Board postponed the ballot indefinitely pursuant to their resolution of all nineteen charges filed against Holly Farms. Company lawyers argued that Local 525 was purposefully bailing out, “three days prior to the election when it was eminently clear that Petitioner would lose the election, it filed frivolous charges against Employer in order the block the election.”

On the day she was fired Allen returned from what she claimed was a five-minute visit to the nurse to get her hand fixed. When Spencer Jennings, the

supervisor who had fired her, was asked by another supervisor what had warranted her discharge, Allen reported, “he said that you might take this damn shit, but I’m not going to have this damn shit. Because I’ll fire every damn body in this plant and there won’t be a damn soul left but me.”

As these cases were reviewed by the Labor Board the following April, Coutlakis would write that “because of the prejudicial manner in which the trial examiner was conducting the hearing, he was asked to disqualify himself and he did.” Holly Farms was willing to bear the costs of fines and back-pay in order to break any sense of momentum that the Meat Cutters had achieved, intimidate workers and tie the union up in litigation. “Our organization, as you must know, is not a trigger-happy group so far as strikes are concerned,” Patrick Gorman, president of the international, wrote in a letter to the president of Holly Farms. “But, I was wondering, Mr. Lovette, is it worthwhile? Isn’t it better to talk the matter over and make a reasonable, gentlemanly effort to have any understanding and to enter into an agreement where the workers involved in your company seem to desire that they be represented by our organization?”

Of the nineteen charges filed against Holly Farms, only two would stick, including Daisy Allen’s unfair dismissal. After Local 525 promoted Allen’s case as vindication of their stand against the company, employees at the Monroe plant

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91 “Statement of Daisy Allen,” Box 701, Folder 105, Local 525 Collection.
93 “Patrick E. Gorman to C.F. Lovette,” February 25, 1972, Box 701, Folder 103, Local 525 Collection.
received one of Holly’s more nonsensical dispatches as they headed for the upcoming election. “WHY IS DAISY ALLEN SMILING?” it began, with liberal use of underlining and capital letters. “She was fired from Holly in 1970 and could not come back until 1973,” explained Operational Manager Sam Zimmerman. “She told the government she lost $7,605 in pay during that time—but she got only $1,571 from Holly,” he boasted. “She don’t have much to smile about, does she?” The company’s unoriginal line of attack was to assert that the union wanted to get rich by collecting dues at the expense of workers. “Many Monroe poultry workers pay $8 every month in union dues,” the company observed. “If they put that money in a savings account (at 5% interest) instead of the union getting the money—In five years they would have about $559.75; In ten years they would have about $1,234.25…The union is getting that money and the members are losing it forever,” Zimmerman warned.94 The arguments ventured by the company in items like this were slightly absurd but their overall ability to frighten workers was unquestionable. They would not threaten workers with the loss of Christmas bonuses in print, but they were less reluctant to do so in meetings called by management where they would address workers “Mr. Williams said if the union got in, there would be strikes and the company would hire other workers in our places, and when the strike was over, we would have no jobs, that while we were on strike,

94 “Who Is The Union Fooling?” October 4, 1973, Box 701, Folder 103, Local 525 Collection.
we could get no jobs any place, and would not be able to draw any money,” Daisy Allen stated in 1973.95

To rephrase Patrick Gorman’s question in his letter to Fred Lovette, were all of these efforts worth it? The Lovettes truly believed that they were. The Labor Board finally supervised an election of the 461 workers at Holly Farms’ Monroe plant on a cold Friday in November of 1973, three years after the date that had been originally proposed. While Local 525 received thirty-three votes, 384 workers voted against a union, delivering a clear victory for management and a validation of their methods.96 Once again Holly Farms had wantonly trampled the National Labor Relations Act and decimated the union organizing committee at the first sign of trouble. In the 1970s at Monroe they had learned from Wilkesboro and managed to put together plausible enough explanations for their selected firings that they were able to withstand legal challenge.

Alternative explanations of the 1973 vote should not be dismissed out of hand though. Many of the accounts that survive from this time exist in legal testimony provided by union members whose employment with the company had been terminated. They were understandably aggrieved at this and their union activism would suggest that they had probably been among the most critical opponents of the company before the campaign had begun. Should we conclude

that the level of fear created by management and supervisors was such that workers feared the repercussions of a victory for the Meat Cutters and voted overwhelmingly ‘no’ in response to this? Were they all as deeply dissatisfied with their work as unionists like Carrie Johnson, Jennie Joines, James E. Lawrence, and Louisiana Robinson? The company did make threats about what a union shop would look like and was capable of instigating acts of quite shocking violence among its female employees, but these most egregious instances of foul play were not indiscriminate, they were targeted at activists. The company waged a campaign of misinformation against the union, asserting that its leaders only wanted the workers’ money, “so they could ride around dressed up, and drive their big cars and stay in the motel and hotels.”

In playing upon negative stereotypes of union leaders and their objectives they promised an uncertain future. “This matter is one of concern to your company, you, and your family,” wrote plant manager Bill Lovette. “It is your company’s sincere belief that if this union were to get in here, it would not be to your benefit, but to your serious harm.”

Did a culture of fear exist in Holly Farms plants? In 1973 a federal inspector surveyed employees at plants in Wilkesboro, Monroe, Hiddenite, Temperanceville, and Richmond. Fifty-four questions were asked of an undisclosed number of workers and the results were tabulated as percentage figures for each location. When read at face value the survey suggests that Holly Farms was a model company

98 See Lawrence Richards, Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
and a great place to work. Its sensitivity and understanding of its employees is only matched by the sense of reward and gratification that they derive from their work. Some of the questions required purely objective answers. In five of Holly's six plants the percentage of women on the workforce ranged from between 66 percent and 78 percent. Most questions elicited overwhelmingly positive responses from employees though. Eighty-five to ninety-one percent of employees at the six plants (the company had now opened a second plant in Wilkesboro) stated that their supervisor made them feel needed at Holly Farms. Between eighty-five and ninety-one percent of respondents said that their supervisor was friendly and seventy-eight to eighty-six percent agreed that they were also considerate. As many as two thirds of employees at all plants believed that their pay scale was "about right" in relation to other workers at Holly Farms. At least sixty-one percent of all employees believed the emphasis Holly Farms put upon product quality was "about right."

When asked broader questions about the company's motivations workers gave generally very positive answers too. Asked if Holly Farms management was only interested in profit the highest score for "yes" was thirty-seven percent from the Hiddenite staff, although a great many answered "don't know" at all six plants. "How do you think Holly Farms ranks as a poultry processor?" the federal inspector asked. "The best," said seventy percent of Monroe workers and seventy-nine and

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101 Ibid., p. 5.
102 Ibid., p. 6.
103 Ibid., p. 7.
104 Ibid., p. 3.
sixty-eight percent of workers at the two Wilkesboro plants.\textsuperscript{105} Employees were asked: “Why do you think that Holly Farms operates a cafeteria?” Only nine-percent of Monroe staff responded “profit,” while thirty-one percent contended the company did so for “convenience” and thirty-six percent said that it was to “provide nutritious meals.”\textsuperscript{106}

When one looks more closely at the results it becomes apparent that while Hiddenite, Temperanceville, Monroe, and the first Wilkesboro plant all seem to follow a trend of expressing unrestrained positivity, there is a noticeable difference in the views expressed by employees at Holly’s Richmond plant. “Will this be a house divided against itself by strife by conflict, confusion, misunderstanding and bitterness?” Fred Lovette asked Virginia employees in August, 1969.\textsuperscript{107} When he was not borrowing from the Gospel of Mark, or even Abraham Lincoln, Lovette warned of the violent consequences that could result from strikes. “You have only to look in your newspapers and almost on a daily basis, you will read about strikes where the Union involved used rocks, slugs, high-powered rifles, paint bombs, dynamite, property destruction and personal injuries to try to stop non-strikers from exercising their right to cross the Union picket line and continue working.”\textsuperscript{108} The owner’s pleas on behalf of the wellbeing of scabs had fallen on deaf ears and the Meat Cutters Local 272 had won the election by a vote of 336 to 205.\textsuperscript{109} Holly had

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\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 7.  \\
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{107} “C. Fred Lovette ‘To All Employees’ letter,” August 7, 1969, p. 1. Box 702, Folder 110, Local 525 Collection.  \\
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., pp. 2-3.  \\
\textsuperscript{109} Local 525 Stewardgram, August, 1969, p. 2, Box 696, Folder 39, Local 525 Collection.
\end{flushright}
employed its usual tactics of firing activists, enlisting the police to deal with pamphleteers and intimidating workers through supervisors and foreman. “As employees came out to their cars supervisors would go over and lean into the car and say something which we could not hear,” testified 272’s president Robert Bell. “However most of the employees who were spoken to rolled up their car windows before they got to where we were stationed. Those who left their windows rolled up did not roll them down to take leaflets,” Bell said. In January 1969 the NLRB had instructed the company to designate a specific area of the property on which the union could distribute literature. Court sanctions against the company had been quick and efficient and they provided a source of encouragement in the effective campaign literature distributed by the union. “Who Said You Have No Protection? (Not Us),” read a flyer from early 1969. “Mrs. Ellis, Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Roane finally receive back pay, and in hard cold cash, for their unfair discharges by Holly Farms,” they were able to boast. Ellis, Logan and Roane received $1,139, $734, and $1,247 respectively, which included “bonuses and 6% interest.” Appearing with broad smiles on the union flyer the three women looked a lot like game-show winners, displaying large handfuls of dollar bills. “These people know what a union can do for them. Do you?” the Meat Cutters asked. “Of course you do now. Who got the back pay for these employees? The union did, of course,” they explained. The Local’s appeal to the Holly workers of Richmond was quite unambiguous. It was not

110 “Affidavit: Robert Bell, James Hamblin, Bernard F. Hopkins,” Box 701, Folder 100, Local 525 Collection.
111 “Holly Farms Dispute Settled,” Box 701, Folder 100, Local 525 Collection.
112 “Who Said You Have No Protection?” Box 701, Folder 100, Local 525 Collection.
113 Ibid.
a campaign based on elusive notions of dignity and respect. It was based on power and economics. The company had a lot of money. The workers did not. In what was a winning strategy the union promised to get them more.

Figure 3.2 Mrs. Lena Logan

Figure 3.3 Mrs. Evelyn Ellis
It might not have had the greatest impact upon the election but a poem, “You Need the A.M.C.,” illustrated the economic basis of pro-union sentiments within the plant. These are three of the more memorable stanzas:

When the Union Rep. came, the people turned away,
“We don’t need you”, was all they had to say,
“Why the company is good...see how nice they are?
If I work hard, I may win a gold star”.

Well, stars are nice, but they don’t buy bread
And they don’t pay wages to see your family well
Yes, stars are nice when looking at the sky
But they can’t be reached...no matter how hard you try.

By banding together, you then have a voice,
And believe me friend...you do have a choice.
So check the facts and I’m sure you will see
THE MEAT CUTTERS UNION IS FOR YOU AND ME.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid.
¹¹⁵ “You Need the A.M.C.,” February 2, 1969, Box 701, Folder 100, Local 525 Collection.
The Richmond plant’s union status clearly seems to have had some bearing upon the results of the federal inspector in 1973. Certain questions elicited responses where there is a clear distinction between Richmond and the non-union operations. “Do you believe that you are appreciated at Holly Farms?” While two-thirds of employees answered in the affirmative at Hiddenite, Monroe, Temperanceville and the first Wilkesboro plant, at Richmond only fifty-five percent responded in the affirmative.116 The inspector asked: “How much work does your supervisor expect of you?” The respondents who checked “too little” rated no higher than one percent at any plant. At non-union plants the numbers who answered “too much” ranged from sixteen percent at Hiddenite to a high of thirty-two percent in Wilkesboro. However, a greater number asserted that they were overworked at Richmond, forty-two percent.117

“Is your pay scale in relation to other companies in the community?” Only fourteen percent said “higher” and thirty-three percent said “lower” at Richmond compared to sixty-one percent and four percent in answering the same questions at Wilkesboro.118 This could well be a reflection of the pay disparities between urban Richmond and rural Wilkesboro, or it could indicate a greater propensity toward expressing discontentment. Workers had actively organized a union against Holly Farms and the company had been forced to take them back; what could the consequences of a survey really be? When asked “how would you rate working conditions?” twenty-three percent of Richmond workers asserted that they were

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117 Ibid., p. 6.
118 Ibid., p. 6.
“poor,” compared to five percent, two percent, and eight percent at Hiddenite, Monroe and Temperanceville respectively.\(^\text{119}\)

This survey data, somewhat dry as it is, can lend to more than one possible conclusion. The running of the Richmond plant could have simply been more dissatisfactory to employees than was the case in other plants. This could explain why workers sought to unionize. Unlike Temperanceville, Wilkesboro and Monroe, Richmond did not have the same aspects of a company town that were a feature of the more isolated locales. These events came at fairly bullish moment in Virginia’s economic development, when the state was considered an attractive site for relocation and expansion. Shortly after Anheuser-Busch announced the construction of a $40 million brewery in Williamsburg in 1969, Imperial Chemical Industries announced a $50 million facility would be built in the Richmond area.\(^\text{120}\)

In 1970 there were a total of forty-eight new plants announced in the state and twenty-five expansions in the first quarter alone, with food processing leading the way in job creation with an estimated 1,500 new jobs.\(^\text{121}\) Though consumer spending started slowly falling in 1969 and technology eliminated some of the gains that new factories may have brought ten years previously, employment in Virginia remained buoyant. In February 1970, the unemployment rate of 3 percent stood

\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 7.
below the national average of 4.7 percent.\textsuperscript{122} Just over three years later Virginia remained below the national average of 4.9 percent at 2.7 percent.\textsuperscript{123}

To some degree the workers surveyed by federal inspectors in Richmond may have had more business models to compare to the poultry company and a confidence that there were always low-paying production line jobs available elsewhere that they could take up if they were to depart from Holly Farms. The statewide weekly average for a factory job in Virginia in 1970 was $106.\textsuperscript{124} Alternatively they may have been experiencing regret for voting in the union, believing that things had turned out badly. Though the company had instituted a pay freeze in the wake of the election results and appealed Labor Board decisions, a “Don’t Buy Campaign” that had been approved by the International Convention of the Meat Cutters had finally forced management to the table. In 1973, the year of the survey, workers were set to receive 3 percent wage increases in both January and July.\textsuperscript{125} The survey asked employees: “How much interest do you think an outside organization would have in your welfare compared to Holly Farms?” While a majority of fifty-nine percent said they had “no idea,” twenty-one percent contended that a union would have “more” interest than the company, compared to ten, eight, seven, and eleven percent at Hiddenite, Monroe, Temperanceville, and the first Wilkesboro plant respectively. Whereas forty percent of Monroe workers asserted that a union would have “less” interest, Richmond was the lowest in this

\textsuperscript{125} “Donald H. Smith to John Russell,” January 5, 1973, Box 701, Folder 99, Local 525 Collection.
category at just eighteen. In spite of some of the limitations of Local 272’s position- their gains were of value but nevertheless modest- the union seems to have achieved some measure of popularity within the plant. The survey of the federal inspector appears to be a highly unreliable document when taken at face value. When combined with the experiences of union organizers and supporters in Holly’s provincial plants and the nature of slaughterhouse work and the dangers involved, it does not quite add up that Holly should be such a popular employer in Wilkesboro and Monroe. This is not to say that there may not have been sincere and effective supervisors at various stages of the production line. Yet it seems that just as the company was able to exert its influence upon the women who assaulted Carrie Johnson and Jennie Joines, this coercive power is surely on display in the results of the 1973 survey of employees. Workers may well have had reason to be suspicious of unions if they had no experience with them, or if their experiences had been negative. But most workers surveyed had several years of experience with Holly Farms. Rather than utilizing this extensive source as a gauge of employee feelings it seems that its greatest value is as a measure of the company’s effectiveness in eliciting compliance from its workforce. There may have been occasions when raising objections to the company’s approach could have seemed a worthwhile exercise. If there were then most workers recognized that there was nothing to be gained by registering discontent with an inspector representing a government that did very little for them. The method by which this survey was administered, and its degree of confidentiality are unclear. Even if it did provide the

latter, Holly workers could have been forgiven if they were suspicious and saw it as an attempt to flush out malcontents; thwarted union organizing campaigns in Wilkesboro and Monroe had made it clear that the state was not a diligent defender of workplace democracy. Employees who had little in the first place were wary of gambling what they had by throwing in with a union that, at least in their eyes, was in many ways unproven, and had been persistently represented negatively by their employer, supervisors, and, at times, the clergy too.

**Further Mechanization**

Management at Holly Farms realized that they could not act with impunity though. In the years before and shortly after the 1965 immigration reform there was not a surplus of refugees and economic migrants that could be played off against native-born workers. If the union led workers out on strike there was not always a ready supply of replacements available. These problems could be compounded by the Teamsters’ presence among the company’s drivers. President Fred Lovette was very clear in 1973 that this was a crucial motivation in wishing to push for USDA approval of further methods of mechanization, some of which were already in use in poultry plants in the Netherlands where they had equipment “superior to anything we’re using in certain areas of our plants.”

Lovette was eager to receive permission to use automatic eviscerators made by companies in Boxmeer and Amsterdam. “It looks to me like this will replace at least half of the hand drawers on the line, and also remove the skill from the job,” he explained very

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unabashedly. “And, of course, a machine can be there every Monday morning,” he quipped.\textsuperscript{128}

Holly Farms workers were invariably there on Monday morning too, but Lovette wanted to ease competition with other employers. “We’re faced with a helluva labor problem,” he complained. “We pay the best wages here in Wilkesboro, for example, but we have a good Chamber of Commerce too. What used to be an excellent labor market now is shared by hosiery, mirror and furniture factories.” He went on. “When we built our plant in Temperanceville, Va., we had an excellent labor pool. Then other plants come in and made the situation tight. It seems to be that way all over.” With the Dutch eviscerators, that removed the animal’s sexual organs, and new equipment for lung extraction, Lovette believed three people could be removed from each of the twenty-six production lines across the company. “The idea is not to do away with jobs,” he continued, “but to get jobs done for people we can’t find.”\textsuperscript{129} Saving $6,000 per person he contended that the company could reclaim $468,000 per year, and eventually go on to eliminate as many as 150 jobs in total.\textsuperscript{130}

Holly Farms hurtled headlong into the future as it deskilled poultry cutting both in the factory and at the supermarket meat counter. While others were trying to perfect fried chicken in a can, in 1964 Holly would begin marketing chicken

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 23.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., p. 23.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., p. 24.
delivered to retailers chilled, as opposed to frozen in ice. Upon slaughter and feathering, passing them through a thirty-two degree bath, adding only five percent moisture, lowered birds’ body temperature. They then underwent a forty-five minute conveyor belt ride in a thirty-four degree cooler during which the water content was substantially reduced as the carcass was wrung dry. The basic incentives were very simple: transporting frozen birds involved driving ice across the country, meaning additional weight and capacity. If the ice and water content of the bird could be reduced then the shipping cost per pound of meat would similarly fall. At the same time the method contributed favorably to Americans’ increasing desire have greater flexibility in their cooking patterns by purchasing chicken parts separately. “Holly has defied every rule in the book,” Broiler Industry wrote without irony. “It wrung moisture out of its chickens when industry practice has been to add water, so much so that the government now imposes a ceiling of 12% moisture added by processing (8% if frozen).”

“Holly Pak,” as the company would refer to it, was employed in the preparation of both whole birds and selected cuts. The fresh bird contained significantly less water but this was not to say it was bone dry. It retained 2 percent water content and remained tender as it was placed on Mobilfoam trays made by the Mobil Chemical Company of Macedon, New York, and sealed with stretchable

133 “Now it is retailer who demands dry chilled,” Broiler Industry, April, 1968, p. 28.
poly bags. Unlike frozen chicken, the meat would dent when touched before returning to shape. Hermetically sealed Holly Pak chicken was found to have a lower bacteria count than frozen chicken due to the minimal time spent exposed. It did not drip when the temperature changed and the ice melted, meaning that it would not pose a risk of cross-contaminating other foods that might be stored in a similar area.

Retailers would take some convincing that it was worth switching from frozen to dry-chilled chicken and accept the costs of altering their storage and display facilities in order to accommodate it. Some chain stores tested it in certain stores and compared the results with ice-packed chicken. “Usually, they will find that even by traditional standards of percent of gross sales, they’ll do no worse than on ice pack, if they’ll give it a full 60 to 90 days’ trial,” explained marketing director Bob Montgomery. “It takes that long, in most cases, for volume to build up from a different mix to overcome the fact you’re not selling as many whole birds and quarters.” Rather than unwrapping, cutting, wrapping, and pricing cuts of chicken for customers at a meat counter, Holly Pak could simply be lifted from a crate and placed into coolers and re-stocked in a similar fashion whenever needed. Holly could pre-label chicken packages listing the name of the cut, the weight, expiration date and the price. If supermarkets wished to sell it as their own in-house brand of chicken then Holly was more than happy to accommodate them and package

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135 “Now it is retailer who demands dry chilled,” p. 30.
136 Ibid., p. 36.
accordingly. Holly Pak products would then have a shelf-life of about five days before they needed repackaging. This was not often a problem though as starting in the late 1960s stores, and in turn retailers, switched away from traditional ice-packed chicken.

Transferring the cutting up of chickens from the knife of a highly skilled and versatile butcher at a meat market to a production line where workers only had to master one task suited both retailers and poultry companies. In addition to being able to reduce labor costs the retailer removed the responsibility for quality control from their own employer. “Everything is made or lost on that three feet between the retail counter and the customer,” argued Francis Garvin, the man who would succeed Fred Lovette as president of the company. “We knew it but we didn’t work hard enough at it. We had to get out there in the aisle, so to speak, and get the consumer involved.” Holly Pak was sold to retailers at a higher price, but the ease and versatility it provided would be encouraging to consumers who were increasingly uncertain how to cut chickens themselves. “Holly Pak is the finest deal offered us since eviscerated chicken replaced New York-dressed,” exclaimed the merchandising manager of a top ten chain. New York-dressed chickens had been plucked of feathers but retained head, feet and entrails. The previous great evolution in the marketing of chicken had been to remove these. “We’re pushing it into all of our stores,” he continued, “15 to 20 stores at a time, as fast as logistics and store education will permit.”

137 “Holly’s system unique: here’s how it works,” p. 42.
139 “Now it is retailer who demands dry chilled,” p. 30.
This was the dynamism of Holly Farms, a company attuned to the future of consumer demands, bold in its willingness to experiment and adept in its ability to convince the retail chains to follow its lead. Trust in us that this is the future of poultry and we all stand to gain, they told the grocery stores. And the grocery stores ultimately believed them. Of course they said the same thing to their workers too, but that was a different story. For marginal annual increases and very limited benefits employees could expect faster line speeds and steady work, if their job was not rendered obsolete. In fighting the Meat Cutters’ three campaigns, Holly Farms was not afraid to reach for the old Southern arsenal of anti-union weapons from corrupt policeman to dirty jail cells, from shop floor thuggery to arbitrary dismissals. If this did n’t scare the hell out of union supporters then there was always dynamite. Could one company be so forward-looking and yet so reactionary at the same time? In accepting the reality of the post-war female work force within the poultry industry, Holly trained women to fulfill traditional male union-breaking roles and act as fierce and loyal agents on behalf of the company.

What may have appeared to be antiquated union-busting techniques in 1957 now assume a timeless quality as enduring features of American business practice, and yet at Holly Farms executives were able to persuade female employees to continue these methods in the new and evolving industries of the late twentieth century. In 1957 worker intimidation and union busting were actually as much a part of the future to come as they were a legacy of the past. Perhaps it is to credit Holly Farms with too much foresight to assert that they realized this early that the future of the private sector was not going to be dominated by industrial democracy.
or collective bargaining. It could just as easily be claimed that the Lovettes clung on tightly to control of their company out of a vehement belief in their own autonomy as owners, though these ideas do not need to be mutually exclusive. From the perspective of the New Deal regulatory state, Holly Farms posed a similar problem as that posed by many successful companies: they could count. They only had to be able to run the numbers to see that the benefits of violating labor laws vastly outweighed the possible penalties. If delays in the process of union organizing are generally thought to be beneficial to the employer then there may have even been an incentive to violate labor laws prolifically and often, rather than selectively, given the burden that greater degrees of litigation presented to both the court and the local. In for a dime, in for a dollar. If they were going to breach employment laws and be answerable in court at some point further down the line then they may as well make sure that these crimes count. The worst possible outcome would be to incur the legal penalties involved without the upside of crushing the union.

As we have seen, such measures could backfire if the Labor Board acted quickly and sent a clear message, but the costs of providing back-pay to a few workers were substantially less than what any effective union should have been demanding. The $3,120 returned to Lena Logan, Evelyn Ellis and Betty Roane was not exactly going to break the bank. The early incidents involving explosives—whether there was any direct connection to the company or not—made very clear that the Justice Department (and the FBI) had little interest in investigating such cases. As of 1957 with the commencement of the McClellan Committee in the US Senate there was more public interest in investigating alleged improprieties on
behalf of organized labor than there was in exploring unseemly business practices. Some of the incidents described here also demonstrate that there were questions of legal jurisdiction involved that further complicated the means of recourse available to the union. Holly Farms’ strategy involved marshaling forces beyond just the workplace and not every obstacle they presented to the Meat Cutters was the responsibility of the National Labor Relations Board. Even if we suppose that the Labor Board may have been institutionally more inclined to see the union’s perspective, where were they to turn when they had fallen foul of county sheriffs, the State Highway Patrol, or the Department of Corrections? In many cases this led back to Democratic administrations in Raleigh and Richmond. The same level of rational calculation united Holly Farms approach to business as a producer, marketer, and manager of personnel. In each area of its operation the company appraised the system as it stood and made dispassionate evaluations based upon the potential risks and rewards. The commanding position they had attained in the poultry industry by the early-1970s speaks to their effectiveness.
Chapter 4

The Limits of Organization and Action at Gold Kist, Durham

In 1973 Karen Walker, a young political activist and a member of the Progressive Labor Party sought to challenge the leadership of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen’s Local 525 at their unionized Gold Kist poultry plant in Durham, North Carolina. The Meat Cutters had been democratically selected as the workers’ authorized representative in a union election in 1965, but as the inflation of the 1970s started to bite at Americans’ spending power the modest gains Local 525 achieved through collective bargaining increasingly seemed to be falling short. While contract negotiations in 1974 had passed without sizable opposition from either side, four years later talks would break down when poultry workers voted against their own president and side with radical insurgents like Walker to reject Gold Kist’s proposal. Local 525 went on strike for a month in July and August 1978, rejecting a second proposal before finally returning to work having gained no further concessions from the company.

Walker’s critique of John Russell, the president of the statewide local, and his business agent Pete Leake, was a fairly straightforward one. “They thought the victory had been won by pure virtue of getting it organized,” she recalled. Russell and Leake were the “upper management of the union,” Walker explained, “and they were proud of all the unions they had.” Nevertheless, “it wasn’t a thriving, living thing where you continued to build a base with these people and fight for more at
all. It was: ‘it’s done, we’re just going to keep nurturing this thing along and keeping it alive.’ That’s where the differences were.”¹ By the 1970s Russell was elderly, silver-haired, and seldom seen by the workers in the 550,000 broiler-a-week North Carolina plant.² Leake was African-American, like almost the entire staff at Gold Kist in Durham. As inflation eroded the Meat Cutters’ achievements of the 1950s and 1960s with increasing effect Local 525 was forced to decide what kind of union it intended to be. The union’s leaders found themselves in the unenviable position of having to justify their recommendations in the face of intensified scrutiny and fend off accusations that rather than acting as a facilitator of working class activism, they had in fact become an impediment to it.

In many ways Durham, North Carolina, seemed a propitious location in which to launch a militant rank-and-file movement among poultry processing workers. Walker was entering a city that had seen escalating levels of social protest over the previous decade dating back to 1963. As of 1970 around forty-one percent of Durham County’s 133,000 residents worked in some sort of industry.³ Roughly two-thirds of this number was white, and one third African-American, and with the exception of the schools, public desegregation had fairly peacefully come into effect in 1963.⁴ However as the 1960s had progressed the political ambitions of the city’s

¹ Karen Walker Interview by Author, November 15, 2013.
http://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C1970/R10984752; Francis Stevens
black minority had transitioned from political reform to broader economic demands, focused upon the uplift of the city’s ghettoized neighborhoods. Within Durham’s slums, “the streets were narrow, unpaved, and unlighted, the houses dilapidated, the plumbing nonexistent or in need of repair, and the rats and cockroaches abundant,” wrote Francis Redburn, a doctoral student from Chapel Hill who explored protests within the city in the late 1960s. The city’s councilmen, made up largely of white men of a certain economic status, had typically “believed that what was good for business was good for the community,” and were unconcerned “with the deteriorating economic position of white and Negro labor in manufacturing.” Redburn noted that, “these are not, for the most part, urbane and enlightened individuals.”

Through the course of the decade levels of agitation and protest had escalated among the city’s black denizens. Mass marches and pickets in 1966 had expressed ongoing concerns about the inadequacies of city services, especially the substandard quality of public housing. As Newark, New Jersey erupted in violence in July 1967, protesters in Durham had capitalized upon this moment of heightened leverage and white fear to great effect, as the local press carried warnings from residents that “people who are tired and frustrated do things they wouldn’t

7 Ibid., p. 52.
ordinarily do.”⁹ Picketing, rent strikes, and the wave of violent urban riots that had been taking place across the country since 1964 had yielded historic concessions from the city council, ranging from changes in hiring practices for government positions to investment in extermination, paving, and lighting within public housing projects.¹⁰

Despite this impressive series of urban reforms Durham’s essential character as a center of industry that attracted rural Southern jobseekers remained unchanged. “Durham offers none of the color and creative life we find among Negroes in New York City,” wrote African-American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in 1925. “It is not the place where men write and dream; but a place where black men calculate and work.”¹¹ While many of Durham’s white working-class gravitated toward the American Tobacco and Liggett & Myers cigarette factories, members of the black working class more often tended to the chicken plant.¹² It was the tobacco business that had served as a catalyst for much of the city’s rapid growth from a population of less than three hundred at the end of the Civil War, exploding in the 1920s from around 22,000 to 52,000, and then almost doubling again in the following forty years.¹³ The city’s Liggett plant employed around 2,500 workers,

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¹² Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
who produced around 3,500 Chesterfield, L&M, Lark, and Eve cigarettes every minute. American was responsible for making Lucky Strikes. Durham was “a tobacco town if ever there was one,” wrote Paul Hoffman for the New York Times in 1976. “Indeed, despite the Surgeon General’s reports,” he added, “warning notices on cigarette packs and the ban on cigarette commercials on TV, the tobacco business is booming.”\(^{14}\) The tobacco factories were known to pay more and were not subject to some of the uncomfortably cold temperatures that were involved at Gold Kist where the company continued to ice-pack around eighty-percent of its birds, a hold-out against the dry-chilled techniques advanced by Holly Farms.\(^ {15}\) That was how things worked out in 1970s Durham, the decade during which the Civil Rights movement would falter and lose any sense of direction.

Operating in an industry that showed little compunction at discarding precedent and in an unstable economy, Walker challenged Russell’s paternalism and raised questions about the future direction of the union. Did Local leadership stand at a fork in the road in which two distinct paths were presented? Durham had a greater record of recent militant black activism than many Southern cities, and, historian Robert Cannon argued in 1975, a basis of “considerable labor


If the residents of the city’s various slums could be persuaded to take to the streets in anger directed towards the city government, could this desire for social and economic improvement be refocused towards one of the community’s largest employers of African Americans? Yet the decisions faced by Local 525 were not straightforward. Perhaps they resembled less a fork in the road and more of a labyrinth in which danger lay in every direction. The sequence of events that culminated in a contract strike in 1978 reveal the acute difficulties facing organized labor’s beachhead within the North Carolina poultry industry in the years following the unraveling of the New Deal coalition.17

Both Pete Leake and Karen Walker were atypical among the three-hundred or so bodies employed at the Gold Kist plant. Walker described Leake as middle-class and having cut his teeth as a Civil Rights activist.\(^{18}\) She was a member of the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) and from a similar economic stratum to Leake. Originally from South Jersey, she was one of only a handful of white line-workers in the plant. When the company discharged Walker in 1978 after five years of employment it would bring a sense of relief to both John Russell and Gold Kist management, who had become united in their opposition to her persistent efforts to motivate workers into mass action against the company. At the end of August 1978 Russell wrote to Leon Schachter, vice-president of the Meat Cutters International Union, signaling the closure of a difficult chapter in his tenure as president. “In conclusion let me say that Local 525 and its leadership have taken a lot of vilification and slander from the PLP for more than four years. Those four years have been filled with NLRB cases, Federal Court suits, arbitrations and grievances around phoney issues that have been won almost 100% by the union.” Russell continued. “We have seen no real evidence of their being good strategists or good tacticians. Nor have I seen them capable of building any solid organization in Gold Kist or the other units in the Durham area. But they are dangerous because they can fish in muddy waters and interfere on any issue without being held responsible for their

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\(^{18}\) Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
actions.” He signed off, adding that, “I can say that it was a real pleasure to cut these lunatics down to size.”

As Walker departed for a short stint in one of North Carolina’s newly constructed county jails to serve time for violent actions during the 1978 strike, Russell seemed to look forward to the resumption of what he believed to be a sensible and mature relationship that had become mutually beneficial to both company and union. Since 1974 Walker and the PLP had engaged in a relentless campaign to expand the horizons and expectations of working class poultry workers. Insisting that they demand more for their exhaustive efforts on behalf of the company, the campaign had initially been targeted at Gold Kist as an agent of capitalist production. Yet as time went by the focus of the PLP’s efforts had developed from merely criticizing the company to confronting the union as well, engaging in withering attacks upon the relationship between the two in a blitz of newsletters that quickly became must-read material among the factory staff. It would be easy to characterize this conflict as one between Old Left and New Left but there was more to it than this. Walker and the PLP raised questions concerning the direction of the Meat Cutters that went unanswered by a union led by octogenarian president Patrick Gorman and rocked by the pace of developments in the beef industry. Trusting in the value of relationships that had been developed with company managers was ultimately a self-defeating option. At the end of the 1970s

slaughterhouse workers stood on the brink in towns and cities across the United States. Mass immigration, inflation, a flagging regulatory state, and a massive wave of takeovers and consolidation within the meat processing business meant that the ground was shifting beneath their feet. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union’s sclerotic and ultimately disastrous response to the Hormel Strike in Austin, Minnesota, just seven years later would achieve a symbolic status in the decline of American industrial unionism.\textsuperscript{21} The lesson that Hardy Green would draw from the abandonment of the creative and energetic Local P-9 was that unions “must be decentralized, highly democratic, responsive, and communitarian.”\textsuperscript{22} Yet proposals of this type were on the table in Durham a decade earlier and the Meat Cutters’ defensive strategy was already on display.

Did Karen Walker and the Progressive Labor Party have the correct solutions to rescue Local 525? They would assert that this was not their goal; they would argue that it was not their intention to save the Meat Cutters or any other union but to form a revolutionary base within the working class. Yet for all their zeal and heightened rhetoric their more intermediate goals, a more democratic organization that involved mass participation, responsiveness to members needs, and a


The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen merged with the Retail Clerks International Union to form the United Food and Commercial Workers. \textsuperscript{22} Green, \textit{On Strike at Hormel}, p. 300.
willingness to demonstrate collective strength and unity, presented a pertinent
diagnosis of the limitations of John Russell's local and the wider labor movement in
the 1970s. Russell’s caution was understandable. From his perspective the union
was not in a very strong position and to have established any level of collective
bargaining and grievance arbitration in a state like North Carolina was an
achievement in and of itself. He must have felt that for the local to go full tilt into an
extended strike action would not only be expensive but potentially ruinous, not only
for workers at Gold Kist for union members in plants across the state. Yet by the
late-1970s both industry and the state were changing direction and unions would
not benefit from some of the protections they had enjoyed since the 1930s. Wedded
to the New Deal Order and trusting in the strength of connections formed through
years of good faith bargaining with management, Russell’s leadership was
increasingly ill-suited for the challenges on the horizon.

The Politics of the Progressive Labor Party

“Poultry has been a big part of Gold Kist’s total operation since the early
1950’s,” Ralph D. Mobley told David Amey in 1978.23 Vice-president Mobley was
“considered by many industrymen to be the single most important cog in the
development of the world’s largest integrated broiler cooperative.”24 Mobley, who
had been with the company for thirty-two years, explained that “Gold Kist has
always placed much emphasis on hiring outstanding young people out of college,

23 Amey, David, “Gold Kist’s poultry manager sees limitless growth,” Broiler Industry,
putting them through our training program and giving them management responsibilities.”

Karen Walker was not the type of former college student that Mobley had in mind. She had become politicized at the turn of the decade at the University of Cincinnati, though she had never actually become a member of the Students for a Democratic Society, an organization by that stage in a state of terminal decline. After two years at Cincinnati she dropped out and moved back to the East Coast as what she describes as a “semi-hippy,” though adding that, “I was never really a very good hippy because I never did like the drugs much.”

Following this Walker joined the Progressive Labor Party and moved to Durham where she undertook a series of different factory jobs, including at the tobacco plant. The Marxist-Leninist PLP had been formed at the turn of the sixties by members of the Communist Party USA (CP) who were disaffected by the failure of the CP to distance itself from the Soviet Union in the wake of Khrushchev’s Secret Speech and the Hungarian Revolution. Lamenting the direction of the USSR since the 1950s, the “old Communist Party,” they charged, “lost its revolutionary outlook and became a prop of capitalism.” Just as they asserted that the USSR had ceased to be revolutionary in its outlook, they contended that the same applied to the CP. For much of the 1960s PLP members had expressed confidence in the direction of the People’s Republic of China, establishing themselves as the most significant Maoist organization in the United States. “What is of fundamental importance as far as the PL is concerned,” wrote Trotskyist Mary-Alice Waters in a sectarian attack in

26 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
1969, “is that from its inception the organization has supported the Chinese bureaucracy and all its policies, dogmatically portraying them as the model for revolutionary theory and action.”

By 1970 the PLP had fallen out of love with Maoism too. They had been supportive of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966, agreeing with the premise that communism in China was threatened by an ascendant middle class, describing it as one of the “four great revolutions (to have) marked the forward thrust of humanity.” The PLP turned on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in the wake of the cessation of this project. “Since the end of the GPCR in late 1968,” it was stated in PL Magazine, “Chinese bosses have been frantically crushing the leadership and dispersing the rank-and-file of the great Leftists movement which almost threw them on the garbage heap.” Deprived of any ideal contemporary models of socialist society to point towards, the PLP sought to put these disappointments behind them and administer strenuous self-criticism while recommitting to building an anti-revisionist revolutionary movement that was genuinely led by the working class. “Revolutionaries cannot live in the past, but must always link up their lives with what is new and developing in the working class movement,” PL Magazine read in 1975. This meant setting aside concerns for the CP which was “dead as a revolutionary organization and had become counter-

revolutionary.” The PLP, in a manner not entirely uncharacteristic of revolutionary leftist parties, asserted that its proposed strategy was the way of the future; “the new casts off the old; the revolutionary discards and destroys the counter-revolutionary.”

In one central regard the PLP’s organizing strategy was distinctly different from that of CPUSA. Where CP organizers had been coy and had sought to conceal their party memberships from workers, union colleagues, and agencies of the state, the PLP pursued a policy of complete openness, explicitly stating their objectives. This was the historical lesson they had drawn from the investigations of the House Un-American Affairs Committee and McCarthyism, where the CP had been portrayed as a decidedly clandestine organization. Karen Walker approved of this approach. “I think one of the best things that the Progressive Labor Party formulated was that your best defense was to be open and rely on the people that you’re trying to organize to defend you,” she said. Taft-Hartley was not a sufficient excuse. “Or don’t try to fool them with what your real intentions are or your long range goals are. They don’t have to agree with you but your protection is if you’re as open as possible.”

In February 1976 the Reverend Harold Gordon Elsam, national chaplain of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, wrote to the Durham Morning Herald claiming that he had discovered a “Communist cell” in the town that was “boring from within.” On March 11, two days after sitting as a guest at the head table of President Gerald Ford at a VFW dinner at the Sheraton Hotel in Washington, Elsam would receive a

32 Ibid., p. 68.
33 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
response from Walker in the Readers’ Views section of the paper. 34 “As a
Communist worker and member of the Progressive Labor Party, I would like to state
that we do not spend our time trying to ‘bore from within.’ We openly organize in
the trade unions and elsewhere to build the party, move the trade unions to the left,
and fight for socialism.” Having made this clear she sought to put the ball back in
the chaplain’s court. “Mr. Elsam also asks the question, ‘How long can the U.S.
remain free?’ I ask the question, ‘Is the U.S. now free and for whom?’...At the rate of
$3.12 an hour I cannot afford the bosses’ justice and freedom.” 35 Elsam responded,
offering his compliments to Walker, asserting that “she, at least, is a dedicated
person,” before adding that, “I disagree completely with her political philosophy for
I see the disaster that has descended upon the Socialist-dominated Labor [sic] Party
of Great Britain.” 36

One Timothy Jordan Harrell from Chapel Hill responded to Walker’s letter
with “A Rebuttal” which the Durham Morning Herald decided to carry. He iterated
the predictable refrain that, “if she prefers the Communist freedom (which contains
the freedom to be Communist only), then she should take it to Russia or Cuba where
she’ll be greeted with open arms.” If you don’t like America, get out! Harrell
presented what he felt was a glaring contradiction. “I would be very interested in
any specific examples she can furnish of her being oppressed, exploited, maimed or

Appendix G, March 9, 1976, President’s Daily Diary Collection, Box 80.” Accessed:
35 “The Fight For Socialism,” Durham Morning Herald, March 11, 1976. Box 20,
Folder 21, Local 525 Collection.
36 “Non-Voters and Freeloaders,” Durham Morning Herald, Box 20, Folder 21, Local
525 Collection.
murdered, especially examples of murder attempts.”37 Harrell’s interjection exhibited obliviousness to recent history. This was little more than a decade after the murders of civil rights workers James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in 1964 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the notorious town that would become the launch site of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign. Any radical that ventured to the South with the intention of upsetting the existing power structure was acutely aware of this precedent. Was North Carolina so very different to the dark forests of Mississippi in which the three young men’s bodies were disposed of?

In November 1979 five members of the Communist Workers Party (CWP) were shot dead by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party in Greensboro while holding a “Death to the Klan March” with some support from local industrial workers. After a state court had accepted a plea of self-defense on the part of the gunmen and granted them an acquittal, the Justice Department charged them with a conspiracy to deprive the demonstrators of their civil rights, only to lose in Federal court in 1984 before an all-white jury. “The surprising lack of police protection for the rally gave rise to suspicions, still unresolved, of official connivance and inadequate control of a police informant,” the New York Times observed. “There was good reason to expect violence; that a few demonstrators were also armed hardly excuses the absence of police officers,” they opined.38 The “Greensboro massacre” had a chilling effect upon the PLP faction in Durham little more than fifty miles away. Over the years they had engaged in sectarian leftist altercations with

37 “A Rebuttal,” Durham Morning Herald, Box 20, Folder 21, Local 525 Collection.
the CWP members who were located just fifty miles to the west. The PLP had held a similar anti-Klan march in Durham prior to November 1979 and given their occasional communications Walker suggests that the event in Greensboro may even have been a competitive response to their own activities.\textsuperscript{39} If Timothy Jordan Harrell was really in need of a display of the ever-present dangers that existed in North Carolina he received it three years later in Greensboro in emphatic fashion.

Did African-American workers at Gold Kist in Durham have the same negative reactions to communism that we would associate with Cold War Americans like Harrell and the Reverend Elsam? Walker did not experience the extreme reservations that may have been encountered elsewhere. Toward the end of her time there she had reached a certain level of acceptance among many workers, “not necessarily as one of them but for who I was,” she recalled. Given that “a lot of people…liked our ideas and liked what we were doing and organizing,” she found that colleagues would stand by her on the basis of those efforts. For those that approved, Walked claimed that their attitude would be, “well you say she’s that but I like what she says and I like what we’re doing.” The logical extension of this line of thought was that some workers would conclude that, “in spite of what you say or in spite of her being a communist...if that’s what it is then I like it.”\textsuperscript{40}

For Walker the area of communist thought that had the potential to be most problematic was its atheism. One of the men at the plant whose job it was to sharpen knives doubled as a minister in his time-off. On one occasion early in her time at the plant he engaged her in a conversation on the subject of theology in

\textsuperscript{39} Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
which she stated that she took “more of a scientific view” and was not very religious. The minister then inquired as to whether she believed in the science of evolution, and she answered in the affirmative. He then proceeded to circulate this information to other workers in such a way that it would elicit comments in the bathroom like “I heard you called us all a bunch of apes.” Was it his intentions to provoke racial tensions by purposefully misconstruing the meaning of the original conversation? “That was one hundred percent his intention,” Walker asserts, but her colleagues were too clever to be this easily manipulated.41

The Industrial Mix in North Carolina

Gold Kist employed Karen Walker without complication in late 1973. Having been fired from her previous factory positions for lying on the job application, she asserts that she must have told the truth this time. Had she gifted the company with such a simple premise by which to remove her earlier then they would have done so. She was initially deployed on the plant’s Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) line. The KFC Cut-Up represented one of eight main departments within the plant along with Live Receiving and Picking, Eviscerating I and II, Packing and Shipping, Maintenance, Fresh Cut-Up, and Sanitation.42 By the time the birds reached her they had already been cut up into breasts, legs, wings, and thighs and refrigerated.

41 Ibid.
Several women would then sort the pieces into bags, after which most of them would be dispatched to the famous restaurant chain.

In 1977 John Russell looked back and tried to explain the sequence of events to Harry Alston, the director of the Meat Cutters’ National Civil Rights Department. “Karen obviously was colonized into Gold Kist poultry at Durham in late 1973 or early 1974 and, after laying low for six or seven months, she surfaced as the leader of a small group,” he wrote. “Their approach is an ultra-left approach with the main target the Union in the plant they are in,” Russell added. Yet this had not been part of Walker’s original plan. In fact the seven or eight members of the PLP in Durham had not exactly developed an elaborate plan at all. They may have realized that Gold Kist was a union plant before they had a member employed there but they knew little about the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and it was not their intent to engage in a battle with the local. The business itself: that was another matter. “Our purpose really was to build a base for socialism among workers,” Walker recalled. That said, “we had very strong ideas on how a union should operate with respect to management.”

After a quiet start the PLP started distributing a publication written purposely for the plant called Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter around twice a month. The WAM, or Workers Action Movement, was a Durham-based organization established by the PLP that purported to stand for a three point program; “30 hours work for 40 hours pay”, support for workers’ strikes by other workers not directly

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43 “John Russell to Harry Alston,” August 23, 1977, Box 20, Folder 22, Local 525 Collection.
44 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
involved, and for unions to be controlled by committees made up of elected rank-and-file members. They would deny that this was a front-organization. It was no secret that the members of the PLP were also the organizers of WAM. Similarly everyone at Gold Kist knew that Walker was writing as well as distributing the newsletters and leaflets, even though her materials never explicitly said as much. The WAM was designed to present an outlet that could involve workers who may not be ready to embrace the idea of joining a communist organization. Stressing their opposition to racism and sexism, the first edition closed with, “if you agree with our program and see the need to fight back, JOIN US (no cops or bosses allowed)”.

The launch of the WAM Meat Cutters Newsletter coincided with the expiration of the union contract in the summer of 1974. The early approach of the newsletter was to embark upon a full-on assault on the company while framing what workers expectations of the union leadership should be in contract negotiations. The WAM encouraged workers to start making strike preparations in order to back up any union claims. Over the past year, “workers have been speeded up and laid off,” they narrated, while “our wage increases (and more) have been lost to inflation...Now’s the time to make the bosses pay!” Another article reported Gold Kist’s 266th placed ranking in the Fortune 500 for 1974. Pointing out that the five-hundred accounted for seventy-nine percent of all profits in the US at the time, they observed

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46 Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter, June 10, 1974, No. 1, p. 4, Box 20, Folder 21, Local 525 Collection.
47 Ibid., p. 2.
that “Gold Kist is hanging right in there,” with $572,982,000 in sales. They then compared their work situation with that of another plant everyone was familiar with. “Right above Gold Kist on the list is Liggett & Myers (#264) with $582,797,000 in sales. Practically the same size and yet the lowest paid worker at the Durham L&M plant makes more than the highest paid worker at our plant!”48 The fact that L&M primarily employed white workers was unspoken but a context that was presumably understood by all. Early WAM newsletters also situated Gold Kist in the context of the state economy. “At Gold Kist our wages are way behind those of other union workers in North Carolina; and North Carolina workers have the lowest wages in the country.”49

This was an issue of particular significance at the time and reflective of North Carolina’s place in the national economy. In the early 1970s the Office of State Planning accepted $16,000 from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to commission a study into earnings rates in the state. It was carried out by Emil Malizia, an economist at the University of North Carolina and completed in 1975, only for the report to be embargoed once Republican governor James Holshouser’s administration learned of its findings.50

To begin with, Malizia showed that the average weekly industrial wage in North Carolina was $135, which ranked fiftieth in the US. North Carolina also had the lowest rate of unionized workers in the country at 8%. Michigan, in which

49 Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter, June 10, 1974, No. 1, p. 4, Box 20, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
industrial wages averaged $248 per week, was 40% unionized.\footnote{Steve Berg, “What’s Behind the N.C. ‘Earnings Gap’?” \textit{Raleigh News and Observer}, November 2, 1975, p. IV 1. Box 2, Folder 26, Local 525 Collection.} In isolation these figures do not tell us a lot. Two obvious points to bring up would be the differences in the industrial mix between Michigan and North Carolina as well as in the level of worker productivity. Automakers earn more than textile or tobacco workers. Yet for each sector of production there is an average wage and even when Malizia compared earnings in the very same forms of production with those in North Carolina, he found that they were lower. This was the case in both high-wage and low-wage areas of work.\footnote{Emil Malizia, ““Earnings Gap in North Carolina: A Study. The Earnings of North Carolinians,” (UNC: Department of State and Regional Planning, June 1975), p. 19, Box 2, Folder 26, Local 525 Collection.}

The value-added per man-hour in the United States in 1971 averaged $12.43 in the manufacturing sectors. In individual sectors value-added could range from as high as $28.43 in petroleum refining to $6.06 in apparel, one of the areas in which North Carolina specialized. The average across sectors in the state was $8.78, only seventy-one percent of the national figure. Yet Malizia asserted that this was largely a product of the industrial mix and calculated that North Carolinian workers were only five percent less productive than those working in similar industries elsewhere. “In short, if the overall industrial mix effect were zero, output per man-hour in North Carolina would be 95 percent of the United States average, while wages would remain at 88 percent of the average United States figure,” he wrote.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 22-23.}

This disparity meant that from the perspective of industry the state was a very effective one to invest in. Given the relative cheapness of their labor, North
Carolinian workers produced seven percent more per dollar spent by business than was the average for the same industry in the US as a whole.\(^{54}\) These economic conditions had meant that businesses in North Carolina had been able to develop some of the highest rates of profit and growth in the country. With average hourly industrial wages running at $3.03 compared to a national average of $3.68, Malizia estimated that profit rates exceeded the average accrued across the country in ninety percent of the sectors examined.\(^{55}\)

The notion that North Carolina was a good place for businesses to profitably invest, a state where the workers were productive, was not what offended the governor’s office. But how would Malizia explain these distinctions in the state’s economy? He would pose two possibilities. “a. North Carolina workers have more and better capital equipment at their disposal than do their United States counterparts in the same industry.”\(^{56}\) Malizia rejected this: the capital-to-labor ratio in North Carolina was sixty-nine percent of the national average. His second suggestion would become for many people the takeaway from the entire report. “b. North Carolina workers are exploited relative to United States workers in the same industry.”\(^{57}\) Malizia asserted that the dearth of unionism, what he described as “local effects,” accounted for the sheer uneveness of the state’s economy. “Sure we think life is good here,” Malizia said in an interview. “And it is good for the upper and middle classes because our lives are built on top of lower class wages, on

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 26.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 21.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 26.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 27.
exploitation.” Of course the general flavor of production in North Carolina was understood, to greater or lesser degrees, by most of those who lived there. However this raised serious questions about the state government’s model of development in the previous two decades. By 1975 North Carolina was the eighth most heavily industrialized state in the nation, a trailblazer of the “New South” as workers transitioned out of historical agricultural occupations. Over time it would become increasingly apparent that the differences between the New South and the Old South had been wildly overstated. Malizia’s report was ultimately leaked and circulated by the AFL-CIO, along with his suggestion that the state reconsider its right-to-work status. He managed to simultaneously puncture the progressive forward-looking image that had been effectively propagated by boosters for years while offending a business community protective of its prerogatives.

“This report from the UNC represents academic arrogance at full flower,” editorialized The Greensboro Record. “No doubt the authors sincerely feel that, in plotting to eradicate the existing protections against involuntary unionization, they are in hot pursuit of the Holy Grail. They nevertheless take quite a bit on themselves in presuming to preach, at public expense, the unions’ gospel.” Charging Malizia with “dubious arithmetic” the conservative paper indignantly went on. “No one will deny that North Carolina workers, protected as they are against being shanghaied, have signed on with the AFL-CIO in modest numbers. It may be that this results in an ‘earnings gap.’ Then again, it may not, depending on whether union dues are subtracted from net wages.” Workers who were employed in a union shop, “suffer

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59 Doar, “N.C. Wages Hit Bottom.”
beyond question from an enormous freedoms gap.” And so it went on. Some state officials were unable to reach quite the same level of thoughtfulness. Natural and Economic Resources Secretary James E. Harrington shrugged his shoulders when reporters queried him on Malizia’s study. “You’ve got unions and high per capita income in New York City,” he explained. “And I don’t know a damn soul who wants to go there.” Industrial development director Robert E. Leak was willing to concede that the earnings gap was an issue, but rejected the idea that unionism could improve things. “It’s a problem you have to peck at. You don’t solve it in one administration or two. It may take 50 or 100 years,” he said. “And I really question whether parity ought to be our goal.”

So how did the rates of pay at unionized Gold Kist compare to those in manufacturing jobs in North Carolina as a whole? In 1971 the average hourly manufacturing rate was $3.68 in the United States but $2.64 in North Carolina. As of 1971 the base rate for starting employees at Gold Kist was $2.35 per hour, increasing to $2.50 after the first year with the company. Certain job classifications provided incremental pay above the basic rate. A knife sharpener received an extra nickel, a foot cutter eight cents, a bird hanger fifteen. This was greater than the $1.60 federal minimum wage, but nonetheless modest. Karen Walker had intended

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60 “Yo-ho-heave-ho,” Greensboro Record, December 21, 1975, Box 2, Folder 26, Local 525 Collection.
63 “Union Proposals to Gold Kist Company,” p.1, Box 2, Folder 22, Local 525 Collection.
to write newsletters whose focus was upon Gold Kist as a centerpiece in a broader critique of American capitalism. Yet the *Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter* had barely been in circulation for a month when Local 525 agreed to their 1974 contract with the company, a four-year bargain that was endorsed by members. The outcome of these contract negotiations, and the smoothness and ease with which they took place, caused Walker to broaden the scope of her critique. If there was an original sin on the part of the union it was the meekness with which they accepted the 1974 contract.

The 1974 contract did contain some highlights. It included two weeks of paid vacation after three years, three weeks after twelve years, and a modest plan with the Cotton States Life and Health Insurance Company that provided $2,500 in case of death or dismemberment.\(^{64}\) In addition it secured the continuance of what was primarily a Monday through Friday schedule with the provision of time-and-a-half if employees should be called in on a Saturday and double-time on Sundays.\(^{65}\) The contract also prohibited the company from scheduling any split-shifts and if an employee was asked to come to work they the could not be sent home without at least four hours pay.\(^{66}\) Crucial were the adjustments to the pay scale. Incremental increases of 10, 12, 10, 13, and 8 cents in successive years amounted to 53 cents across the board increases over the duration of the contract.\(^{67}\)


\(^{65}\) Ibid. p. 9.

\(^{66}\) Ibid. p. 8.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., Exhibit B., p. 1.
“A Quarter?!” read the headline on the front page of the *Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter* of July 18, 1974, only the fifth issue. Walker had attempted to organize a mass meeting of the workers, had collected the signatures of ninety-three members of the union on a petition, only for leadership to make excuses not to convene. She claimed that the union had entered negotiations with the demand for an immediate 45 cents more upon the base rate of pay and a cost of living adjustment, but had settled for 22 cents over the first year with few signs of resistance. Workers would get ten cents right away and then an extra twelve cents in December, but there was no cost-of-living adjustment. In addition to this their sick pay benefits would increase from $45 to $50 per week. The union meeting in which the members endorsed the proposal had been split into two separate sections to accommodate different shifts. Forty-nine out of fifty members had voted for the contract in the first meeting but the second meeting, where Walker had been in attendance, was another matter. “There was a lot of disagreement- some shouting and name calling,” the *WAM Newsletter* reported. “Actually, it was a good fight.” Russell had labeled Walker “cock-eyed” and “an agitator who wanted to strike just to be striking.” By the end of the meeting fourteen voted against the contract and only three voted in favor of it.69

“Should we count our pennies and be grateful for what we got—however little it is?” Walker wrote. “We were sold-out by our union leadership and two people in particular hold the main responsibility for this- John Russell and Pete

69 Ibid., p. 3.
Leake,” she explained. “It’s funny how they happen to be the only two people who don’t have to work for our lousey wages.” Did Russell and Leake do all they could have? “The negotiations were a game- a real joke. The whole deal could have been wrapped up in an hour- but that wouldn't have looked good. It had to look like each side was ‘bargaining hard’- sweating it out right up to the deadline.” They had been unprepared though. “They didn’t even try to scare the bosses into forking over some real money- no strike committee, no strike vote, no nothing!” From this point forth the campaign against what Walker saw as the limiting ambitions of Russell and Leake would become of as much importance as the assault on the company itself. A union that could not, or would not, empower its members to demand more from their employer was no ally of the PLP. “It’s sell out leaders who build fear and try to strip us of our power,” they wrote. “Like us, rank-and-file workers are faced with these kinds of leaders in most unions.” Then, a warning. “They weaken our power to fight the bosses so…WE HAVE TO STRAIGHTEN THEM OUT OR KICK THEM OUT!”

Still Walker pressed for the Local to take actions to achieve a more participatory union, taking issue with the limitations of Local 525 News as an instrument for updating workers on the collective bargaining process. Walker asserted in a letter to Russell that she had put out her own updates because the union publication failed to do so, or to barely even mention Gold Kist and its misdeeds. Leake took issue with her approach. “Pete was dead set against this and with 100% bullshit logic behind his idea. ‘If we tell people what’s going on, then

70 Ibid., p. 1.
71 Ibid., p. 3.
they won’t go to meetings.’ He carried this further by saying that the reason so few people come to our regular unit meetings was because now ‘Local 525 News’ is mailed to their homes. They don’t have to come out to find out what’s happening...Now you gotta admit that these statements are bordering on the ridiculous,” she wrote to Russell.72

In spite of Walker’s increasingly sharp critique of his performance, Leake responded by attempting to reach some sort of rapprochement with the PLP. Walker insists that Leake spoke to her and tried to emphasize the radical history of the Meat Cutters, stressing that both he and Russell were members of the CP. He would argue that they were essentially on the same page in terms of their end goals. “They were definitely communists,” Walker said. “I don’t say that with disdain,” she recalled, “but at this point we were at odds with the Communist Party USA and how they approached things, how secretive they were and they were very typical of that, hiding who they were, acting like they were just pro-worker.”73 There would be no deal. Unsurprisingly the union records contain no evidence to corroborate claims that Russell or Leake were members of the CP. Communists who had survived the 1950s intact could be forgiven for not leaving paper trails. When Russell generally articulated broader political points they were from a leftist perspective but never laden with Marxist language in the manner of PLP publications. While he would criticize what he would describe as the “ultra-left” it is plausible that a case could be made that he was a communist, though for the purposes of Local 525 it does not

72 “Karen Walker to John Russell,” July 7, 1974, Box 20, Folder 21, Local 525 Collection.
73 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
seem to have made a lot of difference.\textsuperscript{74} Even if Russell was a Marxist, his philosophy toward union leadership differed from the views of the PLP. Russell had spent the last two decades attempting to build unions and win elections in poultry factories and grocery stores. Once the union was established it was a means of ensuring job security and consistent, albeit not drastic, wage gains for the workers. The aim was not to turn that union into a revolutionary movement though. An organized working class perhaps. But once the Meat Cutters had won a Labor Board-certified election in a plant or a store they would move on to the next destination. They would assign their crack-organizers to a new target and the campaign would start over again.

At the same time it is not true to say that Russell was unwilling to lead the Meat Cutters out on strike. Local 525 engaged in an extended strike against North Carolina-based Rose Hill Poultry in 1967. The union had begun campaigning at Rose Hill in 1960 and after four years and two defeats they had finally won an election in 1964. In 1967 the company added an extra shift of entirely new hires and started reducing the hours of the pre-existing union shift to sixteen per week.\textsuperscript{75} In cases like this Russell supported strike activities. He was mindful of costs and hardships that a strike involved and a union that delivered gradual and incremental improvements in the lives of workers was, in his view, a successful one.

A 1969 flyer distributed to Cross Poultry Company employees listed the accomplishments of the union in the three years since they won certification in

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Local 525 Stewardgram}, June-July, 1967, p. 4. Box 696, Folder 39, Local 525 Collection.
1966. “Compare the benefits and wage increases you have now with what you were
getting before you became Union members,” it implored. Since 1966 Cross Poultry
workers had seen their pay increase from $1.25 an hour to $1.47. They had seen
one week of vacation double to two weeks after five years of service. Maternity
leave had been introduced. Aprons and other equipment were now provided free of
charge and workers would continue to receive pay during breakdowns and waiting
time.76 These were without question genuine improvements, but not the product of
a movement that was really shaking up the poultry industry. Compounding this,
economic circumstances in the mid-1970s were not what they had been ten years
previously. Since the early-1950s inflation had remained consistently low and
stable. The average rate of inflation in 1964 in the United States was 1.3 percent.
Rates had begun to creep upwards in the late 1960s. By 1974, the year of the Gold
Kist contract, inflation averaged 11 percent.77 An extra quarter on a $2.50 salary did
not mean a whole lot if it was wiped out within a year through escalating living
costs. If inflation remained at the same level through 1975- and it almost did,
reaching a high of 11.8 percent in January and averaging 9.1 percent over the year-
then Gold Kist employees stood to see the value of their incomes diminish over the
duration of the contract.78

76 “To Cross Poultry Workers, Look Back,” Box 696, Folder 41, Local 525 Collection.
78 Ibid.
Contested Control

John Russell and Pete Leake may not have inspired militancy in the Local 525 rank-and-file but they had their supporters. Though the union president was rarely seen and Leake was to some degree separated by not working the line, Karen Walker could not agitate against them with impunity. Laura Green had been working at Gold Kist in Durham since 1956. She had been involved in the unionizing of the plant and had travelled around with the Meat Cutters' organizer in the evenings visiting co-workers and talking to them. They had driven around in a hearse, “so that people didn't know who we was.” Among the issues that had grieved workers was the company’s refusal to take messages and notify them when they were on the production line. “I knew a lady her house had caught fire and she was working,” Green recalled. “They called her to explain but she couldn’t go to the telephone and nobody didn’t even tell her.” She had not learned that her house had burnt down until she returned home. This policy had remained a problem even after the union had been won.

Green had achieved one of the highest paying jobs on the production line. She was a killer. “She would slice all the chickens’ necks that somehow missed the mechanical knife,” Walker said, “so I just always remember her coming out with this thing wrapped around her head and a garbage bag on her splattered with blood.” Green was also the elected Chief Steward of the Durham plant and had been from

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80 Laura Green Langley Interview with Lane Windham, November 15, 1989. Transcript in author’s possession.
81 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
the beginning. No-one was a more outspoken advocate of the union than Laura Green. In 1967 she wrote a letter that was distributed to all of the employees. “I have been employed by Gold Kist Poultry Company for the past eleven years,” she said. “Before we joined the Union, the company paid us as little as they possibly could. When we went to the office to ask for a pay-raise, they (the company) said they couldn’t give us a raise. So in 1965 we joined the union. Now we don’t have to ask for a raise, we have a very good contract with the union. Without the union this would not have been possible.”

Green went on. “When the union first came in, the company told us that the union was no good, and some of us should get out of it. But we didn’t, we stayed with it. Don’t listen to what the company has to say, because they don’t care what happen to you. Without the union you are nothing,” she concluded. “Stand up for the union, this is the only way you can make a decent living.”

It was in this context that Laura Green took umbrage at Karen Walker’s assault on union leadership in 1974. She had worked nine years in a union-less plant and having committed the best part of her working life to the Durham facility was protective of what she felt she, and the union, had accomplished. When Walker started distributing her leaflets around the company Green diligently collected copies of each of them and forwarded them on to John Russell, often adding her own notes to update him.

When Walker handed out the fifth volume of the *Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter*,

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denouncing the 1974 contract process, Green warned Russell that, "something got to be done about this. She up setting the plant."83

As PLP leaflets continued to runoff of Xerox machines and gain increasing popularity Walker’s respect among the workforce would grow and her message start to gain more traction. By late 1974 Walker was holding grievance meetings among workers in the absence of Pete Leake or anyone else in union leadership. A November meeting was convened to discuss a new wrapping machine that had been introduced which they contended warranted an improved rate of pay for its operatives. The union contract necessitated that when new jobs were created basic rates of pay were to be renegotiated within thirty days but this had not happened.84 They quickly moved on to a range of other issues pertaining to equipment and safety. But conversation continued to the subject of what sort of union they would require to effectively address these matters. “And here is one of the most important points we discussed,” Walker reported to workers. “A STRONG UNION MUST HAVE STRONG LEADERSHIP! We feel that this is a key problem at Gold Kist- most of our leadership is weak and they do not represent us well. So, we say, this year we want WEAK LEADERSHIP OUT and STRONG LEADERSHIP IN!!”85 The newsletter went on threateningly. “Our choice of stewards should be based on who we feel will really try to represent us fairly; who we think will defend us and our contract.”86

83 Meat Cutters WAM Newsletter, June 18, 1974, No. 5, p. 3.
84 “Karen Walker to Patrick Gorman,” January 29, 1975, Box 20, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
86 Ibid., p. 2.
These overtures towards Green’s position seemed to unsettle her. “This letter should answer our question what she’s trying to do,” she noted as she forwarded the dispatch to the Local leadership. “If you have any thing to say what we should do or say you can let me know. If not we won’t say anything. She’s trying to get our people to join W.A.M.,” she added.87 A month or so later Green’s level of agitation had clearly increased. In late January 1975 she left a message for Russell which was marked “Urgent” and underlined twice in red ink by whoever took the message. “Laura Green called 1/23/75 said it is imperative you call her at home...or at the Gold Kist plant, she says Karen Walker is tearing up the union and saying you, Pete, Manny, etc. are all Commies, and there is to be a meeting soon.” Green told the receiver of the call that, “I don’t know where our union is going if something isn’t done about this.”88 For Walker, this was not red-baiting but merely a statement of fact. “I was openly a communist and I was saying ‘what’s the big deal?’” she recalled. This once again spoke to the strategic differences between the PLP and the CP.89

Though her public statements expressed support for and confidence in the union, this was not the first time Green had felt abandoned by Russell and the leadership in Asheville. In November 1965 in the early days of plant organization she had written an anxious four-page letter to Russell appealing for his intervention. “A few weeks ago we the employees of Gold Kist poultry Plant wrote you a letter concerning some of our problems in the plant. So far we haven’t received a reply. We are still wondering why we didn’t receive an answer from you,” Green wrote.

87 Ibid., p. 2.
88 “Laura Green Urgent Message,” Box 20, Folder 21, Local 525 Collection.
89 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
The company was doing its belligerent best to ignore the contract and she was concerned about a collapse in support for the union. “We are paying too much money each month not to get any more benefits out of the contract than we do,” she went on. Besides a modest pay-raise and a two-week vacation everything else remained unchanged, while “some things are even worse. None of our problems get solved, even the ones we had when you were in here and you promised us you were going to get straighten out.” 90 The perennial poultry plant problem of receiving relief for bathroom breaks remained unsolved and the company was continuing to deduct pay for periods of inactivity when there were breakdowns in the line. 91 If the president could not make it she requested that he send one of the union’s veteran organizers, Cornelius Simmons. “John Russell these people know Mr. Simmons but they don’t and can’t be as trustworthy with Pete Leake as they can Mr. Simmons and we feel like Mr. Simmons can straighten out these problems as well as you can.” Green ended that “we recommend that you send someone like him to us because we need help very bad. We want to hear from you on this matter right away and we are waiting to hear from you.” 92

Green’s discomfort towards the PLP campaign would come to a head in January 1975 when it was time to vote on stewards for the plant. Both Green and Walker were nominated for the position of chief steward. What followed was

91 Ibid., p. 2.
reported in the PLP’s *Challenge* newspaper. “After a year of intense struggle in the plant thousands of WAM leaflets and hundreds of CHALLENGES the old chief steward folded-out and refused the nomination,” wrote an unidentified worker. “In her own words, “she felt the workers in the plant had lost faith in her.” In fact, we felt that she just didn’t give the strong fighting leadership that we need.” After a decade in the highest rank-and-file position in the plant we can only speculate that Green must have felt that she had been usurped, her longevity and commitment trumped by the wild promises of someone towards whom she held great reservations. Walker was from a middle-class background and would not be stuck at Gold Kist forever. This was probably understood by Green and may have been cause for further resentment towards the situation. Laura Green would ultimately remain at the plant until its closure in 1989.

Upon election as chief steward Walker found it difficult to effectively carry out the operations required of the position. Pete Leake decided to withdraw any assistance in what we can surmise was an effort to undermine Walker’s standing with the rank-and-file of the union. In late January she wrote a letter to Patrick Gorman, the president of the Meat Cutters International Union listing Leake’s failings and asking for him to encourage Russell to appoint a new business agent. This petition may have been a more forceful statement had it contained more than seven signatures. Since the election, Walker wrote in the third person, “Pete has given absolutely no help, advice or information to the new chief-steward. He has

93 “Durham: Poultry Workers Elect PL’er Chief Steward,” *Challenge*, Box 20, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
94 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
95 Green Langley Interview, November 15, 1989.
refused to send a letter to the Company confirming the new stewards.” She detailed some of his shortcomings. “The new chief-steward has asked Pete for several things, but he won’t give her anything, such as: a seniority list (she finally got one from the plant personnel director), a list of union members (up-to-date), more contracts (there are many people who need contracts but Pete refuses to get us anymore—we “just throw them in the trash can” he says) and some grievance forms (she ended up making her own forms until she got some from a chief-steward for the A&P stores).” Finally, “she asked to see the grievance file so she would know what grievances had been filed in the past. Pete said he didn’t know where it was (if there was one).”

In describing the events two months later in Challenge the author, again presumably Walker, suggested that Leake and management were by this point cooperating in their efforts to work against her. “While the bosses attacked us from one side the business agents and the union attacked from the other.” The company ignored the contract with abandon and Leake indicated that he would not support any grievances filed by Walker, rendering her ineffective. “All of this work against the union was meant to force the new chief steward to resign,” she wrote. At the February union meeting the leadership scheduled another election for chief steward without filing any charges against Walker. It is not clear whether this was within the rules but they had managed to persuade Laura Green to return and she was subsequently re-elected for a return to the status quo. Though it is conceivable

that his may have been a strategy designed to undermine Walker’s leadership aspirations, there is no evidence to that effect.

**Draw Hands**

By 1975 Walker was in an increasingly contentious position in relation to both the management and the union leadership. She also transitioned from the KFC line to draw-hand, one of the most difficult jobs in the plant. This required removing the viscera from the bird. As a bird would arrive hanging by its legs the draw-hand would reach through a slit that had been cut adjacent to the cloaca.98 From there, “you have to be between the rib cage and the gut and reach all the way down to the very neck of the bird where between your fingers you get the esophagus,” as Walker described it. There is then a technique of pulling the viscera out. In order to do so, “you can’t break the esophagus, you have to stretch the esophagus and pull all of the guts out and they’re splayed over the side of the chicken.” Pulling the viscera could easily go wrong though. The gall bladder could easily burst, filling the bird with green bile. Similarly if the esophagus were to break then the bird would be contaminated by particles that were in the guts.99

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98 The cloaca is the rear opening from which matter is ejected from the reproductive, urinary and intestinal tracts in species that lay eggs, e.g. reptiles, amphibians and birds.

99 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013. Incidentally throwing gall bladders at one another was a popular activity at Gold Kist in Durham. “We had great, great gall bladder fights,” Walker recalled.
Figure 4.1 Internal anatomy of the chicken.¹⁰⁰

The job of the draw-hand required more than just delicate care. The repetitive action involved was physically grueling. “I’d go home and soak my hands,” she said. “My hands were so in pain from doing this and you’d do both, you had to be good at both hands eventually or else you’d kill yourself.” Some draw-hands would really take a pride in their mastery of this difficult job, much to the satisfaction of the management. Bathroom breaks are a perpetual issue in slaughterhouses where the company is reluctant to ever stop the line. In order for one person to attend the restroom another worker, often the supervisor, is required to replace them at their station. This could take a long time. “Some of the younger

women would say “I got yours, just go,” and so they’d pull every chicken,” rather than the usual procedure which was to pull every other one. “I always thought ‘you’re fools.’ You’re going to kill yourself, this feels good, you’re really good at it but there’s going to be a price to pay for this. That was an argument among workers,” as to whether this should be a permissible solution to what was, and continues to be, a frequently recurring dilemma.101

In 1989 OSHA conducted a study in conjunction with the Georgia Institute of Technology into the ergonomics and industrial hygiene at two undisclosed poultry plants. Besides finding that cumulative trauma disorders were under-reported, their study corroborated Walker’s experiences at Gold Kist. “Employees who draw and present the viscera (“draw hands”) in the Evisceration Department have the highest upper-extremity discomfort level and every person interviewed from this job reported frequent pain and numbness in the hands at night,” the report read.102 The draw-hands “reach down into the bird vent opening with right or left hand flexion and then, with a pinch grip, grasp and position the viscera, with forearm rotation, for presentation to the USDA inspector.”103 The study, sponsored by the industry financed National Broiler Council, remarked on the obvious dangers of pacey line speeds, before recommending that, “instead of drawing with the vent hole facing up the bird could be forced by a guide bar to rotate 90 degrees so the vent hole is facing the worker. The less desirable alternative is to reduce the repetition

101 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
103 Ibid., p. 22.
by adding workers to the line.”\textsuperscript{104} While the field of ergonomics and the industry’s knowledge of cumulative trauma disorders and carpal tunnel syndrome were relatively underdeveloped in the mid-1970s, Gold Kist employees were well aware that workers of senior standing suffered from long-term problems. At the time draw-hands at Gold Kist were required to remove eleven viscera every minute, with forty-four birds passing the four-person station in that time. The company held that on-the-job training was effective and that, “an adequate level of proficiency can be obtained through observation and practice in approximately fifteen to thirty minutes.”\textsuperscript{105}

Nevertheless the transition from the KFC line to the Evisceration Department in which the draw-hands were located did not force Karen Walker to quit. Not yet. As 1975 drew to a close and she continued to circulate literature on a regular basis, both the company and the local leadership found it to be increasingly wearying. Why did the company not simply dismiss her? This is not entirely clear and the records are not particularly illuminating. Perhaps Local 525 stood in the way. “Later in conversations they claimed they protected me when management would have fired me which may be true because if I were management at that time looking back on it I would have got rid of me right away,” she recalled.\textsuperscript{106} Eventually the company took action though and it was derived from circumstances in the Evisceration Department.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 46.
\textsuperscript{106} Walker Interview, November 15, 2013,
In the fall of 1975 the company introduced a drawing machine that altered the process of removing the viscera. The company described the new procedure. “After the installation of the drawing machine, draw hands grasped the viscera after it was extracted from the body cavity by the machine and positioned it to the right side of the cavity to allow examination by the federal inspector. Draw hands also detached any membrane blocking the inspector’s view.” That is not to say that it made it easier though. In actual fact the machine moved very quickly, doubling the number of chickens handled every minute from eleven to twenty two per worker.  

This presented difficulties for the women operating this station. Carl and David, the foremen in the area, rotated draw-hands in and out from the new machine as some struggled to keep pace. Others frequently botched the operation and broke the gall bladder in their haste, contaminating too many birds. They would be returned to the hand-drawing and the quicker women would be attached to the new machine. Pete Leake spoke to the draw-hands in Durham and wrote to John Russell that “most complained that it was too fast and that they could not keep up with the machine.”

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In *Gold Kist Rank-and-File News*, the successor to the *WAM Newsletter*, Walker asserted that what ensued was an orchestrated set-up. When there were three workers operating the new machine she was able to keep up, but it was known that if she was one of only two then she was not quick enough to do so. On October 30, 1975, one of her two colleagues was called away to fill in for someone taking a bathroom break. The foremen did not assist the two remaining machine operators, nor did they switch Walker out for a quicker worker. “Instead of moving her back to hand drawing, it became clear that the bosses intended to single her out and make an example of her,” she wrote, once again employing the third person.110

When she fell behind, Foreman Carl insisted that she was deliberately slowing down the line and told her to go to the office. When he refused to find a union steward to accompany her she exited the office and went back to the line. Walker continued to fall behind and Carl produced a steward and led her to the office for a second time. As the foremen and management discussed the problem they realized they were in a bind. They did not want to set the precedent of granting further assistance on the machine and thus acknowledging that it was unmanageable for two, but they were concerned about the message they would send by returning her to hand-drawing.

“If we do that, I think more draw hands will start complaining about not being able to keep up,” one of them said. When she was given a third opportunity to try her hand at the new machine and once again fell behind they sent her home and suspended her from work for three days on the grounds that she had not given her

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best effort.\textsuperscript{111} After returning to the line she shortly thereafter received a further five-day suspension for the same cause and filed for arbitration between the union and the company. Though Leake fought the first case, Russell would not support going to arbitration on the second on the grounds that it could not be won.\textsuperscript{112}

When Walker subsequently lost in her arbitration hearing she filed a civil action against Local 525 in the Asheville District Court, asserting that the union had failed in its responsibility to represent her in these proceedings through putting together a less than rigorous defense against what was an entirely arbitrary suspension. In her testimony Walker asserted that she, “gave the Defendant Leake the names of those persons who had not been able to keep up with the machine,” only for him to fail to present them before the arbitrator. “These witnesses, had they been called, would have been able to lend support to my claim, that despite my best efforts, I was not able to keep up with the new drawing machine.” Given that Leake was aware of the availability of these coworkers but opted not to present them, Walker claimed that “his decision not to call these witnesses was made in bad faith.”\textsuperscript{113}

For their part Local 525 and Gold Kist stood together in cooperation when faced by what they believed to be a common threat. “Now, both of the defendants say and contend that the plaintiff Walker is a Communist and is interested only in

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid.]
\item “Karen Walker to Emanuel Coutlakis,” January 15, 1976. Gold Kist Legal Challenge, Folder 1, Local 525 Collection.
\end{itemize}
“stirring up trouble,” read the court’s charge to the jury on March 16, 1977, “that she is not interested in peaceful relations in the industrial field but desires to create strife wherever she goes, and that her conduct with this is just an effort on her part to stir up trouble between the Union and the employees and the Company.”

Walker received the assistance of a sympathetic and slightly credulous lawyer who represented her for free, though he might not have known that he would not be paid at the time, but nevertheless lost the trial in what ultimately proved to be a waste of time and effort. It had not served to further radicalize workers against John Russell or Gold Kist management. It was not as if they had even fired Walker; they had only suspended her for a total of eight days. This was not a great rallying point in the first place and by the time the trial came to a close over a year later it must have been difficult to see how this related to continuing struggles on the factory floor. Had they been successful in convincing a jury of North Carolinians to take their side against the labor union and the company, would it have sent out a strong message that resonated with workers? It is hard to say that it would have amounted to more than a pyrrhic victory.

The civil action, “was just a waste of time and money,” Walker concluded more than thirty years later. “It didn’t transport anybody anywhere. It didn’t bring

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up any good ideas.” What was more it forced Local 525 and Gold Kist to cooperate and stand together in court against a common foe. This seemed to have the effect of uniting them in their resolve to expunge communism from the Durham plant. Just two weeks after the end of the trial the company started to move against Walker’s continued distribution of radical newsletters. On March 31 she was issued an official warning from the personnel division. “You have engaged in efforts to inspire or incite other employees to commit an act of assault involving Mr. John Russell, President of Local Union #525, by your telling them that, quote, ‘we need to put our heels where they will do the most good- RIGHT ON HIS ASS – the next time he shows his face at Gold Kist,’ end quote.” This incredible warning continued. “Mr. Russell has a contractual right to visit or be in our facility as an authorized representative of the Union,” Walker was instructed. “You are not to engage in such acts as encouraging assault on visitors to our plant in the future. By doing so, you have exceeded your rights and privileges as an employee and you have not followed the rules of common decency and courtesy in your dealings with others.” Never in his long career as an industrial unionist had Russell been conferred with such respect and reverence from a poultry company. Then came the warning. “Should you again precipitate or attempt to precipitate any such action by yourself or with others against the person of Mr. Russell or any other person, you will be subject to further disciplinary action which may lead up to and include discharge.” The company was laying the groundwork for an eventual dismissal now that it felt

116 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
confident that the union would not stand in the way. This official warning was accompanied by a further two-week suspension from work.

By late 1977 Karen Walker had been at Gold Kist for nearly five years and was ready to move on, to return to college and take up a profession. Unlike many of her African-American co-workers at the plant she had the occupational mobility go to choose a different kind of life. Writing to Harry Alston at the Meat Cutters International Union in Chicago in August, John Russell exuded a sense of satisfaction that he had finally come out ahead in Durham as he recounted events from the previous year. The PLP had wanted “to sow some confusion and create some demoralization at times when unity was at a premium,” he said. “Immediately following their defeat in the Federal Court trial, Karen Walker came out with an attack in an attempt to reorganize her troops but really got nowhere and has not been heard from very much since the company disciplined her with a two-week suspension for her inflammatory and possibly slanderous attacks.” While Russell warned that she might “break loose again,” he closed by saying that, “I don’t see where they have made any substantial or lasting organization but while they are in a plant they can create a certain amount of havoc and chaos.”

Indeed Walker’s creative output appears to have slowed down and newsletters became more and more irregular. She spent some time recruiting women from within the plant to the Local, eliciting a concerned letter from one of Russell’s staff directed to Pete Leake.

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118 “John Russell to Harry Alston,” August 23, 1977, Box 20, Folder 22, Local 525 Collection.
“Important,” an assistant named Joyce wrote, underlining the word twice. “Please note Karen Walker is signing up people see work sheet!”

Yet as Russell observed, there were no clear signs that she had fundamentally changed the dynamic of the union. When Walker printed a newsletter in November after something of a hiatus to coincide with the Local 525 annual meeting with the headline “Turn The Unions Around,” the main content focused more on the inadequacies of the Carter administration than events at Gold Kist, warning that “we have to quit fooling ourselves about what liberal bosses and politicians are going to do for us.” The back page consisted of a rather weak defense of the legal action in an article entitled “The Law Suit- Did We Lose?” The author explained that, “we do not consider our law suit or the trial to be a defeat. What we learned in the process has been very valuable to us. One key lesson was that workers cannot make significant gains in the bosses’ courts and legal system,” before promising “our real gains will be won through DIRECT MASS ACTION and our only lasting victory lies in socialist revolution.”

With her campaign against the company and the union leadership seemingly waning Walker was finally dismissed on June 29, 1978. What was the final straw? It was not dramatic but concerned, as ever, the distribution of leaflets. Walker recalled that, “they said if you pass it out one more time you’ll be fired and of course

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119 “Joyce to Pete Leake,” April 12, 1977, Box 20, Folder 22, Local 525 Collection.
121 Ibid., p. 2.
I passed it out again but I kind of knew I was going to be fired.”123 She appealed her dismissal a week later through Chief Steward Laura Green, who took her position seriously enough that she was willing to look past any previous disagreements. She protested that Walker was fired, “for fully exercise her Constitution right, of Local union leader. She said no untrue words about the company or it working force. She can prove what she say is true.”124 The arbitrator denied the appeal though, agreeing with the company’s assertion that what may initially have been a minor offense escalated in the degree of its severity when repeated in the face of prior disciplining. Arbitrator Wayne G. Anderson took issue with Walker’s leaflets. “The grievant’s statements made about the Company ‘owning’ John Russell charges the Company through its representative with dishonesty. Employees of the Company reading these written comments do not have the benefit of the verbal explanation made at the hearing by the grievant. They may readily believe these statements meant the Company ‘bought off’ John Russell, particularly when in the labor management context.”125 Anderson concluded that, “the off-duty and off-premises publication and distribution of the two newsletters to employees does not extend to erasure from employees’ minds during working hours.” He continued. “The grievant’s off-duty conduct discussed herein intensifies points of friction in human relationships in any Company or organization, and has the potential to disrupt the

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123 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
125 Ibid. p. 19.
operation, and may certainly effect the efficiency of the operation.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 25.} This happened a year later in 1979 by which time Walker had no intention of returning.

**The 1978 Contract**

With plans to return to college she could have departed quietly in June 1978. That might have been an option, but for the fact that 1978 was a contract year at the plant. John Russell and Pete Leake met with company management and agreed to an 85 cent per hour pay increase to be implemented over the next three years which would have lifted the base rate from $3.45 to $4.30.\footnote{“Gold Kist Workers Reject Offer,” August 1, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.} The company offered increases in medical, maternity and surgical benefits and an upgrade of five job classifications that would have affected thirty-five employees.\footnote{“J.M. Perdue to John Russell,” July 26, 1978, Box 13, Folder 19, Local 525 Collection.} Russell described these as “excellent improvements in insurance,” adding that there were “numerous other agreements including pension improvements effective in January 1979.” Regardless of his recommendation the workers voted down the proposal though, standing in opposition to the company’s refusal to grant ten days of sick leave pay accumulation each year. The company refused this proposal, arguing that “sick leave days were like additional holidays since they would all be used each year,” and that it would increase and encourage an already bad absentee rate.”\footnote{“John Russell to Leon B. Schachter,” August 25, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.} They
simultaneously refused any increase in the number of vacation days from the nine that they were presently permitted to receive.

Laura Green reported that members of the employee negotiating committee were in favor of the proposal but that union members had, remarkably, voted 109 to 55 in favor of a strike. Russell blamed the inexperience of the night shift for this result. “They couldn’t have got this over if there hadn’t been a full mobilization for the meeting on the second shift and less than decent mobilization on the first shift,” he wrote in a private letter to the international. He rather regrettably elaborated on this point. “The second shift is a hotbed of young blacks recently hired by the Company. The first shift was older and greater seniority people, who did not turn out for the meeting because they thought acceptance was a foregone conclusion.”

It could be suggested this was the consequence of Walker’s recruitment efforts, yet somewhere between 285 and 290 of the plant’s 300 workers were members of Local 525. It is hard to argue that under these circumstances she was selectively targeting hotheads.

At 5am as the night shift came to a close on July 25, 1978, the strike began as pickets were established outside the Durham Gold Kist plant. As they did so Gold Kist division manager Byron Hawkins put out a call for replacement workers, asserting that “we made an offer to the striking employees that would make them the highest paid workers in the industry for the Southeast.” On the twenty-sixth the company attempted to continue operating with a skeleton crew. “Some workers

130 “Gold Kist Workers On Strike,” July 28, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
who passed by the picnic shelter after crossing picket lines to put in a day’s work were loudly razzed by strikers,” wrote Betty Mushak of the *Durham Morning Herald*.132 This limited staff was unable to process more than a truck of chickens though, far short of the 120,000 to 130,000 birds the plant was regularly able to turn around in a day. Even that one truck which had journeyed from Atlanta encountered problems as it attempted to enter the plant. The driver, 54-year-old George Huffman from Jones Poultry Company, told police that he was thrown to the ground and threatened by four men with pipes and sticks as he was backing up into the loading dock. The police subsequently charged one of the strikers, Ervin Johnson, a loading-dock worker, with battery and assault.133 Predictably this incident led to a court injunction prohibiting the strikers from picketing at more than two of the four main gates.134

In spite of personally addressed and hand-signed letters from Hawkins, the strike continued. “If you return to work immediately, your job is still available,” he wrote. Promise was followed by threat. “Since you are not at work and we have no labor agreement in effect, we found it necessary to cancel group insurance medical coverage, including major medical benefits,” before adding that “employees who have not returned to work by the end of this thirty-one (31) day (grace) period will

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133 “Gold Kist Worker Named In Assault; Strike Continues,” *Durham Evening Herald*, July 26, 1978.
no longer have life insurance coverage.” A week after the strike began union members voted to reject what Hawkins had described as “a fair offer” at a meeting at the Union Baptist Church. The pickets would continue into a second week.

Despite having been discharged by the company, Karen Walker would return to print with reinvigorated gusto on the progress of the strike. “We all know the key to winning is to shut down Gold Kist,” she wrote. “All night long last night, some of the best fighters, men and women, did just that. They kept a clean-up crew from coming in time after time. These strikers did not ‘cool it’ and were not ‘nice.’ They marched together in large numbers and did not back down even when the cops started to put on riot gear and threatened to arrest them!” Though Russell and Leake were obligated to support their picketing workers, Walker sought to undermine their authority. The union leadership, “did not want us to strike in the first place and did everything in their power to scare and control us. Now that we are on strike, they are working harder than ever to control our strike,” she wrote. They needed to learn from a recently failed action across town at the Liggett & Myers cigarette factory. “The strike at L&M was lost because union officials organized strikers to be ‘nice’ to avoid an injunction. As a result, busloads of scabs crossed the lines and the strike was broken.” It should be noted that the compromise made by the tobacco workers provided more than the contract Gold Kist was offering. The hourly cost-of-living adjustments of up to 15, 16, and 17 cents

\[\text{\begin{footnotesize}135 \text{ “Byron K. Hawkins to Freddie,” July 25, 1978, Box 13, Folder 19, Local 525 Collection.} \end{footnotesize}}
\[\text{\begin{footnotesize}136 \text{ “Gold Kist Workers Turn Down Proposal,” Durham Morning Herald, August 1, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.} \end{footnotesize}}
\[\text{\begin{footnotesize}137 \text{ On The (Picket) Line, July 1978, Box 25, Folder 7, Local 525 Collection.} \end{footnotesize}}

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over the years 1977 through 1979 were superior to the pay increases of 8, 15, and then 12 cent increases the existing and proposed Local 525 contract offered during the same period. The tobacco workers had pushed for an uncapped cost-of-living clause and struck for twenty-eight days before returning to work.\textsuperscript{138}

At Gold Kist the key was thus to prevent scabs from entering the plant. On the second Tuesday of picketing the company sought to re-open the plant by bussing in strikebreakers, leading to an outbreak of violence. Karen Walker and three other workers were arrested for allegedly throwing rocks and bottles at the bus as it entered the factory grounds. "Front and side windows were broken out of the 1965 vehicle, according to investigators," wrote Al Wheless from the \textit{Herald}. "Damage was estimated at more than $200," with no injuries, he added, before publishing the home addresses of all of those arrested. The bus driver told police that he had twice collided with a car that had tried to block him and someone had thrown a bottle out of the window.\textsuperscript{139} Walker explained this collision and the actions of one of their co-workers differently in her August newsletter. "Guy Matthews took his little yellow bus and rammed a car (carrying 4 strikers) from behind, totaled the car, and injured 3 people. He drove away from the scene of this attack without so much as a slap on the wrist." As all of this took place Wilson Still, a professional labor consultant

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\textsuperscript{139} Wheless, Al, "Strikers Charged In Rock Throwing," \textit{Durham Morning Herald}, August 9, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
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brought in by the company from Atlanta to “clean up the union,” meaning resolve the communist problem, stood to the side taking photographs of everything that took place and assisting the police.\textsuperscript{140} Three more picketers were subsequently taken into custody.\textsuperscript{141}

Annie May McLeod had been at the company for fourteen years. She was friends with Laura Green and manager of the late-night cafeteria. Crossing the picket line with non-striking workers, she argued that “anybody with bills to pay should have been working instead of striking.” She testified concerning the attack on the bus. “To my right, I saw Percy Hester throw a brick and the window fell-glass was falling. As we turned the corner, Karen Walker threw a bottle in the right front windshield,” she said. “I myself said that I was going to swear out a warrant.”\textsuperscript{142} A delivery driver who arrived after the bus of scabs stated that when he drove up there were “eight or ten people who were standing with rocks or bricks,” and he identified another worker, Dreama Glover who threw a “half brick or rock at the truck.”\textsuperscript{143} A “new employee” called Larry Joyner claimed that he “had

\textsuperscript{140} On The (Picket) Line, August 1978, Box 25, Folder 7, Local 525 Collection. “He was my arch-enemy,” Walker said, referring to Still, but ultimately concluded that he was not a figure who was to be taken seriously. Walker Interview, November 15, 2013. Wilson Still’s pictures would later be used by the company as grounds to refuse to rehire several workers who had been involved in violence during the strike. “John Russell to Leon B. Schachter,” August 25, 1978, p. 4. Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.


\textsuperscript{143} Gold Kist Inc. and Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, AFL-ICO, CLC, Local 525. “Respondent’s Answering Brief to General Counsel’s Exceptions.” United States of America Before the National Labor Relations Board, Case No. 11-CA-7901. p. 2.
had his automobile hit by rocks when coming through the main entrance on Latta Street."  

Walker states that she was not directly to blame for damaging the bus, that if rocks or bottles were thrown, it was by someone else. “I came with eggs,” she said. “We didn’t even hard-boil them. That’s my argument. They weren’t even hard missiles. They broke.” She asserted that “I’m not responsible for what other people threw but I did incite it.”  

John Russell was wary of union members activities, making it clear that “we don’t advocate any violence,” describing the strike as otherwise “very peaceful.” The company was taking matters seriously though. A couple of weeks on they posted a bold advertisement in the _Durham Morning Herald_ as they prepared their legal defense. “Gold Kist Poultry, offers a REWARD UP TO $2,500, For information leading to the arrest and conviction of persons committing unlawful acts (such as firing shot gun blasts into employees homes, automobiles, or throwing bricks into employees homes) against Gold Kist employees & their property.” It is unclear whether Annie May McLeod was the beneficiary of such a payment.

On August 11 a Superior Court judge issued an injunction against the union leadership, Walker, and others who had been arrested including Percy Hester and

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144 Ibid., p. 4.
145 Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
147 “Gold Kist Poultry, Durham, North Carolina, offers a Reward,” _Durham Morning Herald_, August 26, 1978, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.
Ervin Johnson preventing them from appearing on the picket lines. Consequently a group of PLP members, and possibly some Gold Kist employees though this cannot be confirmed, decided to picket a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet to the southeast of Durham. Gold Kist quickly moved for a charge of secondary boycotting against the union before Russell hastily intervened. “This was dropped at the instigation of their Attorney, Bob Burke, in Connecticut, after I talked to him by telephone and convinced him who the picketers were,” he wrote. “The fact that it was Walker and her gang who caused the union to face a possibly dangerous suit was used with great success to further undermine and destroy the effects of the PLP’s,” Russell added. “Beware of activity not sanctioned by the union,” read a strike bulletin subsequently dispatched to workers, which went on to explain that $35 per week benefits had been issued to eligible union members who were participating in the strike.

As management and union leadership re-entered negotiations in the third week Local 525 leadership would eject any non-members from union meetings and

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148 North Carolina, Durham County, Central Carolina Farmers Exchange, Inc., A Growers Cooperative; and Gold Kist, Inc., A Georgia Corporation, Plaintiffs, vs. Local 525, Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, AFL-CIO, and Unincorporated Association; Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, AFL-CIO, an Unincorporated Association; John R. Russell, Peter Leake, Laura V. Green, Karen Walker, Edward Ervin Johnson, Percy Hester, Lawrence Fulton, Floyd Lawson, Abraham Shaw, Charlotte Patterson, Doris Ann Thorp, Willie Bailey, Myra McDowell, Individually and as Representatives of the Members of Local 525, Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, and all other person unknown to plaintiffs to whom notice of the action may come, Defendants, “Preliminary Injunction,” General Court of Justice Superior Court Division, File # 78 CVS 1840, Box 13, Folder 20, Local 525 Collection.


150 “Gold Kist Strike Bulletin,” Box 13, Folder 19, Local 525 Collection.
try to reduce the levels of violence and arrests, the final number of which would be twenty. "At the time we drove the outsiders off the picket line we made the pickets give up their clubs, bats, pipes, chains and other weapons they had carried at the instigation of their allies," Russell recalled. Though some incidents of violence and criminal contempt did continue away from the plant negotiations continued into the third week of August. With Gold Kist unable to amount more than about fifty scabs, after two full days of negotiations the company agreed to the conditions of the original proposal from late June while reinstating all but a few of the striking workers. Management had avowed that, “they had withdrawn all previous offers and were in no mood to reinstate them.” Having convinced them to renege on this commitment and return to their original offer Russell was content to settle the strike. On Saturday August 19 he presented the offer to members at a meeting and they voted in favor of taking the deal, 134 in favor, 11 against with 5 void and 3 blank ballots. The following Thursday, August 24, the workers of Local 525 returned to work having gained no improvements upon the contract for their month long efforts.151

This was not quite the end of the episode for Karen Walker. In late September she was sentenced to eighteen to twenty days in the county jail for her actions during the strike, based largely on the testimony of Annie May McLeod who had been riding on the bus that was attacked.152 The Durham County Jail was one of

the state’s new constructions, the product of the General Assembly bill to refurbish North Carolina’s correctional institutions.\textsuperscript{153} This was not the Civil War-era Wilkes County Jail experienced by John Jervis a decade earlier, but it left a lot to be desired. “They were washing their underwear in the toilet bowls,” Walker said. “And there was a stall where you could shower but there was no curtain, and there were trustees walking around that were male…and guards that were men.”\textsuperscript{154} This was potentially a very serious issue. In 1974 Joan Little, a twenty year old African-American woman with a record for theft, breaking and entering, and possessing a sawn-off shotgun, was serving a seven to ten year sentence as the only woman in the otherwise all-male Beaufort County Jail in the east of North Carolina, close to Greenville. On August 26\textsuperscript{th} of that year sixty-two year old prison officer Clarence Alligood, a white man, had entered Little’s cell naked from the waist down with an icepick that he was known to carry around. The following morning a police officer arrived at the prison and found Alligood, still undressed in Little’s cell with eleven icepick wounds to the chest and head. Following a widely observed trial that involved considerable histrionics from both legal teams, a jury consisting of six African-Americans and seven women acquitted Little after just seventy-eight minutes of deliberations in a landmark case supporting the use of deadly force as a defense against sexual assault.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{153} “Clifton M. Craig to J.E. Jervis,” October 2, 1969, Box 701, Folder 98, Local 525 Collection.
\textsuperscript{154} Walker Interview, November 15, 2013.
These were the events that had shaped the image of North Carolina’s notorious correctional facilities in the 1970s. Any female prisoner was acutely aware of what had happened to Joan Little just as any radical organizer was aware of what had happened in Philadelphia, Mississippi. No sexual assaults occurred during Walker’s Friday evening through to Monday morning visits, but Durham County Jail was replete with many of the same indignities and disregard for women’s privacy on the part of male screws that had preceded Clarence Alligood’s violation of Joan Little. In response to the poor condition of the recent construction Walker co-wrote a letter of protest to the *Durham Sun* in collaboration with five fellow-inmates. They highlighted contaminated drinking water, lack of laundry facilities and shower curtains and the close proximity, about eight feet, between the toilet and the dining table. This took two attempts after a matron at the jail removed the stamps from the first letter. When questioned by the press a representative of the facility admitted that inmates had complained that the water tasted foul, but claimed that it remained sanitary.156 The story clearly caught the eye of J.M. Perdue, the Labor Relations Manager at Gold Kist, Durham. He photocopied the page out of the newspaper and decided to send a copy to Russell in case he had missed it, attaching a note. “John,” it began, “some people bitch about everything. The jail she is complaining about is new and only opened last month.”


This point of scorn shared between company manager and union leader, he informally signed the note, "Jim."  

In January 1967 John Russell wrote to members of Local 525 to notify them of a temporary increase in their deducted dues that had been mandated by the International Union. The added contribution was requested to bolster the national strike fund. He pointed out that 1968 would be a big year of contract negotiations for Local 525 in North Carolina, with agreements set to expire at twelve poultry, packing, canning, and retail locations affecting more than 1,200 members. The various contracts ranged from Swift Oil Refinery and Armour Creameries in Raleigh to Eastern Colonial Stores, Jesse Jones Sausage, and Gold Kist of Durham. Strike funds were necessary “to insure victory in the life and death fight which our Union has been engaged in,” he explained. “A militant membership and a good strike fund is absolutely necessary if we are to continue our past gains,” Russell concluded. “Let’s be sure we lack neither!”

Ten years later we find him somewhat more reticent though. Could Russell and his union have done more to resist the trends they faced in the poultry industry? The fate of the strike suggests that they may have been overmatched. The strike suffered from a court order that restricted Local 525’s ability to picket two gates through which strikebreakers could pass. That said, they were up against a large company that was continuing to expand every year. In 1978 Gold Kist

\[157 \text{“Jim Perdue to John Russell,” November 11, 1978, Box 25, Folder 7, Local 525 Collection.}\]

\[158 \text{“John Russell to the Membership of Local 525,” January 5, 1967, Box 696, Folder 33, Local 525 Collection.}\]
purchased two poultry plants from St. Louis-based animal feed dealer Ralston Purina in Bentonville, Arkansas and Guntersville, Alabama. With this acquisition Gold Kist’s capacity grew from 4.5 million head of chicken per week in 1977 to 5.8 million by 1979, claiming the mantle of America’s largest integrated poultry processor from Holly Farms. The company’s capacity to shift production from Durham to its nine other plants in the South meant that it would not be possible for the union to bring the company to its knees. That simply was not realistic.

Does this mean that the workers’ efforts were ultimately futile and that Russell was right to aver from industrial action in favor of a modest compromise? In the short-term he was probably correct in determining the most certain course of action for Local 525. Yet double-digit inflation was quickly erasing the small incremental pay increases that the company was promising. These trends of industry consolidation and deskilling that made victory in Durham unachievable would be the same trends that made the Meat Cutters’ position as a collective bargaining partner increasingly very fragile as the 1970s transitioned into the 1980s. Like many labor leaders who joined the movement in the New Deal era, John Russell believed the union had a lot to lose. The New Deal coalition was already unraveling though. While New Left-influenced radicals like Karen Walker might have been right to insist that while industrial unions like the Meat Cutters were still

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possessing of some power they should at least attempt to address unfavorable historical shifts that were taking place.

To be sure the women and men of Local 525 showed they were willing to fight for a livelihood better than the one Gold Kist was offering. They were willing to take up weapons against the company. Having signed off on the 1974 contract in the most perfunctory manner, in 1978 they rejected the withered fruits of John Russell’s endeavors. Russell blamed the PLP for this rejection. “The strike mood has been building for quite a period of time,” he wrote, “but the strike could have still been avoided if the there hadn’t been an unprecedented gang up of Progressive Labor Party members, Maoists, Revolutionary Socialist Youth, Commission Against Racism (CAR), TUEL’s, TILIS, Communist Workers (M-L), League for Peace and Democracy, Revolutionary Workers Party and several other groups aligned with the ultra left.” These left-wing agitations could be seen, he claimed, across Durham. “These groups have infiltrated, to one degree or other, the unions in tobacco, textile, hospital, machinery (IAM), paper, American Federation of State County and Municipal Workers and probably a few more I don’t know about.”161 Yet as much as Russell sought to scapegoat outside agitators the strike would not have taken place without the consent and agreement of the rank and file of the union.162 However it

162 Historians like Andrew Hunt and John McMillian have built upon earlier critiques by the likes of David Farber in their rejection of the simplistic traditional distinctions drawn between a so-called “Old Left” and “New Left.” “In the end, the old/new paradigm insults everybody,” Hunt writes. “Pre-1960s radicals are reduced to one-dimensional, card carrying ideologues who left no real legacy, while 1960s militants become hedonistic, irrational, and ultimately anti-intellectual,” he argues. Similarly in his essay “You Didn’t Have to Be There,” McMillian challenges
was clear that by 1978 the difficulties involved in mounting a rank and file challenge
to the rapidly transforming industry were even greater than a generation before. In
1980 Austrian-born social philosopher André Gorz argued that the nature of work
was changing in such a way that the industrial working class could no longer be
the centering of 1960s radicalism in perceived intellectual centers such as New
York, Massachusetts, and the San Francisco Bay area and the “homogeneous cross-
section of activists” that have been depicted as a result of this. Typical distinctions
between Old Left and New Left seem equally inadequate in explaining PLP actions in
Durham in the 1970s. The ideological basis of Walker’s critique of capitalism within
the poultry industry seemed to have more in common with CP-CIO organizers of the
1930s than with the anti-ideological agenda of Tom Hayden and SDS activists of the
early 1960s. If John L. Lewis had tolerated the energy of communist activists, the
post-McCarthy AFL-CIO of George Meany, was a very different entity. Though the
founders of the PLP had splintered away from the SDS their straight-laced narcotic-
free brand of activism with a clear focus upon class warfare represented more of a
continuity of a radical tradition dating back to the IWW than some sort of mutated
form of campus politics. Unlike the CP of the New Deal-era, the PLP stood alone,
neither subject to Soviet influence nor the beneficiary of outside financial support.
Yet faced with an uncertain future the leadership of the AMC in Durham rejected the
radicalism espoused by the PLP and looked to strong labor-management
relationships as a basis of continued influence. The strength of these bonds were
good as long as the union was negotiating with the same company year after year.
While Gold Kist appeared to be a stable bet for the future and would remain
independent into the 2000s, many smaller companies would soon be absorbed
within an impending wave of mergers and acquisitions that would become a
defining feature of 1980s corporate philosophy. Understandably the Meat Cutters
did not foresee the wave of immigration from Central America and Mexico that
would drastically alter the makeup of the workforce. See: David R. Farber, Chicago
‘68 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); David R. Farber, “The 60s: Myth
Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generation Gap,” Lingua Franca, May-
June 1996, pp. 30-37. Farber’s criticisms were in part directed at a sense of
generational ownership of within the academy of interpretations of the 1960s
whereby there existed “too many generational gatekeepers.” Farber’s account has
commonly been seen as in opposition to “classic” texts, including: Todd Gitlin, The
Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); James Miller,
“Democracy Is in the Streets”: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (New York:
Simon and Schuster, 1987); Maurice Isserman, “If I Had a Hammer...”: The Death of
the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Gitlin’s
dated account, in which he features at the center of events as the president of SDS, is
limited by its underlying assumption that 1960s radicalism essentially began and
ended with the rise and fall of the SDS.
looked to as an agent with the potential to drive through radical social change. Western societies were taking on new forms, Gorz wrote, consisting of “a growing mass of the permanently unemployed on one hand, an aristocracy of tenured workers on the other, and between them, a proletariat of temporary workers carrying out the least skilled and most unpleasant types of work.”

This was resulting in a fragmentation of society wherein different social movements had become the standard bearers of liberation, yet a cohesive overall vision of the future was absent. These shifts presented ongoing challenges to Local 525 and the PLP alike in the final quarter of the twentieth century.

The activities of Karen Walker and her colleagues demonstrated that the American left could still exert significant influence within the labor movement of the 1970s, in certain settings. On occasion, as it did in Durham, the left was capable of pointing out the glaring failures of mainstream unionism in ways that unnerved union leadership. But ultimately the PLP lacked the widespread support in multiple plants that would have been necessary to effectively change the realities that poultry workers faced. As a result, unionism in the industry continued its rapid decline as the 1970s gave way to the increasingly anti-union 1980s.

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164 Ibid., p. 75.
Chapter 5

The Conversion of Dave Thomas: How New Forms of Dining Laid the Foundation for an Explosive Growth in Chicken Consumption

Those of us who reaped the benefits of capitalism in the twentieth century owe a debt to the twenty-first century. Our accomplishments have changed America, and our actions continue to impact future generations.¹

- Glen Bell, Founder of Taco Bell

Between 1960 and 1985 a new form of dining took root in the United States, bringing with it demands and competitive pressures that accelerated the transformation of the chicken processing industry in ways no one foresaw at the outset. One of the driving forces of this transformation was the fast food pioneer R. David Thomas.

In 1969 Thomas opened his first Wendy’s in Columbus, Ohio. A latecomer to the chain restaurant industry, Thomas’s business would achieve staggering levels of success in the following decade. Though at first glance Wendy’s may look a lot like of an imitation of Ray Kroc’s McDonald’s, Thomas’s full frontal assault upon the older chain would set in motion a series of changes that would transform the American restaurant industry. With clever branding that would stand in stark contrast to the discord and cynicism that had entered American society in the late

1960s, Wendy’s would alter diners’ expectations and pave the way for companies like Taco Bell and Pizza Hut to push the limits of low cost, high volume meals even further.

By the 1980s, what had begun as a battle between two competing burger chains had become a national contest for the heart of the American consumer, encompassing far more than just the market for beef. When McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and Burger King turned their attention to chicken products in 1979 they would do so as a colossal industry with thousands of outlets and interests in every corner of the United States. They would do so as icons of the American dining experience, their neon totem polls rising high above countless landscapes. With well-established business models, ready access to capital, and very clear demands and expectations, their custom and mammoth levels of output would in time come to both enrich and redefine the shape of the poultry industry. An understanding of their ascent and terms of operation is a vital necessity when trying to make sense of the food economy in the decades that followed.

**Opening Shop**

Thomas was not new to the restaurant industry. An army chef during the Korean War, Thomas was discharged in 1953 and returned to his prior job cooking food in a Hobby House Restaurant in Fort Wayne. He grilled ribs, fried chicken, and served them with potato salads, pickles, onions, and rye bread. Sometimes he would cook a ten-ounce T-bone steak for a more indulgent customer. When he had
prepared a plate he would ring a bell loudly until a waitress would come to pick it up. Promptly. One of these waitresses would become his wife.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 5.1** The original Wendy’s at 257 East Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio. Picture taken in the early 1970s.

It was in this environment that the business-minded chef observed the successes and shortcomings of a busy diner. From his significant position alongside the grill he would come to understand some of the challenges associated with the quickly evolving restaurant industry. Some customers would ask for bread rolls instead of rye bread. Seeking to please diners the owner would make them available. If bread rolls were popular they may as well be a permanent feature on

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the menu. With every additional item the inventory would become more complicated. The lessons Dave Thomas derived from his time at the Hobby House, and from the Hobby House Ranch and Barbeque in Evansville, would come to shape the billion-dollar burger chain that he would found.

The prevailing wisdom to that point had been that customers wanted choices. It had worked wonders for Henry J. Heinz. His company slogan of ’57 Varieties’ had been inspired by an advertisement for ‘twenty-one varieties of shoe’ that he had observed on an elevated train in New York. Heinz had exceeded fifty-seven varieties in the 1930s and his company had become a nationwide purveyor of soups, condiments, and tinned vegetables. In the post-war period of rising affluence some felt that the way to win the consumer’s dollar and to keep his attention was to offer a diverse array of options. Thomas’s manager in Evansville certainly thought so and the menu grew longer. But ever_greater menus made kitchen operations more complicated. The variety “killed our focus,” Thomas would write.

An extensive menu was expected in full-service restaurants. It was customary. Americans’ eating habits in the 1950s were shifting though. This was very apparent. One merely had to look at the changing landscape, defined as it was by highways. Automobiles had proliferated and were affordable and their users expected to move quickly from one destination to the next. They increasingly came to expect speedier service at restaurants too. Quick service was not just helpful; it was at a premium, a defining feature of the rapidly expanding post-war restaurant

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4 Thomas, Dave’s Way, p. 72.
6 Thomas, Dave’s Way, p. 72.
industry. At the Hobby House Ranch and Barbeque Dave Thomas understood that a more basic menu led to a quicker and more efficient operation. Fewer items quickly dished up appeared to be more profitable than a panoply of different meals delivered in an untimely fashion. Make only a few items, but make them well. Making his way in California Glen Bell, the founder of Taco Bell, would agree. “Don’t sell everything your customers ask for,” he said. “Decide what you’re going to sell, then make it the best it can be.”

This was not the only area in which the operation could be made more efficient. Thomas believed in the forsaking of china plates and silverware completely. A paper plate would be sufficient and it could be quickly discarded afterwards. If consumers could be made to accept disposable plates, plastic knives and forks, and paper napkins then a perennial predicament faced by restaurant owners would be resolved.

**Building a Franchise**

By the time Dave Thomas got around to opening his first Wendy's in Columbus, McDonald’s was already the biggest fast food chain in the United States. Not only was there a restaurant in every state, but by 1970 there were 1,500 outlets across the nation. The number of restaurants would continue to grow at a staggering pace throughout the early 1970s, at some points reaching a rate of more than one new opening every day. By 1972 there were 2,000 restaurants, by 1974 there were 3,000, and by 1976 there were 4,000. As Ray Kroc continued to branch

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7 Baldwin, *Taco Titan*, p. 60.
out into international markets he had quadrupled the number of restaurants to 6,000 by 1980.\(^8\)

Thomas was entering into a market exhibiting explosive growth with a clear market leader. There were a number of expanding chain restaurants that were significantly ahead of him including Burger King, Hardee’s, Dairy Queen, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell, the latter three of which would later become part of the billion-dollar corporation Yum! Brands. McDonald’s, KFC, Dairy Queen, and Burger King made up almost forty-percent of the restaurant market alone.\(^9\) Pizza Hut reached its one-thousandth restaurant in 1972.\(^10\) Like Domino’s Pizza, which was similarly starting from a base position of no name recognition or market presence in the early-1970s, Wendy’s would seek to capitalize upon growing demand and at the same time present a direct challenge to the market leader in its chosen category of fast food.

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Like other fast food chains Thomas would develop an easily identifiable aesthetic. Taco Bell’s founder Glen Bell, a California businessman, had drawn upon southwestern styles in creating the stucco Spanish Colonial Revival architecture synonymous with his restaurants, as depicted in figure 2. The company’s architect Robert McKay explained: “The building had to be a substantial architectural monument to put in the customer’s mind that a good, substantial building equaled a good, substantial product. The building projected an image and was part of the educational process.” At around the same time Pizza Hut would introduce its similarly affected red roof, a feature of both the company logo and many restaurants. Without even seeing the neon sign, and this was normally quite hard, drivers should quickly be able to recognize a red roof when they passed by and

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know what to expect wherever the location. An early Pizza Hut is displayed in figure 3. A uniform product and a uniform service with no surprises was central to the appeal. At Wendy’s too, Dave Thomas sought the same kind of recognizable image and predictability that was the hallmark of the chain restaurant.

![Pizza Hut Uniform Product](image)

Figure 5.3 Promotional postcard distributed by Pizza Hut. Demonstrates early "red roof" design and stereotypical Italian chef.\(^\text{13}\)

“We put a lot of effort into designing a building that reflected the “old-fashioned” theme while retaining modern functionality,” Thomas said.\(^\text{14}\) It would include “tables with four not particularly comfortable chairs around them,” so that visitors would not stay for too long. The design was not exactly discreet with “Old-Fashioned Hamburgers” displayed on every sign, the adjectives embossed in what is


known as a shelldrake font, evoking styles associated with the old American West, at least in the popular imagination. Launching his restaurant in 1969, during the turmoil of the Vietnam War and at the tail-end of the Civil Rights movement, Thomas branded his restaurant with the image of his red-haired and freckled eight-year old daughter Melinda Lou, wearing a dress that can hardly have been very fashionable with swinging pigtails on either side of her head. Wendy’s in Columbus presented an image of simplicity and innocence as it opened in 1969, six months after the bloody Battle of Hamburger Hill in South Vietnam. Thomas’s origins were as modest as those of Andrew Carnegie but unlike the ‘titans of industry’, he guarded his image from the appearance of aloof top-hatted superiority. Like Samuel Walton and Frank Perdue, Thomas cultivated a public persona of down-to-earth regularity, a billionaire of the most benign variety. Yet in the branding of his chain with an icon conferring the same benevolence as the clown Ronald McDonald, Thomas demonstrated a shrewdness that would be easy to discount. This strong branding that quickly became nationally recognizable allowed the company to attract investors and potential franchisees.

In order to expand Wendy’s, Dave Thomas would employ the same model employed by the other leading fast food chains. “Franchising provides a means for the branded company to expand, drawing in large part on the capital provided by individual franchisees,” scholar David Weil points out.¹⁵ This was not an invention of the restaurant industry. Chain stores had become a fixture in American life

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during the 1920s and 1930s. Big Boy and Dairy Queen had been early pioneers of fast food franchising, experimenting with different parameters and possibilities as they tried to master the potentially contentious relationship between franchisor and franchisee. Disputes between franchisors and franchisees have historically centered around a number of common themes that are derived from the difference in the objectives of a large corporation versus those of a small business owner.

“The franchisor is interested in expanding markets; franchisees are interested in preserving existing markets,” observed a Dunkin’ Donuts franchisee in 1981. Where restaurant operators may have wanted to innovate in order to improve the product or offer variations to standardized menus, corporate headquarters would demand control of promotions and insist that they should be rolled out on a national basis and the product should be identical in every location. In some instances franchisees have charged corporate management with being too demanding of their investment in upgrading or remodeling of facilities. Elsewhere franchisees have complained of neglectful franchisors that have failed to keep up their end of the bargain. Underlying all such negotiations is the ability of the corporation to decertify franchisees, prohibiting them from operating the restaurant as part of that chain. This imbalanced relationship led many fast food franchisees to ally and form regional and even national organizations, like the California Association of Mexican Theme Restaurant Franchisees, founded among Taco Bell operators in the 1970s. Some organizations, such as the National Black

17 Ibid., p. 144.
McDonald's Operators Association- formed in the Upper Midwest in 1972- gathered on the basis of both racial and middle-class solidarity.

One of the biggest decisions for fast food chains in the early stages of development was in determining a policy towards the franchising of their brand. Colonel Sanders' entry into the food sector was not as a chain operator. He would simply sell the recipe for his 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' to existing restaurants and diners who would then prepare them in accordance with his instructions and pass him on a nickel for every bird sold.

The quickest way to make easy money was to sell exclusive territorial licenses to broad areas such as states or cities. A territorial license could require a franchisee to construct a particular number of stores within a given area. If the license holder failed to build enough units there was not the easy recourse of selling more franchises nearby. With a weak operator a contract could ultimately be terminated but by that point the franchise's reputation, its most valuable asset, could already have suffered.

Another model was to develop franchises as a means of creating a market for equipment and parts. Franchisees would be required to buy specific models in order to prepare the prescribed food. Where the corporate focus was upon selling cookers and milk-shake pumps, business executives could at times lose track of product uniformity and experience control problems, leading to wide variations in the standard of products from restaurant to restaurant. This was an early experience of Dairy Queen and its offshoot Tastee Freeze in the late 1940s and early

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1950s. Later franchises, such as Domino's Pizza, would target their efforts towards being the primary purveyor of food supplies to restaurants in its chain while closely monitoring the dough-making process. Domino's President of Distribution, Donald J. Vlcek, Jr., would take particular pride in maintaining pizza supplies to his outlets, which due to their small premises only had limited storage capacity, through all adverse conditions. He would establish strong relationships of trust with operators by providing the cheese and tomatoes required to keep restaurant doors open, even if the company had to charter a private plane or a snowmobile in order to make the delivery.

Ray Kroc would reject this approach though, encouraging operators to think of themselves more as business partners than as customer. “There is a basic conflict in trying to treat a man as a partner on the one hand while selling him something at a profit on the other,” Kroc wrote. “Once you get into the supply business, you become more concerned about what you are making on sales to your franchisee than with how his sales are doing. The temptation could become very strong to dilute the quality of what you are selling him in order to increase your profit.”

While franchisees would be able to buy supplies that the company had negotiated at bulk rates, food would not be bought from the McDonald’s corporation itself. Kroc would become quickly wary of selling regional licenses as well.

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19 Ibid., p. 59.
Two distinguishing features made McDonald’s stand out as a “blue chip franchise” when compared to previously franchised chains.\textsuperscript{22} Firstly, leases were sold almost exclusively for the operation of one restaurant at one address. This did not mean a franchisee could not purchase more than one lease, but it did limit the capacity of independent businessmen to control the market in a particular city or town. By failing to relinquish exclusive regional rights the corporation also retained the ability to open new restaurants close by to existing sites if they felt the level of demand warranted it. Sometimes a new opportunity would arise like the opening of a new shopping mall. This would be a point of greater contention later in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century when franchisees would allege that they had been compromised by their own franchisor through selling leases mere blocks apart, though in this regard McDonald’s was not judged to be the worst offender.\textsuperscript{23}

The second difference was Kroc’s attention to detail and the level of control he maintained over every aspect of the fast food operation from staff uniforms to décor, from the division of labor to the amount, and variety, of ketchup that should be applied to each burger. McDonald’s franchisees averaged six percent profit on revenues according to one study, but the company also maintained some of the most


stringent standards to be taken on in the first place. A 1990 study estimated only a two-to-three percent acceptance rate on around five thousand annual applications. Close legal and economic control over franchises meant that the fast food industry quickly reached a high level of standardization, a long way from the basic approach Colonel Sanders had originally used with his fried chicken recipe.

So what was Dave Thomas’ approach to franchising? How did he achieve such rapid growth in the 1970s? His view on the business relations between franchisor and franchisee were very similar to Kroc’s in significant ways. He was opposed to selling supplies, equipment or real estate to franchisees. While Wendy’s franchisees were given access to the company’s bakery operation, they were given discretion over whom they should purchase from if they remained within the product specifications. Wendy’s would provide operators with assistance in selecting sites, the building design, training for the franchisee, and continued promotional materials as well as national advertising campaigns. Like Kroc, Thomas sought to establish a ‘business partners’ relationship rather than a debtor-lender relationship. When the company’s primary income was from the sale of supplies, “the franchisees end up owing a lot of money to the franchisor,” Thomas argued. He continued to observe “the resentment starts when the franchisor spends

lots of money on new products and equipment, and the little franchisee is sitting there trying to make the payments on everything.”

As a product of the 1970s and part of a market in which the franchise model had been more tried and tested than earlier restaurant chains, Thomas and many others similarly emulated Kroc in maintaining a close control over franchisee standards. This was for the benefit of all franchisees, Thomas would assert, in order to “protect the quality and reputation that goes behind the franchise brand.” His customers wanted “to get the same great Wendy’s quality at whatever Wendy’s you visit.” Wayward owners and inconsistent experiences could spoil the reputation of the chain for everyone.

Three years after opening the first restaurant in Columbus, Thomas began to fulfill his plan of expanding Wendy’s into a national chain through a balance of company-owned and franchise-driven growth. Unlike McDonald’s, Wendy’s was willing to sell highly demanding territorial licenses that required the construction of a sizable number of restaurants within a given time. To make this possible, and to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with expansive leases faced by earlier chains, the company was very selective when it came to sorting through the hundreds of applicants looking to open up a restaurant. The vice-president of franchise sales, Graydon Webb stated, rather predictably, that the company was drawn to applicants with “intelligence and business sense,” which translated into “an interest in making profits.” They were less eager to chance it with businessmen with unproven track records and limited liquid assets. “Doctors and lawyers who want to invest money

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27 Thomas, *Dave’s Way*, p. 110.
28 Ibid., p. 104.
do not have the attitude and desire to do well,” Webb said. They were looking for owners who would take a hands-on approach “who can build sales.” He added that, though it was not required, “many of our franchisees were self-made millionaires before they joined us.”29 The consequence of their strategy was to create many franchisees that owned multiple stores with Wendy’s ten largest owners operating over four-hundred stores in 1979.30

Attracting this class of franchisee helped facilitate the staggering growth of Wendy’s from one restaurant at the end of 1969 to around one thousand eight hundred a decade later as 1979 came to a close.31 The cost of starting a Wendy’s in the early 1970s was around $200,000 for the land, the restaurant, and its contents. By the mid-1980s the cost had risen and it could reach as much as $1 million.32 Nevertheless the building of fast food restaurants was consistently and directly supported and promoted by the federal government through the Small Business Administration (SBA). Founded in 1953 during the Eisenhower administration by the Small Business Act, the SBA had a record of providing loan guarantees to many former members of the military who were attempting to open franchised operations. A further rationale for the SBA’s existence was that it would create

31 Ibid.
32 Thomas, Dave’s Way, p. 107.
competition within capital markets and thus serve as check upon monopoly power.\textsuperscript{33}

As an agency the SBA could be the subject of political debate in determining what sort of businesses to support as the terms of eligibility could strongly influence where the pool of applicants would come from. “The small firm contribution to innovation is widespread in such areas as instrumentation, consumer goods, and medical devices,” the SBA boasted, but their issuance of loans did not really reflect this as a priority. Franchises had become eligible for both direct and guaranteed loans in the mid-sixties and since then had become consistent recipients of assistance. When relaxations were proposed for the SBA’s size standards in 1981 so that smaller businesses would be able to apply, the International Franchise Association (IFA) stepped forth to defend the status quo, asserting that it was “vitally interested in preserving growth opportunities for present and future franchisees.” For fast food restaurants SBA loan guarantees were “essential to survival.” What was more the IFA saw the potential crowding of the pool by smaller companies as a threat to the rise of multiple unit operations, “which (had) allowed the franchising industry to participate in growth patterns designed to keep pace with customer demands.”\textsuperscript{34}

The independent status of franchising operations had allowed them to become major beneficiaries of SBA assistance, while presenting themselves as safe


\textsuperscript{34} “International Franchise Association’s Interest in Size Standards,” in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Small Business, \textit{Small Business Administration’s Size Standards}, 97\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., 1981, Committee Print, pp. 248-249.
investments with a very clear business model and a track record of great success. It is somewhat difficult to nail down the precise number of loans issued to fast food franchisees. Elizabeth Holmes Rhyne demonstrated that retail operations, a category which included restaurants, were disproportionately the beneficiaries of SBA loans from the agency’s founding through to the mid-1980s. Retailers made up thirty-percent of small businesses as of the time Rhyne was writing in 1985, but they made up forty-one percent of SBA borrowers. In the 1990s journalist Greg Critser would reveal that franchise loan support had continued apace, with nearly $1 billion provided for just this purpose in 1996. Within this budget six-hundred loans were provided for fast food franchisees, by far the largest type of franchise to benefit. They had developed a clear formula for success by this point. In responding to the failure of a company that was developing an anti-cancer device to obtain a loan, former SBA official Jere Glover said that “if this had been a car wash or a restaurant, it would have sailed right through.” In spite of ever greater public health concerns over the consequences of high carbohydrate and high fat meals like those sold at fast food restaurants, the SBA, an agency subject to minimal public interest, was a key contributor in allowing restaurants like Wendy’s to become a permanent fixture on highways, street corners, and in the inner cities.

Challenging McDonald’s?

An important question: after twenty years of McDonald’s and Burger King did America really have the need for another burger chain in the 1970s? Were there not enough already? Some experts were already saying that the market was saturated and that the major chains were going to have to take stock and be satisfied with what they had for the time being, or else “pirate” business from rivals. In the painful economic climate of the early 1970s with increased oil prices and stagflation, there were doubts about the capacity of fast food restaurants to grow further. “The rapid expansion is behind,” said William M. McGarr, an industry expert from San Francisco. “They’re going to have to come up with some very innovative methods, which I don’t think they have in their current plants,” he added.38

As much as the 1970s was a period of ascendance for Wendy’s, Domino’s, and Pizza Hut, other restaurant chain leaders barely survived. Howard Johnson’s restaurants, of which there were 872 in 1970, became increasingly dilapidated and beleaguered as consumers interests moved away from chain’s whose feature item was ice cream.39 Sambo’s, once a popular purveyor of pancakes would find that an epithet for a business name would perturb increasing numbers of potential customers irrespective of your fare.

The company’s assertion that its name was a clever combination of the names of its founders, Sam Battistone and Newell Bohnett may well have held some validity, but was ultimately irrelevant. Battistone and Bohnett had created a

38 Business Week, July 14, 1975, p. 118.
visually appealing chain of restaurants, often equipped with luxuriant leather seating in tangerine, fuchsia and a mango yellow, more vibrant and current than the modest designs of key competitors like Waffle House and the International House of Pancakes. However what had been fashionable in 1970 was no longer fashionable in 1980. The company's increasingly problematic branding and overall financial mismanagement led to interest from the Securities and Exchange Commission which dashed an attempted merger with Maryland-based business conglomerate W.R. Grace and Company.  

Within less than a month in November 1981 Sambo's closed 447 restaurants, letting go of 10,000 employees in an economy that was already facing an 8.3 percent rate of unemployment whilst quickly climbing. Within a few years the remainder of the chain disintegrated, leaving only the original restaurant in Santa Barbara still operating.

McDonald's seemed to partially accept William M. McGarr's forecasts for the late-1970s concerning restaurant saturation. As the corporation sought to expand outside the borders of the United States, at home its focus was upon strengthening sales within existing markets. In patronizing adverts aimed towards African-American consumers, posters suggested “You can do your dinnertimin’ at McDonald’s.” The company trademarked the invented word “dinnertimin,” a term more befitting for a Hattie McDaniel character than for late twentieth century

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publicity. The advert goes on to promise that “you don’t have to get dressed up, (and) there’s no tipping,” before concluding that “you can relax and get down with good food that won’t keep you waitin.”  

In spite of this moronic attempt on the part of the company’s ad men to demonstrate that they had an affinity with black people, McDonald’s was nevertheless successful in strengthening internal markets during the 1970s. They developed a new breakfast menu at the center of which was the Egg McMuffin, four years in the making and introduced in 1972. By the mid-1980s McDonald’s enjoyed a significant lead over its main rivals in the breakfast market, with morning sales accounting for fifteen percent of turnover. While Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken would struggle to gain a foothold in the breakfast market, the operational facilities at other rapidly expanding franchises like Pizza Hut and Domino’s just were not flexible enough to contend. Taco Bell did not even try to serve breakfasts until 2013 when it debuted a new menu featuring such delicacies as the Waffle Taco and the A.M. Crunchwrap, “scrambled eggs, bacon or Johnsonville sausage, crispy hash browns and melted cheese stuffed inside a flour tortilla and grilled, for a suggested $2.49.”

In spite of the twenty years of fast food expansion, Wendy’s, Taco Bell, and Domino’s were able to develop distinct and specialized niches within the market in

44 Love, McDonald’s: Behind the Arches , p. 300.
the 1970s. This was made possible by ongoing transitions in American lifestyles. The ratio of meals eaten at home to meals eaten outside the home continued to shift in favor of the latter from 1960 through to 2000. But for slight slow-downs in the mid-1970s and early-1990s the trend was for more and more people to eat out. Whereas around 20 percent of meals were eaten in the home in 1960, this figure was in the thirties by the 1980s and had reached 40 percent by 2000. So while the population increased by around one-hundred million people in this forty year period, the proportion of meals eaten at restaurants during this time doubled. The share of the total dollars spent on food increased in nearly the same proportion. In 1960 twenty-six percent of the overall dollars that were spent on food were spent on meals outside the home. By 1970 this had reached a third, by 1980 it was thirty-nine percent, and by 2000 forty-seven percent of food dollars went to meals at restaurants.

Though Wendy’s claimed to be challenging McDonald’s, competition between the burger chains was not a zero-sum game. Thomas directly compared his restaurant to the market leader. “They set me up,” he said. “By that I mean they gave me something to look good against.” There were two things that impressed him about McDonald’s, he said, “their real estate and their potatoes.” But a burger that was sat “sweating under a heat lamp with the ketchup and mustard already

spread on it, will never be as good as one that’s freshly made.” Thomas wanted to sell patties that were made the morning of sale, unlike McDonald’s, Burger King, and Hardee’s who bought in a frozen product from off-site.

Besides making a burger that was customizable with a combination of different condiments, Thomas wanted his “Cadillac hamburger” to be bigger. His rivals were selling burgers that were a very modest one-tenth of a pound in weight. Thomas would offer quarter-pound beef patties in 69 cent burgers. If customers wanted more to their customized burger they could have two patties in a “double” for $1.25 or three for $1.75. By ordering more food the price per pound decreased. This presented a dubious system of incentives when applied to a person’s health. In the jargon of fast food chains they were competing over the provision of “value.”

For more than twenty years Thomas would continue to insist that the meal offered by McDonald’s and Burger King was insubstantial in volume. “One other wrinkle to our hamburger design is that the pattie is square and sized so that the edges stick out over the edge of the round bun,” he explained. “This is to show the customer that he’s not getting a “breadburger” which is a frequent complaint about our competitors.” It is unclear quite how common this complaint was. I have yet to find evidence of anyone besides Thomas himself complaining in the 1960s that burgers were too small, but the veracity of this assertion mattered little to Wendy’s advertisers who made it a central point of their most successful television advertising campaign. Actress Clara Peller was presented with a hubcap-sized bread bun containing a button-sized patty. Backdropped by a sign signifying the

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48 Thomas, Dave’s Way, p. 116.
location as the “Home of the Big Bun,” she famously barked “where’s the beef?” and introduced a phrase into the popular lexicon that would be parroted for years to come, most famously by Walter Mondale in a Democratic presidential primary where he ridiculed the vague “new ideas” proposed by Colorado senator Gary Hart. An image from this advertisement is displayed in figure 10.

Figure 5.4 *Wendy’s Advertising*. Clara Peller objects to what is supposed to be a burger from McDonald’s or Burger King in this famous 1984 advertisement.50

Its reputation for selling large burgers was clearly not the only reason behind Wendy’s early success. Consumers must have found the décor sufficiently pleasant. The garish red and yellow colors were not found to be objectionable, the chain’s icon was perhaps endearing. Other menu innovations were a clear success,

including chili. Peter Davis and Richard Robinson point out that this was a particularly clever offering, and not just because it was unavailable at the key competitors. Describing chili as an "adult-oriented item" that could be selected as a distinctly different meal by customers who might visit on successive days, they observe that it could also be slow-cooked overnight using the days unsold hamburger meat, waste that would otherwise have been sold as food for swine.\(^{51}\) This presented a means of protecting the company from the costs of wasted stock that could easily have resulted from Thomas’ policy of buying in fresh beef every day.

Thomas was also ahead of his competitors in offering a pick-up window. “I knew that there were more cars out there than ever before and I got to wondering what had ever happened to the old drive-in style restaurant,” he remarked.\(^{52}\) By encouraging diners to drive through and take their food away without even climbing out of the car, or even eating in the vehicle itself, Wendy’s could build smaller restaurants with limited dining area. In the 1970s Thomas would boast that “Wendy’s units do more business than any other chain on a square foot basis.” He added that “it must have been a good idea- Burger King and McDonald’s are knocking holes in their walls now.”\(^{53}\) Simone Cinotto has argued that the notion of the family meal was a Victorian ideal that was perpetuated by the middle class but

\(^{51}\) Davis and Robinson, “R. David Thomas and Wendy’s: Classic Entrepreneurship.”
\(^{52}\) Wyckoff and Sasser, The Chain-Restaurant Industry, , p. 100.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
rarely actually fulfilled by most Americans.\textsuperscript{54} It would be historically inaccurate to argue that Wendy's and the fast food business were the beneficiaries of “the breakdown of the family” or some such perceived social ill. Nevertheless, as was indicated earlier, an increased number of meals were being eaten outside of the home and quick-service restaurants clearly benefitted from this. This can be explained in part by increased levels of income and female employment, government subsidization of agricultural commodities designed to maintain low food prices, and a decline in the general ability of Americans to cook.\textsuperscript{55}

As Barbara Ehrenreich demonstrated in \textit{Nickel and Dimed}, her widely read study of low-wage America, for some more consistent consumers of fast food in the 1990s and presumably earlier, there did not always appear to be much of a choice. Workers with two jobs who had to commute rapidly from one to another had few available options if they were to eat a cooked meal of some sort in the time available. Not everyone had- or has- access to a kitchen in their residence. This can include those who dwell in a form of temporary accommodation such as a motel or even a shelter, but even in some of the more inadequate apartments or subdivided houses.\textsuperscript{56} “In a low-income area, you can make more money than in a high-income area,” Glen Bell explained to his first franchisee in Los Angeles in 1965.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed Robert L. Emerson also argues that a significant proportion of restaurant

\textsuperscript{57} Baldwin, \textit{Taco Titan}, p. 110.
fraternization is neither recreational nor discretionary but as “an adjunct either to working or to shopping.” Thus the most consistent consumers did not always return out of a sense of fondness for the product or loyalty to the business as an institution. In fact a study in the late-1980s suggested that “heavy users”- those who dine in this manner more than six times per month, made up seventy-one percent of all visits to fast food restaurants, making this category of patron of particular importance.

Value Dining

In his classic book, *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz found that sugar came to take on a central role in the diets of poor Europeans in the late-nineteenth century as it provided the most cost-efficient source of calories. Among the most common forms of consuming these sugars was through fruit preserves and hot drinks. In England this meant jam sandwiches and sugary cups of tea. Later on it may mean custard or even syrup. In this historical setting sugared goods represented the greatest “value” in terms of the return in calories for the price paid. One could also add that sugars have a more stimulatory effect on the human senses than other cheap forms of energy- potatoes for example- even though deleterious long-term effects may offset the short-term gain. We can of course understand this.

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59 Ibid., p. 40.
as a false economy: it is not cost-effective to perpetually consume sugar if the end-result is diabetes. Yet it can be easy to make a decision that may appear to be most rational or desirable in the present when it disregards an invisible cost, which may be deferred unto a later date, as every smoker of tobacco knows.

In the second half of the twentieth century the American consumer pursued the greatest value on offer in the same way. This characterization can extend beyond the poor to the thrifty middle class, if the market for fast food is an effective example. The incomes of the vast majority of Americans- as uneven as they may have been- were rarely so meager that people were forced to pursue the “Mintz option”- the purchase of the highest quantities of products including concentrated sugars. Twinkies were popular but they were not America’s favorite food. The federal government’s support for the production of corn, beets, and cane meant that the availability of cheap sugars, whether it was high-fructose corn syrup or sucrose, was not a real problem. Between 1982 and 1986 corn received an estimated $3.9 billion in aid while the struggling sugar cane business was subsidized to the tune of $6 billion. Yet the option of purchasing the highest energy sugars as the central elements of one’s diet was generally not pursued because for most people this did not fulfill their idea of what a “meal” should be and there were forms of food available that met this expectation at competitive prices. Americans conceptions of a balanced diet had evolved greatly over the past century, influenced by the

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scientific inquiries and explanations of the early home economics movement, as well as by the state itself through the USDA and its varying dietary recommendations. 63

Yet Wendy’s successful growth lay in its ability to tap into long-standing cultural assumptions, offering what for most people constituted very good value for money, a meal that contained a sizable portion of meat and a side. The centrality of beef and bread had existed within the Anglo-American diet since the colonial period. 64 One must also consider that in the 1970s the organic food movement was in its infancy, widespread concerns about mass obesity were not yet on the agenda, and this kind of diet had not yet been subject to the middle-class critique and the sense of scorn that would accompany it, that would shake the fast food industry at


64 Rachel Laudan has observed that the notion of meat and bread acting as the central components that constituted a meal can be traced back to the Western European origins of early settlers. In England, “people had eaten (bread) since time immemorial and thought of it as synonymous with food itself.” While the British aristocracy had adopted aspects of French cuisine in the seventeenth century, much of the remainder of society, including the gentry, had adopted a middling cuisine based on bread and beef. It was widely accepted that all should be able to afford these essential foodstuffs. Laudan argues that such assumptions were brought by early colonists to the Eastern seaboard, particularly in the North. Harvey Levenstein adds that for most of the nineteenth century the main difference between the American and British diets was the abundance that distinguished the New World. Both remained committed to large quantities of meat and starch, while disparaging fruit and vegetables, as well as the potentially iniquitous effects of spices. Southern colonies developed distinctions in their cuisine due to the influence of forced immigration from Africa and the Caribbean, as described by James E. McWilliams. See: Rachel Laudan, Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 208, 237-242; Harvey Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 5; James E. McWilliams, A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
the end of the century.65 Thomas said himself that Wendy’s intended to sell "better hamburgers than McDonald’s or Burger King at a cheaper price per ounce."66 Whether they were actually better, or more popular on the whole than the Big Mac or the Whopper was not of the utmost importance. The bottom line was that Thomas offered a competitive price and a product that was bigger. If McDonald’s rise to national popularity can in part be explained by its popularity among the children of the baby boom generation, with its iconic clown Ronald McDonald first appearing in 1963, Wendy’s slightly more mature theme appealed to the tastes of many of the same people, by the 1970s somewhat older in years and more mature in tastes.67 While these chains were competitors on a certain level, the economic environment of the early to mid-1970s, a rapidly growing population that was eating outside the home ever more frequently, and a market which was, contrary to the concerns of Business Week, not yet saturated, allowed Wendy’s to grow at an explosive pace while McDonald’s and Burger King could continue to expand simultaneously.

The centrality of “value” in the American fast food market is demonstrated most clearly with the case of Taco Bell. Like Wendy’s, Taco Bell had a very simple original menu. It consisted of tacos, burritos, tostadas, frijoles, and chiliburgers, all of which consisted of at least one of the same ingredients whether it be beef, tortilla, 

67 Love, McDonald’s: Behind the Arches, p. 223. Willard Scott, a graduate of American University, was the first actor to assume the role of the red and white faced man child. “The concept was that Ronald did everything kids like to do, and the commercials showed him roller skating, biking, swimming, or playing baseball. Ronald was their pal.”
beans, cheese, lettuce, or tomato. The company had grown consistently for over a decade when PepsiCo purchased it in 1978 for $130 million, having won a bidding war with the H.J. Heinz Company. PepsiCo was the company formed by the merging of Pepsi-Cola and Frito-Lays in 1965, a move that went unopposed by Lyndon Johnson’s Justice Department and created a company that, at the time, would exceed $500 million in annual sales. Their restaurant division had obtained Pizza Hut just months previously in November, 1977. Significantly this deal represented the fusion of supplier and retailer. Without the name recognition of Coca-Cola, PepsiCo had competed by aggressively negotiating competitive contracts with restaurants and bars. Between 1965 and 1985 PepsiCo’s sales volume would increase eighteen-fold. Taco Bell was already the company’s largest purchaser of soft drinks, and in 1983 they would add Burger King to their coterie in the midst of the so-called “cola wars,” an alliance they would maintain until 1990.

In 1978 Taco Bell consisted of nearly nine-hundred restaurants, mostly in the Southwest. With Glen Bell having resigned his chairmanship and more interested in restoring historic railways in the Sierra Nevada mountains, PepsiCo appointed John

69 *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June, 1965, p. 8. “We have had no communications from the Justice Department,” said Herbert L. Barnet, the chairman of the Pepsi-Cola Company. “Pepsi-Cola is embarking on a new, great era both for Pepsi-Cola and the stockholders,” he indelicately but nevertheless accurately observed. “We’re still a growing baby and we expect to go many places in the U.S. as well as abroad. While the merger represented a diversification into snack foods for Pepsi-Cola, it significantly provided access to foreign markets for Frito-Lay’s. At the time Pepsi-Cola owned and franchised over 900 bottling plants in 108 countries, the *WSJ* reported.
Martin, formerly president of La Petite Boulangerie, Hardee’s, and Burger Chef, to run the company. In the 1970s and 1980s Mexican and Italian restaurants were frequently seen as niche markets and commonly referred to as “ethnic foods.” In trying to shake this stigma Martin would eliminate the company’s mascot, a barefooted Mexican boy wearing a sombrero, at about the same time Pizza Hut was dispensing with the Italian chef (see figs. 3 and 11). Taco Bell represented “a slice of fantasy Mexican California plopped into suburbia,” wrote journalist and author Gustavo Arellano.\textsuperscript{72} The adobe arcades would make way for a more standard Mansard style in new building construction.\textsuperscript{73}

\textbf{Figure 5.5 Early artwork used by Taco Bell.}\textsuperscript{74}

As part of this “mainstreaming” process Martin would emphasize the similarities between what he was offering and the burger chains’ menus, rather than

\textsuperscript{73} Jakle and Sculle \textit{Fast Food}, p. 259.

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highlighting contrasts.75 “What’s a burger?” Martin questioned. “Ground beef, cheese, tomato, lettuce, and sauce on a bun. Not very different from a taco.”76 Taco Bell would come “barreling out of the Southwest,” with a strategy that would expand the chain to nearly seven thousand units worldwide by the mid-1990s.77 The two central components of Martin’s agenda were to reduce prices and drive down labor costs. Yet there was a certain deftness and a clarity of vision in the way he went about reworking the restaurant chain, a vision that would come to influence the other major players in the industry.

Like Wendy’s, Taco Bell’s operation involved preparing fresh ingredients every day. The beef that was served in tacos would have to be slow cooked and required regular stirring. Vegetables had to be washed and sliced. Beans had to be washed, stoned, and cooked.78 For Glen Bell and Dave Thomas this was part of running a restaurant. Bringing in fresh ingredients and cooking them. Less so for John Martin. “Maybe we can simplify this whole thing,” he said. “We’re really not in the business of making food,” he revealed. “We’re in the business of feeding people.”79 Not only was cooking food slow and potentially inconsistent, Martin worried that the mess involved made a negative impression upon the clientele.

“Imagine you’re coming to work at Taco Bell at 8:00 A.M. From 8:00 until 10:00, all you’re doing is slicing and dicing things. By the time the restaurant door opens you look like a bomb has gone off in the walk-in refrigerator because you’re covered

75 “Think outside the bun” would not be introduced until 2001.
76 Jakle and Sculle, Fast Food, p. 260.
79 Ibid., p. 10.
with lettuce and beans and cheese and garbage. Now you’re going to be friendly and attractive to customers? No way. No way.”

By simplifying operations Martin sought to reduce labor expenditures on cooking, which were of extra costs when they required managers’ time, while simultaneously reducing prices and increasing sales. Even though the choice to eat out or stay in, and thus the overall demand for restaurant food, may be fairly inelastic as eating away from the home increasingly became a feature of Americans everyday lifestyles, there is evidence that indicates consumers have historically been highly sensitive to price changes on the part of individual restaurants and been quick to transfer their patronage elsewhere. Even McDonald’s, with the second-most recognizable brand in the world—“billions served”—found that modest price hikes could dissuade its loyal customer base. Between 1974 and 1988 they raised prices six times in different years and found that on five of those six occasions store sales declined at an average of 3.7 percent in each of those years. When they finally started cutting prices in 1989 it was as a response to Taco Bell’s effective approach, and to the growth of the double drive-through burger chain Rally’s in the West, a company whose strategy was to offer burgers that were about thirty percent cheaper than those offered by the market leaders. Rally’s would later merge with Checkers in the late 1990s.

The two strategies implemented were known as “TACO” (total automation of company operations) and K-Minus (Kitchen-Minus). K-Minus was a plan to optimize

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80 Ibid., p. 10.
81 Emerson, *The New Economics of Fast Food*, p. 32.
82 Ibid., p. 57, 92, 95. McDonald’s would reduce the price of hamburgers from 75 cents to 59 cents and of cheeseburgers from 85 cents to 69 cents.
space by inverting the present ratio of 70:30 kitchen to seating to 30:70 in the opposite direction. TACO established a system that would constantly keep track of sales at all branches, transmitting the information to the company headquarters in Irvine, California. Computers, which had previously been almost exclusively used in the offices of executives, would be installed in every restaurant. The system allowed for quick electronic communications between restaurants who could oversee multiple sites and quickly be present to trouble-shoot problems through the use of pagers or car phones. Rather than having managers present in each restaurant during ebbing hours of business, they would have fewer managers but make them mobile and available when they were really needed.

For decades dystopian tales have speculated about the possibility of basic human tasks being replaced by artificial forms of intelligence from the manufactured helpers at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc. in Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot*, to Johnny Cab, the automated taxi driver who gets on the wrong side of Arnold Schwarzenegger in Paul Verhoeven’s 1990 film *Total Recall.* Taco Bell were far from reticent about their ambitions and their potential for eliminating manual tasks. The vice-president for operations support, Ken Harris, envisioned the future of retail sales, speculating that “the next step is to automate the POS (point-of-sale) process.” Every store would have a network. “Off that network will be a bunch of devices: some will be robotic- taco-making machines; others will be customer communication devices- touch-screen order-entry, drive-through order confirmation boards, handhelds (terminals an employee punches an order into

84 Schlesinger, “Taco Bell Corp.,” p. 6.
85 *Total Recall*, dir.: Paul Verhoeven, Carolco Pictures, 1990. Film.
while greeting drive-through customers outside the store); maybe a fax or customer phone order capability...All of these will come down the line and will be on one network. The TACO network will be the facilitator.”

In the late-1980s many of these ideas remained pipe dreams. Faxing your order through to fast-food restaurants never quite took off. However in delegating managerial tasks to “team members,” who had formerly been designated as “crewmembers,” the company created “team-managed units” and transferred added responsibilities to its poorest paid employees without increasing their rewards. This cost-saving strategy was cleverly packaged as an attempt to “empower” and “encourage...self-sufficiency” among restaurant staff, as described by Tim Durnford. While Durnford refers to this as an opportunity for team members to “take more ownership of store operations,” ownership remained in every sense in the hands of the corporation and franchisees while staff remained highly replaceable.

John Martin had no intention of veering Taco Bell away from the principles of McDonaldization, though they were not yet described in this language. Far from it, he sought to increase predictability. In order to ensure that the high turnover staff could be even more quickly trained he implemented a whole new kitchen regimen. After all, the company was in the business of feeding people, not making food. “I guess my revelation has been that we were really ripping people off,” Martin said. “The bottom line is, if people come in and spend 100 of their hard-earned pennies in

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86 Schlesinger, “Taco Bell Corp.,” p. 12.
88 Ibid, p. 78.
your restaurant and you give them 27 cents worth of food, that is not a good deal.”

Rather than improving the quality of a one-dollar product so that it was worth every penny, Taco Bell would make it closer to 27 cents worth of value. In order to get by without a manager on the premises they would make tacos very easy to prepare. Lettuce would arrive pre-shredded, and beans were dehydrated and sealed in sachets that could be readied with boiling water. Condiments like guacamole and sour cream were delivered in cartridges and loaded into a gun that squeezed them out onto the appropriate morsels. Taco shells would be fried off-site. This was a far cry from the unpopular traditional method of preparing the pastry where cooks would push it around the pan with their fingers, sometimes burning them in the process.

Rather than ground beef that was prepared on the premises every day, the meat would arrive cooked, frozen, and seasoned. The idea of freshness, a priority to consumers if you believed the contentions of Dave Thomas, was disregarded. How many people would really notice the difference between fresh beef and frozen beef? Martin’s gambit was that it did not matter a whole lot. The pitch was almost purely on the basis of value. Cheaper labor, cheaper ingredients, cheaper food. Undercut the contenders with tacos at 49 cents each. This was in-line with PepsiCo’s broader agenda. “What consumers want most is value,” said company CEO Wayne Calloway. This did not simply mean cheap. Diners had to believe they were getting a good product for what they were paying. If they merely felt they were getting an

89 Ibid., p. 76.
80 Schlesinger, “Taco Bell Corp.,” p. 10.
81 Arellano, Taco USA, p. 58.
adequate product at least there was quite a lot of it. “Value and volume go hand in hand, just like Harry and Sally,” Calloway added.92

“Contemporary writers are unanimous in blaming the labourer for his extravagant diet, and tireless in demonstrating that by better management he might have more meat and more variety in his meals,” wrote English social historian John Burnett in 1966.93 Yet there was nothing nonsensical about the popularity of value meals and value menus. There was no underlying American disposition that explained the success of Taco Bell or Wendy’s. They may have fashioned in accordance with certain cultural sensibilities, but their greatest appeal was to the sense of rational decision-making whereby consumers sought to obtain the best deal with the budget available to them. This often came down to price, volume, and convenience, and very understandably so.

An Everyday Diet

So in the wake of Martin’s introduction of TACO and K-Minus and the rollout of Taco Bell’s value strategy would Americans embrace the restaurant as a venue that could be visited over and over again? The explosive expansion of the chain under PepsiCo’s ownership indicates that they clearly would. In 1983 there were 1,664 Taco Bell restaurants in the United States. By 1990 there were 3,227. Around fifty-six percent of these were company owned, an unusually large number.94

Among the nine largest restaurant chains in the country, Taco Bell’s annual growth

94 Schlesinger, “Taco Bell Corp.,” p. 22.
rate of twenty-two percent from the mid-1970s through to the late 1980s
outstripped that of McDonald’s, Burger King, Hardee’s, Pizza Hut, Denny’s, and
Kentucky Fried Chicken. The only chains with higher average annual growth rates
than Taco Bell were Domino’s at forty-two percent and Wendy’s at thirty-two
percent.95

The purveyors of greater value—of more food per dollar—had managed to
keep labor costs down and had been rewarded with new customers and a clamor of
new franchisees. This was a defining moment for the fast-food industry. The other
leading restaurant chains would ultimately have to respond with larger portion
sizes and value menus. Burger King would develop popular delicacies like the
Bacon Double Cheeseburger. An average soda in the 1950s was around eight
ounces. By the 1990s the smallest available soda was normally twelve ounces but
anything up to thirty-two ounces was normally available, albeit loaded with cheap
and plentiful ice cubes.96 Soft-drinks were by the 1980s cheaper to produce as well,
the primary forms of sugar being derived from genetically modified maize. On the
very same day in November, 1984 PepsiCo and Coca-Cola announced that they
would raise the amount of high-fructose corn syrup in their drinks to one-hundred
percent. Until that point cans of Pepsi Cola had been a fifty-fifty mixture of fructose
and sucrose while Coke employed a seventy-five-twenty-five split. The biggest

95 Emerson, The New Economics of Fast Food p. 37.
96 Andrew F. Smith, Encyclopedia of Junk Food and Fast Food (Westport, CT:
producers of fructose—Archer-Daniels-Midland, A.E. Manufacturing, and Cargill—had already raised their output in anticipation of the final switch.97

The Pepsi Company is often seen as of secondary importance to Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, the two brands with the greatest international name recognition. Both have been the subjects of books and numerous studies, PepsiCo barely any. With a major presence in the snack food industry, its aggressive promotion of its cola drink in shops and restaurants, with an expensive $7 million advertising deal with Michael Jackson, and its ownership of the market leaders in the chicken, pizza, and Mexican-American segments of the fast-food market, PepsiCo probably needs to be given more credit for its influence upon the way Americans eat and drink. From the late 1970s through to the end of the 1980s PepsiCo consistently managed to keep both McDonald’s and Coca-Cola on the back foot as it successfully diversified its portfolio with major takeovers while implementing a clear strategy of reductions in both costs and prices, forcing rivals to eventually fall suit in order to remain competitive.

McDonald’s remained quite determined not to cut its prices until the 1990s, relying on its unparalleled customer loyalty. Only in 1994 it would introduce its famous “Super Size” menu. “Would you like to super size that?” cashiers were instructed to ask every patron, young and old alike, and if they hesitated they could always be cajoled by the company’s pricing policy, whereby the incremental costs of additional food were reduced for every level of upgrade, never below the profit.

margin though. From a public relations standpoint, super-sizing ultimately backfired ten years later when West Virginian documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock gorged himself on super-sized meals at McDonald's for thirty days and catalogued how sick and unhealthy he felt. Nevertheless by this point the company had already profited greatly and it was unclear as to whether those who were of a mind to view the film were among the restaurant’s most frequent customers. In doubling down on value, Wendy’s and Taco Bell had benefited greatly and set the terms of competition that would shape the quick service restaurant business for the coming decades.

However in the cases of both Wendy’s and Taco Bell there was more to it than just a case of creating a restaurant theme and a limited but popular menu which could be implemented through a "McDonaldized" production method. Both required large sums of capital to facilitate this expansion. Whereas for Taco Bell this was made possible through parent company PepsiCo, Wendy’s was very successful in courting wealthy franchisees. John Martin’s remaking of Taco Bell in the 1980s put the company in a position to reach a national clientele. Wendy’s also had to make significant adjustments as the 1970s came to a close.

Dave Thomas had set out to build a burger chain, no more complicated than that. “Everybody likes burgers,” he asserted in the early years of the business. McDonald’s experimented with new items to broaden the menu, adding alternative sandwiches like the Filet-O-Fish, originally debuted in Catholic neighborhoods that were averse to eating meat on Fridays. But Thomas remembered the complications

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of his early days at the Hobby House and how a diverse menu could slow down output. "We concentrate on doing only a few things, but we do them better than anyone else." Better? That might be hard to say, but they made them bigger.

Burgers, chili, and fries. Passed out of one window and through another. That was the idea. But what if a car-load of people approached and one of the group did not wish to eat beef? Would they object and encourage the group to go elsewhere? To McDonald's? To Kentucky Fried Chicken? Or even to a full service diner like Denny's or, if they were close to a major highway, Cracker Barrel? Could the one person who objected to burgers carry the day? Thomas remained resolute. "I know all the arguments about enlarging menus and the only plausible one just won't hold water." McDonald's were mistaken. "Those guys believe in the minority veto. They believe that if four people are going to eat out together and if one wants chicken, the group won't go to a place that serves hamburgers only. I just don't think that people behave that way. For one thing people eat together because they want to eat together, not because of a particular menu item." Was this argument completely false then? Thomas did not go that far, but burgers were something special.

"Someone might want to veto going to a fish place but not a hamburger restaurant," he proclaimed. As convinced as he seemed to be, Thomas left the door ajar. "That's not to say that Wendy's menu is forever fixed. There may come a time to change it," he conceded. "But," he resolved, "I'll need good reason before Wendy's starts frying fish or chicken."^100

^100 Ibid., p. 96.
That day would come. While value for money had propelled Wendy’s into the first tier of restaurant chains, circumstances beyond Thomas’s control would slow down sales, squeeze profits, and force the company to rethink its strategy for the 1980s. Inexpensive beef in large servings had been the basis of Wendy’s success. To continue on the same trajectory the burger chains required a steady commodity market that could provide them with these ingredients. Unfortunately for the fast food industry, the nagging inflation of the 1970s, which had reached double-digits in 1974 and 1975, would eventually take its toll and have a sizable effect upon the cost of beef.๑๐๑ Thirty-three percent rises in the price of beef within less than a year in 1979 would put pressure on the fast food restaurants to inflate prices. That would inevitably perturb customers. Such developments would also coincide with a broad shift in diners’ tastes away from the high-fat high-calorie drive-through diet and hamburger orders would drop by more than ten percent in the space of three years.๑๐๒ “I can hardly stand chicken,” Dave Thomas said in 1978, explaining why he had sold his share in Kentucky Fried Chicken ten years previously.๑๐๓ Faced with uncertainty and decline, fast food company executives like Thomas would do what had been previously unthinkable: they would turn to America’s new favorite meat and tightly embrace a highly mechanized and scientifically developed poultry industry that provided an expansive range of

products that were perceived as both modern and fashionable. This was, after all, an industry that had been over thirty years in the making.
Chapter 6

A Culinary Monstrosity: Robert C. Baker, Further Processed Chicken, and the Arrival of the McNugget

“When he was doing this, it was looked at as progress: producing more food, more cheaply.”

- Dale Baker, son of Robert C. Baker in 2012¹

“Shit, he’s richer than a motherfucker,” observes Wallace, a Baltimore drug pusher in a noteworthy scene from the first season of the HBO series *The Wire*. In conversation with colleagues Poot, and D’Angelo he is referencing the inventor of the chicken nugget, while discussing the theory of surplus value. Wallace, played by Michael B. Jordan, reflects on the technical acuity that must have been applied in its design, as well as the nugget’s practical benefits as an easy form of snack to consume. “He must have got the bone all the way out the damn chicken,” he says. Wallace goes on to explain that, “until he came along niggers be chewing on chumpsticks and shit and getting their fingers all greasy.” Poot questions whether “Mr. Nugget” was handsomely compensated for his invention, and this is when Wallace responds in the affirmative that he must be very wealthy.

At this point the conversation becomes more interesting because D’Angelo, who is working in more of a supervisory capacity in the crack-dealing operation, disputes the assertion that the nugget’s inventor would have been rewarded, observing that he is “just some sad-ass down in the basement of McDonald’s, thinking up some shit to make some money for the real players.” Poot reacts despondently to the injustice of this scenario wherein Mr. Nugget did not receive a percentage cut of future profits. But it is not a matter of right or wrong, D’Angelo states. “Now you think Ronald McDonald is gonna go down in that basement and say, ‘hey, Mr. Nugget, you the bomb! We selling chicken faster than you can tear the bone out so I’m gonna write my clowny-ass name on this fat-ass check for you.’” Far from it. Rather, “the nigger who invented them things, he’s still working in the basement for regular wage thinking up some shit to make fries taste better or some shit like that.”

Robert C. Baker, Professor of Poultry Sciences at Cornell University from 1957 to 1989, did not make a fortune from the numerous poultry products that he developed from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Though his department received support from the poultry industry, their discoveries were freely published and shared with anyone who wished to utilize them. By the 2000s chicken nuggets had achieved an almost iconic status, exhibit 1A of the most infamous of unfoodlike concoctions. While Pop-Tarts, Cheesy Puffs, Funyuns, Cap’n Crunch and Easy Cheese might all be maligned and degraded, chicken nuggets were treated not simply as unhealthy food but as a suspicious entity, an unidentified frying object, not

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to be trusted. In what became a frequently visited Internet clip, British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver sought to explain to schoolchildren the differences between good foods and bad foods in both the United Kingdom and in Huntington, West Virginia. His intention was to show “the most disgusting ingredients in some of the worst processed food.” Oliver removes the breast, legs and thighs from a raw chicken and then hacks the remainder of the carcass to pieces with a large knife before placing them, along with some chicken skins, into a blender. His assertion is that this is how nuggets are made and the idea is to horrify the children. A year or so later, in another show with a similar theme, he teaches schoolchildren how to cook superior homemade nuggets from chicken breasts.

Oliver’s critique, and it is one that has gained increasing traction, is that the nugget is something of a hoax being perpetrated upon the unknowing consumer by the meat company. Mysterious ingredients and additives convince the diner that they are eating an enjoyable and wholesome snack, when in fact they are being tricked by meat that is of such a low grade that it should have been discarded or fed to animals. A 2013 study by doctors in Mississippi asserted that, “chicken nuggets have become a staple of the American diet,” while adding that, “the composition of the present day chicken nugget is not well understood.” The report, published in the American Journal of Medicine, found that “chicken is not necessarily a major component,” rather that “fat was present in equal or greater quantities along with

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3 Jamie Oliver, Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution, ABC: March-April, 2010.
4 Jamie Oliver, Jamie’s Dream School, Channel 4: March-April, 2011.
epithelium, bone, nerve, and connective tissue.” To even call them chicken nuggets was “a misnomer.”

While David Simon’s The Wire addresses the mystery of the chicken nugget and the distribution of profits accrued by businesses, D’Angelo, Poot and Wallace also embody many common presumptions concerning the most prolific consumers of “junk” foods. They are impoverished young black men, lacking in traditional forms of education. The wave of recent popular food writers would take a sympathetic view towards these circumstances, attributing the ‘mistake’ of dining at a restaurant like McDonald’s to culinary ignorance, the product of failing schools and bad parenting. Independent historian Ann Vileisis would explain this as the product of a “mental framework” which has been “stretched and fudged” by a “relentless legion of admen and home economists” who created “an unspoken covenant of ignorance between shoppers and an increasingly powerful food industry.” If consumers like Poot only knew what Vileisis knew about the American food system and embraced the homespun lessons of rustic nineteenth century cooks that she has uncovered, they would cook and eat as she does, joining “a sophisticated revolution” in eating, a revolution in which Vileisis is presumably in the vanguard.

The most famous name within this movement is Berkeley professor Michael Pollan. In a series of best-selling books Pollan has imbued the desire to return to

7 Ibid., p. 10. Perhaps if Poot, like Vileisis, had a Yale degree he would be a more ready “revolutionary.”
pre-industrial farming techniques with a moral fervor, equating his impression of proper eating not simply with stewardship of the body but of the planet itself. “Food is also about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality,” he writes, “about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity.”

He contends that “most of what we’re consuming today is no longer, strictly speaking, food at all, and how we’re consuming it- in the car, in front of the television, and, increasingly, alone- is not really eating, at least not in the sense that civilization has long understood the term.” Pollan has leveled a sustained and credible critique of what he describes as “the flood tide of cheap corn,” a heavily government subsidized and genetically modified crop that remade the American food system in the second half of the twentieth century. This has led to the creation of new dining traditions that in his view are “not really eating.”

Yet for many Americans who have chosen to eat meals in their cars, in front of the television, and as a series of snacks throughout the day, these shifts have been defined not merely by the system of production but as much by changes in lifestyle, work patterns, family structure, as well as expectation and personal definitions of comfort and convenience. Sidney Mintz argues that Americans’ eating patterns are in part the result of changing conceptions of the time required to fulfill

9 Ibid., p. 7.
particular activities, leading to the proliferation of ever-faster forms of meal preparation. “The shortness of time is in many ways, then, a coefficient of a view that our time is in short supply, but also already appropriately distributed,” he explains.13 Even acknowledging that eating styles have evolved, Simone Cinotto has found that historical visions of family mealtimes have been greatly exaggerated in the popular imagination and resemble the circumstances enjoyed by only a wealthy minority of families.14

Besides this ahistorical understanding of what constitutes mealtimes for the majority of people, Pollan’s critique extends to the consumption of what he describes as the “hundreds of foodish products in the supermarket that your ancestors simply wouldn’t recognize as food products.”15 Again there needs to be some appreciation that Americans’ tastes and preferences inevitably changed over the course of time. This combination of distrust of large corporations while simultaneously attributing an essential goodness to the small farmer or small business yearns for an America that never quite existed. Rather than treating American consumers and their fondness for products rich in additional ingredients like the aristocrats of yore who liberally covered foodstuffs with spices to augment, or even disguise their taste, they are regarded more as akin to consumers prior to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Unhealthy foods are equated with poisonous ones as unknowing dupes are bound not by economics or capitalism but by their

15 Pollan, In Defense of Food, p. 149.
own ignorance, in the darkness of their living rooms they chew, puzzled at their own obesity but absorbed by whatever reality show plays out before them.

What would most disturb Robert C. Baker about this dialogue is the way in which processed foods and the notion of sustaining the planet and even the human body are framed as diametrically opposite from one another. As the food scientist commonly credited with “inventing” the chicken nugget he saw the environment, human health, and food processing as intrinsically connected issues. Questions concerning what was edible and what was inedible food clearly appealed to Baker when he decided to migrate from the study of pomology to poultry sciences in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Far from trying to con diners into eating garbage, Baker’s ideas for ‘further processed’ chicken were designed to address global concerns about the earth’s population growing more rapidly than the planet’s capacity to produce food. In creating new meals he aimed to provide affordable dietary needs that were becoming increasingly expensive, while affecting a more efficient food system that could grow with a greater concern for scarce environmental resources.

For all of Baker’s high ambitions he does not appear to have considered all of the implications of his approach and the consequences of the implementation of his recipes falling to the vertically integrated processing companies that were coming to dominate the poultry supply in the United States. While further processed poultry products, such as the chicken nugget, were capable of delivering edible proteins of a reasonable quality to American consumers, they also offered the potential to provide staggering profits. In the hands of late-twentieth century poultry
companies borrowed Baker’s technique but not his idealism and concern for healthy nutrition and an end to food waste, and though chicken nuggets would form a robust and convenient snack enjoyed by millions, they increasingly became adulterated and seen as the quintessential junk food, associated consumers like Poot and Wallace, cut adrift and disconnected from the values and expectations of middle-class society.

Preserving Food for a Hungry Planet

Robert C. Baker did not set out to devise a product with the notoriety of the Chicken McNugget. He did not even set out to work with poultry as he was raised on a fruit farm in the twenties and thirties in Sodus, New York on the southern edge of Lake Ontario. Though his family kept a flock of Rhode Island Reds he went on to receive a BS from Cornell in 1943, majoring in Pomology. “I guess I fell in love with chickens,” he would explain many years later. Though he had started studying botany, “I changed later on because I thought the future was brighter in chicken than it was in fruit.”

Baker worked as an Assistant County Agent in Orange County, New York for a couple of years before completing an MS in Agricultural Economics from Pennsylvania State University in 1949 while serving as an assistant professor of Poultry Husbandry. He would then return to upstate New York where he would commit to working in the Poultry Extension Service at Cornell while

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working on a doctorate that he would receive from Purdue in 1956.\textsuperscript{17} It would be for his innovations in food science as a professor in Ithaca, particularly but not exclusively applied to poultry, that Baker would come to be known. “The C. doesn’t stand for ‘chicken,’ but maybe it should,” quipped local journalist Carol Ritter, referring to his middle initial in a 1982 profile piece. “Baker, perhaps more than anyone else in America, can be called the ‘Chicken Man,’” she chirped.\textsuperscript{18}

As a professor of Food Science, Baker was working in a fairly young area of academic research. “Food science can be defined as the application of the principles of science, engineering, and economics to the processing, formulation, synthesis, distribution and marketing of food,” he explained. Baker and his colleagues were seeking to serve a growing industry, one that “employs 1/7 of the population of the United States.” He added that, “this is greater than the combined work force in the steel, automobile, chemical, communications, public utilities, and mining industries.” While he still worked from the viewpoint that women were primarily responsible for preparing food, Baker indicated that this was an evolving situation. If “food science” was once about cookery and recipes, “times have changed with the rapidly...

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\textsuperscript{17} “Biographical Sketch: Robert C. Baker,” RCB Papers, #21/26/4030, Box 3.
\textsuperscript{18} Carol Ritter, “He brought you the chicken hot dog,” p. 1B.
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growing popularity of convenience foods for the consumer and the emphasis today is on trained, technically-oriented food scientists.”

So to what ends did Baker apply new scientific methods and how did he see their application as pertinent to the American diet? To understand Baker's developments in further processed chicken it is important to try and relate to his persistent and enduring concerns about food waste in the United States. When presented with a public platform he would repeatedly assert that the matter was a critical national problem, citing a common series of examples. These included all of the major food groups. “At least 8 percent of all commercial bread stales and is thrown away, never reaching the consumer,” Baker wrote. “If one assumes that this loss is somewhat representative worldwide and that one pound of bread is made from one pound of wheat, then the world wheat loss from staling approaches one billion bushels per year,” he claimed. “A fourth of all fruits and vegetables harvested are lost through spoilage between harvest and time of purchase,” he added. This did not even include nature’s own wasteful ways: fruit that fell from trees and crops that were destroyed by weather or insects.

Then there was the fishing industry, a particular cause of worry to Baker. “Did you know that each year we waste or “underutilize” millions of tons of fish?” he would ask the League for International Food Education in their 1978 newsletter. “It

is estimated that as much as 70% of the fish in the oceans are underutilized.” The same could be said for lake dwelling fish too. Why were fish underutilized? “Some have tiny, needle-like bones which make them difficult to eat,” he explained. Others have unfortunate names, like sucker, crappie, or cancer fish. Still others are considered too small to be worth the effort to prepare them.” When these “trash” fish were returned to the water dead they served as a pollutant.22

Besides fish, animal blood shed in abattoirs was commonly washed away. “This blood, an excellent source of high-quality protein, could be used to feed humans,” he wrote. “From the red meat industry alone, over 300 million pounds of blood protein could be added to our diet.”23 And then there were poultry meat losses, the problem to which Baker would commit the greatest share of his time and creativity.

When poultry processors mention the yield of a chicken they are referring to the difference between the live weight of the bird and the amount that is salvaged as sellable meat. The higher the yield, the more productive use the processor or butcher could be said to be making of the chicken. A 1973 report by poultry scientists P.L. Hayse and W.W. Marion asserted that the average total yield in the United States from broilers was 70 percent for females and 72 percent for males.24

In their experiment the average weight of the females was 1494 grams while the males were 1841 grams. Of the eviscerated meat the most popular cuts—breast, thigh, drumsticks and wings, constituted 72-73 percent of the meat. The remaining 27-28 percent consisted of the neck, tail rack, rib rack, heart, liver and gizzard. For females this amounted to 282 grams, and for males 364 grams per bird. By the 1970s these components were largely unpopular though. “The necks and giblets of broilers are placed in the body cavities of the carcasses and sold to consumers, who often throw them away,” Baker wrote. “If both necks (deboned) and giblets were further processed, a potential 300 million pounds of neck meat and 487 million pounds of giblets, or a total of 787 million pounds of edible meat would be available.”

Then there were Leghorns, the most popular breed of egg-layer in the United States. “Back a few years, Leghorn fowl were very popular for meat and I can remember their selling for as much as forty-five cents a pound on the farm,” Baker said in a speech in Bogotá in 1978. Tastes had changed though. “Today in the United States we are raising broilers and consumers much prefer the tender broiler to the Leghorn fowl. At present Leghorn fowl are bringing about seven cents a pound on the farm and they have been as low as two cents.”

Agricultural Experiment Station, Brookings: South Dakota State University, May 1975. RCB Papers, #21/26/4030, Box 1. p. 4.
25 Ibid., p. 4.
an estimated 292 million hens and pullets of egg-laying age in the United States.\textsuperscript{28} Once these birds had passed the point of optimum productivity they could be sold for dog and cat food but the market for human consumption was limited.

Why did Baker consider waste and underutilized resources to be such a problem? “Looking into the future for our food supply the main concern will be the important food pipeline between producer and consumer,” he wrote. And yet the pipeline had “many leaks and these leaks must be repaired.”\textsuperscript{29} This needed to be a component of long-term planning, “if we as Americans are going to have a plentiful supply of food.” He went on. “Although current projections indicate that this nation will not face a nutrient shortage even in times of crop failures, present diets, particularly high protein foods, will become increasingly costly in relation to income,” Baker explained. “As our nation looks for ways to increase food production, a growing awareness of what is happening to the food once it is harvested will become mandatory.” Leakages in the pipeline also incurred great costs. “Vast amounts become waste compounding pollution and waste disposal problems. This all includes the enormous amounts of energy used to produce food no one consumes.”\textsuperscript{30}

As far as Baker was concerned there had been a change in the agricultural paradigm in recent years. “In the past we have used most of our research dollars to increase production. We have carried out all kinds of studies on improving grain

\textsuperscript{29} Robert C. Baker, “Food Science- The Future,” Talk presented at the 75\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Birthday, New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, May 12, 1979. RCB Papers, #21/26/4030, Box 6. p. 1.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 2.
yields, increasing pounds of milk per cow and eggs per hen. This has been excellent research and the results have really paid off.” Commenting before the potential of genetically engineered seeds was fully apparent, Baker predicted that “in the future, however, scientists are not going to be able to continue to make large gains in food supply by breeding, feeding, pest, control, etc. We must obtain our large increases elsewhere and a logical place is the food pipeline.” This was a frugal as well as an environmentally sensitive approach. “The cost of preventing waste and making use of underutilized sources is less in dollars and energy than cost of increasing primary production,” Baker concluded.31

So was Baker a fantasist or was this a response to realistic and widespread concerns? Events of the early 1970s had informed debates about the tenability of the global food supply in the wake of rapidly increasing populations. The most scarring example of the potentially explosive consequences of famine occurred in Ethiopia where drought and crop failure contributed to the usurpation of the civilian government by the Marxist Derg in 1974.32 The estimated death toll as a consequence of starvation ran as high as 200,000 in the northeast of the country, with many more underfed.33 Famine was not limited to East Africa though. “In West Africa and Bangladesh, people are starving by the millions, and in Washington, officials are scratching to find quite small amounts of spare food- food not committed to be sold- for relief,” wrote the Washington Post in 1973. The editorial

31 Ibid., pp. 2-3.
went on to assert that this crisis was “a condition very much aggravated in the last year by Soviet grain purchases on a scale which all but erased the United States’ (and other exporters’) ‘surpluses,’” adding that “it was on these ‘surpluses’ that humanitarian food programs had been built.”\textsuperscript{34} As much as the 1972 grain deal was a component of détente, the Post editors appeared unconcerned about crop shortfalls in the USSR and more aggrieved at the loss of an effective tool for projecting Cold War power into non-aligned areas of the developing world. The grain deal “sharply altered the global supply picture,” and “permanently modified America’s complacence with respect to food abundance,” wrote J. Don Looper of the Foreign Agricultural Service in the 1981 USDA \textit{Yearbook of Agriculture} which was titled \textit{Will There Be Enough Food}\textsuperscript{35}

Present circumstances and future projections were framed as the result of uncontrolled population growth. Paul R. Ehrlich’s best-selling \textit{The Population Bomb} brought the concerns of scientists to a broad audience as his projections of social upheaval entered the public consciousness. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” the book began. “In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.”\textsuperscript{36} The duration of time required for the earth’s population to double had shrunken exponentially, Ehrlich explained. Whereas it had taken around one-thousand years for the earth’s population to double to a total of 500 million from 650 to 1650, there were as many


as a billion people just one hundred years later. By 1930, there were two billion, meaning a one-hundred percent increase in just eighty years.\textsuperscript{37} The global population would reach four billion by 1974. Even if one was to set aside the logistical difficulties of moving billions of people off of the planet, “it would take only about 50 years to populate Venus, Mercury, Mars, the moon, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn to the same population density as Earth,” Ehrlich observed.\textsuperscript{38} Crisis was therefore inevitable.

“It is difficult to guess what the exact scale and consequences of the famines will be. But there will be famines,” Ehrlich projected.\textsuperscript{39} In 1957 in \textit{The Fight for Food} J. Gordon Cook observed that the “lack of animal protein and vitamins in the diet of the under-developed nations has been the cause of deficiency diseases, such as pellagra and beri-beri, which are endemic in many countries.”\textsuperscript{40} Ehrlich, like Cook and Robert Baker, identified proteins as the crucial dietary component that would be most difficult to provide in sufficient quantities if the health of the species were to be maintained. It was proteins that were most commonly lacking in developing countries. “Without enough high-quality protein in a mother’s diet during pregnancy and in a child’s diet during the first few years, the child may suffer permanent brain impairment and be mentally retarded.” Other consequences included, “dwarfing, crippling, and blindness.” Ehrlich thus concluded that “protein is the key to the world food problem- it is high-quality protein which is most

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 5
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. p. 18.
expensive to obtain, both in economic terms and in terms of the ecological cost of getting it.”

In light of these concerns, there was a revival in the popularity of nineteenth-century English cleric Thomas Malthus and his forecasts that world population would outstrip the capacity to produce food, leading to a “Malthusian disaster” where famine and pestilence would reduce the number of people back to a manageable level. Malthus contended that, whereas population increased geometrically (1+2+4+8+16, etc.), the productive capacity of land only increased arithmetically (1+2+3+4+5, etc.). This was the essential basis of his predictions. Perhaps the most strident work claiming vindication of these theories was *Homage to Malthus*, published in 1975 and written by English-American historian Jane Soames Nickerson. In her bold effort to revive Malthus’ reputation Soames Nickerson goes so far as to state that “Malthus was a prophet, and prophets are notoriously unpopular.” Prophets, she explains, “possess a gift which they have to share, however beclouded by uncertainties, however unwelcome to their audience.”

Up until that point, improved technologies had meant that the world food supply had been able to keep pace with increases in population. That said, “the time of crisis is getting very near,” Soames Nickerson warned. “It seems certain, according to the competent authorities in many related fields, that in the not distant

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42 Jane Soames Nickerson, *Homage to Malthus* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), p. 9. It may be of some interest that Russell Kirk provides an introduction to this volume. One would be correct to deduce from this that Soames Nickerson was conservative in her political views. For further information on “Neo-Malthusianism” see also: Björn-Ola Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-War Population-Resource Crises* (Isle of Harris, UK: White Horse Press, 2003).
future the question of who shall have enough to eat will become a political question: to which of the hungry will the societies that possess a surplus allocate that surplus?”

Leon Bates, a former Air Force electrician and the founder of the Texas-based Bible Believers Evangelical Association remarked in *The Projection for Survival* that, “it is still hard for most people to believe that our civilization is on the brink of DISASTER.” Yet Bates’ prayers and studies led him to assert that “evidence continues to increase that Universal Famine may be our next MAJOR CRISIS.”

Bates also contended that UFOs were probably the result of demonic activities, rather than the more common assumption that they were aliens visiting the planet earth, so his view may well have been somewhat astray from the mainstream of American thought. But Ehrlich was not, and nor was the USDA, which continued to express concern about prime farmland being sacrificed for suburban commercial and residential developments- about eight million acres between 1967 and 1975- growing to as much as three million acres per year by the beginning of the 1980s. In spite of these concerns, the USDA, in all likelihood unknowingly, was more in agreement with Friedrich Engels than it was with Thomas Malthus. Engels’ critique of Malthus in 1844 remains remarkably cogent in understanding why a global catastrophe was averted in spite of Ehrlich’s

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43 Ibid., p. 16.
46 Ibid., pp. 89-91.
predictions. Engels and Marx essentially charged that Malthus underestimated the
capacity of science to increase agricultural output. “Capital increases daily; labour
power grows together with population; and science masters natural forces for
mankind to a greater extent every day,” Engels wrote, meaning that “the productive
capacity of the land can be infinitely increased.” Engels claimed that Malthus’
model of geometric versus arithmetic increases was flawed in its understanding of
historical progression. “But science increases at least as fast as population; the
latter increases in proportion to the size of the previous generation, and science
advances in proportion to the body of knowledge passed down to it by the previous
generation, that is, in the most normal conditions it also grows in geometrical
progression- and what is impossible for science?” In supporting larger
agribusinesses that had the budgets to operate effective research departments, and
altering the incentive basis away from the New Deal conception of maintaining
commodity values by creating scarcity to a model of subsidized mass surpluses, the
USDA helped to facilitate a scientific food system that would continue to yield
increasing returns.

All of that said, animal proteins were more difficult to produce than say soy
proteins, and Robert Baker expressed what were sincere and legitimate concerns at
the end of the 1970s. “Waste and starvation should not go together,” he wrote in
1978. “Hunger in the world is on the increase- a fact that is complicated by the
projection that there will be 80 percent more people in the world by the year 2000,”

48 Friedrich Engels, “The Myth of Overpopulation,” from Outlines of a Critique of
Political Economy (1844), in Marx and Engels on Malthus, ed. Ronald L. Meek (New
49 Ibid., p. 63.
Baker said, before adding that "food to supplement scarcity in industrial and developing nations have become critical issues in the United States." Baker realized that there was a large obstacle facing most of the forms of animal protein waste that he identified and that was that they were considered unappetizing. In harder times people had been willing to eat chickens' hearts and necks. But there was a readier supply of broiler meat available than ever before. In 1932 there had been a total of four-hundred-and-fifty million chickens in the United States, about three-and-a-half times the number of people. By 1978 there were 3.6 billion broilers, about sixteen per person. And who was going to eat pigs' blood? Blood sausage simply was not popular. Thus for these types of animal protein to be utilized to the full they had to be developed from their original structure and reconstituted as something more appetizing. It may even help if the original form was obscured entirely.

Robert Baker's Laboratory

For new products to be successful they had to be married to changes in consumer tastes. Baker recalled that when he conducted a survey in Syracuse in the 1960s he found that “we just weren’t giving the consumers what they wanted. Mrs. Consumer wanted convenience items and we as an industry just weren’t obeying

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her wishes,” he told the poultry industry. By 1968 Baker had developed thirty-eight new poultry and egg products. By 1985 he’d be up to fifty-two. Many of these products were based on existing red meat dishes. One of Baker’s first attempts to present further processed poultry to the public was the chicken hot dog, introduced as the “bird dog” in 1962. Mastering the bird dog would pave the way for further inventions like the nugget. “There were Germans who knew the art of making beef or pork franks, but they didn’t know how to make chicken or turkey franks,” Baker wrote. He experienced difficulties in achieving a sausage with the right texture and consistency. “They were somewhat mushy due to a fat content of 28%, and chicken meat didn’t fit the consumer image,” Baker recalled in 1985. “There’s no question we were going at it more or less blindly in the early years, simply because no technology existed for making products out of poultry meat.”

Mirroring the fat content and the method used in making red meat sausages did not work. “One of the principal ways in which chicken meat differs from beef, pork and lamb is that the skin is generally considered an integral part of the meat, while with red meats this is not the case.” Different quantities of ground skin were added to samples of chicken meat with varying ratios of protein, water, and fat. The resulting sausages would then be tested for tenderness, taste, and deformation at

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56 “No end of products we can make from poultry!” Broiler Industry, September, 1985, p. 14.
both hot and cold temperatures.\textsuperscript{58} Achieving the correct balance of skin was crucial. Tests showed that as the proportion of skin increased tenderness and chewiness did likewise, but in the process juiciness would be incrementally reduced.\textsuperscript{59} Baker reported that a threshold of twenty-percent skin had to be reached before there was any noticeable difference. “This would indicate that the amount of skin normally present in boned-out chicken (about 15 percent added skin) makes little difference to the texture,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{60} In utilizing skin, as opposed to any other ingredient, he attempted to keep the proportion of meat as high as possible. When chicken links would receive some scrutiny in the 1980s Baker would write in defense of what appears to have been his proudest invention. “I am very familiar with the production of chicken and turkey hot dogs and can assure anyone that everything that goes into chicken or turkey hot dogs is wholesome,” he explained in 1989. “Approximately 98 percent of chicken or turkey franks is meat,” he stated. Baker went on to defend the use of additives like sodium nitrite and sodium erythorbate. The former protected the hot dog from pathogenic bacteria while the latter prevented color changes.\textsuperscript{61}

Chicken frankfurters, like all sausages maintained their shape through their containment within a skin of their own. However, reclaimed and deboned poultry meat would not hold together and maintain a shape through cooking merely by being compressed. If this problem could be effectively resolved then poultry products of any shape and size could be constructed. Finding the correct binding

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., pp. 1990-1992. \\
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., pp. 1994-1995. \\
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 1995. \\
\textsuperscript{61} Robert C. Baker, “What Goes Into Chicken Hot Dogs?”
agents had to accompany an emulsifier that would suspend water and fat particles. “When chicken is cooked twice, extra water is lost and this gives a mouth feel which is described as ‘warmed up’ flavor,” Baker wrote.\(^{62}\) To counter this he built off of the work of previous studies on both red and white meats that had attempted to bind meats together using different ingredients such as salt soluble proteins, food-grade phosphates, egg albumen and gluten.\(^ {63}\) His tests in 1970 found that a considerable level of binding was achieved when sodium chloride (salt) was combined with Kena blend FP-28- a sodium phosphate mixture- and beaten for three minutes. “Beating enhanced binding in all cases,” it was stated. After three minutes of beating the texture of the broiler muscles they were testing on was affected. “The tensile strength values for this treatment combination were almost 5 times the control (no treatment),” the report reads.\(^ {64}\) Sodium phosphates also happened to be white and granular in solid form, but they were soluble, meaning that they did not alter the appearance of the meat in a way that would disturb the consumer. Beyond just helping in the binding process, sodium phosphates had the effect of stabilizing meat through the cooking, freezing, thawing, and re-cooking process. This meant that the meat would not suffer from oxidation and it would retain nutrients, taste, and color. As stabilizing agents sodium phosphates would ensure that the chicken did not become too acidic or too alkaline. Baker asserted that the binding of proteins was most successful at a mildly alkaline pH of 8.0. When the pH dropped down towards

\(^{64}\) Ibid., pp. 440-441.
acidic 5.0 proteins would carry no electrical charge and they would become inactive and insoluble.\textsuperscript{65} In contrast to the later image of the mysterious McNugget, Baker was open and declarative in his defense of phosphates. “Just compare phosphated versus non-phosphated chicken, cooked or warmed up a second time,” he instructed. “If you haven’t done so, you will have a pleasant surprise. You will become a believer. The phosphated will have a pleasant fresh flavor while the non-phosphated will taste ‘warmed up’ or stale.”\textsuperscript{66}

Baker and his colleagues at Cornell were not the first to experiment with the use of Kena FP-28, also known as sodium tripolyphosphate, in prepared meat products. In this regard they built upon the recent work of other scientists. What they did do was to devise a formula of protein, fat, water and additives whereby mechanically deboned chicken could be pulled apart and put together again in a shape that would survive the experience of cooking, freezing, and reheating. These robust products maintained the form that the processor had selected and retained the essential characteristics that were expected of meat products: tenderness, juiciness, texture and color. Whatever flavor they possessed in the first instance was not lost either. With this formula chicken could be shaped in any manner of different ways. The only limitation was one’s imagination.

Baker was not lacking in creativity himself. His creations went beyond novelty. He created numerous poultry-based products, and they would achieve varying levels of success. Chicken Chili Con Carne was not a big hit. Most were


derived from red meat dishes. “Bake and Serve” Chicken Loaf, Chicken Ham, Chicken Bologna, and Chicken Patties. Chicken Crispies, Chick-A-Links, and Chicken Hash. Others with even greater names like Chickalona, Chicken Chunkalona, Chicken Chunk Roll, and Poulet Supreme. Baker would similarly create products from other under-utilized sources of protein such as fish and egg whites. “Easy to use” Frozen Minced Fish and Fish Crispies were based upon the same concept as chicken patties and other products made from deboned poultry meat. Concerned that eggs had become singularly associated with breakfast he would design a pizza base made from egg whites. “Are Consumers Ready?” a newspaper articled asked. They were not. In spite of this he would promote the idea of chicken as a pizza topping, a trend that would eventually catch on.

**Breaking Into the Meat Market**

Many of Baker’s own design of products were somewhat anomalous. Published in scientific journals and freely available, with the exception of chicken sausages their impact was limited for much of the 1960s and this really would not change until the confluence of a series of factors at the end of the 1970s. In 1976, amidst climbing grain prices, Americans ate an all-time record 93.4 pounds of beef per person. The relationship between grain prices and beef prices is an unusual one. When feed costs appreciate, cattle farmers often choose to avoid paying higher prices.

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67 Ibid., p. 20.
68 “Are Consumers Ready? Researchers Develop Egg-Based Pizza Using Whites,” RCB Papers, #21/26/4030, Box 8.
prices by liquidating stock and selling it to market. This can lead to a short-term depreciation in meat prices, followed by a medium-term spike. The prices of smaller animals like hogs and poultry have a more intuitive relationship, rising and falling with the price of feed as stock levels are more readily adjusted.\textsuperscript{70} Between 1975 and 1980 the number of beef cattle and calves fell by sixteen percent from one-hundred-and-thirty-two million to one-hundred-and-ten million, while the average price per head increased three-fold from $159 to $502.\textsuperscript{71} In spite of the number of broilers increasing from around 2.9 to 3.9 billion, price per head was relatively stable, increasing modestly from $1.74 in 1975 to $1.88 in 1980.\textsuperscript{72} The rising wholesale price for beef precipitated a sharp ascent for regular consumers by early 1979. By April the USDA was reporting that beef prices had inflated by thirty-three percent over the previous twelve months while the National Cattleman’s Association reported the figure to be forty-two percent.\textsuperscript{73} Alfred E. Kahn, President Carter’s economic advisor on matters of inflation and a proponent of deregulation, blamed the price controls of the Nixon administration and stated that “there is very little that can be done about the situation except to let the normal forces of the market


\textsuperscript{73} Judy Hevrdejs, “Despite high beef prices: The best meat bargains this week are...”, \textit{Chicago Tribune}, April 26, 1979, p. D3.
restore the balance.”

Kahn, also a professor at Cornell, said this just as government agencies announced their intentions to reduce beef purchases in the following year-and-a-half.

An increase in the price of beef by 13 cents per pound or 37 percent between April 1978 and April 1979 presented a clear and immediate hazard to America’s legion of burger restaurants. While full-service restaurants and supermarkets benefitted from some measure of protection provided by their diversified range of products, McDonald’s, Burger King and Wendy’s business models all relied upon a high turnover of low cost beef. In order to keep pace with the new costs of basic materials McDonald’s started raising its prices by about eleven percent every year, beginning in 1977 and continuing through to the 1980s.

The economic disincentive to buy beef coincided with a certain measure of fatigue towards the standard burger menu. “A diet of hamburgers, French fries and milk shakes just no longer satisfies the fast food consumers,” said the president of Jack in the Box in 1982. Restaurant industry journalist Jane Wallace wrote that, “an ever-more demanding public has tired of the concepts that once lured them to eat at new places. Themes that were considered clever have become clichés.”

Restaurants also had to address evolving nutritional expectations. Increased interest in fitness and the idea of leading a healthy lifestyle was taking a hold in

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75 Ibid., p. D1.
77 Ibid., p. 45.
America as the 1970s transitioned to the 1980s. In a *Los Angeles Times* feature in 1981 journalist William Overend profiled what he referred to as the “gym generation,” an approach to the physique that had left Muscle Beach, had consumed Southern California, and was set to spread across the country. Overend described how the “Body Temples” of the gym generation were “mirrored palaces of chrome and glass, with new miracle machines to transform long-neglected bodies into marvels of well toned flesh.”\(^79\) The gymnasium craze could be seen in part as a reaction to the heaviness of the American diet. “We all eat better these days, the standard of living is higher, and so we all take in a lot of fat,” explained Rudy Smith, the president of Holiday Spas Health Clubs of California. “If we don’t burn that off, it turns into ugly body fat,” he added, before judiciously observing that “just watching Rocky racing up those stairs and getting stronger…That really was one of the turning points for all of us.”\(^80\) Leaving Stallone’s immeasurable influence aside, red meats quickly found themselves in an unfamiliar position. Having long been considered the central and most common feature of most meals, a counter-narrative developed suggesting they could be dispensed with entirely.

Dr. Jean Mayer was perhaps the most influential nutritionist of the time and a scientist with an accomplished record of researching the causes of obesity. In countless books and newspaper columns he advocated a balanced diet consisting of the “basic seven” food groups, rejecting the “basic four” introduced by the USDA in

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\(^{80}\) Ibid., p. G6.
1956 as too broad, and dismissing Dr. Atkins' Diet as “absurd” and a “fad diet.”81 For the increasing numbers of Americans that were seeking to reduce their size, Mayer warned against relying on high-protein, high-fat foods for a source of caloric intake. He estimated in 1981 that the caloric content of the average American diet consisted of around 12 percent to 14 percent protein, 42 percent fat, and 46 percent carbohydrates. The fat intake should be reduced to around 30% in favor of complex carbohydrates, Mayer asserted. That 12 percent of additional carbohydrates should not be made of up sugars though.82 In order to achieve this he recommended that the fifth group of the “basic seven” should be made up of “one or two servings of lean meat or poultry, fish, dried beans, peas or nuts and eggs.”83 There were eccentric exceptions like Robert Atkins with his low-carb plan, but the idea of switching towards leaner meats was in the mainstream of popular dietary thought in the 1980s.

Beef had an image problem, a costs problem, and consequently a sales problem. “Chickens are stampeding our beef customers,” exclaimed the May 1981 issue of Successful Farming magazine, warning that poultry consumption could


83 Ibid., p. I31.
overtake beef by the decade’s end. Cattlemen and packers were put on the
defensive as the direction of chicken and beef sales headed in opposite directions.
The Meat Board sought to redirect public perceptions, arguing that their product
was much leaner than it had been in the past. A spokesman asserted that, “beef is
much different than what our grandparents and maybe parents put on the table,”
before adding that “we’re trying to overcome some misconceptions.” The problem
was that they were not misconceptions though. It is very difficult to alter the basic
understanding people have of a product when it is sat before them on a plate most
days of the week. When they cook it, cut it apart, and consume it.

In order to adjust to this new reality the burger tradesmen would have to
embrace the idea of “menu diversity.” For the best part of two decades they had
been loathe to do this, concerned that additional menu items complicated and
consequently slowed service, and confident in the limitless demand for the burger
meal. New items that were not a beef patty in a bread bun had a mixed track record.
While McDonald’s Egg McMuffin had been a success, and its Filet-O-Fish Sandwich
had taken off in Catholic neighborhoods on Fridays, Ray Kroc’s untested slice of
pineapple with grilled cheese in a bun, the Hula Burger, had been a disaster.
Attempts to sell a burger-shaped hot dog had been equally unsuccessful, a
“floparoo” in the words of company CEO Fred Turner. As Kentucky Fried Chicken
and S. Truett Cathy’s Atlanta-based Chick-fil-A went from strength to strength, both

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85 N.R. Kleinfield, “America Goes Chicken Crazy,” New York Times (Business),
86 Lisa Bertagnoli, “McDonald’s: Company of the Quarter Century,” Restaurants &
fast food and full service restaurants that did not have poultry options started to add them to their menus. “Chicken seems to have almost universal appeal,” wrote Tom Strenk in 1985. “Today more than ever chicken is perceived as lighter, leaner, and more nutritious than red meat.” It was also a pretty straightforward proposition. “For the food operator, chicken has a relatively low food cost, is stable in price, readily available, and incredibly versatile,” Strenk asserted.87

Beginning in the late 1970s McDonald’s started test marketing “McChicken” menu items in Dayton, Ohio and Norfolk, Virginia. Having tried fried chicken of a more traditional variety they developed a breaded “deep crispy” offering, with production taking place in a broiler plant in Cumming, Georgia owned by the Wilson Dairy and Poultry Company, a specialist in hotel, restaurant and institutional supplies.88 They also tried out snack-sized offerings of chicken ranging from three pieces to eighteen per box. The company’s first venture into the chicken market would prove to be unsuccessful though. While Wendy’s was trying to expand its appeal by installing salad bars, McDonald’s gave the national rollout to the McChicken Sandwich in 1980.89

The 95 cent bargain consisted of a breaded chicken steak with tartar sauce and a lettuce leaf inside of a sesame seed bun. Healthy? It was healthier than a Big Mac, though it was still frozen chicken fried in vegetable oil and it was apparently boring. Two reporters from the Lancaster New Era in Pennsylvania conducted their

own survey of one hundred chicken eaters where they ranked different fried meals at fast food restaurants and ultimately concluded that the McChicken was “a loser.” How so? “The processed chicken is so bland that you simply can’t taste it,” said one participant in the survey. “Your can taste the bun, lettuce and sauce all right. But there could be anything inside that greasy breading,” they continued. “Even when we took a hunk of the breaded patty out of the sandwich and tried it, we still couldn’t taste the chicken,” they bemoaned. With disappointing sales, McDonald’s had realized by 1983 that the McChicken “wasn’t going to fly”, to paraphrase the keen wit of the Wall Street Journal. Chief Operating Officer Michael R. Quinlan said in May that, “we’ve pretty much concluded that our chicken sandwich product is not good enough. It’s not generating the results we want.” Another director explained that, “to date we still have not hit upon the formulation, patty content and distribution method which meets all of our needs.” It would be “sent back to the culinary labs for fine-tuning,” wrote W. David Gibson in Barron’s.

The McNugget Moment

McDonald’s was not out of ideas though. It was at this point that they would turn to Baker’s ideas for further processed chicken products, appropriating the

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90 “‘McChicken’ doesn’t turn on this duo,” Broiler Industry, April, 1980, p. 14.
92 “McDonald’s Executives Meet the Press,” Restaurants & Institutions, June 1, 1983, p. 100.
93 “Chef Arend and his magic wand produce the McNugget,” Broiler Industry, December, 1983, p. 82.
concept of a chicken snack food made from mechanically reclaimed meat. The closest Baker had come to a product of this type was the Chicken Stick, a breaded finger food that utilized deboned Leghorn fowl. Chicken Sticks were designed to have a high meat content as a proportion of the final product. As created by Baker, ninety pounds of poultry meat resulted in 108 pounds of product before the batter coating was added and 135 pounds afterwards. With McDonald’s exact recipe unavailable the exact extent to which they replicated Baker’s methods remain impossible to determine. Yet the characteristics of the Chicken McNugget clearly relied upon innovations in further processed poultry that were the result of experiments at Cornell from binding agents to preservatives.

After passing through taste panels to refine its taste, the McNugget went into operational testing where stores assessed the kind of equipment that would be needed for its preparation. The company then began testing the product in select markets in 1980 with limited televisual promotions on local stations. These early tests were extremely positive. Its addition to the menu led to a reported 8 percent increase in sales as a snack that accompanied other meals. The success of trials in about 1,600 restaurants convinced the company to prepare for a nationwide campaign and its addition to the menu in every restaurant in the United States by June 1983.

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It had not been a mystery in either the poultry or fast-food industries that
McDonald's was readying a product of this type, "pre-formed, battered, deboned
meat cubes." 97 It required considerable preparation to meet the logistical demands
required to sell a product on a national scale for a chain that, as of 1983, had 6,094
restaurants. 98 Processing plants required fitting out with deboning and meat
recovery equipment, often supplied by Utah's Beehive Machinery. "If you're looking
for the most simple, rugged, dependable, easy to operate deboning equipment on the
market with an infeed capacity of up to 10,000 lbs. per hour," the company professed
in an advert for the Beehive Model S-76 Deboner. 99 Improved deboning technology
allowed processors to "reclaim" bits of meat that had previously been hard to reach
and had been lost with the carcass. Keystone Foods, a two-plant company with
operations in Reidsville, North Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee, handled the test-
production of the McNugget, but for the national plan McDonald's needed multiple
partners and numerous processing plants.

The corporation was able to reach a "handshake agreement" by late 1981
with Tyson's, then the seventh largest poultry processor in the nation, a company
that claimed to have increased its sales by 3,280 percent between 1958 and 1975. 100
Tyson's already had a strong record of working on further processed chicken as well
as breaded products. Moving into the fast food market also suited Don Tyson's

98 Robert L. Emerson, The New Economics of Fast Food (New York: Van Nostrand
100 "Tyson gets 40% of McNuggets," Broiler Industry, January, 1982, p. 18; "Nation's
top broiler firms," Broiler Industry, December, 1991, p. 22; "Tyson expects to have $1
plans to diversify the company’s interests beyond their seven present plants. In addition to adding a swine division the company was seeking to aggressively expand through the acquisition of other businesses while improving export sales around the globe.\textsuperscript{101} Becoming the largest producer of Chicken McNuggets Tyson’s agreed to provide McDonald’s with around 40 percent of its needs and refit its Nashville, Arkansas plant so that it could focus exclusively on the new product.\textsuperscript{102} This would amount to around $50 million worth of produce, which would help in the “fattening of Tyson Foods margins,” wrote Gordon Mitchell.\textsuperscript{103} Reaching this agreement with a company that slaughtered approximately 3.9 million chickens every week meant McDonald’s was poised to change the culinary world forever.\textsuperscript{104}

In late 1983 it began. In a quiet library a man in a suit leans over to the librarian and whispers, “they’re here.” Unable to control her excitement the decorum of her environment is lost to her and she turns to him in shock. “They’re here!” she exclaims loudly. We move to a dark living room in which a young couple sits on a couch watching television. The girl, dressed in pink, disturbs her boyfriend who is looking to put a move on her by sitting up sharply in response to the image on the screen. “Bobby they’re here!” All thoughts of sex disappear from Bobby’s head as he excitedly sits up and adjusts his blue sweater in anticipation of going out. “They’re here?” he responds in disbelief. We then see a McDonald’s restaurant at

\textsuperscript{102} “Tyson gets 40% of McNuggets,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, January, 1982, p. 18.
night with fireworks exploding overhead. It could be any branch of the chain. Most of them look the same. People are climbing from their cars and hurrying towards the entrance. Others are departing with large paper bags in their hands.

“McDonald’s new Chicken McNuggets,” a voice sings as a polystyrene container rotates towards the camera to display the cause of such unbridled enthusiasm. “Chunks of chicken, a crispy nugget, dip ’em in a sauce,” the advert continues. “Sweet and sour,” the librarian says, smiling as she holds a McNugget in the air. “Honey,” says the girl in pink. “And barbeque,” adds Bobby, sat beside her. “Hot mustard,” the man in the suit says in a deep voice, before a pretty McDonald’s team member lays out a tray on the counter showing the three portion sizes. “Six, nine, or twenty.” “A winner,” a father prophetically declares, seated at a table with his children. All of the fifty-odd actors in the commercial, whether in speaking or background rolls, are white. This includes the restaurant staff in what appears to be an entirely segregated environment.

It was not that McDonald’s was disinterested in the African-American dollar. Far from it. They created an alternative advert to announce the McNuggets roll-out, specially designed to appeal to black people. In the “McNugget Mania Chant” commercial a group of five black teenagers sing “one McNugget, two McNuggets, three McNuggets, four. Six Chicken McNuggets taste so good you’ll ask for more.” The chant is based upon “one potato, two potato” and involves similar hand movements. “Six pieces, nine pieces, twenty pieces too, Chicken McNuggets, McDonald’s and you.” This was presumably designed to fit in advertising slots during television shows whose central appeal was to an African-American audience.
While the white ad shows people in professional and domestic settings and stresses family appeal, the black ad employs none of the same tropes. The group of youths are not even situated within the restaurant itself, they are stood outside on the sidewalk and parents are entirely absent from the scene. The ad employs two stereotypes that must have made sense to McDonald’s executives; firstly, it suggests that young African-Americans were fond of roaming the streets in large groups; secondly, that they are particularly musical. While the second assumption may seem the more benign, when juxtaposed with the white ad one is clearly left one is clearly left with the message that black people are better for entertainment than they are for professional vocations. This was not the first time McDonald’s had employed racialized advertising. As ham-handed as this effort was, the restaurant’s attempt to create something that would appeal to working class African-Americans is very clear.

In spite of, or even perhaps with the help of these advertisements and a reported $35 million marketing budget for the McNugget Mania campaign, the Chicken McNugget was a staggering success.\textsuperscript{105} Perhaps we should not treat Bobby’s awestruck proclamation that ”they’re here” with incredulity or irony. Within months of the national rollout Michael Roberts reported that “we sold enough chicken product to position us firmly as the world’s second largest chicken restaurant,” after Kentucky Fried Chicken.\textsuperscript{106} “The frozen boneless chicken business in North America has ‘gone crazy- bananas,’ since the introduction of the Chicken

\textsuperscript{106} “Chef Arend and his magic wand produce the McNugget,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, December, 1983, p. 82.
McNugget last year,” reported Ben Fiber of the Toronto Globe and Mail in September 1984. He was quoting Steve Poirier, the product manager of McCain Foods, a New Brunswick based company that was developing a frozen line of nuggets for Canada as the new snack entered international markets. “McNugget sales are running beyond our most optimistic budget projections right now,” said Gary Reinblatt, vice-president of marketing for McDonald’s Restaurants of Canada. “Our projections in the first place were wild because we had run our own tests based on the U.S. data we had,” he continued. “But we’ve even had to revise all of those figures upward,” Reinblatt said.

McDonald’s had managed to present an item that successfully met the needs of multiple eating trends that were in the ascendance. They had introduced menu diversity at their restaurants, providing lean white meat over red, while at the same time providing a snack that could be fit into increasingly irregular dining patterns. “At the chicken chains, new lunch products generally are finger foods,” wrote Restaurants & Institutions in April 1982. In capitalizing on the increased popularity of finger foods, McDonald’s had also overcome the bland taste problem that had doomed the first incarnation of the McChicken Sandwich. As the McNugget Mania campaign eagerly pointed out, boxes were served with a selection of honey, barbeque, hot mustard, and sweet and sour sauces, all designed to enhance or even obscure the relatively limited taste of the nugget itself. The omnipresent red tomato-themed sauce was a more banal option too.

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“McDonald’s has really started something,” wrote Restaurants & Institutions.

“The success of its McNuggets line has rubbed off on the entire chicken fast-food segment,” they reported.110 The senior vice-president of Kentucky Fried Chicken recognized by the end of 1984 that the “nugget business has great potential for KFC.” By 1985 KFC, which already purchased 7 percent of the nation’s broilers, was ready to get into the game with its own Kentucky Nuggets.111 “Do your chicken nuggets seem to run out of flavor when you run out of sauce?” their thirty-second commercials queried in an undisguised jab at McDonald’s. All nuggets were not created equal. This being so, you needed to “know your nuggets,” a rich voice sang.

KFC served “the only chicken nuggets with the Colonel’s secret blend of eleven herbs and spices for a taste so good you’re going to love them with sauce or even without,” they claimed. The suggestion that McDonald’s had infringed upon Kentucky’s turf pervaded their ad campaign. “You wouldn’t go to a Chinese restaurant for tacos. Or to an Italian restaurant for egg rolls. So why go to a burger place for chicken nuggets?” KFC correctly recognized the threat presented by McDonald’s. Kroc’s chain was the only company that could rival KFC’s almost unparalleled logistical capacity and access to markets in the United States and overseas.112 This meant that McDonald’s had enormous potential to eat into the market for quick-service chicken

110 “Chicken: Breakfast and sandwich program worth crowing about,” Restaurants & Institutions, July 24, 1985, p. 125.
111 “As KFC enters nugget business, supplier’s role to change, too,” Broiler Industry, December, 1984, p. 10.
112 As of 1988 McDonald’s had the second highest number of foreign restaurants for any American restaurant chain, around 2,600 to KFC’s 2,800. However the volume of sales in McDonald’s international restaurants, an average of around $1.6 million per site, was more than double the turnover at the average international KFC. Emerson, The New Economics of Fast Food, pp. 164-165.
in which KFC had to date been pre-eminent. It is difficult, and possibly futile, to
predict counter-narratives, but it seems quite plausible to suggest that the entrance
of the big burger chains into the chicken game stunted what had been to that point a
rapidly growing and unique segment of the fast food industry. At the very least it
sustained the burger joints in a time of crisis.

Burger King and Wendy’s, traditionally McDonald’s most direct rivals, would
follow suit. By the early 1980s Dave Thomas had assumed a more deferent role in
determining the future direction of Wendy’s and allowed younger men to take the
lead. Robert Bauer’s initial involvement with the company was as a franchisee, but
within fifteen years he had risen to vice-president of procurement, responsible for
the purchasing and distribution of foods for company-owned restaurants. By March
1986 he was able to reflect on how Wendy’s had acted to avert demise at the end of
the 1970s. “As our customers’ tastes have changed, Wendy’s has adapted,” he
wrote. “And that’s what success in today’s marketplace is all about- change and
adaptation.” Bauer tried to pinpoint the locus of the shift in taste. “As more women
entered the work force, our customers started to demand lighter fare,” while he
added that,“in the late 70’s, many consumers became concerned about health
considerations associated with beef. They wanted an alternative to our
hamburgers.” Though Bauer would assert that “‘me too’ products wouldn’t do,”
Wendy’s would add boneless “Breast of Chicken” sandwiches and nuggets to their
menu alongside a range of egg-based breakfast meals. His promise that “we’re
expanding our menu by developing new products” represented a departure from
Thomas’s orthodox quick-service restaurant philosophy which said that limiting the
number of items available was the surest way to achieve efficient service.\textsuperscript{113} Wendy's, Burger King, and Church's were among the nearly twenty chains to add some variation of the Chicken McNugget to their menu in the three years following its McDonald's debut.

\textbf{Industry's Beneficiaries}

For the poultry processing industry the surging demand for fast food products was a great boon. Besides making nuggets and patties for the various fast-food vendors in food courts and roadside restaurants up and down the highways of America, it really was quite an obvious move to start offering the same dishes for the home-cooked frozen food market. Their ease of preparation made them a popular product as microwave and oven cooked meals became increasing popular. “Further-processed chicken products add flexibility without a lot of skilled labor,” wrote Roberta Jones.\textsuperscript{114} In some ways the nugget seemed like quite an advanced way of consuming chicken. The bone was removed. It was breaded, which added to the tidiness of the eating experience. And it was popular among children. “Advanced, high-tech kitchens, markets, and food sources will not alter the social and cultural need to share food together- even if ‘cooking the family meal’ means gathering around a table and pressing coded buttons to activate individual retrieval systems,” observed Joanna Pruess. She went on to add that “Two qualities will

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\item \textsuperscript{114} Roberta Jones, “Chicken, Dressed, and Undressed,” \textit{Restaurant Business}, May 20, 1988, p. 236.
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prevail in the next decade: convenience and healthfulness.”\textsuperscript{115} This was not exactly the future of popping a pill that would amount to an entire meal that some had imagined, but when the digital clock of a microwave counted to zero and emitted electronic noises to alert you that it was ready it seemed quite modern and convenient.

In short time Holly Farms, Pilgrim’s Pride and Perdue, the third, fifth and sixth largest poultry processors in the United States, were joining Tyson Foods in offering lines of frozen chicken nuggets for grocery stores and supermarkets.\textsuperscript{116} These three firms had all traditionally focused on home sales, though Holly had also been a supplier for Kentucky Fried Chicken. They all saw the changes in the way in which chicken was being consumed and tried to adapt. Only one in ten chickens had been processed beyond dismemberment in 1980. With a few years of the introduction of the McNugget it would be as many as three in ten.\textsuperscript{117} In early 1985 Holly Farms launched a $6 million “Time Trimmers” campaign to promote its new one-pound bags of chicken nuggets. Breast nuggets cost between $3.49 whereas thigh nuggets were a dollar cheaper. They were accompanied by a series of twenty-minute recipes involving nugget such as stir-fry, chicken masala, and shish kebab.\textsuperscript{118}

Meanwhile Pilgrim’s Pride, based in Pittsburg in the northeast of Texas, invested in what Lonnie “Bo” Pilgrim described as “state-of-the-art” new facilities to

\textsuperscript{118} “Holly pumps $6 million into deep-chilled nugget campaign,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, March, 1985, p. 63.
produce further processed chicken. A new 75,000 square foot processing plant in Mount Pleasant was just ten miles from Pittsburg and established next to a slaughter plant capable of killing 800,000 birds-a-week.\footnote{“Bo” Pilgrim tells why he made the plunge,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, April, 1986, p.12.} Pilgrim’s Pride claimed that the new facility could roll out up to 20,000 pounds of deboned, cooked, sliced battered, or diced chicken every hour.\footnote{“Poultry Processing & Marketing,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, April, 1986, p. 34.} “There are many other integrators and deboners,” said senior vice-president Tom Garner, “but they don’t have the full arsenal of products we’re able to offer.”\footnote{“New state-of-art plant aims for foodservice,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, April, 1986, p. 18.} Garner asserted that diversifying Pilgrim’s range of frozen and non-frozen chicken products was popular with both the fast food bulk-purchasers as well as regular supermarket shoppers. The chain restaurants wanted to keep their options open. “We know these people, and I can say that they not only want more suppliers in the field, but are eager to have us enter this arena. They don’t like to be dependent on one supplier,” he added.\footnote{Ibid. p. 22.} And where Perdue had become prominent for selling leaner meat to the east of the Mississippi, Pilgrim’s would maneuver to capture the same market to the river’s west. Bo had started offering low-fat chickens because “we listen better, and respond more quickly, to what customers really want.” He explained in more detail. “I think the market is 100% ready for low-fat chicken. We’re selling both right now, because that is what our customers have requested. We do label most of our parts as ‘lean’. Our chickens are certainly 25% leaner than the conventional chicken we and others sell.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 22.}
Pilgrim’s Pride, Perdue, Tyson, Holly, and ConAgra, the largest processors in the country, scaled up their vertically integrated chicken empires to fit the new realities of the mid-1980s where Americans demanded greater quantities of poultry than before. Unlike decades past they expected the chicken to be marketed to them in innovative ways that went beyond tradition. Finger foods reflected a new approach to dining. At the same time the idea of purposefully promoting a lean chicken would have struck their predecessors as very odd. The idea was to fatten a chicken for market so that it was finished at the greatest possible weight. In order to become an everyday serving of meat that could be eaten night after night poultry sellers needed to distance their product from the image of the fat bird. These were the requirements of a generation that was thinking more seriously about ideas of health and fitness, even if it was not always acting upon them.\textsuperscript{124}

In a \textit{Wall Street Journal} article on January 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1986 as Halley’s Comet traversed past the far side of the sun, Martha Bayles reflected on the terrestrial, bemoaning the standard of political debate a little over a year after the 1984 election. She singled out television as the subject of her ire, charging that news shows were ”bite sized at best” before proclaiming that “television is to reality what the McNugget is to a whole, living chicken.” Bayles would not relent in her damning

\textsuperscript{124} One could argue that this kind of a population made for the best customers: people who were overweight and consistently concerned enough about their body image to shun red meat, but never quite active or disciplined enough to achieve the sculpted physiques demonstrated on magazine covers and on MTV. Shari L. Dworkin and Faye Linda Wachs conducted a very interesting study of fitness magazine covers as a cause for insecurity in their 2009 study \textit{Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness} (New York: NYU Press, 2009), concluding that the images presented bodies that were unattainable to many but encouraged the continued consumption of fitness club memberships, home work-out equipment and videos, dietary supplements, more fitness magazines, and so on and so forth.
analogy. Whose fault was it? The journalists blamed the campaign managers and the campaign managers blamed the journalists, “as if chicken farmers and franchise operators were blaming each other for McNuggets, when clearly they create a product together, to their mutual benefit.” Was it new? “Many Mondale supporters, both within and without the ranks of the media, feel compelled to declare 1984 the Year of the McNugget,” she continued, “-the flash-point election where issues and substance finally succumbed to the artificial processing, packaging and pitching of sleazoid media types.”125 What did this situation say about the American people? There were two theories. “Some media critics seem to believe the country is full of cretins who would blindly swallow a McNugget without asking what the devil it is, simply because they have been instructed to do so by a slickly designed ad.” Bayles preferred the second hypothesis. “Others say that the cretins are few, that the average consumer has a pretty good idea of how a McNugget is made, and whether or not he should swallow it. After all, he lives in the real world, where he experiences things other than television.”126 Though focused upon the state of televisual debate, which it is probably fair to assume was relatively shallow though far from 2000s levels, Bayles’ doubts about the McNugget are readily apparent. Unlike the comet, they present something of a harbinger of the concerns that were to accompany nuggets and further processed chicken in the coming decades. While the Chicken McNugget certainly bore similarities to the products to emerge from Baker’s laboratory, the criticisms that it was attracting were inconsistent with his

125 Bayles made clear that the “slezoid” types she was referring to included political strategist Lee Atwater.
designs. If you were to follow the original recipe then there was no way someone should complain about an absence of meat. Baker was always very clear about which cuts were used whether they were the necks, backs or organ meats from broilers, or the more popular cuts from Leghorns. In designing further processed chicken products he had identified sources of protein that had been eaten for centuries and only recently fallen out of fashion and made good use of them.

Just as Baker seemed to take offense when people started to question the content of chicken hot dogs, he would have been extremely disappointed at the way further processed chicken products were held in such contempt by the early-2000s. With the benefit of hindsight this seems like an unfortunately predictable outcome.

Baker’s legacy was entrusted to poultry companies and fast food restaurants, economic institutions that had objectives quite different from the Cornell poultry scientists. It was always known that the meat within a chicken nugget was fairly limited in its taste. This was why it was battered and dunked in sauces. Consequently the distinguishing characteristics for the consumer were dependent on texture, tenderness and juiciness, which were determined by the balance of protein with emulsified water and fats. If the mouth feel was satisfactory then it did not entirely matter how much of the nugget was made up of actual chicken meat. The spare parts Baker identified and the methods he developed for binding them together were of great value to the poultry industry but they quickly realized that an even greater yield of the bird could be achieved with a seemingly limited effect upon the customer’s response. The study by the doctors from Mississippi indicates that
meat companies did their best to make a small quantity of meat go further, processing chicken parts that even Baker would have regarded as sub-standard.\textsuperscript{127}

At the same time Baker may have been naïve about further processed chicken’s potential to become a dietary staple for poorer Americans. He was understandably excited about his products and proud of them. Baker and his colleagues had overcome considerable challenges in order to create poultry-based meals that were able to illicit positive responses from test panels. Much of this had been done from scratch. He envisioned these meals as new and interesting variations on traditional themes. They were healthier than red meats and they addressed environmental problems as they rescued good food from being discarded while also being freezable products that would not easily spoil. Given Baker’s concerns over waste, frozen foods, facilitated by the proliferation of home freezer units, were a progressive step into the future. In contrast to contemporary writers like Carlo Petrini, Anthony Winson, and Michael Pollan, he was a dedicated believer in the capacity for technological change to improve the efficiency and utility of the food system, at the same time making a balanced diet affordable for everyone. Baker may have been so enamored by his own inventions that they created a blind spot. He never seemed to spend too much time considering who it was that would become the primary consumers of further processed chicken. By introducing a new form of cheaper proteins that could be stretched further and further through manipulation within the factory, chicken nuggets would become more than just a supplement to existing forms of meat consumption. For those in the most pressing

\textsuperscript{127} deShazo, Bigler, and Skipworth, “The Autopsy of Chicken Nuggets Reads ‘Chicken Little,’” p. 1018.
economic circumstances they were one of the lowest-cost alternatives to longer-standing forms of protein, a fattier substitute that was easy to reheat and which held widespread appeal among children.

Over the course of the twentieth century the primary issues pertaining to the diets of America’s poor had evolved. The adulteration of foods in the early 1900s was seen as the activity of rogues, attempting to stretch a product further, alter color and taste, and otherwise deceive the purchasers. While the FDA had arrested many of the immediate risks to health associated with processed foods of the time, by the late twentieth century many of the same original objectives of processors could be achieved through legal and authorized means. Rancidness in meat was rarely a concern. Coloring in food was safe and straightforward, if still misleading. Neither was a mere capacity to obtain calories or even proteins the central issue. Cheap foods were available in every convenience store. The McNugget had filled a void. It was also available with honey, barbeque, hot mustard, and sweet and sour sauces.
Chapter 7

Managing Imperial Food Products and Managing Without It

A week after the Imperial Food Products fire Jeff Holland from the Rockingham-based Richmond Journal interviewed Bobby Quick. Many workers were waiting to learn whether the plant would re-open and considering their options but Quick, who had kicked open the break room door to escape the inferno, had resolved that he would not return to work for the company. Holland asked him if he believed anything positive could come from the tragedy. Quick’s response was brief and to the point. “No.”

From the perspective of many Imperial Food Products employees this was undoubtedly true. On the day after the fire a Shoney’s truck arrived at the burnt out plant to try and retrieve any chicken that remained. It would not return thereafter. Both those that had been working on September 3 and survived, and the relatives of the deceased, had a strong legal case against the company for its negligence. To the consternation of local lawyers and the State Bar, the famous Washington tort lawyer John Coale quickly arrived in town and started acquiring clients. The husband of then CNN legal commentator Greta van Susteren, Coale was a self-proclaimed

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2 Ricki Morell and David Perlmutt, “In panic of racing fire, fate chose victims, survivors in split seconds,” Charlotte Observer, September 8, 1991, p. 11A.
“troublemaker” who “specializes in prime-time disasters” and had, “raised the art of ambulance-chasing to a new high-spending” in his search for cases, wrote Stephanie Mansfield of the Washington Post.4 Despite the prospect of a payoff at some point in the future from the struggling company, many had suffered permanent physical effects and after the company announced that the plant was finished on October 9, many were simply unemployed. “We’re on our own now,” was the reaction of Elaine Griffin, an employee of four years, as she worried about the expenses of the coming Christmas season.5 The prospects for new opportunities in Richmond County were indeed poor. The most significant project planned for the area was a nuclear waste dump housing cooling pools for spent fuel rods from across the South. Though the state had agreed to accept the facility as far back as 1987, and the North Carolina Radioactive Waste Management Authority had selected sites in 1990, Richmond was opposed to the project and would ally with other proposed counties and environmental protesters to tie up the issue with litigation for years to come.6 A nuclear waste dump would not have provided appropriate opportunities for semi-skilled employment in any event.

While a handful of the survivors of the fire would become public speakers and advocates of safer workplaces in the following year, Bobby Quick may have been expressing the practical concerns of many former Imperial employees who did not want to become “a cause.” As advocates of state and federal OSHA reform invoked the Hamlet workers, they almost became more of an abstraction than a group of actual people. Workplace safety reform was not going to help them now. It was too late for that. Thus OSHA reform was proposed to serve the needs of “people like them,” not the former employees of Imperial themselves. In the rush to appoint more safety inspectors their privation became an exhibit designed to demonstrate a case for political action, not an identifiable group in need of special assistance that went above and beyond what was normal. The cameras left, the charitable donations ran out, and the blackened shell standing at 40 Bridges Street remained, an active reminder of what had happened to all that passed by. Though Imperial’s insurance company would ultimately settle for around $16 million, this assisted primarily those who were injured, rather than merely out of work.7

“Some are optimistic,” said Jeanine Wall of Hamlet’s branch of the United Way just a month after the fire. “Some are really scared.”8 Of the 215 surviving employees, ninety filed for unemployment insurance in Richmond County in November, 1991.9 A year later in September 1992 many of their fears had become a

8 Paige Williams, “Hamlet’s stark reality: No jobs,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 12, 1991, p. 4C.
reality. While sixty-six former workers were receiving compensation, around one hundred were still waiting for claims to be processed by the North Carolina Industrial Commission. Some estimated that around sixty remained unemployed. They joined over one hundred and thirty retail workers who had been let go in Rockingham, the county seat, as CSX Railroad, Hamlet’s largest employer, announced job losses of its own.\(^1\) Fifteen former-Imperial workers had remained in the poultry processing business by taking positions with Perdue Farms in Rockingham and a dozen or so others had found work in textiles, historically one of North Carolina’s largest areas of production alongside furniture and tobacco. Seventy had requested job retraining but a year later only eleven had taken a new position that resulted from further education.\(^1\)

Then there were the physical and mental effects of the fire. Local physicians reported that many who had escaped the plant suffered from respiratory conditions, and most from post-traumatic stress disorder, the effects of which included nightmares, the breakdown of relationships, and difficulties in subsequent jobs.\(^2\)

“You know you don’t be the same person,” said Mattie Fairley, whose escape from the plant had been impeded by a dumpster. “The ability you had, like it’s all torn down. Once you used to be yourself. Now, you be different.”\(^3\) Husband and wife Olin and Mildred Moates had known each other for over thirty years and worked

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10 Ibid., p. 2.
11 Ibid., p. 3.
12 Ibid., p. 4.
13 Ricki Morell and David Perlmutt, “Fire’s grip on survivors still fierce,” Charlotte Observer, August 30, 1992, p. 17A.
separate shifts at Imperial. Mildred was one of the fire’s most improbable survivors having been comatose at North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill for five weeks, suffering permanent brain damage from excessive smoke inhalation.\textsuperscript{14} Her recovery was only a limited one, unable to walk, eat, or attend to herself unassisted, her hands locked in one position, her speech slurred and sometimes inaudible. “Happy to be alive,” she observed, but Olin had been turned into a permanent care provider.\textsuperscript{15} For some the struggle was to find a new source of income. For the Moates, income was not an issue as they were being compensated and assisted, but the damage was irreparable. Mary Bryant, who had called out to God in the darkness of the plant and been spared, president of a Baptist gospel choir and a member of the NAACP, would pass away in September 1996, aged just fifty.\textsuperscript{16}

As the town of Hamlet languished, two important judgments approached on the near horizon. For many they presented the occasions by which the responsibility for the fire would finally be formally attributed. In June 1992 long-standing Democratic Labor Commissioner John Brooks would face the public ballot in the party primary. Three months later Imperial Food Products owner Emmett Roe, his son Brad, and plant manager James Hair were set to face their criminal trial at the Rockingham County Courthouse. Since the fire had taken place two parallel narratives had been established in the pages of the state’s daily newspapers and among many of North Carolina’s residents as they sought to explain what had

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ben Stocking, "The pain won’t stop," \textit{Raleigh News & Observer}, December 8, 1991, p. 12A.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Morell and Perlmutt, “Fire’s grip on survivors still fierce,” p. 1A.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Service of Triumph for Mary E. Cole Bryant, September 23, 1996, Greater St. James Missionary Baptist Church, Bennettsville, South Carolina. Box 42, NCOSH Collection.
\end{itemize}
occurred. On the one hand there was the negligent state that with a nod and a wink attracted businesses on the understanding that they would not face burdensome regulatory agencies or labor unions. In the previous two decades, forty-three of North Carolina’s eighty-three poultry plants had never seen a health and safety inspector.\(^{17}\) Whether one believed that NC OSHA was inept and mismanaged, or merely underfunded and over-stretched, Brooks was the ship’s figurehead, nailed to the bow in an uncomfortable pose with limited capacity to maneuver.

Then there were the Roes. Like Brooks they were isolated, considered villainous, without allies or defenders to turn to. Apologize, they might. Remorseful, they most probably were. But they could not be forgiven. While they bore the ire of many of the former employees who felt they had been poorly treated and that the company had not been diligent in its approach to safety, Imperial’s critics just as frequently came from the business community.

“Stating it as clearly as possible, Imperial Foods was a ‘rotten egg’ or a ‘bad apple,’” said Phillip Kirk, the president of the pro-business non-profit North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry.\(^{18}\) The president of the National Broiler Council wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* asserting that “the industry as a whole should not be held accountable for Imperial’s disregard for worker safety,” while Monroe poultryman Clayton Loflin wrote to the *Raleigh News & Observer* to request that they stop referring to Imperial as a “poultry processing plant,” given that the

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company "bought, cooked and resold poultry products." Loflin went on. “It could just as easily have been cooking fish or french fries when the tragedy happened. A more accurate description of Imperial Food Products would be ‘food processor’ or ‘wholesale restaurant.’” Loflin was clearly fighting a rearguard action to defend what he described as an industry with “a long and distinguished record of responsible service,” but the distinction he introduced was not a crucial one. The fact that slaughter and defeathering took place elsewhere did not avoid the fact that Imperial was part of the same farm to retailer food chain. What was more, Imperial Food Products was in direct competition with companies that clearly were poultry processors by Loflin’s limited definition.

At the same time the ‘rogue company’ narrative, more favorable to conservatives and business owners, was designed to ward off any hasty reforms favored by liberals. “We believe a danger for over-reaction is a real possibility,” Kirk had gone on to say, adding that they should “be very cautious about any dramatic increases in laws, rules, regulations, and governmental employees,” at both a state and federal level. “How is it possible...that North Carolina had only 42 inspectors to protect its millions of working men and women, but 225 wildlife officers to protect the state’s population of white-tailed deer and big-mouthed bass?” asked Democratic Senator Howard Metzenbaum from Ohio.

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20 Statement by Phillip J. Kirk, Jr., p. 2.
Are either of these competing narratives satisfactory? Or does the truth lie somewhere in between as a combination of the two? Beyond the immediate cause, the leaking hydraulic fuel hose, do they help us to understand what happened at Imperial Food Products in 1991? While there are elements of truth to both and the state of North Carolina and Imperial bore a great burden of culpability, these events cannot be seen outside of the historical context of developments in American industrial production and consumption, particularly where it pertained to the Southern poultry business. At the same time the poultry business had grown to maturity with a clear and informed understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and contradictions of the late twentieth century regulatory state. These are the defining characteristics on display when we examine the origins of Emmett Roe’s Imperial Food Products.

**Founding Imperial Food Products**

“These newer further-processing firms, *entrepreneurs*, unencumbered by the politics, size and weight of a large food organization, back up their dream with all of their resources,” explained William A. Haffert, in 1985. “Most large food companies, if one were to be honest, are a bit staid, lots of capital,” he added. The young insurgents were different though. “They mortgage their houses to fulfill that dream.” In entering the poultry business at this time they sought to be the benefactors of a revolution within the industry, Haffert argued, a transformation
toward further processed chicken where “demand pull” was replacing “commodity push” as the defining force.\textsuperscript{22}

This was the intent of forty-five year old Emmett Roe, originally from Troy in upstate New York, when he leased his first chicken processing plant in 1973 in Moosic, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Scranton. He made a deal with Empire Frozen Foods, a company that was also from Troy that had provided him with his first executive position in 1965. As vice-president he had run the Moosic operation for five years and learned the ins and outs of the business, sometimes even working on the floor of the plant boning and packing chickens. After a three-year hiatus in the restaurant industry, he signed a five-year deal with Empire to take control of the plant, which he would now operate through his newly formed company, Imperial Food Products. He would buy the plant for $200,000 when the lease expired.\textsuperscript{23}

Adopting the same workforce, Roe returned to a plant that had voted in favor of an agreement with the Amalgamated Meatcutters in the intervening period. “He did not like unions,” recalled Betty Shotwell, a former employee. She claimed that his demeanor changed too. “He was more strict. He was very much down to business. He knew the union would be riding herd on him.” Roe took a harder line with workers. “His finger could be in your face for an hour screaming at you,” Shotwell said.\textsuperscript{24} Others who did not work for Roe formed a different impression. A local restaurant owner described him as “a real class guy, a gentleman. Everybody

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 8A.
around him was his friend. He was just that type of guy, just a real down-to-earth, hard-working family man, a wonderful guy.”

In Moosic there was early evidence that Imperial was not a company that showed the utmost diligence with regards to the maintenance of equipment and worker safety. Following an accident in which an employee suffered second and third-degree burns after being sprayed when a hot cooking oil line broke lose, OSHA inspectors visited the plant in October 1985 and issued a series of citations. The most serious violations included exposed oil lines that were not covered by protective barriers, electrical outlet boxes suspended in the air without faceplates on them, and cords and cables that were being used in ways that were prohibited. A penalty of $1,200 was proposed and the company reached a settlement of $800. Yet much to the resentment of Roe, inspector Robert Fink returned to the plant with a second warrant just sixteen months later.

The list of violations was even more extensive in 1987. There were metal fan blades left exposed on coolers, a bench grinder that sent chips and sparks flying, exposed 110 volt electrical wires, and there were no safety instructions for

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25 Ibid., p. 9A.
26 Ibid., p. 9A.
27 U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Citation and Notification of Penalty, Inspection Number: 002080059, 10/29/85-10/30/85, pp. 1-4 (of 5), in Hearing on H.R. 3160, Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act, and the Fire at the Imperial Food Products Plant in Hamlet North Carolina, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, One Hundred Second Congress, First Session, September 12, 1991. pp. 92-95.
28 Federal Inspections of Imperial Food Products, Inc. – Moosic, PA, in Hearing on H.R. 3160, Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act, September 12, 1991, p. 60.
employees who used hazardous chemicals. Twenty citations were issued with a proposed fine of $6,030, though Imperial ended up paying just $2,580. One inspector wrote in his final report that Roe had “utter contempt for OSHA.”

Though he would ultimately wind up the Moosic operation in 1989 and sell the plant to another company, Roe had spent the intervening years transferring the base of his operation to the South, relocating the company headquarters in Atlanta.

We can speculate that his dealings with the Meat Cutters contributed to his relocation to the South; the poultry industry had centered itself for other reasons besides the region’s more flexible labor environment. The South’s mild climate allowed for year-round broiler raising, allowing processors to locate close to breeders while retaining access to rail connections, and significantly the Mississippi River, providing access to grain producing Midwestern states. Since the 1950s the broiler industry as a whole had moved south and expanded southwestward into Oklahoma and Arkansas as it gravitated toward growing population centers and cheaper production. This meant all but abandoning the Northeastern seaboard and the Great Lake states. While the Northeast produced 12.2 percent of the nation’s broilers in 1950, a quarter century later this was reduced to 5.1 percent. The states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin had accounted for 9.1 percent of American production in 1950, but by 1975 the figure stood at just 1.4 percent. In

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30 Federal Inspections of Imperial Food Products, Inc. – Moosic, PA, in Hearing on H.R. 3160, Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act, September 12, 1991, p. 60.

31 Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” p. 9A.
the same period Southern production increased as a proportion of the expanding industry from 66.9 percent to 88 percent. Perhaps a reflection of this could be seen in the repeated alterations to the title of the leading trade publication throughout the fifties, starting the decade as *New Hampshire Breeder* and finally settling on *Broiler Industry* in 1957. Poultry constituted one of just a number of industries that had increasingly moved southwards in the 1960s and 1970s, including electrical equipment, fabricated metals, rubber products, and transportation equipment. As Bruce Schulman and James Cobb have both demonstrated, these were the rewards of a wide array of tax exemptions on everything from capital improvements to the use of raw materials, and levels of state investment in industrial development that consistently ranked above national averages.

In 1980 Emmett Roe decided to purchase a second plant in Hamlet, North Carolina. With beef prices high and chicken increasingly occupying a permanent and affordable place on American restaurant menus, he sought to capitalize upon a propitious moment by expanding Imperial Food Products. As the late 1970s transitioned into the 1980s it was no secret that the poultry industry was becoming increasingly consolidated in the hands of a smaller number of major players. This

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was occurring while the industry was all the while expanding in output to meet the needs of 25,000 non-chicken restaurant units that added chicken products to their repertoire between 1977 and 1985, by the estimation of William A. Haffert.\textsuperscript{34} Increased output was accomplished through a complicated series of factors that included breeding larger broilers, increasing line speeds in poultry plants, the development of intensive and accelerated raising methods of farming, and improved rates of food conversion from grain to body weight. Whereas a 1935 broiler would take 112 days to reach market weight and would average 2.8 pounds, a 1975 broiler averaged 3.8 pounds and took fifty percent of the time to prepare and less than half the volume of feed.\textsuperscript{35}

**The Rise of Tyson Foods**

The industry leaders were changing too. In 1970 thirty-four firms were responsible for 70 percent of American broilers, but among the top six producers only two considered fowl to be their core area of competency, Holly Farms and Gold Kist. The other four were made up of Ralston Purina, an animal feed and pet food specialist, Swift and Wilson who were both old-time Chicago red meat packers, and Pillsbury-J.M. Smucker, purveyors of flour, baking mixtures, and spreads. Campbell Soup was the fifteenth largest poultry producer.\textsuperscript{36} In the 1970s business strategists like former Avis-president Robert Townsend argued that the large multi-interest corporations had become lackadaisical and unprofitable, guided by administrators

\textsuperscript{34} Haffert, Jr., “Broiler industry’s third great revolution!” p. 108.
rather than creative leaders. This critique was not directed specifically toward the poultry industry, but it appears to have been cogent where companies like Holly Farms and Gold Kist, whose sole interest and focus was upon turning out chickens, would lead the way in terms of both product and production innovations and long-term commitment.

Over time many of the multi-interest conglomerates would gradually divest themselves of their interests in the industry. By 1985 Tyson’s Foods, tenth in 1970, would be the biggest integrated poultry processor in the world. Tyson’s ascendance was less the result of innovation and more the consequence of access to capital and an aggressive approach to using it. Don Tyson, president and son of company founder John, fully acknowledge that it was Fred Lovette at Holly Farms that had influenced him to go the direction of chill-dried prepackaged chicken, leaving behind the ice-packed product. “He convinced me 11 years ago to go that route,” Tyson recalled in 1982. “He was smart, too. He knew that if there were two of us in the field, we’d both sell more because buyers would have another supplier,” he added. Through the early-1980s Tyson acquired large and small operations as he grew the business. In 1984, fifty years after the company’s founding, Tyson’s beat out Archer Daniels Midland to purchase Memphis-based Valmac Industries with its substantial Tastybird Foods division for $70 million, ranked months before as the fifth largest processor in the United States.

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38 “Tyson’s goal: $1 billion sales in 1985,” *Broiler Industry*, April 1982, p. 34.
“We’re chicken folks, nothing else,” Tyson told the Associate Press as the company acquired Poultry Specialists from grocery giant Sara Lee in 1985. “We ride all the health trends,” he went on to say, as the company sought to deepen its relationship with Burger King. Sara Lee, like Ralston Purina, Pillsbury, Quaker Oats, and other publicly traded multi-interest corporations often took the strategic approach of divesting their poultry operations when faced with the difficulty of explaining fluctuations in earnings to stockholders. Others, like ConAgra, decided to remain involved in the poultry industry, and had purchased Armour from Greyhound and acquired fifty-percent of Swift, thus taking three-quarter ownership of the two most famous old names in American meats. Towards the decades end Tyson would reverse its approach to other meats, diversifying into pork and seafood processing, but it was in 1989 that the company, now running revenues of nearly $2 billion, would acquire the jewel in its crown as the king of American poultry.

In October 1988 Tyson’s attempted a hostile takeover of Holly Farms, by this point the fifth largest poultry company in the US with $1.6 billion in sales in the previous year. The Wilkesboro firm was coming off of a bad couple of years. It had entered into further-processed production late, preferring to focus upon fresh supermarket chicken, an area of the market that had been hurt by consumer

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concerns over salmonella. At the same time the company’s bold entry into Holly Farms branded restaurants had ultimately proven to be less than successful, the final branch closing in 1986.44 Holly’s board of directors resisted Tyson’s move and sought to enter an agreement with ConAgra, the nation’s second largest poultry producer, reaching what they believed would be a favorable ratio of exchange for company stockholders while maintaining the integrity of the company. “This transaction provides our stockholders with significantly higher value than any other available alternative and also gives them the opportunity for even greater value in the future as stockholders of ConAgra,” said president and CEO R. Lee Taylor II in November. “I believe our management teams will work well together in a way that will benefit Holly Farms’ employees, customers, suppliers, and communities,” he asserted.45 Tyson’s sued and sought to invalidate the agreement in court in Wilmington, Delaware, and then returned in 1989 with an improved offer to Holly Farms’ stockholders.46 While the Delaware court ruled in Tyson’s favor, on the grounds that the proposed merger did not give stockholders the opportunity to consider both offers, Holly executives scrambled to seek an injunction of their own, fearing that Tyson would find a way to persuade ConAgra to withdraw from negotiations.47 Offering $70 per share, up from its original offer of $45 on what was then $43 stock, shareholders would reject a second attempt to merge with ConAgra

and finalize the deal.\textsuperscript{48} Don Tyson stressed the patience that had been required. “If it hadn’t been such a perfect fit, we would have gone off. But it was such a perfect fit with our company, product-wise and geographically,” he said, as the company added Holly’s nine plants to its own thirty-two, twenty-two of which were in Arkansas, and extended its market share to twenty-five percent.\textsuperscript{49}

The company that had revolutionized the way Americans purchased chicken had disappeared as a distinct entity and was replaced by Tyson’s, whose first order of business was to merge the two companies’ transportation divisions and declare invalid a successful union election of Teamsters Local 592 among Holly drivers that had taken place just months before.\textsuperscript{50} Around one hundred workers, drivers, feed mill employees, and chicken catchers, refused to work under the new conditions that they felt had been imposed upon them and were eventually fired. This case would finally be settled six years later when the US Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond would rule 2-1 in the Teamsters’ favor, validating an earlier decision by the NLRB.\textsuperscript{51} “Every change in corporate ownership cannot raise the specter of disruption in the labor relations of the company being bought or sold,” wrote Judge

Francis Murnaghan, a Carter appointee in March, 1995. Tyson’s would appeal the decision to the Supreme Court at the same time contending that the live-haul crew constituted agricultural employees under the terms of the Wagner Act. While the justices upheld the Circuit Court ruling they agreed to hear the second part of Tyson’s challenge. The Court distinguished between truck drivers and forklift drivers, yet ultimately held that both were non-agricultural employees.

With the Holly Farms takeover the Arkansas firm stood as the unchallenged leader of the industry, uninterrupted by the Department of Justice’s Antitrust Division, producing around seventy-eight million pounds of ready-to-cook chicken per week to ConAgra’s thirty-two million. Within five years Tyson’s would claim to be supplying ninety of the one hundred biggest restaurant chains in the United States as well as numerous schools, hospitals, and hotels, while exports would more than double to eight percent of its overall sales during the same period.

54 United States Supreme Court, *Holly Farms Corp. v. National Labor Relations Board*, 517 U.S. 392 (1996). Whereas the Court unanimously agreed that truck drivers were non-agricultural employees, forklift truck drivers were voted in the same category by a 5-4 decision with support from the justices Breyer, Ginsburg, Kennedy, Souter, and Stevens.
These changes in the industry had been anticipated for decades though as processors had sought to dominate growers, hatcheries, and feed companies. “I predict that, in four years, 25 operators will control 75% of the nation’s production,” said Arkansas Valley Industry’s Harold Snyder in October 1960.  

Between 1960 and 1977 the number of poultry firms fell by nearly 40 percent. As Table 1 indicates, industry consolidation continued apace throughout the 1980s as broiler companies sought to create economies of scale and produce on a level sufficient to meet the needs of the large retail and restaurant chains whose custom was essential for survival in an age when local independent vendors were no longer enough to live on and company brand goods were stocking the shelves. While strikes were rare, multi-facility companies also provided themselves with the flexibility to increase production at another plant should the need arise. During Local 525’s short-lived

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58 “We Went to the Public for Money!” *Broiler Industry*, October 1960, p. 61.
60 Ibid., p. 205.
strike in Durham in 1978, Gold Kist was able to turn for production to seven other plants across the South stretching all the way from East Texas to Northern Florida.\footnote{“Top 50 Broiler Companies,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, December 1977, p. 17.}

Furthermore publicly traded poultry processors and meatpackers were subject to pressure to merge from Wall Street. Returns on equity were steady but below industry averages and grain prices continued to fluctuate, although these affected beef and pork prices more than poultry with the chicken of the 1980s presenting a superior feed-conversion rate.\footnote{Jeff Blyskal, “Food processors,” \textit{Forbes}, January 2, 1984, p. 207.} With major restaurant and supermarket chains giving greater returns on stock, investors contended that greater scale on the part of poultry companies would redress the balance of power. It was in this environment that Tyson’s was able to consistently outperform the food industry average of returns on equity.\footnote{Laura Jeresi, “Food Distributors: In the supermarket business, the bigger you are the more money you make- up to a point,” \textit{Forbes}, January 13, 1986, p. 152.} With the introduction and rapid proliferation of checkout scanners and computerized tracking of inventory and sales an informational imbalance had been created whereby grocery chains like Wal-Mart knew more about the demand for certain products than the manufacturers themselves. As large-scale retailers developed the power to demand great flexibility of producers and drop them if their needs could not be met, they were also able to leverage wholesale prices downwards.\footnote{Nelson Lichtenstein, \textit{The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created A Brave New World of Business} (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), p. 43.} “Suppliers will never say they pay to get onto the shelf,” said retail analyst Steven Mandel of Goldman Sachs, “but it just depends which form the money is coming in.”\footnote{Mark Clifford, “The supermarket seesaw,” \textit{Forbes}, August 26, 1985, p. 76.}
In the decade from 1975 to 1985 more than five thousand companies were acquired within the food industry as the relationship between producers and retailers continued to evolve.66 “Until some fast-food chain makes a tender offer for General Motors or until the Reagan Justice Department approves a merger of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, who can imagine a piece of takeover news that would amaze us anymore?” quipped journalist Robert Reno in 1987, indicting what he saw as the administration’s relaxed attitude toward monopoly power.67 With beef prices leveling off and agricultural prices stabilizing, food companies had become a hot commodity on the stock market, “once among the most neglected entrees on the Wall Street takeover menu, (they) have become the main course,” observed Terry Bivens of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.68 Considered steadily and consistently growing investments that benefited from federally subsidized raw materials, tobacco giants Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds, both looking to diversify and concerned by the prospect of massive class action lawsuits and declining numbers of smokers, had consummated two of the largest mergers of the 1980s with General Foods and Nabisco Brands respectively. While some critics charged that the Reagan administration’s approach to antitrust action was one of *laissez-faire*, analyst Martin Sikora argued that the 1980s represented a change in emphasis away from scale or market share with a greater aversion toward pricing domination. This was in line with Reagan’s Executive Order 12291 issued in February 1981, instructing a cost-

66 Ibid.
benefit analysis approach to regulation. “Regulatory action shall not be undertaken unless the potential benefits to society for the regulation outweigh the potential costs to society,” read Section 2 (b) of that order. Nevertheless as the administration cut the budget for the Antitrust Division by 12 percent in its first year in office alone, Sikora agreed that this alteration in philosophy at the Department of Justice amounted to a “catalyst” to encourage the historic wave of mergers that took place. Robert Reno was left to conclude that “you show the Reagan administration a free market gone insane and it’ll see an apple pie every time.”

**Imperial’s Expansion**

While he posed no monopolistic threat to the American consumer, it was in this context that Emmett Roe engaged in a series of acquisitions during the 1980s, starting with an old ice cream factory in Hamlet, North Carolina in 1980. “With construction costs doubling since 1970,” Don Tyson said in an interview in 1977, “it’s cheaper to buy old facilities- and some are always available.” The Mello-Buttercup plant on Bridges Street cost $137,000, and while it took several months to refit, it offered closer access to poultry growers than the plant in Moosic. Richmond

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had been an established broiler growing county since the late 1950s when there
were forty commercial farms, many of them sizable in their capacity, specializing in
dual-purpose breeds like White Plymouth Rocks and New Hampshires, a twentieth
century breed developed from Rhode Island Reds.73 By the 1980s poultry farming
had become a highly specialized practice. Whereas 90 percent of farms kept
chickens for commercial purposes in 1920, by 1959 that number had fallen to 58
percent and by 1982 it was around 11 percent but continuing to fall as cash receipts
had increased fifteen-fold during that time to $4.8 billion.74

In selecting a location in the Sandhills of rural North Carolina, Imperial Food
Products in Hamlet was a long way from the outskirts of urban Scranton in
Pennsylvania. Even though North Carolina had seen significant capital investment
in high-tech industries in the previous year, the state still ranked forty-fourth in the
United States in median family income, in part due to the near half-million low wage
jobs in textile, apparel, and furniture. Average factory wages of $5.46 lagged behind
the national average of $7.31, and with 5.6 percent of its workforce represented by a
union, North Carolina ranked fiftieth as the least unionized state in the union.75

“People don’t love dear old Colonel So-and-So any more,” warned one of the state’s
labor lawyers to his business clients after a series of union victories in the Piedmont

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February, 1955, p. 38.
74 Janet E. Perry, David E. Banker, and Robert C. Green, *Broiler farms’ organization,
management, and performance*, Agriculture Information Bulletin, no. 748, Economic
Research Service, 1999), p. 3.
D4.
region in 1978. “The old concept of loyalty to the company doesn’t sell any more,” he added.76

That may have been so, but in the remote environs of Hamlet that loyalty had not been transferred to organized labor and Roe found a workforce that was short on education and short on options. The town’s largest employer, CSX Transportation, would employ around 1,500 when Imperial arrived in 1980 but would reduce the staff in the freight yard by nearly a thousand in the following decade. About forty percent of the jobs in Richmond County were in apparel and textile plants, producing items for Fruit of the Loom and Burlington Industries, among others.77 The hourly wages in the textile industry jobs could pay more than poultry but rates varied and there were not enough positions for everyone. The statewide average wage in a finishing plant for cotton goods in 1989 was $6.79. In a wrap knit fabric mill, $6.16. Yet in a knit outerwear mill the average was $5.44 and a job in hosiery would earn $5.11, comparable to the $5.13 average working chickens.78 The 1980s were unkind to the American domestic textile and apparel industries with the number of jobs in North Carolina falling by 10.3 percent during the course of the decade as tumbling national figures reached the lowest in fifty years.79

“They did not ask for publicity,” said Tom Smart, Hamlet’s mayor in 1980. “They came in very quietly.” As business strategists like David A. Heenan pointed out in 1991, by the 1980s technology and quality transportation networks had erased many of the disadvantages traditionally associated with locating industry in rural confines. In spite of the perpetually lower costs of real estate, access to specialized services had been a limiting factor for much of the twentieth century. Companies like Wal-Mart, Dow Chemical, and Ben and Jerry’s had managed to overcome these challenges. In his study of corporate relocation to smaller towns, Heenan wrote that, “with the new minimalist mindset, faster communications, and better market information firms can operate effectively outside the mainstream.” He was also at pains to stress that rural America offered quality of life improvements too, drawing clear contrasts with the “crumbling, graffiti-plagued infrastructure” of segregated cities like Los Angeles.

In spite of its quiet arrival people learned that Imperial Food Products was in business in 1981. The company would enter into an agreement to provide chicken for family-restaurant chain Shoney’s. The Southern based company had originally operated under the Big Boy franchise owned by Marriott, famous for its giant fiberglass roadside statues of a boy in checkered dungarees bearing a platter with a burger on it. Marriott had only granted the company the franchise in eleven states and in order to go beyond the limits of the contract they had developed the Shoney’s brand, first in the Southeast, then further afield, “growing in a ring-type fashion

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80 Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” p. 9A.
82 Ibid., p. 25.
where you go out a little further each time and by the time your restaurants get there, your reputation is already there,” explained chairman and CEO Ray Danner.83

The company had pursued a cautious approach to expansion, building through cash flow rather than loans, and owning a diversified portfolio of restaurant brands. Less than half of the 1,084 facilities owned by Shoney’s in 1984 carried the Shoney’s brand in the driveway, but the company was ranked seventeenth in restaurants by the mid-eighties, had strung together over one-hundred consecutive quarters of record profits, and averaged twenty-three percent growth in revenues each year since 1978.84 By 1990 the company had spread into the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions and numbered around 1,663 restaurants, 715 of which were company owned.85 By contracting to Shoney’s, Imperial Food Products appeared positioned to profit from the upsurge in chain restaurants and the growing appetite for further processed chicken. “They were a very, very important supplier,” said Shoney’s vice president responsible for purchasing in 1991.86

Imperial Food Products was not done there though. With Shoney’s as a client Roe sought to expand the company further, obtaining three further plants and eventually producing more than half of the restaurant chain’s supply of breaded tenders and breasts.87 Imperial would briefly operate a plant in Denver for two years before it closed down. Then in 1988 he would purchase a plant from Haverpride Farms in Birmingham, Alabama, and follow this with a plant in

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84 Ibid.
86 Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” p. 8A.
87 Ibid., p. 8A.
Cumming in Forsyth County, Georgia a year later, just as the Moosic operation was winding down. Forsyth County had a special reputation of its own. Twenty-five thousand protesters held a civil rights march in January 1987, seventy-five years after a notorious series of lynchings had led to most of the county’s black residents being driven away. Greeted with Confederate flags, chants of “James Earl Ray is an American hero,” and “Niggers go back to Africa,” and copious openly displayed firearms, Forsyth County, described by one journalist as “quaint, rural,” and “racist,” had once again made news for the wrong reasons. Though an explosion of commuter subdivisions would transform Forsyth into the richest county in Georgia over the subsequent thirty years, in the late-1980s poultry was vital to the area’s economy. “You start messing with the chicken works, you start messing with a lot of people,” said Jim Avery, a local firefighter. Indeed 18 percent of the county’s residents worked in the poultry industry in 1991, including a thousand at a Tyson’s facility in Cumming.

The Haverpride plant in Alabama was another conversion. It had been a 48,000-square-foot dry warehouse, converted in 1982 into a modern further processing facility running fifteen product lines. “Because we are a state-of-the-art plant, we can offer advantages other producers can’t,” said vice president Skip Lawlor in a feature article. “We can easily handle everything from solid muscle products to ground products, from fully cooked to parfried to frozen products, from

88 Ibid., p. 1A.
90 Ken Garfield and James Greiff, “Georgians staunch in support where chicken is king,” Charlotte Observer, September 15, 1991, p. 12A.
bulk foodservice to retail packaging,” he added.\textsuperscript{91} Like Imperial, Haverpride was not a vertically integrated company: the “farms” referred to in the company name were owned by someone else.\textsuperscript{92} Yet the scope of the company’s operations made it a good fit with Imperial. Roe used a leverage buyout to acquire the company whereby $5 million was borrowed from the Northeastern Bank of Pennsylvania and the Birmingham plant was used as collateral in the loan.\textsuperscript{93} It was not unusual for poultry companies to go into debt in order to expand- this was the approach taken by Tyson’s as it swallowed up one operator after another- but Imperial did not have the same level of existing assets to fall back on and as valuable as a Shoney’s contract was, it was not as lucrative as being McDonald’s leading chicken supplier.

**Mounting Problems**

By 1989 Imperial Food Products consisted of three fully operating plants in Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina. The company headquarters were relocated from Scranton to Atlanta and Emmett Roe appointed trusted family members in key positions throughout the company, including Brad in Hamlet, son Emmett, Jr. in Cumming, and his daughter Kelly as the corporate secretary in Atlanta. That’s when things started to unravel in each of the three locations. Shortly after opening the plant in Cumming there was a fire on Christmas Day causing over a million dollars in damage, which was attributed to bad ventilation and a broken sprinkler system.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{93} Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” p. 1A.
The building had been empty of people at the time. Jim Avery, one of the firefighters called to the scene, attested that the former-salad preparing facility was ill suited for poultry processing. “It wasn’t built for that,” he said. This was followed by a series of disputes with suppliers and purchasers in Alabama. Lyle Farms, a Georgia-based purchaser of Haverpride nuggets started to receive complaints from consumers about the chicken content of the product. It is unclear exactly how the company was making its nuggets. “Some contain soy protein isolate to lower cost, depending upon customer requests,” read the 1984 profile of the company. “I’ve seen the meat that’s gone in it,” said a former Haverpride employee. “I’ve smelled it. And I wouldn’t feed it to my dog,” they added. In May 1989 Lyle Farms filed suit against Haverpride in the US District Court in Atlanta for a breach of contract. A month later in June Cagle’s, the company that had been supplying Imperial and Haverpride with 140,000 freshly slaughtered and deboned chickens every week, filed suit in the same court alleging that they were owed $504,000. While the case filed by Lyle Farms failed to go to trial and was dismissed with prejudice in May 1990, the loss of the company’s business, which would have amounted to $20 million over a three year period, left the Birmingham plant with little in the way of demand and Imperial indebted. This was compounded by an adverse ruling in the suit with Cagle’s in which the company was instructed to pay $115,000 to the supplier, though significantly less than the half-million the plaintiff

94 Ibid., p. 9A.
95 Garfield and Greiff, “Georgians staunch in support where chicken is king,” p. 12A.
97 Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” pp. 10A-11A.
98 U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia (Atlanta), Civil Docket For Case #: 1:89-cv-00911-ODE, Lyle Farms, Inc. v. Harverpride Farms, Inc.
had requested. By March 1990 Haverpride was unable to cover outstanding costs of $4,000 to the power company and the decision was made to dismiss the staff and shut down the plant. Even this was carried out in a haphazard fashion though, with employees failing to receive the legally necessary two months notice. It also emerged that the company had stopped paying its workers healthcare benefits in January but had continued to withhold the money from paychecks. When pregnant women were denied treatment under the company plan, Haverpride faced a further lawsuit filed by 115 former workers in the Birmingham District Court. The company was instructed to issue them $250,000 in severance pay.99

At Imperial Food Products the pressure was on. Reduced from three plants to two and adrift in the proverbial sea of red ink, Roe ramped up the output in Forsyth and Richmond counties. This led to increased strains on the sewage systems of the two small towns. “Your facilities’ wastewater discharge has caused more problems for the City of Cumming’s treatment process than all others combined, both industrial and domestic,” wrote the city’s sanitation engineer.100 In Hamlet the authorities twice threatened to cut off water services to the plant, effectively closing it down, if it could not bring its sewage output in line with city limits.101 These were not the only environmental hazards the company faced though.

100 Ibid., p. 10A.
101 Steve Riley, “Hamlet twice had threatened to close plant,” Raleigh News & Observer, September 19, 1991, p. 1B, 8B.
At some point in 1990 a new trash compactor had been installed alongside the exterior wall of the building, between the marinating and trims rooms and next to the loading dock used by trucks. This area carried repositories for all manner of waste from boxes and bags to inedible by-products and chicken that was deemed not fit for human consumption. With the delivery dock and the trash compactor adjacent to one another truck drivers and waste disposal men often used the nearest door for access to the plant. Federal regulations specified that all doors had to remain closed. “But you will have plants that people want to stand and look at the sun,” observed the USDA inspector responsible for the Hamlet facility. “Some of the guys want to get out and get some fresh air.” The door next to the trash compactor was discreet and so workers who were looking to take a quick unofficial break would leave the door open as they stepped outside, sometimes to smoke cigarettes next to the dumpsters.\(^{102}\)

As winter turned to spring and spring to summer this brought problems. “It was a bad fly problem,” one of the supervisors said. This had presented an issue to both management and the USDA, who “had raised so much Cain about flies, you know, and they said they were coming from the dumpster area.” Ultimately the inspector would bring the production line to a halt until the flies were remedied. “There’s seven flies back there,” he would say. “There’s five flies back there.” The inspector “would really give you a count on them.” As a consequence there would

\(^{102}\) Interview conducted by Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor unidentified USDA inspector, September 24, 1991, commencing 2.30 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 29.
be “five or six women out there with fly swatters, you know, when the job stopped,” he said.\(^{103}\)

Single mother Gail Pouncy worked in the cutting room and lost her sister in the fire. “We used to be fly killers,” she said. “We used to take turns, go around killing flies.” When they had to stop, the supervisor continued, “you’ve got people, you’ve got fifty people standing around for thirty minutes, you know. That’s really tearing you up right there.”\(^{104}\) The door to the trash compactor, which was inward swinging, was bolted and double locked shut from the outside, at which point the problem with flies was discontinued.\(^{105}\) This raised no objections from the federal inspector. “The fact that he signed off on it indicates to me that it was an acceptable solution,” said a USDA spokesman in his defense when this information emerged after the fire.\(^{106}\)

Pouncy would testify that some of the product that they put out should have been disposed of before it ever saw a restaurant. When pieces fell on the floor she was instructed to pick them up and put them back on the line. “Once it gets through that marinade machine with all that seasoning and sauce, it’s going to taste good,”

\(^{103}\) Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 8.54 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 53.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., pp. 52-53; Ben Stocking, “Life and death at Imperial,” Raleigh News & Observer, p. 9A.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 56; Interview conducted by Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor unidentified USDA inspector, September 24, 1991, commencing 2.30 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 6.

managers would explain to her. Thomas Oates worked in the trim room. He corroborated Pouncy’s account, and claimed that Brad Roe had told him to continue to process meat that was putrid. “The smell alone (was) enough to gag a maggot or send a buzzard running for a gas mask,” Oates graphically iterated. As long as the chicken was not green, they should prepare it for Shoney’s and the company’s other valued clients.

The USDA inspector disputed some of the workers’ assertions though. While he could not rule out the possibility that they had been running spoiled meat when he was absent, as some claimed, he faulted the scientific understanding of Imperial employees. Whenever line workers saw what looked like green chicken they sought to dispose of it. The inspector thought they were disposing of perfectly good meat that had merely been stained. He believed that water was leaking into the iced sixty or seventy pound boxes of chicken breasts and bleaching the flesh in places. Having passed through the spiral freezer at the plant it would assume “a greenish tint” when under lights. He had thawed the meat and smelled it and judged it to be unspoiled. “They were throwing it away by the case in there one time and as far as I know they kept throwing it away even after I deemed there was nothing wrong with it,” he told the Department of Labor.

However, “you can have a product that is wholesome, that your average person thinks is bad,” he continued. “They get real upset if you inspect it and you

107 Stocking, “Life and death at Imperial,” p. 9A.
108 Ibid., p. 10A.
109 Interview conducted by Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor unidentified USDA inspector, September 24, 1991, commencing 2.30 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 10-11.
find nothing wrong with it. They accuse you of running bad meat.” Yet he argued that freshness and edibility were not akin to one another. Beef and ham often underwent a process of aging.\textsuperscript{110} “You get some second guessing, housewives that wouldn’t eat this but that doesn’t mean you condemn a product just because a housewife wouldn’t eat it,” he said. “A poultry worker wouldn’t eat it. It could be a wholesome product.”\textsuperscript{111} Given that Imperial worked with pre-slaughtered broilers it was probably inevitable that the company would suffer greater spoilage than at a plant where the birds were killed on site. Whether or not workers were overstating the degree to which they were processing spoiled meat there was a clear absence of one consistent understanding among employees, management, and inspectors regarding what was fit for consumption. Though the USDA’s representative technically had the final say, concerns on the part of diligent employees led to what seems to have been substantial levels of waste.

This was not the only way Emmett Roe was losing his product. Multiple interviewees told the Labor Department that the company had experienced problems with theft and that at least a couple of people had been let go.\textsuperscript{112} “I have two freezers that I inventory every day, and you’re not going to come up one case off one product every other day,” said one former employee. “I’m sure it’s been

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p. 7; Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, Doug Jones, and David Poole of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 7, 1991, commencing 8.54 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 52-53.
Another long-standing maintenance engineer went into further detail. “Usually when they caught somebody, they always caught them with a 60- to 90-pound box,” he said. Imperial only dealt in sixty to ninety pound boxes of fresh chicken. The company would turn the perpetrators over to the law if given the chance. “People had got caught for stealing trash bags. A box of trash bags, you know, cost them a job in police prosecution.” One of the doors that workers from the second later shift were believed to be using was the exit next to the new trash compactor. Faced with the presence of flies- “the USDA was really throwing a fit”-and disappearing boxes of chicken, the Roes devised a very simple and effective solution to the problem. “Any of the doors that was, you know, either to lock up the plant, or the doors that were locked during operation were locked to keep people from taking chicken out,” said the maintenance engineer. He reiterated: “That was the whole purpose of the locks and the security guard.” Keys would be distributed among the managers but not production line workers.

The evidence would clearly suggest that the debt-ridden Roes, with the family business on the line, felt as if they had to fight for every pound of chicken in order to control their costs and protect their profits. Companies might well be able to reduce theft over time by engendering employees with a great sense of loyalty, but this would require time and commitment as well as expense. Time was of the

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113 Interview conducted by Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton, and Charles W. Johnson of the North Carolina Department of Labor with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, November 8, 1991, commencing 9.00 a.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, p. 25.

114 Interview conducted by H. Alan Pell, Frank Trogdon, Joe Bolton of the North Carolina Department of Labor and Mark A. Allen, Esq. with unidentified former-Imperial Food Products employee, October 23, 1991, commencing 1.00 p.m., NC Dept. of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina, pp. 71-73.
essence and locking the doors certainly came with risks involved, but they cannot have seemed more than somewhat remote. Though it was a decision that would haunt them many times over it was one that some people could clearly relate to. A couple of weeks after the fire a resident of Shelby, a town one-hundred or so miles away that branded itself as the “City of Pleasant Living” as well as being the hometown of the noted minister and author of The Clansman (1905) Thomas F. Dixon Jr., wrote to the Charlotte Observer to lend his support. Though the “accident is a real tragedy,” J. Don Shields began, “the employees who stole chicken and made it necessary for the plant to lock the doors must assume much of the responsibility,” he asserted. Not long afterwards, construction company owner Bradford Barringer would lend his support. “If there had been more honest employees, those doors probably wouldn’t have been locked,” he explained at a meeting of the Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Council. “A lot of times an employer is at the mercy of his employees,” Barringer went on. “I imagine they stole chickens just as fast as they could go.”

For some Carolinians the aged stereotype of African-Americans stealing chickens was sufficient to explain the Roes’ decision, though most stopped short of articulating the sentiments held by Shields and Barringer. That said, Emmett Roe was not the first, nor would he be the last employer to lock fire exits to keep nature out and stock within. Nor was Imperial Food Products the only facility in the state to have locked fire escapes in 1991. In the months following the fire journalists

115 “We all pay for employee theft,” Charlotte Observer, September 20, 1991, p. 8A.
from the *Raleigh News & Observer* adopted the habit of pushing on fire exits to see if they swung open while on their travels around North Carolina. Even though many organizations were presumably being extra-careful to make sure escapes were unlocked in the wake of Hamlet, a secondary escape route was found locked in the Labor Building in the state capital of Raleigh at the agency tasked with enforcing fire codes.\(^\text{117}\) Suffice to say that the department did not fine itself for the malfeasance. In a subsequent investigation of seventeen high school gymnasiums in which popular sporting events took place, eight were found to have fire exits that were chained shut, often to prevent people from avoiding the price of admission.\(^\text{118}\) Federal inspectors would find multiple exits locked at garment factories in the US possession of Saipan early in 1992, though perhaps the clear comparison to sweatshops in the Western Pacific Ocean is in itself telling.\(^\text{119}\) Yet the sense of Roe’s criminality was nonetheless framed by the disastrous consequences of his risky strategy to preserve his business.

**Disaster and the State**

In the wake of the fire Emmett Roe struggled to manage his public image. When first confronted by the media he impolitely suggested that they leave him alone through the use of a raised middle finger from the safety of his vehicle.\(^\text{120}\) He


\(^{120}\) Yandle and Barnett, “The road to ruin,” p. 11A.
subsequently issued a statement expressing sympathy for the victims’ families without admitting any liability, but continued to refuse interviews throughout, as did son Brad.  

 Barely had the embers dimmed on Bridges Street in Hamlet before Imperial’s multiple creditors demanded repayment of loans and payments that were due. The largest of these was Northeastern Bank of Pennsylvania, owed around $5 million. This left the company with the choice of filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy or acquiring substantial outside investment.  

 As details of the company’s financial tribulations became public and no investor emerged the company announced in October 1991 that due to its “inability to make an arrangement to finance its short- and long-term obligations” the plant would not be re-opening. The state penalized Imperial with $808,150 in fines relating to safety violations in December, perhaps trying to make up for its previous laxity. Imperial replied that it was “financially unable to pay even one dollar of any fine.” It was at this point that the company was forced into bankruptcy and a trustee appointed to oversee Imperial’s liquidation. When the case reached the county court in Rockingham a year after the fire, Emmett Roe reached a bargain in which he pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter, in exchange for which the charges against Brad and plant manager James Hair were dropped. He would

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121 Greiff and Garfield, “Debt dogged Imperial’s owner- then the fire,” September 15, p. 12A.  
124 Bruce Henderson, “Imperial: We can’t pay state fines, or fight them,” Charlotte Observer, January 24, 1992, p. 1C.  
receive a nineteen-year sentence with the possibility of parole after two-and-a-half, to the satisfaction of prosecutors and the consternation of some survivors of the fire. “Our research revealed that throughout the United States the longest sentence for this type of crime prior to this sentence today was 12 to 15 years,” argued assistant district attorney David Graham. “Mr. Roe was satisfied that he could help his son and his friend,” said Roe’s attorney. “I know that he feels responsible, and he is devastated that these people died,” he added. To some degree the district attorney made a valid point. Though notorious inside-traders like Ivan Boesky and Michael Milkin had been issued custodial sentences and there had been a general rise in white-color criminal convictions in the 1980s, it was nevertheless rare for a business owner to face a jail term, least of all for crimes committed against his employees. After around a half-century of slips, cuts, and falls, of hands and arms crippled in frigid and yet sweat-inducing conditions, of physical and verbal aggression, a poultryman would be sent to prison and this was unprecedented.

Some former Imperial workers had wanted to see a trial where they would have been given the opportunity to testify. Others contended that Brad Roe and James Hair should have been held accountable too. “I felt like the other two should

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127 William J. Maakestad, “Corporate Crime and Violence: Should the Boss Go To Jail?” The 1992 Annual Faculty Lecture, Western Illinois University, p. 3, Box 31, NCOSH Collection.
128 As a point of comparison Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners of the Triangle Waist Company, were acquitted of all criminal charges relating to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, though in the subsequent civil suit in 1914 they were ordered to pay $75 in compensation for each life lost. “The claimants have been tired out,” reported the New York World. “Their money and their patience have been exhausted.” Leon Stein, The Triangle Fire (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 207.
have gotten at least two years because they did what they were told to do even when they knew it was wrong,” said the mother of one of the twenty-five.\textsuperscript{129} In spite of the trauma the fire had caused, some took a philosophical view, perhaps emptied of a need for vengeance or punishment. Health and safety campaigners had circulated petitions and flyers with an image of Roe, reading “Wanted For Murder,” in the style of an at-large bandit of the Wild West. Another handout showed his head atop a chicken’s body accompanied by a bomb with a burning fuse labeled “Imperial Foods.”\textsuperscript{130} The UFCW even vowed to organize Imperial Food Products if the plant re-opened while the AFL-CIO supported rallies in Hamlet and Atlanta.\textsuperscript{131} Yet this was not reflected in the merciful attitudes of workers like Ruby Bullard, who had emerged from the smoky building injured, but alive. “That man didn’t murder those people,” she remarked of sixty-five year old Roe. “That man’s getting old, and I don’t like to see nobody locked up like that,” she continued. “Putting him in prison is not going to bring those people back.”\textsuperscript{132}

Others turned their ire toward the state though. “If the inspectors would have inspected like they should have, none of this never would have happened,” said Pamela Moore, another worker who had made it out of the fire.\textsuperscript{133} At the center of a

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\item\textsuperscript{129} Martha Quillin, “Families, survivors say Roe’s sentence too light,” \textit{Raleigh News & Observer}, September 15, 1992, p. 7A.
\item\textsuperscript{130} “Petition Demanding Indictment for Murder;” “Wanted For Murder;” “Defuse The Time Bombs,” Box 35, NCOSH Collection.
\item\textsuperscript{132} David Perlmutt and Ricki Morell, “Term stirs outrage in survivors, but some redirect blame,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, September 15, 1992, p. 6A.
\item\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., p. 6A.
\end{itemize}
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political storm was the state’s long-standing Democratic Labor Commissioner John C. Brooks, holder of the elected office since 1977. In his earlier years he had received campaign support from labor unions. The Communication Workers of America and the Boilermakers had each donated $300 to his campaign in 1976 and the CWA another $300 in 1977.\textsuperscript{134} The Amalgamated Meat Cutters Local 525 had supported Brooks to the tune of $700 from their voluntary political fund in advance of his first election, and even local president John Russell had cut a check for $125 from his own pocket.\textsuperscript{135} While the CWA provided financial support once more four years later, the Meat Cutters and Boilermakers declined to do so again and as the 1980s progressed Brooks’ more significant donors were businesses with interests in the state including telephone company Southern Bell, garment manufacturer Cannon Mills, paper company Champion International, and construction supplier Vulcan Materials.\textsuperscript{136}


Over a period of fifteen years Brooks presided over a less than spectacular regulatory regime. Between the years 1980 to 1988 a total of 1,572 workers were reported to have died on the job in North Carolina, a ratio of 7.2 per 100,000 workers, which ranked exactly at the national mean average and placed twenty-first among the fifty states. The 8.1 workers per 100 who were hurt on the job in 1990 situated North Carolina ahead of the national average of 8.8. This information was based on injuries that went reported by employers though. In North Carolina employers had the power to select the physician who would determine what constituted an injury. The National Safe Workplace Institute, a non-profit in Chicago, highlighted some of the problems with Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data in a 1987 publication, pointing to their dependence upon voluntary reporting of information. Some private assessors like the National Safety Council contended that the real number of fatalities in the workplace could be twice as high. This seemed to be corroborated by a 1986 Wall Street Journal report finding that violations of federal record-keeping laws had increased by 71 percent over the last six years as companies sought to control their insurance costs. In 1980 OSHA had


138 Ibid., p. 45.


estimated that as many as 38 percent of workplace deaths in North Carolina were not reported.\footnote{141}

Underreporting of fatalities and injuries made it more difficult to foresee areas of concern within certain industries. In poultry plants line speeds increased from around fifty birds per minute in the 1970s to ninety per minute by the late 1980s.\footnote{142} This took place very much with the support of the USDA who pursued a policy described by legal scholar Marc Linder as “throughput über alles” in which productivity trumped concerns over strain upon workers and even the department’s own inspectors.\footnote{143} Besides increasing the chance of contamination, accelerated line speeds resulted in a sharp increase in the number of recorded repetitive motion injuries (RMI), the most common of which was carpal tunnel syndrome, an intensely painful wrist injury that can linger for years and render the sufferer unable to work.\footnote{144} The number of workers receiving compensation for RMIs in North Carolina increased sharply from 145 in 1982 to 480 in 1986. As a proportion of workplace injuries, RMIs grew from 7.7 percent to 19.8 percent over the same period.\footnote{145} Data from the BLS reflected the high concentration of this type of complaint within meatpacking and poultry processing where 480 of every 10,000 workers were estimated to be suffering from an RMI in 1986, up from 164 in

\footnote{143} Marc Linder, “I Gave My Employer a Chicken that Had No Bone: Joint Firm-State Responsibility for Line-Speed-Related Occupational Injuries,” p. 68.
\footnote{145} “Repetitive Motion Injuries In North Carolina,” North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project, 1987, Box 32, NCOSH Collection.
Of course the number of poultry production workers was increasing too; 19,000 in 1947 had increased to 55,000 by 1968 and stood at around 200,000 by 1994. The rate of injuries was clearly rising at a sharper rate though.

Increasingly concerned by what Democratic congressman Tom Lantos would shortly thereafter describe as “the major occupational epidemic of the 1990s,” OSHA would take action in states that were subject to federal jurisdiction. Whatever the increasingly infirm president’s regulatory philosophy may have been, toward the end of Reagan’s second term the agency’s approach to meat processors was purposeful. In July 1987 an inspection at the Iowa Beef Packers plant in Dakota City, Nebraska would lead to 620 citations issued for willful violations associated with RMs. Finding a series of irregularities and a failure to record 1,038 incidents, a Labor Department assistant secretary described it as “the worst example of under-reporting injuries and illnesses to workers ever encountered by OSHA in its 16-year history,” as the government proposed a record $2.6 million fine. By agreeing to initiate a three-year plan designed to improve upon ergonomics, IBP was later able

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147 Linder, “I Gave My Employer a Chicken that Had No Bone,” p. 54 n118.
149 Dramatic Rise In Repetitive Motion Injuries and OSHA’s Response, Employment and Housing Subcommittee, Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, One Hundred First Congress, First Session, June 6, 1989. p. 64.
to settle at a still substantial fee of $975,000.\textsuperscript{151} The IBP case was followed a year later with a series of citations issued against the John Morrell Company, a meatpacker in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, like Nebraska a state under federal jurisdiction. As many as 880 of 2,000 workers at Morrell had sustained some form of RMI between May 1987 and April 1988 with an average time off of one day in 180 cases requiring surgery, considerably less than the thirty to sixty days recommended by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).\textsuperscript{152} “Young men and women who can no longer open a jar or lift their children are the victims of Morrell’s callous, concerted indifference,” said UFCW president William H. Wynn.\textsuperscript{153} OSHA proposed another record fine of $4.33 million, settled at $990,000 with an additional $260,000 being directed to NIOSH by Morrell, a subsidiary of Cincinnati-based United Brands.\textsuperscript{154}

In October and November, 1989 OSHA moved on to poultry with two major inspections taking place at Cargill plants in Buena Vista, Georgia and California, Missouri. Finding 113 violations at the chicken facility in Georgia the agency proposed $242,000 in penalties. At the Missouri-based turkey plant they found the same pattern of carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, and company doctors issuing hand wraps, Vitamin B6, and prescription pain killers. The proposed fine was $754,000. “We want these citations to send a strong message to the poultry

industry to start working aggressively toward reducing” the RMIs, said Gerard Scannell, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health.\textsuperscript{155}

While it can be argued that federal OSHA was endeavoring to curb the debilitating consequences that had resulted from the leeway pertaining to line speeds provided by a much larger and more powerful government entity, the USDA, it would be hard to say that John Brooks’ Raleigh regime showed the same vigilance in the face of the coming crisis. Given the patchwork of federal and state regulatory regimes overseeing American places of employment, workers’ safety was invariably tied to their geographical location.\textsuperscript{156} As of 1991 North Carolina was forty-seventh in the nation in terms of the lowest average fines paid by companies for serious workplace safety violations. The mean average of $550 compared poorly even to many other Southern states like Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi at $930, $920, and $750 respectively. Though these were federally operated programs, the state-run Virginia OSHA ranked sixteenth with an average fine of $970, while the national average stood at $1,130.\textsuperscript{157} Similarly to federal OSHA, many companies were able to reduce the cost of their citations on appeal to the state’s review board, a three-member committee appointed by Republican Governor Jim Martin and chaired by the vice-president of a wax company. The composition of the board was beyond


\textsuperscript{156} National Safe Workplace Institute, \textit{The Rising Wave: Death and Injury Among High Risk Workers in the 1980s}, p. 15.

Brooks control, but in the two years leading up to the fire in Hamlet the percentage of cases appealed had increased nearly fourfold to 24 percent.\textsuperscript{158}

A point that was consistently repeated in the months after the fire was that Roe’s Hamlet facility had never been subject to inspection by NC OSHA. “Since the day it opened 11 years ago, the Imperial plant had never seen a state Labor Department workplace safety inspector,” the Raleigh News & Observer editorialized on September 5, 1991. “What else could you expect in a state so stingy, so callous, that it hires a miserable 27 safety inspectors to police 150,000 workplaces, 15,000 of them know to be dangerous,” they added.\textsuperscript{159} The chances of seeing an inspector in North Carolina were indeed quite slim. A 1992 study by the AFL-CIO’s Department of Occupational Health and Safety found that it would take 119 years for an inspector to visit every workplace in the state, as demonstrated in Table 2.\textsuperscript{160} This situated North Carolina close to the bottom of the list again, though a decennial visit was rare in the majority of states. Yet the burden of responsibility for NC OSHA lay with multiple agents and this was part of the problem. While Brooks was the Labor Commissioner, he was elected and unaccountable to the governor who was not empowered to veto budgets passed by the legislature, the body determining funding that would be committed to workplace inspection.

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\textsuperscript{158} Joseph Menn and Greg Trevor, “Many N.C. firms able to reduce safety fines,” Charlotte Observer, October 2, 1991, p. 1A, 6A.
\textsuperscript{159} “Lives up in smoke,” Raleigh News & Observer, September 5, 1991, p. 18A.
\textsuperscript{160} AFL-CIO Department of Occupational Safety and Health, Death On The Job: The Toll of Neglect, p. 12.
\end{flushright}
Figure 7.2.: Years needed for OSHA to inspect all jobsites, 1992
In North Carolina voters directly elected the governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, auditor, treasurer, insurance commissioner, superintendent of public instruction, and agriculture commissioner as well as the labor commissioner. That was in addition to voting for president, senator, and congressional representatives, and members of the bicameral General Assembly. Without including county, municipal, or school board elections, North Carolinians regularly had to vote in as many as fifteen different contests. Until he found himself in the eye of the storm in 1991, few people really knew who John Brooks was. He was the Democratic candidate in a state in which Democrats still tended to dominate statewide office. “With so many names on the ballot for offices that most people know very little about,” wrote the Charlotte Observer in January 1992, “voters decisions in those races aren’t very well informed, and the people elected to those offices remain relatively obscure unless they become involved in some controversy.”

Besides this the light footprint of state government was part of North Carolina’s appeal to outside suitors. In a supplement that appeared in Forbes in 1990 the state boasted having attracted $22.7 billion in manufacturing and non-manufacturing investment in the past five years, ranking third in the nation. Among the “10 best reasons for locating in North Carolina” were an “Excellent Labor Environment” and “A Government That Works For Business.” The boosters elaborated. “North Carolina is a right-to-work state, with a unionization rate that is

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the second lowest in the nation.” In addition the state, “offers low workers compensation insurance rates,” the pamphlet read.163

Brooks was an undistinguished Labor Commissioner whose prickly and defensive response to the fire won him few admirers and he would ultimately be defeated in the 1992 primary. In one cartoon in the News & Observer entitled “Babbling Brooks” he was depicted as a wild stream uttering a plethora of different explanations.164 In another he is stood on a golf course, his club raised in the area and acting as a lightning rod attracting criticism that might otherwise have affected the governor or the legislature.165 Yet to a certain extent Brooks was just playing the hand that he had been dealt. Even then he charged the state with failing to provide the Labor Commissioner with sufficient discretion to make departmental budgetary decisions. “What you are asking,” he fumed, “is that we be held accountable over a system we don’t control.”166 Faced with a budgetary deficit, Governor Martin had imposed a hiring freeze on government employees in January 1991, meaning that in the period running up to the fire Brooks could not have expanded upon his staff.167 This would only be lifted in September when in the wake of the disaster in Hamlet an additional $1 million would be appropriated to hire twenty-seven new inspectors.168 In an ad-hoc response the General Assembly would pass a raft of measures in the 1992 legislative session mandating that

166 C.E. Yandle and Van Denton, Raleigh News & Observer, September 19, 1991, p. 4B.
168 Menn and Trevor, “Many N.C. firms able to reduce safety fines,” p. 1A.
companies operating in riskier industries must form safety committees, expanding protections for whistleblowers, increasing penalties for OSHA violations, and permanently increasing the state’s inspectors so that their number was in line with federal standards. These did not resolve some of the central issues facing poultry workers. RMIs did not result from violations of the law; they were the consequence of industry-wide and USDA approved procedures. If poultry workers already found it difficult enough to access the mechanisms of the state and turn them on their employers, the rapid Hispanicization of line workers that would see Mexican and Central American become the majority form of labor by the end of the 1990s would only extenuate these difficulties. As the complexion and national origins of the hands that pulled apart and cut up chickens changed over time, the experiences remained consistent.

Rebellion

How should we evaluate the historical meaning of workers’ actions taken against Imperial Food Products in Hamlet? In Primitive Rebels, his 1959 study of groups on the edge of society, Eric Hobsbawm defined what he referred to as social banditry. Employed in a discussion of Western and Southern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “social banditry,” he wrote, “a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon, is little more than endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors,

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a vague dream of some curb upon them, a righting of individual wrongs." Bandits operated in primarily rural environs on the frontiers of capitalist development and survived with the consent of peers among their class who shared some of their collective resentments. “Thus all members of the kinship community,” Hobsbawm continued, “including the outlaws, may consider themselves as enemies of the exploiting foreigners who attempt to impose their rule on them.” Who entered into this extralegal category? “A man becomes a bandit because he does something which is not regarded as criminal by his local conventions, but is so regarded by the State or local rulers,” he explained.

Writing of uprisings in eighteenth century England, E.P. Thompson similarly argued that rather than understanding crowd actions as reflexive responses to a set of common stimuli, they were “grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor.” Rebellious actions resulted from infractions upon these moral assumptions and were born of “definite, passionately held, notions of the common weal.”

Where Thompson was intending to locate these events as forms of behavior “modified by custom, culture, and reason,” Hobsbawm sought to shed light on

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171 Ibid., p. 4.
172 Ibid., p. 15.
movements that existed "not simply as an unconnected series of individual curiosities, as footnotes to history, but as a phenomenon of general importance and considerable weight in modern history."\textsuperscript{174} If European peasants were resisting burgeoning capitalism through either enabling or taking actions against private property or the state, would the underlying meaning differ if similar actions took place within a highly developed capitalist economy like the late-twentieth century United States? Is the meaning of criminal activity limited to an explanation of the circumstances that contrived to create it?

"The Chicken Hole," as some referred to it, was subject to the judgment of both black and white residents of Richmond County in 1991.\textsuperscript{175} Appeals to management for benevolence were seen as futile, subject to contemptuous rejections and the threat of termination. As employees gave unto the company their bodies and minds they received what seemed like little in remunerations. In a state whose economic model was based upon luring in outside investors like Imperial with promises of cheap land, cheap labor, and an unobtrusive approach to regulation there was little in the way of political recourse. For African Americans the history of the South was one of extended periods of disenfranchisement with occasional brief interludes wherein they received some measure of representation. In Richmond County blacks constituted a sizable minority of 29 percent in 1990, but a minority nonetheless.\textsuperscript{176} The town's elected authorities were proud of their award

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., p. 78; Hobsbawm, \textit{Primitive Rebels}, p. 10.
from the National Civic League as an “All-American City” and glad that the plant was
off the picturesque Main Street; not an enterprise to be proud of but rather
tolerated. It employed people. Not much more could be said than that.

Faced with these circumstances some employees surreptitiously challenged
the confinements of the frigid production line, evading their superiors to spend a
moment in the sun. Others went a step further though, beyond the realms of
sanctioned protest. Acting outside the law they attacked not only Emmett Roe’s
authority but also his company’s bottom line. We do not have access to the
inventory or personnel records and so cannot estimate the scale of Imperial’s losses
to theft. Nor do we know a lot about the perpetrators of theft against the company.
They very understandably remained secretive about their activities. Two had been
cought and turned over to the police prior to the fire but it would seem fair to
assume that this had not eliminated the problem, or at least the owner’s concerns, as
the doors remained locked.

We know that Imperial in Hamlet did not buy or sell boxes of chicken smaller
than sixty pounds in size and many were larger. While it would have been possible
to bundle individual chicken parts in pockets, we have testimony stating that entire
boxes were frequently missing from the inventory. Imperial only operated on a
wholesale basis and there were no company-brand packaging options for
supermarkets and home consumption. A container of that size could not be subtly
hidden up a shirt or under an apron. To remove sixty-pound boxes required not
only strength and commitment but also a considerable degree of guile, the need to
time one’s move correctly and evade anyone who could not be trusted. The
company was very clear that it would fire employees who were caught and turn them over to the police and press charges, meaning the risks were known and understood.

It would be common to characterize these thieves as acting in a self-serving manner that demonstrated little regard for others around them. It is true that they did attract suspicion and some measure of resentment from ownership towards the entire workforce. Yet, how many people does it take to consume sixty-pounds of chicken? Or even ninety? The image of the lone villain is conceivable, stashing an entire box within his freezer and then slowly working his way through it, piece-by-piece, over a period of three or four months. However it seems far more plausible that these substantial yields would have been shared among family and friends. If that were the case then this would clearly require complicity from others. Some must have been opposed to the idea of stealing as a contravention of their deeply held Christian beliefs, but when it came to the Roes and Imperial Food Products could distinctions be made? Theft can come in shades of grey that the law does not always recognize. Most people would consider there to be a difference between taking from a neighbor versus taking from a million-dollar business that was deemed capable of sharing more than it did. To steal from Imperial was an act of vengeance, maybe for some even an act of economic justice, part of the moral economy of the community.

When I raised the issue of Imperial employees stealing chicken with the former-director of Health and Safety at the United Food and Commercial Workers the question was quickly brushed away, dismissed as either untrue or
unimportant. It could easily be misconstrued as a mitigating factor, employed in defense of the company, and a point disparaging to the workers. Better to think of them as honorable victims who played by the rules. Would this make them better martyrs in the name of a stronger regulatory state? This common reading does not have to be the only interpretation though. Theft of some sort is common in many workplaces where hourly wages are low and items are portable and companies often implement prevention policies that do not risk the safety of their employees. In the early-modern world the seizure of goods on behalf of oppressed rural peoples was considered banditry and mythologized in characters like Robin Hood and Dick Turpin. Expressions of similar sentiments were on display in Hamlet. What was considered heroic and rebellious in a different time and place has been set aside as more of a social condition than a political and economic reaction. For some the promise of a secret ballot and equal protection under the law did not offer them fair recourse. They had not the economic heft to influence either of the political parties operating in North Carolina, and they only had to glance around their dilapidated workplace at Imperial Food Products to see the true meaning of equal protection. How many effective and powerful options did they have?

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177 Telephone Interview with Debbie Berkowitz, former Director of Health and Safety, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, November 5, 2013.
Conclusion

By the 1990s the United States had achieved the kind of poultry economy that most Americans seemed to have wanted with chicken consumption nearly three times greater than it had been in 1950. However it had come at a cost. Having been fairly stable for the preceding twenty years, obesity rates doubled between 1980 and 2000 to include thirty percent of the adult population. Fast food restaurants poised themselves to take advantage of heightened levels of concern over bodily image and the long-term effects of an unhealthy diet in which beef or pork were the main forms of protein. “In the last several years, fast-food chains have switched to vegetable oil for frying, added at least one chicken product to their menus and experimented with salads,” said restaurant industry analyst Harry Hansen in 1989. “The perception is that all this is healthier,” he added.

In spite of the fast food industry’s promises to provide lighter and more nutritious offerings, by 2010 two out of every three American adults were overweight. Increases in childhood obesity were even greater with rates more than tripling among 11 to 19 year olds between 1980 and 2010. While white childhood

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obesity rates increased by fifty percent, the rate of increase among black and Hispanic children was closer to one-hundred-and-twenty percent.⁴

Chicken was benefitting from being “leaner, lighter and easier to digest,” commented Bill Roegnick from the National Broiler Council.⁵ Even as poultry products contributed to the rise in obesity, Americans continued to consume more, believing them to be the solution and not the problem. Whereas fast food restaurants accounted for twenty-two percent of chicken sales in 1981, they had increased to thirty-two percent of the growing total by 1989, outnumbering sales in all other restaurants combined by a margin of over three to one.⁶

The ways in which chicken that was eaten in the home, accounting for fifty-eight percent of sales, had changed too.⁷ A 1992 survey of two thousand households found that three-quarters cooked chicken at least once per fortnight, with the average consumer dining on poultry forty-seven times a year at home. Around eighty-percent of households owned a microwave in 1992, an almost fourfold increase in the past decade, and the proportion of meals that were prepared in this kind of oven had more than doubled. While attitudes towards fried chicken had hardened over the past decade, there were few signs that Americans were actively rejecting it as a form of preparation with twenty-one percent of families cooking it at least once per two-week period, down by only two percent since 1985. At the

⁵ Key, “Chicken’s salad days in fast food,” p. 85.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
same time only twenty-percent of chicken meals had been served without a vegetable as a side in 1982. This had increased to a staggering twenty-eight percent by the early 1990s.\footnote{David Amey, “Poultry Consumption: Opportunities for Growth,” \textit{Broiler Industry}, July 1992, pp. 14-22.}

The promise of chicken as a lean and healthy alternative had not been fulfilled with the tastelessness of the oversized modern broiler being compensated for with ample offerings of fructose-rich sauces and coatings of flavor-absorbing breadcrumbs. Robert Baker’s products were available in every supermarket and fast food restaurant, but their impact was far removed from his intentions. As school meals, home cooking, and restaurant quality deteriorated and waistlines grew ever more pronounced, the general state of American public health spiraled downwards in the final years of the twentieth century. While the risks of heart disease may have become increasingly clear with major public figures, including former president William Clinton and vice president Richard Cheney undergoing significant heart surgery resulting in part from years of poor dietary habits, the crippling pains of poultry workers with busted hands and wrists were a far less conspicuous- but no less significant- problem.

In spite of efforts that were often creative and sustained on the part of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and locals like North Carolina’s 525, they were unable to create a foothold that could dramatically change the fortunes of workers on a sustained basis. As the political and economic climate evolved at an accelerating pace in the late-1970s and 1980s, the union found itself lacking a consensus on how to challenge new business leaders in poultry, beef, and pork. With the ceaseless
process of mechanization changing job specifications from one year to the next and successive waves of mergers and acquisitions, the industry landscape altered too quickly for organized labor to adapt.

In 1998 the UFCW commissioned a probe into forty-five Tyson and Perdue plants in order to assess potential union support within various workforces. Though the demographics had changed and Latinos made up one-third of Tyson’s surveyed workforce, many of the issues remained similar to those that John Russell, Emanuel Coutlakis, Laura Green, and Karen Walker had challenged years earlier.  

“The majority of workers here are white and they are very hard to find,” they observed of Tyson’s plant in Wilkesboro, the city in which Holly Farms was founded. Though there was considerable fear among the employees, the “general perception is that they don’t really need a union,” Anne Janks and Duane Stillwell noted in their report to the UFCW.  

Workers in Monroe, North Carolina, the home of another former Holly Farms facility, observed that the plant was better run under the previous ownership, and while they were willing to discuss a union they knew that previous efforts had resulted in firings.  

Janks and Stillwell also probed the Perdue plant in Rockingham, the county seat of Richmond County and six miles from Hamlet, a plant that had employed some former Imperial workers after 1991. Here employees were required to pay for their own safety equipment, fill out company surveys during their break time, and subject to considerable favoritism. Perdue frequently employed a bus-full of

10 Ibid., p. 46.
11 Ibid., p. 39.
prisoners in the plant. While two thirds of the workers said they were very much in favor of a union, the obstacles appeared “insurmountable.”\textsuperscript{12}

The Amalgamated Meat Cutters Local 272 had successfully organized Holly Farms’ plant in Richmond, Virginia, in 1969. Nearly thirty years later the union was viewed as weak among employees but it still stood and relations between foremen, supervisors, and line workers were generally good, even though there was an overall animosity towards Tyson’s. Unlike many of the other plants surveyed, Richmond was one location in which effective job rotations took place, designed to reduce the risks of RMIs.\textsuperscript{13} These four plants represented a cross section of the American poultry industry at the close of the twentieth century. As the demographics of the workforce had changed, language barriers among workers had added to pre-existing racial differences. In a minority of plants workers had a union and a modicum of power; in most they had neither. “I want to work in a plant that’s in those Tyson’s books,” one interviewee told Janks and Stillwell. “They sure look happier in them books.”\textsuperscript{14}

After The Jungle was published in 1905 it was to Upton Sinclair’s great regret that the lesson most readers gleaned from his masterpiece was not the need for socialism but the need for regulatory reform to enforce food safety standards. Sinclair’s work of fiction vividly depicted many of the risks to health and home faced by Jurgis Rudkus and working-class immigrants within the factories and slums of Chicago. During the course of the novel Jurgis’ health and physical strength break

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 42.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 2.
down as he drifts from the packinghouse to the noxious environment of a fertilizer plant until he is driven to the edge of ruin. Events in Hamlet in 1991 were not a work of fiction though, and the notion of bodies huddled in a freezer to escape the toxic fumes of a fire, of hands and feet beating at padlocked fire escapes, are no less powerful than any of Sinclair's creations. Though the political response to these events, in part embodied by the Safety and Health Improvement and Regulatory Reform Act of 1995, was ultimately misdirected and impractical, that does not have to foreclose the possibility for change in the future.

One might venture that twenty-five lives ended in a terrible disaster would be enough to illicit an effective response, but calls for improved workplace safety were not enough alone to overcome the combined might of American industry and the collective inertia of a political system craven for financial support. Many of the courser elements of the production system are rationalized on the grounds that driving down prices benefits all consumers without ever questioning whether the overall value to society makes such methods worthwhile. The abstract notion of the consumer had taken on a life of its own and achieved a political identity of great importance.

And so as Americans manage to consume over one billion chicken wings in a single Sunday every January, the production lines continues across the South from Arkanas to North Carolina. They continue at speeds of up to one hundred and

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forty birds per minute. The line stops and a cleaning team remove the feathers, blood, and entrails with high-pressure hoses. As live haul crews offload truckloads of startled birds a new shift begins and the line starts again.

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