

A GOOD IDEA ?

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It seemed such a good idea at the time – as all such ideas do ... at the time. He always had ideas, some better than others. He even had a file emblazoned 'I-D-E-A-R-S' in his filing cabinet. No matter he couldn't spell – he had ideas! I knew when I married him that life would not always be easy, but also that it would never be dull. I was a willing shadow.

Now he had a new idea After all, wasn't He a property man and wasn't this such a good buy – 10 acres with a north-facing slope, pumping rights from the creek, a rentable house and a poultry quota. As the local agent he'd enthusiastically sold all this to a local academic, who then took the contract to his solicitor. So far so good - until the solicitor advised his client not to enter into the contract because the client would be away for some time on sabbatical leave. He reasoned, He fumed, He stormed – He'd had contracts fall over before, but this ... this was just a solicitor's opinion. For heaven's sake, a solicitor's opinion – what would a solicitor know about land! And good land at that.

He fumed, stormed and paced the floor – then decided he should front the Vendor with the news. Hours later he returned, somewhat the worse for wear, and informed me that he'd solved the problem – He'd bought it himself! My reaction was totally predictable – What with? Where would the money come from?

Time passed, as it does, and more ideas sprouted.

The first dream was a small commercial crop of pawpaw. To grow good pawpaw, one should source out a local supply and use the seeds from a good fruit – and thus many pawpaw were consumed in the next few months. Finally the winning farm was chosen. This was back in the days when Brisbane had regular summer rains, and, of course, the creek was up and the crossings flooded when the 'special' case' was to be collected just after Christmas. With much drama this was achieved, and the ripe case tested. Yes, this one was really good. Many seeds were collected and washed. Then the

planting into pots started. Four seeds into a pot. One hundred pots, two hundred, three hundred. The novelty of planting wore off. Seeds were distributed with much less precision. Eventually more than 600 pots were lined up neatly.

He went off to the top of the new block and started clearing and preparing 600 holes – quite a job given the overgrown lantana and the January heat – but enthusiasm for a new project spurred him on. By late March the pawpaw seedlings were up and ready for planting out, so off we went and did all that in one afternoon. We looked at each other proudly and said ‘We’re real farmers now’. This was definitely a good idea. The dream was alive.

Next morning he went off early to check on our new plantation. He wasn’t much of a gardener, but a lot of these plants didn’t look good. In fact, many of them were falling over. Home to find me, so that I could pass an opinion – which was that clearly something was eating them just above the first node. New idea - off to the hardware shop and by late the next day, 200 metres of chicken wire enclosed the planting. He was just finishing the job when one of the local farmers called in to give him the news that this paddock had always been the place to shoot hares! Hares are hardy animals, and not one plant survived. Well, it was a good idea at the time.

The poultry quota became another interesting exercise. At the time the right to keep hens for eggs was strictly controlled, and that right went with the land and could not be sold separately. Households could have up to 20 hens in the backyard but commercial producers needed an allocated government controlled quota, with appropriate regulation and fees. On this farm it was leased to another poultry farmer. It all looked so easy – a boy came twice a week to feed out along the racks, and the farmer came each afternoon to collect the eggs. Simple. Anyone could do it – couldn’t they?

He thought I should become a poultry farmer. Forget that I had never spent a day on a poultry farm and that my experience was limited to backyard bantams. Forget that I had no business background. Forget that I had no money to put in the infrastructure to make such a business work. He thought it was a good idea ... as all good ideas are at the time ... and I was carried along by the dream. After all, it would only be a part-time activity. Just feed out twice a week, collect the eggs daily, put them in the cold

room and take them to the Egg Board twice a week. Anyone could do that, couldn't they?

It had, of course, to be seen as my business. After all, he was the property man and it could not be seen to be his business. His business was selling property. I was just 'helping out' with a little business on the side. Tentatively I absorbed the idea. Would I? Could I? Perhaps I could. I started to dream that this really was a good idea, and then it became my dream. I had never done anything much before. This would be an adventure and it all looked very exciting.

Then we faced up to the reality of what we did not have. There was no shed for the grader, cold room and other equipment we would need. So off I went to the bank and put my case to borrow \$30,000. This was 1982 and it seemed a huge amount at that time. We built a shed and a cold room, bought a grader and other equipment. Easy – when you say it quickly.

Next it was time to order hens – no doubt about it, the representatives from various companies were eager to help this novice. I learned that, under the quota system, the effective laying life of hens was one year. Since the Egg Board could not control the number of eggs laid, they controlled supply by rationing the amount of the quota that could be used in any given season, levying fees on the number of hens kept. When backyard hens come into production in July, then poultry farmers would have to cull their flocks by 20% and these dates would vary in different districts. There would be at least four changes annually in the allowed quota. Under this system, the cost effective laying life of a caged hen was 12 months. Then they had to go. I saw an alignment between growing eggs and the fashion industry - both always working 12 months ahead for replacement stock. Also eggs weren't just eggs – they were designer eggs. Did I want big brown eggs from big brown hens or more smaller white eggs from ordinary white hens? I ignored the extra cost of feeding those big brown hens in favour of their beautiful eggs, and so orders were placed with both the supplier of point of lay hens and the abbatoir for replacement and disposal of flocks. This really was exciting.

Before beginning this new adventure, I visited some local egg farms. One farmer, Tommy, was insistent that I should focus on the number 72. I understood quite clearly

that, in my fortnightly returns to the Egg Board, NO farm ever returned a production rate higher than 72%. Farms kept records for their own private purposes, but fortnightly returns were pure fiction, varied slightly according to the season and other circumstances. Remember always the magic number is 72

Cages had to be replaced in the main shed, so the first intake was only a couple of hundred hens. The excitement over the first small eggs was intense. At long last, real farmers. The dream was well and truly alive.

The next delivery of hens was more than 2000. A couple looked a little weak, so I isolated them – of course I put them at the beginning of the water line, and not at the end. In all my investigations I had relied on the assistance of the poultry rep, Glenn. I had asked about infections and other problems, and had been advised that they were rare and that I would be assisted through that. Certainly nothing to worry about.

This delivery of 2000 hens was on a Tuesday, and on Wednesday Glenn phoned to say that there was a 'bit of an outbreak' at Thornlands, and that if the hens did not look good, I should phone. On Friday I phoned Glenn and he came promptly. With the skill of many years, he took a failing bird and slit the throat. Words were not necessary. The mucus congestion confirmed that this was the same as the outbreak at Thornlands – Infectious Laryngitis – the disease most feared by poultry farmers after Newcastle disease. The farm was immediately quarantined and I felt isolated too. Yes, there was some help available – a vaccine from the Department of Primary Industries. Other farms, much bigger farms, had problems too and it seemed that vaccines were going to those farms while I watched my flock sicken and some of them die.

Vaccine is a nice clinical word and, in my ignorance, I thought that would fix the problem. I gave no thought to how it would be administered, and was dismayed to find that it was by eye drops – one drop in the hen's eye. That sounded all right ... until I started. Three birds to a cage. Open the cage, grab one bird by the neck, a drop into her eye and then grab the next one. Which bird wasn't done? And, of course, the birds did not sit passively waiting. Long sleeves were no protection from sharp claws and soon I was scratched and bleeding. He helped with some, but soon found reasons not to be there. Each vial of vaccine did 200 birds. As each vial finished I drew in deep breaths

and realised that, if I did not go on, the problem would still be there tomorrow. So on, and on, and on. Too tired even to think about the dream.

Some birds died but most recovered – but there were consequences. These birds were at a crucial point – just coming into lay - and so eggs from many of them had spots or rings on the end. The eggs themselves were good but the Egg Board decreed that such markings made the eggs second grade and the price paid was below the cost of production. More ideas were needed, and quickly.

His first idea was that the children should not be deprived of their annual camping holiday with friends to Humpy Island, off Great Keppel Island. It was her business, so chin up, and I waved them away. A week later there was a sudden heatwave in August, and my poor stressed birds were wilting. What would I do? On my own now – time to think for myself. Daybreak next morning saw me on the roof of a shed, brooming white paint to reflect the burning sun. This made me so late with the daily program that when he phoned (there were no mobile phones in 1982) I melted in tears. Somehow he had the idea that he should return, and quickly. He was back by midnight and not overly impressed by my news of painting the roof. Anyone could do that, and there he was at dawn painting another shed. He should have looked up to see storm clouds gathering, and I laughed when heavy rain washed all his paint away.

Back to the problem with second grade eggs and the Egg Board. Most farmers at that time were good farmers but not salesmen. He was a salesman so he sold me the idea of approaching a new shopping centre for supply of eggs into the fruit shop. I had never done anything like this before and was surprised how easy it was to get orders. Next it was restaurants and that was an even better idea as they wanted boxes of eggs on trays, saving the effort of packing into boxes. As chefs moved from one restaurant to another they would ring and ask to be included on the delivery run. Within twelve months, all farm production would be delivered directly, with nothing to the egg board. Within two years I was raising day old chickens to point of lay for my own supplies and selling abatoired hens to delicatessens.

On farm there were good days and bad days, as in any business. It was physical work and I was fit. My house cow was on this farm, and I milked daily as well. On good

days there was no place I would rather be. I enjoyed the illusory freedom of being my own boss and the energy that comes from working in the open air. Wet days were bad days and hired labour was frequently a problem. We even built a second dwelling on farm and brought in a manager from a Townsville farm. For a year or more Tony was the answer to most of the problems and I started to get a life again away from the farm. I still had the delivery run twice a week – that meant collecting pre-packed eggs from the farm, delivering to city hotels and leaving the city by 7.15! This was four years of experience. This was easy. I was living the dream.

Then ...overload. Tony left, deciding that he missed country life and I was on my own again. Late one cold wet afternoon in July everything was wrong. He brought in a basket of 120 eggs, exploded and threw them at the wall. I screamed, he yelled and we both wept. In that moment the dream died. The piece of paper that gave us the right to keep hens was now saleable, so the best idea was to sell the quota.

So, was it all a good idea? I could not have foreseen what I would learn in four years – about myself, people and business – and I took my reward for the effort by enrolling for a B. Bus degree with QIT. He kept on thinking.

Just remember to mark your next file I D E A R S.