

*Cooped Up with the Chickens*

*by Frederick Wickert*

My family lived on Montgomery Street in the town of Hamilton, New York. It is and was the Home of Colgate University. I had three playmates that also lived on the street. One lived next door and the other two lived at opposite ends of the street. The one next door and myself went down the street to visit the one at one end of the street. His name was Jerry.

Jerry's father was in a little higher income bracket than our fathers were, but as children, we had no understanding of such things. Jerry always had more and better toys than we did. On this occasion, Jerry took us in the basement to proudly show off his new electric train. Not many people could boast one of those.

Stewart, the kid next door and I were in awe with this train. It was set up on a flat surface covered with green felt. There were little trees, cars and people, and even little mountains with tunnels. There were railroad-crossing gates that went up and down and flashed little red lights and rang a little bell. Jerry was not permitted to run the train. His father ran it for him at times, and he happily gave us a demonstration then.

Stewart and I of course, wanted one of our own. Neither of us ever got one. From that time on, I gave my parents no peace at all. I was a first grader and I believed I was big enough to have things like electric trains. My parents explained that they cost a lot of money and they could not afford to give me one. They had three girls to support in addition to myself.

After a few weeks of trying to get that electric train without success, I went into a pout. My birthday came early in November and I thought surely I was going to get it then. I was disappointed. I no longer remember what I did get, but it was certainly not a train.

In my anger, I decided nobody loved me and I was going to run away. I didn't make any plans. I knew not where I was going. I was going to survive by knocking on doors and asking for a sandwich or piece of cake and a glass of milk. I never thought at all about shelter. Where I was going to sleep nights never entered my mind. I just decided I was going, and I took off.

I didn't get to far. I got into some ones back yard. There I found an unpainted building with a chicken wire enclosure attached to it. It was a chicken coop. The chicken coop had a door with a spring on it. One could enter from outside and then the door was shut by the spring and held shut. As a first grader, I had no idea of how to open the door from inside.

The strange small person, who had invaded their coop, startled the chickens and they began to flutter around flapping their wings. This frightened me and I began to cry. To make matters worse, it was getting dark and it was in November. I was getting cold.

I didn't know what to do. I was cold, scared and trapped in a chicken coop with a bunch of unfriendly chickens. I began to have some regrets about running away by then, and my tears increased in volume.

The owner of the chicken coop was in his house, but he could hear his chickens continue to put up a fuss, so he got up from his chair, put on a coat and hat and came out to investigate. Imagine his surprise to find one bawling little boy shut up in his chicken coop.

He asked me what I was doing in there, rather gruffly I thought. I don't remember what I told him, but he just told me to stay there a little longer and think about it. Then he left to return to his house. I then became even more frightened as I believed I was going to be kept there in the chicken coop.

After what seemed like an eternity to me, the man came back. He let me out of the chicken coop and led me around the house to his driveway. Soon my father pulled into the driveway, spoke to the man for a few

minutes after telling me to get in the car, and then he took me home where I enjoyed a warm bath and a good supper before being sent to bed.

The experience taught me that running away wasn't what it was cracked up to be, but I had not yet learned to give up on the train. I continued to beg and pester my parents for a train.

Finally, Christmas came. Under the tree was a silver train. I flung it away from me in a temper tantrum because it was not electric. It was not even a wind up train and there were no train tracks. This train, my dad had spent many hours making. He had cut the cars out of pieces of 2X4 and sanded them carefully by hand. He had made them so there was a fitting on one end of the car with a tongue and a hole. The other end of the car had a tongue and a piece of dowel rod glued to it. The end of one car with the hole fit over the short length of dowel rod on the other end of the car.

There was an engine and a caboose. All the other cars, four of them, were the same. It was a six-piece set and was made so that one could slide the engine along the floor and the remainder of the train followed the engine. My father had spent many nighttime hours in the shop making it for me. I refused to play with it. I was angry because it didn't go by itself under its own power.

Many years later I was talking to my mother. My father had passed away more than ten years before. Somehow it came up in the conversation and my mother remembered the incident well. She told me Dad had worked so hard to be able to give me a train, and that when I angrily rejected it so completely, that it broke his heart.

I felt so ashamed. By then of course, it was too late to tell him I am sorry. It was too late to make amends to him for it. It was too late to tell him how much I loved him and how much I miss him.

I hope you are looking down on me now Dad, and reading this story. I want you to know.