



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Reflections on Lola's Chicken Coop



During Indian Hill's agricultural heyday, most farms had outbuildings for equipment, storage, and livestock. Families kept a cow for dairy products, raised vegetables for their tables, and had poultry in the backyard for eggs and chicken dinners. One of the Village's last old-time chicken coops still stands at Bonnell Park on Camargo Road.

No doubt Lola Bonnell (1885–1966) tended her own chickens. Assuming she followed tradition, her fowl were free range. They had space to rove about the yard searching for food, lots of spots where they could scratch a hole for a dust bath, and they could retreat to the henhouse to perch or lay eggs.

Lola's chicken coop measured 16 by 14 feet. Constructed of wood with 2 windows on the south side, it met all the standards of a good poultry house by providing shelter and fresh air and admitting sunlight. Located on a slightly elevated portion of her property about 70 feet from her residence, the coop was close enough to observe from the eastern windows of her home. A door on the west side provided access to the building; and on the north side were 2 pop holes – which provided exit/entry for the poultry and could be closed at night. The slanted metal roof allowed for airflow through vents in the walls, and glass paned windows were covered with chicken wire. The concrete foundation and floor made it easy to clean and maintain. The interior windows were covered with cloth during cold snaps.

Though the interior is now bare, its fixtures were similar to most other coops. There were roosts – probably on the north wall running lengthwise. Here the birds perched, and removable boards below accumulated the droppings. Elevated nests were along the sides of the coop, located in the darker crannies, as hens preferred concealed, cozy straw nests to lay their eggs. A water stand and feed hopper were fixtures in the coop, and there was plenty of floor space to prevent overcrowding in winter. The floor had straw litter so that the hens' feet were kept clean. This was turned on a regular basis and changed when necessary.

Lola's birds were part of her daily life. She'd let them out in the morning and collect any eggs laid the night before. The chickens roamed about during the day, foraging on what they found in the yard – from insects to windblown grit to little seedlings. At the end of the day, she'd put some mash and table scraps into the feed hopper to lure the flock back to the coop where they would spend the night. Occasionally the hens laid eggs in a secret nook in the yard, but generally there could be gathered about an egg a day per hen until they moulted and production fell off for several months. After hens ceased to lay, they were culled and used for stew, and replacements were added to the flock. The straw collected from the floor of the coop was placed on top of Lola's vegetable garden, thus adding nitrogen. As recyclers the birds were valuable; table leftovers were fed to them and their manure was fertilizer. They also helped with bug control in the yard.

Predators were sometimes a problem. Weasels, foxes, skunks, and cats killed birds now and then, and rats burrowed into the coop to scavenge feed. These varmints were an accepted hazard of country living. Since chickens could be inexpensively replaced, the wild animal threat was not a deterrent to keeping poultry. Chickens were very useful: they were the only animals that could be eaten before birth and after death; they provided food, didn't require much labor, and were visually attractive in the yard. Their guttural clucking was a reassuring backdrop during daylight hours. Caring for the flock was about a half hour chore daily for Lola Bonnell.

Recently Lola's chicken coop has undergone renovation by the Historical Society. The building was shored up and the roof was fixed. Rotted boards were replaced. Some of the original boards still stand, and they are as wide as 18 inches. A volunteer wisteria enhances the rustic appearance of the preserved henhouse. The now vacant outbuilding remains a testament to Indian Hill's agricultural heritage.