

NOVEMBER 28, 1985

At the end of October, when Daylight Savings Time was over, I was taking my walks every evening in Mertzon. The main things I noticed about the new time standard was that the citizens seemed to be scurrying home from work at a more frantic pace and the chickens loose on the townsite were going to roost a full hour earlier than they were the week before on the old time system.

The people, I decided, were in a rush to make their favorite TV shows, plus the Monday night football games. But the chickens were a real mystery. First, I thought maybe my watch was wrong; yet under test, I found I was making my appointments and church at the correct hours.

It wasn't hard to peg the exact hour that the chickens went to roost, but it was impossible to tell if they were sleeping an hour later, or arising an hour earlier. Even in a town as small as Mertzon you can't determine whether the people awaken the chickens, or the chickens awaken the people.

Under a rural influence, man and his domestic fowls become restless after midnight and are prone to be stirring around, disturbing the peace of the community way before the break of dawn. So it's easy to see that without running a house-to-henhouse check of each individual unit, you can't tell whether it's the rooster crowing or his owner stomping around in his boots that opens the day.

One matter, however, that I can straighten out is that chickens aren't to blame for their emotional instability. Man has never given chickens a chance to calm down into reasonable animals. Once he learned that the easy way to capture them was at night with a candle, or a lantern, or a powerful flashlight, chickens have never known where they would awaken the next day. Needless to explain, this has built a psyche based on fear and uncertainty. I do want to caution against publicly making serious studies of the behavior problems of poultry. We live in a scientific age, but there is a limit to the realms of research, so it might be a good idea to keep your interests in chickens private.

In my investigation I was unable to tell if these were an exceptionally intelligent breed of chickens. Once I did see a white leghorn hen in an arcade out in California that could beat all corners playing tick-tack-toe. After a quarter was dropped in the slot under her cage, she'd peck out her plays on an electronic feed trough. The hen always won, or she did while I was watching, but I can't swear how smart she was, because I don't know how to rank her competition.

Without knowing what time the chickens are coming off their roost, I can't tie this problem down. I wish I had interviewed a few of those West Coast tick-tack-toe players when I had the chance. I think right there would have been a breakthrough at knowing more about the intelligence of a chicken.