

A LESSON AT THE TURKEY FARM

[THIRD Edition]

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

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Date: Nov 26, 1987

Start Page: 27

Section: METRO

Document Text

NORTH READING - Turkey growers have a cardinal rule: Don't fraternize with the livestock.

Turkeys are supposed to be for roasting, not petting, and the hearts beating beneath those luscious breasts are not as important as the tender meat.

A sad story unfolded recently at Seven Acres Farms here, illustrating the emotional hazard awaiting anyone who breaks this rule. A grower let down her defense and allowed herself to be seduced by an affectionate turkey. She hardly could be blamed -- he was a handsome tom, with a flashy red comb and fine white feathers.

Susan Magliozzi noticed him a few months ago, in pen B, when he was young and Thanksgiving was but a faraway date on the calendar. The sun was warm and the air pungent with turkey. Everything seemed possible.

"I'd go in to feed in this pen and he'd follow me around," said Magliozzi. "I could tell it was him by the way his beak was cut."

Turkeys have their beaks snipped at an early age to keep them from marking themselves and one another. This turkey's beak grew back slightly and peeled back, creating a rakish effect.

Magliozzi said she began to look forward to seeing the turkey with the distinctive beak. He kept her company, following her from feeder to feeder.

"I'd pet him," said Magliozzi. "He was very gentle. He never hurt me or bit me. He thought I was his girlfriend."

The Magliozzi family is in its 50th year of raising turkeys at Seven Acres Farm. Raymond Magliozzi, 82, and his wife, Susan, are the founders and remain active in the operation. But the bulk of the work is done by their son, Paul, and his wife, Susan.

It is the younger Susan, 28, who, against the warning of her husband and mother-in-law, took up with the turkey. She named him Gregory.

"That came out of the clear blue," said Susan Magliozzi. "I was going to call him Tom, but that seemed too obvious. I don't know anybody named Gregory who would have been upset I used that name, so I called him that."

Magliozzi's mother-in-law warned her she was going to be hurt. Susan Magliozzi asked her husband about keeping Gregory as a pet; Paul Magliozzi told her she was crazy.

Last week, the annual forced march of turkeys began from pens to slaughterhouse. Seven Acres

Farm sells about 1,300 Thanksgiving turkeys raised on natural grain and dairy nutrients.

The turkey drive covers about 100 yards, with all the whistling, shouting and "yee-hawing" that accompany a cattle drive. The turkeys are herded in five groups of about 250.

The scene at the slaughterhouse is not pretty. First, the turkeys are knocked out by an electric prod and hung upside down by their legs. Necks are cut, and blood is drained. Carcasses are plunged into hot water to loosen feathers, and then proceed into a machine that spins at high speed to remove the feathers.

The newly bare birds are hung by their legs and their heads snipped off. Cleansed in cold running water, they move to the eviscerating table, where insides are removed. Necks, gizzards, hearts and livers are wrapped and returned to the inner cavities.

The process is humane -- the electric prod spares the turkeys pain, said chief eviscerator Mark Ryland.

Gregory was among the first group of turkeys herded last week, Susan Magliozzi said. His head was erect and his beak firm as he covered the 100 yards, she said.

Magliozzi could not watch. She closed her eyes and went to her station as neck-snipper. She hoped that the bare poultry hung before her would be unrecognizable. But then her heart stuck in her throat: Upside down was a familiar peeled-back beak.

She handed the neck-snipper to a colleague.

"I couldn't do it," she said.

The others were right, after all, Magliozzi said. It is foolish to get attached to a turkey.

"I'll never do it again," she vowed.

But the story of Gregory is not entirely sad, she said. He was one of their largest turkeys, a 35-pounder. Turkeys of that size are sold to restaurants or special customers planning large gatherings. Gregory, and other large turkeys, are known as "party birds."

"He ended up at a great big party," said Magliozzi. "I'm sure

he's going to make somebody happy." MARANT;11/23 LDRISC;
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Illustration

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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