

THE COSTS OF RAISING IT YOURSELF

As those of you who have been badgered by me already know, I've been working on a piece about home-raised beef. My interest in the subject was sparked by our own experience: we were given two steers (Holstein) about seven months old by a dairy farming friend who owed Tom a favor. One of these animals we butchered ourselves at about ten months of age. He was very lean (definitely the sort approved by the American Heart Association), and therefore, a bit tough, but the flavor of the meat was excellent. Dressed out, not including head, hooves, hide, etc., he cost us about 16 cents a pound. Can't beat that, even taking into consideration the fact that a young animal seems to have a higher proportion of bone to meat.

A year later, we butchered the second steer. He was both fatter and meatier and dressed out at about 34 cents a pound. Needless to say, this cost includes only hay, grain and salt blocks--not barns, fencing, collars and other miscellaneous items which remain behind to be used again. Nor have we made any allowance for the value of the manure.

However, in speaking with Those Who Know, I discovered that the chief cost in raising a steer comes in those first six months during which our own animals were quietly passing their time in our friend's heifer barn. Our costs, then, are artificially low.

I'm still looking for people who raise their own beef, though--preferably, people who also keep records, or at least have a hazy idea what their meat costs. More than one person has told me that it doesn't do to keep too close tabs on expenses when you live "like we do." In general, Lifers seem to feel that, in raising their own, they are getting high quality rather than monetary savings. There is often some resistance to investigating costs for fear they're even higher than we suspect.

We've felt just that way about chickens. In January, 1982, when egg prices were over .90/dozen, we calculated that it was costing us, in laying mash and scratch, exactly what eggs cost in the grocery store. When egg prices went down--while feed prices held steady--we stopped figuring cost-per-dozen.

Lately, however, I went back over our records and found our hens are not quite as expensive as I had assumed. Eleven birds are in their second year of laying and two were hatched last summer and began producing eggs in December. (We also feed one rooster.) Allowing store value for the roosters we've eaten, the cost of our eggs is now .82/dozen and will probably decline as the chickens spend more time outside digging up their own food. Besides that, we still have the birds--if we ate them all now, assuming they were worth \$2 apiece, the egg costs would go down to .73/dozen. Which is probably more than eggs cost in the supermarket, but, fortunately, I don't have time to go check. When you live "like we do" it doesn't do to look too closely at supermarket prices.

-- Jane Plastino

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