

The Short and Troubled Life of Henny Penny

Or "The Dog Who Ate Poop"

A True Story by Rick Reil

It all started with my winning a chicken. A young bantam pullet to be specific. It happened one summer evening during Atomic Frontier Days. It was an annual celebration held in Riverside Park, now known as Howard Amon Park at the east end of Lee Boulevard. The event was held in Richland, Washington to celebrate the accomplishments of the activities at the Hanford Atomic Energy Works.

My dad arrived in Richland in June of 1943 and began work on the Hanford security force. My mother and my oldest sister Scherion arrived from Missouri two months later after dad had found a place for them to live. Several years later he transferred to the municipal police department in Richland as a sergeant. At that time the town was wholly owned by the government and was the bedroom community for the Hanford workers and their families.

My sister Saralyn was born in 1944. In 1948 our family moved to Potter Avenue. I was born in 1952, the last of my parents' children.

My parents, both having been born of humble means, and having endured great challenges during their teen and young adult years though the Great Depression, were the products of a society that valued self-sufficiency. Gardening, food preservation, sewing, culinary skills were all part of their makeup. We three children were raised with a strong sense of the value of work, strong values, and pride in our community and country. These values were pretty much the norm throughout Richland.

Atomic Frontier Days was a week of great community celebration. There was a grand parade, talent contest, nationally known celebrities in attendance, and many other activities. One of the highlights was the carnival and fundraising booths on Lee Street, in the park. There were many civic organizations with booths peddling wares or hosting games of chance to raise funds for numerous civic projects.

It was 1958 and I was six years old. This was a time when parents were more relaxed about the whereabouts of their children. I remember walking around looking at the booths by myself. I had earned a nickel doing some chore for my mom. It was in my pocket. As I walked by a booth I looked up and saw a gallon jar filled with water sitting on a little counter at the front of the booth. A man looked down at me and asked me if I'd like to try and win a chicken. Being six and loving animals I answered in the affirmative. He asked if I had a nicked to which I answered, yes.

He reached down, picked me up and sat me on the counter next to the jar. There were several other volunteers in the booth who gathered around while the man told me what to do. He pointed to a small bottle cap sitting open side up at the bottom of the gallon jar. He said all I had to do was drop my nickel in the jar and if it landed in the cap, I would win a chicken.

I held the nickel above the jar opening and let it go. It dropped straight down into the cap. I was thrilled. I remember all the people in the booth laughing as a man pulled a young chicken out of a

cage while another man grabbed a small sack and ripped a small hole in the bottom. He placed the chicken in the sack with its head sticking out of the small hole and handed it to me.

I ran and found my parents and showed them my prize, a little bantam pullet (young, small breed, female chicken). We took her home and she became a great pet. We named her Taata after her little staccato clucks. Since this was our only chicken and chickens being social creatures, Taata developed a great affinity for me. To her I was the alpha rooster and her main source of companionship. She had the run of the yard during the day and at night slept on a perch in the unused coal room at the back of our house. This room was also the bedroom for our two small dogs. After a few months, this young hen became broody, which means she wanted to hatch her own chicks.

My mother felt it would be a great learning experience for me to witness the birth of baby chicks. In this case it would be the birth of chicks. She explained that a hen required a rooster to make baby chicks. Since we had no rooster to propagate the breed, we would need to purchase some fertile eggs. Since we were low on feed Mom decided it was as good a day as any to visit the local feed store. She was sure they would have just the eggs we needed.

The store was located in a shabby part of West Richland. Adjacent to the feed store was the owner's old run-down house. On this particular visit, the old man who owned the feed store was in his house. The crunching of the gravel driveway announced our arrival, and he came out to see what we needed. He was wearing an ancient pair of bib overalls. His considerable girth did not allow the top side buttons to be closed. The resultant gap revealed a bit of the upper part of his old boxers and a bit of his fat stomach. He had some pink scraps of toilet paper stuffed in his nose. As he walked toward us, I asked the purpose of the paper. He replied it helped to keep the chicken feathers and dust out of his nostrils.

Mom told him what she wanted, and we walked across the gravel parking area to the store. It was in an old cinderblock building with a dirty concrete floor. Cobwebs served as curtains in the dust-glazed windows. From the rafters hung well used fly strips which reminded me of disembodied, hairy monkey tails. The walls were adorned with various old advertising signs extolling the virtues of various brands of feeds such as "Purina Chows." The air was permeated with the smells of cracked corn, rolled oats, alfalfa, molasses, dust, and other unfamiliar scents which were indelibly recorded in my six-year-old brain.

An old balance scale sat on the wooden counter next to an antique cash register with a crank handle on the side. Near the counter were opened, partly filled bags of livestock feed in large burlap bags. Since the nutritional needs of a small bantam hen did not require a fifty pound bag of layer mash, my mother would purchase only a few pounds of feed every month or so. The man placed a paper sack on the scale. Next, he poured in a few pounds of feed, closed the sack and handed it to my mother. Mom reminded him that we needed some fertile eggs.

Attached to the old building was a ramshackle chicken coop. It housed some old washing machines and dryers turned on their sides which served as shelters for the owner's small flock of mongrel birds. The run was surrounded by a fence of chicken wire with an old screen door serving as a gate.

I followed the man out of the store and watched as he entered the coop. He came back out with a half dozen large eggs. Taata was quite small, especially for a bantam. Her eggs were about half the size of the small size sold at Campbells, the neighborhood grocery store. These feed store eggs

were quite big. I wondered how our little hen would sit on these huge eggs. We returned to the store where he punched a few keys on the old register, pulled the crank and the cash door popped open with a loud ding. Mother paid him, he thanked us, and off we went back home with chicken dinner and some precious fertile eggs.

Mom fashioned a nest for Taata out of a cardboard box and some straw-like packaging material. We put the eggs under the little hen and noticed she wasn't too happy. Taata had been in the habit of laying her daily egg in the comfort of our little dogs' bed, which was appointed with soft old blankets. She also felt that this was the only suitable place to incubate her eggs. Mother agreed and the dogs were replaced with the young hen and her six large eggs.

For the next three weeks the little hen kept the eggs at precisely the right temperature and then one Saturday morning, mother and I beheld the miracle of birth. I watched in amazement as the little chicks pecked their way out of their shells. Out they came, gooey and wet. They were soon dry little balls of fluff, peeping, eating, drinking, and pooping.

I ran as fast as I could to my best friend, Jimmy Schirado's house. Jim lived several houses from ours. "Come see the babies!" I breathlessly shouted. We returned as fast as we could to my house. I was proud as punch to show off "my babies" to Jimmy. He noticed that one of the chicks was larger than the others. This wasn't surprising since the six eggs most likely came from six different hens. In fact, all the chicks were large and soon it was impossible for Taata to keep them all warm under her tiny body. It was good that it was summer, the heat helped the chicks survive.

Jim decided that he just had to have a chicken too. I told him he could have the big one for a dollar as soon as it was ready. He was ecstatic at the prospect of having his first pet! The deal was struck and a few weeks later the livestock was transferred to the Schirado's home.

Jimmy, not being particularly creative or original at the time named the little pullet Henny Penny. She shared the name with the heroine of a popular children's story. It was about a little hen who thought the sky was falling when she was hit on the head by an acorn. The only similarity between the two hens, other than their names, was their lack of intelligence.

Jim's dad, Victor Schirado, was a jack-of-all-trades. With great skill he built a cage for Henny. It was no surprise that my largest chick would become a very large hen. Henny was not only huge but also extremely dumb. In fact, she was the dumbest chicken I have ever seen. I never recall her laying a single egg. While my hen had the run of the yard, Henny was cooped up in the cage in the Schirado's garage and rarely allowed to run. Needless to say, there was a lot of chicken poop under this giant chicken's cage.

It's a little-known fact among adults, but ask any seven-year-old boy and he will tell you the truth, dogs will eat chicken poop. Why is this important? Let me tell you, it is very important if it's your chicken whose poop is being eaten. In this case it wasn't my chicken, at least not at the time it happened. It was Henny Penny's.

Schirado's were devout Catholics, as was my family. Jimmy and I attended Christ the King Catholic School. Mrs. Schirado was a member of the Altar Society whose responsibility was to decorate and provide altar cloths for our parish church. Mr. Schirado was a member of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization. With their connections, the Schirados were able to fraternize with the clergy and often had some of the local priests over for dinner. One young priest had a shaggy

black dog named Pedro. Since the only pet I ever knew the Schirados to have was Henny, it was a great treat for the family to "dog sit" Pedro when the priest was out of town, especially for Jimmy.

There in was the problem! Pedro loved to eat chicken poop and Henny produced lots of it. It was a marriage made in heaven or might have been. Pedro not only liked to eat poop, but he was also a young, easily excited dog that loved to lick faces. Nobody, except maybe Jimmy, enjoyed being licked by a poop eating dog. I remember the disgust of Jimmy's parents one evening while enjoying a late summer backyard picnic dinner with the parish priests. The door to the garage was left open and Pedro, taking the opportunity, made a beeline to Henny's cage. He gorged on fresh poop until everybody noticed. Jim's dad grabbed him by his collar and dragged him out of the garage and the door was closed. There was a look of embarrassed anger on Mr. Schirado's face that as a seven-year-old I didn't quite understand. I remember asking myself why anyone would want to keep a chicken penned up in a cage in a garage. What good is a pet if you never play with it or give it any attention? This was something wrong, but it was soon to be rectified.

With the dinner over, we were allowed to visit with the young priest. He was much more fun than the other older priests. He swung us around and around by an arm and a leg, like airplanes in the backyard and paid attention to us and greatly endeared himself to me and the Schirado kids. I don't remember his name, only his dog's, but I do remember that he was kind.

Summer was soon over, and Jimmy and I returned to school and began the second grade. It was a hard year for me with a difficult Nun for a teacher by the name of Sister Rita Joan, a most unhappy woman. I'm sure she often wondered what she'd gotten herself into by agreeing to live a life of poverty, celibacy and worst of all teaching over fifty second graders all by herself!

For me, school was a confining, boring, frustrating experience, especially second grade. The last few minutes of the day seemed to last an eternity. I couldn't wait to exit and be on my way home to play. Jimmy on the other hand was much more sedate. He rarely got in trouble and was a favorite of Sister Rita Joan. He was never in too much of a hurry. When school was out his main concerns were twofold, getting home and eating dinner. Jimmy was a chunky boy who liked to eat. Fortunately for him, Mrs. Schirado was a fabulous cook. Under normal circumstances she could make anything taste wonderful.

The Schirados, like most of the neighbors, were not particularly well off. They were comfortable, but had, like the rest of us, to watch their pennies, or in this case their Henny Pennys! That fall evening Jimmy sat down to one of his favorite dinners, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and chicken gravy. Normally the chicken would have been tender but this time it was very tough. Jimmy later recounted that it tasted like rubber. "Mom," he asked, "why is this chicken so tough?" His dad looked at his mom who returned the stare. It was deathly quiet at the table. Finally, his mom turned to Jimmy and spoke the awful truth, "the chicken's tough because it's... Henny Penny." No one spoke. Jim didn't take another bite. He countered, "you're kidding?" No, I'm not, his mother replied.

Without another word Jimmy left the table and ran to the garage. There he found an empty cage. Next to it in the garbage can was a pile of feathers and the head of his beloved pet, the only pet he ever had or would have for the rest of his growing up years! Struggling to regain his composure and deal with his grief, he returned to the kitchen. Nearly in tears, he tried his best not to cry. For obvious reasons he could not finish his dinner nor could the rest of the family. It didn't really matter anyway, the chicken was inedible. It was a sad, awkward, and uncomfortable night at the Schirados.

Over sixty-five years later, I think I understand the dilemma Jimmy's parents faced. Who wants a non-laying chicken living in their garage all winter doing nothing but pooping. It's not like other pet birds. You can't teach a chicken to talk. It can't sit on your finger, especially Henny who was a huge chicken. They aren't too intelligent and if they're not laying eggs what are they good for . . . eating? That was their only choice. Unfortunately, I felt somewhat responsible. It was after all my idea to have a chicken in a residential neighborhood, and it had worked out fine for me. But a big dumb chicken like Henny was never meant to be a pet. They are only good for three things, eggs, meat, and poop.

A few days later Jimmy seemed to have dealt well with his grief. His dad got rid of the cage. The garbage can was emptied and there was no more poop to clean up or dumb animal to feed and water. And best of all now it didn't seem so bad any more when Pedro licked our faces.

The End