

BEING the Story of a Young Woman and Her Sister Who Find Great Pleasure and Sure Profit in the Raising of Squabs for the Delicate Palate of Epicureans.

BY BURTON T. BEACH.

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If you took your mother, wife, sweetheart or any other girl to supper at a high class hotel or restaurant after the play, opera or concert, or after a late automobile ride, and she were to tell the waiter to bring her a nice, plump Jumbo, would you think she had developed suddenly an appetite for elephant? And if she were to call for a "royal" or an "imperial," would you think her head had been turned by the incidents of the evening? Certainly not. You would know that the lady was ordering squab of the latest and most reliable variety.

Epicures are coming to think that squab on toast is as appetizing as quail on toast, provided the bird is bred scientifically, killed at the right moment and properly kept in the larder.

Squab meat is one of the few forms of food the supply of which falls absolutely short of the demand in the United States. Scores of banquets given last winter in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston were arranged without squabs in the menus for the sole reason that it was not possible to get enough to go around.

"My chef," says the proprietor of a famous Manhattan hotel, "tried to gather eight hundred squabs for a dinner in February. The committee insisted that we get them. After searching the markets and squab farms and cold storage houses all we could find was five hundred, and we had to cut out squabs. Very likely there will be a similar shortage next winter. And it will be a genuine shortage, not an artificial one."

Causes of the Under Supply.

Undersupply is due in part to causes affecting most food products in a nation of ninety million, but special factors are at work. Owing to the increasing severity of game laws the squab is made to take the place of half a dozen wild birds on dinner cards during a large part of the year.

Private demand is developing faster than had been expected, and the squab farmer finds it worth while to reserve a steadily rising percentage of the best sorts for the kitchens of the wealthy, thus restricting the field from which hotels, restaurants, clubs, steamships, yachts and public caterers must draw.

Another feature looming up is the hospital demand. The first solid food given to Mr. Gaynor after the shooting was squab. Medical men are more and more inclined to prescribe squab in the dietary of invalids, especially children. One of the most nourishing fluids is the juice of the squab killed when about able to leave its nest voluntarily.



Misses Jeannette (Standing) and Myrtle Bohannon

At the age of four weeks and a half the pigeon weighs ordinarily more than it ever will again, being the fastest of all birds in reaching the size of its parents, and the juice, or "liquor protoplasmic," runs then from two to five ounces. The squab farmer kills a few days earlier, because if the squab be permitted to leave the nest the juice diminishes rapidly and in forty-eight hours the bird weighs considerably less, growth being, as a rule, retarded or stopped.

Consumed in New York.

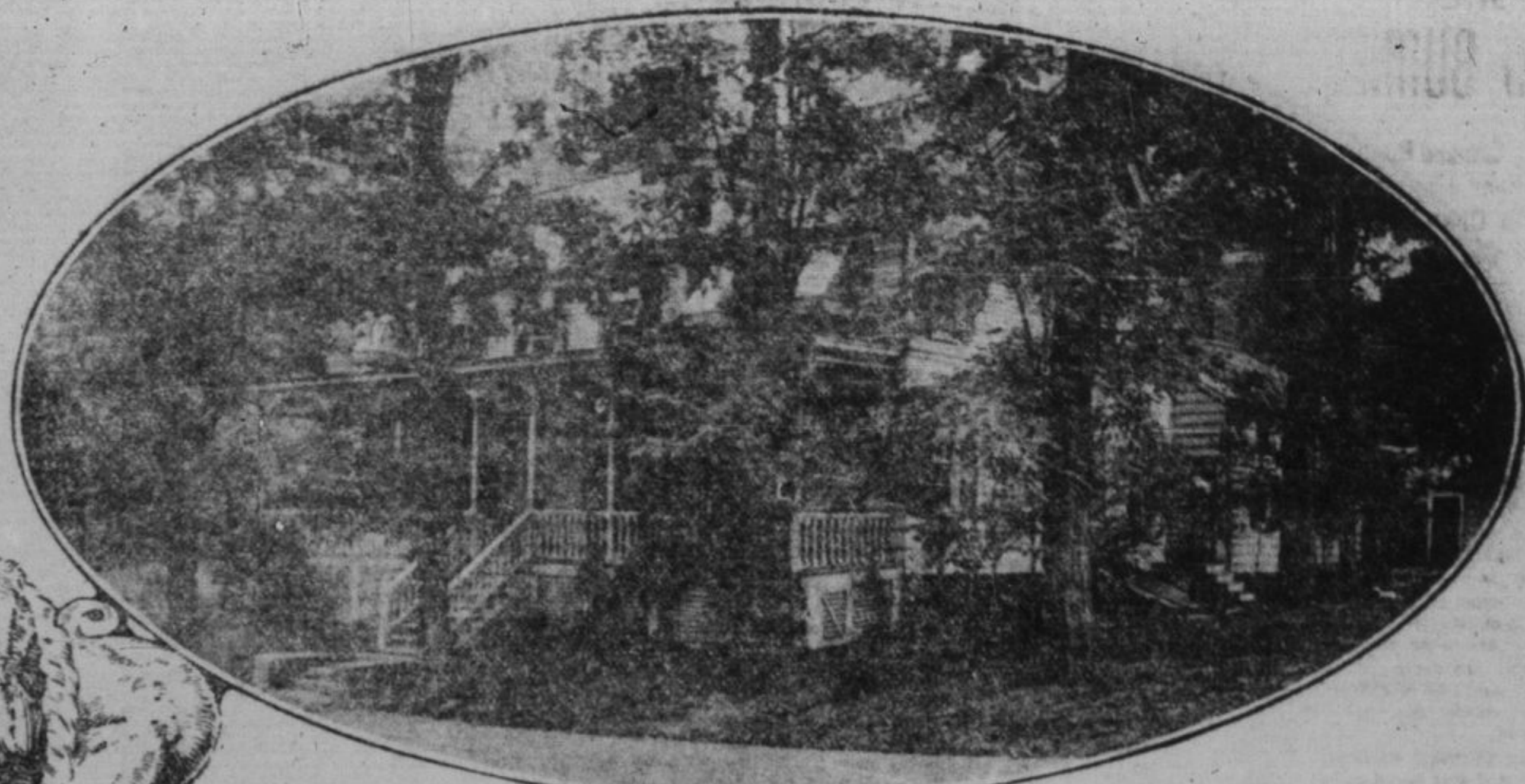
It would be hard to estimate even approximately how many squabs are forwarded to New York city, the principal American market, either for local consumption or for distribution to other points. Convincing statistics are not to be had. A prominent middleman asserts that he would consider business slow if his daily average fell below five hundred pair, and he admits that his competitors press him closely. But their combined sales would not be a reliable index of the total turnover, because some of the most successful farmers place their goods for New York use without the aid of the middleman.

Six years ago the business had a boom, but the boom soon collapsed. In 1907 there was a vigorous revival; improvement has been continuous, and to-day the trade, though on a narrower basis than before, is much better established.

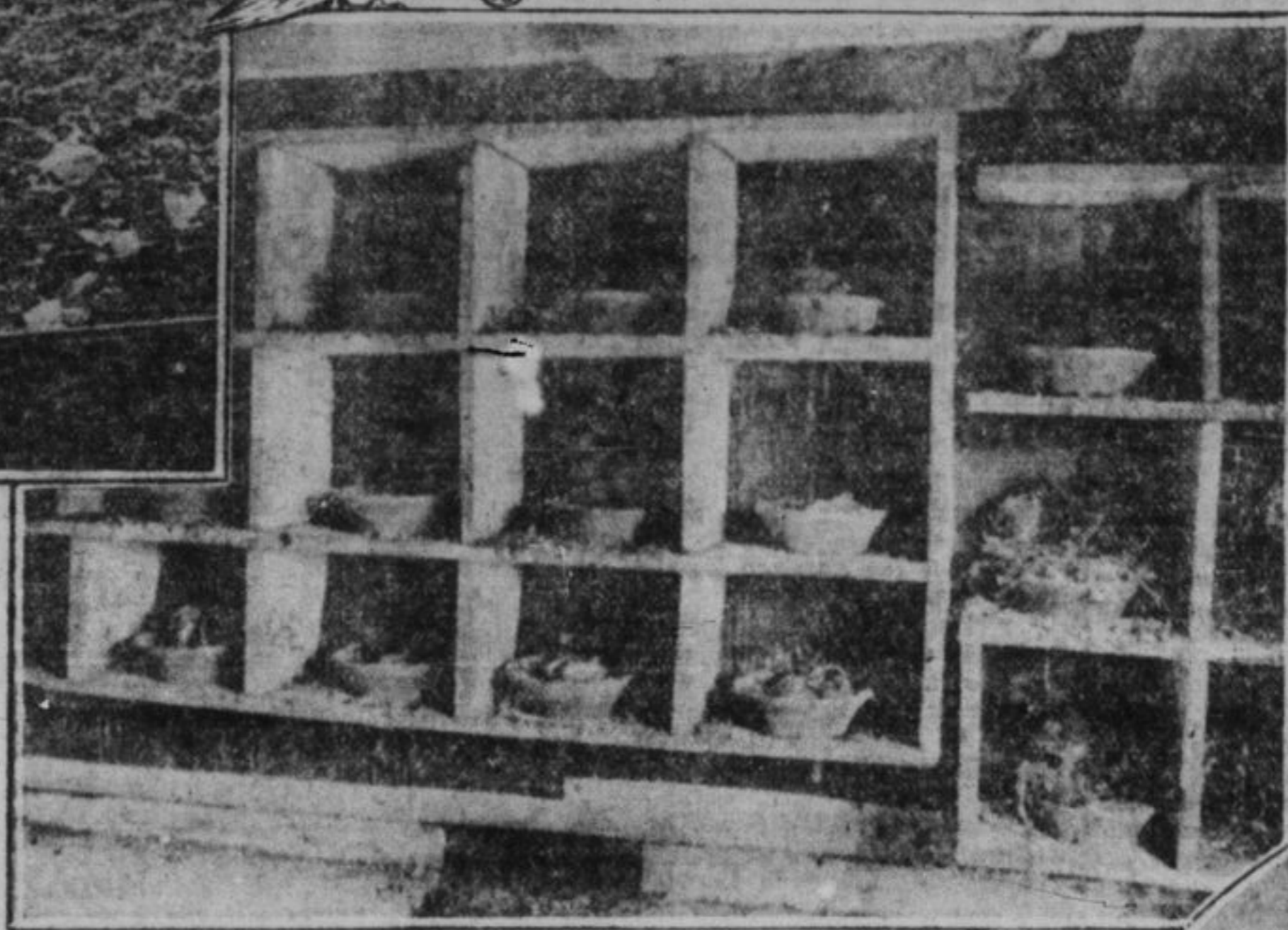


Miss Jeannette Bohannon Feeding Young Birds

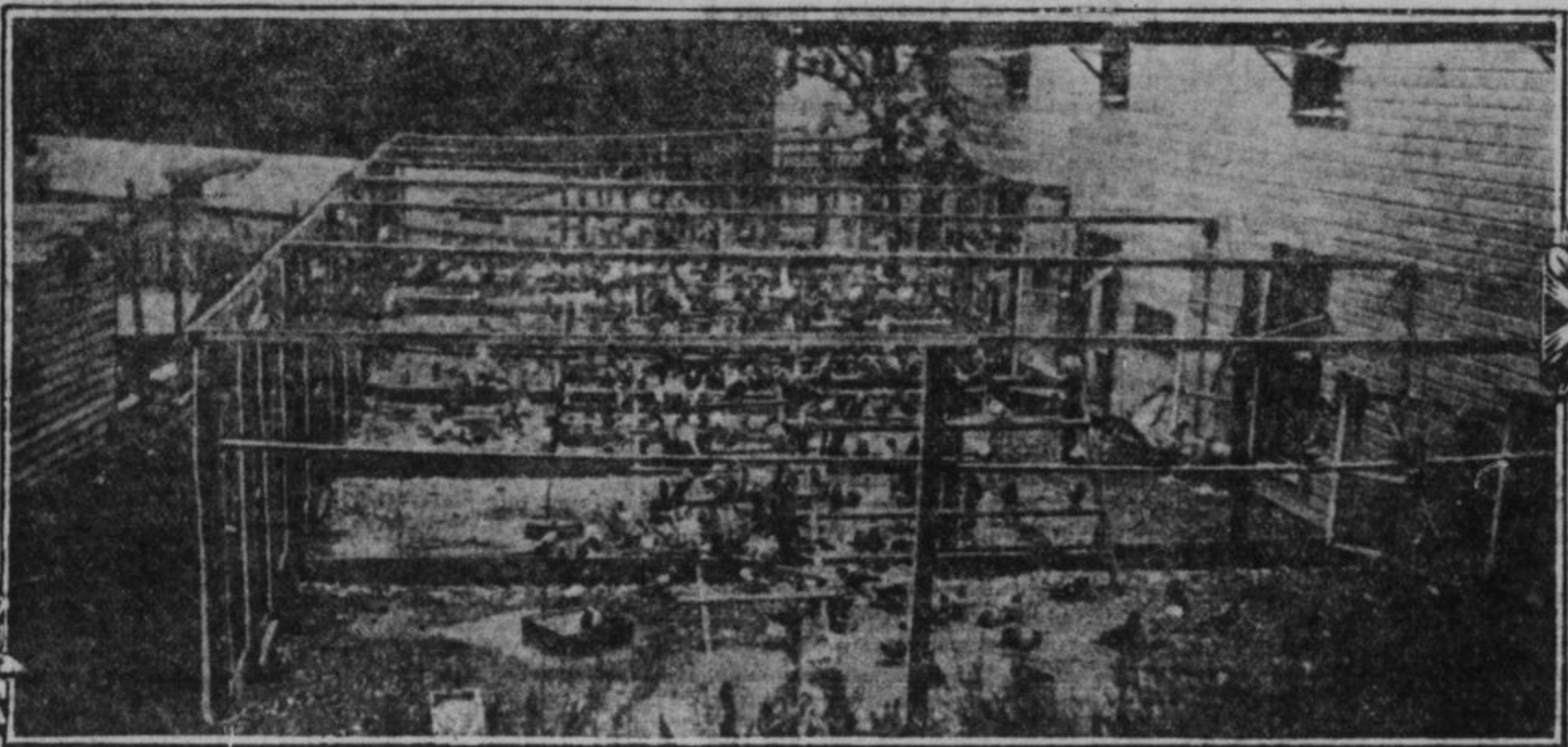
It is remarkable that so few women are engaged in the industry as proprietors; there are perhaps not half a dozen along the Atlantic seaboard who are well entrenched. At Knollsides Farm, Manhasset, L. I., the Misses Bohannon, after five years of unremitting attention, have built up an excellently organized plant, with improved modern appliances, and are exploiting a flock of four thousand birds, soon to be enlarged by half as many more. But they are noteworthy exceptions in a calling that might be supposed to appeal to feminine taste because of the charm and artistic atmosphere of bird life in most forms,



Knollsides Farm Manor House



Nest Bowls Containing Squabs and Eggs



Pigeons at Bath



Misses Bohannon Holding "Grandpa" and "Grandma"

and particularly the life of the dove.

One who never had met them save at a social function in Manhattan or in their parlor at Knollsides Farm would not suspect that they knew any more about pigeons than could be learned from books or an inspection of rare columbids at the zoological gardens or a visit to the Basilica of St. Mark's, in Venice, where the pigeons are a whirling wonder.

Confronted suddenly with the necessity of making parental capital yield at least four times what it would yield if deposited in savings banks or invested in securities, they decided to try squab farming as likely to bring a better return than the New York market for poultry. While there are plants larger than theirs devoted to the business of raising "breeding birds," these young women have the satisfaction of owning one of the largest devoted exclusively to raising squabs for food.

"What is the difference between a dove and a pig-on?" Miss Jeannette Bohannon was asked. "None that I know of," she replied smilingly, "except point of view. Poets see birds in one light and cooks in another."

"But we see them in both lights," remarked Miss Myrtle Bohannon, "and they are a perpetual joy to us, with their pretty ways, lovely plumage and high spirits; with the devotion of the married couples and the care of the parents for the offspring. I have retained health in tending pigeons. More than this, I have been trying to check up what poets have written about them, and I tell you that poetry has not yet done justice to the intelligence, feeling and morality of the dove. There are unpleasant features in our business, but the pleasant far outnumber them. Perhaps the detail and constant watchfulness deter women from taking it up."

Home of the Pigeons.

Pigeons at picturesque Knollsides Farm are concentrated in two houses or lofts about one hundred and twenty feet long and twenty feet wide, with an elevation in one case of twenty-five feet. In the other of twenty. The buildings are carefully fortified with concrete to keep out rats and mice. A big rodent in a pigeon house will do as much mischief as a cyclone. Both houses are divided into a dozen pens about ten feet wide, two sides of each pen being lined with, say, fifty to a hundred compartments, after the fashion of pigeonholes in a desk, though many times larger.

Every compartment contains a clay bowl four inches or so deep and twelve across the top. This is the "nest bowl," and in it the pigeon builds a nest of tobacco stems, a supply of which is thrown where the bird can reach it. The little compartments are so built that they can be kept clean easily.

From the pens the pigeons pass, at the pleasure of the caretaker, through doors, windows or special apertures into wire-covered structures outside known as "flying cages." The latter extend the full length of the houses and have the same elevation. In the older house an additional cage is superimposed upon the loft itself, and the birds in this can look down upon their neighbors in the ground floor cage. Pigeons are inquisitive and enjoy watching their acquaintances while on promenade or at bath.

Flying cages are divided into sections that correspond with the pens, and in them are placed bathing pans. The scene of greatest animation in all pigeon culture is the bathing scene. The birds then are in their gayest mood.

Coming Into the World.

Pigeons come into the world very much as other birds do, but in certain respects their experience in an up-to-date squab farm is unique. In each pen of one hundred or more nest bowls at Knollsides live fifty brace of mated birds, some observation showing that ordinarily a pair will require at least two bowls; for as soon as a set of squabs is ten days old the parents will open a new establishment close by and maintain both.

At the psychological moment for making the nest the mother bird carries to the bowl the tobacco stems—this material being chosen by farmers because the odor repels small vermin. The male lays the stems in place, and by tramping around ceaselessly and trampling them into the desired hollow.

Next day at four P. M. the nest contains an egg, and over this one of the birds stands, though not near enough to heat it much. More than a full day elapses; but on the third day, about ten A. M., a second egg is in evidence. Upon these two birds take turns in sitting, the male leading off and remaining "on duty" from ten A. M. till four P. M., at which hour the female assumes responsibility, remaining until ten the next morning, while the male keeps watch at a short distance, frequently on the edge of the other nest bowl if it contains very young squabs.

"They cannot see in the dark," says Miss Jeannette Bohannon, "and therefore they prepare for bed quite early, a curiously interesting proceeding that shows a kind of reassembling with one another. If you enter a pigeon loft after sunset you notice a gentle flutter of winging and here and there a soft, owl-like hoot that is richly musical and a sort of language."

Breaking Out.

Nineteen days after the laying of the first egg both squabs emerge from the shells, the latter dividing almost exactly in the center. On the upper part of the beak, or mandible, the fledgling has a small, sharp

bone, projecting like the horn of a rhinoceros, and as the creature, impatient to be free, rolls over and over in the prison it punctures the shell with a ring of holes and finally cuts it in twain. If any fragments cling to the squab the parents tear these off. Ten days later the horn is missing—nature has discarded it as of no further value.

The maxillary horn and its uses and abandonment were of great interest to Darwin in the course of his experiments at crossing pigeons to show the tendency of all forms of animal life to revert to primitive types.

During the first five days of its shell-free life the squab is fed by the mother with a liquid that gathers in her throat, though not the same thing as the pigeon's milk after which April fools are sent. Beginning on the sixth day the parents feed the fledgling by bill with predigested food, the process being a species of pumping.

A not infrequent spectacle, and one that is always worth looking at, is two squabs being fed in this fashion at the same time by one bird, the youngsters laying their dilapidated bills on opposite sides of the parental mouth. Grain food, whole or cracked, comes last.

Length of Squab Life.

Between the laying of an egg and the killing of the squab only forty-eight days intervene, and by the time the second two eggs have been hatched the squabs from the first two have been sent to market and the parents are planning a third consecutive nest. Except during the four cold weather months—and even then no artificial heat is supplied to the houses—nesting and hatching proceed with but slight interruption in a properly managed plant until the parent birds are about eight years old. At twelve a pigeon is in extreme age.

If the last bell rings for a squab it is taken from the nest, placed in a basket with others equally doomed, borne to an execution chamber fitted with numerous contrivances to insure sanitation, despatched by a method almost painless, plucked at once and then immersed in cold spring water for several hours, after which it is cleaned punctiliously, dressed and put on ice for the night. At Knollsides they are not frozen, though consignments are sent on the coast as far as Philadelphia and even Boston.

When ready for shipment the squabs, assorted according to size, are placed, if consigned to hotels or restaurants, in layers, separated by wax paper, in wooden boxes; while, if for private trade, they are wrapped individually in oil paper and forwarded in corrugated paper boxes containing one dozen, two or three dozens, as the case may be. The cold storage side of the business is becoming impressive, but freezing does not improve the quality of this delicate food. If a squab is to be held back from the market and

raised for breeding purposes a seamless band, stamped with a number and with the date of its birth, is drawn over one of its feet when the creature is ten days old and the membrane is soft. An entry corresponding with this "year band" is made in the books of the pigeon farmer.

In due season the young bird is sent to the "mating pen," where it chooses a permanent companion. Both are promptly caught, and upon the right leg of the male and the left of the female is placed a bicolored enamel band, the two hands showing the same hues. Miss Myrtle Bohannon calls this band the wedding ring. Thus banded the birds are listed for future identification.

Female birds mate when six months old, but are exceedingly coy then, and it is not surprising to learn that the pigeon widow seems to have far less difficulty than the debutante in making an impression among eligible bachelors or widowers. Pigeons, however, are monogamous and are not disposed to mate with their kin. Of these characteristics the up to date farmer makes the utmost.

Among the kinds to be seen at Knollsides are homers, French Mondaines, Carneaux, Maltese hen pigeons, dragons, fantails, Minorcas, pouters, Jacobines and imported runs, the last named producing the largest squabs known. The ideal squab flesh is white, firm and plump, but plumage in no way determines the tint of the meat.

That two women of refinement would dedicate themselves to caring for four thousand pigeons without showing some partiality among their feathered charges is quite unlikely. A half dozen exquisite birds are singled out as the favorites. Gray splash is a gray homer, splashed with black and glittering of eye. Goldie Golden seems a magnified canary, and the costume might give a hint to Rostand. Blue Boy, a dashing cavalier, is all in navy blue, save for a black and green neck, much envied in the flying cage. Fluffy Ruffles has a white head with a dazzling frill on the neck. She gets her name from her unending but otherwise irreproachable vanity, the giddiest thing on the farm.

Phoebé Snow, needless to say, is spotless of robe, but, like Du Maurier's Tribby O'Farrell, she long refused to take a serious view of life, and even now displays a tendency to resume the flirtatious habits of her youth. Quite the most gorgeous of all is a blue barred bird of mottled breast like a waistcoat of many colors. He is named after a prominent politician. His mate is a beautiful creature, dark blue with a white throat, and he does not permit her to go gadding about.

Grandpa and Grandma, both white with black spots over blue, are the patriarchs of the flock, and, according to the Misses Bohannon, they are inseparable as mates and, within the limits of the domain, are "first in war, first in peace and first in the feed troughs and bathing pans."

There is an air of discipline about a hatching pen that is unmistakable, old birds covering eggs or patrolling their chosen preserves in defence of property rights, squabs of all ages, from a day to a month, lying or feeding in the bowls; here a bully strutting in his pride, and there a reputable male driving some Lethario back to neutral ground. Everywhere is a cooling flutter, but the confusion is orderly and as sociological in suggestion as is it pictorial in incident.

Given wholesome food, with trays of "grit" always and "dainties" now and then, pure drinking water kept pure, close attention to the cleanliness of nest, pen and cage; baths twice a week in summer and during winter on sunny days only; given such precautions, the business of pigeon culture, whether for squab meat or "breeders," can be conducted even by women at a fair profit and as a comparatively light form of labor.