

SLAUGHTERHOUSE SEVEN

Are there any epiphanies in killing chickens?

By Lee Burdette Williams

IF THE TERROR of driving a twelve-passenger van through an Ohio snowstorm wasn't enough. As if the misery of ten hours in this same van as it made its way to West Virginia wasn't enough. As if the rather rustic accommodations provided upon our arrival weren't enough. No, there was more. There was the Great Spring Break Chicken Slaughter awaiting me.

I had traveled to a mountainous region near Bluefield, West Virginia, with a group of thirty students interested in spending their spring break doing something useful. Our hosts were the staff of the Appalachian South Folklife Center (ASFC), a kind of grassroots, activist, preservationist, community service type of organization (I use the term loosely). Our group, Albion College's Appalachian Service Project, had been planning and taking similar trips for more than ten years by the time I arrived on campus to find myself promptly installed as their advisor.

I asked about participating in the trip. They demurred. "We don't like to take faculty or staff with us," the group's executives (I use the term very loosely) told me. "They always want to be in charge." But I prevailed, convincing them that I would not usurp their leadership roles, would not intervene in any situation unless asked, and (my trump card) would drive a van,

which was worth more than anything else to them, I'm sure. Off we went.

Once at the center, the group split up each day, heading off in different directions to do service projects planned (I use the term oh so loosely) by the staff of the ASFC (actually, some guy named Mike, who was the only staff member I ever saw). One morning, as we assembled in the dining hall, Mike outlined the day's possibilities. One of them involved staying at the center and disposing of some roosters that were disrupting the henhouse. Six students volunteered for the task. I decided to join them, as I was limping rather painfully from a stress fracture in my foot incurred on a day-long hike the first day we were there (don't ask; and while you're at it, please don't ask about the incident with the van and how it ended up stuck up to its doors in a

muddy parking lot, or about the two nice-but-mute West Virginians and their large truck and the rope and the bumper).

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compare a henhouse to a fraternity house), but over the past several months a few roosters had grown from harmless chicks into fierce, jealous, dangerous creatures who were, to use a technical term, beating the crap out of one another (prompting, of course, another comparison). Mike's plan was to kill all but one rooster, and a few chickens as well, because the henhouse had limited space available.

The henhouse sat on the top of a hill overlooking an open field that descended to a tree line and thick woods. The hillside was covered with fresh snow, the result of the same storm that had introduced me to the wonders of monstrous Ohio highway snowdrifts. Next to the henhouse was a darkly stained tree stump and Mike stood beside it for his first demonstration. "You grab the rooster by its feet, and in one motion," he said, swinging a hapless bird skyward, "swing it up and then down onto the stump. Then, as soon as you have a good hold, you bring the axe back and then down in one solid shot." This he did, slicing through the rooster's neck in one swipe.

Please be assured that they do indeed run with their heads cut off. This particular headless rooster ran in our direction, scattering us rather quickly before dropping over onto the snow. We all stopped and stared at the rooster, at each other, at Mike, and again at the rooster, in silence. "That's all there is to it," said Mike, a man with an obvious gift for understatement. "Who wants to try?"

John volunteered. Now, growing up in the Detroit suburbs may prepare a person for a lot of things. My guess is that slaughtering fowl is not one of those things. Still, John was game, so to speak. He put on a heavy glove, and went with Mike into the henhouse. With Mike's help, John got hold of a rooster and brought it out. In the process of trying to swing it onto the stump, he lost his hold and the bird was free. It ran back into the henhouse, despite the thousands of acres of woods nearby, thereby removing any doubts we might have had about the gross stupidity of these birds.

Together they captured another, and John managed to get this one onto the stump. Here's an important les-

son about slaughtering chickens: try and get the axe to go all the way through the bird's neck on one swing. John did not do this. I am here to also report that they run even with their heads still attached, dangling upside down, held on by a few tendons. They do not crow or cackle, however.

After a few steps, the bird dropped over. Another student volunteered, managing to embed the axe in the bird's shoulder on the first try but succeeding on the second. I stood nearby with two students, forming a macabre Greek chorus. Our comments were meant mostly to distract us from the gory scene at our feet.

"You're going to feel just a pinch."

"Ooh—I hate when that happens."

The three of us declined Mike's offer to let us take a swing. The other students continued to give it the old liberal arts try, improving slightly with experience.

Grab, swing, chop, run, drop. The birds all ran down the hillside—a natural inclination, one might say, when one is running blindly, I suppose. They dropped at various locations on the hillside, spraying their blood as they made their last desperate pirouette. At the end of the hour, the fifteen birds strewn across the snow resembled nothing so much as a particularly realistic Civil War reenactment.

Our next task: collect the birds, throw them into a wagon, and carry them to the kitchen for plucking, cleaning, and cooking. We had just begun preparing that night's dinner, Mike informed us. He asked a few people to pick up the heads and put them in a bucket. I do not know what he did with them. I didn't ask.

In the kitchen we learned why poultry processing is so loudly decried as a horrible profession. The smell alone is enough to drive one to unionize. We plucked these birds, revealing not the plump, tender, chemically altered birds of Frank Perdue, but scrawny, dirty creatures. "Are these free-range?" one student asked, hopeful. I looked up from the viscera, and thinking of nothing particularly educational to say, looked down again.

Mike gave us another lesson, this time on the topic of gutting and cleaning chickens. We tried to pay

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attention, but our minds were wandering. Where? To Fort Lauderdale, where some seemingly wiser students were lying on beaches; to McDonald's, where most of us had eaten our share of McNuggets; to anywhere but the bowels of the birds we were expected to eviscerate.

We did, though, and dropped them into pots of boiling water. One student, Pam, looked across the counter at me. Her apron was coated in blood and guts, and she held aloft her latest victim. "Lee," she said, in what I hoped was an ironic tone, "I am learning so much."

THE OTHER STUDENTS returned from their projects full of stories about meeting the people of Appalachia, repairing the stairs of an elderly man, chopping wood for a disabled woman. One student came into the kitchen and asked us if we had been painting that day. "Painting?" we said in incredulous unison. "Yeah, I was just walking up the hill and there's red paint all over the snow and I was wondering what you were painting, like furniture or something and why just

red and—" His gaze moved down from our faces to our aprons to our hands to the piles of innards to the pots. "Oh." He quickly left the kitchen.

I noticed at dinner that night that none of us involved in the mass slaughter ate our chicken. The other students took quick advantage. "You gonna eat that?"

One student commented that the chicken was "kind of tough but good." We, the unholy anointed, looked at one another and continued eating our bread and vegetables in silence.

I would like to be able to say that the experience somehow brought the seven us together, or taught us something particularly profound, or at least sent some of us scurrying down the road of vegetarianism. I would like to say that we connected with some part of our past, the part where people routinely killed their own food. But I don't think

any of that happened. There are no epiphanies in chickens, I think. It was nothing more than a cold day on a West Virginia mountainside, one none of us would ever forget, despite our most fervent attempts to do just that.

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