
THE WHITE AWARD

GOLD

City and Regional Magazine Competition

1989

Local Features:

General Interest

Rod Davis

James Morgan

The William Allen White School of Journalism
The University of Kansas
The City and Regional Magazine Association

A DIXIANA
CHRISTMAS

LIVE FAST, DIE YOUNG — THE SHORT, HAPPY LIFE OF A
SOUTHERN CHICKEN ★ JOHN EGERTON'S BODACIOUS EGGNOG

SOUTHERN

M A G A Z I N E

DECEMBER 1987 \$2.50

THE HIGH COST OF BLACK POWER

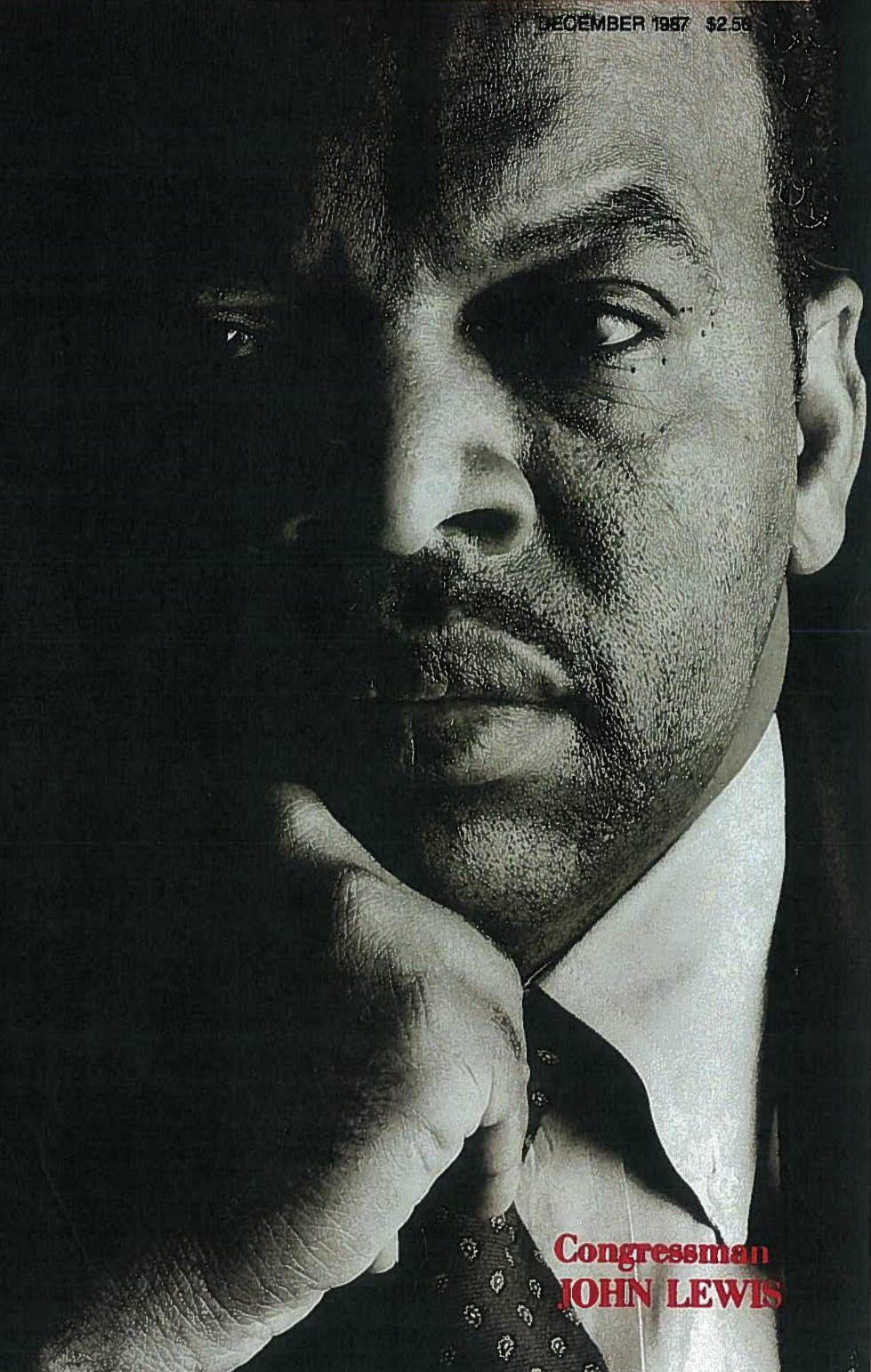
By JAMES WOOTEN

MILITARY SCHOOL—
ONE CADET'S
PERSONAL WAR

THE BEST
BROTHER ACTS
IN SPORTS



Congressman
JOHN LEWIS

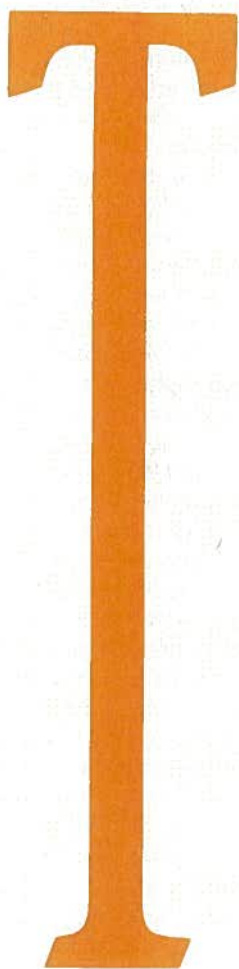


LIVE FAST, DIE YOUNG

*A saga of tradition, honor, and sacrifice—
the all-consuming career of a Southern chicken*

By ROD DAVIS

Illustrations By RANDY BISHOP



THE EGG CAME first, if Don Tyson's executive lair overlooking Springdale, Arkansas, is an indicator, and it ought to be. Tyson Foods Inc. posted \$1.5 billion in revenues in 1986, staking out a 15-percent share of the increasingly lucrative business of keeping America in chicken meat and seizing undisputed title as the nation's largest chicken farm. Malcolm Forbes was so impressed that his magazine ranked Tyson as one of the leaders in market value among Forbes' 500 companies. At 57, Don Tyson isn't just the major private employer in Arkansas and probably the state's second wealthiest citizen (after Wal-Mart tycoon Sam Walton of neighboring Bentonville); he's got to have a handle on the eternal riddle. If the king of the Chicken Belt wants his office to look like an egg, there's surely a reason.

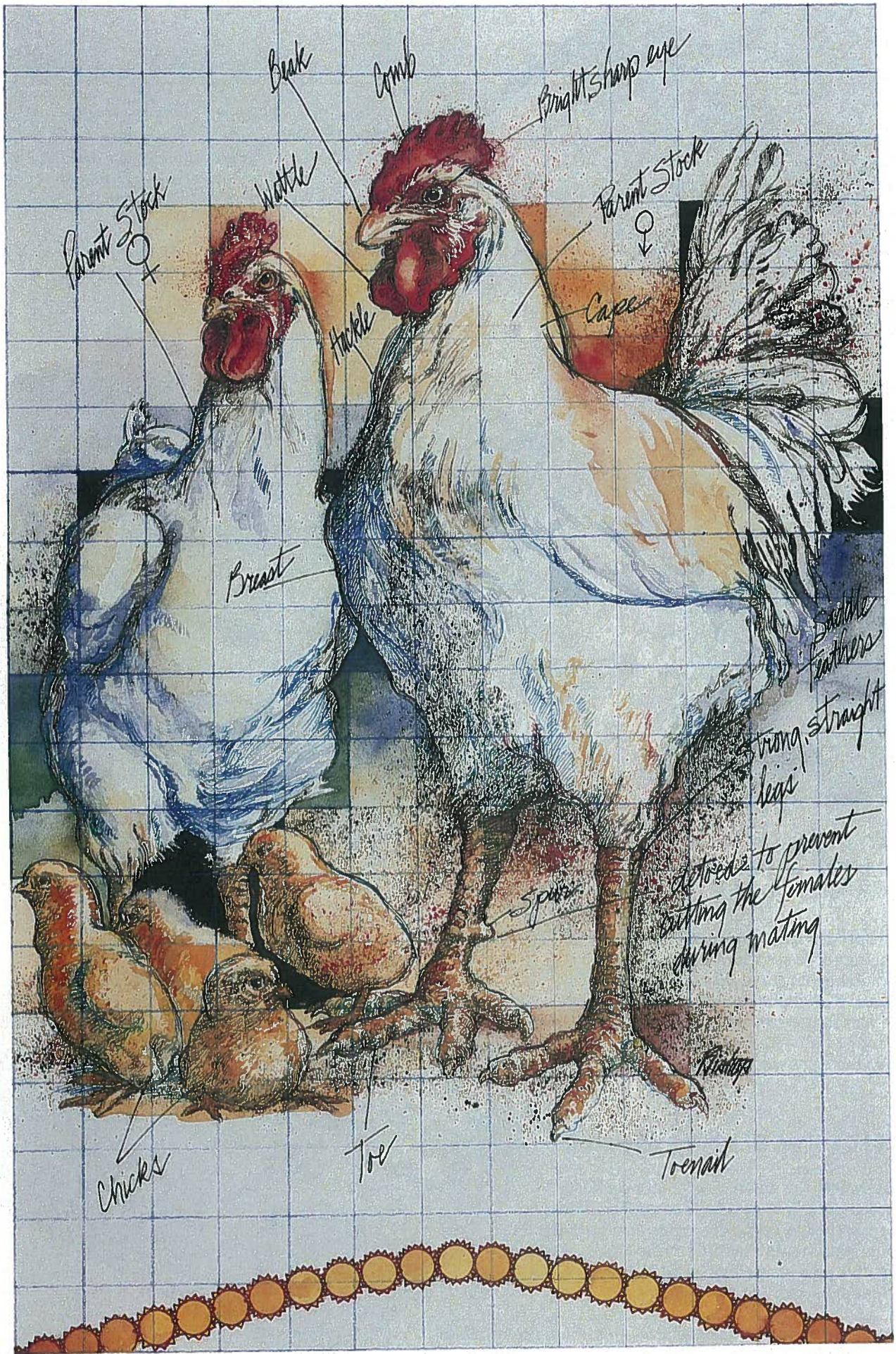
Not just the office, but the desk, the bric-a-brac around the white oak doorways and walls, and the brass door handles. Tyson's secretary sits in front of a half-oval panel constructed of what at first appear to be acoustical tile designs, but are, in fact, bronzed replicas of cardboard egg flats. Even the corporate boardroom—adorned with the sharp bills of black marlin Tyson has

caught on monthly excursions to Panama or Australia or Cabo San Lucas—is anchored by a massive oval table.

According to Tyson, who became company president in 1966, a year before his father, patriarch and company founder John Tyson, died, the egg motif originates from deep within the Southern psyche. "When Jimmy Carter was President," recalls Tyson, "I was in the Oval Office one time. I told Jimmy, 'You know, if I ever build me a new office building, I think I'd like to have me a big office like this one.'"

Tyson got his big office and a building to go with it. Having burst from its existing one-story, brick headquarters, the company is in the process of moving next door into a five-story tower (six, if you count the basement computer center) in the middle of a pasture down a crooked country road from the Richmond Avenue Church of Christ, an Assembly of God church, and a Wal-Mart.

From such terrain, as aw-shucks as chairman Don Tyson's speech, the company masters an eight-state, clockwork chicken empire of 21 hatcheries, 16 feed mills, 32 processing plants, and the clout that goes with it. Tyson Foods ships chicken to 42 of America's top 50 fast-food chains, including almost all



Parent Stock ♀

Beak

Comb

Bright sharp eye

Wattle

Parent Stock ♀

Cape

Hackle

Breast

Saddle feathers

strong, straight legs

detached to prevent cutting the females during mating

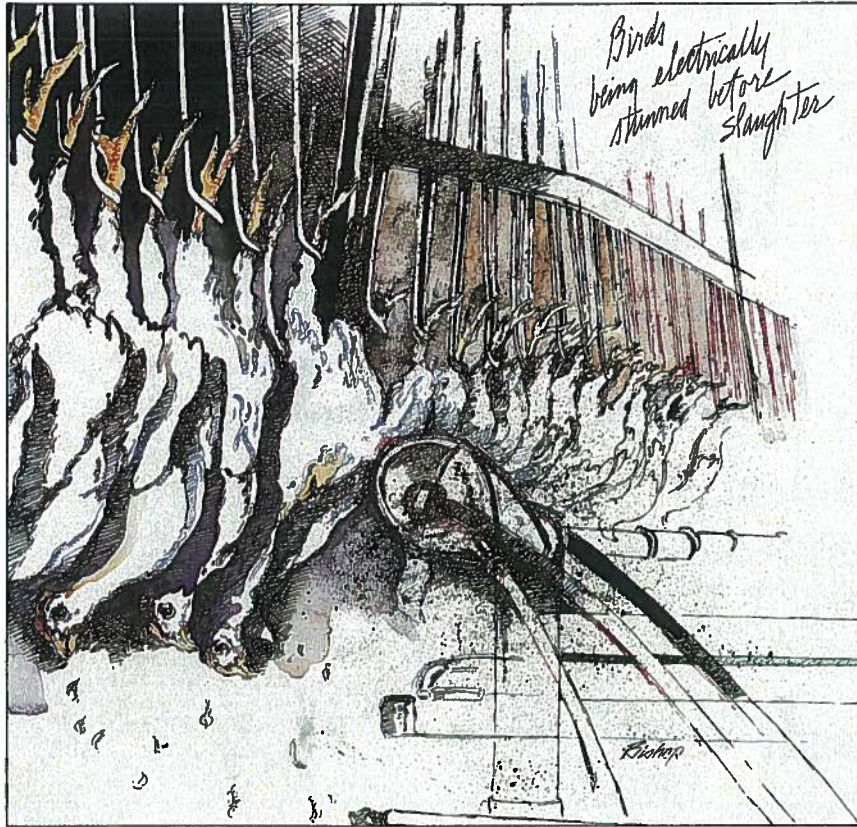
Spurs

Rings

Toe

Toenail

Chicks



From egg to drumstick, the life of a Southern broiler burns out faster than an anchor on the CBS "Morning Program."

McDonald's restaurants west of the Mississippi. Tyson is the top-ranked supplier in the food service field (restaurants, hospitals, prisons, schools, etc.) and boasts more than 350 varieties of packaged chicken products.

Since 1980, the company has tripled in size, gobbling up rival firms—from the poultry division of Wilson Foods to Val-Mac and Lane Processing—with an insatiable appetite. It has its eyes on the world market, too, especially Asia, a region that already consumes 200 million pounds of Tyson chicken annually, and it is scouting other routes to your dinner table and checkbook. Mexican Original label foods are Tyson-made—which means that the biggest chicken producer in the U.S. now also owns the world's largest flour tortilla factory.

But if the rise of Tyson Foods has meant good times for humans, it's proven to be an infinity of bad road for the avian species domesticated 5,000 years ago in Southeast Asia and raised commercially at least 3,500 years ago in China. The career of a contemporary chicken is one of genetic tinkering, enslavement, and—except for the lucky few in the breeder houses—chastity and *adolescence interruptus*. From egg to drum-

stick, the life of a Southern broiler (hens lay eggs, broilers are what we eat) burns out faster than an anchor on the CBS "Morning Program."

Five weeks of eating, sleeping, and defecating among 15,000 to 20,000 cohorts, one bird per square foot—having been hatched among four times that many siblings by a mechanical mother—lead directly to a fate the philosopher Thomas Hobbes could only hint at in describing mortal existence as "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Thomas Hobbes never visited Berry Street.

IDID. A low, white building the size of a modest junior high school, the Tyson Foods processing plant on Berry Street in Springdale lessens the ranks of chickendom by 450,000 each week, helping the company achieve its weekly kill-and-process total of 14 million. In a year, that's about 700 million ex-chickens, a hefty chunk of the national annual consumption of nearly 5 billion birds (roughly the world supply of people).

To a broiler being off-loaded on the concrete dock behind the plant on a recent sunny afternoon, the opportunity to join this juggernaut of agriculture may not seem a compensating honor. Neither, probably, would the knowledge that, as bodies pile upon bodies, chicken is expected to surpass beef as America's

favorite meat by 1990, when we'll be ingesting 65 pounds of the birds per capita, nudging slightly ahead of dead cows and way ahead of dead pigs—also dispatched by Tyson—at a mere 50 pounds per capita.

But the plant and its purpose are a source of pride to the company. When Willie Nelson comes to Springdale to visit buddy Don Tyson, a backer of Nelson's movie *Red-headed Stranger*, he gets a tour of Berry Street. So do inquiring potentates from the Middle East and businessmen from Japan. Doubtless these and other visitors come away with a different perspective than do with the chickens. To paraphrase Mel Brooks' conclusion about the merits of being king: It's good to be at the top of the food chain.

Toward the other end, it's maddening. As a fork-loader transfers crates from a flatbed truck to the dock, the white, pale broilers squawk and jostle and fret. Soon they'll be inside, undergoing considerable alteration before emerging as Tyson's Honey Stung Fried Chicken, pre-cooked, frozen, and ready for deep frying. I watch their 11th-hour protests and button the blue smock given me by Richard Shipman, the 34-year-old processing superintendent who will guide me through the trenches of the modern appetite. We're also wearing hair nets. To a chicken, we must look like psycho-zombies.

Rod Davis wrote about voodoo in our February issue. He lives in Dallas.

The air around the dock is thick with dust and feather particles. It gets into my lungs and, by the next day, will have left me with a rasping cough. Out past the dock, another truck waits in the huge shed, near giant fans used to cool down temporarily parked birds during the summer. In winter, great strips of plastic shield the creatures from the wind.

The chickens that pour into Berry Street five days a week come mainly from contract farms in the immediate area. Like the nucleus of a complex organism, the Tyson processing plant welds together an intricate economic system of hatcheries, breeding houses, broiler farms, rendering plants, trucking depots, and feed mills. Moreover, the nitrogen-rich chicken litter has even reinvigorated the scabbly northwest Arkansas soil. "Without being facetious or anything," says Don Tyson, "Arkansas without chickens would be a damn poor place to be today."

Shipman precedes me across the dock area to a stack of cages near a conveyor belt. Each cage is maneuvered atop a sliding ramp over the belt. The cage is opened, and the birds topple down the brief incline onto the belt, where they're immediately surrounded by escape-proof mesh. It's the beginning of the end and an understandably traumatic moment for the broilers. To quiet them, the belt veers inside, where the lights are dusk-dim. "Chickens won't move in the dark," Shipman explains, yelling above the now-constant din of machinery and enclosed fowl. He's right. The birds crouch low and stay put.

They stay put, that is, until they round

a corner and meet three men known as "hangers," phantomlike figures in the interior grayness. "It's the hardest job in the plant," Shipman bellows in my ear. "This noise and the chicken shit and the dust. But we have whole families who've been hangers. Brothers, cousins—it's mostly the pay, I guess."

Everett McGarrah says that, being a family man, that's what drew him. A hanger starts at \$6.12 an hour, a cut above the \$5.85 plant average. McGarrah, 20, has been at the job two years. The chickens move along past McGarrah and the other two hangers in a long trough with sides about chicken head-high. It is McGarrah's mission to catch every third bird, turn it upside down, and insert its rough, scratchy legs into a pair of U-shaped metal shackles. Each shackle is attached to an overhead, wheeled track that will eventually whisk the incrementally disintegrating chicken through the entire plant. McGarrah works fast and barehanded, snaring most of his quarry on the first grab. His colleagues take the second and third inductees. Somehow, they manage to get every one.

A chicken jumps the belt and lands near my feet. She looks confused, nowhere to run. Nothing in her five weeks of minutely calculated life has prepared her for unstructured freedom. McGarrah scoops her up without missing a beat, and I am reminded of a short story by Albert Camus, the existentialist. "This is O.K.," McGarrah drawls in a thick Ozark twang, "but there's a yard job coming up. I'd like to get that. Work outside."

The chickens, having come to the

hangers heading to the right and on their feet, now reverse course and pass back to the left, inverted. Their blood is doing what yours does when you stand on your head. Judging by their flapping wings, the anxiety level is increasing.

Chickens don't take valium, but they do conduct electricity. To ease their angst, the birds' heads are now swished through a shallow brine bath with just enough electrical juice to stun them semiconscious and frenzy their hearts. Wings, which could become fouled in the impending machinery, draw up tight. The chickens now have 12 more feet of life and are moving in two lines at a rate of 46 birds per minute. That is when they encounter J.C. Maynard.

He sits on a high stool, his ruggedly handsome, 52-year-old face obscured under a hard hat and surgical mask, his plaid shirt and green trousers lost beneath a plastic apron, his big Pea Ridge, Arkansas-born worker's hands shielded by steel mesh gloves. His left hand, anyway. His right balances the sharp, thin knife that will be the last contact with humanity a Tyson broiler makes.

The walls around Maynard are splattered with blood. A trough of the thick, sluggish fluid runs below his feet. No one works with or near him, and the kill room is bathed in black light. Shipman says it helps soothe the final moments of the slaughterees. It makes me want to hear, if not ingest, "Purple Haze."

Between Maynard and the approaching chickens are parallel metal guide bars. As the inverted, stunned birds come nearer, the ever-narrowing bars accept their necks, sliding them along,

A chicken jumps the belt and lands near my feet. She looks confused.



It's hard being around death all the time," Shipman says, "even if it's just chickens. You can't really think what you're doing."

and gradually tilting their chins up, the only way to die. The tip of a whining buzz saw zips through feather, flesh, carotid, and jugular. The bird passes on, its head still attached for disposal later.

Twenty-five years ago, when Maynard started his career, he would have performed the bloodletting personally. Standing before the line, he and his colleagues would have reached up quickly, trapped each passing bird's head, and cut its throat. Maynard became "one of the best in the business," according to Shipman. But business demanded the rotary saw. Maynard's assignment now is to back up destiny.

Even high tech doesn't always go as planned. Every so often the blade misses a neck or doesn't make a deep enough cut. Maynard administers corrections. "You have to watch it real steady," he says later, sipping coffee in the plant cafeteria. "It's awful easy to let one slip through." Around him, other Tyson employees are snacking on chicken. Maynard doesn't eat it anymore, though, he says, "not because of what I do." He's a friendly man with a deep, gravelly voice. He's a grandfather, lives alone, and has a house full of cats. "Sometimes people say something to me about my job," he tells me, "but I don't think anything about it. It's just got to be done."

Past the sawblade and Maynard's knife, the chickens pump out 99 percent of their blood, assisted by a second shock. "We like to leave about one percent inside," Shipman explains. "Otherwise, it draws the pores up." I follow Shipman around a dividing wall into a hot, steamy, tiled room that smells like boiled chicken. Shipman shows me the scalders. Should Maynard miss a bird, it will hit the 140-degree water alive. Not only will

this be a rotten way to go, it will condemn the bird as a "cadaver." Unfit for human consumption, it will be relegated, along with its blood, head, beak, feet, and other inedible parts, to a rendering plant. Instead of becoming Tyson's finest, it will be "cooked" down to cakes of protein meal and wind up in puppy chow, or, as often as not, back—along with fish, stale cookies, and other cast-aways—in feed for phalanxes of chickens yet to be born. It's the chicken equivalent of going to hell.

Shipman senses in me some lingering weirdness about the kill room. "It's hard being around death all the time," he says, "even if it's just chickens. You can't really think what you're doing." I step over a puddle of warm water from the withered fowl passing overhead. "But this is nothing like the red meat industry. Those guys who do the killing over there"—he shakes his head—"they're not like you and me."

WHEN THE LATE patriarch, John Tyson, put on his porkpie hat and white shirt and founded his business in 1935 by shipping 500 chickens from Arkansas to Chicago for \$235 profit, there was no such thing as a broiler industry. Chickens were minor elements of farm life, used mostly for egg-laying and, when the eggs stopped, for Sunday dinner. City folks got their chickens whole, heads on, ungutted, and sometimes unplucked. Mostly, it was more trouble to raise and foinst farm birds on the urban market than they were worth.

Longhorn cattle were a similar problem in the 1870s, until entrepreneurs figured out a way to walk them up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas railheads and ship them to the slaughterhouses of

Chicago. With chickens being less amenable to forced marches, the dawn of the broiler industry had to wait on the ability to raise masses of them in place and get them to the butcher before they spoiled. John Tyson's contribution was finding a way to feed and water birds in transit.

By that time, Mrs. Wilmer Steele of Ocean View, Delaware, had already solved the more pressing problem—how to grow a lot of chickens at once and not have them die off. Mrs. Steele built a year-round production farm with a capacity of 10,000 birds. She also decided to send her chickens to market by train and, in 1926, the year generally considered to be the inception of continuous commercial chicken growing, she shipped 10,000 broilers.

From then, it was up to the Tysons, Steeles, Perdues, and other test pilots of broiler space to probe and, in relative isolation, invent a new agricultural order, one that has come to affect the diet of everyone in the country.

Animals eat grain and turn it into meat that animal raisers sell for enough profit to stay in business. Any animal that gives its owner an edge in the conversion of grain to meat is a long-run winner over those that don't. Chickens convert feed, primarily corn-based, to meat at the ratio of 2-to-1—two pounds of food to yield one pound of meat. Hogs convert at a rate of 4-to-1. Cattle, the dinosaurs of the range, seldom convert at less than 8-to-1. The only more efficient way to consume grain than putting it into a chicken is to eat it directly (as in tortillas) and pick up the protein deficit with beans. This is, in fact, the current diet of much of the world and may one day be ours as well. But as long as we remain carnivores, we'd better get used to Southern fried.

In the six decades that it's been in existence, the machinery of manufacturing chickens has been honed to an efficiency unprecedented in the vicious world of food supply. The industry's very novelty and lack of structure allowed it to borrow and adapt from anything, and it is probably no coincidence that the lessons of post-World War II corporatism, mass production, and marketing were synchronized hand in glove with impressive drives in biology, physics, and high tech. The result is a virtual case study in advanced capitalism. While the chicken was segmented into assembly line standards of productivity, the industry around it became a free-for-all of competitors,

(Continued on page 88)

CHICKEN

(Continued from page 64)

each battling to eliminate the others, that slowly shrank to a few dozen family-run survivors.

The present level of economic sophistication required considerable and painful experimentation. If chicken raising is largely by the book in 1987, it was seat of the pants when John Tyson started out. Disease, natural disasters, and incompetence were but a few of the pitfalls inherent in raising any form of livestock, but the most frustrating dilemma of all turned out to be the old law of supply and demand. Although by the 1950s Americans were eating more chicken, and infrastructures such as veterinary training, laboratory research, and technical services were expanding, the fiscal movement of the industry had hooked into a frustrating 30-month supply and demand cycle that continues today.

At the high end of the cycle, demand outstrips supply, prices rise, and profits are high. Then supply begins to overtake demand as farmers, like TV sitcom producers, swarm onto a good thing. A glut of marketable birds drives prices down, forcing failures, bankruptcies, and the acquisition of the losers by the lucky. In time, prices go back up, but with fewer and fewer players. During the conglomerate-minded 60s, hundreds of companies such as Purina, Pillsbury, and Quaker Oats were lured to the prospects of feathered gold—only to bail out in a cyclical shake-up.

Those who have hung on have changed the role of agriculture in the marketplace, becoming as adaptable to new ways of doing business as have the chickens to new ways of being manufactured. It was clear to Tyson and others that although the laws of supply and demand couldn't be repealed, they could, like the statutes of man, be worked with.

The answer was planning—exerting control. In the "broiler skirmishes," control of the market was applied through a central tactic of the new corporation, a tactic known as vertical integration. Tyson Foods describes it as "total control of the product from the egg to the table."

Like all forms of mass production, the successful raising of broilers depends upon the cutting of hundredths of a cent in costs all along the line. These savings can add up to millions in profits

in a good year or, in a bad one, can reduce losses enough for a company to weather the cycle. So chicken growing became an industrial science. Computations told how much heat, per pound, should be pumped into a broiler house to keep the chickens from expending their own energy (i.e., weight) on producing their own warmth (i.e., weight loss). Technologies allowed the development of the 77,760-egg incubator capable of precise humidity and temperature parameters, with special rotating shelves to replicate the random shuffling of an egg by a hen. Medicines were found to overcome Newcastle and Marek's disease, coccidiosis, and other biological devastators.

Laboratories, both private and at uni-

The marketplace had to be convinced to consume chicken in new ways.

versities, produced a heavier chicken with big breasts for the white meat used in McNuggets and other fast foods. Also grown were hens with longer laying lives and the Rock Cornish breed, designed to grow to maximum feed conversion in five weeks—two weeks better than the industry average. Feeds were milled in strict percentages. Timetables were worked out showing, by the half-day, how long a chicken should be raised before killing and how much feed should be left in the automated supply bins on pickup day. Nothing was left to chance. No accidents. No surprises.

Having exerted upon the business the rigors of mass production and science, the Horatio Algiers of the Chicken Belt were able to negotiate the cycle. But that control still wasn't enough. If producers were going to give their industry the kind of predictability Wall Street rewards, they had to change the cycle itself. Instead of consuming more chicken, raised ever more efficiently, the marketplace had to be convinced to consume chicken in entirely new and different ways.

It got to the heart of mortality: Meat spoils. You could run that through corporate meetings a million times, and

you couldn't change the iron rule: Sell it or smell it. The problem seemed cosmic in its damnation, until Tyson and a few other companies realized there was a third option: Process it.

Processed meat—frozen, precooked, biologically neutralized—was not, in fact, meat at all. It was something that could sit for months in inventory or on a freezer shelf, far from the curves of the 30-month cycle. You could still sell it as chicken, but it would behave on the market a lot more like an oil filter or a can of peaches. The cycle would become moot.

In 1976, as America began to bask in the glow of its new microwaves, Tyson Foods introduced the Ozark Fry, the first chicken breast patty to be marketed. By 1982, the company sent its Chick'n Quick line—15 varieties of down-home convenience (Chick'n Cheddar, Swiss'n Bacon, etc.)—into battle against the cycle. Today, Tyson is the nation's heaviest advertiser of "further processed" chicken, using celebrities such as Robert Morley and Tom T. Hall and devoting up to 70 percent of its output to meat-that-is-not-meat.

The percentage will increase. "We got to looking around," says Don Tyson, "and we found out we could sell chicken like that, and it didn't vary with the market. This insulates us from the broiler boom-bust cycle. That's the whole thing we're trying to do."

By 1990, Tyson hopes the principles of processing will lead to \$2 billion in sales. The \$1.5-billion level of 1986 was up 34 percent from 1985, and the company has expanded an average 27 percent in each of the past five years.

This almost giddy acceleration is in direct pursuit of Tyson's stated corporate goal of leading "the drive to make chicken America's number one meat protein by 1990." But there are other contributing factors. Among them are Federal tax laws that allow Tyson—as well as 23 other of the top 25 United States poultry companies—to be classified as a "family farm." The issue is complex, and Tyson competitor ConAgra of Nebraska is lobbying to dump the statute, but by permitting Tyson to operate on a cash accounting basis, the law encourages the deferral of profits (\$50.2 million for Tyson in 1986) into growth. Tyson is well known for keeping its stock dividends low and reinvestment high. Its current debt-to-equity ratio is about 80 percent, including \$211,888,000

in long term obligations, mostly used to finance acquisitions and new facilities.

Like all titans caught in the eat-or-be-eaten pressures of an evolving industry, Tyson Foods has conquered everything but its own terrible momentum. To stay alive, it must grow. To grow, it must make more money at an increasing rate. To do that, it must make chicken an indispensable craving in your life.

AFTER NEGOTIATING THE 140-degree scald, the broilers at the Berry Street plant relinquish their last claim to corporeal unity. The shackle track shunts the inverted carcasses past the head remover, where the combed tops drop into a yellow plastic barrel. The torsos pass through the rubber fingers of the plucking machine and then, to eliminate those unsightly pin feathers, are doused in a ringlet of gas flames.

A quick rinse not only improves the broiler's appearance, but keeps up what is now a continuous struggle against bacterial contamination. Among the best known forms is salmonella, an unpleasant and potentially (though rarely) fatal bacteria that has been traced to foods of animal origin. The booming of the chicken industry has enticed a number of entrepreneurs whose operational standards have been less than sanitary, prompting recent publicity about widespread incidences of salmonella infection. The people at Tyson are understandably sensitive to this problem and don't want their chicken dinners to go the way of vichyssoise soup or cranberries, two foods whose marketability was crippled by poisoning scares. The USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service says Tyson runs a clean operation; the company is off the hook primarily because most of its products are precooked—salmonella prefers its meat raw and unwashed—and also because the company inspects its own birds with standards it says are higher than those of the government.

The next stage of Tyson chickenhood, the dismemberment, thus takes place in conditions of stringent hygiene. In the main production room, the melancholy, lonely, and disconcerting business of terminating the birds becomes the lively, raucous, human-filled activity of reassembly and packaging. The overhead track now snakes throughout an auditorium-size area where dozens of specific tasks make clear how alike modern chicken production is to a Detroit

auto line. The difference is that in Detroit they put things together, and in Springdale they take them apart.

Freshly scalded, plucked, and decapitated, the chicken is still full of itself, literally. It must be gutted. Back when people used to catch and kill their own Sunday dinners, zapping their prey with hatchet or neck-wringing or whatever else was supposed to be more humane than J.C. Maynard and a sawblade, evisceration was accomplished by hand, which is probably why your palm can form a scoop.

At Berry Street and all modern plants, a mechanical device takes care of that. After the carcasses are taken down from the shackles and re-hung inside the main

In Detroit, they put things together; in Springdale, they take them apart.

room, they encounter a device that breaks the neck while slicing the oil gland from the tip of the tail. Then the carcass is cut and vented along the stomach cavity to the anal opening, or "butthole," as it is known on the shop floor. The eviscerator, a kind of rotating merry-go-round, is then ready to perform. As the freshly vented body is pressed into place, a metal loop digs down into the cavity, extracting the viscera and entrails easier than you spoon ice cream from a quart carton.

The government now takes an interest. The evisceration is another spot where contamination might occur: meat could be torn or rubbed against intestinal matter. A USDA inspector, working barehanded, feels and peruses each passing body for discoloration, lacerations, or anything else that could violate strict Federal standards.

If he finds anything amiss, the inspector, who also regulates line speed, puts the suspect carcass on a nearby tray. A Tyson employee can remedy the problem, perhaps by snipping away a bruise, or can accept the verdict. Shipman says about a quarter of a percent of Tyson's birds wind up in the condemned bucket.

Down-line from the USDA inspector,

the livers are "harvested," the lung tissue checked, and there's another rinse. The pre-broken neck is lopped off into a collection tub, near where 26-year-old Janice Bewley works. She's been at the plant six years and spends most of her time pulling out kidneys. I ask her how she likes the work. "It don't bother me," she says with the kind of robustness Sally Field sought in *Norma Rae*. "It's my job. We pass the time telling jokes. Screaming them, I mean."

"It must get boring, though," I persist. Although Tyson Foods professes to have a fast management track for the college graduates among its workforce, most of its employees perform what appear to be repetitive and perhaps monotonous tasks.

"You'd be surprised," Bewley says, winking at the half-circle of kibitzing colleagues around us. "If you really want to know, my job is to stick my hand in their butthole," she laughs. "You would be surprised."

It's time for the big chill, that part of processing that Shipman's boss, plant manager Phillip Brown, considers the lip-smacking edge of a Tyson chicken. A determined advocate of mass broiler production, Brown, 44, came into the business as a hanger. He has patience neither with the "elitist" advocates of "natural" raising, nor with their allegations that commercial chicken has no taste.

"I really question that," says Brown, a 13-year Tyson veteran. "Today's chickens are healthier. We've taken upon ourselves a mission to have the best plants, products, and feed in the world. We use every method at our disposal to turn out high quality protein at a low price."

The method that shows up most noticeably in your mouth, Brown figures, is the chill. "You can take one of those other birds, wring its neck, kill it, and throw it in a skillet," he says, eyes flashing above his dark mustache, "or take one of ours, kill it, and chill it 10 to 12 hours, and then cook it. Ours will taste a lot better, I guarantee you."

The chilling comes in two phases. First, the birds are remounted onto overhead tracks and dropped into a long, stainless steel tank filled with 40-degree water. Slowly oscillating paddles usher the whitish carcasses, which bob and sink in the blood-pink water like skinned apples, down the length of the vessel. The process takes about an hour.

Exiting the chiller, the corpses are

"If you have Diabetes, you can help change the way it is treated."

The Diabetes Control and Complications Trial is seeking volunteers for a major research study supported by the National Institutes of Health.

The goal: to determine whether one of two insulin regimens will help prevent or slow down the devastating complications of diabetes, including kidney and heart disease, blindness, and nerve disorders.

Qualified volunteers receive expert diabetes medical care, at one of 27 top quality medical centers in the U.S. and Canada, at NO COST, for up to six years.

Volunteers must be:

- insulin-dependent for 15 years or less,
- taking no more than two injections daily,
- between the ages of 13 and 39.

For more information, call our toll-free numbers 24 hours a day.

1-800-522-DCCT

IN THE U.S.

1-800-533-DCCT

IN CANADA



Space provided as a public service by the publisher.

kicked onto a conveyor belt and whisked before a row of eight women who will judge market quality. Grade A broilers, the kind most of us will buy, are hung by one leg on yet another line of tracking. The lesser-grade birds—bruised, missing parts, or otherwise inferior—go to a different line and eventually wind up in soup, hot dogs, bologna, and TV dinners.

Hung and graded, ever nearer their reincarnation as "product" instead of broiler, the carcasses move past a row of electronic sensors that trip the bodies by weight into marked stainless steel bins. Full bins are covered with ice and wheeled away for coding and tallying. "We can trace each bird all the way back to the egg it was hatched in and the flock it was raised in," says Shipman. "In case there's a problem."

A woman annotates a bin, indicating date of arrival, kill, and processing. Once the paperwork is completed, the bin will be pushed through insulating strips of plastic into the source of Brown's pride—a large, plain enclosure not unlike a morgue. The iced bodies remain in place about 12 hours. "Today's kill," says Shipman, leading me back into the warmth of the main room, "is tomorrow's cook."

To our right, yesterday's kill is being dissected by an automatic cutter in which a configuration of saw blades reduces the torso to wings, breasts, and thighs, later to be arranged in different combinations for packing and ship-out. Because the broilers have been raised to clone-like uniformity, the cuts are precise and nearly identical. Before transmission via yet another conveyor belt through the apartment-size ovens and quick freezers that will ready them for final packaging, the cut-up portions are treated to a light coat of breading.

Shipman scrapes away a pasty covering with his thumbnail to show it isn't overpowering. He also shows me a machine that punctures each piece of chicken with an array of needles. Some of the needles inject the sweetness that allows the product to be described as Honey Stung. The other needles pump in 10 percent sodium phosphate solution. "It's used in most frozen foods," says Shipman.

That's true, but the use of sodium phosphate solution and other chemicals, from hatching through processing, has become a significant cause of some people's disenchantment with chicken's

image as a healthier (leaner, less cholesterol) alternative to beef and pork. If the typical broiler of today is healthier than its barnyard ancestors, it is by having become a clucking laboratory of antibiotics, growth enhancers (steroids, common in beef, are prohibited in poultry), and feed supplements. More than 300 types of drug products are approved by the government for use in chickens.

Industry defenders—such as the Orwellian-named Animal Health Institute of Alexandria, Virginia—report that the use of antibiotics alone saves the American consumer close to \$4 billion a year for all types of meat. The savings derive from staving off diseases that could wipe out flocks, or herds, and presumably drive prices up or make raising livestock prohibitively expensive.

Other groups—including the Natural Resources Defense Council, Americans for Safe Food, plus numerous health publications, natural food co-ops, and many physicians—believe the use of some chemicals in poultry, or in any food product, portends trouble. One argument is that chemicals in meat pass along the food chain to the people who eat the meat, with untoward effects. Another concern is that some kinds of bacteria may, like certain insects, develop a resistance to antibiotics; if humans were infected by such bacteria, common antibiotics might prove ineffective. Still another fear is that humans may react adversely to additives contained in the meat.

These kinds of objections have not only subverted the chicken mystique, they have spawned a marketing counter-trend. At Subiaco, Arkansas, a couple of hours southeast of Springdale, David and Gloria Farrington are enjoying a booming trade selling about 18,000 "chemical-free" chickens coast to coast each week.

At \$4.90 for 1.15 pounds, the meat from the Farringtons' Pine Ridge Farms is three times the cost of a comparable Tyson product. As the population of the planet approaches chronic malnutrition, it's a disparity worth considering. You can't feed the world protein at \$4 a pound.

SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE Arkansas hills, the breeders are the alpha-omega link where the chicken becomes the egg, or vice versa, just like Howlin' Wolf sings in the old blues grinder:

*I've got a little red rooster, too lazy
to crow for the day.
I've got a little red rooster, too lazy
to crow for the day.
Keeps everything in the barnyard
upset and ready to lay.*

At Joe Davenport's farm just outside Springdale, the mud from an afternoon drizzle spatters the sides of the pickup truck Tyson serviceman Larry Myers drives every day troubleshooting 22 breeder flocks. Myers, 39, a University of Arkansas grad who got into the business after leaving the Army, closes the unpainted gate to Davenport's 30 acres after we pass through. A few cattle watch from the other side of a tractor, and a dog bounces down from the red farmhouse. Just ahead are two long metal sheds, built to the Tyson specifications, containing about 5,600 Ann Arbor hens and 600 Vantress roosters. The Vantress breed is hallowed in the industry. It was Charles Vantress, a Californian, who, in 1946, won A&P's "Chicken of Tomorrow" contest, a concerted effort to create a super-chicken genetically bred to suit the tastes of consumers.

Myers parks at the first unit. The feed bin, which allots grain into automatic peckable dispensers, rises alongside. Like his counterparts, the broiler servicemen, Myers must routinely check the feed, water, and living conditions of the flocks under his purview. As a breeder man, however, he cannot drive onto a broiler farm, nor can broiler men come to breeder farms, without undergoing a shower, a change of clothes, and disinfecting. Disease control.

The unit opens onto a small foyer kept at 65 to 68 degrees. Metal stacking carts as tall as Myers' big, good old boy frame are filled with trays of 144 eggs each. Twice a week, trucks from a Tyson hatchery (two in Springdale) pick up the eggs and take them back for "setting," or incubation. Davenport shows up to greet us. He and Myers look over the house chart, which shows the hens to be producing 4,100 eggs per day. That's a 76 percent rate, about 10 percent short of the optimum they'll reach during their year of laying. After 60 to 65 weeks they're "amortized." Altogether, Davenport will make up to \$4 from each 6 1/2-pound hen before it's sold to become a "lesser" product, such as a TV dinner.

Unlike the open-floor format of the broiler houses, the breeder units con-

tain raised wooden slats down each side. The chickens thus stay off their litter, reducing potential infections and possible broken eggs. All down the center of the unit, also raised off the floor, metal "nests" about the size of a mailbox hang 10 per module. Four or five hens share each nest and, in their prime, leave one brown egg per day atop the excelsior packing. The frequency is more or less the result of a menstrual cycle. If fertilized, the egg contains an embryo that will be nurtured by the yolk sac until it turns into a chick, 21 days after being laid, and busts out. If unfertilized, the egg, which the hen lays anyway, contains only a clear yolk.

The object of the breeding house is to produce embryos. In return for getting to grow up (these chickens look like chickens—big, white, heavily combed), the breeder flocks must become slaves of lust, mating 16 hours a day, with the lights on.

Much of the chore falls upon the roosters. Heavily outnumbered, each male must tend a harem of at least 10 hens, not counting those he cuckolds from rivals, an offense for which his fellow roosters are willing to peck him to death. Such fights are accepted in the corporate houses because, Myers explains, you have to let the hens run free in order for them to be exposed to the roosters.

To consistently produce embryos, a hen only has to be fertilized every two weeks. But the roosters don't like to wait that long. In some experiments, roosters bred to become horny went too far and mated a dozen times in succession—only to drop dead of heart attacks. Davenport's boys aren't that salacious, or foolish, but the action is always on, especially in the morning and evening.

I watch a hen circle in front of a rooster and squat low. He takes an immediate interest, moves behind, and mounts. Before I can say, "Look, aren't those chickens (deleted)?" they're finished. He has matched his "vent" with hers and squirted in the wave of the future. A colossally simple act, really, on which to base a billion-dollar avian empire and orchestrate the eating habits of the world. Don Tyson's office motif notwithstanding, I'm convinced that the activity I'm watching, not the egg, is the genesis of the cycle. I think Myers would agree. "It's kind of like a wet, juicy kiss," he explains, as we observe.

That's what I like—a romantic ending. □

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE
STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP
(REQUIRED BY 39 U.S.C. 3685)

- Title of publication: *Southern Magazine*.
A. Publication number: 0164627.
- Date of filing: 10/1/87.
- Frequency of issue: Monthly.
A. Number of issues published annually: 12.
B. Annual subscription price: \$15.00.
- Location of known office of publication: 201 East Markham, P.O. Box 3418, Little Rock, Arkansas 72203.
- Location of the headquarters or general business offices of the publishers: Same as number 4.
- Name and complete address of publisher and editor.
Publisher: Alan Leveritt, same as number 4. Editor: Linton Weeks, same as number 4.
- Owners: (The following own one percent or more of the Southern Limited Partnership. All addresses of these stockholders are the same as number 4.) Southern Limited Partnership, Arkansas Writers' Project Inc., and Stephens Inc.
- Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None.
- For completion by nonprofit organization: Not applicable.
- Extent and nature of circulation. Average number copies each issue during preceding 12 months (November 1986, through October 1987) (actual number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (October 1987).
A. Total number of copies printed: 291,864/307,000.
B. Paid circulation.
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter agents: 9,305/9,305.
2. Mail subscriptions: 214,179/242,000.
C. Total paid circulation: 223,484/251,305.
D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means, samples, complimentary and other free copies: 16,709/23,031.
E. Total distribution: 250,193/274,336.
F. Copies not distributed.
1. Office use, leftovers, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 2,450/2,319.
2. Returns from news agents: 39,221/30,345.
G. Total (Sum of E, F1 and F2—should equal net press run shown in A): 291,864/307,000.
- I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Alan Leveritt, Publisher.
- For completion by publishers mailing at the regular rates. (Section 132.121, Postal Service Manual.) 39 U.S.C. 3626 provides in pertinent part: "No person who would have been entitled to mail matter under former section 4359 of this title shall mail such matter at the rates provided under this subsection unless he files annually with the Postal Service a written request for permission to mail matter at such rates." In accordance with the provisions of this statute, I hereby request permission to mail the publication named in item 1 at the phased postage rates presently authorized by 39 U.S.C. 3626. Alan Leveritt, Publisher.

Toll Free
**SUBSCRIBER
SERVICE**

Change of Address
Questions or Complaints

1(800)227-7585

SOUTHERN
M A G A Z I N E