

Sween Poultry Farm



In 1914, C.J. Sween (1878-1972) established a 20-acre poultry farm on the Sammamish Plateau in King County, in what is today (2007) the city of Sammamish. He expanded the farm and by 1940 had 300 acres, stretching south and west from near today's intersection of SE 4th Street and 228th Avenue SE in Sammamish. Sween (pronounced "Swinn") raised laying hens, but when his son Bill Sween (1913-2000) took over the farm's operation in 1940, he switched the operation to raising fryer chickens and selling them commercially. The farm closed its operations in 1965.

In 1914 Carl Joseph Sween -- typically known as "C.J."-- was working a 12-hour night shift with a steel company in Seattle and making \$90 a month. Figuring there had to be a better way, he purchased a 20-acre farm on what was then the remote Sammamish Plateau, just southwest of today's intersection of SE 4th Street and 228th Avenue SE in Sammamish. Sween paid \$1000 for the 20 acres, which consisted of \$500 of his own money and \$500 that he borrowed from a friend.

At first, Sween was going to start a dairy ranch. But only four of the 20 acres were cultivated and the rest was principally logged-off stumps, ferns and gravel. Sween knew he couldn't properly sustain a dairy farm with so little useable land, so he quickly sought another enterprise that would work on his logged-off land. He researched poultry production and found one instance where it had proven successful in western Washington up to that point, and decided to give it a try.

Sween's timing was perfect. In 1914 the poultry industry was almost non-existent in Washington state, but it would expand exponentially in the next 15 years. One example of this growth is cited in a April 1929 article of *The*

Washington Farmer: "This industry has grown from virtually nothing in 1914 until last year [1928] western Washington exported in excess of 1700 [rail]carloads of eggs." Indeed, several chicken ranches sprang up on the Plateau after Sween's, but none rivaled his operation.

Sween hatched and raised chickens primarily to sell their eggs commercially, although he also sold baby chicks. In 1914 he started with two dozen hens and hatched 130 pullets (female chickens under one year old); his gross income for the year was less than \$500. But the next year he had 300 hens and by 1916 he had 600. He continued to grow his flock until he had 6,000 hens by the mid-1920s. These hens each laid an average of more than 200 eggs, with the champion hen laying 336 eggs, and this was serious business: In 1928 the Sween farm had pens of chickens entered in egg-laying contests in Puyallup, San Antonio, Quincy, Illinois, and Logan, Utah. (Sween's pen of ten chickens placed fourth among 62 pens competing in the San Antonio contest.) The hens laid eggs continuously. In the early years of the farm the chicken houses were equipped with gas lights which were used to keep the chickens awake and laying eggs, but electricity had arrived at the farm by the late twenties.



By the late 1920s, Sween was making \$35,000 a year. As his farm grew, he bought more acreage -- by 1929 he had 50 acres -- and built the buildings necessary to maintain his chickens. By 1929 he had 46 buildings of varying sizes, including a two-story chicken house, 160 feet long and 20 feet wide, capable of housing 2,200 hens.

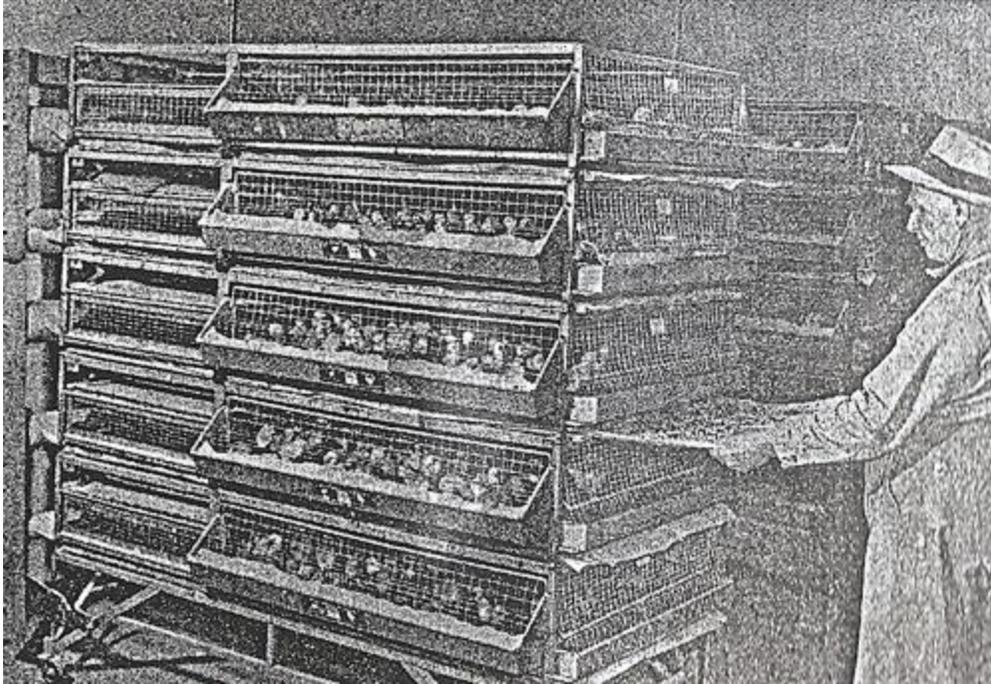
Scattered at intervals over about 15 acres were 25 portable colony range houses, complete with self-feeding hoppers that held a week's worth of

feed. The young pullets were allowed to range freely over 30 of Sween's 50 acres during the summer months, drinking from faucets installed at places strategically located on the farm. Fall was the laying season, and it was then the chickens were rounded up for duty. Faye Turner Sween (b.1916) recalled being recruited by the Sweens as a young girl in the 1920s to catch chickens: "My brother Fred and I would chase them all along the ground and up into the trees. We got paid a dollar a day, a silver dollar at the end of the day" (interview).

In 1936 Faye married C.J.'s youngest son William "Bill" Sween (1913-2000), and in 1940 Faye and Bill moved to the farm and took over operations there. However, C.J. stayed on, officially but not really retired. During the thirties C.J. had purchased additional land and by 1940 the farm was 300 acres. At this point, the Sweens decided to shift gears and began raising fryer chickens. Fryers (also known as broilers) are young chickens (of either sex), typically seven to 13 weeks old and weighing between two and a half and four and a half pounds.

The Sweens retooled their operation to accommodate a dramatically increased volume of birds. By 1947 the Sweens were maintaining 50,000 chickens at any given time at their farm, and had air conditioned buildings for their young chicks at a time when air conditioning was still a novelty for most homes and offices. They bought their chicks from Fors Farm in Puyallup when the chicks were typically a day old, and raised them in starting batteries (large cages stacked on top of each other) in a chick starting brooder room until the chicks were four weeks old. The chicks were then moved to secondary batteries specially arranged to promote their growth. At six to eight weeks, the young chickens were large enough to sell. The Sweens typically sold their chickens live to Acme Poultry Company of Seattle.

A reporter for *The Washington Farmer* interviewed C.J. Sween in 1929 and asked Sween what he thought the major factors were that contributed to his success. "Persistency, sanitation and rotation of range for growing pullets, and good bookkeeping so we could find the leaks," replied C.J. Sween. Perhaps by coincidence, perhaps not, a reporter for the *Co-op Chick News* asked Bill Sween the same question 18 years later in a 1947 interview. "Good chicks, good equipment, and good hard work," replied the younger Sween.



This formula was clearly a prize winner, because the Sween Poultry Farm continued its rapid growth through the 1950s. During one year in the fifties -- Faye thought it might have been early in the decade -- the Sween farm was the largest fryer grower in the state. By this time about 500,000 fryers were processed through the farm each year, and were typically sold in batches of 100,000.

In 1965 Bill Sween decided to retire. He closed the poultry operation that year and divided his land into parcels, and sold off bits of the farm at a time. The Sween family moved to Lake Sammamish for about five years, but around 1970 returned to the farm and remained there until Bill died in 2000. Faye then sold the remainder of the land. The final parcel was sold to the City of Sammamish for the Sammamish Commons Park.

-Phil Dougherty July 22, 2007

Sources: Ron Harvey, "Sween's Poultry Farm Large Scale Broiler Plant," *Co-Op Chick News* (a publication of the Washington Chick Association), July 1947, p.8,9; Dave Herman, "Sween's remember a Plateau from long ago," *Issaquah Press*, n.d; W.L. Teutsch, "From \$90 a Month to \$35,000 a Year," *The Washington Farmer*, April 25, 1929, p.3; Phil Dougherty interview of Faye Sween, July 15 and 16, 2007, Issaquah, Washington