

History of the Iowa Blue

By Kent Whealy

Each year Seed Savers hold its Campout Convention on the next to the last full weekend in July. About 200 of our members come together for two days of fellowship that includes speeches, slide shows, garden tours and good food. In 1987 Chris Norman and his family drove all the way from Thunder Bay, Ontario to be with us. Chris is the site manager at Old Fort William, a restored fur trading post. There he maintains historic gardens and several endangered breeds of livestock. During his trip to Decorah, Chris went to meet Micheal Moore who lives about five miles northwest of Heritage Farm. Michael, who is probably in his mid-40's, is living on his family's farm. He has continued to keep his grandfather's herd of Dexter cattle.

Michael also keeps a large menagerie of poultry: ducks, geese, guineas, chickens, pheasants, and quail. During their visit Michael took Chris into a shed to see some chickens that his grandfather had developed a half century earlier. Until a few years ago, there had been a fairly large flock, but they got into some bad oats and most of them died. Hogs killed a few more, so a couple of years ago, Michael started keeping them in the shed continually. Only one rooster and five hens remained, all very old. They barely laid each spring and their eggs were no longer fertile. Michael was afraid he was going to lose them. They were called Iowa Blues.

Chris related that story to all of us during his speech at the Campout. That fall I went to meet Michael Moore and got my first look at his Iowa Blues. They were old, but spectacular! The rooster's comb had been frozen off so many times that I couldn't tell what it should look like. He had a white mane; long, narrow, white feathers also covered his back and hung down on both sides of a large, curved, bluish black tail. The feathers on his breast were barred with black and white which made his lower body appear almost grey, not the blue I had expected. He was broad breasted and his legs were olive. The hens were covered with even more finely penciled black and white feathers. Their manes were much more subtle, white feathers edged with black which gives a silver appearance. Their tails were a more solid dark grey, olive legs and small, spiked combs.



Herman and One of the Old Hens

Those five hens laid less than a dozen eggs in the spring of 1987. Michael had tried to hatch them in an antique incubator, but they all rotted. Michael and I schemed about ways to get them out onto some grass the next spring, sock the laying mash, and then take any eggs to a friend of mine who runs the Decorah Hatchery.

But we both knew that the situation looked rather hopeless; those six remaining Iowa Blues were just too old. Michael didn't know a lot about the development of the breed. He did tell me that they were supposedly part pheasant. (Right! And Escondido Gold melon is supposedly part papaya.) His grandfather had once taken two pair to a fair in Missouri and sold them to some people who also bought several Dexter cattle over the years. We followed up that lead, but with no luck. Michael told me to contact a fellow named Ransome Bolson who use to run a hatchery in Decorah. Twenty years earlier, Michael's grandfather had sold Ransome some Iowa Blues. There was an outside chance that he might still have some.

I'd already noticed Ransome Bolson's place just northeast of Decorah where Locust Road climbs up through the bluffs out of the river valley. It had fallen into despair, but must have been a showplace in its time. There were three long, narrow chicken houses with fancy metal cupolas, one of the roofs had caved in. Half a dozen small, square, brooder huts were also scattered around the property. Ransome's mother and father, who are in their late 80's, still live on that home place. Ransome and his family live across the road.

I asked Ransome if he still had any Iowa Blues, he grinned and said he had about 50. We walked down through the trees past several young woodchucks about the size of guinea pigs that were sunning themselves on some old tires. It surprised me that they didn't scurry away when we walked up. I looked through the chicken window and torn plastic that covered the windows on the south side of one of the houses. Inside, looking back, were three beautiful young roosters and half a dozen hens that looked exactly like Michael's.

Ransome said he had known about the breed for nearly 40 years. About 1960 he bought a rooster and nine hens from Dolly Logston, Michael Moore's grandmother. She told him that a White Rock hen hatched out a nest under a building and brought out a clutch of chicks like no one had ever seen. Ten years ago Ransome had 30 Iowa Blue laying hens. Today he has about 30 older birds, that he doesn't have the heart to butcher, although he never told me that. Over the last couple of years a few hens have hatched out nests of eggs, so he also has three roosters and eight hens that are two years old, and two roosters and six hens that are one year old. He agreed to sell me hatching eggs when the young hens started laying in the spring.

Ransome also told me to contact W.C. Fenton who used to run the Fenton Hatchery in Strawberry Point. At one time he had sold Iowa Blues through his hatchery and might know of someone down that way who still had some. The hatchery closed in 1972 and Mr. Fenton retired to Elkader. When I called, he sounded quite elderly. From about 1960-1970 he had sold Iowa Blue chicks, but didn't think anyone was still keeping any. He did, however, tell me several interesting stories.

W.C. Fenton named the breed. He told his employees at the hatchery, "Iowa doesn't have a chicken named after it. Let's call them Iowa Blues." According to Mr. Fenton they were developed from the eggs of a Black Minorca pullet and a Rhode Island Red pullet that were locked in a corn crib with a cock pheasant. (As John Withee said with a wink about all the Wild Goose beans, "Sure makes a good story, doesn't it?") Over the years his niece won 64 ribbons with them at the Clayton County Fair. He had used Iowa Blues to produce two beautiful crosses. An Iowa Blue cockerel on White Rock hens produced greyish cockerels and black pullets. And a cross with New Hampshire pullets produced reddish grey cockerels and blackish grey pullets.



Iowa Blue Chicks

Last spring Ransome Bolson sold me seven dozen hatching eggs over a three-week period. He warned me that it might be like playing the Iowa Lottery; he was afraid that the chickens had become inbred and that the hatch might be 20% or less. I took the eggs to my friend Steve Matter, whose family has run the Decorah Hatchery since 1923. Three weeks later I went back in to collect the first batch of chicks. About 65% of the eggs had hatched and there was no crooked toes or other signs on inbreeding. About half of the chicks were solid chestnut brown. The other half also had light yellow, horizontal stripes on their cheeks, a light yellow triangle under their beaks and chins, and two black stripes down their backs. In other words, they looked like pheasant chicks!

I asked Ransome Bolson if the two color patterns were sex linked; he assured me that they were not. A few of the chicks were quite a bit lighter or darker than the others, but he had seen all of those variations and said they would all end up looking the same. A month later the chicks had feathered out and you could tell the roosters in the oldest batch by their combs. They were starting to get some size to them, but still looked very little like their parents. Ransome agreed to sell me one young rooster and five older hens to display at the Campout.

I especially wanted to show them to Thane Earle, one of our members who is a well-known poultry judge. Thane has kept as many as 300 strains of chickens at one time, and more than 20 species of pheasants. I fully expected Thane to walk in and say "Oh hell, Kent, those are just *Such and Such*." But he had never seen anything like them. He was also surprised that their color pattern was stable and not the result of a cross. Iowa Blues are actually grey, not the blue that poultry fanciers try to achieve.

Last winter two of Michael's old hens died. The three remaining hens laid five eggs last spring. I took the eggs to Steve at the hatchery, but none were fertile. By the time the Campout rolled around, another old hen had died. At that point we were hoping to hatch anything out of them, to cross with our young birds. The two flocks have been separated for 20 years, so we might gain some vigor.



Young Iowa Blues

We traded Ransome's young rooster and five older hens plus two of our young roosters and two young hens to Michael for his old rooster and two old hens. Quite a deal. Michael's flock increased from three to ten with five young birds. Aaron and I brought them after dark, but there was a light in the shed. Michael caught his old rooster and held it up to the light bulb; I held Ransome's rooster up beside it. Except for the old rooster's comb, spurs, and a slight yellowish cast to its white feathers, they looked exactly alike. Michael carried the box containing the three old chickens to my van. He handed me the box and said, "Take good care of Herman, you hear." Then he looked sort of sheepish, grinned and said, "Well, that's what we call him."

Aaron and I had fixed up a vacant cattle pen in the barn for the three old birds. The next morning we let them out for the first time in two years; they loved it! We started feeding them laying mash and a few weeks later one of the hens laid two, small, light brown eggs. Glenn came up about that time to spend the weekend with our family. He brought along a round, metal hundred egg incubator and taught me how to use it. We filled it's water pan, brought the temperature up to 103 degrees F. and set the two eggs. Three and a half weeks later neither egg had hatched, so we broke them. They were infertile and had not even started to develop. Glenn said that a rooster can become sterile if his comb freezes severely. One of the hens is very old; -her feet look ancient. The other hen is old, but somewhat younger. Next spring I will pen them with the young rooster, hoping to get anything out of the last of Michael's flock.

Last spring Ransome sold me 84 hatching eggs. We lost maybe half a dozen chicks, but still ended up with 28 roosters and 23 hens. Two roosters and two hens went to Michael, along with Ransom's young rooster and five older hens. Eight roosters and eight hens went to our friends Lee and Jan Zook who live about five miles north of Heritage Farm. One of those roosters drowned in a tank and two or three more have probably been butchered by now.

A week before Halloween, Glenn brought us a pickup load of squash for David's pumpkin carving party. Glenn and I selected our seven best roosters and the other eleven were butchered. Those of you who wince at that have probably never kept any poultry. Seven young roosters is actually far too many for our 13 young hens. We only need a couple, but I'm scared something might happen to some of them. So far they aren't fighting or running the young hens ragged; that may happen next spring. Right now Herman still rules the roost and protects his two old hens from the young roosters.

All of us at Heritage Farm are quite pleased with the way things went this summer. As often happens, another piece of our work has fallen perfectly into place, allowing us to rescue an almost extinct local breed. Instead of one breeding flock, now there are four with 36 new young birds. We intend to continue to spread them around. At the Campout I had to discourage several people from taking birds home with them right then. Next spring we should be able to mail hatching eggs to most folks who want them. We could also raise chicks that could be picked up at the Campout. It will probably be illegal for us to mail chicks, since they won't be inspected; I'll have to check on that. Let us know what you want, and we will try our best to help you out.