

If and when he found a chickenhouse that he liked, there was still a great amount of work involved. He had to make sure that all the characteristics of a great chickenhouse photograph were there. He had to spend at least a day figuring out angles, making charts, checking positions, readying his gear. And he had to make sure that it was OK with the owner of the house.

Sometimes these people were hard to find. He had spent many an afternoon tracking down owners in backfields or in taverns. And sometimes they weren't easy to deal with.

"You from the government, ain't you?" one owner asked him. "I'll tell you right now, I ain't been feeding my chickens anything that won't make them grow."

This was in a tavern in the Northwest. The owner was drunk, leaning over the bar, surrounded by chickenhouse workers. They all laughed at him.

"What you going around taking pictures of chickenhouses for? Can't find a job?"

"This is my job. I take pictures of chickenhouses. It's for a book."

"No kidding. Well, I heard of stranger things. Be sure to spell the name right. There's two n's in McLennock."

Once inside the chickenhouses, his work was not over. "Do you realize," he wrote in a letter to his brother the lawyer, "that there are over fifteen thousand chicks hatched in a day in some of these houses. FIFTEEN THOUSAND PER DAY! I have to really watch my step." "Listen," his brother wrote back, "about these chickenhouses. I understand that this is an interesting thing you're doing. Fifteen thou per is a hell of a lot of chickens. But don't you think it's time you did something with a little more security? Not everyone shares your fascination with chickenhouses. The book might sell only to those people whose houses you included, or whose names you spelled right.

*He could not think why these people would be interested in watching him take pictures of an old chickenhouse. He was sure that there was something that they would rather be doing. All this publicity, he thought, all the pictures that have been taken of them have really screwed them up. One thing I'll never do, he thought, is take pictures of Indians. He watched them watch him. Besides, he thought, it's been done before.*

I know this guy who's starting his own photography lab. With a little commitment, I could get you on. He's seen your work, says he loved *Wells*. But this chickenhouse thing . . ."

But this did not bother him. In fact, he was used to it. Long ago he had made up his mind to do the things that interested him the most. He had decided that he would never be able to enjoy the same things that his brother and his friend with the photography lab and almost everyone else did. It made him happy to think about this, how independent and spontaneous he could be. He thought often and with scorn of the things that he did not have to have: breakfast before nine, new types of toothbrushes, suits with thinner than last year's lapels. A jet-propelled window washer for that hard-to-reach second story was to him the funniest thing in the world.

His work was progressing, but slowly. He calculated that he had about half of the stills and copy that he needed for the book. He was going to run out of money somewhere in the Southwest. He contacted some artist friends in Santa Fe to see if they could organize a show. Santa Fe, it seemed, was ready for a glimpse of chickenhouses. A show was arranged for early next month.

Since not many chickens were raised in

the Southwest, he spent days traveling before he found a house worth photographing. It was near Albuquerque, on a reservation. The Indians were friendly enough; they were quite used to people coming through the reservation to take pictures of their lives. The chickenhouse was extraordinary, unlike any he had ever seen. But when he went out to photograph it, many Indians came out to watch and help. He had no money to pay them and refused their offers politely. But they wouldn't leave, and it made him uncomfortable. He could not think why these people would be interested in watching him take pictures of an old chickenhouse. He was sure that there was something they would rather be doing. All this publicity, he thought, all the pictures that have been taken of them have really screwed them up. One thing I'll never do, he thought, is take pictures of Indians. He watched them watch him. Besides, he thought, it's been done before.

The show in Santa Fe was a surprising success. There had been a write-up in the paper, and after he arrived he had given an interview to the *Santa Fe Arts Journal*. The interviewer was an enthusiastic man with shoulder length hair who "loved his work," he had said. The interview came out in the paper the day after the show started. It was not long, and the interviewer described the show as "A wonder-

fully stark and beautifully photographed vision of chickenhouses that really are America's own. "All this from the man who brought us the book that captured the true essence of self-reliance: the original and simple *Wells of America*."

He soon grew tired of signing copies of *Wells* and talking about the capacity of the average-sized chickenhouse. He was eager to get out of Santa Fe, to complete his project. On the third day of the show, he had to have a break. He left his post at the end of the exhibit and went over to a park across the street. He sat for a long time on a bench, shading the sun from his eyes with a copy of *Wells*. Two women sat beside him on the grass, eating lunch out of plastic carryout cartons. The women talked loud and fast, and he tried to ignore them, but he couldn't.

"You won't believe what Jerry did," said the woman closest to him. "I told you we went on vacation last month. To Houston and New Orleans. We took the kids with us this time. We spent one night in Little Rock with Alma. Well, anyway, I must have told Jerry three dozen times to call the paper and have them cut off the subscription while we were gone. We were gone for almost three weeks, you know."

He listened. He winced. It's the details I can't stand, he thought.

"Well, he forgot," the woman said. "You're kidding," said the other woman. "We always cut ours off when we go anywhere. Even for the weekend. Ever since the trampoline got stolen."

He sat there, listening, but he didn't want to hear anymore. It was hot and he was there on the bench by himself. He felt the discomfort spread and wanted to shout at the women for all the uneasiness they had caused him. With their details and their newspaper subscriptions. But he couldn't. He couldn't look over at them. He looked through *Wells*, but that didn't help. He thought about chickenhouses, but that didn't help either.

