

My Chantecler Journey

Sometimes people want to know what White Chantecler bloodline I have, or where it originated. I try to explain that my Chantecler flock is a bit of a cocktail blend, mostly of unknown origins. I always enjoy hearing the stories of breeders who have worked with a particular breed for many years, so thought I might share this summary of my introduction and progression with White Chanteclers over the past decade or so.

Foundation Trio, 2010: This journey began during the winter of 2010. My sister came across a trio of White Chanteclers advertised for sale in central Alberta and bought them on a whim. She thought I might enjoy the opportunity to borrow them and raise a few chicks for myself. Chantecler flocks were not very plentiful in this area at the time, so I couldn't pass up the chance to gain some new experience and learn more about another breed.



As it turned out, this original trio proved to be a starting point, but I had no idea of the challenges that would lie ahead to bring them up to standard. It was probably a good thing I went in blind, or I would never have taken on such a long-term project! I didn't have much experience as a breeder but I did



have a lot of enthusiasm, and as I collected eggs for incubation I was surprised and pleased by the continuous egg production of those 2 hens throughout the short, dark days of winter. The rooster was gentle-natured and I enjoyed having him in my barn.

2011: During the spring of 2011 I hatched and raised 39 chicks from that original trio. Although they were strong and vigorous, nearly every one of them displayed one or more serious defects. The worst was probably the high proportion with severely bent or curled toes. I knew this was not related to incubation problems because my other breeds were hatching without incident. Other issues included pea combs and willow-colored shanks. It was disappointing to see so many flaws in the offspring, but rather than culling them as chicks I decided to grow them out, and most were butchered as fryers. Our family found them tender and flavorful, although they fell short of the target weights for the breed. I still stubbornly believed that this could be a decent foundation to build on, and kept the best 5 pullets and 1 male. The original trio was sold by the owners.



That fall I bought 2 new cockerels from a breeder in Saskatchewan, hoping that an influx of new genes would bring improvements in the physical features of the offspring.

2012:

Through the last half the winter and spring of 2012 I used the 5 pullets in a number of different mating combinations with the 3 cockerels and hatched lots of chicks. This included some sibling inbreeding to help bring faults to the surface. I tracked egg outputs, fertility and hatch rates from each mating pen. As the chicks grew I recorded the percentages of faults that resulted from each of the matings, mainly bent toes, pea combs and willow shanks. I've always used toe punching to track parentage, and I added numbered leg bands to identify any chicks that appeared to be possible keepers. This allowed me to track their individual weights at 12 weeks, 16 weeks and 6 months, as well as 9 months and 1 year for the few I still had left at that stage.

Overall, the 2012 generation was an improvement over the previous year with about 50% of the offspring displaying a more correct phenotype. More importantly, the majority held onto the prized utility traits of a decent, meaty carcass and excellent laying rates. Out of the 93 Chantecler chicks I hatched and raised in 2012 there were several promising youngsters to continue forward with. I had also managed to buy some chicks from another local breeder that year, and the top few were incorporated into my flock.



Breeding pen – March 2012 and resulting cockerel (right) in the fall of 2012



By taking some young pullets and cockerels to poultry shows and breeding workshops I was able to get helpful feedback and opinions from judges and from the more seasoned Chantecler breeders. Mine were not yet placing at any shows, but I was now officially hooked on the breed, and it was a valuable learning experience to compare my best with what others were raising and showing.

2013

I experienced a disappointing year with the Chantecler offspring of 2013. Although there were fewer phenotype flaws in the chicks, suddenly I was dealing with some poor hatchability and lack of vigor. These traits had been the main strength of my birds in the beginning, so I was worried that I'd lost something fundamental along the way! At this point I seriously considered throwing in the towel and dropping the entire project. But other breeders assured me it's pretty common to hit a few major bumps in the road in the process of establishing a new strain. So I culled any offspring that appeared weak, and prepared to carry on for another year. Another priority at this point was to boost up finished weights, and this was accomplished the following year in the form of a heavy rooster from old bloodlines originating in eastern Canada.

2014

This proved to be a turning point in my Chantecler adventure. The new rooster brought with him a number of excellent features I'd been looking for including a very wide back and deep, well rounded chest. He was a giant, weighing in well above the standard weight. This would complement my flock nicely since most of mine were still not up to the desired size. His wide, attractive head was another bonus that had been on my most wanted list.

Having already weeded out a lot of undesirable traits in my remaining hens, this proved to be a good match. Of course, a new outcross always seems to bring along a few unwelcome surprises! So I hatched and raised close to 100 chicks to make sure I'd have plenty to choose from to make careful selections for the following year's breeders. Throughout 2014 my optimism with this breed returned along with a renewed sense of enjoyment and excitement. I ended up with an over-abundance of chicks that practically leaped from their shells and grew with remarkable speed and vitality. By July I had to reduce some numbers so about half were culled for the freezer, but I still had dozens of pullets and cockerels left to grow out. I was finally able to narrow my selection criteria to focus on some finer points, such as neater, smoother combs, wattles and earlobes. I was also happy to see some females with better tail spread, as opposed to the pinched tails which had been the norm previously in my flock. Cockerels were ready for processing at 20 – 22 weeks; that's a full month earlier than when I started with the breed.



At this point I began to feel confident that everything I wanted was now present in the strain and that no further outcrossing should be needed. To this day I have not introduced any new birds, but I do need to continue to polish, refine and improve uniformity.

2015-2017

For the next couple of years I continued to hatch good numbers of chicks, grow them all out and carefully select my next year's breeders. I was finally enjoying some nice wins in the showroom, and had good numbers of extra birds to help others establish their own flocks. Customers were speaking well of the birds they bought, which really is the greatest compliment!



In 2018 I was branching out into some other breeds which took my focus away from the Chanteclers. I hatched Chantecler chicks from 2 different mating pens, but I wasn't happy with the results from one group. Exhibition had become a higher priority for me, so excellent utility traits weren't enough. They also needed to be competitive for show which meant I needed to improve shank colour to a consistent bright yellow, and work on feather quality. While I was lucky to have the correct genetics for dazzling white birds, I struggled with narrow feathers, especially in the tails.

By **fall of 2019** I was feeling uninspired, and nearly dispersed my Chantecler flocks entirely. But, at the last minute I found I couldn't part with one favorite cockerel. I figured I might as well keep 2 pullets and a hen as well. From this small group I have once again started rebuilding. Cutting back so drastically might have been good in the sense that it forced me to breed from only the best of the best. But it meant that 2020 would need to be a year to increase numbers without a lot of room for selection.

As the 2021 breeding season draws near, I find I'm once again excited to explore all that is possible to achieve with this breed. I see a great potential here to develop a flock that shines in ALL of the important aspects: health, fertility, egg production, fast growth and standard finished weights. It's equally important (and I now realize, completely achievable!) to also maintain their graceful beauty and all of the unique characteristics that makes this breed stand out and gain attention at poultry shows. This is a breed that really can do it all!

This Chantecler journey has been a long and often difficult road, as well as a fantastic learning opportunity and a test of my personal fortitude. I have always been a strong believer in the value of conserving correct, standard-bred flocks. So, in this sense, it's been time well spent. I hope this story might help encourage other breeders to stay in for the long haul. Sometimes if we can persevere through a disappointing year, the end result can be incredibly satisfying and worth the effort.

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