By Mark Leggett, President Mississippi Poultry Association

The Mississippi Poultry Association marks 75 years of promoting the growth of the state’s poultry industry in 2012. Growing the poultry industry from a farm sideline into a global industry has grown the state’s economy in the process. Mississippi with 22 poultry plants and 2,000 farms ranks fifth in the nation in poultry production, and is home to the world’s largest egg producer, Cal-Maine Foods. This growth from every farm having a few chickens for eggs and meat into farms and plants dedicated to feeding the world hasn’t been told because the industry has been so focused on finding ways to more efficiently meet the growing consumer demand there has been little time to reflect on the past. The 75th year of MPA is a time to stop and review how this industry with a $6 billion impact on the state’s economy developed.

There were groups that promoted chickens around 1900, but these were more like kennel clubs for chicken fanciers who bred and showed chickens with colorful plumage or combs. As the demand for chickens as a food grew, an industry developed that needed assistance from a wide variety of sources to overcome the challenges. The modern poultry industry began by accident that a smart, enterprising woman in the Delmarva peninsula turned into income in the 1920s. Farmers could order baby chicks from hatcheries and they would be delivered by train. Mrs. Wilmer Steele, the story goes, ordered 50 chicks and got 500 in 1923. She wisely capitalized on the mistake, raised the chicks and sold them to meat processors in New York City. By 1926 she was raising 10,000 chicks at a time and an industry was born.

In 1937, the Mississippi Poultry Improvement Association was formed to combat diseases that when they struck, could kill up to 40 percent of the chicks and to speak for the growing industry. At that time, prior to World War II, the poultry industry was broken into component parts. The feed mills, the hatcheries, the broiler growers and the processing plants were all separate businesses, many with their own associations prior to this. After World War II, poultry production began to move South from the Delmarva. New companies sprang up to provide chicks, feed, processing and to raise broilers. Some of these included Leake Milling, Green Acres Farms, Southeastern Poultry, Purnell’s Pride, Fred Moore Co., Colonial Poultry, Gaddis Packaging, R&R Poultry, B.C. Rogers, Choctaw Maid Farms, McCarty Farms, Lady Forest Farms, and Davis Poultry.

Many of the companies we know today grew up from entrepreneurs who saw business opportunities such as buying and selling eggs or chickens door to door or at markets or who had a feed store and discovered that also selling chicks meant... Continued on page 2

Thanks to Mississippi Egg Producers for the Incredible Edible Egg

Commissioner Cindy Hyde-Smith receives a lesson in the art of omelet making from the world’s fastest omelet maker, Howard Helmer, at the 6th annual Legislative Luncheon sponsored by the Mississippi Egg Marketing Board. Commissioner Hyde-Smith is testing her skills on Mississippi Egg Marketing Board president, Dolph Baker, sponsors of the annual luncheon. The luncheon is an opportunity for guests to learn just how quick and easy it can be to make their own omelet.

This year’s annual Easter Egg Hunt at the Mississippi Agricultural & Forestry Museum in Jackson, was held the Saturday before Easter, and sponsored in part by the Mississippi Egg Marketing Board. Area children had the opportunity to dye eggs, play games, have photos taken with the Easter Bunny, and of course, for the grand finale, the hunt for over 12,000 filled eggs on the grounds of the Ag Museum.
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sellers more feed. The industry has grown by leaps as entrepreneurs and farmers were willing to put their capital, land and futures at risk. These risk-takers created new methods that produced efficiencies in raising or processing chickens, produced new products consumers wanted or opened new markets to markets to Mississippi products.

List of Chicken Companies in Mississippi in 2012
Cal-Maine Foods, Inc.: Jackson, Edwards;
D. G. Foods, LLC: Hazlehurst;
Koch Foods of Mississippi: Morton;
Marshall Durbin Company: Jackson, Hattiesburg, Waynesboro;
Peco Foods, Inc.: Sebastapol, Canton, Bay Springs, Brookville, Lake;
Sanderson Farms, Inc.: Collins, Laurel, Hazlehurst, McComb, Flowood;
Southern Hens, Inc.: Moselle;
Tyson Foods, Inc.: Forest, Carthage, Magee, Walnut Grove, Newton, Union, Vicksburg;
Water Valley Poultry, Inc. Water Valley;
Wayne Foods LLC: Laurel.

Includes: feed mills, hatcheries, processing plants, further processing plants, company headquarters, laboratories, and egg processing facilities.

Market forces drove the vertical integration of the industry where hatcheries, feed mills, processing plants all became part of one company that contracted with farmers to raise chickens. This system ensured the industry was able to feed the world with safe, affordable chicken products.

While demand for chicken has grown steadily, it skyrocketed in the 1980s and 1990s because of several factors: new products, such as chicken nuggets and Buffalo wings, became popular, new research from universities, government agencies and private companies was improving production, and Russia opened up as a market for leg quarters.

The poultry industry has always been quick to seize an opportunity and adopt technology to meet that opportunity and that will continue. The industry, since its beginnings, has worked closely and cooperatively with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s many agencies, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, the Board of Animal Health and Mississippi State University to overcome the challenges to continued growth.

You can look for bright entrepreneurs on the farm, in the plant, in the lab, and in the kitchen to continue to find ways to give the world what it needs and grow Mississippi’s economy.