

How Do You Like Your EGGS

By Dr. Pete



Everybody has a nightmare job story. Here is mine. The worst job I ever had was washing salmonella contaminated chicken barns. The tale is a gruesome one, full of unbelievably sad and disgusting things that I am sure you would rather not know about. Well that's too bad, because I'm going to tell you about them anyway. But wait, I can't force you to continue reading, so go ahead and stop. I'll be back next month with another fun parable.

What, still here? OK, here goes. This month's article is going to be different from my normal fictional story turned advice format. That's because fiction is eclipsed by fact here. To start off, I need to give you some background to help you comprehend why I washed these barns to begin with. Without some explanation, I would never expect anyone to believe I ever did this.

When I started my business, I put my house up for sale. I planned on moving everything to another state. I had a wife and two kids. I lived in suburbia. I wanted to live in the north woods. I wanted an old fashioned healthy place to raise my kids. It all makes sense until you throw in the "chuck everything and start fresh in a strange place" part of the plan. The first thing I learned was the difference between running a mobile wash business in a populated area and running one in rural America.

So before my move, I had three months to run my new business in Suburbia. Suburbia offers lots of opportunity. Many houses, truck fleets, restaurants, etc. I ran my new business while I was selling my house. It was summer and I picked up work easily. I would wash a ranch and walk away smiling. Nice customers, fun work, everybody was happy. Then I moved to where tar was what you hit after driving for a spell. Great place to raise my kids, but my mobile wash business transformed into a different type of operation. It was working to clean heavy equipment, logging operations, farm equipment. There were still some houses, but when you have 20 houses per mile instead of 500, the customer base is reduced. So in the beginning few years of my business I needed a big customer that had lots of work for me. Enter one of the largest brown egg producers in the world. There were lots of trucks, grain silos, processing plants, rendering plants, and chicken barns. This customer kept me alive during my first year in my new wilderness home. So that is why I cleaned chicken barns.

The barns were really building complexes of 10 barns attached by a long hallway in the front. Each individual barn was 700 feet long x 60 feet wide. That is over twice as long as a football field. Each was filled with row after row of cages. Each cage was jammed full of chickens. The bottom of each cage tilted towards the front. When an egg was laid, it rolled out and was taken to the front of the barn on a small cloth belt. From there rubber belts with big rubber fingers grabbed the egg and lowered it to a larger belt. The larger belt delivered the egg, along with thousands more to the packing facility at the end of the complex. Thousands of chickens packed into each barn created their own heat, the barns are dimly lit and dusty inside. Gigantic exhaust fans stood ready for the summer heat so the chickens would keep laying eggs instead of dying in the heat. Special grain spiked with "other things" ran through the feed troughs in front of the rows of cages. The feed troughs looked just like rain gutters with an auger in the bottom. Under all the cages there were dropping boards. Manure ends up there. Scrapers pulled by cables slowly move across the boards. They are angled to plow manure to the center where it drops into the pit. Some manure dries on the boards and stays there forever, or until it is cleaned with a pressure washer. These are called deep pit barns. The pit is the basement of the building. Month after month the droppings collect in the pit. When the manure gets to be 6 or 7 feet deep, big garage doors are opened at the end of the barn. A poor soul then removes the manure using a small loader. The loader has no roof. It is terrible to witness this individual riding down the road, going to the next barn, covered with droppings.

Then there are barn testers. They test for diseases. These guys use jumbo q-tips. They wipe surfaces with the q-tips then go back to their labs to see what they have discovered. When I was washing barns it seemed like they found a whole lot of salmonella. Once salmonella was discovered the chickens were removed and destroyed and I was called in. An empty barn is eerie. You still have the occasional loose chicken running around that escaped. The mice and rats remain. Their scratching and scurrying sounds can be heard in the quiet. Without chickens in the winter the barns are cold, in the summer they

Now it's cleaning time. To get a chicken barn spotless took me two weeks, 7 days a week, 10 hours a day using two guns, 3200 PSI, 5.6 GPM each. Anytime you clean manure, you need to soak everything and wait. These barns required a tremendous amount of water. I would always start a barn with brand new unloaders, because power was important in a chicken barn. Cleaning was always done with hot water because heat kills germs. Everything was covered with chicken dust and goo. The dropping boards that were located under the cages always had about an inch of dried manure on them. I made special barn guns to clean them. They included a pistol style gun with a 12" lance that was tipped with a large Stiletto rotary nozzle. To clean the dropping boards the sliding door on each cage needed to be opened, then you stuck the gun in the cage and sprayed down while moving side to side. Dried manure is tough, and there was a fine line between removing all the manure and splintering the plywood dropping boards too much. At night in my dreams I would continue to clean, moving the gun side to side, over and over.

Dropping boards were always the first thing to do because everything else got covered with manure when they got cleaned. After a section was cleaned it was important to rinse down all the feed troughs, belts and each wire of each cage. After the dropping boards everything else was washed down until all the cages and equipment were spotless. Next came the ceilings and walls. When the upstairs looked clean, I would soak everything down with a sanitizing solution. Think that was it. Nope. Next was the pit. The manure in the pit had already been scooped out, so the pressure washing consisted of the floor joists and plywood overhead, the walls, the support posts, and the floor. Once again, when that was complete, every surface was sanitized. It was then done. The inspectors with the big q-tips would then come back and rub those things all over everything. If they found a germ I would have to return and heavily sanitize the entire barn again. When it tested good, new chickens were stuck in the cages, and the cycle began again.

Chicken barns taught me some lessons about pressure washing. It was in the barns that I realized the value of the headphone style hearing protectors. They protect your hearing, that's true, but at the end of the day it also keeps your ears from filling up with manure. They keep your ears warm too. I also learned lessons in safety. One afternoon my worker screamed from the other side of the barn, so I ran over. Turns out he had decided his hand was tired so he had taped his trigger gun open. Turns out it was much easier than having to hold the trigger. It would have been great, but he lost his grip on it. The thing flew through the air and turned around on him. The heavy zero degree spray coming out of the rotary nozzle ran diagonally up his face. It cut through his skin and welted up almost immediately. It broke his safety glasses. I'm sure it would have taken out one of his eyes if it weren't for the glasses. Lesson learned. I learned what type of rainwear held up to abuse well. I learned that I had to strip before my wife would allow me in the house every night. I learned to eat my lunch in my wash truck with hundreds of flies crawling on me. All these are lessons that one never forgets. - Pete



Meet Pete Case, EnviroSpec's President and the celebrated 'Dr. Pete' who, each month, brings us another 'Tall but True Tale' from his experiences as a Professional Mobile Washer.