



Latta Family Farms

I first met Mark Latta when I worked in the Weaver Street Market bread bakery in Carrboro. Mark delivered eggs to the bakery and neighboring Panzanella Restaurant on Mondays and Fridays, and he always said hello. I didn't realize that the eggs were from Mark's family's business, Latta Family Farms, and he wasn't bringing the eggs in from eastern Carolina or the mountains, but from Hillsborough.

Lantham Latta started the egg farm just after World War II. It was located on Highway 57 north of town until 1990, when it moved a short distance to a peaceful setting just off the highway. The farm has grown to produce 30,000 eggs, 12,000 of which are the cage-free brown eggs that Weaver Street Market sells and uses in its baking. To get all the eggs boxed and delivered, Lantham has the help of his three sons, Mark, Paul, and Frank, and his grandsons Ray and Gardner.



I arrived at the Lattas' place at 9 AM, and the family was already at work.

Inside the open door of their warehouse I found a spacious room containing a huge metal contraption that helped them sort, size, and box the eggs. It was like Willy Wonka's, but instead of nuts or chocolates zooming around on conveyor belts, there were only eggs... and they weren't zooming, they were wobbling. Stacks of cardboard boxes and egg cartons lined the walls.

Lantham greeted me with a smile from the edge of the machine, where he unloaded full cartons of eggs and put them into cardboard boxes for delivery. How did the eggs get to the cartons? I traced their circuitous route from the far corner of the room, where a conveyor belt took them through a washer and drier. Next they passed under a black curtain; behind the curtain was, not the Wizard of Oz, but Ray, who lined up the eggs and checked for cracks with the help of a glowing orange light and an overhead mirror.

The lines of eggs proceeded out of the curtain onto rods with egg-holding notches in them. A rod would suddenly zoom up into the air, lifting a row of six eggs. This was a size sorter: the rod alighted at the top of a ramp, and one egg (the largest) rolled off. Then it swooped into the air again, moving down and alighting on the next ramp, where three semi-large eggs rolled off. At its third stop, two medium sized eggs rolled off. The last stop was for the smallest eggs, if there were any.



Once the eggs were off the sorter, a conveyor belt carried them slowly down narrowing chutes that led to the entrance to a final conveyor belt, which took the eggs to their ultimate destination: the egg carton. On this final conveyor belt, the eggs wobbled uphill, gathering in a crowd at the far end. They seemed to be chatting as they bobbed along en masse. At the top of the ramp, six grabbers reached down, lifting the eggs from the ramp and

placing them into cartons, which then moved on their own belt towards Lantham. He checked each carton, filling any empty spaces from a stash of eggs before closing it.

Frank drove me a mile down the road to meet the chickens. A few hens peered out through the chicken wire windows of their tin-roofed henhouses, watching our approach. Billowing draperies hung below the windows, left open on the sunny day. Frank opened the door to one henhouse slowly, so as not to scare the hens, but by the time the door was open, every eye in the place was on us.



The brown hens stood silent and still, with only irregular twitchings throughout the crowd. A double row of metal nesting boxes ran down the length of the henhouse. Most of the hens lay their eggs between 8 and 11 AM and then return to the floor, where they mill around with the others or eat at their food stations. They sleep on the floor. Outside, I met Paul and Gardner, who'd been tending to the chickens. Soft chicken noises drifted over from the henhouses that we hadn't just disturbed.

Mark was out making deliveries—he drives south as far as Raleigh and Apex, while Frank makes the deliveries to the west as far as Burlington—so I returned at 3 PM to say hello. The egg machines were still rolling, with Lantham now loading eggs from flats onto the first conveyor belt, and Mark and Frank pulling off the filled cartons. Ray was still behind the curtain.

“Do you do this every day?” I asked Mark, thinking that maybe they could let the eggs pile up on Sunday, and catch up on Monday. But with 30,000 eggs, they can’t take a day off—the chickens certainly don’t.

“Every day,” Mark replied with a smile.

