We didn't need any more chickens. We have nine hens--four Aracaunas that lay blue and green eggs and five White Rocks that lay nice big brown eggs. The tenth chicken in the flock is a lovely White Rock Rooster, the proud and careful type that calls his hens whenever he finds a tasty morsel. The chickens go wherever they wish during the days and spend the nights in their coop, safe from predators. A little organic chicken feed supplements their own free range harvesting, though they actually eat very little except for what they find outside.

Hens that spend their days scratching and searching, eyeing bugs, plants, and whatever they can find with a avaricious joy lay eggs that have yolks that are nearly orange in color. Green in the diet makes very bright, nutrient-rich eggs.

The hens are happy, too, at least if their demeanor is any indication. They sing and cackle, running about as soon as they come out of the coop in the morning. Some of them, fortunately, do go back to the nests in the coop to lay their eggs. Others find spots they prefer, and we try to find their eggs. One hen laid an egg in fjord horse Alvik's manger several days in a row. Another prefers a spot in the barn. Many times, we find nests full of eggs long after they are in any way edible. But, we get enough fresh eggs in the coop's nests and in the places we regularly check. The alternative of shutting the hens in day and night might produce more eggs for us gather from the nests, but, they wouldn't be the same as these free range eggs from satisfied hens.

We raise chickens for meat every other year. The freezer is stocked with vacuum-packed chicken meat, and the fruit cellar shelves hold jars of chicken broth and canned chicken. We really didn't need any more chickens this year.

So, we bought an incubator. Mostly, we were curious about the process of obtaining chicks in this way. We seldom have a "setting hen," a broody layer that "steals her nest" and emerges from some hidden spot with a flock of babies. So, we decided it would be interesting to see what--if anything--would come from incubating eggs from the Aracaunas and White Rocks.

We put thirty-five eggs in the self-turning egg pockets in the

incubator, filled the humidity-producing slots with water, and began the twenty-one day wait. This incubator has panel that shows temperature, humidity, and days to hatch. The proper humidity was very difficult to maintain, and we finally improvised by laying in a rolled up piece of cloth or paper towel saturated with water to increase the moisture content in the incubator.

At nineteen and a half days, we were surprised by the first hatch. It was a little brown chick, an Aracauna/White Rock cross. Hatching was not a fast process, but after twenty three days, we had thirteen healthy chicks plus two that went to that big chicken coop in the sky. Not a spectacular success, but it was interesting, and we now have eight crossbred chicks and five that are pure Plymouth White Rocks. We don't know yet how many are pullets, but I am wondering if those crossbred chicks will grow up to lay blue and green eggs or if the White Rock cross will take away that trait. It will be fun to see what develops.

And now--we also have a setting hen, sitting on some eggs in one of the nests in the coop. She may be the type that thinks that incubating eggs is a part time job. She may decide it isn't worth it, or, if she is diligent, we may have even more chicks this summer. And, as I pointed out, we didn't need any at all.