



## Critters in Our Midst: Chickens and Roosters

Early morning scene in the Publix parking lot at Tradewinds Plaza.

by Carol Ellis

If you have ever visited the parking lot at Key Largo Publix, you have undoubtedly seen the chickens there. Great idea for a story, but why weren't they there mid-afternoon on a weekday when I actually had my camera to take their photograph?

I drove the whole lot, and all I saw were some chicken feathers. Thinking the worst... did the gentrification squad move them away? My friend said when she was shopping early on a Sunday they were everywhere... even blocking the road, as if daring you to drive-by.

So I returned early one morning, and there they were in all their parading, pecking, crowing, scratching glory. Luckily I had finished photographing by the time the parking lot clean-up crew, with their blowers and weedwackers arrived, and the chickens and roosters dispersed into the woods.

Now that I know their routine, tell me, "where did they come from and why do they stay?"

The chicken (*Gallus domesticus*) is a domesticated species that arose from the jungle fowl that was originally found throughout the Caribbean, including Cuba. Early settlers in the Keys, many from the Caribbean Islands of the Bahamas and Cuba, kept chicken coups and used them to feed themselves, consuming both the meat and their eggs.

The 10 Year War in Cuba (1868-1878), a war led by

planters and wealthy Cubans for independence from Spain, caused many Cubans to migrate to Key West. There were three Cuban wars for independence, the last of which escalated to the United States' involvement in the Spanish American War, after the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor in 1898.

A 1906 postcard of sailors betting on a cockfight depicted everyday life



Cock fight on board U. S. Man O'War.

This 1906 postcard of sailors betting on a cockfight depicted everyday life aboard warships during WWI. Color-tinted postcard published by the American News Company, New York.



Chicken Crossing. Be prepared to stop and let the chicken cross the road.

aboard warships during WWI. These sailors must have adopted some of the traditions of the countries they were protecting. Cubans arriving in Key West fleeing a war brought with them their Cuban heritage, including their roosters and the sport of cockfighting.

Is it fair to say the Cuban roosters qualify as military veterans or AWOL?

Cockfighting thrived in the

## Chickens and Roosters CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



A hen and her chicks taking a stroll in the parking lot median strip.



Many residents love the chickens, but would rather not deal with their loud crowing.

Keys until it was outlawed in the 1970s; no longer being of use to their owners, these roosters were released into the streets of Key West.

Few are aware that back in the mid-80s a flourishing illegal cockfighting business was going on in north Key Largo, just off CR 905 about a mile south of the three-way at Card Sound Road. I recall seeing many cars turn off the main road on weekends and drive into the hammocks. At a glance, it didn't look like it was a family picnic. The conversation was loud and exclusively Spanish; there were guards checking all who entered, a few women, but mostly many older Cubans with lots of cash and their bodyguards with lots of guns.



Left: Photo taken in 1999 at Crocodile Lake wildlife refuge of what was once an active cockfighting ring off CR 905. The arena which hosted rooster fights was called the "Chicken Ranch," and it shut down after it was raided sometime in 1987-88.

Hidden behind the trees was a huge steel frame building that law enforcement called "The Chicken Ranch." There were numbered seats surrounding an open ring in the center, where the cockfighting took place. The roosters were raised on chicken farms on Rockland Key, from former Cuban-bred roosters, known for their territorial and aggressive tendencies. The illegal operation was raided, and shut down permanently around 1987-88.

So with hens no longer being kept in coups for food, and roosters no longer being needed for the wagers, these released feral fowl hooked up and are free-ranging through the Keys. In Key West, where the unofficial mascot is the

chicken, locals call their chickens "gypsy chickens"

as they roam freely everywhere. So much so that the City of Key West funds a program to rescue, and care for the sick and injured, and rehome the chickens.

Many of the chickens from Key West are trucked to farms on the mainland, to continue their free-range lives. Did a few jump off the transport in the parking lot in Key Largo? And now they are here, and they are officially staying since



Chicken (*Gallus domesticus*). Chickens are attracted by the daily feeding.

obviously someone is feeding them. I suppose no-one is particularly bothered by the roosters' early morning crowing. I find them amusing and a small reminder of our early Caribbean island roots.



Right: A cock fight. Wright Langley Collection.

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