

Fecal Soup

EXECUTIVES ARE ALWAYS LOOKING to cut costs and fatten the profit margin.

Thankfully, though, we can be assured that chicken magnate Frank Perdue would never skim; he's got his conscience to contend with. "I could save money by depriving my chickens of [wholesome] foods,"

Perdue explained some years ago in a television ad. "But I wouldn't be able to sleep nights."

It's sort of ironic that Frank feels that way, seeing as how I just got off the phone with Joyce Williams, who tells me that, in her 10 years as a Perdue employee, she actually had *a lot* of trouble sleeping nights.

Several of her fellow employees, it turns out, had the same problem—not from ethical quandaries so much as from the excruciating pain in their fingers, toes, eyes, wrists, arms, and backs. In Williams's case, the grueling repetitiveness of packing no less than 42 drumsticks *per minute*, eight hours a day (with few breaks), led to the permanent nerve damage known as carpal tunnel syndrome. "It's like a nagging toothache in your fingers and your wrists," she says. "A lot of times I can't get a grip on things. I'll knock things over."

AS SHE WORKED AT HER STATION, pushing 50-pound piles of meat from Point A to Point B—grading, sorting, and packaging it along the way—a supervisor stood over Williams with a stopwatch. "You weren't allowed to get tired," she says. "If you slowed down, they'd tell you, 'Tighten up!' They would say, 'We

got someone outside waiting on your job. So if you can't do it, let us know.'"

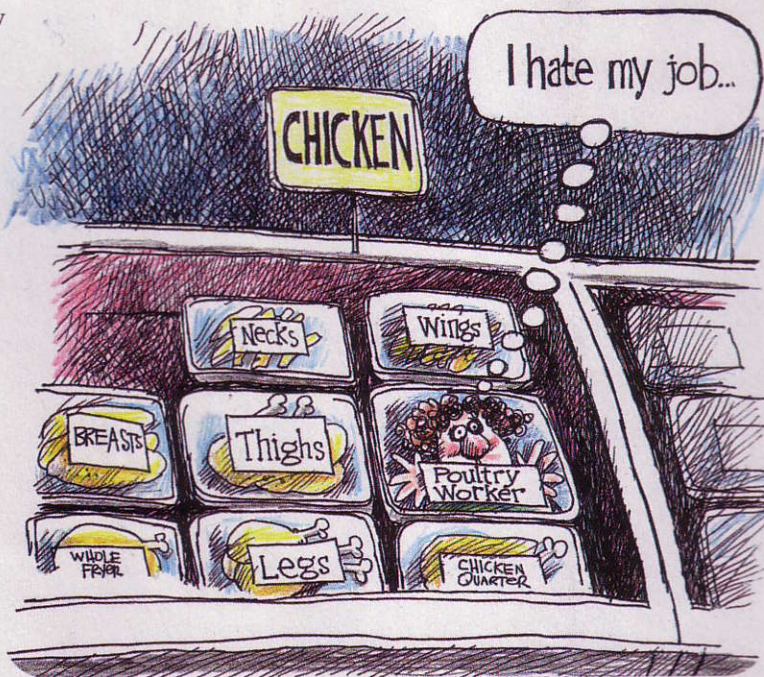
Ten years after she began, and a few months after unsuccessful back surgery, she finally succumbed. At age 39, Williams awaits a decision on disability compensation. But that's only the dark side of the modern American poultry story. There's a fairy tale, too: Americans *love*

keeps going up every year," gushes the National Broiler Council's Bill Roenigk. "The demand is driving the need for more capacity, more workers, and more emphasis on efficiency."

Efficiency—as in more, faster, cheaper. That's what Americans are demanding, and that's what the industry is supplying. Indeed, productivity is up—way up. The process line over the last 20 years or so has increased from 50 BPM (birds-per-minute) to 90 BPM.

"WHEN I FIRST started at Perdue in 1978, the lines ran at a reasonable speed, and the workers could handle it," says Jo Ann Bond. "It was rare that contaminated birds went out to consumers. We felt proud to work there. But the company got greedy... I have seen cancerous birds come through with tumors, regularly, sometimes all day long. Right after I'd put them in the condemned barrel, foremen would have the floor workers hand the birds back on the line."

When another Perdue employee, Donna Bazemore, made similar claims before a congressional committee, Perdue danced around them and said "there have been no other reported incidents of this nature." Still, it's not just Perdue. Sam Shrum, an 18-year poultry veteran of



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poultry! We crave nuggets, fajitas, boneless breasts, and turkey burgers. Poultry producers shipped \$20 billion worth of ready-to-cook carcass in 1994 (more than double the production in 1980). Per capita, we're scarfing down eight times the fowl we did in 1950.

Not surprisingly, Perdue and his industry brethren are giddy over their success. "It's been an amazing increase that

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