



Sharon Thatcher, Merrill, wraps herself in one of the Fromm Brothers furs that were displayed in 1934 at the Chicago World's Fair. The exhibit at the fair was part of the Century of Progress Exposition and was the Fromm Brothers first public appearance in the consumer world of furs. The exhibit in 1934 was one of the most unusual and talked of exhibits of the Fair. It caught the eye of the public including men and women. The exhibit dramatized the history of the silver fox and was set up by brother Henry Fromm who displayed the luxurious garments in a subtle but effective manner. . . . Foto News

The story of the Fromm Brothers

Rags to riches, riches to rags

Though it was in the twentieth century, a frontier saga in this area re-enacted the great American dream. It is the story of the Fromm Brothers of Hamburg, who in the early 1900's. were the four youngest sons of a large family on a wilderness farm in the Northwoods of Wisconsin. the four sons—Edward, Henry, Walter and John—helped their parents struggle for existence.

When the oldest of the four was 13, the brothers decided to build on their interest in trapping and they dreamed of a creature that would be the most beautiful fur-bearing animal in the world—a silver fox. It was in 1903 that such a dream began. But the trapping of such a fox led to the breeding of foxes and eventually the work of cross-breeding and mutations produced a range of beautiful colors of fox from sleek silvers to the golden ambers, an exclusive mutation for the Fromm Brothers.

To get started in the fox breeding business, the brothers raised the money through another enterprise which is a story by itself. The brothers discovered a strange root called ginseng that they could find in their own woods and was wanted by the Chinese and the Fromms began gathering ginseng to the tune of \$6.00 per pound. The brothers expanded their ginseng business from gathering and drying to cultivating the plant to raise money for fox-raising.

The Fromm brothers became one of the largest ginseng growers in the world by the mid 1940's. They continued to supply thousands of pounds of their homegrown ginseng to the Far East. In fact on December 6, 1967, six cases of ginseng were sent to Hong Kong and earned the highest price for ginseng that Fromms had ever seen — \$38,000.00.

Though the ginseng farming was doing well, it was still secondary to raising foxes. Trying to breed a fox bright with silver became a passion of the Fromm Brothers. For forty years the ginseng venture grew, fox pens now numbered in the many thousands, but it was a never-ending struggle along a path of many unknowns.

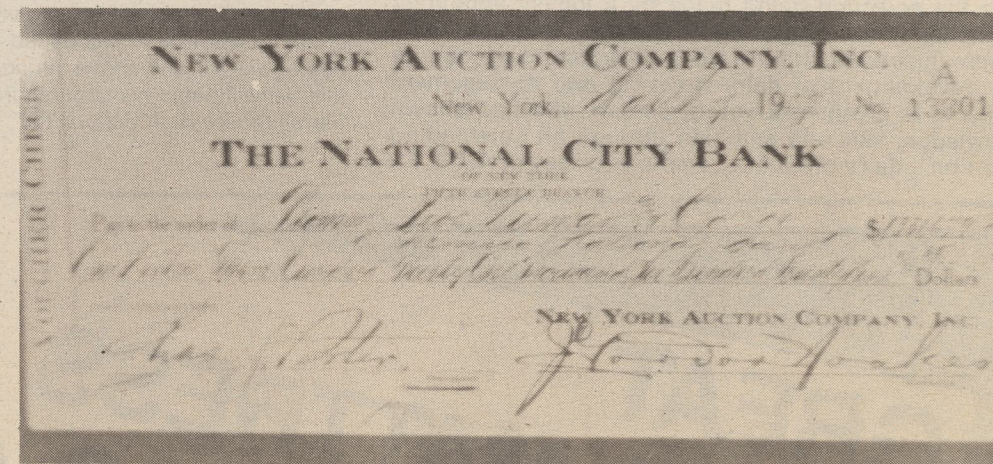
Though the Fromms kept making millions of dollars during the Great Depression and they had grown to one of the finest and largest fur farms in the world, poor planning, unwise investments and management of the business led to its demise. "There was no research and no innovation to keep the business alive," said Ned Tead, grandson of Ed Fromm. "You can't continue with the same system of raising fox to be effective. Millions of dollars were spent trying to keep the foxes healthy. Distemper and encephalitis was a major problem for the

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The photographs here are reproductions of photos that still hang in the lodge of the Fromm Brothers office today. (Upper left) The famed silver foxes of the Fromms were left to roam the range and feed in the woods. (Upper right) Hundreds and thousands of pelts hang waiting to be examined and bought by buyers. (Lower left) Ed Fromm (center and with a cap) tries to make a deal with buyers. In a bold departure from tradition, Fromm asked the market to come to the farm in Hamburg. History of the fur trade usually kept fur auctions in the great cities of the world and this was the first to have the market come to the producer. (Lower right) As the Fromm reputation grew, the western wolves of the Fromms of 1923 were now referred to as the million-dollar foxes as the nation went into a deep depression of the 1930's. But fur prices were still at an all-time high for the Fromms which is evident in the check written to the Fromms by the New York Auction Company for \$1,331,679.35. . . Foto News



Fromm Brothers

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Fromm's. With the help of a doctor, the distemper vaccine was formulated and produced at the Fromm Farms. Every step of the way with the foxes was costing more and more money—millions and millions. But it meant nothing and did not affect the stubborn nature of the brothers in pursuit of the "perfect" fur. Also the brothers were uneducated farmers, not money managers."

"The history of the company is painful," notes Tead, who now owns the company. He comments that lawsuits

broke the family up. The brothers took it as a matter of pride to keep it up even though they were losing money after their climb to glory. "I am not all that proud of them," says Tead. "They were cheap." He comments that the business had a notorious history of paying minimum wage or whatever they could to get by, Ned recalls that he started working in the fields in 1969 at \$1.40 per hour.

Before the fall of the fur empire, the Fromm Brothers had as many as 20,000 foxes that they were breeding for pelts along with the addition of 60,000 mink available for fur buyers. The company handled mink until the early 1970's. The end of the foxes came in 1986 and ginseng growing and the selling of the last crop came in 1988.



Broken and run-down fox pens are the only sign of a famous and world renowned fur business in the Hamburg area. Foxes had no market, ginseng was threatened with blight, and recurring health problems among the foxes along with unwise investment and spending of millions of dollars brought the Fromm business to an all time peak only to return to the struggle of trying to survive in a business. . . Foto News

Grandson Ned Tead was disappointed that everyone in the family went their own way and lost monies. "Everyone of them should have died multi-millionaires," comments Tead.

As a third generation businessman, Tead became president of the company in 1985. As sole owner in 1986, he had to overcome a \$2 million debt in the business. He sold much of the land which at one time was an empire of more than 17,000 acres. He sold many of the 16 farm houses that were homes for old-time employees of the Fromms. His decision to sell the last of the foxes and the realization that there was no way to maintain the ginseng gave Tead the monies to pay off the inherited debt.

With the bills paid and the overhead low, Tead now has four employees, and with new energy and innovation, has developed the Fromm Brothers Inc., Ginseng Auctions. The auction system devised by Tead will help ginseng growers with the sale of their ginseng at the best prices. "You need to have a crystal ball to choose the right time to sell," says Tead, but he has already lined up steady customers and buyers from China and Hong Kong. Tead likes the silent auction concept for the root. He has more than 140 growers bringing in excess of 400 barrels of ginseng. He hopes that the business will grow. "The market is there," he adds. "There are a million and

"Have you seen twenty-nine eighty-nine?" they asked each other, up in the North Woods of Wisconsin where Fromm Brothers hold their famous sale. Word sped that this number marked a fox pelt like nothing ever seen before. A skin so large, so thick and bright with silver that experienced buyers grew lyrical as a debutante at sight of it . . . in the tense silence of Fromm's auction, Marshall Field and Company bought the miracle pelt called 2989—and made fur history. For the \$2,100 paid was the highest price that a full silver has ever been known to bring . . . cheers greeted the sale. Bidding adjourned. Excited speeches were made by buyers not easily excited. . . Excerpt from full page in a Chicago newspaper. FN

half pounds of ginseng grown in this area every year. People need to sell it."

Tead recognized the fact that records could not be set again and changed the entire perspective of the business. In closing the era of the Fromm Brothers fox and ginseng production, Tead has set up for an auction this weekend to sell memories of the glory years. "Many people in both Lincoln and Marathon County have worked for the Fromm Brothers or probably know of someone who worked here," comments Fromm's grandson. "The photos, the World's Fair Furs and other memorabilia are available to those who have a special interest." FN

(Information and pictures gathered by Sharon Jaeger and Jim Hostvedt.)