

Fromm Bros. World Leader In Raising Of Fox, Mink

Last year Edward Fromm was honored "Man of the Year" by the fur industry in New York City. This comes as no surprise to Merrill residents, who have been neighbors with the huge Fromm Brothers fur and ginseng enterprise at Hamburg since its inception almost 60 years ago.

Shortly after the turn of the century the four Fromm brothers, Edward, Henry, John and Walter began their adventure into fox breeding and ginseng growing which was to culminate in the largest fox farm in the world, the largest ginseng farm in the world, and one of the largest mink farms in the world.

It took them five years to breed their first silver fox, then an al-

most unique color in the market. At this time one of these rare pelts sold in London at the record price of \$2,600, and breeders throughout the world turned their efforts toward this new line. This sudden boom eventually died, but the market continued high in its demand for the popular darker silvers.

Fromms, despite the popularity of this dark silver variety, doggedly bred their silvers ever brighter, believing that eventually the highest prices would be paid for their color. In 1916 their first crop was auctioned in St. Louis at prices far below the darker pelts. At a New York auction in 1923, however, their bright silvers brought considerably higher prices.

Then at another New York auction five years later they received the largest check ever given a single breeder — more than a million dollars for 6,600 of their pelts. Between 1932 and 1947 Fromm fox farming was at its height, with an average of 35,000 foxes on their ranges each year. In 1937 they established their Hamburg farm as a significant fur auction center in the United States, with a million dollars worth of foxes for sale. Every important buyer participated in the auction held in this unprecedented location. And Fromms made fox history by selling their pelt number 2989 for \$2,100, a price second only to the famous \$2,600 London pelt. It was purchased by Marshall Field and Company for display in their fur salon.

Fromm's partially supported their fox breeding by harvesting ginseng, an herb they originally procured from their own farm woodlands. After numerous failures at growing this difficult crop they finally succeeded. But not without repeated discouragement over such things as plant blight, root rot and slow maturity, and heroic efforts at sustaining a yield at a profitable level. Their first sizable planting in 1909 had covered half an acre. In 1915 it yielded only \$3,500, scarcely enough to meet expenses. In not

too many years, however, Fromms received their first large check for their efforts — \$40,000.

Since this first profitable return annual ginseng production has increased until today they are the largest raisers in the world. Exports to all parts of the Orient have amounted to hundreds of tons of root, at prices fluctuating widely between \$1 and \$20 a pound, depending on conditions in this delicate market. Of the estimated 150 acres under ginseng cultivation in North America, Fromms have 100, making them far and away the single largest producers at home. Abroad, they also have no equal.

During World War II, though the fur market was finally well established in the United States, the fox market dropped severely. Fromms kept just a nucleus unit of foxes after the war, and concentrated on developing new colors: the Golden Amber and the Golden Glory. Fromms are the only producers of the Golden Amber in the world. This beautiful color is today their primary pelt marketed, and they consider it the loveliest ever produced.

They still market considerable fox, however. With 4,000 pairs of breeders, they pelt this year approximately 16,000. Three-quarters of this pelting is Golden Amber, a variety of colors constituting the remaining quarter. The big farm has three square miles of fox ranges and four breeding units for their luxurious new and standard breeds.

As the fox market declined during this war period, mink was on the rise. Fromms and several other breeders publicized a new platinum mutation with the auction of the only all-platinum mink coat in the world. The auction was in behalf of the Stage Door Canteen, attended by many celebrities. Edward Fromm was the auctioneer. The coat sold for \$18,000 highest price ever paid for a mink coat. The color was later rechristened "silverblu" and the Mutation Mink Breeders Association initiated a vast program to promote it.

In 1950, Fromms were pelting 33,000 mink. Today they are one of the largest breeders in the world, now pelting 45,000 a year. Heaviest production, however, is now in the popular pastel colors, with silverblu trailing behind, victim of the ever-changing fur market. Prospects are bright, says Edward, for consumption of the past crop of mink before the new crop arrives, in spite of a currently depressed market.

In speaking of this current fur market, he gives the following information:

Low prices have been due to the importation of both fox and mink from Finland, Norway, Sweden and Poland. Because of a generally slow economic year in the United States, because of general domestic overproduction, and because of excessive fur imports, there was a further drop in mink prices last year, amounting to 25 per cent. This also affected price levels in fox, which still enjoys only limited production. In addition, the acceptance by breeders of extremely low prices at Scandinavian auctions last year set the stage for this year's low market.

In addition to fur farming and ginseng raising, Fromm enterprises include a well-known and highly important biological laboratory, and a feed producing plant.

Fromm Laboratories, Inc., is located at Grafton. It produces

vaccines and serums for pets, and biologicals for fur animals and large animals. It successfully pioneered immunization against fox encephalitis and a vaccine against fox and dog distemper. Numerous other small and large animal vaccines have been developed.

Federal Foods, Inc., Fromms' feed plant in Thiensville, produces approximately 100,000 pounds a day of fox and mink feed. This scientific and nutritious mixture of cereal, fish, chicken, turkey, vitamins and minerals is distributed to ranches throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest.

Another of their fox and mink farms, Fromm Brothers Nieman and Company, is located at Thiensville, Wis., and another is located at Boulder Junction. Together they produce approximately 20,000 mink and 7,500 fox pelts a season.

The huge tract at Hamburg includes 15,000 acres, or almost half a township. Everything from at least two dozen barns to a blacksmith shop can be found in this miniature city. Breeding yards and ranges are scattered throughout the area. A sprawling warehouse lies near the main entrance and it is here where Fromms' auctions are held. One or two occur every year in this building, at which as many as 40 fur houses are represented. Feed processing is also done in the big warehouse, which also contains a freezer plant for feed storage. Mink and fox are graded here, and pelts are cleaned. Ginseng is dried and stored here, too. The building is an operational headquarters for the diverse Fromm activities.

Stately homes for the brothers are also located on the grounds, as well as a large timbered lodge housing everything from a bowling alley at one end to office desks at the other end. A complete boarding house stands nearby for the convenience of buyers attending auctions, and for other business guests.

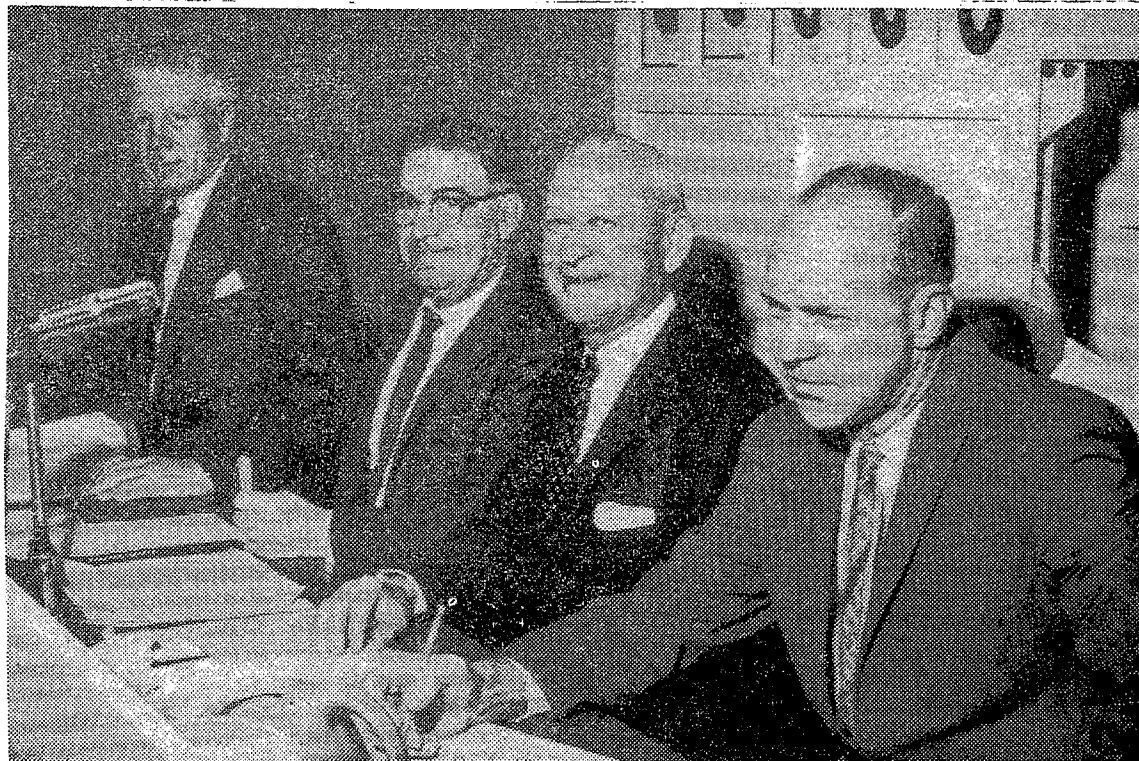
A forested deer range with as many as 100 white-tailed inhabitants stands secluded on the Fromm property, and numerous plots of pine and spruce are maturing in selected sites. The trees have been planted for the last 30 years, and are supervised by Trees for Tomorrow, which plotted all Fromm timber lands for type and age of trees, and outlined a continuous controlled harvesting program for them. Last year between 25,000 and 30,000 trees were planted under this program, part of a total stock of approximately 750,000.

A variety of community projects have received substantial donations from Fromms, including their "Little Red Schoolhouse," as the nearby Maple Grove school is affectionately labeled by its benefactors who brought it into being with a \$60,000 grant and continue to nurture it with generous provision. Last year the bright red elementary school had an enrollment of 82. It expects to grow to 120 students this school year.

Fromms benefit their community in other ways also. Providing employment to farmers and their wives and children is not the least of them. Approximately 150 such persons work at the Hamburg location, 30 find work at the Boulder Junction farm, 75 work at the Thiensville feed plant, and more than 100 work at the laboratory in Grafton.

Measured economically, the total payroll of this far-flung and world-renowned organization is more than a million dollars a year. But a true measure of the enterprise would have to take into consideration the story behind

this present day fur and ginseng giant. That story is well known in Merrill, in Wisconsin, and throughout the fur industry which is spread over the United States and the world. It is one of vision and hard work by four Wisconsin brothers in the face of difficulties which only a select few such as the Fromms have the capability and energy to surmount.



A highlight each year at the Fromm Brothers in Hamburg is the fur auction. Ed Fromm (second from right) is shown at the auctioneers table just before the start of the December 15, 1960 auction. With him are Leonard Polard (left), George Mayers and John Fromm. (Jim Freiberg)



Mrs. Vincent Sackmann, Rib Lake, who with her husband has a mink ranch, checks some sapphire mink pelts at the Fromm Brothers Auction house at Hamburg. (Jim Freiberg)