

Focus

Harvesting foxes for finery

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY BEN LUEDTKE

In Marathon County's early days a settler rejoiced when one of his traps yielded a fox. And if by chance it was a silver-black his joy knew no bounds, for this mutation would bring him an unheard-of price for the pelt.

This week Fromm Brothers of Hamburg began the annual "harvest" of about 4,000 fox pelts — all of them exotic in color and shade — and including the silvers.

Few articles of clothing have ever equaled the warmth and comfort of natural fur. Searching for fur-bearing animals helped settle the North American continent, building huge fortunes in the process, such as that of John Jacob Astor.

The Fromm Brothers as lads — Edward, Henry, Walter and John — recognized the potential in domestically-raised foxes, and naturally wanted to begin with the silvers, but their father, Frederick, a hard-working Hamburg farmer, didn't think much of the idea and refused to give the boys money enough to buy breeding stock.

However, one fine day in the summer of 1914 Papa Frederick went to Mason City, Iowa, to examine a farm he owned there. While he was gone the boys talked their mother into mortgaging the family farm for \$6,700 to buy three silver foxes. What Papa said when he returned can only be imagined.

It was the start of one of the largest fur-raising empires in the world. While cheap imports from Scandinavian countries, and even Poland, have under-

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Part of Fromm Brothers fox harvest begins a long journey to some lucky woman's wardrobe. The animal, now in the Happy Hunting Grounds, is being transported by Mrs. Rose Kuehn, Hamburg.



Harvest 4,000 fox pelts . . .

mined the fur raising industry (including mink farming), the two Fromm boys left in the business — Edward, 81, and Walter, 84 — still have enough faith and fight to continue with the foxes which started them on the road to success. They sold out their mink a year ago, which also was an extensive project.

Fromm Brothers are also the largest individual growers of ginseng in the world. All of the harvested roots, which Chinese believe to have great curative powers, are exported to Asia, much finding its way to Hong Kong.

But foxes are still a concern of the Fromms, and great tales can be told of the early fur auctions held in Hamburg, when the Fromms played host to fur buyers from far - away places. A special bus would haul the buyers from downtown Wausau to Hamburg and back again.

But after 1946, when pelts averaged around \$50, the domestic fur business went downhill with only occasional rallies. Foreign fur breeders, (mostly Scandinavian and Polish) ever quick for the American dollar, flooded the market with mink and "blue" fox pelts.

But, according to Carlos Kromholz, bookkeeper for the Fromms, the market has been gradually going up. "The last couple of years we have sold all pelts, with ambers bringing the best overall average price," he said.

Kromholz added that there may be as many as 400,000 foreign blue pelts on the market today.

About 1,000 pair of breeders are kept each year, mostly silvers and ambers. The pelts are used mainly for trim, such as collars and cuffs on coats.

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Mrs. Cyrilla Hopperdietzel, Athens, and Eugene Westfall, Hamburg, begin the first operation, slitting of back feet.



Any small tears occurring during pelting are repaired with care by expert sewers — Mrs. Molly Mootz, Mrs. Hattie Riemer and Mrs. Eleanor Bartlet.



This "silver" is part of the breeding stock being kept. Foxes are quite shy and will yap in a high-pitched voice when disturbed.

NEXT WEEK:

Next week's edition of FOCUS will feature area youth . . . their likes and dislikes, their jobs, their social activities, their fashions, etc. Reporters Geri Nikolai, Jim Lee, Lynn Kordus and Marion Lillge team up to tell the story.



Slitting the front feet and preparing the carcass for "skinning" are (from front) Edmund and Ray Riemer (no relation).



Mrs. Mert Juneau, Merrill, slits the animal's tail so that the skin side may be scraped along with the rest of the pelt.

. . . at Fromm Brothers

Neck pieces are coming back to some extent, and now claws are left on the pelts.

The foxes breed in late December and January, and have their young in spring up until April. When large enough the foxes are culled and those headed for wearing apparel are turned into the range, a large acreage where they run free. Allowing the foxes to have the run of a large wild area during summer and fall makes for a healthier animal and a pelt that is prime.

The annual drive this year began the day after Thanksgiving, with foxes being driven from their wild habitat into a smaller area, then into a still smaller enclosure, and finally into a fenced area where the only escape is into wooden tunnels where the top is removable. Here the foxes are electrocuted with two - pronged conductors that bring death instantaneously.

In the Fromm factory pelting is done assembly - line style with workers performing their specialty as the carcass moves

along. The front legs are stripped out, then the hind legs. The long bone in the tail is pulled out and after a few more

cuttings the pelt is entirely removed and put on stretchers.

Finishing of the pelt is done by scraping the underside. The pelts are also put into a drum and "tumbled" with sawdust.

The Fromm foxes are kept healthy with a balanced diet of necessary elements. The Fromms have spent many thousands of dollars in a research program which was triggered in 1924 when a large number of their silvers died of sickness. Vaccines were developed.

Fox pelting at the Fromms' over the years has brought an economic boost to the Hamburg community with many local farmers augmenting their income with seasonal work.

Unless the fur business goes completely awry it is likely the Fromms will continue their fox harvest for years — and women in many parts of the nation on a cold day will be able to bury their face into a fox collar that originated in Marathon County.



Foreman Lawrence Schult inspects foxes