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The famous Fromm Fur Farm

An effort to get it on the National Register of Historic Places could spark new life
into one of the most storied successes in Marathon County



The Fromm Fur Farm's signature silver animals became known as "the million dollar foxes" in 1929. That year, one single shipment of pelts from the northern Marathon County operation was bought in New York for an astounding \$1.3 million — the largest single payment made to date to a single fur farm.

That also was the year of the stock market crash and beginning of the Great Depression. But the Fromm operation, which employed up to 500 people, helped the area weather the storm, thanks to worldwide demand by the rich and famous for the silver fox furs, and the Fromm brothers' spin-off businesses in ginseng and animal vaccination.

Today, about a dozen of the farm's original buildings remain, most still in good to excellent condition: a barn, boarding houses for visitors and workers, the pelt warehouse and the rich, rustic clubhouse where high society dignitaries and fur buyers were entertained.

The entire site is dripping with stories about the family characters who ran the place and made riches from their ingenuity.

But the family no longer owns the site, and local history buffs long have worried it would sink into disrepair. In the fall of 2011, the Fromm Bros. Historical Preservation Society formed with the goal of getting the site on the state and national registers of historic places. It looks to be a shoo-in for the list.

From there, Fromm Farm in the Town of Hamburg could become the property of a nonprofit organization, and eventually become a state historic site along the lines of Villa Louis, the rich fur-trader/lumberman's home in Prairie du Chien, or Pendarvis, a historic lead-miner's home in Mineral Point.

The site is being used for corporate retreats, other group meetings and even public tours. Gary Mason and his wife, Sue, own the place almost by accident. An avid hunter, the retired cabinet salesman wanted a home with good hunting land. When the couple ran across a real estate ad for the core of what was once a sprawling ginseng and fur operation, they agreed to buy it.

Gary fell in love with the place and is still absorbing its lore so he can better share it on occasional tours he gives. But he realizes it would best be owned by a nonprofit or government-connected entity so the public can have greater access into the future.

The grounds and the scattered buildings are too much for a single family to maintain without some sort of revenue stream. So The Fromm Bros. Historical Preservation Society, with the help of people like local attorney Greg Strasser and financial consultant Keene Winters, is laying the groundwork for a fundraising effort on the scale of the \$1 million raised for the 400 Block.

What remains of the Fromm mega-enterprise is the 265 acres the Masons purchased in November 1998. But it represents a sliver of what once was.

The Fromms owned 11,000 acres in the immediate area of the farm, 6,000 acres near Mequon north of Milwaukee and 3,000 acres purchased in Vilas County for cooler temperatures to improve the coats of the mink raised there.

The basis of the Fromms' success was their development of a line of silver foxes that had no equal elsewhere.

Of nine children born to a second-generation family of German immigrants, the four youngest sons banded together in 1904 in a lifelong partnership that became Fromm Brothers, Inc. Their combination of perseverance, ingenuity and marketing savvy allowed them to establish — 18 miles from Wausau near the Lincoln County line — the world's largest ginseng farm, the world's largest fox farm and the world's largest mink farm. They went literally from farm kids to well-heeled players in the international business world, traveling to Paris and Hong Kong to cut deals for furs and ginseng.

This isn't a place that should be allowed to fade away, Winters says. The Fromm farm impact was felt the most in the Wisconsin counties where they based their operations, but the inventive brothers also set up a business sewing fur coats in New York City.

The famous Fromm Fur Farm

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The richly rustic clubhouse — still in use today for group meetings and retreats — is where the Fromms entertained dignitaries and fur buyers

What the brothers wanted the most was to have premier silver fox pelts. They started with just six breeder animals, paid for, according to family lore, by their mother against the wishes of their father. To pay for their dream of silver foxes, the boys hit on the idea of raising ginseng to sell in China. The innovative methods they developed in cultivating the picknickety plant still are being used nearly 100 years later.

After years of fox breeding to get the perfect bright, luxurious pelt, they succeeded, and established a standard in the industry. "The Vanderbilts, Rockefellers and people like that were buying coats for their ladies," Mason says.

"Anybody who was anybody had a Fromm fox," Winters says.

The visionary brothers also set about solving a singularly major problem. The animal disease distemper was killing 40% of the closely confined, valuable foxes each year. They hired a university scientist to come to the farm to work on a vaccine. It was a huge drain, but the scientist eventually found a way to vaccinate the animals against distemper and, later, canine encephalitis.

In true Fromm Bros. fashion, they then set up a subsidiary company to make the vaccines for sale to others, adding to the bountiful profits. One of the medicines is still in the arsenal of veterinarians today, protecting countless pets.

"That happened right there in a little cottage at the site," Winters points out.

Something similar happened with dietary developments the Fromms made to increase pelt size and quality.

The story is a bit grisly. When the Fromm brothers first began to raise silver fox in serious numbers, they knew no more than other fox farmers about an ideal diet. Foxes were meat-eaters, so the Fromms turned to the most economical source at the time, horsemeat.

The farm purchased wild mustangs that were rounded up in the western states, and shipped them by rail to Marathon. From there the horses were herded cattle-drive-style north along CTH 107 and then west a few miles on CTH F.

This also was the period when huge numbers of domesticated horses were being replaced by cars and tractors. In their peak years in the 1930s and '40s, the Fromms brought in 30,000 horses a year to convert into fox food. Another account puts the number at about 50 horses per day, or closer to 20,000 per year.

Mason shows visitors the slaughter area where the horses met their end. The actual equipment that could grind up a quarter of a horse at a time is gone, but the waist-high electric motor used to operate the grinder remains.

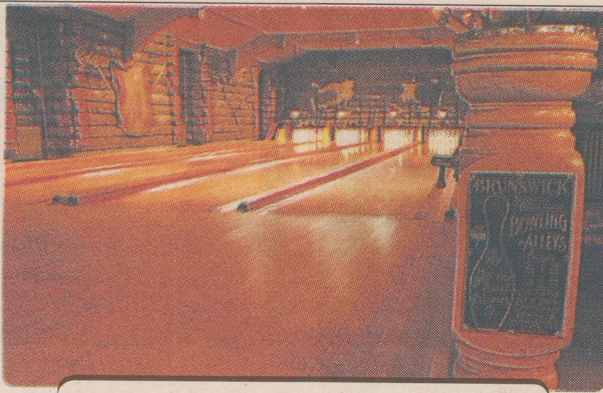
The Fromms began to wonder if something other than straight horsemeat would serve the animals better, so they began mixing in grains, vegetables and supplements. It worked. Over the years, the silver foxes they raises grew to be nearly twice as large as wild foxes, weighing in at 20 pounds at maturity.

Somebody in the family thought this knowledge would be valuable to the public. So a dog and cat food company became another family enterprise in 1949. The Fromm Family pet food operation still is run in Mequon by Fromm cousins.

In 1903, the Fromm boys ranged in age from 8 to 12, and were typically outdoorsy. They did some trapping and became fascinated with the idea of raising silver fox, which in the wild were a rare mutant. After intense efforts to find litters of silver fox pups in their own area, they vowed as a quartet to find a way to buy some silver fox from a breeder to tap into a market for premium fur pelts. Being kids, they had few ways to make money, but they saw ginseng as their ticket into the world of fox farming.

In 1904, with the oldest of the four barely in his teens, they formed Fromm Bros. Inc., and started gathering wild ginseng for sale, then cultivating a crop to get greater quantities. They improved on what other growers were doing, learning, for example, how to better propagate plants via seed rather than transplanting from the wild.

Ginseng was only the means to a goal, but by the time they had enough money to buy a half-dozen silver fox in 1913 from a breeder on Prince Edward Island on Canada's eastern coast, the tricky plant was making too much money to be sidelined.



The clubhouse bowling alley still functions today

Being somewhat diversified helped, especially when either furs or ginseng had a bad year. They made strides in domesticating ginseng and found raising it for export fit in well with raising silver fox.

One of the brothers concentrated on breeding for the best-looking pelts. Other farms were raising silver fox, but not as well.

Four years after they had imported those first six foxes, they had 50 pairs of the valuable silver variety. Eight years later, in 1925, they sold nearly \$500,000 worth of fox pelts. The next year they earned \$785,153. Then came the \$1.3 million sale in 1929.

The Fromms, though, had some difficulty convincing the fashion world their silvery pelts were the most beautiful choice compared to the darker silver foxes their competitors had long produced, Mason says. The second oldest of the four brothers, Edward, decided to go directly to the top fashion designers in Paris to convince them to make garments with Fromm fur instead of the darker pelts. He was rebuffed.

The Fromms had enough financial clout to try something big to change the minds of those Paris designers. Edward started placing large ads in publications such as *Women's Wear Daily*. Almost overnight, as Mason tells it, demand shifted in the United States for lighter-hued silver fox garments.

The Fromms became significant players in the fur world. After assembling a big exhibition of their furs for the 1934 Chicago World's Fair, they convinced the international fur auction house in New York City to shut down operations three times a year to hold an auction of Fromm furs at the farm in the town of Hamburg.

Buyers from all over stayed at what is now the Landmark hotel in Wausau before making the 18-mile trek through "the wilderness" to the farm. The Fromm auctions became such a prestige event that people like New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia came. Special badges were made for visiting dignitaries. Mason has a badge for Albert Einstein, though he's not certain the famed scientist actually made it to the farm.

The success of the operation made the immediate geographical area nearly immune to the effects of the Great Depression. Furs and ginseng were still selling. Mason says that almost no area families lost their farms because the families were able to skip planting crops and, instead, work for the Fromms. The operation had as many as 500 jobs at a time when they were dearly needed.

Despite their wealth, the Fromms were known more for their frugality and munificence to employees than for extravagances. Mason tells of one valued employee who suffered a broken leg during his off-work time. The Fromms still continued paying him while he recovered enough to return to work.

The Great Depression was a time of many farm foreclosures, and there were also instances in which a nearby farm about to go under was bought by the Fromms, who allowed the family to stay there.

Fromm money built the Maple Grove School that still operates just to the east of Mason's property on CTH F. Students there ate lunches prepared and donated by the Fromm farms kitchen.

The school eventually became part of the Merrill public school system, but with a tremendous hook: Students who attend this little red schoolhouse can get their college largely paid for.

In 1976, eldest brother Walter Fromm and his wife Mabel started the Fromm Scholarship Fund in the Merrill School District with a donation of \$500,000. It provides educational aid to any Maple Grove Elementary School grad who earns at least a 2.5 GPA at Merrill High School and has been accepted into a technical college or university.

Jen Seliger, a Merrill School Board member and Hamburg town chair, says the amount available each year varies, depending on the fund's earnings. It's a hefty sum, though. Seliger says as many as 34 students will receive scholarships in the coming school year, between \$2,500 and \$3,000 per semester for up to four years of studies.

It has been "truly amazing," she says. "When the school needed two new rooms, they paid for it. When they needed bathrooms, they paid for that." The Fromms valued education and quietly supported the school for decades "for the right reason," she says.

In the 1950s, fur fashions turned to the sleeker, lighter mink. The Fromms were ready. But demand for fur dropped steadily after that, and by the mid-1980s, the farm ceased operation.

The preservation society for the farm already has raised \$5,000 and hired a consultant, Pat Lacey from Marshfield, to help with the nomination to the state and national registers of historic places. In late May, the society arranged a lunch and tour where they showed the place to Daina Penkiunas, the national register coordinator for the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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The youngest Fromm brother was the primary caretaker in 1914 for the first three breeder foxes purchased from Canada. By 1917, the boys had 50 pairs of the animals. In 1929, the year of this photo, the Fromms sold a single shipment of pelts in New York for an astounding \$1.3 million

COVER FEATURE

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The Fromms raised the prestige of their furs by placing full page ads in the popular women's magazines of the day

Penkiunas is optimistic of approval. An attempt to get the designation in the early 1990s failed because of some discrepancies in property boundaries, a mistake unlikely to be repeated. She says, "I think this will be a fascinating, fascinating nomination."

The approval from the State Historic Preservation Review Board will put the farm on the State Register of Historic Places. From there, it will go the National Park Service for listing on the National Register.

Penkiunas says the process is long, but results should be known in less than two years. "It's an honorific designation," she says, but it doesn't result in any state or federal funding. The entity that owns it can get state and federal tax credits to make improvements to non-income-producing properties.

Winters says fundraising will start in earnest in 2013. Part of what's at stake is the nine-bedroom boarding house that housed some of the hundreds of workers, along with a wing that served as a bunkhouse.

The showpiece of the farm, the clubhouse, is a rustic structure of logs where the fur buyers were entertained during auction events. It sports meeting rooms and a four-lane bowling alley that's still in working order.

"It's a much bigger deal than people expect," Winters says. "People come out and think it's going to be a little farmhouse."

Pig roast fundraiser

To raise money for the eventual purchase of the property, the Fromm Bros. Historical Preservation Society will host a pig roast Thursday, June 14, from 5:30 to 9 pm on the farm at 436 CTH F in Hamburg. The expert assisting with the nomination for the National Register of Historic Places will give an update on progress. To be sure of getting one of the \$35 tickets, send an email no later than June 10 to info@frommhistory.org or phone 715-539-8574. **CP**