

Merrill Historical Society

received
9.18.13

From: bstnbrvst@juno.com
Sent: Tuesday, September 17, 2013 4:14 PM
To: merrillhs@frontier.com
Subject: Here is some follow up information I put together on the questions about the old Fromm factory in Merrill

Beverly,

Here is some follow up information I put together on the questions about the old Fromm factory in Merrill.

Mark Seliger

According to the revised edition of the book, "Bright with Silver" by Katherine Pinkerton, on page # 285, it is mentioned that the Fromm Brothers first opened a factory to manufacture fur coats in New York in January of 1941.

Then, on page # 320, it is mentioned that in the summer of 1945, Arthur Fromm's son, Johnnie Fromm, who had been overseeing the New York factory, had also been quietly taking note of the process by which fur clothing was manufactured, and he quietly appropriated material, patterns and sewing machines and secretly set about sewing together a fur coat.

At this time, New York was the world center of the fur industry, and that industry had always been held closely and secretively as to their methods by a monopoly that went back centuries. The Fromm factories workers were represented by the International Fur and Leather Workers Union - CIO.

On page # 322, it is mentioned that the Fromms, were not fond of New York, and wanted to have more control of the process and of their product from the farm to the ultimate customer, and so "factory quarters were found in Merrill".

The union went on strike at the Fromms New York factory, and the Fromms were able to convince some of the best New York employees to relocate to Merrill, where they were paid well and were in all regards well taken care of, and these skilled workers trained Merrill people in the art of fur clothing manufacture.

On page #324, it is mentioned that the Fromms were proud to be paying the highest wages in the Merrill area. The Merrill factory was in all important regards a success. The Merrill employees learned a craft that heretofore had guarded in secrecy. And they had an excellent production record for quality and quantity and at substantial lower costs per unit.

On page # 349, it is mentioned that the Fromms closed both the New York and the Merrill factories, and this would have been in 1948 – 1949. And the reason was general market conditions, changes in taste and demand. Because of their all around efficiencies they were able to sell profitably at a lower price point than ever before, but the market demand became such that they could barely give their items away much less sell them for even the cost of production. And it was at this point that they started to reduce the number of fox they were raising.

Being that on page # 322, it is mentioned that "factory quarters were found in Merrill", I would take it to mean that they did not build that factory, but acquired it probably through a real estate agent. — *ARMORY*

If old-timers say that at one time parts for parachutes were manufactured there, that might be true. And if so, it is possible that the manufacture might have been by the Fromms, but I tend to doubt that.

I am tending to think that the building predates the Fromms having used it, and if one were to walk around the building, you might find a cornerstone possibly indicating the year of construction, and maybe some other clues.

There might be at least one person in that area who knows something of the history of the building. But fewer and fewer would know on a first-hand basis. 1945 was 68 years ago. Earl Becker, Carl Voigt, Bob Huebner, or Mavis Steidinger, of the Hamburg area, might know, or know someone who might.

If parts for parachutes were made there, what kind of parts? Could it be the wedge-shaped sections of material for the canopy? Could it be the cord connecting the canopy to the harness, or straps and webbing for the harness? Could it be connecting hardware? Could it be adjustable hardware to fit the harness to the individual using the parachute? —

All of this could conceivably be made in Merrill, but the last items would be the most likely.

If the building first came available to the Fromms in 1945, the year the war ended, that would — suggest that it might have been used for war time production.

I don't know the history of Merrill Manufacturing, but if this building had been used in World War II for the manufacture of parachute hardware, then maybe it could have been a precursor to that company? *NOT FROMMS.*

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: "bstnbrvst@juno.com" <bstnbrvst@juno.com>

To: merrillhs@frontier.com

Subject: Fromm Factory Gary Mason commented on Facebook as to the source of the parachute story, "The information came from some of the few old timers".

Date: Sat, 7 Sep 2013 15:48:36 GMT

Hi Beverly,

Gary Mason commented on Facebook as to the source of the parachute story, "The information came from some of the few old timers".

Now you just have to find out who those old timers were and see if they can still be contacted, and if they could fill in more of the story.

Mark

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: "bstnbrvst@juno.com" <bstnbrvst@juno.com>

To: merrillhs@frontier.com

Subject: Fw: Fromm Factory
Date: Thu, 5 Sep 2013 20:31:27 GMT

Hi Beverly,

Thanks for looking into that. The bit about them manufacturing parachutes comes from Gary Mason. It does sound plausible.

If I happen into more on that I will promptly pass it on you.

If you like Facebook, her are a couple of Facebook pages you might find interesting:

The Hamburg-ers Unite! Facebook group page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/155018634690/>

The Fromm Bros. Historical Preservation Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Fromm-Bros-Historical-Preservation-Society/126127190826408>

Mark

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: "Merrill Historical Society" <MerrillHS@frontier.com>

To: <bstnbrvst@juno.com>

Subject: Fromm Factory

Date: Wed, 4 Sep 2013 12:45:04 -0500

Dear Mark –

We do not have any more info on the Fromm factory than what you already have. The reference to manufacturing parachutes was a surprise and if you do find that info, we would appreciate hearing from you.

Beverly King

Collections and Research

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Book Section

BRIGHT WITH SILVER

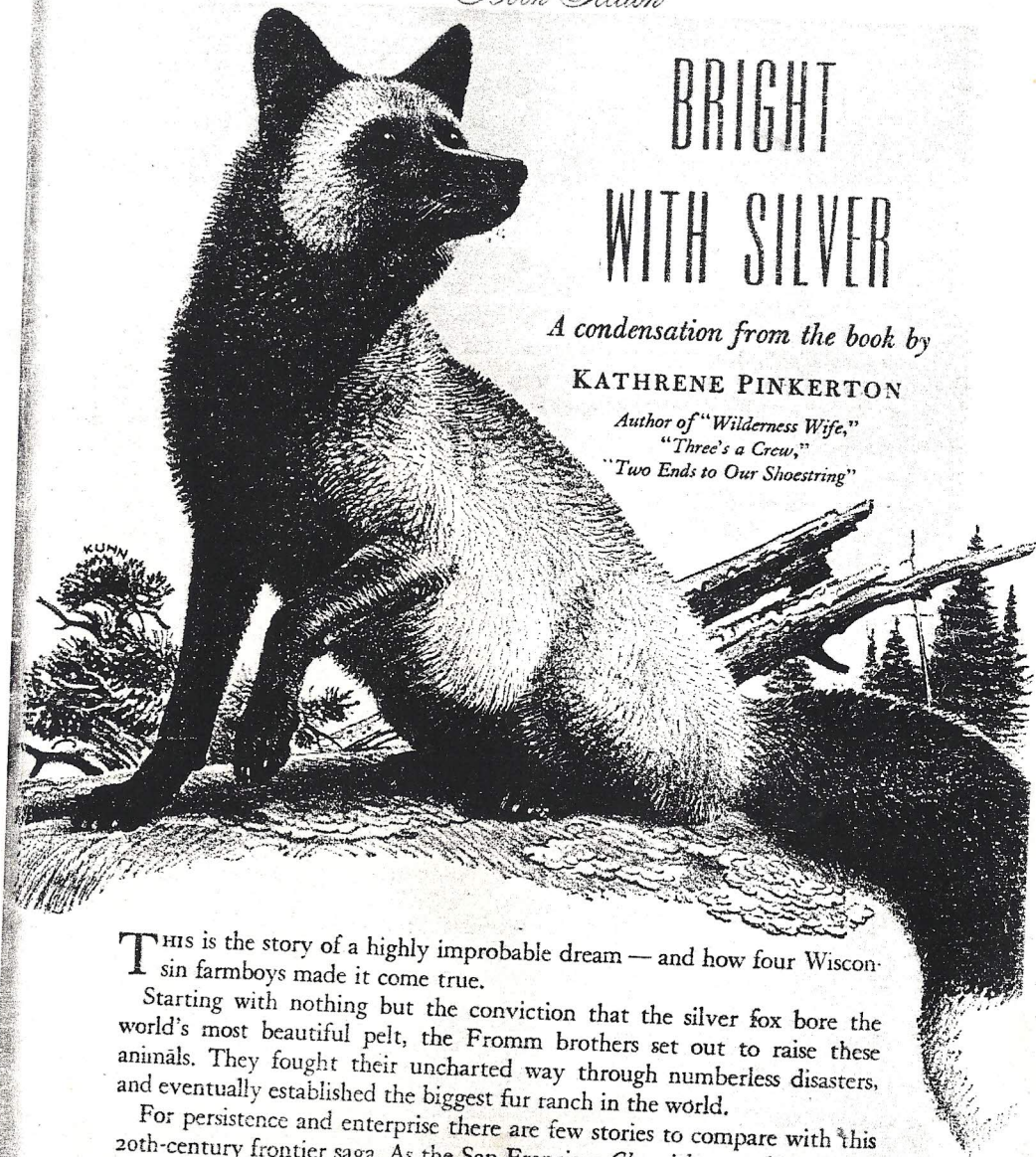
A condensation from the book by

KATHRENE PINKERTON

Author of "Wilderness Wife,"

"Three's a Crew,"

"Two Ends to Our Shoestring"

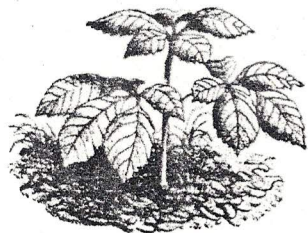


THIS is the story of a highly improbable dream — and how four Wisconsin farmboys made it come true.

Starting with nothing but the conviction that the silver fox bore the world's most beautiful pelt, the Fromm brothers set out to raise these animals. They fought their uncharted way through numberless disasters, and eventually established the biggest fur ranch in the world.

For persistence and enterprise there are few stories to compare with this 20th-century frontier saga. As the San Francisco *Chronicle* remarks: "Kathrene Pinkerton makes this story of the Fromms, who were always 'devising ways of accomplishing the impossible,' as exciting as a mystery thriller."

"Bright with Silver," copyright 1947, 1953, by Kathrene Pinkerton, is published at \$4 by William Sloane Associates, Inc., 425 Fourth Ave., New York 16, N. Y.



BRIGHT

WITH SILVER

THE FOUR Wisconsin farmboys had finished their evening chores and now were poring over the magazine *Hunter-Trader-Trapper*. Although the oldest was only 13 and the youngest seven, the Fromm brothers were already expert trappers in the forest that pressed close around the homestead's tilled fields. They called themselves the Wolves because they roamed in a pack.

"Look here!" 11-year-old Edward said excitedly to Henry, his youngest brother. He had come across a picture of the silver-fox pelt that had brought \$1200, the top price, at a recent auction in London.

"Don't you wish you'd got that one!" Walter, the oldest, said. "We're lucky if we get \$4 for a red."

All the rest of that evening in 1901 the Fromm boys could talk of nothing but silver foxes. They decided that these animals must be the most beautiful in the world and they determined that someday they would raise and sell them.

John, who was nine and as niggardly with words as an Indian, asked where the silvers were caught.

"Probably way up north in Canada," Edward answered. "No one around here ever got a silver like

that. But there could be one." Already Edward had a way of looking ahead of the moment.

The boys knew what he meant. Only recently they had read that silvers could be born of lowly red-fox parents. A Nascapi Indian in Labrador had found a litter of one silver, one red and two cross (red, black and silver) pups. Several trappers had seen reds running with silver mates, found mixed litters.

Now as the boys hoed in the fields and trapped in the woods they talked of catching the greatest prize in fur land — a black silver fox. They might even dig out a litter in the spring and find a black silver among the reds!

In time they no longer spoke of a fox or a pair of foxes but of dozens of pairs. They talked until fantasy was hammered into fixed purpose. If silver foxes could be raised and bred — and they saw no reason why they couldn't be — they would eventually own a herd of the most precious fur in the world. Having determined on this, they no longer referred to themselves as the Wolves. To give solidity to their dream they now called themselves the Company.

Listening to their talk, their father grew impatient. By ceaseless

and driving toil Frederick and Alwina Fromm had wrested the homestead from the quarter section of untouched wilderness in Hamburg Township. In summer there was hay to cut, oats, wheat and rye to be bound by hand. In autumn there were butternuts to gather, in spring maple sap to boil for syrup. And always the forest must be pushed back. The farm, the boys' father felt, needed all their time and energy.

The boys were not deterred from their plans. But they soon realized they could not depend on so frail a hope as finding a litter that contained silver foxes.

"There's only one other way to get started," said Edward. "We've got to get money to *buy* a pair. And we'll never make enough by trapping."

ONE Sunday afternoon in 1904 the boys strolled through the woods with their father to estimate the fall butternut crop. Beneath one of the trees Frederick Fromm poked at a plant with his toe and, chuckling, said, "Here's the thing Reinhold Dietsch is going to get rich on."

Edward bent over the plant. It had broad, bright-green leaves and a stalk of red berries. "We've seen this all through the woods," he said. "What is it?"

"Ginseng, Dietsch calls it. He claims Chinamen pay so much for it that he can make \$20,000 an acre. He's even built a house of laths to grow it in. But it would have to be worth a lot more than that before

I'd fuss with a crop that takes five years to grow."

The boys had seen the price of ginseng root listed in *Hunter-Trader-Trapper*. In China, as they were to learn later, the ginseng plant had been venerated for centuries. The Chinese used it not only in sickness but in health to retain vigor; they considered it an effective specific against all nervous diseases and the debilities of age. Because little of it now grew in China, the Chinese were willing to pay astounding prices for it. Dried ginseng root from the north-central states in this country was most valuable of all.

At the moment practically all the boys knew about ginseng was that it brought \$6 a pound; it had never occurred to them that the plant could be cultivated. But if Dietsch was right, the possibilities were dazzling.

When Frederick returned to the farmhouse, the Company did not go with him. Instead they stayed to examine the plants with the broad leaves and red berries. Here, they saw, was a way to start their silver herd.

The boys began searching the woods for miles around. Their first ginseng bed, 5 x 16 feet, held 150 plants. Later, from berry pulp of these plants they extracted 300 seeds for a second bed. Before long ginseng culture became a nuisance to Frederick Fromm. It seemed that whenever he needed a boy to help him clear some land the lad was off looking for ginseng, or weeding a bed

where no sprouts yet showed, or spraying new growth with slaked lime and blue vitriol to prevent ruinous blight.

"Cleared land is valuable," he said.

"So is ginseng," said Walter, who had become superintendent of its cultivation. "Ginseng and foxes!" Frederick Fromm protested. "What kind of a farm is that?"

IN A FEW years he was to find out. With \$24 of hard-earned ginseng money the Fromms bought a litter of red foxes from a neighboring farmer. They felt they must begin the study of raising silvers by experimenting with the common red. On the day they brought home the six males and one female, their father had gone to Wausau. Alwina and the boys were admiring the rich tawny hue of the young foxes just as Frederick drove in the gate. When he saw the foxes, he decided the time had come to put a stop to all the talk he had heard for years.

"You'll not keep those miserable creatures on my land!" he said.

During the ginseng quarrels Alwina Fromm had remained apart. Now she stepped forward. "Put them on *my* land, boys," she said quietly.

It was the first time she had ever referred to the actual ownership of the quarter section. Her father had given the land to her as a wedding present.

From the first, Henry was the official "fox man." An article in

Hunter-Trapper-Trapper had emphasized the importance of a regular keeper; foxes were nervous and distrustful and must not be disturbed. Custody of the Company's herd was a big responsibility for a 15-year-old, but Henry liked it. The pens were built close to the house and he spent hours watching the foxes from a special lookout on the farmhouse roof. A good keeper, he felt, should learn to think as foxes think, and foxes behave naturally only when they believe they are not observed.

Henry's first effort in fox thinking brought tragedy. The animals fought the netting, and he decided they had too much leisure in which to resent captivity. He thought of an inspired scheme: Why not hang meat on wires so that the foxes would have to jump for it? Wouldn't this "busy work" make for tired and contented foxes? Next morning Henry found a fox hanging from one of the wires, strangled. It had caught its head in a hook holding the meat — and the victim was the only female!

Henry began to understand why fox farmers failed.

The boys managed to capture three more females, however, and Henry, who now saw that the job required more than forest thinking, obtained a Government bulletin on fur farming. He adhered to it strictly, and thereafter each litter grew large and healthy. All the pups were red, for no freak of heredity occurred to give them a silver; but Henry proved he knew how to raise foxes.

Soon came the electrifying news that silver foxes were being domesticated. A Canadian fox farm on Prince Edward Island had sent some ranch-bred black silver pelts to the London auction; 25 skins had brought \$34,000. Men had successfully competed with the forest. The silver fox, once wholly a creature of luck, was now, thanks to the pioneering of the two owners of the Canadian farm — Charles Dalton and Robert Oulton — an established commercial strain.

The boom in silver-fox raising that followed almost overnight sent prices of breeding stock soaring. Pairs of silver pups brought \$6000 and up. Now it would be years before the profits from ginseng would enable the Fromms to pay such an amount.

In despair Henry wrote James A. Kane, a silver-fox dealer whose advertisement he had seen in *Hunter-Trapper-Trapper*. Henry did not mention the existence of a "company," but merely told earnestly of the many years he had been planning to raise silver foxes and of his failure so far. He asked if there were any way for a boy with almost no money to obtain breeding stock.

James Kane answered promptly. The fervor of one fanatic had made contact with another. He reported the conclusions reached by pioneer breeders: that a red pup of one silver parent might carry silver blood and in turn, when mated to a silver, produce a silver or even half a litter of silver offspring. These red carriers of

silver blood, termed "outcastes," were valuable as breeders, and ranchers had paid as much as \$500 for them. If Henry wanted to try this route to a silver herd, Kane would find him a bargain in an outcaste and a silver mate.

WITH help from an older brother who was teaching, the boys managed to scrape up \$550 needed to buy an outcaste and a fine male cross. Kane referred to the male cross as a "double-cross" because its black coat carried only a flash of red. This mating should produce at least one silver.

For a month after the litter was born the Company didn't dare investigate. Nervous mother foxes may consume their young if disturbed. Finally the boys looked. Three pups and all red! Kane was as astonished and dismayed as the Fromms. He offered Henry his money back, but Henry refused.

There followed a series of events which made the Fromm boys feel that bad luck had fastened on them in earnest. Figuring that the female outcaste had been the parent at fault (for the male double-cross carried in his coat visible proof of black-silver blood), the boys mated their double-cross with a female silver that had been trapped by a man in their district. The arrangement was made on a partnership basis and all concerned had high hopes for the mating. But when the resulting litter arrived it consisted of two cross pups and two reds. The owner of

the female silver came and took her away without comment, and refused to take his share of the pups, red or cross. He was through with fox breeding forever.

The Fromms had no thought of giving up, but they were baffled. Unfortunately, they were involved in a genetic mystery at a time when geneticists had not yet studied silver-fox breeding. Years later these scientists made a discovery which might explain the enigma. They found that the silver strains in both Alaskan and eastern silver foxes are recessive — and a different recessive — and that when they are mated together the offspring tend to return to normal, that is, to red. The Fromms' double-cross might have been Alaskan.

Nor was this mystery the only pitfall in fox heredity. Once, to everyone's amazement, Frederick Fromm agreed to lend the Company \$3000 to buy a silver female from a farmer who lived some 60 miles from Hamburg. Mr. Fromm went with his sons to see the fox. It was a miserable-looking animal and Frederick decided it did not look like anything a man should pay \$3000 for. Without saying a word he stomped back to the car. The boys followed and on the drive home no one spoke. But for once their father's distrust of silver foxes was justified. The boys later learned that the animal proved to be a Sampson, the name given a fox which never furs out properly. If allowed to breed indefinitely, the strain may even

become hairless. Thanks to their father, the boys were kept from a brush with disaster.

After their failure with the silver female and the double-cross male, Henry became ill and had to spend several weeks at Battle Creek Sanitarium. On his way home he stopped in Chicago for just one errand. He visited the fur salon in the Marshall Field store and asked to see a silver-fox scarf. He examined it carefully, then handed it back to the mystified saleswoman. It was the first time the farmboy — now 19 — had ever seen a pelt made up into a scarf. Although the pelt was dark and lustrous, Henry thought it should have had more silver to make it brighter.

Now Henry gave up on the double-cross and sold him. He used the proceeds to buy a pair of outcastes which James Kane offered him at a bargain \$450. The morning after the arrival of the outcastes the Company went to inspect the pen. The male appeared in good spirits but all that remained of the female was the tail. Half of \$450 had gone down the hungry male's gullet.

A second female was then purchased and, although the male seemed intrigued by her, the boys had no way of knowing whether he was regarding her as a mate or as a meal. By breeding season, however, the pair were devoted to each other.

The weeks that followed were a period of anxious waiting. The litter meant so much that the Company hardly dared to think of the outcome. Mother foxes keep their pups

in the nesting log until they are about a month old. One lovely May morning Henry gave breakfast cereal to the outcaste pair and as usual the mother picked up food to carry to her young. As she went toward the log she called her family. It was a strange little sound, half sigh, half grunt, but the youngsters heard it. A red pup appeared. Henry stood motionless, his heart thumping. A second red pup followed, then a third and a fourth. Finally came the fifth pup, its blackness glistening in the morning sunlight. At last they had a silver!

Henry shouted the wonderful news to the others. It was the happiest day the farm had ever known.

THE Company now considered its position. The boys had worked five years for this one pup, had been planning silver foxes for over ten. If they tried to build a herd by the addition of a single pup each year, they faced at best a long period of sluggish growth. Others, meanwhile, had made killings in the silver-fox bonanza. A group of clerks, for instance, had cleared \$40,000 in a year, and three sisters had made \$35,000. Apparently the only requisite for success was capital for a half-dozen pairs of silvers. Natural increase took care of the rest. The Fromms felt this was the only way out for them — the purchase of breeding stock. They determined that before the next mating season they would have not only a mate for their silver but a second pair of silvers as well.

Three such silvers, they found, could be purchased for \$6800. It was now or never for the Company. They had no money, nothing to borrow on, and the half acre of ginseng seed planted so long before would not mature till 1915, the following year. Once again it was their mother who helped them.

The boys knew the farm had never carried a mortgage and that their parents' ways had been slow and thrifty. But they knew, too, of Alwina's boundless faith in her sons. She did not hesitate now. "What good is land unless it gives a family a start in life?" she asked.

Conveniently, Frederick Fromm was away on a visit. The boys and their mother went to the local bank and got a \$6800 mortgage on the farm. The banker put no great faith in foxes but hoped that future ginseng crops would justify the loan.

When Frederick arrived home, Alwina told him what she had done. He said almost nothing, for argument was futile with the catastrophe now an established fact. But he knew that to repay the mortgage tilled fields must be given over to fox pens and ginseng arbors.

After the next breeding season the Company could scarcely believe its good fortune. It now had 14 silvers! Vastly different from the year before, when a single silver pup caused a celebration. But since the foxes could not yet pay their way, ginseng must be expanded to carry them — and meet the mortgage payments.

The boys now asked neighbors' sons and daughters to work for them during the rush season. Girls could transplant ginseng, drop seeds and gather ginseng root. Men could help reproduce the natural conditions of ginseng by bringing leaves and loam from the forest, and do the heavy labor of cultivation. Ginseng work took on the communal excitement of a barn-raising.

The financial returns, however, were disappointing. In 1909, when they made the original planting, the boys had talked of a \$10,000 crop within five years. It was now 1915, and in those six years, what with plant blight, root rot, slow maturity, the half acre yielded only \$3500. After all expenses were met, it barely paid the interest on the mortgage and a token payment on the principal.

FROM the first the boys strove for brightness in their fox pelts. At that time the fur world considered dark silver-fox skins with only a limited area of silver the most beautiful and distinctive. But the Fromm brothers liked the brightness and life that silver guard hairs imparted to the pelt. It was incredibly presumptuous of farmboys to believe they could change a trend in fashion. But their decision to breed for more and more brightness proved of tremendous importance, both to the Company and to the silver-fox industry.

Gradually the members of the Company slipped into their special

jobs. Henry had a way with foxes that made for healthy animals. John selected the matings; his instinctive reaction to scarcely discernible gradations in color was to prove of enormous value to the Fromms. Walter took charge of ginseng; Edward, who handled business matters, was coordinator of all their efforts. The Company's welfare was the tyrant that drove them all.

THE COMPANY decided to try out its first silver-fox pelts on the market in January 1917. By this time St. Louis had become an important fur center and pelts from the entire country would be offered at the midwinter auction there. So to St. Louis went three Fromm silvers.

If ever a company had a warning that it was embarked on a precarious course, that January auction was it for the Fromm brothers. The dark silvers sold well; a single pelt brought \$910. But the more silvered Fromm pelts sold for only \$160 each. The most stubborn individualist might have paused and pondered, but the boys did not even reconsider. It would take years to achieve the color they desired and more years to convince the public that the brighter, more silvered foxes were beautiful. But it had taken years to grow ginseng; they were accustomed to long-time gambles.

That summer the Company had 65 silver foxes and, counting the reds and crosses, 150 in the herd. They had never lost an animal through sickness. So Henry was

staggered when the foxes suddenly began to have what he could only describe as "fits." One morning he found three dead animals—two silvers and a red. Next morning he knew an epidemic had struck; four more foxes were stretched lifeless. Henry was aghast at how little he knew of fox diseases. When he cut the animals open, however, it was not hard to decide what had killed them—worms.

Parasites, the great foe of ranches foxes, had caught up with the Company, and the infestation had gone unnoticed until the whole herd was infected. Vermifuge capsules were ordered at once, but the remedy came too late. The Company lost half its foxes. And these were summer pelts; they were valueless. Counting up the appalling totals the Company now learned—the hard way—that fox farmers can never afford a sense of security.

Disaster struck in the ginseng crop, too. In previous years the roots, which had to be dried, had crowded the farmhouse attic, and their extreme vulnerability to mildew in the final drying process added a last-minute hazard. They had been doing reasonably well with ginseng, and to protect the forthcoming promisingly large harvest they decided to build a drying house with a central-heating plant and an intricate system of ventilating pipes.

The crop that year outran expectations. Tiers of occupied racks filled the new drying house, and still wagons full of washed root drove

to the door. The boys knew that they were crowding the racks, but they needed the harvest money desperately. They brought in the green root, then constantly turned it, changed racks from bottom to top, did everything they could to give each part of the harvest its chance at warmth and air.

Days later they knew they had been defeated. In sorting, they found that half the roots had black spots of rot! Their first major improvement, their elaborate drying house, had cost the Company \$10,000. And this was to have been their big year!

IN 1919 Edward took nine pelts to the winter auction in St. Louis. Once again the fur trade passed judgment on bright silver foxes; dark silvers sold considerably higher. But the triumph of the dark fox worked one advantage for the Fromms. Other ranches wanted small dark silvers as breeders—the very foxes the Fromms wanted to get rid of. The Company was rigorous in its culling procedure: whereas other ranches considered a ten percent replacement adequate for improvement, the Fromms generally replaced 35 percent in their determination to produce brighter, large foxes of uniform quality.

The Fromm farmhouse now held three families, for Edward and Henry had married. With ginseng crew and fox workers to feed, house-keeping might well have appalled the young wives. But if the girls ever thought their lives were harder

than those of other farm wives they remembered that the goals were higher.

Suddenly the Company was confronted by a completely new type of problem — the ginseng harvest brought a check for \$40,000! How best to use the money?

"The Company's got to have more land," said Walter. "It's had a chance now to get into real ginseng production. It ought to buy the Roehl farm."

This was the original farm of their grandfather, Joachim Nieman, and it adjoined Alwina's quarter section. It was cleared, had good land for ginseng and was the logical first step in expansion. The other brothers nodded.

"We've got to buy some eastern foxes as breeders," said Henry. "That strain could improve the texture of our herd."

"We have to enlarge the house and we need feeding quarters for a bigger crew," Edward said. "But land and foxes must come first."

So the Company bought the Roehl farm and Walter, John and Henry set out for the fox ranches on Prince Edward Island. They went from ranch to ranch, carefully selecting their stock from a long and well-established line that had been bred for softness of texture and gloss of coat: all were light, and all were large.

Frederick Fromm now began to admit that ginseng, and even foxes, might someday bring success. As he grew older, he spent his days

showing his sons' farm to a curious public. He never failed to point out the first fox house built by John and Henry.

"That's how all this started," he would say. "I didn't want them to be fox farmers and what you see around here now they did in spite of me."

But he always spoke proudly.

WITH a herd of 800 pairs, large enough to yield a good crop of pelts, the Company realized that every effort must be made to avoid coat damage to their foxes. Penned foxes became bored, developed nervous habits. Persistent scratching of an ear, face or neck made bare spots, and this damage could not be repaired.

It was Edward who thought of the solution. By August a fox had made its winter coat; in fall and early winter guard hairs grow longer and more lustrous and undercoats thicker. Wouldn't two or three months of active life on a forest range not only alleviate the boredom of pen life but add size and value to the pelt? Also, forest life would provide shade for the sensitive color of each pelt; too much exposure to sunlight imparts a brownish cast. The Company adopted the idea with enthusiasm.

The first furring range embraced 45 acres of forest. Fencing was heavy and high (with a two-foot overhang slanting inward), and was extended at an angle 18 inches into the ground. The Company discovered later that

it had overestimated the craftiness of the foxes: entrenching the fence was not necessary; a three-foot carpet of netting laid on the ground proved a sufficient precaution against escape.

The Fromms' early paper dreams were beginning to come true; the breeding season of 1922 increased the herd to 2000 animals. And in November 1921 the *Black Fox Magazine* had acknowledged existence of the Fromm fur farm by saying, "Fromm stock is equal to any other strain in regard to length and density of hair, and hardier and more prolific."

However, when Edward took the Company's first real shipment of pelts to New York, which had succeeded St. Louis as the acknowledged fur-trade capital, derisive buyers advised him to "take home those western wolves." The auctioneer, J. Gordon Noakes, a man of long experience in the fur trade, invited Edward to luncheon. He liked the quality of the Fromm foxes, even though he couldn't admire the color. "You and your brothers ought to know by this time," he said, "that the public will never have any truck with those all-over silvers. What's the sense in being so stubborn?"

But the Fromms went on breeding foxes still more silvered.

Fortunately the Chinese agreed with the Fromms on their ginseng. For several years after the first \$40,000 harvest, ginseng brought from \$45,000 to \$115,000 annually. All this money went into expansion

— barn, roads, more fox pens, warehouses and a refrigerator plant for the fox food.

The 1923 crop of pelts brought the Fromms a check for more than \$35,000. The 1924 check leapt to \$200,000. Once these sums would have seemed large. Now they did not begin to stretch over the pattern the Company had set. With the country's increasing prosperity, the number of women who might someday hope to possess a silver fox had increased enormously. And preferences had undergone a change: the dark fox, with only a faint scattering of silver guard hairs on the hips, was no longer the most popular; there was a definite swing toward pelts with more extensive silver. This was a hopeful straw in the wind for the Fromms, but a frail one. Fromm pelts were still topped by others at the auction.

Once again a mysterious epidemic broke out in the furring ranges — there were four of them now. Foxes apparently in good condition would stagger or run wildly, then fall to the ground in a convulsion and die. The Company took every possible precaution to halt the spread of the infection, but little could be done. Range foxes ate from the same dishes at the feeding stations, stole food from one another, and in a quarrel stood face to face with forefeet braced, mouths almost touching, as they threatened each other with deep-throated snarls. They were cannibalistic and ate the dead and dying, although rangers pa-

trolled constantly to secure the bodies before they could be devoured by range mates.

Edward sent carcasses to the University of Wisconsin for autopsy but laboratory reports proved nothing. As deaths mounted, the Company feared a wipe-out of the entire fur farm. Toward the end of the furring season the epidemic abated, but far more devastating than the loss of pelts was the realization that the strange new disease might strike again. Expansion had added to their vulnerability.

Pelting was in progress when Dr. Robert G. Green, an associate professor of bacteriology at the University of Minnesota, came to see the Fromms. He had made a study of fox distemper and his interest was stirred by the strange epidemic on the Fromm farm.

Edward and the doctor planned a campaign. The doctor offered to contribute his time and knowledge to research into the nature, cause and cure of the trouble if the Company would finance laboratory expense and provide a herd of red foxes for experimental study. This was the beginning of an association that benefited hundreds of people and farms.

THE PELTING of an enormous number of foxes was a new experience for the Company. So the Fromms, as had so often happened in their history, "found a way to do it." In the pelting room the foxes were hung around the walls on large

wooden pegs. And whereas in the past each man on the pelting crew had skinned a fox in regulation trapper style, now each man performed only one task in skinning, keeping the animals moving in a continuous procession. The last station was the table where Walter took the records from the tattooed marks in each fox's ears, showing year of birth, pen and number of the animal. Later, when the fur was sold, the price would be entered, and thus the history of the skin would be complete from forebears to market. Ultimately it became possible to pelt 2000 foxes in a single day, day after day.

Summers were always spent in building. By 1926 the Company was putting up pens in numbers that would have staggered them in early years. They purchased land for a fifth furring range of about 50 acres and enclosed it. Then the epidemic — which Dr. Green was now calling "fox encephalitis" — struck again. This time there was a 12 percent crop loss. The Company figured its only chance for survival lay in growing so big that even disease couldn't touch it. The boys were thinking now in terms of 40,000 or even 50,000 foxes. For fur-trade favor was still swinging in their direction. At the 1927 midwinter auction Fromm pelts did not establish individual record prices, but the crop as a whole had brought a robust check — \$785,153!

Foxes always managed to make life diverting. In the period when

silver-fox scarfs were most popular, foxes suddenly took to biting off the tips of tails. No one knew whether they bit off their own or the tips of others. But the Company finally put a stop to it — by dipping the tails of all pups into a solution of pine oil.

Nineteen twenty-nine was the year of the Fromms' greatest victory. Fromm foxes had a new name in the East. Company pelts were bid up as high as \$685. The fur trade, which only five years before had advised Edward to get rid of "those western wolves," now called Fromm silvers "the million-dollar foxes." At last, the fur trade had approved bright silver.

DURING the depression, for the first time ginseng and fur prices dipped simultaneously; always before, profits in one crop had covered losses in the other. Floods, revolutions and political unrest in China had caused hard times, and American ginseng growers were forced to sell at a price less than the cost of growing. The Company stored its ginseng harvests for two seasons, then called a meeting to discuss the continuance of ginseng culture. But none of the four partners had the slightest notion of turning his back on either ginseng or foxes.

The situation in China was beyond Fromm control, but the silver-fox problem was on home ground. Present low prices could not be lifted, so markets must be widened. Edward, the Wisconsin farmer, went to Paris

and visited every famous *couturier*. He talked with designers and argued with fur workers that the silver fox could be manipulated as a lavish fur trimming. But even though he left silver-fox pelts in his wake with a prodigality which departed from the frugal precepts of his early training, the originators of the world's fashions did not catch fire.

A few American designers, however, showed interest in using the luxurious silver fox as trimming for coats and suits. But another of Edward's ideas became a definite style. Almost overnight, as so often happens in fashion history, it became fashionable for women to wear scarfs of two matched skins instead of the single pelt. Capes of four or five skins also came into vogue. Silver fox gained countless new wearers, and even at depression prices the Company ceased to worry. Volume, the Fromms' old bulwark against disaster, again served them.

It was in 1934 that distemper, dreaded scourge of fur farms, broke out in two of the Fromm units. Mortalities were 75 percent in the infected areas. Crews took all known precautions to prevent spread of the disease. They wore special clothing, walked through disinfecting solutions, changed gloves and had aprons sprayed with disinfectant at the door of each yard. Fox carcasses were picked up by a separate collection crew and each carcass was put in a special airtight bag. Yet the epidemic cleaned out whole fox families as had no other.

Until a sure method to immunize foxes was discovered, there was no hope that losses could be cut. Dr. Green, the bacteriologist, undertook the project and the Company bought a bankrupt fox farm near Thiensville and opened the Fromm Laboratories. A small permanent staff was installed, and the Company prepared for a long and aggressive campaign.

The fine quality of the survivors in the 1935 fur crop gave the Company courage to attempt a bold departure from tradition. Since the beginning of the fur trade in America, fur auctions had been held only in the great centers of the industry — Leipzig, London, St. Louis and New York. The Fromms decided to ask the market to come to them on their farm in Hamburg, 1200 miles from New York.

This was a daring gamble. If successful, it would make fur-trade history and add immeasurably to Company prestige. A strong argument in the Company's favor was that theirs was the largest single offering of silver foxes in the country and the only real collection of bright silvers — in a year when public demand for full silvers had outrun supply. Fromm pelts, instead of begging for fur-trade favor, were now competed for by buyers. But would the buyers make the journey to Hamburg?

The Fromms' suspense was ended by the news that a New York group had arranged to come to the February auction by special railroad car. Furriers throughout the country,

too, announced that they would be represented. The Fromms engaged a wing of a hotel in Wausau, arranged for transportation between hotel and farm, set up a display room in the warehouse, and provided food and drink for nearly 100 guests.

Two days before the buyers were scheduled to come, the worst storm of the winter set in. The visitors arrived to find 15-foot snowdrifts and a temperature of 38 degrees below zero. To the Fromms' astonishment, their guests liked it. The north woods had turned out to be exactly what they had imagined. Each buyer became a stalwart who dared rigors and hardships to wrest pelts from the northern wilderness.

Edward assumed the role of auctioneer for the first time in his life. Each buyer had a unique method of attracting the attention of the auctioneer without revealing his bid to a competitor: a twiddled pencil, a raised eyebrow, a finger to the ear, a slight movement of a thumb, while no other muscle of the body betrayed interest. But if Edward had stage fright as he began to cry his first auction, he did not show it.

Silver fox sold 15 percent higher than in the previous month in New York. When one pelt was bid to \$450, the highest price paid since the depression, the buyers stood and cheered. This auction established a second record. It was the first 100 percent sale in silver-fox history; not one of the 7500 pelts offered by the Fromms remained when the auction ended.

Dr. Green announced in 1936 that he had at last perfected a method to immunize permanently against fox encephalitis. The triumph of furring ranges freed from encephalitis, once so eagerly awaited, went almost uncelebrated. Losses from distemper were now so disastrous that owners and keepers could think of little else.

Still the Fromms went ahead with preparations for a 1937 winter auction in Hamburg. This was to be more ambitious than the 1936 project: in addition to their own pelts, the Fromms would auction the pelts of 300 other ranchers through a separate organization called Federal Furs. Practically every buyer of importance in the country announced his intention of attending, and the 20,000 silver-fox pelts under the hammer made Hamburg the leading silver-fox market of the country.

The highlight of the auction that year was Fox Number 2989. It was a large pelt without a blemish, silky and deep in fur, a bright silver with a distinctive black cross on the shoulder. The Fromms agreed that it was the most perfect pelt they had ever produced. The fox's name had been Silver Celebrator I; it had 28 generations of known ancestors. Men talked of Fox 2989 as people once talked of the Hope diamond.

Not until midafternoon of the second day did "2989" appear on the board above the auctioneer. Not a man moved a muscle, but tension filled the air. "I could feel it from the stand," Edward said later.

The bidding started at \$300 and went quickly to \$1000. Only the serious contenders remained in competition now as bids went up in \$100 steps. At \$1500 only two rivals remained: Trencher Furs of New York and Marshall Field & Co. of Chicago. Both had prepared special promotion with Fox 2989 as a spearhead. Trencher offered \$2000, as much as anyone had believed the pelt would bring. Then Marshall Field signaled \$2100. Edward looked toward the New York bidder. He did not raise his head. Down came the hammer. Only once before had a higher price been paid for any fox. In the early years of the industry a black fox had brought \$2600 in London, but no one had expected to see such a sum approached again.

Fox 2989, most talked-of pelt in America, was displayed in the Marshall Field fur salon — the same salon where, 24 years earlier, Henry Fromm had asked a puzzled saleswoman to show him a silver-fox scarf. Henry, confronted with this coincidence, did not find it startling. "We've always known," he said, "that we were going to raise good silver foxes."

THE VACCINE on which Dr. Green had been working finally took effect on distemper in 1938. Medical research had now cost the Company almost \$1,000,000, but the ultimate successes led to an enlargement of Fromm Laboratories to produce distemper and encephalitis vaccines for other fur farms. Dr. Green added to

his laurels by developing a successful distemper serum for dogs that is now used by veterinarians throughout the country. Perhaps the most satisfying triumph was achieved, however, when the fox vaccine of Fromm Laboratories stopped a distemper epidemic that threatened to wipe out the silver-fox herds of Prince Edward Island.

An important change in the Company's fur farm began in 1936 when John bought several mink trios (a male and two females), more as pets than as fur producers. He decided that he liked them.

"You can get close to mink," he said. "When you catch a fox, that scares him away from you for good. Mink — you can catch them, turn them loose, and they'll come back and peek around the corner at you."

So Henry and John now talked of mink and mink pens, as many years before they had talked of foxes.

Edward did not share their enthusiasm. The mink was a small creature with no real nobility, and its skin must be cut and resewn and become a part of many other pelts before true loveliness was apparent. Besides, the price of mink pelts in the late '30's did not show promise. Walter, immersed in ginseng culture, also showed no interest in mink ranching.

John and Henry found a space for a new mink unit in the outskirts of the forests, not far from the home Walter had built. Walter, who didn't mind living in the midst of foxes, complained about the new smell,

and Edward said, "Those are just some mink Hank and John want around the place." Neither realized this was the beginning of the largest mink herd in the world. But John and Henry did not long remain the Company's only advocates of mink. Soon all four brothers were caught up by the possibilities of a new era.

For the price of silvers was not stable. Despite the tariff, Norway had flooded the market with silver foxes. Uncertainty compelled fur houses, which formerly had purchased a year's stockpile, to buy for temporary needs only.

At the Hamburg auction in 1939 the price of Fromm pelts dropped for the first time. After a few lots had been disposed of, Edward began to take bids "off the chandelier," as furmen say when an auctioneer looks over the heads of buyers and accepts a mythical offer. As the auction progressed prices were no higher and Edward continued to "buy back" Fromm furs. Finally, he took unprecedented action; he stopped the sale. It was an announcement that the Fromms did not propose to sacrifice their pelts.

Edward wrote a letter to the trade, pointing out that although the situation in silver fox was not good the low bids at Hamburg were not justified by market conditions. The letter was followed by an announcement of an early-spring Fromm auction. The same pelts were offered, the same buyers arrived. The bids were acceptable, the auction was a success. The trade still wanted

Fromm silvers. But it was clear that interest in silver fox was falling off.

JUST AS four farmboys had not liked somber black silver foxes, so they did not warm to the uniformity of the then popular dark mink. It was brighter, livelier mutation mink that beckoned them to fresh adventure.

Mutations were not news to mink, although they were to mink ranchers. Albinos, or pastels, had been caught by trappers for years. The first of these "freak" minks to be born in captivity was whelped on the Wisconsin ranch of William Whittingham. It was an elusive shade of bluish platinum. Also, the Wisconsin ranch of Charles Whitaker was blessed with platinum mink and he worked to produce more. A new mink called silver sable and later blufrost — two-toned with light-bluish underfur and dark guard hairs enlivened with silver — was reported on several ranches. Next pastel mink, a delicate shade of taupe, turned up. Suddenly mink ranching took on all the thrill and suspense of prospecting for gold.

Breeding stock in the mutations was scarce and costly. In some variations only a few pairs existed and owners refused to sell. Ranchers reported, too, that platinum mink were hard to raise. Nevertheless, the Company determined to develop this fur of lighter, livelier color and bought both platinum mink and silver sable.

The Company found platinum mink even harder to raise than had been

reported. Valuable mink, apparently in good health one day, would be found dead the next morning. The technique of breeding these recessive strains had to be studied, too. "On silver foxes we'd been working with a recessive mutation for 25 years," John said, "but we'd never thought of it like that." Now he found the genetics of raising platinum mink could be summarized this way: To build a herd fast, a rancher might mate platinum with platinum — if he could afford it. He might pursue a slower course by mating a half-blood with a platinum to produce a split litter (half platinum, half half-bloods, on an average). Or an even slower course: mate half-bloods with half-bloods, to produce an average of one platinum to five standards.

The Company decided on the middle course. In the first breeding season the half-blood females produced 400 kits. Half of these were platinum — and in a year when trios of this color were selling for \$1200. The remainder of the litters were half-bloods, valuable as future breeders. Thus the Fromm platinum herd was begun.

In 1942 men who had pioneered the platinum mink met to consider its presentation to the public. Although they did not yet have enough skins to sell through retail channels, the way must be paved for the sizable crop of 1943. They decided to present the only platinum-mink coat in the world to the American Theater Wing to be auctioned for the

benefit of the Stage Door Canteen. No single rancher had enough pelts, but more than a dozen joined in the venture. A mink coat requires at least 60 well-matched pelts. The selection of pelts for the first platinum-mink coat was probably the most spectacular feat of grading ever accomplished in the fur industry. Of necessity the mink had to be selected while alive, and Herbert Mezger, one of the three judges at important fur shows of the country, traveled from ranch to ranch, carrying the desired color in his eye. It was the first time that grading on the hoof had ever been achieved.

Many stage and screen celebrities attended the party, at which Edward was auctioneer. Myrna Loy set the ball rolling with an offer of \$9000. For a while bidding was somewhat tentative. Then bids started to climb, first by \$500, then by \$1000. At \$18,000 Edward brought down the hammer.

Acceptance of that final bid, many times more than a mink coat had ever brought, was a decisive event for the Company and for all mutation breeders. Had the auction gone flat and the new color, christened "silverblu," been repudiated, there might have been no story of mink mutations today. This triumph settled doubts in ranchers' minds.

After the January 1944 auction, where bids per pelt averaged a stunning \$147.25 for silverblu, the only problem for the Company was how big its mutation herd could be. With a variety of color combina-

tions, the Fromms have gradually raised the proportion of mutations to standard mink in their herds, and have so increased their herds that this year they expect the country's biggest crop — between 35,000 and 40,000 skins. All except a few will be bright-colored mutations. Another long-shot gamble by the Fromms has proved sound.

IT HAS all been an exciting and rewarding adventure for the Fromms — a sort of folk tale of America, the age-old story of boys who dreamed of accomplishment and then followed the narrow pathway of that dream. Today, of the possibly 100 acres of ginseng in cultivation in the United States, the Fromms have 80. Their 160-acre homestead, mortgaged to buy three silver foxes, has grown to 17,000 acres. Through the years the Company has made many significant contributions to the great fur-farming industry; by intensive medical research they have eliminated many of its hazards; they have themselves paid out some \$10,000,000 in wages; and they have brought a precious fur, once worn by only a few, within the reach of almost every woman.

But the real essence of the endeavor which has stretched through more than 40 years cannot be expressed in foxes, or in mink, or in ginseng. For the Fromms' dream was set in terms of living. Four farmboys were not content with their lives. They knew life could be better. And they made it so.