

Tenacity of Fromm brothers inspires

I don't believe there is any Marathon County history more unique or fascinating than the history of the four Fromm brothers, who created their own private empire in the small hamlet of Hamburg. It all began because of their dream of raising silver fox.

The amazing thing about the Fromm boys was that they knew so soon in life what their passion was. In 1901, Walter was 13, Edward was 11, John was 9 and Henry was only 7 when they decided on their life's work. They also knew that to accomplish this dream they needed money to buy a pair of the finest foxes available, from Prince Edward Island.

Luckily, their father, Frederick Fromm, pointed out a plant in the woods called ginseng and said that their neighbor Reinhold Dietsch had made money from growing this plant. Ginseng has always been indigenous to the area, growing wild in the woods, but it was not recognized by the settlers until about 1877. The American Indians were well aware of it and had used it for years before this date.

The Fromm brothers knew that in order to be successful growing ginseng they had to re-create the conditions of the forest.

When the Fromm brothers decided to pursue ginseng in order to raise money, they asked their father if he might give them a little plot of land. He told them that the only land available to them was under the huge rock



Mary Jane
Hettinga

his boys, but it did not.

It took the Fromm brothers many years of trial and error before they realized a large profit from their ginseng. The 150 ginseng plants they began with in 1904 developed into more than 60 barrels of ginseng with a value of \$45,000. This was an enormous amount of money in 1919.

Because of their innovative efforts, the Fromm farm became the largest ginseng operation in the entire world. Not only did they perfect the operation, they also invented the machinery to make the planting and processing of the root more efficient. Most of these machines and techniques are still being used today.

All four brothers were perfectionists and each had their own special talents. One can only imagine if they worked hard on the ginseng operation — which was only a means to an end — how hard they must have worked for their real passion — silver fox.

In spite of their ginseng operation, it was not until 1913 that they were able to purchase the premier pair of foxes that they

piled. Every farm in Marathon County had its own pile of glacier rock that had to be cleared before farming could begin — and theirs was no exception. Their father thought surely that this would discourage

desired. They were becoming discouraged by their lack of success and turned to their mother for help. While their father was away, the boys persuaded her to mortgage the land. Because the land was hers from her dowry, she was able to give the boys \$6,800 so that they could purchase the foxes.

And the rest is history. They were successful beyond their wildest dreams, becoming well-known for their beautiful, bright silver fox fur. In fact, their furs were so prized that the fur buyers were willing to travel to central Wisconsin.

They held their first auction in February 1936. A special train was chartered from New York City and the Wausau Chamber of Commerce held a huge banquet for the visitors at the Hotel Wausau where they were staying. Each day a chartered bus would transport them to Hamburg. Mrs. Fromm and the brothers' wives would cook them hearty meals. Two days before the auction, a major snowstorm caused 15-foot snowdrifts and the temperature plummeted to 38 degrees below zero. The Fromms were worried, but the guests loved the snow and it was what they expected in Wisconsin. In fact, the Fromm farm was nicknamed "Fromm's Resort" because the buyers had such a grand time as guests at the auction.

The Fromms went above and beyond in their fur business.

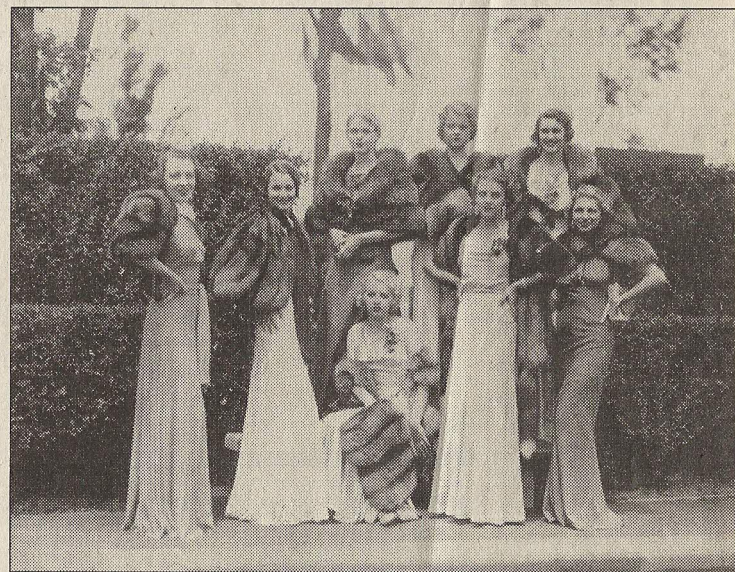


Photo courtesy of the Marathon County Historical Society

A William LaCerte photo advertising the Fromms' silver fox furs, circa 1935.

Besides their fabulous marketing techniques, they invested in research that would benefit all breeders. For every fox they had, they gave \$3 to scientific research. All told, they contributed more than \$1 million to research. They hired Dr. Robert G. Green and set up a laboratory. He was successful in establishing an encephalitis vaccine in 1927 and a distemper vaccine in 1938.

The Fromms were also pioneers in the field of animal genetics. They developed the "bright silver," a color that never existed before.

Animal nutrition was another

of their research projects. Because of improved diet of the foxes, they were able to produce larger animals. Instead of six pelts for a jacket, they only needed four.

The Fromm brothers' story should be an incentive to everyone. These four men, who began with nothing, through hard work and ingenuity made their dreams come true. The story of their success is well documented in the 1947 book by Katherine Pinkerton called "Bright with Silver."

Mary Jane Hettinga is executive director of the Marathon County Historical Society.