

Ed Fromm — last of fur-farming brothers

With the death of Edward Fromm, the saga of the Fromm Brothers of the town of Hamburg comes to an end. Mr. Fromm, Route 1 Hamburg, died at his home Thursday at the age of 96. He and his three brothers, Walter, John and Henry, by founding Fromm Brothers Inc., Hamburg, were responsible for making this area the U.S. capital of silver fox and ginseng enterprises.



Edward, the last surviving brother, was the leader of the pack which started with pennies and ambition to develop a \$2 million business. Although their ventures have slowed in the passing years you can still see foxes range on Fromm lands and ginseng grow in the shade on Fromm farms.

Mr. Fromm was also founder of six other companies: Fromm Laboratories, Grafton; Federal Foods Inc., Thiensville; Fromm Brothers, Nieman Inc., Mequon; Fromm Auction Company, Hamburg; Fromm Fur Garment Manufacturing, Merrill and New York City; and the Fromm Foundation of Hamburg. He was president of the six companies until 1964. In 1980, at the age of 90, he retired as chairman of the board and president of Fromm Brothers Inc.

The Fromm brothers' story is filled with the romance of entrepreneurship fully reported in the book, "Bright Silver," written by Kathrene Pinkerton in 1947. It's the dream of four young boys on a backwoods farm whose dream changed the trend of world fashion and broke the monopoly of New York as the nation's fur center. It provided the laboratory for some of the most exciting advances against animal diseases and for the study of animal genetics.

It is a Horatio Alger story that will and hard work brings riches. For years canceled checks for \$1 million hung on the wall of the Fromm office — payment to a single rancher for silver fox pelts.

Furs were an exotic product, but they were topped by ginseng, which, at the time, was tied to an ancient, mystic faith of the Chinese in the power of ginseng to promote

long life and virility. From this beginning Marathon County has become the ginseng capital of the world in the production of cultured ginseng. It is still growing and the ginseng beds can be seen popping up everywhere in the county.

In their heyday, the Fromms, with 17,000 acres of land, each year harvested 30,000 silver fox pelts, 24,000 mink pelts and nearly 500 acres of ginseng — acres which up to 1947 had produced more than eight million pounds of ginseng.

There were annual sales of silver fox pelts at the Fromm ranch, when buyers came from many parts of the United States and from abroad to vie at the auctions conducted by Edward Fromm. The buyers were bused from the Hotel Wausau to the ranch, which, during the sales, was protected by American Express guards. The guests were feted with dinners of venison raised on the ranch. In a separate building was a bar and bowling alleys for entertainment.

The first full silver pelt was purchased by Marshall Field & Co. for \$2,500 and was displayed in the show window of its Chicago store.

When the Fromms began their venture Edward was 11, Walter, 13, John, 9, and Henry, 7. They began by trapping red foxes, hoping to catch a "sport" with black in its fur. They had no luck and decided in 1904 to buy black silvers. To get money they hunted the woods for ginseng after reading a root shaped like a man's thighs brought \$400 an ounce. They went a step farther and transplanted ginseng roots on their farm in the hope of domesticating it. In 1909, five years after the first planting, they harvested their first crop for \$24.

They used their hard-earned money to buy cross silver females, which produced only red foxes. Pure silvers were selling for thousands of dollars. After two years of saving they bought a black male and an outcast female for \$450. The morning after they bought the pair they rushed to the pen. There was a bulging male and the tail of the female. The black had eaten his mate. They bought another female and in the spring of 1914 she produced their first black silver fox.

They realized one fox in a litter would be a slow business. Their father, Frederick, who hated the mention of the word fox, went on a trip. The boys talked their mother into mortgaging the homestead for

\$6,800 and spent it on three pure black silvers. By the next year they had 14 silvers, but there was bad news ahead. While they were seeking silvers, the fashion industry wanted darker and darker fox furs. In 1916 they sent a dark, but lusterless, spotty fur to market and sold it for \$450. Three bright silvers, perfect pelts in every way, brought \$160 each. They were not dismayed, but kept breeding silvers.

They were still financing their fox venture with ginseng sales. In 1920 they sold ginseng for \$40,000. A few years later ginseng brought in \$115,000. The money was used to breed silvers, although at auctions they were told to take those "western wolves and go home."

In 1924 they had 1,335 pelters and it looked like a good year, but disease hit and they lost a fifth of the crop worth \$50,000.

The losses continued. Dr. Robert C. Green, a bacteriologist at the University of Minnesota, seized on the chance to use the Fromm ranch as a laboratory for virus diseases. The brothers poured more than \$1 million into medical research at Fromm Laboratories in Thiensville in the next 20 years. Out of it came cures for encephalitis and distemper, the two killers of foxes. The distemper vaccine became a savior of dogs, also.

The first year disease hit, the brothers got their first big fur check — \$489,967. Triumph came in 1928 when 6,600 pelts of the 8,841 offered in New York were Fromm pelts. They brought the million dollar check.

Now that the foxes were paying off, it was ginseng which became a loser. In 1927, 90 percent of the crop rotted. Edward went to China to study the market, came home convinced the market was here to stay and they decided to stay in the business.

In 1936 the company decided it was large enough that it would not take its pelts to New York. Instead it asked buyers to come to Hamburg. They did and continued to do so for many years.

As a sideline Henry Fromm in 1938 bought a few good quality breeding mink. In 1946 the company produced 24,000 mink pelts and had 11,500 breeders. In seven years the hobby of Henry Fromm had made Fromms the largest mink farm in the world.

His responsibilities as president of Fromm Brothers did not keep Edward Fromm from taking an ac-

tive part in Marathon County and Wisconsin affairs. He served as a co-chairman of the Wisconsin Council for Local History Education Committee, and he was a member of the Merrill and Wausau chambers of commerce. He served as chairman of the Merrill School Board, and was instrumental in consolidating the Maple Grove School of Hamburg into the Merrill area public school system. He was a benefactor of the Maple Grove School for many years.

As president of the Marathon County Library Board, he was the first library trustee to be cited by the State Library Association. He served for several years as a member of the Board of Curators of the State Historical Society and as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Wisconsin Council for Local History. He was one of the founders of the Marathon County Historical Society.

He attended the Marathon County Training School in 1906 and graduated from Stevens Point Normal School in 1909.

Mr. Fromm was a member of St. John Lutheran Church, Hamburg, and an associate member of Lake Wales Lutheran Church, Lake Wales, Fla. In 1977, as president of Fromm Brothers Inc., he presented St. John's Lutheran Church, Hamburg, with the land on which the church is now located.

A veteran of World War I, he served with the Army in radio communications.

He was born March 6, 1890, in Hamburg, son of Frederick and Alwina Fromm. He married Alice Frederick on June 25, 1919, in the town of Berlin. She died July 21, 1982. The couple also maintained a home in Lake Wales, Fla., which Mr. Fromm still owned at the time of his death.

Services will be at 10:30 a.m. Monday, at St. John's Lutheran Church, Hamburg. The Rev. Mark A. Homp of St. John's Church, and the Rev. C. J. Cizek of Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Schofield, will officiate. Burial will be in the parish cemetery that was donated to the church by the Fromms.

Friends may call from 5 to 8 p.m. Sunday at the Taylor Funeral Home, Merrill, and at the church on Monday after 9 a.m. There will be a prayer service at the funeral home at 8 p.m. Sunday.

Memorials may be sent to St. John's Lutheran Church, Hamburg.