

Famous fox farm brought in celebrities

Though the wire is rusting away and most of the land had been auctioned off years ago, the history of the Fromm fox farm lives on.

The Mason family has the property in the town of Hamburg that once had the largest fox operation in the U.S. Every year millions of dollars and world-famous people passed through Marathon County because four brothers dreamed big.

The remnants of the fox empire stand as old fences along Highways F, FF and the roads between. The grounds are preserved by the Masons and open to the public, revealing a chronicle of young men with a vision, fantastic luxury and plenty of hard work.

Humble beginnings

The Fromm brothers — Edward, Walter, John and Henry — were bold in their vision of raising foxes, almost arrogant. They swore they would rise from toiling farmers to having everything they wanted. They had such confidence they carved their names and ambitions of a fox empire into the highest points of Rib Mountain twice before they had a single silver fox.

The Fromms actually farmed first before they trapped. They had turned to a locally known crop to provide early funding for the foxes. They were one of the first large producers of ginseng in the region. Long before the shaded beds sat side by side with corn fields, the four brothers were scouting the woods of Hamburg for wild plants. They uprooted them, guided their growth and sold the dried root.

Like any story from a central Wisconsin farm, the obstacles were trees in potential fields and the stones that littered them. Years and steady effort laid the foundation for the farm, but vision and novelty made it successful.

"Foxes aren't any wilder than ginseng," Walter Fromm said in the book *Bright with Silver*, which tells the story of the Fromms.

In the early 1910s, as the brothers struggled to get started they ran the gamut of problems. Their father, Frederick, was opposed to the operation from the start, sellers were obstinate, prices were prohibitive, genetics were



BUILT FOR ROYALTY- The exquisite furnishings of the clubhouse on the former Fromm brothers fox farm illustrate how much money passed through Hamburg.

hazy and one male even ate his potential mate before producing a silver fox with another.

Henry was in charge of managing the foxes. He often stayed close to them overnight, but always understood how sensitive they were. He coached four silver foxes into 50 pairs by 1917 and saw the operation bloom.

Meanwhile, their ginseng operation continued to grow and the two together spurred the brothers on. Success came quickly and soon a homestead was sprouting buildings as fast as fox pups and ginseng roots.

A barn went up in 1922 and dual fox houses started appearing all over their land. It became a runaway business for the next 40 years.

'Million dollar foxes'

At its height, the farm spread over 11,000 acres around Hamburg. A second operation had 6,000 acres near Milwaukee.

The brothers sold a "miracle pelt" for \$2,100 to the Marshall Field Company during the Great Depression. Before this, the most they knew of was a pelt going for \$1,200.

The brothers even managed to change the entire focus of the fur industry. As the Fromms' business was growing, buyers wanted dark silver pelts but the

brothers were breeding for bright silver. They took out ads in *Vogue* magazine with Hollywood's most beautiful starlets and persisted on their pelts. Irene Rich, a famous actress from the 1920s and 30s, often sported their furs in advertisements. Public opinion changed, and the Fromms found their product in great demand.

New York City buyers began referring to their silvers as "million dollar foxes" because the Fromms received a \$1.3 million check after a 1929 auction.

Tax returns show the brothers were enormously wealthy before that check was cut. In 1928 each of the four earned \$72,000. That would be more than \$1 million today. This was well before they peaked.

Each coat had a pedigree number because other producers had tried to copy their furs. Shipments were sent out under armed guard.

In 1934 the Fromms headed to the Century of Progress International Exposition, often called the Chicago World's Fair. The Fromms won the best booth award by featuring a rotating stage, models with furs and live foxes in the exhibit. Originally they planned to spend \$44,000 on it, but its final cost ended up being more than \$100,000.

In 1931, Henry experimented with mink to expand the farm. In a few years