

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Fri., May 29, 1970

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Silver Fox Worn As Early As 1505

By NEIL A. MATHESON

BACK TO THE STORY of the Black Fox, and later the Silver Fox in this province. I recall that I started this review because I was surprised to learn that the effort to domesticate this type of fox and breed it in captivity was started by Charles Dalton as early as 1874.

Most of the information comes from a column that ran in this paper years ago under the by-line of Lt.-Col. D.A. MacKinnon.

Looking back at the first parts of MacKinnon's reference I find a statement that the Silver Fox has been known to have been worn as early as 1505 and that was at the coronation of Ivan the Terrible of Russia. Colonists who came to this province – then the Isle St. Jean – noticed the quality of the black fox fur on animals trapped by the Indians.

Samuel Holland, the surveyor sent here by the British Government wrote:

“I have never seen such quality black foxes as are found here.”

Previous columns noted some of Dalton's earlier ineffective efforts to breed and raise Black Foxes in captivity, and his arrangement, in 1890 with one Robert Oulton of Little Shemogue, New Brunswick.

Oulton Bred, Ranched Them

MRS. WILLIAM OULTON – she's married to a grandson of Robert Oulton – tells me that the agreement between Dalton and Oulton specified that Oulton should ranch, breed and feed the foxes and Dalton should market them.

Of the partnership experience, Dalton wrote”

“This partnership and friendship continued for 18 years, during which time we never had an unkind word pass between us.”

Oulton believed in large pens, 50 feet by 50 feet. The idea was the larger space caused the foxes to exercise more and thus produce better pelts. “Our foxes on Cherry Island – near Alberton – in natural surroundings in the woods, never failed to breed and they gave us large litters of fine, healthy pups.”

Dalton recalled that “In our Cherry Island days we always selected the darkest color foxes we had for breeding purposes. After several years”, he wrote, “we succeeded in producing an absolutely perfect blue-black pelt, heavily furred.”

Such furs had never before been seen, Dalton wrote of the effort which his partner, Oulton, was responsible for as he did this breeding and selection.

World-Wide Renown

CHERRY ISLAND RANCH pelts obtained world-wide renown and brought the highest prices in London year after year.

In 1905 the Dalton-Oulton combination shipped a pelt from a nine-month old silver fox that brought 350 pounds Sterling, almost \$1,605. It was purchased by a buyer from Paris who resold it through the same auction company a month later for \$2,810.

I've heard much speculation on what might have happened had Island fox breeders of the time not sold any live animals for breeding purposes. Dalton told MacKinnon "The first pair of live foxes we ever sold was to Robert Tuplin, Alberton, P.E.I. in 1900. He paid us \$340 for them."

If readers are startled at the apparently low price, so am I. If the MacKinnon column was correct at that stage, the price was unbelievably low. The only reason I can think of is that the breeding bug had not really bitten Island fox fanciers at that time.

The situation had changed greatly some 13 years later. MacKinnon wrote: "As word got around about the tremendous prices being received for silver fox pelts, the price of live foxes kept soaring."

In 1913 the last pair of pups sold in the autumn for \$17,500, and dozens of pairs had changed hands at \$16,000.

"Money poured in from all parts of Canada and the United States and companies by the dozen were formed. The usual practice was for a buyer to purchase option in the spring on a pair of foxes, male and female pups, paying 10 percent down; the balance of 90 percent was to be paid when taking delivery September 1st. If delivery was not taken the 10 percent was forfeited."

Inexhaustible Money Supply

MacKINNON WROTE: "Practically all those options were taken up and there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of money to establish new fox farms. The reason was that companies were paying enormous dividends."

This reminds me that a friend asked if I knew that not all option buyers, not all investors in fox companies, reaped big dividends. Yes, I have heard of many people who lost most of the money they invested. I have no way of judging just how extensive the losses were.

The outbreak of the First Great War in 1914 "put an almost complete stop to the spread of silver fox farming. Prices of breeding stock slipped to one-fifth, and sometimes to one-tenth of previous values. The ranchers were confronted with a situation that was seemingly hopeless." London, the main market at the time, would be largely inactive during the war.

But a move to interest New York buyers in the high class fox fur was successful – Chester McLure, Charlottetown was given the credit for initiating the move.

Island furs came into good demand in a very short time. "A price of \$1,200 was paid for a pure black fox pelt raised by Thomas Metherall, West Cape.

Other prices, some of them better, were paid for other Island fox pelts, some up to \$1,500, and the industry here took on a new lease of life.

At the fall auction in 1918 of C.M. Lampson and Co., London, England, a pelt from the Seal River Company's ranch brought \$1,250 and other silvers brought prices in proportion, MacKinnon wrote.

A KEEN DEMAND was reported from the U.S.A. and from London, England for fox pelts in 1919, but the United States put a 50 percent duty on pelts “and this had a most depressing effect on the industry.”

World production increased greatly and by 1939, prices reached an all-time low and in the spring of 1940.

I know that most people think of the silver fox industry in this province in terms of the fabulous days close to the turn of the century and for a decade later. But I was impressed by what George Callbeck, Summerside, told me when I was researching a story on the history of the industry for the CBC perhaps 10 years ago.

It was the fox, more than anything else, he told me, that helped to tide Island farmers over the days of the Great Depression in the 1930's. Prices were far from fabulous but the industry meant cash in hand for many people through the province who bred and fed foxes, some of them only small pens in the farmers' back yards.

When the history of Island agriculture is written in the future, the story of the fox must be given an important part in it.