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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Island Fox Industry Dates Back To 1867

By NEIL A. MATHESON

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND'S fox industry started as far back as 1867 for the date the first foxes were dug out of the ground with a view to ranching them.

The place was Fox Hill, near North Cape, and the man was a fisherman named Thompson. There are no other details.

My authority is the fox column that the late Lt.-Col. D.A. MacKinnon ran in this paper in former years. The man he was quoting was Charles Dalton who is generally regarded as one of the pioneers in the industry. Indeed this man who was later knighted by the Roman Catholic Church is generally regarded as "The Pioneer" in fox ranching, though a man named Robert Oulton ranks with him because they are partners in the first real honest to goodness fox ranching effort in the province. The place was in Alberton and the home built by Oulton is owned now by his son and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. William R. Oulton.

Dalton's story said the foxes were purchased by Benjamin Haywood of Tignish for about \$16.25 in dollar currency – actually the transaction was in English money at the time.

In An Old Barn

MR. HAYWOOD kept the foxes two years in an old barn, got one litter but could not get the animals to breed successfully again, so he pelted them.

Dalton reports "I bought two pelts from Haywood and sold them to a Halifax buyer, Daniel Cronan, for \$150."

It was then, he said, that he began to think seriously about farming silver foxes. "I came to the conclusion that if one litter could be bred in captivity, they could, with proper care, be bred annually". At least Dalton speculated on that idea.

It was on the Island of Anticosti that he found a pair of black foxes and purchased the pair for \$100. They were medium silver "of good size and perfectly clear color".

But to his surprise and great disappointment, the progeny were all crosses and in those days cross fox pelts sold for only \$12 on the London fur market.

Dalton had trouble getting foxes to produce black pups. He heard of a black fox at Lot 6, P.E.I., bought him for \$50, mated him with a red female and got five red pups. But the immediate cash result was okay. Next spring the male died and Dalton sold his pelt for \$100.

"It was my intention", he said, "to keep a pair of the red pups, but all of them escaped one night." Next fall, he adds "I pelted all of my Anticosti Island foxes."

Looking back on the unsuccessful beginning of what was in reality a tremendously successful career, Dalton recalled in part:

Ten Years Thinking, Planning

“I HAD BEEN 10 years constantly thinking and endeavoring to successfully procure to farm silver – or black foxes as they were then known – in captivity, and with very meager success. But I was not totally discouraged and in 1885 I bought a pair of foxes from John Martin, Lot 40 for \$100. He had dug them out of the ground the previous year but could not get them to breed.”

Dalton observes “This pair of foxes from which I got two litters, was the foundation of the domestic Prince Edward Island Silver Fox.

“I pelted the poorest pups and got about \$150 for the skins, that was then considered a high price.”

Two years later, he says “I bought two pairs of black foxes from Louis Holland of Bedeque and these four, together with three reds, were dug out of a den. I gave him \$300 for the lot.

But Dalton’s troubles were far from over. From these two pairs of silvers, and the silvers he got from Martin, he produced litters for two years. Then, however, the foxes once more stopped breeding.

Kept Animals In His Barn

SEVERAL YEARS AGO in talking to a Dalton next-door neighbor, Austin Handrahan, Norway , he told me of Dalton’s often unsuccessful attempts to breed foxes in his barn.

Getting back to Dalton’s own story, he said he realized then, after the foxes stopped breeding, it was due to the conditions under which they were kept.

That Convinced Him

“THAT CONVINCED ME,” Dalton said, “that if I were to make a success out of silver fox farming I must ranch them as nearly as possible under natural conditions.”

It was in 1890 that he entered into an agreement with Robert Oulton, Little Shemogue, N.B., who came and settled on Cherry Island, near Alberton.

Oulton and Dalton knew each other well, indeed they had been pals on hunting and fishing sorties. I gather Oulton played a big part in the tremendously successful methods that were developed to breed these valuable animals in captivity, but as close to nature as their ingenuity could devise.

This story will be continued in a future column, probably in more than one. Anyone who is interested in the real story of the silver black fox and the boom days from that activity, should cut out this column, along with the ones that will follow in the next week or so.