

Always a newsmaker



BY ROSEMARY CURLEY

Red foxes have always been economically important on the Island, and records of trade in fox skins date back as far as 1789. An early Island missionary traveller, Walter Johnstone, noted that most furs were trapped by the Micmacs, but whites also took part in the little recorded fur trade. In 1861, a government sponsored publication detailed the value of the various fox pelt colour phases; a red might fetch a dozen geese, but a black pelt was worth a horse, sleigh, harness and whip!

Foxes became big news on the Island and abroad when Robert Oulton and Charles Dalton succeeded in breeding foxes in captivity in the 1890's. After several years of experimentation when little was understood of fox genetics, the early ranchers produced foxes which bred true to their colours. Dalton bred a pure black fox to match the demands of the fashion world, and the fancy for heavy silvering did not become popular until several years later. The great fur farming era continued with its ups and downs until the late 1930's, when poor prices and World War II spelled the end of the glory days. During this interval, many Islanders rapidly became rich, while others just as quickly went bankrupt if prices fell.

Ranchers experimented with other animals, but foxes remained king of the ranch. P.E.I. exported breeding stock to the U.S., the USSR, Scandinavia, most European countries, and to our neighbouring provinces. There was a two-way trade though, and foxes were also imported from Alaska, Wyoming and most Canadian provinces, some to escape to the wild and interbreed with our native wild fox.

By 1951 the fox was back in the news as an exploiter of free-ranging chickens and other poultry. Appreciation for its past contributions to the Island economy was replaced in people's minds by a desire to rid the red fox from the province. An initial reward of \$2.00 was offered for its snout and ears, and the bounty stayed in effect until 1964. An average of 1901 foxes per year were turned in for cash.

Back at the ranch.....well, back at the ranch, only a few dedicated ranchers with a special love for foxes stayed in business in the bad times. When fox fur again rose in status in the late '60s, many Islanders renewed their acquaintance with both ranches and wild foxes, essentially the same beast. Trapping became a worthwhile venture, and the number of fox ranches increased quickly from 15 in 1972 to 118 in 1980. Foxes are once again bringing significant amounts of money into the province.

What does the red fox think of all this? The fox is regarded as an intelligent animal and over the centuries, they have survived adversity in many countries, always flourishing in close proximity to man. On P.E.I., the red fox increased its numbers with the clearing of agricultural land, and has counteracted increased trapping pressure by producing larger litters. At present it has few detractors; its economic value is obvious and most of us admit a high aesthetic value of our wild predator king. A final footnote: since the invasion of the coyote to P.E.I., we can expect what has happened elsewhere to occur here. i.e. As coyotes increase, red foxes will decrease. Perhaps the red fox has only begun its battle for survival here, but it's a born survivor and we can expect to see it well into the future.