

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

FOX FARMING FEVER

In the years immediately preceding World War I, Fox Farming Fever spread from Prince Edward Island to Gaspesia.

KEN ANNETT

FOX FARMING FEVER

PREFACE

Like many another Gaspesian lad or lass of the 1930's who sought education beyond their local elementary school, it was necessary for me to travel daily some miles to attend the Gaspé Intermediate School. When winter set in and my bicycle had to be put away, I made my way to school on snowshoes or skis along a woodland path that lay across the hills separating the north and south arms of Gaspé Bay. That path led me past the then deserted fox farms of the Cass family on the north-west arm and the Richmond family on the Basin of the south-west arm. It was evident that these vacant, wire-fenced enclosures with their deserted fox kennels represented a major investment in the era when fox farming fever had spread from its beginnings in Prince Edward Island to distant Gaspesia. Later in time I would have the opportunity to learn of the high hopes and the financial implications of the years of fox farming fever.

ORIGINS

The origins of fox farming that would grip a host of investors in Canada at the turn of the 20th century were centered in the Alberton-Tignish region of Prince Edward Island, starting in the 1880's. Today, the visitor to the Alberton Museum can find there fascinating evidence of the beginnings of fox farming, including press clippings on developments and the local personalities involved. Two Island men, Charles Dalton of Tignish and Robert Oulton of Alberton were involved in the pioneer efforts to select and breed black and silver foxes in captivity. Dalton had observed that such black fox pelts that he trapped, or acquired from Indian trappers, always brought a better price than the more common red fox pelts. He reasoned that a strain of pure black foxes might result from selecting and breeding the black fox pups that were found occasionally in the litters of the native red foxes. He and his Alberton friend, Robert Oulton began secret experiments in the 1880's—beginning with four black fox pups found by an Indian trapper. Their early efforts were not always successful but these pioneers continued to work with persistence and scientific zeal.

ORIGINS (ctd.)

A step forward in successful fox farming occurred about 1890 when a British company perfected and began to manufacture a type of wire mesh that foxes could not cut and so escape. In 1894 the Prince Edward Island pioneers moved their operations to secluded Oulton's Island in Alberton Harbour. There by persistent and scientific application of the laws of breeding they produced more and better black and silver fox pelts and built up breeding stock. It was inevitable that others in the district would become aware of the Dalton-Oulton project but it was remarkable that in the fifteen years from 1894 to 1910 when world records were set on the London, England fur market for Prince Edward Island fox pelts the monopoly in the Tignish-Alberton district was held by only six concerns. By 1913 the cost of a pair of select black foxes had risen to as much as \$35,000. and a veritable "fox farming fever" spread outward from the Island to other maritime provinces and to Gaspesia and other parts of Quebec.

LEGISLATIONQUEBEC

Evidence of this pre-war fox farming fever is relected in the following Act of the Quebec Legislature.

 QUEBEC

 An Act Relating to Foxes and Other Fur-bearing Animals
Kept in Captivity

2 GEO. V, CHAP. 45

(Assented to Dec. 21, 1912)

WHEREAS certain persons in the Province of Quebec have engaged in the business of raising or breeding foxes and other fur-bearing animals kept in captivity;

Whereas it is desirable to encourage this industry, as well because of the diminishing supply of our most valuable furs, as of the rich source of profit which this industry has proved itself to be in some of the sister provinces;

Whereas it is essential to the successful breeding of these animals in captivity that they should be protected from disturbance by strangers, or persons other than the owner or keeper of the said animals;

Therefore, His Majesty, with the advice and consent of the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly of Quebec, enacts as follows:

1. Every one is guilty of an offence and liable to the penalty hereinafter provided who at any time hereafter, in any part of the Province, without the consent of the owner or caretaker of a ranch or enclosure where foxes or other fur-bearing animals are kept in captivity for breeding purposes, shall approach or enter upon the private grounds of the owner or owners of the said animals within a distance of twenty-five yards from the outer fence or enclosure within which the pens or dens of the said animals are located, and upon which said fence or enclosure notices forbidding trespassing on the said premises are kept posted, so as to be plainly discernible at the said distance of not less than twenty-five yards. No offence will be committed, however, by any neighbouring proprietor or occupant who approaches within such distance in the execution of work recognized or imposed by law or by municipal by-laws.

2. Any person convicted of an offence against Section 1 of this Act, shall be liable to a fine not exceeding fifty dollars nor less than five dollars and in default of payment of such fine and the costs to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months nor less than one month.

3. Everyone is guilty of an offence and liable to the penalty hereafter provided who at any time hereafter, in any part of the Province, without the consent of the owner or caretaker of any enclosure within which foxes or other fur-bearing animals are kept for breeding purposes, and on the outer fence of which enclosure are kept posted notices forbidding trespassing on the premises where the said animals are kept, and plainly discernible at a distance of not less than twenty-five yards therefrom, shall pass within the said fence or such enclosure or climb over break or cut through the same for the purposes of entering the said enclosure, or for any other purpose whatever.

4. Any person convicted of an offence against Section 3 of this Act shall be liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars, nor less than fifty dollars and in default of payment of said fine and the costs to a penalty not exceeding six nor less than two months.

5. Any caretaker may kill any dog wandering in the neighbourhood of any enclosure in which foxes or other fur-bearing animals are kept, and there giving tongue or otherwise terrifying such animals, provided, however, that the dog so killed is neither muzzled nor accompanied by the owner or by a person having charge or care of such dog.

6. Every infringement of any of the provisions of this Act is punishable summarily upon prosecution before a justice of the peace having jurisdiction in the district in which the offence was committed.

7. The provisions of Part XV of the Criminal Code respecting summary convictions shall, unless incompatible, apply to all prosecutions brought, tried and decided under this Section.

8. This Act shall come into force on the day of its sanction.



A MATED PAIR, VERY DARK SILVER MALE AND HALF SILVER FEMALE, OCTOBER FUR

LOCATING A
FOX FARM.

By the time the fox farming fever reached Gaspesia, the experimentation and experience of some thirty years was reflected in a scientific literature. The following extracts from one such volume, "FUR FARMING IN CANADA", are typical of the advice offered to prospective fox farmers.

A Woodland Site

A wooded area, not subject to flooding, and where the snow does not pile up in deep drifts in winter, is best adapted for the site of the ranch. The subsoil should be a hardpan to prevent deep burrowing and escape under the fences. Areas which produce a growth of birch, spruce, fir and cedar, with heath plants and blueberries in the open areas, have usually a good turfy cover and a hardpan subsoil near the surface. In such a situation it is easy to erect pens as the fences have only to be extended down to hardpan to prevent the foxes from burrowing under and escaping. A sandy soil and subsoil, on the other hand, while providing good drainage, entails an additional expense, as foxes can burrow to depths of six feet or more. A family of foxes working one behind the other will relay earth out of a sandy hole in a veritable shower. In ordinary loam, the fence is not considered safe unless it extends down a depth of over three feet or is founded on a subsoil of considerable hardness.

Proximity to the dwelling of the keeper is also an important consideration. This is usually accomplished by building the ranch in a woodland lot a few hundred yards distant from the house, or, if the ranch is a considerable distance from the owner's dwelling, by building a house for the keeper. It is not advisable to keep fox pens nearer than ten rods to a dwelling as, particularly during muggy weather, the peculiar and somewhat disagreeable 'foxy' smell is strong and unpleasant.

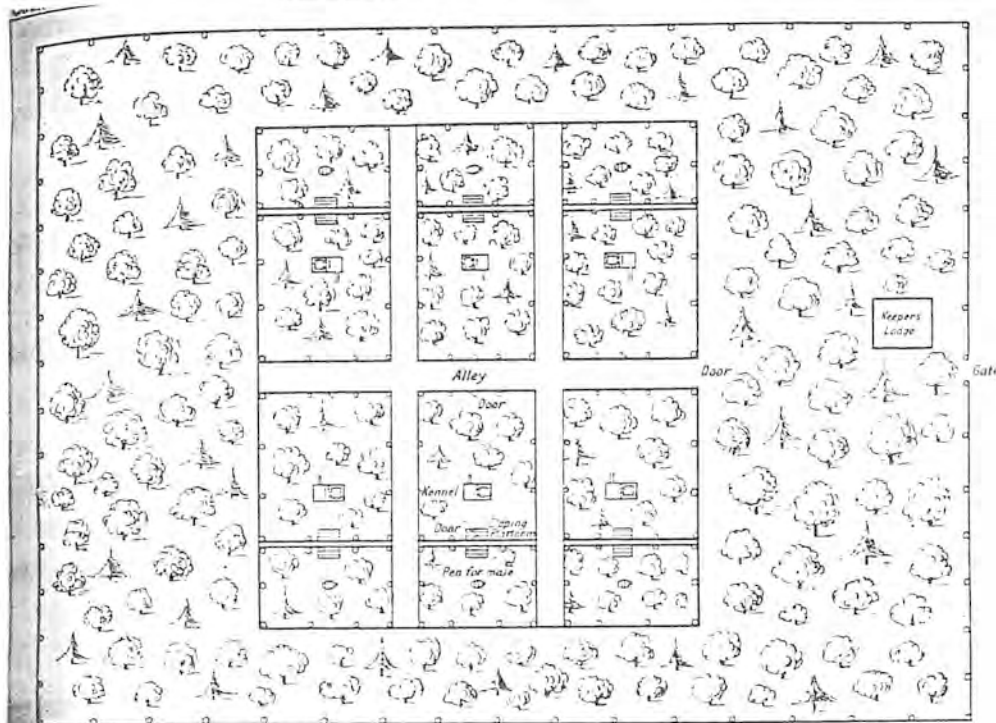
The advantages of a large woodland ranch may be summed up as follows:

1. The outer fence and bush cover protect the foxes from curious sightseers, dogs, cattle and thieves, and give them a sense of being hidden from enemies.
2. The bush cover is especially valuable for nervous foxes to hide in and to provide shade for the fur. They will also sleep contentedly all day under a bush, where it is more healthful than in a nest or a burrow.
3. The outer fence is an additional insurance against escape to the woods. If a fox escapes from the paddock, he can be easily caught in the outer enclosure, or, if the door is left open, he may, of his own accord, go back to his pen at feeding time.
4. The snow does not pile in drifts, but lies level, on wooded areas. Huge drifts necessitate higher fences, or wiring over, to prevent escape. Fences do not need to be more than six or seven feet high if the snow never lies more than one or two feet deep.
5. A ranch in the woods has more equable climatic conditions. It is cooler in summer, less windy in winter, and is warmer for young foxes in the spring. There is less thawing and freezing up of snow to injure the fur. It also affords protection from rain and sleet.

6. The foxes can hide from thieves and could not be captured by a stranger unless the house were broken into when they were shut in their nest. So much noise, however, would be sure to rouse the dog and the watchman.

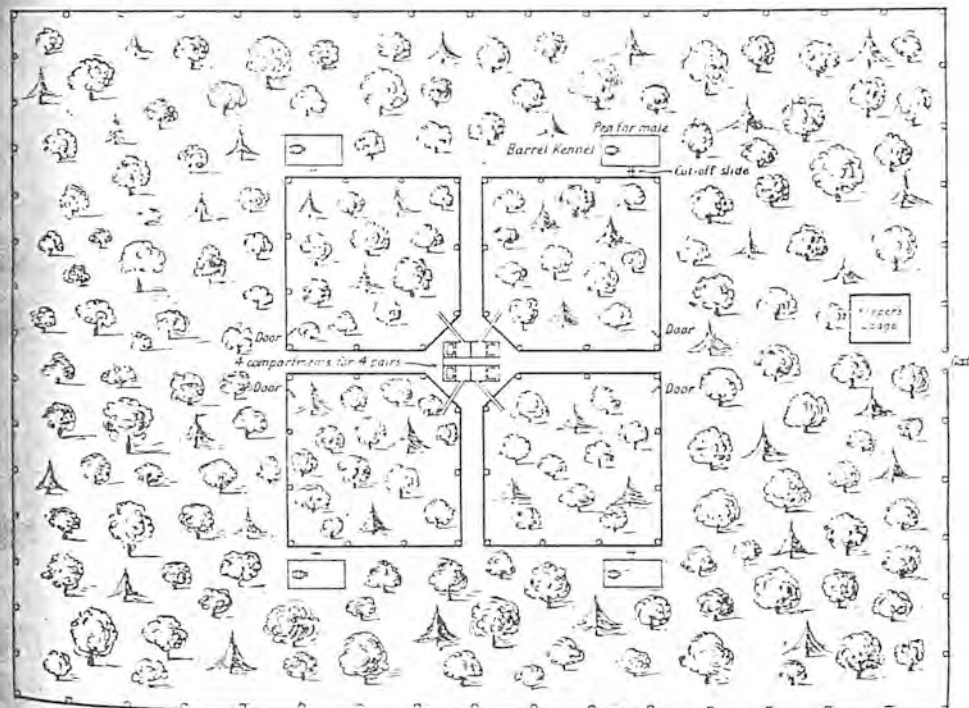
7. The outer enclosure permits of protective measures being taken. The keeper sleeps in a house there. Dogs are kept chained. Traps for thieves are laid, as, *e.g.*, bear traps, burglar alarms, electric shocking devices; and some ranches are lighted with lanterns or electric lights and are equipped with telephones.

8. Large ranches seem to be more successful than smaller ones, because foxes in contiguous pens are company for each other.



THE BEST TYPE OF FOX RANCH

Scale 1 inch = 50 feet



A GOOD TYPE OF FOX RANCH

FOX PENS

The fox farm comprised a number of pens. Experience had shown that it was vitally important that these pens conform to specific criteria.

Construction of Pens The requirements of an ideal pen may be summarized as follows:

1. It should be large enough for foxes to run in at full speed when playing.
2. Part of it should be shaded overhead and it should provide good hiding cover.
3. It should have warm, well-drained, sunny areas in which the young pups may play.
4. Turfy or mossy ground cover is desirable. Leaves, or spruce or pine needles, make a good ground cover. Sand is good, but mud is objectionable.

The smallest pens used by the best ranchers enclose an area of at least 9,000 square feet. One rancher has a highly-valued pair in an enclosure of over 4,000 square feet. The usual size is a pen enclosed by one bale of wire, which is 150 feet long. Thus the area is 37 feet by 37 feet, or 30 feet by 42 feet, or 25 feet by 50 feet. In some cases the last-named dimensions are adopted and a cross fence is used, so that the male is shut in one end and the female in the other during the latter part of the period of gestation and while the pups are young.

Inasmuch as they must be extended into the ground to prevent the foxes from burrowing under them, the paddock fences are harder to build than the exterior. When a solid hardpan exists, the fence may be laid on it, even if it is only one foot from the surface. If the subsoil is light and open, paddocks are not fox-proof unless the fence is buried over four feet. In light soil, additional precautions may be taken by digging the trench wide and by rough-concreting the base a couple of feet inwards from the fence. One rancher, on a sandy area, planned to concrete the whole floor area of his paddocks and cover it with a foot of sand. When it interferes with the drainage, this use of concrete is objectionable.

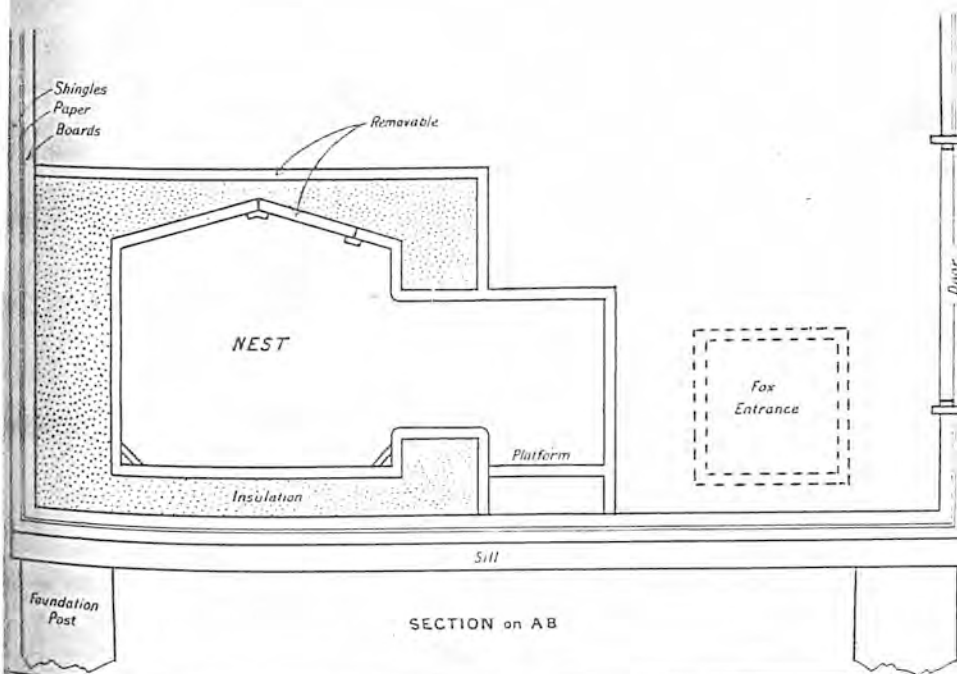
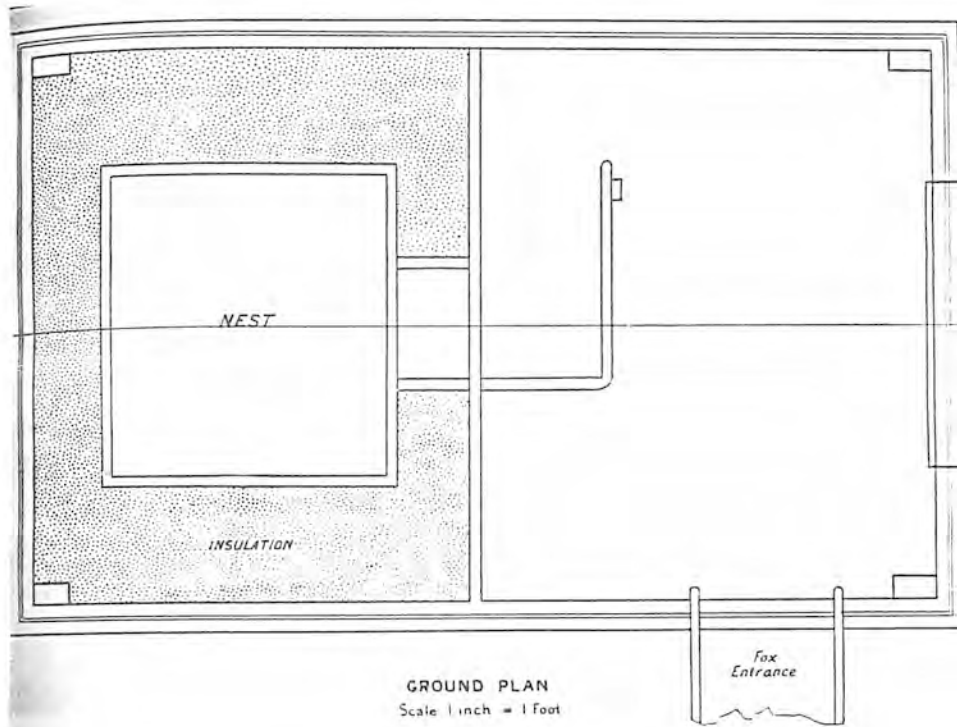
The carpet wire should be used on the paddock fence as well as on the exterior. It prevents the fox from burrowing alongside the fence where digging out is always attempted.



PEN IN THE MAPLE WOODS—SUNNY IN WINTER AND SHADED IN SUMMER

FOX KENNEL

In the earliest days of fox farming experiments the houses or kennels were made of logs, which were buried in the soil to simulate fox burrows in the wild. With time it was found unnecessary to bury the kennels and the plan of the nesting box enclosed within an outer one and insulated from it, evolved, as shown in the sketches below.



FLOOR PLAN AND VERTICAL SECTION OF A FOX KENNEL

THE FEVER
BREAKS

The outbreak of World War I in August, 1914 was to have economic and social consequences ruinous for the fox farming industry. It is interesting to note that those Gaspésians who were witnesses to the sailing from Gaspé Bay in October, 1914 of some thirty-two passenger liners and escort warships of the Royal Navy, bearing some 30,000 Canadian Army troops to Britain, were also witnessing the end of an economic era for fox farmers. As the war dragged on over the next four weary and painful years, more and more of the fox farms became deserted and their owners suffered financial loss. By the time of my school days, only the great wire enclosures and the vacant kennels remained as a reminder of a previous time of high hopes and great expectations.

