The Fox Industry of Prince Edward Island
Fur farming and where it all began…

This program was researched and compiled by Sarah Stresman, museum intern student from Sir Sanford Flemming College, Peterborough, Ontario, 2006.

What’s in this Suitcase?

- A binder outlining the development of the fox fur industry in Prince Edward Island
- Animal furs harvested from small animals raised in captivity

How to use this suitcase

The objective of this outreach suitcase is to give the user a sense of what it would have been like to experience the realities of fur farming in its heyday during the first half of the twentieth century.

As a teaching tool, pages titled Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss accompany the material and relate to the topic of each section.

Additional resources have been listed for anyone wishing to continue learning about this fascinating subject that brought so much wealth and renown to Prince Edward Island.
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Introduction

The story of fox farming in Prince Edward Island is a tale of pioneering spirit, wild successes, great opportunities, and crushing disappointments.

Harvesting fur is by no means a new industry. It was a business venture in Canada as early as the 1600s, and businessmen in the fur industry learned fairly quickly that the more rare the fur, the more it was desired. Fur farms, where animals could be raised in captivity became wildly popular and were viewed as a sure way to make money. Fox ranches, and the industries to support them, popped up all over the Island. Today, although the grandeur of this era has only left behind scattered evidence of its existence, this once great enterprise left a lasting impact, not only on the province, but on the whole world.

“What more picturesque setting could one find for the conception and birth of that wonderful new Industry of fox-farming than is to be found on P.E.I., the Cradle of Canadian Confederation. In summer this emerald isle stands out as a gem upon the silvery sea, and is equalled and rivalled only by its beautiful furry inhabitants which formerly disported themselves in the woods of this wonder paradise, but not gambol in their luxuriant cages. See its fertile fields in summer and its beautiful silver-tipped foxes in autumn, and then understand why the poet calls this tiny bit of earth ‘the island El Dorado, where the silver turns to gold.’”
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European merchants first began to realize the incredible wealth of furs in North America around the year 1600. Samuel de Champlain of France was one of the early explorers to develop the fur trade.

People made fortunes out of selling fur. Companies such as the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North-West Company were formed to gain the maximum benefit of fur-trading. Some of the prominent fur traders were Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who was the first European to reach the Pacific Ocean cross-country, George Simpson, who was made Governor of the Northern Department of the HBC, and Dr. John McLaughlin, who erected forts in Vancouver and Victoria and established the Oregon Territory.

Fur trading became a major part of the North American economy. Animals such as beaver, bear, deer, buffalo, fox, mink, otter and seal were slaughtered for their skins.

Furs became an important component of the luxury fashion industry, which catered to the rich and powerful. The fur coat, which became the most coveted and cherished item in the wardrobe of every woman with an appreciation of fashion, was a Victorian innovation.

Near the end of the nineteenth century the fur-trade was no longer sufficient to meet rising demands of fashion. Fur farms began to appear as a result.

The first fox ranches began on Prince Edward Island after an experiment near Tignish in 1895 resulted in production of a mature litter of foxes with a vein of silver in their fur.

Summerside became the focal point for this “silver rush” on Prince Edward Island during the first half of the twentieth century, and was famous around the world for its association to the industry.
Chapter 1 - Setting the Background

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

How did the fur trade contribute to the establishment of the country of Canada? Would Canada have been the same place without the fur trade?

Using the Internet or the library, trace the history of fur trading. When did people first start to wear fur?

At one point, there were very strict rules as to who could wear certain types of furs or clothing. Are there still those kinds of rules today?

Do a lot of people still wear fur today?

Do you think it's alright for people to wear fur? Why or why not?

What is the difference between fur trading and fur farming?

Why did fur farming become necessary?

Do you think that you could have succeeded at fox farming?
Tignish entrepreneur Charles Dalton began to collect breeding stock from the wild about 1883. Though an accomplished woodsman and somewhat familiar with scientific principles, Dalton drew upon the practical experience of Robert Oulton who had been successful in raising foxes in captivity.

These two men began the first fur farm in 1884, working together on Cherry Island, later become known as Oulton Island, in Alberton Harbour.

Oulton recognized the importance of keeping the foxes in surroundings that resembled their natural environment so they’d feel safe, and to this end he set to work constructing the first fur farm in the isolated woods of his island. It had been observed that female foxes or vixens in the wild would kill their new offspring if they felt threatened.

Oulton and Dalton quickly realized the importance of their venture, and while it became impossible to keep their project a secret; they did manage to keep the techniques secret, and thus controlled a profitable monopoly for years.

When one of their pelts from Cherry Island sold in London for the amazing price of $1807 the men discovered that they could no longer keep the method of raising fox litters or their prized silver foxes from interested parties.

In 1900 Dalton sold a breeding pair of silver foxes to Robert Tuplin for $340, and in partnership with Captain James Gordon, he and Tuplin founded the Island’s second fox farm at Black Banks.

Although Dalton and Oulton were the first to achieve success with fox farming, there were others that had been experimenting with the process for years.

Silas and B.I. Rayner of Kildare had succeeded in raising some silvers from crosses (offspring resulting from mating red and black foxes) around 1898, and had also bought two breeding pairs of silver foxes from Charles Dalton.
Soon Dalton, Oulton, Tuplin, Gordon, and the Raynor men were known as the Big Six Combine. They controlled the industry, which was still centred in western Prince County, and made a verbal contract to keep their fox breeding practices secret, to never sell a live fox, and not to produce too many pelts. In this way they expected to keep prices high.
Section Two – Early Fox Farming in Prince Edward Island

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

What kinds of places would foxes find comfortable? Where have you seen foxes in the wild before?

Why do you think vixens would try to kill their pups if they felt threatened? How did fur farmers overcome this problem?

Consider why Dalton and Oulton tried to keep their new business a secret. Do you think you could keep a secret like they did?

What kind of person do you think made a good fox farmer? Why do you think Oulton and Dalton were so successful?

How would you start a fox farm?
Section Three
The Silver Rush: Expansion of the Industry

The monopoly allowed the members of the Big Six Combine to each make a huge fortune between 1900 and 1910.

Maintaining the monopoly was the key to the Island’s status as the capital of fox farming – something that became more difficult as time went on.

The first person to crack the monopoly was Frank Tuplin of Margate, nephew of Robert Tuplin. In 1910 he sold two pairs of breeding stock to Harry T. Holman for a large residence on Beaver Street in Summerside. The transaction was equivalent to $10,000 in the currency of the day.

But the rush didn’t truly begin until after the pelt sale of that same year, when the Dalton and Oulton pelt harvest of 25 skins claimed a grand total of $34,649.50. That was an immense sum considering that the average Island farm worker made $26.20 a month.

There was no way that the Big Six Combine could hide the fabulous new industry and wealth after that sale. The original members of Big Six were soon joined by hundreds of new fox-farmers.

It is ironic that because of the rush of those dreaming to make fortunes in fur, barely a pelt left the Island over the next few years. The buying and selling of breeding stock fuelled the silver fox fever in PEI. In 1912 one breeder sold 22 pairs of foxes to a syndicate for $250,000.

By 1913 there were more than 3,300 foxes being raised in captivity in Prince Edward Island, and the place was wild with excitement as everyone scrambled for stock options and the money to finance them.

The highest legitimate price that is known for a single silver fox pelt was in 1913 for $4000, although there’s also a story that an English noblewoman once bought a pelt for $3500, then immediately resold it to an Austrian nobleman’s wife for $7000.
Very quickly fox farmers and all those who benefited from this new industry were building expensive homes and buying speedboats and motorcars. It was purported that they even carried thousands of dollars in cash through the streets.

The Silver Black Fox Breeders Association of Prince Edward Island was organized in 1913. That year also saw the publication by the Federal Department of Agriculture of a book by J. Walter Jones titled “Fur Farming in Canada.” Both were indicative of a certain maturity of the fox industry.

By 1920 the industry was worth millions. With the demand high and the number of ranches springing up to meet the demands of the many new fashions that were designed around the silver fox, there arose a need for a nation-wide governing body to make sure that the quality of the product did not decline.

The Canadian National Silver Fox Breeders Association was formed in 1920 and with it came new registration standards and new blood.

The Federal Government was so interested in this new industry that in 1925 it opened an Experimental Fox Ranch in Summerside. This was a partnership between the federal government and the local ranchers, who donated the land for the site and the breeding stock. The institution researched new and innovative ranching techniques to improve the breeding industry.

In 1926, 855 live silver foxes were shipped from Summerside to the United States, with each fox having a retail value of $900. It was the largest and most valuable shipment in the history of Prince Edward Island and is commonly referred to as the ‘Million Dollar Train’.

Starting officially in the 1920s, the Island began holding fox shows. Farmers could enter up to 30 foxes for $5 per animal. Nearly 500 foxes were shown in the first year of the show.

Fox farming helped the farmers of PEI survive the Depression of the 1930s a bit better than farmers throughout the rest of Canada. They were willing to sell fox pelts at reduced prices during the lean years, even though the price of a fox pelt still paid more than any other farm stock.

By the 1930s the fox farming industry was making millions of dollars, and there were hundreds of thousands of foxes in captivity from coast to coast, throughout the United States, and even world-wide.
Section Three – The Silver Rush: Expansion of the Industry

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

How do monopolies work? Why was the Big Six Combine so successful?

If someone offered you $10,000 for something, but you had to break a promise to get it, what would you do?

What would you have bought if you were a member of the Big Six Combine?

Would you want to breed foxes to sell, or breed them for their fur?

What do you think standards in a fox show would be like? If you were a judge responsible for picking the best fox what would you look for?
Section Four
The Brittle End: Declining Demand

Although it seems that no two people can name a specific date for the end of the era, many different things contributed to the decline of the “Silver Age” of fox farming on Prince Edward Island.

One of the main issues was over production. With all the new fox farmers hoping to make an easy fortune, there were far too many pelts on the market to support the high prices of earlier years.

World War Two thoroughly eliminated the European fur market, and the United States became the key market for Canadian furs.

Other things, such as taxation within Canada, import duties to the United States, competition from Scandinavia and the Soviet Union, feed shortages, and floods of inferior Canadian pelts were enough to halt the silver craze in its tracks.

Demands for fur fell, and pelt prices fell with them. In 1948, auction houses were only able to sell roughly 20% of the pelts that were offered.

With less demand and very low prices, the number of fox farmers shrank. In 1946 there were 3,729 ranches with 99,269 foxes and by 1955 there were only 189 ranches and 3,293 animals still in captivity.

Fox pelts became so devalued that many farmers simply let their foxes loose, rather than keep feeding them.

Changing fashions called for a slim appearance. Consequently, the bulky furs gave way to the sleeker furs. Mink and sable were shorthaired, and as early as the 1940s, the Canadian mink industry shot ahead of the fox business and never looked back.
Section Four – The Brittle End: Declining Demand

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

Why do you think fox farming fell prey to over production when there were things like The Silver Black Fox Breeders Association of Prince Edward Island, and The Canadian National Silver Fox Breeders Association that were supposed to prevent things like that from happening?

How do you think World War Two destroyed the European fur market? What were the issues?

Picture yourself living during that period, and dealing with things like the Depression and/or a wartime economy - things like rationing, for example. Would you still have time or money for luxuries?

Do some research to find out what fox farmers did once they decided to get out of the business. What did they do with their foxes and their ranches?

Why do you think mink fur was able to take over the fur fashion industry from the fox?
Section Five
Fox Fort: Logistics of Raising Foxes

Robert Oulton came to realize that foxes didn’t need to be raised in their natural surroundings, and he started experimenting with alternatives.

He and his business partner Charles Dalton began to use enclosures made from wire imported from England.

“Fox Wire” stayed shiny, free of rust, and was very resistant to deterioration. Using such a suitable material for pen construction was an important factor in making fox farming a success in the early days.

Early ranchers tried to keep foxes in large communal enclosures, but this lead to the foxes killing one another, so alternatives had to be found.

Foxes are monogamous by nature, so farmers recognized the benefits of keeping a breeding pair together in a wire pen, which would contain a wooden kennel.

Farmers experimented with different methods of building pens. To prevent foxes from climbing, farmers tried building sidewalls slanting inward or adding an overhang. To prevent burrowing, some farmers dug trenches and buried the wire in the ground, while others made a ground cloth out of the wire mesh.

Most early farms were built in secluded and usually wooded areas. A typical fox farm was usually made up of at least half a dozen wire enclosures measuring approximately 20 feet by 30 feet.

Large fox farms would enclose their fox pens by a perimeter guard fence, a concept that remained in use for years.

Special catch boxes were sometimes placed in corners or along one side of guard fences to trap escaping foxes.

The various methods to prevent escape were not always successful. School boys used to make good pocket money on weekends by offering to re-capture
foxes. The rate per fox was 25 cents, provided that the capture methods wouldn’t harm the fox or damage the precious fur.

Watchtowers were usually built at or near the guard fence and provided concealment for a rancher to view all of the pens without being detected by the foxes.

The guard fence and watchtower were in place not only to keep the foxes in, but also to protect them from dangers beyond the fence.

Large operations would usually include a feed house, workshop, refrigeration plant, laboratory, pelting room, caretaker’s quarters, owner’s home, barn, and garage and incidental storage buildings.

One of the largest examples of a fox farm was the Raoul Reymond farm called “Swissvale” which was in the community of Stratford, formerly called Southport. In 1936 it was the largest on the Island, being able to accommodate over 4000 foxes.


Section Five – Fox Forts: Logistics of Raising Foxes

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

Why do you think a hollow log was first used to domesticate the silver fox? Try to draw, or create somehow, what this must have looked like.

What would cause one fox to kill another fox while they were kept together?

Fox farmers had to find creative ways to prevent foxes from escaping their pens. Can you come up with five ways that would have prevented foxes from getting out?

Imagine yourself as a child trying to recapture escaped foxes. How would you do this without hurting the fox? Remember, 25 cents is riding on your successful capture!
The fox industry required its own equipment. Many Island manufacturers and businessmen were able to profit by making or supplying the tools of the trade.

Early pens for confining the foxes were made from imported cross wire purchased from local hardware stores. Some Island blacksmiths made specially designed tongs used in the capture and handling of the animals.

The Hall Manufacturing Company of Summerside introduced its Runway Redi-made Fox Pen about 1920. This unique cage was sold around the world.

Many ranchers acquired equipment such as a Tattoo Registration Kit, a Pilling Gun, and feeding bowls.

To ensure that the animals were in the best of health, ranchers made regular inspections of their stock. The foxes were treated for worms and ear mites among other things and were subjected to distemper shots during their months of development.

A mature fox would eat about six to eight ounces of food a day – about the same as most cats.

Many fox farmers ground up their own fox feed. It typically contained tripe, chicken livers, junk fish, raw horsemeat, or beef offal. These ingredients would be mixed with water along with a commercially prepared fox meal. Each farmer had his own specific formula.

The International Fox and Animal Food Ltd of Summerside was a producer of fox feeds for many years.

The health of the fox was always of vital importance, and if a vixen didn’t produce milk for her pups, it was an old trick to use a nursing cat as a surrogate mother.
An early method of killing a fox was to crush its chest cavity with human body weight. This was not an easy or humane way to kill the animal. Another method was to inject a poisonous material directly into the chest cavity.

Some ranchers used a battery-operated device imported from Norway to kill their foxes. It was known as the Fox Stunner.

The first stage of pelt preparation was skinning. Machines called “Fleshing Machines” were commonly used for this purpose. The dead fox was attached to a spool, and the machine not only cut the flesh from the pelt but also sucked the fat into a tank.

A common method of cleaning the raw pelt was to put it into a spinning drum filled with either sawdust or corn grit.

To stretch and dry the skins, many farmers made and used narrow wooden boards cut with ventilation shafts.

Grooming combs and brushes were used on the pelts and official registration bands indicated different colour strains.

When live foxes were transported, special cases were used. The early ones were made out of wood and wire.
Section Six – Tools of the Trade

Things to Ponder, Research, and Discuss

Why do you think fox farmers had to have their tools made?

How do you think Island fox farmers came up with the idea of using a mother cat as a surrogate for fox pups?

Would the health of a fox pup be more important to you than being kind to it, even if you had to be cruel?

What kinds of things do your pets eat at home compared to what a fox on a farm would eat? Is it better or worse?

What would be the most humane way to kill an animal? Is there such a thing?

People have skinned and tanned fur for millennia before fox farming. How do you think fox farmers came up with machines that did this for them?

Think about what you now know about foxes, and design a tool or a fox pen that you think would have been necessary and useful for fox farming.
Born in 1835 at Little Shimogue, New Brunswick, Robert Trenholm Oulton was one of the twelve children of Thomas Oulton Jr. and Catherine Taylor.

Oulton never received much formal education, but learned the trade of a seed-farmer and a stockman.

In 1857, at the age of twenty-two, he married Jane Main. They had four children, but unfortunately she died giving birth to twin boys.

The tragic loss of his wife and one of the infants led him to reconsider future prospects. In the summer of 1862, Oulton and his two oldest boys boarded the steamer at Pointe-du-Chene to sail for Prince Edward Island.

The Oultons settled first at Lot 14 on a small 73-acre shore farm rented from shipbuilder James Yeo. It was situated at the mouth of the Grand River overlooking Richmond Bay.

Oulton remarried, his new bride being Ann Brander of New London settlement. Four years later they had put enough money aside to purchase the Richmond Bay farm.

In 1873 the couple sold the farm and moved to Brae Harbour in Lot 9. Oulton resumed farming but also rafted lumber, mostly spruce and juniper, to be brought down the coastline for use in Summerside shipyards.

Brae Harbour and area was a haven for game, abounding with wild fowl, as well as otter, muskrat, and fox.

One of Robert Oulton's more frequent “gunning pals” was Charles Dalton of the Norway Road near Tignish, an Irish farmer and fifteen years younger.

Oulton's hunting expeditions took him overland to the shores of Cascumpec Bay and to the bleak solitude of the sand hills and the woodlands of Lots 5 and 6.
Around 1880 Robert Oulton moved his family again, this time to Cherry Island, located one-half mile from the Alberton wharf. It was 200 acres of woodland that he rented from J. C. Pope until he was able to buy it in 1890.

Oulton continued with farming at the new location, cultivating about 80 acres. He branched out into other areas and succeeded in taming both wild geese and brant in the natural environment of Cherry Island.

He and his friends continued to hunt on his island, running down the wild red fox and selling the animals to “Fox and Hound” Clubs in the United States.

Oulton began experimenting with breeding foxes in an attempt to raise their numbers, but it was his friend Charles Dalton who was the first to consider breeding the animals for a profit. In 1894 Dalton and Oulton entered into a business partnership.

Robert Oulton reaped his share of the profits from the sale of live breeding stock to new ranchers after 1909 but, at the peak of this opulence, he dissolved his business partnership with Dalton and in 1911 moved back to the family homestead at Little Shimogue at the age of 76.

He died there on February 14, 1920, in his eighty-sixth year. He was considered an unpretentious man whose unique fox farming achievements placed him among the pioneers of Island history.
Charles Dalton was born in 1850 at Norway, near Tignish on Prince Edward Island, to Patrick and Mary Dalton. As a young man he was inspired by Ben Haywood, a local man who had managed to raise two red fox pups in a stockade behind his barn.

Dalton began to acquire breeding stock about 1883 and was in his prime when fox farming took off. He was full of ambition and had a natural talent for dealing with the public during his business association with Robert Oulton.

The first skins from black foxes raised to maturity in captivity were marketed by Dalton in 1896, signalling the birth of the "Silver Fox Industry."

Dalton sold his fox holdings in 1914 and was able to retire a millionaire.

In his later years, he established a reputation as a philanthropist. He donated an ambulance to the Red Cross and a building for St. Dunstan's University in Charlottetown and funded the construction of a tuberculosis sanitarium in North Wiltshire and a Normal School in Tignish.

In 1916, in recognition of his many charitable donations, Charles Dalton was knighted by Pope Benedict XV, who named him a Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory.

On November 29, 1930, he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of PEI.

Sir Charles Dalton died while still in office in December of 1933.


**Printed Resources**

**Articles**

"Silver into Gold." Bruce, Harry. Equinox; the Magazine of Canadian Discovery. July/August, 1985, pages 57-68


**Books**

Forester, Joseph E. and Anne D. Silver Fox Odyssey; History of the Canadian Silver Fox Industry. The Canadian Silver Fox Breeders Association with the Assistance of the P.E.I. Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Irwin Printing. Charlottetown, P.E.I., 1982


Fox Tales; A Compilation of the Original “Fox Tales Series.” Prince Edward Island Department of Agriculture, 1986

The Silver Fox Industry. Publicity Department, Canadian National Silver Fox Breeders Association, 1939

Frank, Leo. Silver Fox Farming; the Industrial Marvel of the Twentieth Century. Rosebank Fur Farms, Ltd. Southport, P.E.I. Canada, 1925
Internet Resources

http://www.islandregister.com/foxfarm.html. This page provides a few items about the industry in PEI.

www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/PrinterFriendly.cfm?ArticleId=A0003110. This article provides an explanation about fur farming in Canada, particularly mink and fox.


http://collections.ic.gc.ca/tuberculosis/tbhistory/people/dalton.html. This page provides a profile of Sir Charles Dalton, particularly about his fight against tuberculosis in Canada.

http://news.fws.gov/historic/1915/19151014.pdf. This page is a 1915 bulletin released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the viability of fox farming.

http://collections.ic.gc.ca/chip/english/farming/foxes.htm. This is an article about Island fox farming, especially in the Kensington area.

http://rothesaylivingmuseum.nbed.nb.ca-communities/renforth/foxfarmbw.pdf. This website presents a booklet about silver fox farming in New Brunswick from 1910-1915.

http://www.edu.pe.ca/paro/exhibits/display.asp?foxfarm.1.1. This site provides an on-line exhibit of Island photographs related to fox farming.

http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/PrinceEdwardIslandHarvest/fox_e/foxpast01.html. “Harvests of Prince Edward Island” prepared by the Community Museums Association of PEI includes a section on the silver fox.


http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/hist/hist1_e.html. This site provides a short history of the Canadian fur trade and the Hudson’s Bay Company.

http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/canadianreflections/04-09.asp. This page displays an article written by John Boileau titled “When Fox Was King”