

Fromm brothers are celebrated

Group preserves the family's legacy and memories on its farm

By Ross Pattermann
The Tribune-Phonograph

Nestled in a little corner of Marathon County, in the township of Hamburg, sits a farm.

On this farm buildings of various sizes and colors stand in a haphazard relationship to one another, paint cracked and faded in dried golds and rusted reds.

A log cabin with a low ceiling lies off in the distance. Inside are four bowling alleys, a bar and beautifully crafted fireplaces.

Looking at the structures and quiet, idyllic surroundings, one would never know that years ago, this was a bustling operation and the birthplace of the mighty Fromm Brothers' ginseng and fur empire.

No discussion about the history of Wisconsin can be complete without the story of the Fromm Brothers.

The Fromm Bros. Historical Preservation Society (FBHPS) celebrated this legacy on Saturday, inviting descendants of the Fromms and former employees, to walk the grounds and share stories during their first ever oral history event as a way to preserve the memories of that time.

From humble beginnings, the Fromm Brothers - Walter, Edward, John and Henry - began their operation in 1904 as a pact to breed silver foxes.

After reading an article about a silver fox pelt that went for \$1,200, they decided to get in on the business.

"These four brothers just used what they had, ginseng roots that grew wild, to create a ginseng empire and really revolutionize ginseng growing, just on their own," FBHPS board president Gregory Strasser said.

"The same with the fox and later the mink. They had animals that they knew from seeing in the forest, read an article, and decided we can breed a pelt no one else had."

The Fromm Brothers would go on to develop and pioneer the ginseng and fur trade in central Wisconsin, eventually controlling the monopoly on both products.

"These brothers pioneered market connections in Singapore in the 1920s, and to get the fox operation going, they were selling \$50,000 to \$60,000 worth of ginseng to their contacts to Singapore," board member Keene Winters said.

"What they wanted was the silver fox, which is a mutant strain of the red fox. They bred their pairs, worked very hard, and went to Paris and New York and marketed it."

The Fromms also benefitted from the rise of Hollywood, silent films and fashion magazines.

"One good fortune they have is that they look really gorgeous in black and white photography," Winters said. "They were in the right place at the right time and they had the only breeding population."

As great as their success was, it would take long years of painstaking work to cultivate the wild root into a product suitable for harvest.

They would mortgage their mother's farm, weather two World Wars and a

Great Depression. Through it all they persevered and slowly built their fortune.

As their fortunes rose, so too did the need for more workers and more buildings.

By 1923 the Fromm Brothers added a boarding house and then a dairy barn. The following year a bunk house was built. At its peak the Fromm Brothers employed nearly 1,000 people.

It seemed as though there was always a job that needed doing, and for many in Marathon County, the Hamburg operation was the only reliable place of work.

For Leona Graf, now 94, the Hamburg farm was one of the few places that would hire a teenage girl.

"I was 16 and we lived four miles east of here," Graf said. "My girlfriend and I decided we wanted to get a job."

In the summer of 1940 Graf, along with one hundred other girls, came to the Hamburg operation to pick weeds around the ginseng plants for 10 cents an hour:

"Now there's just three of us left," Graf said during the event. "I met all of these ladies, which I hadn't known before, and we worked ten hours a day."

By 1958, the farm was paying the princely sum of \$1.50 an hour - at a time when the minimum wage was \$1.00.

For LaVern Brunow who worked on the farm from 1958-59, being back brought him many memories.

"I worked all summer and then towards fall, I came back and we were making pelts, and after that was done I got laid off," Brunow said.

"There was quite a bunch of friends I worked with," Brunow recalled. "I was working on the fleshing machine... and once in a while you'd lose a tail and the girls would have to sew the tails back on."

LaVern was joined by his wife, Lorraine, who also worked on the farm. She marvelled at the buildings and all the hard work that has gone into restoring their interiors.

"I enjoy seeing all the different things and reminiscing about the places and buildings," Mrs. Brunow said. "I never really got to know all these buildings at the time I worked here."

"It impresses me," she said. "I enjoy old things and I'm glad that they are trying to preserve this. I think it's very good people are learning about this part of our history."

The farm continued to operate well into the '70s and '80s. Gay Mootz worked on the farm during and after her school days and was among the last of the employees to work on the farm, and she looked back on her time in Hamburg fondly.

"My parents also worked at this place and they stayed at this place," Mootz said. "So did their friends. People met their spouses here."

"It makes me happy to see people come back here and it's so nice to see the heritage and see people rebuild this place. It's awesome to be able to tour and go back through."

Peter Fromm Wade came to the farm on Saturday to enjoy his connection to the land. Fromm Wade, the grandson of Edward Fromm, spoke about what it



FAMILY PRIDE-Peter Fromm Wade, grandson of founding Fromm brother Edward Fromm, spoke on Saturday about his family and day to day life on the family farm.

meant to come back to his family's ancestral home.

"It always feels good to come here," he said. "It felt good to work here... It was a good place here and I enjoyed it very much."

Fromm Wade came to Hamburg when he was seven, and like his grandfather, set to work at an early age, joining in on the work at 11.

"I started out sweeping floors, scraping paint off buildings, washing fox pans, which was pretty much an all summer project... \$1.25 [an hour] - pretty good for an 11 year old."

"I went to work in the summers and then in the winters, when I wasn't in school. During Christmas time, I was working with the pelts, so there was always something to be done."

Unlike companies today, the environment on the Hamburg farm was more relaxed, Fromm Wade recalls.

"Day to day here was amazing... It was more of a family atmosphere... It was hard work for sure, but I remember the employees having a lot of fun. People liked to stay here and work."

The farm is more than just a place of business for Fromm Wade - it's a place where people built lives while helping to establish one of Wisconsin's chief commercial crops.

Fromm Wade's wife, Carla Jo, echoed these sentiments.

"People all over worked here," she said. "My mother said that her dad brought carrots to feed the foxes and horses. So people from all over had some little tie to this place."

Carla Jo also shared stories of the brothers and how well-liked they were.

"Being married to Peter I get to hear family history stories," she said. "I get to hear people tell him about how outgoing the Fromms were, how nice they were to other people."

"They helped people out. They really cared about people - their employees weren't just part of the business to them, it was a family."

The Hamburg operation eventually shuttered its doors and closed down the silver fox products in the 1980s, but the changes the Fromm Brothers created are still alive today.

Today, the ginseng trade brings in over 20 million dollars, with Wisconsin responsible for 98 percent of all ginseng produced in the United States.

Fromm Labs, which pioneered the vaccine for fox, feline and dog distemper in 1938, can trace its origins to a small red building on the grounds.

Fromm Family Foods continues to create nutritious food for pets everywhere, and new members of the family are busy creating their own legacies.

"The most important thing you learn from studying the Fromms and their history is you learn that failure is a part of success," Strasser said. "When you study the Fromms you're studying part of the drive and entrepreneurial spirit that built our country."

For Strasser, and the FBHPS, Saturday's turnout was validation for all their hard work.

"To see people smile and laugh and reconnect with someone they haven't seen in years and to share the stories - that is why we have this and why we do this."

For Fromm Wade it's easy to understand why so many people came back on Saturday.

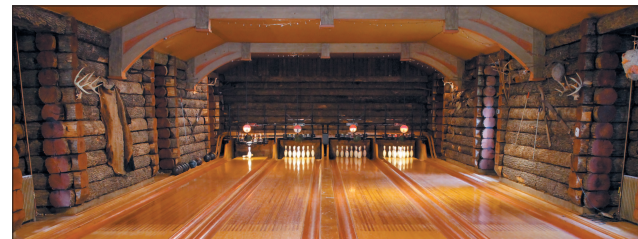
In much the same way he is connected to the farm, so many others feel the same way, and are proud to have been part of something that shaped Wisconsin's identity.

"I knew that growing up that this... was their legacy too - the employees and the family," Fromm Wade said. "Without [the employees] none of this would have happened."

"Them coming back, and wanting to remember their time and remember their friendships, and the people who married and met here, that's normal to me... The fact they've come back here makes sense - this was so much of their life."



HUMBLE ORIGINS - This small, unassuming building is the birthplace of Fromm Labs and the Fromm food line of pet food. From here, Dr. Robert G. Green of the University of Minnesota worked to find a cure to the distemper virus. The Fromms spent one million dollars to develop the vaccine. In 1938, during a distemper outbreak, the vaccine was successfully administered and saved the Fromm fur industry.



RESTORED GLORY-The Fromm Brothers Historical Preservation Society has been working hard since 2010 to preserve the Fromm Brothers legacy and to restore the buildings to their luster and shine, giving visitors a glimpse of the past.