

Fox & Mink Farming; Supplying Fur for the Fashion Industry

*Stories from the "East St. Paul Centennial 1916-2016" book
Submitted by Mayor Shelley Hart*

One of the early industries of East St. Paul was mink and fox farming. Today, only one fox farm tower, a relic of the industry, still stands in our community along Henderson Highway. This tower is in poor condition and may not be around for many more years unless we act quickly and preserve it – and by extension our history.

Fox towers were wood framed, three or four story buildings, sometimes detached, sometimes build on top of another barn-like structure. They were built as a lookout from which the farmers could observe and control the penned animals below. Because these canines will not mate if they think someone is watching, the shy animals could be observed without disturbing their breeding or parenting cycles. Farm hands stayed in the "peeping towers," observing the animals for several days at a time, ready to move the male to another female pen once he had done his duty. Today, breeding is controlled with drugs and artificial insemination.

The fur farming craze was at its height from 1902 to 1920, the years Paris led the fashion trends in Europe. The fur farms supplied mink and fox pelts to the fashion markets because the demand was great and farming was easier and more lucrative than working trap lines.

The price for a pelt was about \$25 each, but could be as high as \$300 to \$400 for a rare mutation such as the white mink, which weighed in at eight to nine pounds. All specialty coloured mink were bred on farms, while the ones trapped in the wild were usually dark brown or black. Breeding stock sold for \$40 a pair and up to \$1800 each for specialty animals. The boom lasted into the 1930's when the stock market crashed and prices fell to \$15 or less a pelt. A few farms still exist, but none provide the monetary profit seen in the early years.

Recently, I sat down and spoke with one of East St. Paul's resident historians, Bill Andrews, to learn more about this industry. He remembers at least four towers in East St. Paul, the one which remains along Henderson Highway, one on Mowat Road south of Hoddinott (built by Frank Buksak), and two towers nears the Birds Hill gravel pit which is now Silver Springs Park.

Some of the mink farmers Mr. Andrews remembers were:

- John Walker – farmed on Mowat Road, east side, in/around the 600-700 block
- Fred Watson – farmed on the property where Country Villas is now located
- Lloyd Smith – farmed on the property just north of Anderson's Greenhouses on the east side of Highway 59
- Les Andrews – farmed on the property just north of Neyedli Drive

- Bill Routley, farmed on property at the far east end of Roseneath Avenue
- Joe Cruse, farmed mink and fox on the Henderson Highway property where the last remaining fox tower is located, and
- Andrew Wasney, who farmed on the property on the north east corner of Hoddinott Road and Raleigh Street

In the June 2017 East St. Paul newsletter, I shared Council's plans to possibly restore and relocate the last known fox tower in our community to a public space where residents and visitors could learn about our history. The feasibility of this historical project is still ongoing and we hope that one day soon a new catchphrase will be common place in East St. Paul; "meet me at the fox tower."

