PART II.—FURS

Section 1.—The Fur Industry*

Fur Trapping.—The fur wealth of Canada is still a very valuable asset as it has been since the early days of settlement. Despite the rapid development of the country and the consequent exhaustion of fur resources in the settled areas, the belt of Northern Canada extending across the Yukon and Northwest Territories, the northern parts of the Prairie Provinces, through northern Ontario and Quebec and into the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland is one of the world's few remaining natural reserves for fine furs. At the same time, conservation measures—including the protection of scarce types by limiting the catch or closing the trapping season completely for a time and the establishment of natural preserves—have also been effective in maintaining the numbers of wild fur bearers. Some species are normally subject to marked fluctuations in numbers from one year to another and the numbers of pelts of these types taken annually is notably affected by these cycles. But probably the most important factor governing the numbers taken of any particular species is the fluctuation in demand and price consequent on changes in fashion. Thus the swing to short-haired furs resulted for some time in the almost total neglect of fox and other long-haired furs. Recently these have shown signs of returning to favour but present demand comes mainly from the trimmings trade wherein price is a major consideration, so that price levels for furs in this class are not yet sufficiently attractive to encourage trappers to concentrate on them.

In recent years, prices for most types of wild furs have not kept pace with rising commodity prices; in fact many varieties are bringing less money than they did immediately prior to World War II and, in areas where the population depends largely for its livelihood upon returns from trapping, a great deal of hardship has been occasioned by the two-way drop in purchasing power. The effect of depressed returns has been to force many trappers to abandon their traplines completely for more rewarding employment, and others have become full-time or part-time wage earners, carrying on their trapping activities on week-ends or off days. Thus, with the exception of natives in the more remote areas, few trappers now operate on a full-time basis and this has led to incomplete coverage of the trapping grounds in many parts of the country.

Fur Farming.—During the past decade there has been almost continual growth in mink ranching in Canada. From a total of 589,352 mink pelts produced on 2,557 farms in 1950—an amount that represented a steady increase from the early 1930's when the industry was in its infancy—production by 1960 rose to 1,204,077 pelts, produced on 1,616 farms. At the same time, this increasing production in Canada was equalled or surpassed in other mink-raising regions, notably the United States and the Scandinavian countries, so that in 1961 estimated world production of mink pelts amounted to approximately 15,000,000 and at the outset of the selling season in December 1961 considerable concern was expressed regarding the ability of the market to absorb this very large quantity. However, the tremendous popularity of mink, demand for which has easily surpassed the demand for any other fur, proved equal to the task and the 1961 crop, like its predecessors, was completely moved at firm prices.

On the other hand, the fox ranching industry in Canada, as elsewhere, has fallen upon disappointing times. Production of 2,034 pelts valued at $20,340 in 1960 contrasted with the production of some 320,000 pelts valued at over $5,000,000 in 1939. Currently, a modest demand exists for silver and other ranched foxes but prices realized do not come close to meeting the cost of production and the market is showing little signs of improving.

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