

783 Wedgewood Drive  
San Jose, CA 95123  
July 10, 2000

Dear Mrs. Pera:

Enclosed is a brief essay relating my memories of the history of Mountain Forest Fur Farms, Inc. I felt compelled to do so at length after reading Elmer Ranta's remarks in your book. My father and a small circle of friends and advisors planned the building and stocking of the fur farm with attention to the risks involved. During the construction of the infra-structure at Turkey Creek Mesa, I would hike from Telluride just to see what was happening. I learned a lot just by asking questions.

I have fond memories of the library located in the old school building during my school years. During the winter months, I always had a couple of books checked out to read before going to bed. My mother, a school teacher, never let my entertainment reading interfere with homework.

I enjoyed talking with you and wish you the best in writing a sequel to "Conversations at 9000 Feet."

Sincerely,



John E. Partanen

## THE FOX FARM

By  
John E. Partanen

After the disastrous avalanches at the Black Bear Mine that destroyed the buildings and aerial tram in April 1926, the "clean-up" lease in which my father, Isak Partanen, was one of the leasees came to an end. The owner of the mine, the Colorado Superior Mining Company, abandoned it. The price of metals did not warrant restoring the buildings.

In the mid 1920's, ladies in the large cities in the eastern part of the country prized the fur coat as a symbol of social stature and wealth. A scarf fashioned from the pelt of the silver fox enjoyed great popularity and sold for several hundred dollars. After considerable study by my father, including trips to Minnesota to consult with fur ranchers, decided to become a fur farmer. He exercised his rights as a World War I veteran to acquire the land by homesteading forty acres on Turkey Creek Mesa about five miles from the town of Telluride. He then formed a corporation named Mountain Forest Fur Farms, Incorporated and sold stock to local residents, many of whom lived in Finn Town and were friends of the Partanen family. Through his contacts with the Minnesota farmers, he hired Baptiste (last name forgotten), a French-Canadian, to supervise the building of the fox pens and a surrounding fence about ten feet in height to isolate the foxes from intruders, human and animal. Men from Finn Town worked on this construction and accepted stock in lieu of pay. They also built an owner's cabin that had a kitchen in the basement to bake a special bread for feeding the foxes, a wood shed, a cabin with an observation tower in the enclosure fence for Baptiste, and hutches for chinchilla rabbits. The rabbits would be used to feed the foxes and chinchillas were chosen because their pelts had a market value.

After the construction was completed, Baptiste returned to Prince Edward Island off the eastern coast of Canada to bring the initial stock of silver foxes by boat and rail to Telluride. My father purchased several pairs of red foxes from fur farmers in Minnesota.

All the stock arrived in good condition in the spring of 1927. The silver foxes thrived in their new environment. A good number of fox pups were born. The red foxes became a problem by digging their way out of the pens and the enclosing fence. To do so they had to chew through chicken wire laid across the bottoms of their pens and for several feet around the enclosing fence. Baptiste reworked their pens by putting several layers of chicken wire below the soil covering and the escapes came to an end.

At the end of the winter of 1928, the farm shipped a good number of prime pelts to fur companies based in Saint Louis, Missouri. The monetary return paid the 1927 and 1928 operating costs. The future looked promising.

In the summer of 1929, my mother, my two sisters (Margaret and Eſther Ann), and I lived in the owner's cabin. Dad spent part of the summer at the Mountain Forest Fur Farms office in town. I remember that summer as a happy time. Baptiste and I became friends and I helped him in the morning cleaning of the fox pens and similar chores at the rabbit hutches. In the evening, we worked together to feed the foxes and rabbits. I felt proud to be doing my part. Afternoons I spent wandering in the forest behind the fox farm enjoying the sense of solitude. Dad and I on weekends hunted ground hogs and cotton tails along the rim of the mesa for meat for the foxes. September came all too soon and the happy wandering came to an end. We moved back to town for the school year.

On October 24, 1929, the Wall Street Stock Market crashed and the Great Depression began. Telluride suffered a hard hit. The Tomboy in 1927 and the Smuggler-Union in 1928 had already shut down. The First National Bank closed its doors after a run on deposits wiped out their cash assets. Mister Charles Waggoner of the Bank of Telluride swindled eastern banks of a large sum of money to cover his depositors. Before the money was distributed, the bank examiners detected his crime and the Telluride Bank was closed in 1929. The population of Telluride declined sharply. My eighth grade class began the 1929 school year with about eighteen students and ended the year with seven. Houses became vacant on every street, some with windows boarded and doors locked, others with doors ajar looking empty and forlorn. Some were in fact just abandoned leaving furniture behind. I remember talk that Telluride might become a ghost town.

Mountain Forest Fur Farms also suffered in the bank closures. Except for a modest deposit in a bank in Montrose that survived the crash, most of the money needed for operations was gone. In mid-January of 1930, the fur trading companies published a new price schedule for all furs. I remember my father telling my mother that the value of a prime silver fox pelt declined from over a hundred dollars to less than sixty and that it would be difficult to keep the fox farm. Then Baptiste came to town to announce that he was going to quit and go back to Canada in the spring. He delivered a crushing blow. My father tried to find another man with knowledge and experience in fox raising and preparing pelts for market. The search failed to find anyone who would relocate to the remote southwestern corner of Colorado. Faced with the depressed fur market and Baptiste's decision to leave, my father and his principal shareholders made the hard decision to declare bankruptcy, liquidate the assets of the fox farm, and go out of business. All the foxes and chinchilla rabbits were killed and their pelts sold at the best price available. Baptiste was paid and given a railroad ticket to Denver. The remaining money was divided among the shareholders at a small fraction of the face value of the stock. To satisfy one disgruntled shareholder, Dad offered him the title to our house at the corner of Oak and Galena with the condition we could stay there until we found a rental. Mountain Forest Fur Farms no longer existed. All my parents had left beyond our personal belongings was a modest postal savings account in my mother's name. They retained title to the homestead. In the face of the hard times then existing, it had no market value. No stockholder wanted it. My father sold his Dodge sedan leaving us afoot and dependent on the RGS railroad for trips out of town. He did keep the tools of his mining engineer profession -- transit, surveying tape, stadia rod, and drafting equipment

My father eventually lost the Turkey Creek property. The County of San Miguel seized it for non-payment of taxes. A promising dream foundered in the hard times of the Great Depression.

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Note: In 1929 I was twelve years old and able to understand what happened to the fox farm. My father answered every question I asked during that heart breaking time after the Wall Street crash. It is also interesting to note that the demand for silver fox pelts

never again reached the level of the mid-1920's. Economic recovery across the nation was slow through the 1930's and the threat of war loomed ahead.