

# Fur Industry Shrinking With No End in Sight

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These are bitter times for those involved in trapping, dressing, making and selling furs. In a harshly symbolic blow to the industry, the Hudson's Bay Company of Canada announced recently that it was closing the last fur salons in its Bay department stores.

The company, which was synonymous with fur for centuries after it was founded in 1670 to pursue the trade under a royal charter, had been confronted by the relentless campaigning of animal rights advocates and plunging demand that began with the 1987 stock market crash.

The decision was a clear signal that even this country has been unable to fend off the sharp pressures that have cut deeply into the fur business elsewhere, including the United States and Western Europe.

The announcement followed the bankruptcy in early January of Northbay Fur Sales, the auction house of the Ontario Trappers' Association, which for 40 years had kicked off an annual round of fur auctions that stretched from New York to Copenhagen to Leningrad, with half a dozen stops in between.

In Montreal, center of a Canadian fur industry that surpassed Manhattan in the early 1980's as the leading fur center in North America, hundreds of jobs have been lost. By some estimates, as many as 20,000 Canadian trappers have quit the business, and many of the 85,000 who remain are barely covering costs.



Credit...The New York Times Archives

"It's certainly not the business it used to be a decade ago," said Barry Agnew, a Hudson's Bay vice president. He and other company executives were unsentimental about cutting their link to the past. They said salons that offered finished mink and fox garments, along with beaver, raccoon and other furs, had become only marginally important to profitability, and the decision was made to clear the space for other wares. The company, which operates four department store chains across Canada with more than 480 stores, sold its fur auction houses in 1987.

Now, with a Canadian recession biting more deeply than the economic downturn in the United States, the industry is confronting a gloomier future. David Sebben, a spokesman for the Fur Trade Association of Canada, predicts that 1.5 million wild animals will be trapped or shot this year, representing a 50 percent decrease from 1987. The number of pelts to be sold from the ranches that account for 90 percent of mink and fox furs, the top end of the market, will decline similarly, he said.

Over all, by Mr. Sebben's estimate, the Canadian industry shrank between 1987 and 1990 to \$800 million (Canadian), or about \$695 million (United States), down 30 percent. And pelt prices set at auctions so far this year suggest that the downward trend may steepen.

At an auction earlier this month in New York, mink pelts averaged \$23, down from \$35 in 1987. Declines for some other furs have been sharper still. To sell coats from overburdened racks, some furriers have cut retail prices by as much as 60 percent from 1987 highs. Optimism, for the Record

For the record, industry spokesmen remain optimistic, saying fur has gone through boom-and-bust cycles before. But some executives acknowledge privately that once-profitable markets in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands may not recover from the onslaught of the animal rights advocates. In December, for instance, Harrods, the landmark London department store, closed its fur salon and shipped many unsold furs to Canada for auction.

Japan is one of the few bright spots, with sales that reached \$1.7 billion last year, only slightly behind the United States, the world's largest market, with sales of \$1.8 billion.

But Canadian animal rights advocates say they are not about to let up the pressure, and predict harder times still for the industry.

"I think the downslide is just going to continue and continue," said Christina Fox, spokesman for the Canadian Anti-Fur Alliance. "It's not going to happen in a couple of years, but people are just becoming more and more aware that you don't have to wear a dead animal for decoration."

The anti-fur alliance is part of a worldwide network of groups that has brought pressure on the fur industry. In Canada, these efforts halted the killing of whitecoat seal pups off the Labrador coast nearly a decade ago, and they have become increasingly sharp-edged. "Get

the feel of fur -- slam your hand in a car door," one poster declared.

The Canadian industry is fighting the animal rights advocates and contends that it can prevail. It has begun an advertising campaign of its own, built around images of fur and fur-trapping as part of the natural cycle. A Canadian Government grant of \$4.3 million is being spent, in part, to develop what Mr. Sebben called "humane traps," some with rubber guards. The aim is to insure that animals held alive in traps suffer as little as possible, and that traps designed to kill do so instantly.

Fur companies long for a return to the mid-1980's, a time when the fur industry in Canada boomed. There were soaring exports of raw and semi-finished pelts and still faster growth in the sales of finished furs, as a generation of Canadian designers shed the stodgy image of the past.

On the strength of a tripling of business in the previous decade, companies that had been the mainstays of the industry expanded, and new ones sprang up in Vancouver, British Columbia; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Toronto, and Montreal. The stock market collapse of 1987 caught trappers, ranchers and manufacturers on an expanding curve. And as fur sales dropped precipitously, anti-fur advocates stepped up their campaign.

By Mr. Sebben's account, the industry took heart last year from "focus groups" of potential buyers who were gathered in cities across Canada and the United States. Among the conclusions taken from these gatherings, the Canadian fur industry spokesman said, was that fur coats continue to convey "an image of warmth and accomplishment" among consumers and that the activities of some animal rights campaigners have prompted a backlash. Replacing the Mirrors

Still, radical moves have been necessary to stave off further bankruptcies. Four times since November, Canadian manufacturers have offered coats at knock-down prices at retail "auctions" in Toronto. In place of the mirrored salons that bolstered the industry's luxury image in the past, the auctions have been staged in a drafty exhibition hall on the Toronto waterfront, with women in jeans and sneakers taking their pick of coats fashioned from pelts of mink, fox, beaver, marten, raccoon, lynx and muskrat.

The auctions have sold more than 6,000 coats, albeit at prices that have made many manufacturers wince. But for sellers seeking hope amid the gloom, the enthusiasm of many buyers was encouraging.

"It's my very first coat; I can't wait to get it on," said Beryl Browne, a 38-year-old nurse, as she waited for the paperwork to be completed on a \$2,070 raccoon and fox coat. The Canadian, born in Antigua, paused, and acknowledged that the threats of animal rights extremists had worried her.

"People say, 'You wear something like that, somebody will throw paint on you,' " she said.  
"That does trouble me. Oh, well, I'll just wear it for special occasions, not for everyday."