OSTRICH FARMING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Ostrich plumes were used for decorative purposes as far back as Ancient Egypt. Originally, the plumes were gathered by killing and plucking wild birds—a procedure that, had practices not changed, may well have led to the extinction of the species.

Farming of ostriches began in South Africa in 1867. In spite of the gloomy predictions of many, the early venture was a pronounced success. The industry grew apace and interest rapidly spread to other countries. It was not long before restrictions and, ultimately, prohibitions were placed upon the export of birds and eggs in an effort to preserve South African dominance in the feather trade.

Before the restrictions were introduced, however, birds had been brought to Australia. In 1873, the Melbourne Acclimatization Society imported some and in 1881 others were brought to Gawler in South Australia. The South Australian government, in an effort to encourage the new industry, offered 5,000 acres of land to the first grower to place 250 birds on a farm. The Gawler enterprise was expanded to become the South Australian Ostrich Company Ltd. and it received the grant, becoming established on the outskirts of Port Augusta. Birds from that farm found their way to a number of locations.

The earliest ostrich farm in New South Wales was established by a Mr. Barracluff on approximately 100 acres at South Head, overlooking the entrance to Sydney Harbour. Just when it was established is, at present, not known but in 1909 it had 84 birds on it. One of them—a bird known as Duke—is reported to have produced plumes up to 27 inches in length, 15 inches across, and "of the purest white." The farm was a popular spot for day trips and picnickers. It was ultimately disposed of in 1925, long after the industry had gone into its decline.

In 1900 a pair of ostriches was acquired by the Hawkesbury Agricultural College and a flock was developed from them. Feathers from there were awarded a Gold Medal at a Franco-British Exhibition at some time prior to 1913. Also, birds from that flock were taken to Queensland in an attempt to establish the industry there.

The most significant ostrich farming enterprise in New South Wales was that of Captain Cairnes and his partner, Mr. Sanderson. They began at Gilgandra in 1905 with six pairs of birds from Port Augusta. By 1907 the flock had increased to 67 birds and a move was made to "Nardoo," 17 miles from Coonamble. By 1913 they had 550 birds on 2,500 acres of the 7,500 acres property. Although the remaining 5,000 acres were devoted to the raising of sheep, greater profits were made from the ostriches than from the sheep—in spite of the fact that the land would support three times as many sheep per acre as ostriches.

Another major undertaking was that of Mr. T. J. Herbert, the Advisory Expert in Ostrich Farming for the New South Wales Department of Agriculture. After spending six years in South Africa
he returned to New South Wales and, with nine birds (four cocks and five hens), he established an ostrich flock at Temora. In 1912 the birds were taken to the Yanco Experiment Farm, where, on 408 acres (108 of which were irrigable), the flock had increased in number to 90 by 1913.

A brief reference appeared in the Illawarra Mercury in February, 1900, to the existence of an ostrich farm in the Ulladulla district, but, at this time, no details of it are known except that “Mr. Hulbert, brother of Mr. Hulbert of Bulli” was the farmer.

The feathers were of best quality when the ostriches reached maturity, which they did at about three years of age. In 1914, the average return was from £7 to £10 per bird, the feathers being graded into a number of classes and, generally, being disposed of through dealers in London. While on a visit to Europe studying ostrich farming, Herbert reported seeing £300,000 worth of feathers at one time in the premises of Messrs. Lewis and Peate, the principal feather brokers in the world.

The feathers were not plucked; they were cut about 2 inches from the base in order to prevent damage to the sockets which could interfere with later feather production. The stumps of the feathers dried and were removed two to three months later. The usual interval between harvestings was about eight to nine months.

The industry flourished in the years preceding World War I but the changes in fashion which took place during the war years and after led to the rapid decline and ultimate demise of the industry in Australia. What happened to the birds in New South Wales is not clear, but the survivors of the South Australian venture were apparently allowed to roam free. It is reported that descendants of those ostriches are to be seen on the fringes of the desert in that state to-day.

—K. V. Mathews.