

## A Preview of the Ostrich Farm

By Robert Dunkelberger

Coming this spring is a new publication from the Columbia County Historical & Genealogical Society, currently titled *William Hile and the Great Columbia County Ostrich Experiment*. It is the story, previously told just in brief over the years, of one of the most unusual ventures to be found anywhere, but especially in a rural county in central Pennsylvania. The following is a very short introduction to an amazing time in our history.

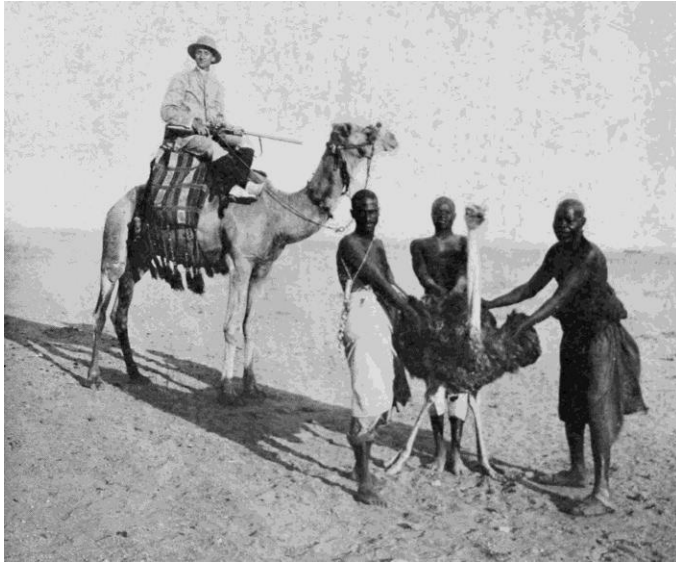
In July 1910 William H. Hile, a native of Northumberland County born in 1869 in Mount Carmel, arrived in Bloomsburg with a remarkable cargo. He had just returned from a safari in Africa and what he brought back were a half dozen ostriches. A born capitalist and wheeler-dealer in the truest sense, Hile was perpetually on the lookout for the next opportunity to score big financially, whether as a store owner, gold miner, stock dealer, or land broker. By 1909, working throughout the American Southwest, his latest venture was the ostrich and the feathers it produced. Women's fashions at the time demanded the plumes for hats and other apparel and there was real money being made.



*William H. Hile, architect and driving force behind the African Ostrich Farm & Feather Company*

At the time all farms in the United States raising ostriches were located in either the Southwest or Florida, but Hile felt that a cold weather farm was viable and would be successful. Columbia County was selected for several reasons. There were personal connections, since his grandfather James Hile had bought land and farmed in Franklin Township and his first cousin James Teple

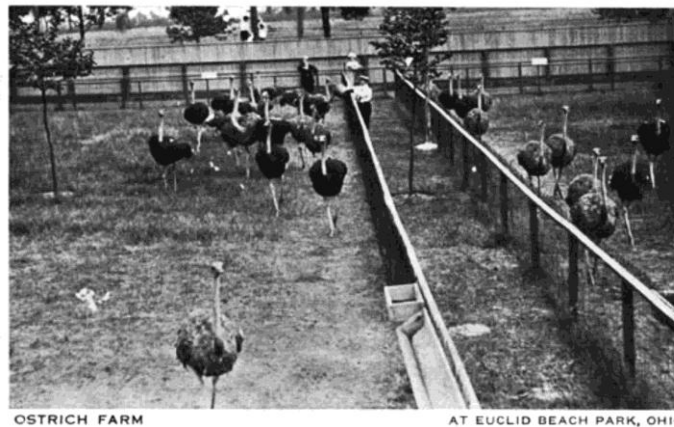
grew up there and became his business partner. In addition, the economic prospects for business in the county in this era were excellent. Products of all types, from carpet to pens to school desks to pottery were all being produced in factories large and small, so why not luxuriant plumes produced from ostrich feathers?



*William Hile in Africa (on camel as the “Great White Hunter”), with one of the ostriches captured on his second expedition, 1911*

Eventually three farms just east of Espy were purchased and the ostriches heavily promoted. In 1911 Hile went back to Africa and returned with even more, then three years later plans were in place to expand to other locations. One was in Harrisburg, where a large farm would both manufacture the plumes and show off the magnificent birds. But the second would extend the fame of the company Hile had

conceived of and created even further into another state. That was Ohio and the location was an amusement area near Cleveland.



OSTRICH FARM

AT EUCLID BEACH PARK, OHIO

*The ostrich pens at Euclid Beach Park, Ohio, 1914*

On January 25, 1914, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* newspaper published an interview with Hile, as he promoted his ostriches for their appearance that summer. What follows is the complete text of the article, along with a few annotations to correct some of the information the reporter was told. Hile was much like George Keller, the Bloomsburg native, art professor, and wild animal trainer. No matter how good or interesting the truth and reality were, a little (or lot of) imaginative storytelling could make it even better. Especially for people who did not know what had actually happened.

**Headline – Tiger-Mauled Hunter will bring Farm of Ostriches to Cleveland: Man who has Battled with Grizzlies and Faced Death in Jungles will continue Experiment U.S. Officials are Watching.**

*An ostrich farm, an experiment in which the U.S. Department of Agriculture is taking an active interest, is to be established at once in Cleveland by W. H. Hile, a big game hunter once described by English newspapers as “the Yankee game poacher who defied three governments and got away with the goods.”*

*A site has been found at Euclid Beach and as soon as the ground has been prepared, Mr. Hile said last night he would bring 20 birds from his farm in Bloomsburg, Pa. “I chose Cleveland as the location for the experiment of breeding ostriches in a northerly latitude for three reasons. First, because I regard Cleveland as the best distributing point for the Ohio trade; second, because of the equable, clean-cut climate and, third, because it is a physiological law in breeding that you must distribute your breeding over a wide area to keep up a high quality of blood.”*

*W. H. Hile has hunted big game from the northern point in Alaska to the most southern point in South America. He has been mauled by tigers in the jungles of Africa **[Tigers live in the wild only in Asia, not Africa]**, he has battled for life with grizzlies in the Rockies, he has faced death in the jungle regions of the Amazon, and has lured the royal maneater from his lair with the rajahs of India. “I have killed every kind of wild game except an elephant and but for bad management I should not have even that exception to lament.”*

*Mr. Hile is president of the African Ostrich Farm & Feather Company. You notice a limp as the hunter walks across the floor and scent a story. “Yes, I got that limp in Victoria Nyanza, in the Mt. Sinai district. I nearly lost my life, but I escaped with the loss of a foot.” Mr. Hile was after a big man-eating tiger. At the moment the tiger made his spring, Mr. Hile slipped over a twig. “He chewed my left foot off all right, but I had shot him dead before he got any further.” **[This statement has so many facts wrong, it is difficult to know where to start. At this point, I will merely say that Hile lost his foot in a hunting accident near Catawissa on November 26, 1909.]***

*How he fooled three governments is a story more germane to the subject of ostrich breeding. When Mr. Hile left German South Africa, with the first batch of ostriches brought to Pennsylvania, the German government found he planned a bigger campaign for importing ostriches to America. The kaiser himself took immediate steps to forestall the venture. All countries interested in ostrich farming in South Africa combined to make further exportation illegal, but before the law became operative Mr. Hile had crossed the water again and was on his way back with 53 birds. The venture nearly came to grief in Algiers, where the steamer put into port. Mr. Hile was guilty of carrying contraband goods and an effort was made to get the birds. “It was only the fact that I was on an English ship and under the protection of the English government that got me through.”*

*Stating that he found fur bearing animals give a better quality of product when bred and located in a northerly latitude [He previously made an unsuccessful attempt to bring Alaskan seals to frolic in a pond near Espy], Mr. Hile says he decided to experiment with ostriches in Pennsylvania. The experiment has proved successful beyond his most sanguine expectations. "The flutes on the feather of the bird raised in a northern latitude are much denser than those of the ostrich reared in a warm climate, the feather is wider and very much longer and instead of getting 45 feathers to a wing, as is the case in South Africa, the Pennsylvania-reared ostrich has a wing of 250 feathers." Mr. Hile says his birds in Pennsylvania were strutting about and eating snow when the thermometer recently stood at 20 degrees below zero. "Why, they were indignant when we tried to pen them up."*

*"Given two birds you can have thousands of ostriches in a few years." The hen lays from 50 to 200 eggs in a season and each bird earns from ten to 40 times value of its keep in the production of feathers besides continually multiplying. [Although the facts on breeding capabilities were true, at this time not one ostrich had been born and successfully raised at the Espy farm.] "As we only take the feathers, it is the only form of livestock breeding where no blood is spilled to obtain profits."*

To learn the more about William Hile's exploits and the fate of his farm and the ostriches, look next year for the most complete story ever written of Hile's life and the African Ostrich Farm & Feather Company. You won't regret it!