

The African Farm and Feather Company

William H. Hile, a native of Columbia County, was a man with a dream and a mission. The dream was to help the "downtrodden masses" of the early 1900's to earn the extra income they needed so badly. His mission, which would carry him to Africa, South American, Europe and the western United States, was to study and then create many cooperatives for the "betterment" of the poor. It was in Africa that he became convinced that the ostrich would be the source of wealth for all who joined the cooperative (by paying one dollar a month – a day's pay). What made him think this enterprise would be successful? At that time, the beautiful ostrich plumes were in such great demand for fashionable ladies' hats and home decoration conversational pieces that in 1909 South African exports of the plumes amounted to \$30,000,000 annually. Feathers were selling for \$20 a pound. Also the hens laid seven to eight inch eggs. One egg was equivalent to 12 to 20 or more chicken eggs. Hotels and restaurants would serve ostrich egg omelettes. Even the shell, if broken carefully in half, sold as home decoration pieces. Ostriches usually matured in six months, and their meat was tender and delicious. One ostrich yielded two hundred pounds of meat or more. With such grand plans for success, William and his shareholders formed the cooperations called, "The African Ostrich Farm and Feather Company." With capitalization of \$1,000,000, the company bought 150 acres where today's Old Berwick Road and Edgar Avenue lie. Full of enthusiasm, William traveled to sunny, sandy California and Arizona where he attempted to sell shares in his cooperative venture – no one was interested.

Back in Columbia County in Espy, he found backers. Hile erected a large plant for breeding and care of the ostriches. To provide warmth and comfort in the nesting pens for the tropic birds from the Nubian Desert, steam pipes were buried in the ground and covered with sand. Hile built a feather house and opened an ostrich plume outlet in Bloomsburg. Hile imported forty expensive breeding ostriches from Africa. To finish stocking the farm, he also bought thoroughbred Belgian draft horses, Guernsey cattle and Berkshire hogs.

When all was ready, Hile invited the public to visit and invest – and they did. Excursion by train from Scranton, Sunbury, Williamsport and nearby communities became very popular. For the admission price of twenty-five cents, the viewers saw the beautiful birds in the exhibition years. Hile explained that each male had a number of females in his family, and that his mates laid their eggs in a huge common nest made in the sand. During the day, the females took turns sitting on the nest; but at night, the mighty male stayed on the nest and guarded it well.

Visitors could see the stanchions where workers placed the birds to clip their plumes. Handlers had to take great care to fend off the infuriated bird with a long iron rod fitted with a wishbone or u-shaped rod opening at the end of the bar. The people were told one blow from the powerful ostrich leg could kill a horse. If the handler could not control the angry bird, his only chance was to roll to the gate before the ostrich reached him. The ostriches could run up to forty miles an hour! Handlers warned the visitors not to wear shiny jewelry, eye glasses, or buttons as the ostrich might try to eat these objects.

All seemed to be going well for the cooperation when trouble struck. The proprietors were unable to hatch a single chick in this cold climate. Time and time again, they failed. A local barber who had considerable success in hatching turkey, goose, and duck eggs tried his hand at the ostrich eggs. After months of experimenting, the barber hatched 42 chicks. The proprietors were elated, but the barber would not divulge his secret! After an attempt was made to break into the barber's basement, the angry barber vowed he would never tell his secrets, and he didn't.

To make matters worse, within a few years ladies' hats no longer featured plumed feathers, the public became apathetic toward buying the stock, and the profitable train excursion dwindled. Under these circumstances, bills began to accumulate. The flock of thirty to forty mature birds dropped to two. A Bloomsburg restaurant owner brought the last two birds for \$25. The couple grew fond of the smaller hen and named her "babe." She became quite a pet and laid eggs at regular intervals. The restaurant served them as omelets. However Babe's fate was sealed when she was declared a health menace and butchered. We are not sure what happened to William H. Hile, but many copies of his novel called *The Ostrich* (published in 1912 and subtitled *For the Defense*) can still to be found in Columbia County.

Sources:

Ted Fenstermaker, "Ostrich Farm Sounded Like a Good Idea," Edward T. DeVoe, "Articles from PA Farmer of June 28, 1952;" "Columbia County Ostrich Farm of Sixty Years Ago;" "The Ostrich Farm was William Hile's Dream," Ted Fenstermaker, and Letters written by William H. Hile.

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