

# Ferretting out ferret farmer is farming fun



The Path Valley Farm of Chuck and Fox Morton also features Nubian goats bred for showing. In background amidst isolated pasture are ferret breeding pens.

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN

WILLOW HILL — The county and the man it's named after might both be considered enigmas.

Ben Franklin, likely the most diversified intellectual at the time of the birth of this nation, achieved his goals in the most practical and often earthy ways.

For example, while serving as an ambassador abroad, he collected many seeds to send back to the founding nation. Often, courtly ladies seeking his favor would smuggle the seeds off the gentleman farms of their husbands and this helped found the dawning nation's agriculture.

In 1784, Pennsylvania honored its most prominent resident by naming a county after him. Franklin County lies in the extreme southcentral part of the state on the Maryland border.

Although within a short distance of numerous metropolitan centers, Franklin is largely rural in nature.

One of the most picturesque sections is the extreme northern Path Valley, whose only blot inflicted by civilization is the Turnpike which slices through it.

Otherwise, it's a peaceful valley of small, sometimes specialized, farmers, including a settlement of about 40 Amish.

It is a fitting place that one of the most unique agricultural enterprises in the state should be located.

The livestock enterprise is that of ferret farmers Chuck and Fox Morton, who operate the Path Valley Farm.

The Mortons operate the third largest ferret breeding farm in the nation, presently having about 400 animals.

"This number fluctuates up and down, depending on litter sizes and our commercial sales," Morton explains.

Litters can range from one to 22 and averages close to seven — the number of teats on the female.

While the word "ferret" likely brings to mind a wild animal, they actually are one of the oldest domestic animals. It is believed they were first domesticated by the Egyptians at least 3,000 years ago.

Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria of England both had pet ferrets.

"Domestic ferrets were first

introduced to this country in the late-1800's," Morton explains.

"A going business at that time was the ferretmeister who went from farm to farm and rented-out his animals who drove rats and other rodents from their burrows so that the terriers could finish them off."

In fact, many royalty kept them for the same reason. They're about the best mousers and ratters in the world.

"Although they're the natural enemy of rodents," Fox Morton explains, "they make some of the best and most trustworthy pets."

"They live to 10 or 11 years, but never lose their inborn playfulness, which resembles that of a kitten. They have an insatiable curiosity and become extremely affectionate."

Probably, the best description of a ferret ever written was calling it an animated piece of elastic, a furry pretzel come to life, a warm and cuddly slinky toy.

The small, slender, winsome creatures are at least triple jointed.

Nearly two feet long, about four inches high and weighing about two pounds, the descendants of an Eurasian weasel are able to turn around in a burrow just two and one half inches wide.

Is it any wonder they can run rodents out of their holes?

And it's from this ability that the ferret's archaic and ill-deserved reputation as a rabbit hunter has developed. At one time, they were used for this purpose, but they've become so domesticated they likely couldn't survive in the wild if they had to.

Because of this old-fashioned reputation and Pennsylvania laws that are just about as Victorian, ferrets, as pets, are strictly controlled in the Commonwealth by the State Game Commission.

The Mortons, who also breed Nubian goats and maintain a rabbit breeding operation on a neighboring farm, are among the



Ferrets romp all over Fox Morton. The little, domestic animals and make playful, affectionate pets.

few self-taught ferret experts in the nation.

They're also filled with historical anecdotes about the ferrets.

The ferret was among the most patriotic of animals in World War II. Due to their burrowing and twisting agility and trainability, ferrets were used to wire B-29 airplane wings. And as early as World War I, they helped in underground wiring in such places as St. Louis.

Like all livestock enterprises, ferret raising has its pitfalls.

"They're extremely sensitive and touchy at birthing," Morton explains, "and the first eight weeks is a critical time."

But as pets, they appear to be ideal, even if unusual. They're house-trained by the mother at about three weeks and will eat mostly dry cat food, plus a couple drops of Linacone.

Actually, there's a wild species of the ferret indigenous to North America. It's the black-footed ferret, which wasn't identified until 1851 by Audubon. It is now on the endangered species list and should not be confused with the domestic European variety.

And the little animal also added a word to the English language. Because of its burrowing navigational ability, to ferret out has become a descriptive verb.



Natural burrowing animal, ferrets will seek any confined space into which they can crawl.