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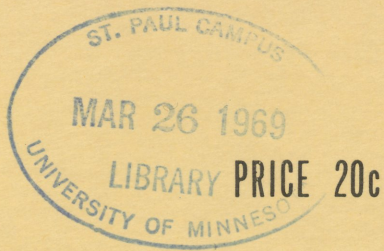
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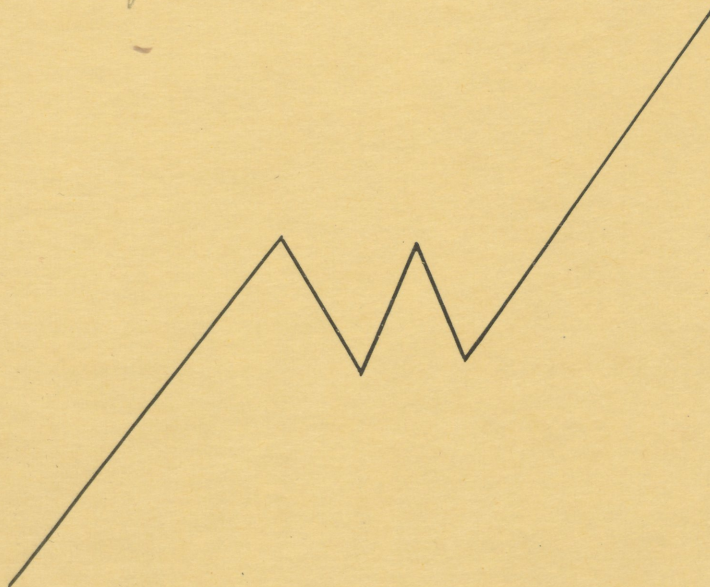
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## REQUIREMENTS FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Articles in the field of agricultural economics, suitable for publication in the journal, will be welcomed.

Articles should have a maximum length of 10 folio pages (including tables, graphs, etc.), typed in double spacing. Contributions, in the language preferred by the writer, should be submitted in triplicate to the Editor, c.o. Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Pretoria, and should reach him at least one month prior to date of publication.

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# Ostrich Farming in South Africa\*

by

A.J. BEYLEVELD

The ostrich is found in all the drier parts of Africa and Arabia and it was known in biblical times. In Leviticus and the Book of Job ostriches are mentioned. Ostrich plumes obtained from wild birds have been used for ornamentation for thousands of years and up to 1865 plumes from wild birds were also exported from South Africa.

Ostrich farming was started between the years 1857 and 1860 by catching wild birds and keeping them in camps and paddocks. Feathers were in great demand and from £20 to £30 was paid for the plumage of a bird. In hunting birds only one crop of feathers can naturally be obtained while birds in captivity can be plucked repeatedly.

In 1900 the value of ostrich feathers exported was £876,801, in 1910 £2,272,846 and in 1913 £2,953,587. After wool, ostrich feathers were the most important agricultural export - 1912 wool £4,780,594 and ostrich feathers £2,609,638. In 1913 there were 776,313 birds in "captivity" in the Cape Province. The birds cannot be tamed like horses or cattle and it is probably more correct to state that they were kept in captivity although they might roam in a camp of 100 acres or more.

To improve the quality of the plumes birds were imported on various occasions from North Africa, of which the first arrived in 1876. During 1912 the Government of South Africa sent an expedition to

Northern Nigeria and the French Sudan and the expedition returned to Cape Town with 140 birds. Meanwhile the high prices for plumes interested farmers in other countries. Birds were imported into Australia and the United States of America, as well as other countries. In 1913 it was reported that there were about 10,000 ostriches in the U.S.A. mainly in Arizona and California.

During 1912 the boom in ostrich feathers showed signs of collapsing. A firm in Port Elizabeth considered the enormous increase in supply the main cause for the fall in values. It pointed out that in 1905 the value of feathers exported from South Africa was £1,100,000 and in 1910 £2,250,000.

It mentioned further that feathers had gone out of fashion in America and that country normally took about a third of the supply. Meantime trade was good in Paris, Antwerp and Vienna. At this time the prices per pound in Cape Town for the best plumes were £19 to £28 and in Port Elizabeth for unsorted pluckings of about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  lb £9 to £12. Feathers were graded into 30 different classes and it is not possible to give a representative average price. The average price according to Customs returns declined from 61/4 in 1910 to 9/10 per pound in 1930. During 1930 fewer low-priced feathers were probably exported and the averages would not be strictly comparable.

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\* The writer is indebted to the Klein-Karoo-Landboukoöperasie for assistance in providing material for this article.

After 1913 the number of birds in the Cape Province declined rapidly and in most parts of the Province farmers never showed further interest in ostrich farming. This

also happened in other countries where an industry was being developed.<sup>1)</sup>

#### OSTRICH FARMING IN THE LITTLE KAROO

In this area - Oudtshoorn is located more or less in the centre - farmers reduced their flocks but retained the best birds and continued to farm with ostriches. It is a comparatively dry area, but a fair amount of irrigation water is available and lucerne, which is an excellent green feed for ostriches, grows well. The soil is rich in lime. At present there are about 55,000 birds and a few farmers have as many as a 1,000. An average flock consists of about 300 birds.

During 1947 an auction scheme was introduced for the selling of feathers produced by members of the Co-operative (Klein-Karoo-Landboukoöperasie) and during 1958 complete control was introduced and all producers had to sell through the Co-operative. Control was extended in 1959 to include all ostrich skins and meat intended for sale.

The quantities auctioned and the amounts realised are given in Table 1. At present auctions are usually held 11 times a year and are attended by about 10 buyers.

Prices reported in 1912 and in 1966 are given in Table 2. The 1912 prices are in gold currency and those for 1966 are not. It would be misleading to convert current prices to their gold equivalent and the two different sets of values are therefore given. The present classification does not correspond entirely with that of 1912.

- 1) This historical information was obtained from Volumes III, V and VI, of the Agricultural Journal of the Union of South Africa and from Pamphlet No. 358, Ostrich Farming in the Little Karoo, by D.J. van Z. Smit, published by the Department of Agricultural Technical Services.

TABLE 1 - Ostrich feather auctions, 1947 to 1966

Period	Weight	Amount realised
	lb	R
5/3/47 (first auction)	1,918	10,618
1/11/49-31/10/50	78,498	199,969
1/11/54-31/10/55	56,323	181,992
1/9/59-31/8/60	90,220	309,179
1/9/60-31/8/61	98,856	376,052
1/9/61-31/8/62	103,167	508,196
1/9/62-31/8/63	135,183	656,055
1/9/63-31/8/64	174,187	677,531
1/9/64-31/8/65	200,487	788,297
1/9/65-31/8/66	189,081	924,470

TABLE 2 - Prices of ostrich feathers, 1912 and 1966

	March 1912	1966
	£ per lb	R per lb
Primes	18. 0.0-29.0.0	30.00-40.00
Firsts	12. 0.0-17.10.0	20.00-29.00
Second		
Whites	8. 0.0-10.10.0	8.00-19.00
Bycocks and fancy	2. 0.0- 9. 0.0	2.00- 4.50
Superior		
feminas	10. 0.0-14.10.0	16.00-19.00
First		
feminas	7.10.0-9.10.0	12.00-15.75
Second		
feminas	1.10.0-3.15.0	8.00-11.75
Greys	1.10.0-7. 0.0	3.00- 5.00
Long		
blacks	2.10.0-7. 0.0	2.00- 4.50
Medium		
blacks	2. 0.0-3.10.0	4.60- 6.00
Short		
Blacks	0. 6.0-1. 5.0	6.10- 7.50
Short		
drabs	0. 3.0-0. 7.6	5.00- 6.50
Long		
drabs	2.10.0-3.10.0	3.00- 4.50
Spadonas	0.10.0-3. 0.0	4.00- 8.50

The plumes are used in various ways - on ladies' ensembles and hats, as capes and on theatrical costumes. This demand is naturally always subject to the whims of fashion. Short feathers are used for making dusters, for which there is a good demand. The Co-operative spends about R30,000 a year on advertising.

After complete control was introduced the Co-operative erected a special abattoir for slaughtering ostriches and two butcher shops in which ostrich meat is sold in Oudtshoorn. The number of birds received at the abattoir and the skins delivered by farmers from birds which died or were killed through accidents are shown in Table 3. This is the only abattoir in the world where ostriches are slaughtered and full use made of all parts of the carcass.

TABLE 3 - Ostriches and skins delivered at the abattoir

Year	Birds	Skins	Total
1964	15,253	5,718	20,971
1965	16,870	5,092	22,962
1966	18,325	6,169	24,594

The skins can be damaged as a result of kicks by other birds, sunburn and rough handling, but it is difficult to detect this damage before the skins have been tanned. There is no recognised tannery in South Africa for the tanning of ostrich skins; raw skins are all exported and about 25 per cent are re-imported as tanned leather. The skins are valuable and are used for making various kinds of leather goods - uppers for shoes, document bags, ladies' handbags etc.

Ostrich meat has been consumed from time immemorial; for the Israelites the meat was unclean. The meat from the legs (a leg weighs about 40 lb) is used to make biltong, part is sold fresh and the rest is

used to make various types of sausage. This along with the wings, neck, liver, heart and other parts, is sold in two butcher shops owned by the Co-operative. The biltong is sold to a distributor who distributes it over the entire Republic. The remaining parts of the skeletons and other offal are sterilised and converted into carcass meal.

## PAYMENTS TO FARMERS

A. Feathers - Feathers are delivered to the co-operative by farmers in different classes, catalogued, displayed and sold by Public Auction. Proceeds are paid to farmers within 10 days of the sale.

B. Skins - Wet skins are sorted into four grades, and dry skins and the skins of young birds into five grades. After grading, the skins are washed, treated and stacked, ready to be sold. An advance price which is determined every year, is paid to each owner in accordance with the grading and at the end of the financial year a final payment is made, depending upon the amounts realised on sales. The co-operative establishes its selling prices.

C. Meat - The owner receives an advance payment on the legs of each bird slaughtered.

The income derived from the skins, the various kinds of meat and the carcass meal is pooled and after deducting the advance payments on the skins and legs the balance is paid to suppliers at the end of the financial year.

The Department of Agricultural Technical Services has an experimental farm near Oudtshoorn where research into the control of diseases, feeding, breeding and general management is undertaken.