

Building a Town:

An introductory history of the transient workers of the
Matanuska Valley Colony of 1935.

By James H. Fox

In the past when settlers moved west into the so-called Frontier they built their own homes, whether crude log cabins, sod houses, dug outs, or simple frame houses. Rarely was labor hired to do the work. The settlers built what they needed to survive, what they could afford, and out of what was available. To create a town, a group of settlers often gathered together to build the school, a store, a church, or a post office. At some point, the needs of the community exceeded what its members could do. Businesses or the government built what was needed. A town came into being, grew organically and at the pace the local economy could support. This was the pattern of small towns, religious communes, and gold rush cities.

In 1935, when the U.S. government decided to send 201 families¹ to Palmer – then consisting of a small log roadhouse, a small frame trading post with post office, and a small wooden building used by the railroad – it was not a town, just the three buildings of convenience to the 30 or so families in the area. Not truly a wilderness, but far from a community for the planned 1000 or so new citizens the government was bringing up to farm.

The government planned a colony for this site. It was to be an experiment in socialism, a way to remove these families from relief rolls, a way to increase the population of Alaska, and provide produce for anticipated military bases. It was a massive undertaking done quickly. The plan was created in January of 1935, the families were selected and sent north by April, arrived in May and were expected to be housed by winter's start in late October. The planners of the Matanuska Colony, as it was called, were smart enough to realize that the colonists would not have the skills or time to build their homes. They needed the community built by winter, while the mail and supplies were needed upon arrival. So, in a rare example of community planning, a town was to be created from nothing – in a matter of months – by temporary workers brought in specifically for this project.

While the colonists were being recruited for the Colony, government officials were recruiting men to build the town, and build it quickly – besides building shelter for themselves. Well into the Depression, the Federal government had at hand a ready population of workers: men in transient camps along the west coast of the U.S.

Born out of a desire to rehabilitate homeless, jobless, or otherwise unemployable men, many transient camps were established across the country, but our focus is on those of Washington and

California. They were close at hand. Often these men have been called “CCC men” (Civilian Conservation Corps workers) but they were not. CCC men, camps, and programs were specific and worthy of another essay. The transients were men out of work because of the Depression, bad luck, personal or physical problems, or ready to live the life of a vagabond. The name “transient” for these men replaced the terms “hobo”, “bum”, “indigent”, “loner”, and “unemployed”. Though it was an old, commonly used word, the social workers felt it best embodied what was happening to these men – transitioning from hard times to better times – with the help of the government. The skills of the men ranged from farm hands to office workers, laborers to executives. Regardless, the government’s goal was constructive employment and a boost in each man’s self esteem².

On April 23, 1935, the ship North Star (a Bureau of Indian Affairs vessel) set sail from San Francisco with 118 transient workers and several officials and staff of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (ARRC). The ship, laden with supplies, stopped on its northbound voyage at Ketchikan to load lumber for the temporary tent housing and other buildings to be built by the men prior to the arrival of the colonist families in the Valley. But timing was off. The North Star took longer than expected to travel north. It was still unloading at the Seward dock when another ship, the St. Mihiel, arrived on May 6th with the first group of colonists from Minnesota, as well as about 280 more transient workers. Both groups of transients went on ahead to the Valley while the Minnesota colonists spent four days living on the St. Mihiel, docked at Seward. This allowed the transient men to build the tent “city” for the colonists and a camp for the workers.

Orlando W. Miller, in his definitive book on the colony, describes one newspaper’s account of the transient workers: “...an advance army transforming the valley: the land was one of ‘threats and promises, a wilderness fast yielding to the axes, the tractors, the grit and the determination of America’s jobless come to make Alaska their homeland.’”³ This comment would soon come to be thought of as about the Colonists, further perpetuating the image of destitute families valiantly and single-handedly pioneering homes and farms out of Alaskan wilderness. In reality, few “pioneers” ever had so much help.

The Federal government withheld the bulk of the workers wages, sending the funds to accounts Stateside as a way to encourage and require the men to return home. Still, within a week of their arrival in Alaska, locals saw these men as a threat – taking away summer jobs from Alaskans.⁴ Complaints were made to the ARRC, the legislature and governor in Juneau, and to businessmen in Anchorage. Journalists, officials, and locals were ready to cry foul at any untoward action of these men.

Even the transients begin to voice complaints – about the actual work, disruption to projects, corruption, “agitators”, and troublemakers within the Colony. In June of 1935 thirty-one transients left the project, fed up with conditions. While waiting in Anchorage on their way back south, some expressed interest in staying in Alaska, but the mayor announced that they would not be allowed to – nor were they welcome here. He then requested assurance from the ARRC that this would be the case. There were rumors that another 200 wanted to leave, but couldn’t.

In July, more transient workers were recruited in Seattle and sent up to Palmer to accelerate construction for winter. Bowing to local pressure, 150 Alaskans, supposedly on relief, were hired.⁵ Eventually, the Congressional Record would report that there were 425 workers and 14 administrators and officials to manage and help the 897 colonists by late summer.⁶

What did these men do? First, they built themselves a tent camp with a mess hall, showers, lavatory, bakery and water tower south of present day Palmer. Simultaneously, they started work on a tent camp for the first colonists waiting in Seward on the St. Mihiel. A few roads were improved or created. The community center and over two hundred farm tracts were surveyed in time for the May 23rd drawing for the tracts – immediately after, the other families from Michigan and Wisconsin arrived, so land had to be cleared for more tent camps built throughout the valley. Portable sawmills were set up to cut logs for housing, lumber was unloaded – also for housing and community buildings. More roads were cleared, stumped, and graded to the farm tracts. Through shipping strikes, delayed supplies, deaths in the colony, changes in management, journalistic and government investigations, scandals, and hard work using hand tools, these men accomplished an amazing amount of work.

The best chronology of the work accomplished is from the weekly radio reports to Washington, D.C. A nearly complete collection is in the Luther Hess papers at the University of Fairbanks Archives, as well as in the National Archives and the author’s own personal collection. Orlando Miller condenses many of them in his book. According to the reports, by late October, 1935, 140 homes were enclosed and habitable. Colonists Clair and Margaret Patten always thought they were the last to move from a tent to their house in Thanksgiving week. A winter storm was snapping and tearing the tent. The Pattens grabbed the valuable and the needed, running into their log home. “I didn’t care if it was finished or not,” Margaret recalled. “I knew the tent wasn’t going to last the day.” In 6 months, the workers – with the help of some colonists - built 174 houses.⁷ The reports also noted that the trading post, warehouse, and power plant were finished and in business by August. Other buildings like the train depot, hospital, teachers’ dormitory, and school were almost finished – enough so that a wedding was held in the dorm, and Christmas was celebrated by the community in the gymnasium, its stage finished but the interior walls still bare studding.

With the bulk of the work done on October 22nd just over 400 transients were sent back home Stateside. The Federal government kept its word. About fifty were allowed to stay to work on the

uncompleted community buildings and office staff housing during the winter, still without power tools and in freezing winter temperatures while living in tents. For recreation, there were dances in Matanuska, the new gymnasium, and at colonists' homes as friendships were formed. Trouble happened that summer and in the winter – too much drinking, too much flirting directed at colonists' daughters. A few transients were removed from the Colony and sent home that summer and winter.

With the completion of the Community Center and dedication of the school and hospital in the spring of 1936, the government sent the remaining transient workers home. Or so it was reported. A few stayed, becoming part of the community, some marrying into local families. One man, Ralph Moore, became mayor in the 1950s.

As the decades passed and the Colony was colored with history, journalists, tourists and historians – even many of the colonists – focused on the colonists as pioneers who built their community from scratch. The transients were moved to the back of the story – even those who stayed did not push out. The homesteaders and settlers living in the Valley prior to 1935 who had built their homes and small community by themselves would tell an inquiring historian or sympathetic ear that the Colonists had not done it on their own, that they had hundreds of men to do much of the work – and had received financial credit to buy food and supplies. Not until the 50th anniversary of the colony in 1985 were the Colony workers – the transients, office staff, teachers, doctors and business people – recognized for their invaluable work in creating the colony.

Now, nearly 25 years later, the Palmer Historical Society is organizing another recognition with the listing of these men who, as transient workers, built the colony. It is but the first step in recognizing all the people who have contributed to the history of Palmer, Matanuska, and the Valley – from the colony back into time to the settlers, homesteaders, business people, miners, trappers, railroad men, Russians, traders, and the original inhabitants, the Dena'ina.

For further reading :

“The Frontier in Alaska and the Matanuska Valley Colony” by Orlando W. Miller. 1975, Yale University.

“California Transient Service: Progress and Methods of Approach. August 1933 - April 1935.” June 1935, “The Nomad”: Transient Publication Project, San Francisco, California.

There are many photographs of the Matanuska Colony available for online viewing at Alaska's Digital Archives, <http://vilda.alaska.edu/index.php>. The official photographic album of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corp., consisting of more than 900 images, can be accessed by searching for "ARRC", or the album number "ASL-P270".

Footnotes:

¹ The number of "original" colonists is often quoted as 200. The two criteria used to identify "original" families were:

- 1) chosen from the three states of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin;
- 2) they had to participate in the original drawing for land on May 23, 1935 in Palmer, Alaska.

Using criterion number one, there were 201 families chosen from the three source states. Using the second criteria there are two additional families: First the Stahler family who drove up from Oklahoma to Minnesota seeking to qualify, which they did and were added to the departing group from Minnesota. Second the F.S. Lee family. F. S. Lee had a homestead in the Matanuska Valley prior to the Colony's formation. He happened to be back in Minnesota when the colonists were picked. He applied to be a part of the Colony and was accepted - conditional on his giving up claim to his Valley homestead which he did. However, he had to pay transportation and freight costs for his family and goods from Minnesota to Alaska unlike those chosen by the social workers. He arrived in time to attend the original drawing on May 23rd, his family arriving later on July 16th, 1935.

Thus using these two official criteria, the total number of original colonist families is two hundred and three (203). [See note of 2011 below for new information on the number.]

After that, the only new families admitted to the Colony replaced "original" families who left a tract vacant. These new colonists were called "Replacements." Some Replacements were sons of original families – an Onkka and a McKechnie son for example. Such distinctions between "original" and "Replacement" Colonists originally served as bureaucratic distinctions, later giving way to social distinction. The terms never reflected any kind of valid evaluation of the work or lack of work in building a home, a farm and the community by the so labeled families. There were original Colonists who didn't or couldn't pull their weight in the project – a number left early on before houses were even started – while replacements not only had to pay their travel costs north, a great many went on to establish thriving farms, and to retire in Alaska, their descendants continuing to farm or staying within Alaska.

N.B. 2011 Additional information: June 2011.

I have since discovered that Don Irwin, Manager of the ARRC, was allowed to draw tract #205 (which was later taken over by Harold and Clara Zook within a month or two) at the original drawing on May 23, 1935. So by criterion #2 this would bring the "original" colonist families number to 204.

It is clear that the numbers 201, 203, and 204 can all be "correct" figures when counting colonists – depending on which criteria you use. However, it is my opinion that Don Irwin be excluded from the count as a Manager's Farm was established for him and succeeding managers not long after the May, 1935, drawing.

By excluding Don Irwin the number of "originals" remains at 203 using criteria number two.

Some people come up with 204 families, even without Irwin, by counting the Nelson and Olive Spencer family of Michigan who, while selected, never made the trip up, withdrawing before leaving Michigan. Atwood and Irwin both mistakenly list this family on their lists of "original".

Both also omit the Chancy and Julia Poor family confusing them with the Marion and Esther Poore family. Either Atwood copied Irwin's list or they both copied the same older list, which had misspellings, other errors and omissions, provided by some unknown third party.

² “California Transient Service: Progress and Methods of Approach. August 1933 – April 1935.” June 1935, “The Nomad”: Transient Publication Project, San Francisco, California.

³ “The Frontier in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony.” Orlando W. Miller. 1975, Yale University. p. 78.

⁴ *ibid.* pp. 85-86.

⁵ *ibid.* pp. 79-80.

⁶ “Congressional Record of the 74th Congress” 1935; #74, pt. 9; pp 10,285-286.

⁷ By the end of November, about 40 families had left the project. Ten of the completed houses were empty.

