name “Palmer” in honor of the prominent valley trader. Encouraged by the success of garden vegetables and hay crops produced by early homesteaders and others, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture established an experimental station near Matanuska in 1917 to explore the potential for greater agricultural development in the valley. The railroad encouraged settlers to take up homesteads in the valley. Between 1929 and 1934 railroad representatives recruited some 55 farm families from “the States” to move here.

**Matanuska Colony**

As the “Great Depression” forced destitute farm families onto government relief rolls, the Roosevelt administration began a resettlement program as part of their “New Deal.” In 1935 the largest of these resettlement projects moved 203 young families from rural Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin to the Matanuska Valley. Because of railroad access, available land, good soil and encouraging history of agriculture in the area, the little town of Palmer was chosen to be the cultural and economic center of this new agricultural colony. While the government’s “colony” was short lived, the community grew. The roads, power distribution, telephone system, schools and other social and economic development evidenced today in the Palmer area largely began with that government program.

The Early History of Palmer, Alaska Until 1935

*Moving Forward, Making History*

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The once-great glacier that scoured out a magnificent valley at the head of Alaska’s Cook Inlet has long since melted away to the remnant “Knik” and “Matanuska” glaciers which now feed their melt water rivers flowing through that valley. The city of Palmer nestles at the eastern end of the valley, along the Matanuska River which gives the valley its name.

**Earliest Residents**

Two groups of Athabaskan Natives were the first inhabitants of the valley. The De-na’ina came from the west, across the Alaska Range, and settled the lower valley near Cook Inlet’s Knik Arm. The other group, the Ahtna, migrated down Mata-
nuska River’s upper valley from the Copper River region to the east. In small groups, the enterprising Athabascans moved extensively throughout the area, developing a highly successful culture of subsistence and trade with other regions.

**The Russians**

Evidence suggests that Russian hunters and traders were in the area prior to Captain James Cook’s exploratory voyage that gave the inlet its name in 1778. They traded with seafaring natives for pelts of sea otters and other marine mammals, and with inland peoples for upland furs, copper, fish and other goods. A Russian trading post operated for a time near the confluence of the Knik and Matanuska Rivers several miles southwest of present-day Palmer. While the Russians established settlements on the lower Cook Inlet, there is no evidence they attempted to do so in the Matanuska Valley.

**U.S. Interests**

With the collapse of sea otter populations and the lucrative trade in their fur coinciding with expensive wars and political strife at home, the Russians sold off their claim to Alaska in 1867. The United States paid two cents per acre for that claim to 586,400 square miles of mostly unexplored land.

Interest in fur trading continued after the U.S. took control. The Russian American Trading Company operations were taken over by the Alaska Commercial Company, and other smaller trading companies established themselves over the years around Cook Inlet. Trappers and prospectors were drawn to the area, encouraged by the abundance of game and tantalizing gold flakes in local streams. A network of trails developed throughout the valley, improving and expanding upon those created by the Natives long before.

Significant gold deposits were discovered in 1897 on Willow Creek in the Talkeetna Mountains of the valley’s northern rim. The small town of Knik on the northwest shore of Knik Arm became the supply center for mines that developed from that strike and other gold discoveries further north. At the turn of the century, with a population approaching 500, Knik was the commercial and social center of the valley, where traders provided goods from “Outside” in exchange for furs and gold, and Natives prospered by trading and guiding prospectors and explorers.

One of the prominent valley traders was George W. Palmer who arrived in the area in 1893 and took over operation of the existing Alaska Commercial Co. trading post at Knik. He would subsequently open his own store there, become the postmaster, and enter into numerous other commercial ventures in the area. Palmer observed that the Matanuska River to the east of Knik was an important travel route used by Ahtna Natives.

So, not far from where a town would one day develop and adopt his name, he established an unmanned post on the bank of that river, stocked it with goods, provided a price list, and left it to the honesty of his clientele to conduct the trade. Apparently it was a success for many years. Prospectors found coal as well as gold in the area. The U.S. Navy became interested in the high quality coal deposits of the Matanuska River valley to fuel their Pacific Fleet. As railroad construction passed through the valley in 1914-1915 on its way from Seward to Fairbanks, a branch line was constructed up the Matanuska River to access that coal. The community of “Matanuska” developed at the branch line junction.

A section house and siding were built on the line about five miles north of Matanuska junction and central to numerous homesteads. Soon a fledgling community began to form around a small depot, a store, and in 1917 a post office. Establishment of the post office triggered a need for an official name. Initially called “Warton” it would later adopt the