Moving Forward, Making History

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Structure, was available. Alterations were allowed on the houses and barns as long as the specific budget for each plan was used. This allowance accounts for the many variations seen in the structures.

Supplies arrived haphazardly, and government regulations prohibiting colonists from building their own houses and clearing their own land (the transient workers were hired for that) irked many. Some got busy with friends and began work anyway, finishing their houses before most others. A feat believed impossible by many occurred on October 30, 1935, when the final colonists moved into their homes.

As plans were being formulated for the colony in 1934 and 1935, several valley homesteaders hoped that they would be eligible for the same benefits from the government as the colonists. However, no consideration was given to them in the organization and hard feelings arose between the homesteaders and the colonists. The homesteaders were not allowed credit at the store, nor were they granted low interest loans at the same favorable rates as the colonists.

More than 60% of the original colonists left within a few years. The Government recruited replacement families through 1940 and many found permanent homes in the Valley.

The New Deal in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony is a project of the

The New Deal in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony

Colonists gather to draw tracts of land for their new houses.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a time of severe worldwide economic hardship. On October 29, 1929 the United States stock markets crashed starting the longest, most widespread, and deepest economic downturn of the 20th century. The wealthy lost their worth, the poor lost employment, which came from the wealthy. By 1932 a million farm families were on relief aid and 13 million people were out of work. Thus began the Presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

After the crash of the stock markets, President Roosevelt and his advisors pro-
The New Deal

posed a relocation effort to move desti-
tute Midwestern farmers onto more profit-
able lands. With Alaska’s agricultural po-
tential the Matanuska Valley was selected
in 1934 as a good target for the reloca-
tion effort; the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation
Corporation (A.R.R.C) was created to ad-
minister the project.

To be chosen from the states of Michigan,
Wisconsin, and Minnesota, only “honest-
to-God” farmers, couples between the
ages of 25 and 40 with Scandinavian
backgrounds would be considered. In ex-
change for a $3,000, 30-year loan, each
family would be given a 40-acre tract of
land, a house, a barn, a well, and an out-
building. Those families that chose tracts
with poor soil conditions and hilly land-
scape were given 80 acres. In all 203
families were chosen for the colony.

The families who accepted the challenge
had little time to make up their minds.
Irving Newville gave his wife one hour to
decide. One accepted, Tony and Alys
Vickaryous, along with their two children,
had just two days to pack up and leave.
Larry Vasanoja heard about the project
when he was given the task of selecting
families for it by his supervisor at the
country welfare office in Cloquet, Minne-
sota. He called his neighbors, Loren
McKechine and Virgil Eckert, and once
they had discussed the move with their
wives, all three families joined. Already
on their way to Alaska were 400 transient
laborers from California who were sent
ahead to construct the settlement. They
were chosen for their building skills to
prepare logs, construct roads, erect farm
and community buildings. Unfortunately,
coordination and supply problems often
delayed construction so that many facili-
ties were not ready when the first colo-
nists arrived.

The Journey

On April 26, 1935, the first Minnesota
contingent left St. Paul by train.

Arriving in San Francisco to a warm wel-
come, the Colonists boarded the army
transport ship, the St. Mihiel on May 1st
and docked at Seward on May 6th. The
St. Mihiel returned for the second group
leaving from Seattle and arriving in Sew-
ward two weeks later. In Alaska, both Sew-
ard and Anchorage residents put on
Holiday airs for the new arrivals.

The Colony

Houses had not yet been built, but or-
derly rows of tents along the railroad
tracks awaited the colonists in Palmer.

A colonist draws the number for his tract of land.
Unfortunately not all the tents were ready
in time for the arrival of the second
group, and for a while, some families
had to double up. On May 23rd, the col-
ony men lined up to draw a number from
a cardboard box which would indicate
the tract of land that would be their farm.
By June the families moved into 10 dif-
f erent camps near their tracts until the
houses were completed. In time families
were able to choose one of five floor
plans for their houses, although only one
barn design, a 32’ x 32’ gambrel roof