

Pioneers watch homesteads disappear

by David Foster
Associated Press

Palmer — With a shopping mall down the road and condos sprouting in the old hayfield, the pioneering days of Tony and Alys Vickaryous are over.

They did their part 50 years ago, when they and 200 other Midwestern farm families were

hauled to Alaska as part of the Matanuska Colony Project, one of the Great Depression's most ambitious welfare programs.

Wrestling stumps and plowing fields in the Matanuska Valley, the couple helped create some of Alaska's finest farmland. Now, from a little red house on a corner of their old farm, they're watching it disappear.

Tony, 83, passes time tinkering with his tractors and cutting hay in a field that's soon to become a business park. Alys, 75, tends a blue-ribbon flower garden in the yard, watching traffic stream by on a road where moose once outnumbered cars.

"It's no place to farm no more," grumbles Tony, a wizened man with hours of tales from the old days. "You've got to have a fence six feet high to keep people out of your crops. We never locked our doors before. Now we lock."

The gradual shift from forest to farm to city has become a familiar theme of progress across the American landscape. But here, in the fastest-growing borough in a fast-growing state, the pioneers are still alive, wondering what's become of their frontier.

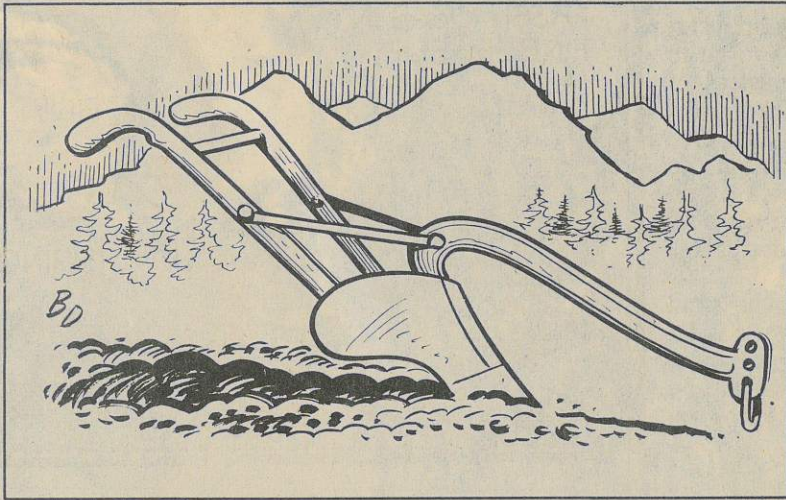
Before the spring of 1935, Tony never gave much thought to Alaska. He was a poor farmer and fisherman in Minnesota's Lake of the Woods country, trying to support a wife and two young children in a seemingly endless depression.

One day, after visiting the county office, he came home to make the announcement that has become a family legend: "Alys, we're going to Alaska." Two weeks later, they went.

To President Roosevelt and his New Deal disciples, the Matanuska Colony must have seemed a stroke of genius. Not only would it help settle the northern territory and keep families off the relief rolls, it would show a down-and-out country that there still was a frontier, where hard-luck men and women could start over by exercising the pioneer spirit that had forged America.

To Alys and Tony Vickaryous, going to Alaska was a case of having nothing to lose. The train dropped them and one ton of household goods at the Matanuska station on May 10, 1935.

They found a broad, forested valley shaped by a glacier that retreated 18,000 years ago into the jagged Chugach Mountains.



It is a fertile valley, where vegetables grow huge under the sun of long summer days. But summer ends quickly, with frost as early as mid-August. In winter, icy winds whip down from the mountains, scouring fields and lifting roofs.

The retreating glacier dumped its load of earth at random, laying gravel deposits next to fertile soil. Colonists got their lands the same way — by chance.

They held a lottery, and Tony won a swamp. He refused it and nearly got booted out of Alaska.

"Washington, D.C. came up here — big shots," he says, still fuming at the thought. "They said if I didn't like it, they'd ship me back to Minnesota. I told them I've been through two depressions, got a wife and two kids, and I'll be here when you're gone." They gave him another parcel.

Alys started making a home in the tent city at Palmer. She remembers women passing one precious frying pan from tent to tent. When workers distributed blankets, Alys spied the ticking they were packed in. She grabbed the whole pile and patched clothes with it for years. "Still got scraps of it," she says proudly.

The colony was not all that planners had hoped for. Bureaucratic bungling delayed homebuilding and land-clearing. Many colonists found Alaska too rough. Within four years, 60 percent of the original colonists had left.

But people like Alys and Tony stuck, as stubborn as stumps. They raised potatoes, tended gardens and started dairy farming. Tony took up fishing to make ends meet, leaving Alys and the children to mind the farm two months each year.

World War II brought more people to Alaska, and times got better. But Tony and Alys still lived by a motto born of the Depression: "Land is security." Scrimping and saving, they expanded their original 80-acre plot to 1,000 acres.

And the settlers passed on a more polished land to their children.

The Vickaryous' daughter, Rose Marie, married a local farm boy, Ray DePriest. Ray's parents sold them a picture-postcard dairy farm by the rushing Matanuska River, and they have been there ever since.

The valley has been kind to Ray and Rose Marie; soon it will become more so. Now that only one of 10 children remains at home, the DePriests plan to sell their 385-acre farm.

At the market price of \$15,000 an acre, they could become millionaires overnight.

grandchildren, "with three more coming."

And each one has a spark of the pioneer spirit, she says. "You could put them anywhere in the country and they'd make it. That's all you can teach them — how to survive."

Heady stuff, in a valley where land once was so plentiful "you couldn't give it away," Mrs. DePriest says.

What happened? Anchorage, 40 miles to the southwest, began to bulge at the seams as it became the service center for a state growing wealthy with North Slope oil. In the early 1970s, people began spilling over into Palmer and neighboring Wasilla.

"For Sale" signs blossomed in the valley's fields. When the DePriests bought their land in 1957, there were 72 dairy farms in the valley. Today there are six.

"I'd like to see my kids farm," Mrs. DePriest says. But probably not in the Matanuska Valley — they'll have to find new frontiers. "The days of farming here are numbered. The economics just aren't there."

Fifty years has whitened Alys' dark brown hair, but it has not dulled her sharp-edged wit or capacity to make do with whatever fortune brings. Some of her old friends still own land, and "they're talking millions." But she wouldn't have that headache for the world, she says.

She has found another security, stronger even than the land. It is blood — four children, 26 grandchildren, and eight great-

Meeting delayed