Pioneers watch homesteads disappear

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 Labor Day. In winter, icy winds whip down from the mountains, scouring fields and lifting roofs.

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

Heddy stuff, in a valley where land once was so plentiful “you couldn’t give it away,” Mrs. DePriest says. “That’s all you can teach them — how to survive.”

by David Foster
Associated Press

Palmer — With a shopping bag, mall down the road and condo operating in the old hayfield, the pioneering days of Tony and Alya 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 Pioneers Project, one of the Great Depression’s most ambitious welfare programs, as mid-August. In the sloping 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 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. Alya, 78, tends a blue-ribbon flower garden in the yard, watching traffic speed by on the road where moose once outnumbered cars.

“It’s no place to farm no more,” grumbles Alya, a thin-haired woman who badgered men 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 farmland has become a familiar theme of progress across the American landscape. But here, in the Pioneers Project, thoroughbred in a fast-growing state, the pioneers are still alive, wandering 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: “Alyas, 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 territories and keep families off the relief rolls, it would show a down-and-out country that still had a frontier. Families of hard-luck men and women could start over by exercising the pioneer spirit that had forged America.

To Alya 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.

The colony was not all that planners had hoped for. Bureaucratic bungling delayed homesteading and land-clearing. Many colonists found Alaska too rough. Within four years, 60 percent of the original colonists had left. But people like Alya 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 Alya 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 Alya still lived by a motto born of the Depression: “Land is security.” Scrimping and saving, they expanded their original 30-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 glacier that flows into Matanuska River, and they have been there ever since.