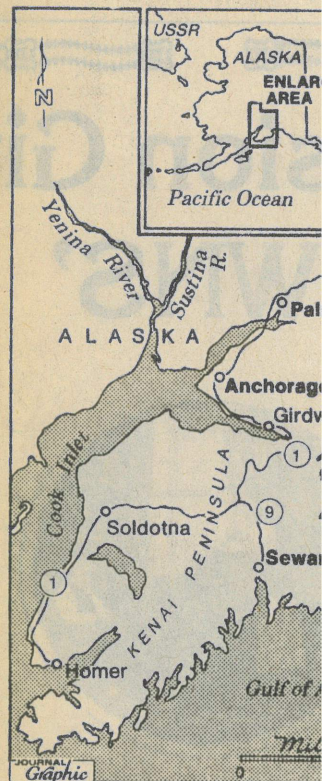




When the Midwestern residents arrived in the Matanuska Valley (left) they were amazed by the surrounding mountains. They lived in tents until new homes were built.



North to Alaska

Colonists from Wisconsin mark 50th year in Matanuska

Special to The Journal

Palmer, Alaska — The year was 1935. Depression-era farm families from the cutover timber region of northern Wisconsin were locked into lean economic times.

Would they grasp at a financial straw offered by the federal government by volunteering to be colonists in the Territory of Alaska?

A group of 69 Wisconsin families — 134 adults and 174 children — took the dare, abandoned their marginal land and packed up for a 4,000-mile trip to start a new life farming in a land that would not see statehood for another 24 years.

Their destination 50 years ago was the fertile but undeveloped Matanuska Valley, 60 miles north of Anchorage. They became part of a project planned by New Deal social architects.

The project included 903 people from logged-out regions of northern Wisconsin, northern Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan who made up what officially was called the Matanuska Valley Colony.

Lived in tents

The Matanuska Valley is a flat area ranging from 1 to 10 miles wide and 50 miles long. It now has a population of 34,000. When the colonists arrived in 1935, the valley had a population of about 700.

On May 22, 1935, the Wisconsin group anchored in a bay in Seward, Alaska. Cold winds whipped the icy rain typical of spring in southern Alaska. Through the clouds they could see the outlines of towering, snow-covered mountain peaks, a contrast to the land they left behind.

Colonists lived in 16-by-20-foot tents for about two months, then were allowed to choose their permanent homes — log or lumber — from five designs made in Washington, D.C. But none of the homes could have full basements or full foundations.

The colonists faced many disappointments. Some became disillusioned before the colony became self-supporting. Many families failed and went to Anchorage in search of easier and higher-paying work.

But others stayed, made good and became leaders in the experiment. Wisconsin's contributions to the colony still are reaping benefits for the former territory, which was admitted to statehood in 1959.

Now Senate president

Jalmer Kertulla, who was born in Milwaukee and was 6 when he left on that trip to the Matanuska Valley with his parents, is in his second term as president of the Alaska State Senate. He was speaker of the Alaska House for several years.

Turn to **Alaska**, Page 8



Grace Mornson of Shell Lake spent three years in Palmer with her family.

Milwaukee Journal June 2 - 85