Sudden Shift in House Plans Brings Howl From Colonists

Call Buildings ‘Sheep Sheds’

Matanuska Officials Kept Busy Soothing Settlers; Move Intended to Speed Construction

BY ARVIL SCHEFFER

Palmer, Alaska—(By Radio)—A sudden change in house plans for the Matanuska valley colony, in order to speed construction, brought the wrath of colonists down on the heads of officials Monday.

With astonishing speed the rumor spread throughout the valley that the government was trying to pass off “sheep sheds” on the new settlers in place of the handsome little houses they had expected. Until officials could explain what it was all about, there developed a general rush on administrative headquarters, with a deluge of complaints of some of those which went up as often during the eventful last half of June, when the colonists first began to realize that they could not have everything they had expected, due to inadequate supplies and construction delays.

"Just a Chicken House"

Some of the men on the colonies got hold of somebody’s rough hand drawing of what they imagined the new homes to be. It showed a structure 40 feet long and 30 feet wide, divided into three equal rooms.

"Hell, that’s just a shed," stormed Dean fellow. "They can’t get away with that."

"I never lived in anything but a regular house and I’m not going to start being a chicken farmer," added Arthur Hack. "Half the camp will quit on this one."

"I’d been planning a pretty house and now I’m getting a chicken house," another lamented.

Finally the boys got up enough steam to surround the door to the architect’s office and cornered James Shelly, who was recently placed in charge of homesites. Shelly would no sooner get through explaining to one crowd when another would pepper him with threats to leave and demands as to what he was going to do about it. He was kept busy most of the afternoon.

The rumour boiled down to this: The time before when it was considered too short that officials have decided they must build some 75 frame houses. They will be so-called “growing houses”—that is, the primary structure consisting of three rooms in a row with a total length of about 20 feet are to be built to assure shelter for all. Those who need more room may add to their homes, possibly with government assistance, when there’s time this fall, next winter, next summer, in 1934, or whenever he get to think of it.

Puller Misses the Fun

The design as explained by the architects seems sound. Most colonists appeared not too greatly disturbed when the “sheep shed” idea was disclaimed.

"Said, that’s why we’re doing it," Shelly asserted. "Right now it’s a way of getting the roof over most and we’re going to be sure we have them."

R. P. Puller, Washington’s temporary director of the colony who had gone on an inspection trip to Camp Butte to discover how to handle the construction of 36 houses to which nothing but a muddy wagon road now leads, mixed most of the excitement. The house change rumor somehow beat him there, however.

"Some fellows are real workers," Puller said of the Butte colonies. "They’re out there sweatin’ and knockin’ over trees and they are real pioneers. They asked us about the changes. I explained them and said they could build all the fancy work onto their houses when they want to. The men said that was all they wanted to know. I didn’t find one who had any fundamental kick with the changes."

Inquiring colonists were assured that frame houses would not cost more than log houses, and maybe less. They are to be built on sites where logs are not available. Material will be pre-fabricated as much as possible.

Time Details, Save Hours

Officials are also considering plans to cut out some details of the log cottages. They would wait for the time being such things as porches and other features which add to appearance but not to comfort. Eliminations of one above shows it is estimated, will save 125 men hours per cottage.

Scattered over the valley now is much “boughten” material for houses. It is being trucked to home sites as fast as it arrives and stacked there awaiting the time when it is to be used. That is a precaution against what the busy season will do in the roads. It is comforting evidence to the colonists that foresight is finding a place in the project.

Many of them say, “That’s what we needed all along,” and they are showing appreciation by being more willing workers.

"They are buckling down pretty good," said Shelly, who is also in charge of colony labor. "I think they could do better—and they will—but they are at least showing that they are not afraid of work.”