

Couple's lives shaped by Colony

by Jo Blahut

Louis and Estella Odsather weren't part of the contingent of settlers who came to the Mat-Su Valley in 1935 as part of the Matanuska Colony Project, but both became an integral part of it.

Louis, of Norwegian stock, was a young logger and adventurer from Ballard, Wash., when he arrived in Anchorage in 1935.

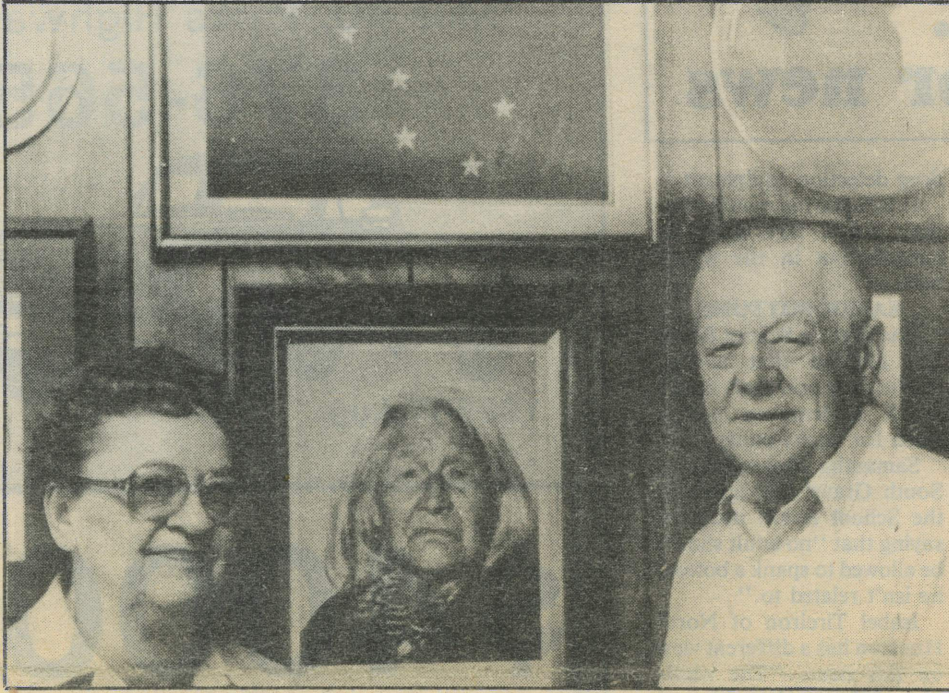
Estella arrived in the Valley with her parents in 1935. They came from Wyoming. Her father, Don Irwin, had been appointed manager of the University of Alaska's Experimental Station.

But, stepping back two years into the history that was to affect their lives, it began with the birth of the Colony Project in Washington, D.C. It was 1933, and the bleak height of the Great Depression was sweeping the nation. Americans, especially those in agriculture, were in dire financial straights, and Washington had to do something to help.

Someone had come up with a plan of embarking on an experimental agricultural project of sorts — of putting some of the farmers from Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota into developing farming in Alaska. President Roosevelt thought the project had merit and gave it the go-ahead. Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 which included the Matanuska Valley project.

After the Irwins arrived in the Valley in 1935, Estella's father was enlisted into becoming the first general manager of the Colony project.

Back in Anchorage, Louis got himself appointed to the Colony project, too. He was general storekeeper in charge of all supplies. That also included assuming the job of chief steward for the hastily thrown-together dormitories



Louis and Estella Odsather have hundreds of artifacts going back to the Matanuska Valley Colony Project days displayed on the walls of their home on Wasilla Lake. They are especially proud of the flag of Alaska, signed and given to them by their friend, Benny Benson, designer of the flag.

Estella, however, went on for home economic studies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, and Louis went on with the business of running the commissary for the colonists. But it was inevitable, (stepping on shoelaces works every time), and Louis and Estella were married in the Presbyterian Church of a Thousand Logs in Palmer in 1937. Theirs was the first wedding in the little church.

A year later, they bought a little store on Fourth Avenue in Anchorage and called it Lucky's Self-Service. The store grew along with Anchorage. In 1953, they sold it and Louis took on the hotel business. He bought out the old Parson Hotel on Third and H streets, the first real hotel in Anchorage, he said. Later, he sold that to Hickle Development Co., and became a silent partner in an

insurance firm.

His experience with managing the colony dormitory probably influenced his interest in architecture, and he designed and built a three-story business office building on Second and E streets. He sold that in 1969, but his interest in land and acreage was piqued and he began some real estate development of his own.

Louis and Estella have three children; Richard and Kenneth in Fairbanks, and

Kathy in San Francisco who manages a hotel. There are four grandchildren.

In 1976, they moved to their home on Lake Wasilla, which is a study in uniqueness. The house itself was built from logs taken from the old colony granery, Louis said. Its addition is part of an old Alaska Communications System building and wood from the first temporary hospital in the colony.

The house's interior widens eyes in wonder, for most of

that served as accommodations for the teaching staff and for project officials.

It didn't take long for Estella and Louis to meet. In fact, it was unavoidable since she had stepped on his shoelace and wouldn't remove her foot until they were introduced to each other.

all the wall space is covered with artifacts taken from colony days. It's memoirs of times and people past that are kept fresh; reflecting from the multitude of pictures, the awards and the antiques, Louis and Estella's life and their great involvement in the Matanuska Valley Colony Project.

Coming Events!



YOU'RE INVITED!

to
Matanuska
Electric
Association's

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Tuesday, October 8, 1985

7:00 p.m. at MEA's

Palmer Headquarters Building

Agenda Items to Include:

* Power Supply Study

* Progress Report on Management Review

For more information,

contact Member Relations at 745-3231 ext. 215



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