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# Matanuska Valley Families Left Rhinelander Just 35 Years Ago

Biggest snafu any government agency ever pulled, or the greatest humanitarian experiment any society ever dared attempt... whatever it was, and people called it both of those extreme things, it all started just 35 years ago right here in Rhinelander.

It was FERA's effort to colonize the Matanuska valley of Alaska by resettling families from the far northern parts of midwestern states, people who had met financial adversity because of the depression, and seemed likely prospects for another chance by becoming pioneers in a development program subsidized by the federal rehabilitation office.

Each applicant had to be young, healthy, with some skill or trade and at least a fair knowledge of farming. They had to be approved by their county relief administrator. Each family could take 2,000 pounds of personal belongings at government expense to Alaska, where they would be

furnished a 40-acre farm of which six acres would be cleared the first year. The FERA would loan each family approximately \$3,000 that first year; two hogs, two sows, some chickens, a house and a barn would be furnished each family, while horses and tractors would be furnished on a community basis, three or four families using the same team or tractor.

Rhinelander was the gathering center for northeastern Wisconsin and part of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; Green Bay and St. Paul were other meeting places. The special trains arrived in the Twin Cities where the settlers transferred to other trains that carried them to Seattle, where they boarded the USS St. Mihiel, a transport that sailed for Seward, Alaska. There they took the Alaskan railroad for the last 150 miles of their journey to the Matanuska region. The trip from Rhinelander started in May, 1935, and ended in Alaska the first of June, just 35 years ago.

People from this area were selected because they were used to severe Winter weather, and were more likely to be able to shift for themselves in a pioneer venture than would be "city folks." In all, 400 Badgers and Wolverines made the journey. Some came back as soon as they could finance the trip home. Some stayed the first year and returned. Not too many made a go of it and remained permanently. Some who did succeed did so not as farmers but as people with trades or who could work in service occupations.

"Cleared" meant the trees had been cut but the stumps remained. "Barn" and "house" sometimes meant a structure little warmer than the old outhouse on a Wisconsin farm. The \$3,000 didn't go far in a land where there was little help to hire and every bit of supplies you had to buy cost far more than in Wisconsin because of the high expense of getting it to Alaska. As with all government projects, there were some able administrators, and then there were many of the other type. Things were tough for people then in Wisconsin, but this was home, and Alaska was not.

Those who remained became a second layer of the Alaskan aristocracy which today consists of those who were there before the FERA, those who came for resettlement, and those who arrived afterward. There is no question that the colonization left a tremendous impact on that part of Alaska.

Nine families were selected from about 30 Oneida county families that applied to be Matanuska settlers. They were Mr. and Mrs. Carl Erickson and two children of Rhinelander, Mr. and Mrs. William Bouwens and 11 children of Rhinelander, Mr. and Mrs. Victor Johnson of Harshaw, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Soik and child of Minocqua, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Roughan and five children of Monico, Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Worden and five children of Three Lakes, Mr. and Mrs. Otis Brown and three children of Pelican Lake, Mr. and Mrs. Allen Sexton of Pelican Lake, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Griese and three children of the town of Stella.

Rhinelander, with the American Legion in the

leadership, gave the group a rousing sendoff with a dance and dinner at the Memorial Building. A program of music and short talks was presented, with Howard Hackett in charge. Oscar Nelson led the singing. Tom Crawford, Oneida county relief director, and Dr. Gale W. Huber of Minocqua, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, spoke. Mrs. Mary Gamble of Washington, D.C. and A.M. Jacobson spoke for FERA. Lewis A. Moore of Rhinelander's Legion post presented Legion buttons and paid-up dues cards for one year to four veterans of World War I in the group that met here to start their trip - Worden, Roughan, Griese, and Laurence Arndt of Forest county.

Their "last meal" consisted of roast beef, roast pork, mashed potatoes, gravy, olives, dill pickles, celery, lettuce, ice cream, cake, and coffee. Henry Sly headed the kitchen detail. A hastily formed band-drum corps led the parade from the Memorial Building to the Soo Line depot, and there were many tears as the musicians played "There's a Long, Long Trail."

Young lovers, about to have the bottom drop out of their world because one would be going to Alaska while the other stayed in Wisconsin, held hands openly, which was quite a daring thing to do in 1935, or took a walk to a secluded part of the station platform. Tony Khoury of the Oxford Club sent his entertainers to cheer the colonists.

At 3 a.m., the special train rambled in from the east behind its steam engine, hissed to a stop, there were tearful farewells that most thought would be forever, baggage was loaded aboard quickly, passengers found seats, then waved from the train windows. The conductor called "B-O-A-R-D", waved his lantern, and with gathering speed, the train headed west toward St. Paul on the first of a 4,000 mile trip from Rhinelander to Alaska. Friends and well-wishers stood on the platform until the rear lights of the train blinked out of sight around the first curve into the town of Crescent. Adventure, or misadventure, they were on their way to meet the future.