

'Chaos Rounding Into Form' in the Boom City of Palmer

The Impossible Is Taking Place

It All Seems Confusion,
but Slowly, Surely a
Colonial Empire Is Be-
ing Created

6-9-35
BY ARVILLE SCHALEBEN
OF THE JOURNAL STAFF

Palmer, Alaska—(By Mail)—Boom City, where things that can't be done are done every day . . . Boom City, mushrooming out of a wilderness . . . Boom City, which never sleeps . . . which throws grime in your eyes and makes you like it . . . which gives you hell and makes you take it. Boom City, that's Palmer.

Incredible, fantastic, confused, blundering, blustering, miraculous, every man for himself and yet every man for his neighbor, contrary today and obedient tomorrow. America, that's your Palmer.

Uncle Sam is doing this. It's his gold that's gilding the city. It's his men that are ruling the streets. It's his people that are peopling the valley. It's his farmers that are leveling the woods.

Five Are Now 1,500

They said in the Colorado and Yukon and Nevada gold rush days that it wouldn't be done again—this mushroom city business. Maybe they were right. But Uncle Sam is weaving a pattern as incredible.

On May 5 Palmer's population was five, all members of the Felton family. On May 6 it jumped to 122. That was when Uncle Sam's transient laborers from California hit town. Now the population exceeds 1,500. The FERA settlers from the states have scrambled in with their families; additional transients are on hand; the administrative force has doubled, tripled and grown to tenfold, and the inevitable boom town drifters came along with their varied wares. Why, we even have a pastor or two.

I said things that can't be done are done every day. They dumped 400 women and children settlers on this town at 5 o'clock one afternoon. There wasn't any place for them to sleep or eat. But they slept and they ate.

Tents Fairly Bulged

Settled families gave room until some of their 16 by 20 tents bulged with 14 men, women and children besides their own brood. Food wasn't ready so 20 men pitched into the commissary and clapped together hundreds and hundreds of sandwiches—cold meat, cheese and plain butter.

Next day at 12:30 an authority came dashing into the transient laborers' mess cars. Most of the prepared grub had been gobbled. But the authority shouted, "Got 36 families to feed. Can you do it in half an hour?"

"Half an hour? Yes, sir."

But a half hour is a long time in Boom City, so in 10 minutes the families were chowing.

Ed Anderson drifted in from Anchorage one morning. He rented

part of Felton's cabin. At noon he had a restaurant in operation. He gets 50 cents for a pork chop. Down the road, in neighboring Matanuska village, hamburger and egg sandwiches retail at 25 cents.

Buildings up in Day

Once they moved 50 men seven miles between camps, over roads so

wide that they could drive a truck

over them. They were in the pay of the army

and hence entitled to protection as

victims were in the pay of the army

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A City Booms as of Yore in Alaska Wilds

Sum. June 11/35
You Walk Down a Street
in Palmer, When You
Come Back There Is
Something New

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Palmer 'Boom City' of Today

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

had they were part corduroy, in 20 minutes. How?

"How the hell do I know?" barked the straw boss. "But they're there, ain't they?"

Buildings blossom like magic. You walk down main street in the morning, past a vacant lot. You walk back main street in the evening, and on the vacant lot a temporary recreation hall is being hammered together. It was just that somebody decided we ought to have one.

From their tent homes in the scattered camps, a handful of farmers head for one of their properties. They shoulder axes, saws and spades. Maybe mosquito netting hangs from their hat brims. In the evening they return, sweating, muddy and exhausted. They've cleared another homesite.

Airplanes Drop In

Special excursion trains run out from Anchorage. The fare is 6 cents a mile—one way. Wealthy excursionists zoom in out of the clouds, for Alaska is air-minded and enterprising pilots from Anchorage quickly established connections. The 40-mile trip costs \$25.

Before Boom City boomed, the Alaska railroad ran one train a week into Palmer. It operated this branch line by the calendar, instead of the time table. Now trains come in every day, bringing gravel, baggage, food, coal, lumber, stoves, tools, tractors, pencils and what have you.

Much of this stuff is dumped off along the sidings. The tiny station platform can't begin to accommodate it. Mattresses, bed springs, suitcases, big timbers and all clutter the railroad grade. By and by they disappear, when the consignee gets time to wander among them and find his own, only to be replaced in night or day by new shipments.

Trucks roll ceaselessly along the dirt roads—always either dusty or muddy. The workers operate them in shifts, for transportation is a real problem in Palmer and available equipment must not stand idle. Loaded until their sides bulge with freight and men, the trucks cut roads to ribbons. Roads must be repaired continually. A mudhole develops. Gravel rattles off the rail cars into dump trucks. Two or three loads are poured into the road hole. Half a dozen men spread them and the parade of trucks over them renews.

Forty-horsepower caterpillar tractors wriggle through the town, lugging wagons and trailers laden with supplies. They attack the cleared lands with their glistening plow blades and slicing discs.

In every great development cap-

tured achievements possible in the building of America's west it was the steam shovel and the derrick. In Palmer it is the truck and the tractor. What has been done could not have been done without them.

But Things Are Done

Yes, we're jumbled and rough in Boom City. But there's direction here, too, that steps in miraculously and rights things just when it seems confusion is getting the upper hand. And there's no confusion about the main objective—putting 200 farmers into operation in the Matanuska valley. It is just the individual effort that is jumbled, as most individual effort appears to be when things move as swiftly as here.

Whittier said it like this:

"I hear the tread of pioneers,
Of millions yet to be;
The first low wash of waves where
soon

Shall roll a human sea.
The elements of empire here
Are plastic yet and warm,
The chaos of a mighty world
Is rounding into form!"