50 Dwellings Rise in Colony

Settlers, Transients Losing Hatred of Each Other in Race to Finish

BY ARLIVE SCHALEN
OF THE JOURNAL STAFF

Palmer, Alaska (By Radio)—A new snap has come into the Matanuska Valley colony project. Construction is going forward at a greatly accelerated pace and the spirits of most of the colonists are responding enthusiastically. Bickering, although still evident, is fading. The worst rifts among officials have been closed.

What could have revived the morale of the settlers more than sight of the houses they have dreamed of seeing reach this new frontier? Under the reorganized construction program 50 were growing from the ground Saturday. An increased number of skilled Alaskan carpenters have the urgent community center construction program moving. Seventeen wells have been drilled until they tapped water.

Fewer Needed Now

It appears now, therefore, that barring unforeseen difficulty or failure of lumber to arrive, construction work can be completed by winter, now that it has been trimmed to 50 house units. The trimmer has been extended even to cottage porches, of which there will be none until every colonist has a roof over his head.

The latest estimates are that 160 houses will be needed. Official estimate at the original 50 was extended to 200 structures which were planned will be abandoned because of returning colonists and because the rest have houses already under contract good enough to last the winter.

Of the houses under construction, six are complete sufficiently so that families have moved in. The colonists are expected to do their own finishing work. The remainder range from first work on the foundation to final work on the roof. Transient crews of 10 men each, aided by colonist owners, are working on or have put up 41 houses. Crowds of colonists are building the other nine of the 50 now under construction.

Wants Outdoor Plumbing

A few colonists have decided on constructed houses, built according to their own plans. “I’m living in Alaska and I’m going to put up an Alaskan house,” Mr. Harold Davis of Lansing, Mich., explained. “None of this fancy stuff for me. My wife and I laid out a three-room place and we’re going to start it and be in it in a week. It’ll be easier to heat and won’t cost me over $300. I’m not even going to have an inside toilet. No, sir, not in Alaska. Those other places are costing about $800 with a well or a fence, so I’m going to have plenty of credit left over to buy socks with.”

For a long time there has been real antagonism between the transient workers and the colonists. Each group felt that the other wasn’t worth a plugged nickel in the woods. Now that they are working side by side they are learning that neither is so bad.

“I can’t kick on these guys,” said Colonist Henry Roughan of Monica, Wis. “They’re helping me build my house and they’re doing a good job. All I wanted was to see, those timers going up.”

While the men are pitching into building homes, the women and older girls are preparing food for the winter. They are making wild berries into sauces and jellies and at the experimental farm have been working in groups canning salmon which are now running up streams from the Knick Arm of the Matanuska River. The men catch them in the same pools.

“Tough but Possible”

Col. L. P. Hunt is practically dictator of the project since S. R. Fuller, Hopkins investigator, left. Sensing that he senses a great im- proved spirit in all divisions of the project, Hunt has been readily mixing in with the colonists, to such an extent that one pioneer found him “as common as an old shoe.”

“We’re not over the hump yet by a long way,” Hunt said Saturday. “But we can see the light. This construction job is tough but it isn’t impossible. The construction boys and the colonists are beginning to realize that they’re all human. That’s what we need. This project looks sound and my guess is that it’s going to go over.”

Fuller, a New York industrialist who was sent here to investigate the project, after the United States Senate had asked Relief Administrator Harry L. Hopkins for a report, is due to report soon to Hopkins, and probably to President Roosevelt himself, on the project. He declined to comment before leaving here last week.

“All I can say now is that we made an organization out of what we had at hand, and I think we’ll do the job.”

Plaints Health Rumor

Fuller avoided peaking into reasons behind the “black eyes” the project has received. He ignored the domiciliary causes of the trouble, and stopped in at Juneau both coming and going to pay his respects to the territorial health officers against whom the colonist had so often shouted. Instead of cutting off the heads of certain officials he simply bent them into notches of less importance without altering their titles — their salaries. In other words, he poured oil on troubled waters instead of dousing them off.

The rumor of construction from some quarters that the valley is a naturally unhealthy spot was refuted by Dr. R. G. Davis of the Fuller party.

“We visited all the camps and found conditions good,” Davis said. “I can say that without reservation. We consider the valley as healthy as any similar number of acres in the United States. The colonists have no health hazards here that they didn’t have at home.”

15 Families Leave

Their number increased by last day defections, 15 families were to leave the colony Saturday for the States, after 24 hours’ delay occasioned by a change in the sailing plans for the Steamer Northern Star. Friday 39 more men also left the tran- sient division.

Families were added to the list at this deadline for signing out while one earlier signer, William Bingham of the North Carolina colony, had to forego immediate return because his one child had contracted pneumonia.

Their reasons were the same as those previously given except that Sherman Way of Hamburg, Mich., added a new touch.

“I’ve always wanted a team of horses,” he complained. “I thought I’d get ’em by coming to Alaska, but I didn’t. But I think by selling all my stuff and working here I’ve got enough money to get that team when I get home again.”

Colony Cut 15 Per Cent

William Schultz of Lincoln county and Harry Keenan of South Range, Wis., who has a child here, were the only Wisconsin signers.

The other families signing to leave Saturday are Art Hack of Port Huron, Michigan, and Ernest Porterfield of Alexi Henry Liptak, both of Wexford county, Michigan.

In addition, both pledges to leave the Alaska colony totally — Wexford county departures 25 families—or 15 per cent—are now out of the colony. No more may leave at corporation and state expense, with the possible exception of Charles H. Jones, until Dec. 1, when the San Miguel is scheduled to return to Seward on project business. Officials feel that few will leave unless they have houses.

Editor’s Note: Early in June it was predicted in a survey article by Mr. Bingham that 15 per cent of the colonists would leave the Matanuska project.

A total of 145 transients, excluding deserters of the original 48 construction workers, are now being shipped to the State of homesickness, disgust with the work, malcoordination or inefficiency. Of the original construction division administrative staff of 15, nine have left from time to time.

Encounter With Bear

Two colonists tangled with a bear Thursday night and embarrassed it mortally. Mr. Bruno came snooping around the new homestead of Russell and Helen Pakonen. The young couple were in the nearby home of Harry Nichols for help, Pakonen’s wife failing in the driveway from fright. Pakonen and Nichols returned to find the bear still there.

“Nichols shot him high in the rump, while I was getting my gun,” Pakonen related. “The bear charged him and we shot him four times from my front porch. He was about 12 feet away and when he rolled over dead. I got his hide hanging in a tree; it’s seven feet long and the bacon weighed 400 pounds.”

It’s against the law to hunt black bear but the colonists claim self-defense.

“If you’d seen him shake his head and open his mouth you’d know he didn’t mean us any good,” Pakonen vowed.

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