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Along the old Santa Fé Trail — in covered wagons the pioneers of other days sought new homes

Alaska's Modern Pioneers

Amid many comforts, with necessities guaranteed by the government, the American pioneer, 1935 model, is settling on the Alaskan frontier. Two hundred families from Mid-West relief rolls are being given a new start as homesteaders

by MARK RHEA BYERS

THE American pioneer is on the march again. Depression-driven, as always in our history, he is moving on to the frontier. Those gloomy observers are wrong who have been mourning that, this time, there were no new lands to which the victims of economic dislocation in "the settlements" could migrate, there to wrest a living from the wilderness.

It is true that there remains no government domain of any size or agricultural value in "the states." The frontier, pushed to the Pacific Coast, has turned northward. A considerable wave of migration has set in to the sub-arctic valleys of Alaska. In Matanuska Valley, north of Seward, the government has its latest homesteading project under way. A month ago the first contingent of homesteaders — 287 members of Middle Western families that had been on relief — sailed from San Francisco. Soon they will be joined by others, who will bring to 1,000 the population of this new community in the North. And here, it seems probable, a new chapter in the saga of the American pioneer is to be written.

It will be pioneering, however, modified by the twist which a generation of increasing paternalism in government has given to the American way of life. After the Revolutionary War the landless and the misfits of the seaboard colonies pushed over the Alleghenies into the Mississippi valley without benefit of government help. They were, indeed, a considerable nuisance to the federal authorities, continually embroiling themselves with the Indian tribes and demanding protection, squatting on lands in defiance of

state territorial claims and individual titles.

After the Civil War, in the Long Depression which broke upon the nation in 1873, much the same thing occurred. The government paid its "veterans' bonus" in landscrip, pointed to the vast reaches of the Great Plains and told the depression victims to help themselves. Outside of a few troops of cavalry in widely scattered garrisons, the settlers were left to shift for themselves.

Government followed, rather than led, in the march which subdued the continent. Even when Texas and California were added to the territories of the United States by the Mexican War, it was chiefly a matter of the federal government legitimatizing an enterprise which the pioneers had barged into on their own, mainly through and over the objections of Washington. The covered wagon trains were not financed by a paternal govern-

ment, and there was no county agricultural agent to indicate to the settler where he might drive his stakes.

That was back in the days when rugged individualism was more than a sounding political slogan. The 1935 pioneer is cut to a different pattern. He is carefully hand-picked from the relief lists in a certain designated area, submitted to a physical examination to make sure he and his family are sound in wind and limb, checked for various skills and social aptitudes, supplied with a proper outfit and shipped to the frontier by train and boat shelter guaranteed for five years.

Arrived at his destination, he is deposited on his designated plot of land, upon which the government fells the timber and builds him a modernized log home — not cabin, please. He is instructed what to plant, when and how. A government-organized cooperative will market what he raises on his forty acres, and when he is not busy on his farm the government will give him a job to earn extra cash.

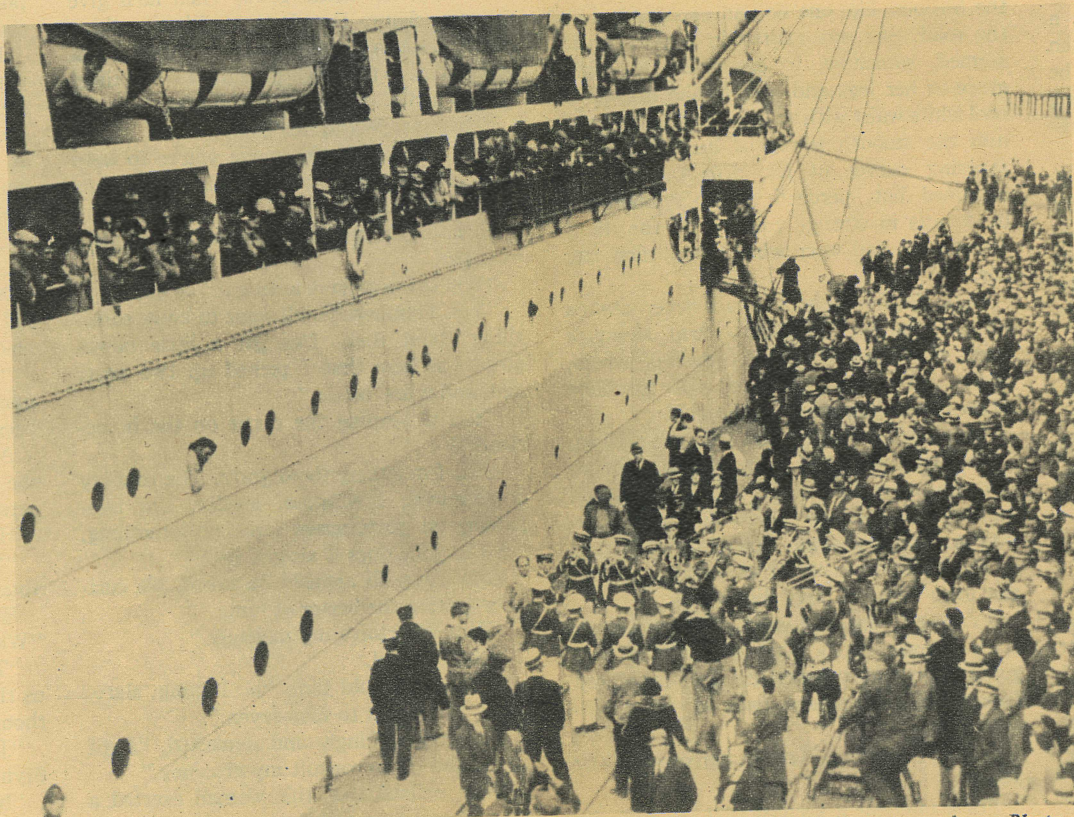
The government will stock his farm and supply needed implements. He will not have to worry about providing a school for his children, or teachers — the government takes care of all that. The government builds the roads, provides a community building and a recreation director — even erects his interdenominational church.

Not that the modern pioneer gets all this for nothing. After the first five years he is expected to begin to pay for his farm. One way and another, his forty acres, home, implements, clearing and so on, will run to about \$3,000. He can take thirty years to re-pay this to the government, with interest at 3 per cent.

This is not intended as derogatory criticism. The nation as a whole expects more of government than its grandfathers did. In the last century the unplaced man might reasonably expect to starve if he couldn't figure out a way to maintain himself. But society — and, later, government — has accepted the responsibility of maintaining its unfortunates, and that upon a level within hailing distance of "the American standard of living."

So it speaks well for the contemporary spirit that the announcement of the Alaskan settlement project precipitated a deluge of applications far beyond the number contemplated by the government. If the conditions of this new settlement of pioneers seem soft compared to the hardships into which Daniel Boone led his followers, still softer is life "on relief." The government, not the new pioneers, arranged the scheme. And the indications are

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Acme Photo

The pioneers of 1935 — a group of colonists sailing for Alaska

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that thousands would have jumped at the chance under conditions much less favorable than the government has arranged for the Matanuska Valley experiment.

In fact, announcement of the government project led to a great influx of unsubsidized landseekers into Alaska — people who could not join the government scheme, but who adventured on their own. Public domain lands in the valley, indeed, have been withdrawn from settlement except for the official colony; too many settlers might interfere with the success of the rehabilitation experiment, or perhaps the pioneers-on-their-own might grab off the best pieces of land, to the detriment of the colony.

Incidentally, it will be interesting to see which group of settlers makes the better progress — the unsubsidized, volunteer pioneers or those who are members of the government's experiment in pioneering de luxe.

Judging by the circumstances under which the colony is starting, the Matanuska Valley experiment ought to succeed. The families that will go to the valley, with 2,000 pounds of per-

sonal possessions apiece, were the carefully selected top cream of thousands of applicants, personally investigated by relief directors in their home counties.

Only applicants from Northern Minnesota, Northern Wisconsin and upper Michigan were considered. In this area winters are long and cold, and most of the farming population has had plenty of woods experience. Alaskan winters should not be terrifying to them; the mean temperature averages very little below what they are used to. Also, they are used to crops that need only a short growing season.

Only families drawing relief or eligible for it were included in the selection, and of these the primary requirement was a farm background. No white-collar men or city factory hands were invited to muss up the government's plans. Probably two-thirds of the party that will settle the Matanuska valley knows what it is to live in a log house in a forest clearing, and to plant and harvest among the stumps of cut-over land.

The chief difference between condi-

tioned farming all around that district of Wisconsin for years. In the winter he had worked in the woods — when there was work to be had. A slim, wiry, rather pleasant-spoken and easy going chap, he was. He was born in Kentucky, one of that numerous contingent of "Kentucks" who have flooded into northern Wisconsin in the last two or three decades. They call Forest County, Wisconsin, "Little Kentucky" because of the many from the Blue Ridge mountains who have located there.

Collier was all for Alaska. It meant, at least, a chance to get on his feet.

"What's there here to keep a man?" he asked. "This country is skinned out for twenty years to come, depression or no. They've leveled off the woods like cutting hay with a scythe. Anything from three and a half inches up. There's hardly anything left.

"Farming? Sure, I've tried it on a half-dozen different places. If a fellow could get work winters in the woods, he could raise enough potatoes and other stuff to get by. But now it's done. There is no more work in the woods to speak of. And you can't make a living off farming. What money you get ain't enough to pay the rent.

"Now the gov'ment is reforesting the land, and building up timber again. In forty years this country will be as good as it used to be, but it's going to be dead in the meantime. There's no timber to cut, any more. And you just can't make a living trying to farm this land between stumps."

Did he like the Alaska venture?

"Well, it can't be worse than it is here. The gov'ment sets you up in business, and gives you thirty years to pay off. They are going to have schools for the kids, nurses and doctor service. Maybe it won't work out just like they claim, but a fellow ain't taking such a long chance."

Mrs. Collier was less sanguine.

"What I want to know is how near neighbors will be," she said. "I got to have somebody to talk to. It's bad enough being all that way away from the folks, and I'd just die if I had

Informed that the plans called for locating no family farther than seven miles from Palmer, the center of the colony, Mrs. Collier still was doubtful. "I'm going to miss my friends something terrible," she said.

"And those winters! Imagine twenty hours of darkness and no sun," went on this modern pioneer's helpmeet. "And no lights but oil lamps. I guess I ain't going to like it much."

"Well, I don't call this so much," interrupted her husband. "We ain't going to be any worse off than we are here. It's a chance, anyhow, and a fellow can't get a chance around here."

Mrs. Carl F. Erickson, visited in the small flat, had no such misgivings. A stocky, sandy-haired woman, with pleasant, decisive features, her aggressively neat home reflected her own immaculate self.

"The women are talking a lot about the long winters and the darkness," she said. "It won't be so bad. I know I was born and brought up in Norway not so far from Oslo. The winter must be about the same."

The Ericksons are thoroughly familiar with cut-over farming. They homesteaded out in Minnesota where they were first married, moved into town when the children began to grow up, for better school opportunities. The husband worked in a lumber mill, rose to be a foreman, and was out of work when the mill closed. Savings exhausted, they were "eligible for relief," according to the case-worker who investigated, to determine their fitness for the Alaskan colony. But they hadn't "gone on relief," although the savings were exhausted after more than a year of unemployment.

"It seems so sort of queer to me," Mrs. Erickson said, "that there was a lot of doubt whether we could get to go to Alaska, just because we hadn't gone on relief. Seems like the government doesn't want to help people that try to do for themselves. . . ."

She turned her face away for a moment, and when she looked back again, her eyes were full of tears. Beneath her steady control one senses the strain of anxious years.

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cultivation, including 250 acres attached to the Matanuska valley experiment station, the staff of which is to take a leading part in directing the labors of the colonists. There are 17 families already homesteaded in the valley, mainly near Palmer, and the government is much interested in this project, and that they are expected to participate in the program.

The land is mostly good light loam. It raises excellent crops of almost every variety grown in Wisconsin and Minnesota, except corn. During the growing season, May 10 to September 1-16, wheat, rye, potatoes and all garden crops do well. The damp climate, due to the warm winds from the Japanese current sweeping against the mountains and depositing their moisture, induces abundant hay crops.

Prices range steadily higher than in the states, and the Alaska College of Agriculture asserts that there is and will be a good market for all the settlers can raise, since the territory annually imports \$1,000,000 worth of foodstuffs to support its population. Not much, unless it may be dairy products, can be raised for shipment back to the United States.

A creamery and cannery are planned, as soon as there is a sufficient quantity of butter-fat and vegetables to justify these industries. Controlled cropping and marketing is contemplated to insure a balanced production, and the colony will be directed toward dairying and its by-products, potatoes, vegetables, hay, grain and berries. Cattle are said to thrive in the valley and the possibility is held out that hogs, poultry and fur-bearing animals can be raised by the colonists to supplement their income.

The government is committed to relatively elaborate development of the colony, aside from clearing the land and building homes for the settlers. Each family is to have a log house with a kitchen, living room and as many bedrooms as the size of the family indicates. There will be indoor chemical toilets, but at the present time it is not planned to install bathrooms. All the homes, however, will have running water.

Palmer, the seat of the colonial establishment under the aegis of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, at present consists of a postoffice and railway station. Here are to rise a school for 400 children, a community center with workshops, recreation and religious facilities, a creamery, cannery and warehouses, together with homes for the teachers and members of the staff of the colony, the project manager and others. Several stores are contemplated, to be run on the co-operative principle as a part of the project.

To get all this done in any reasonable time requires more manpower than the settlers can muster, even if they were not busy with their homesteads. So 480 CCC workers and men from transient camps of the Northwest preceded the settlers into the valley, to start the necessary clearing and construction work.

Even so, with all this government help, the time element will run a close race with the weather. The settlers start life on their new farms living in tents supplied by the government, and it will be nip and tuck to get them all under adequate shelter by the end of the brief summer. The beginning of farming is not expected until next year, with the government meantime caring for the settlers out of relief funds.

How do the settlers themselves feel about the colony?

Roughly speaking, from personal interviews with a number of them, the men are enthusiastic and the women more dubious. The almost universal answer of men selected as potentially good timber for the colony was that "it couldn't be any tougher than it is here." Their wives said: "It's a long way from home, among strangers."

Take John Collier, for example. He was living in a couple of shabby rooms in the front of a rambling, ramshackle house in a Wisconsin village, with his slender, fragile-looking wife and four small children. The house hadn't seen a coat of paint for ten years, at least. The porch sagged. A screen door covered with tar-paper shut out the worst of the wintry blasts.

Collier had been a "renter". He'd

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"I know we can make a go of it," she said. "Mr. Erickson and the children are just crazy to go."

Reliable people, the Ericksons, one could see. Victims of the great economic smash, but still in full possession of their strength and courage, still anxious for a chance to work out their own salvation.

The children in all the families visited were unanimously enthusiastic about the venture.

"There's gold in Alaska, ain't there, mister?" asked nine-year-old Jimmy Rollain. "They find it in chunks. A-course, I wouldn't have no luck — but it wouldn't hurt to look around for some."

And his shining eyes showed plainly enough that Jimmy Rollain would not only look around for some gold, but was very sure he would find it.

A determined effort is being made to select only families with good social backgrounds. The whining or truculent type of relief recipient, who has been giving the relief-workers trouble in the past, got no encouragement when the lists were being prepared for the Alaska venture.

There was no dearth of applicants in most of the counties to more than fill their quota. Except one. Forest County, Wisconsin — "Little Ken-

tucky" — had only three applicants. Apparently the modern descendants of the mountaineers who followed Dan'l Boone into the Dark and Bloody ground do not face hardships so readily as their ancestors.

Nevertheless, the record is that the pioneer spirit is far from dead. The rush of eligible and ineligible alike to enlist for the Matanuska adventure shows that not all jobless Americans are content to sit down "on relief" and let Uncle Sam or the state government care for them. It may be true that some of the unemployed like the dole better than a job, and wouldn't take work if it were offered. But many others are fermenting with the desire to regain their independence, find work and get going again under their own power.

If the government is displaying a record-breaking lavishness in helping a few of the deserving to a new start, that is not, after all, a debit mark against the individuals who accepted the offer. They are simply looking for a chance, and they took what was offered.

It was a swell offer — unparalleled in our history of pioneer settlement. Anybody reasonably qualified for the colony would have been idiotic not to take it.