

Road paved the way for early Matanuska Valley colonists

So much is heard about the agricultural potential and pioneering past of the Matanuska Valley that it is often assumed that support for development of the Valley has always been popular with Alaskans. But such is not quite the case, for in the years just before the colony was founded, some important Southcentral leaders vigorously opposed Valley projects. Foremost among the opponents was John Ballaine.

The famed colonists of 1935 were not the first settlers in the Matanuska Valley. The area's arable potential was demonstrated soon after 1900 by the U.S. Agricultural Experiment program, and the first homesteads staked and improved in the Valley were patented before the first world war. The building of the Alaska Railroad between Anchorage and the Valley, and beyond, between 1915 and 1917 brought with it high hopes for increased Valley settlement.

A number of farmers tried to make a go of it in the Valley, and to help them, by 1933 the Alaska Road Commission had built 118 miles of roads



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between Palmer, Wasilla, Willow, Knik and Matanuska, near present-day Four Corners.

But the railroad ran a freight unit to the Valley only once a week, and Anchorage residents had petitioned the road commission for years to put through a highway between the town and the Valley to make it easier to get produce to market. With a road connection to Valley farmers, city developers argued, Anchorage could become economically self-sufficient.

But the road commission argued that it could not justify the cost of a road to the Valley since

the railroad already connected it to the city. Such a road would be a duplication of the railroad route, and the commission's meager resources were needed badly at other places in Alaska where no transportation connection of any kind had been built.

Ballaine applauded the commission's position, and his voice counted for something, for he had been an early promoter of a railroad from Seward northward to Ship Creek and the Matanuska Valley, and had even tried to build one long before there was an Anchorage. His project had failed, and had eventually been taken over by the federal government to become the first part of the Alaska Railroad. But Ballaine still owned considerable property in Seward and on the Kenai Peninsula, and he felt that a better investment in agriculture could be made along the west side of the Kenai.

The richest part of Alaska, he argued, was the 30-mile wide, 110-mile long shelf between Cook Inlet and the Kenai Mountains, from Point Possession to Homer Spit. This 2.2 million acre

tract was warmed by the Japan Current and protected by the Alaska Range. It could comfortably support 500,000 "hardy Americans" engaged in general agriculture, fruit growing, gardening, dairying, fishing, lumbering, and even mining. It should be developed first.

Anchorage residents chafed under Ballaine's persistent campaign for the Kenai, because he seemed to have the ear of both the road commission, with its meager resources, and the Alaska Railroad, which wasn't sure it wanted competition on its Valley route from an always-accessible road.

To force the issue, in the winter of 1932-33, Anchorage businessmen subscribed a private fund of \$4,000, hired a contractor, and began building their own road. All of Ballaine's fulminations could do nothing to stop them.

Then, in the spring of 1933, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Congress created the Public Works Administration to get more money into localities through public construction

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