Celebrating the bygone days

Palmer was established in 1916 as a railway station on the Matanuska branch of the Alaska Railroad. In 1935, Palmer became the site of one of the most unusual experiments in American history: The Matanuska Valley Colony. Franklin Roosevelt’s office created this agricultural colony to utilize the great agricultural potential in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, and to develop some American farms with families that had been stricken by the Great Depression in the lower 48. Two hundred two (202) families, mostly from northern Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Oklahoma, were chosen and allotted 40 acres each. The colonists arrived in Palmer during the early summer of 1935, each with a maximum allowable weight of 2,000 pounds. Although the failure rate was high, many of their descendents still live in the Mat-Su Valley. Palmer gradually became the unofficial capital of the Matanuska Valley, acting as headquarters for farmers cooperatives’ marketing organizations and as the business and social center for the State’s most productive farming region.

This exciting four-day event is to honor those first colonists who arrived in the Mat-Su area. Look on pages six and seven for a schedule of all the new events at this year’s Colony Days celebration.

Join Don Irwin, the first manager of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, on a journey into the establishment and development of one of Alaska’s all-time historic treasures, the Matanuska Colony. Irwin creates a fascinating inside look at the details of the Colony’s people and management, including Washington power struggles, the challenges of long-distance federal oversight, the conflicts with Alaska Territorial authority and the hardships, obstacles and triumphs of 202 families being cut off from virtually every creature comfort known to man.

Copies are available for purchase and autograph by Don Irwin’s daughter, Estella Irwin Odsather and Ina Belle Irwin Moss Kennedy, at the 70th anniversary Colony Days celebration at Palmer Junior Middle School on June 10-12 for the one-time special anniversary price of $10. Copies always available for purchase for $15.00 at the Palmer Colony House Museum (donations benefiting the Palmer Historical Society) located at 316 E. Elmwood Ave. in Palmer’s Historic District and at bookstores.