

Colonists went north 50 years ago

Alaska, from State Page

His father, Oscar, was an electrical engineer at A.O. Smith Co. in Milwaukee and one of 5,000 people who were laid off from Smith in 1935. He went back to his native Minnesota and left for the Alaska colony project from there in May 1935.

Kertulla's mother, Elvi, is 79 and lives in the Matanuska Valley, which her son represents in the Senate. After Oscar died in 1965, she married another colonist, Ray Rebarchek, who arrived at the Matanuska Valley colony from Minnesota at the same time the Kertulla family did.

Only seven of the original Wisconsin colonists still are living on the 40-acre homesteads they received during the project, said Louie Odsather, of Palmer.

They are Harry and Theodora Campbell, originally of Abrams; Leroy and Gretchen Hammand, from Iron River; William and Viola Lentz, from Merrill; and Ella Henry, from Viroqua.

Odsather, 74, who was a colony employe in 1935, is general chairman of the "50th Anniversary Celebration of the Colony," which will be held in Palmer Friday through Sunday at the state fairground.

Main speaker for the dinner Saturday night will be Arville Schaleben, retired associate editor of The Milwaukee Journal, who provided daily coverage of the colonists' first several months in 1935 for The Journal and other major US newspapers.

Odsather said 650 confirmed reservations had been made for the Saturday night dinner, and 750 people had registered for the Sunday afternoon picnic. Only original colonists, their descendants, certain dignitaries and colony employes have been invited.

The concept for the Matanuska Colony developed in 1934. That fall, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instructed New Deal planners to add Alaska to the program of organizing Rural Rehabilitation Corporations in the United States. He based his choice on general information that suggested the Matanuska Valley was favorable for farming and could trade with nearby Anchorage and the Alaska railroad belt. The railroad had encouraged settlement and trade in the valley between 1929 and 1933.

The colony was established for three reasons, according to Hugh A. Johnson and Keith L. Stanton, who in 1955 wrote "The Matanuska Valley Memoir," the story of the Matanuska Valley development.

The colony was established first, to take people off relief rolls in the continental US; second, to demonstrate that Alaska provided a settlement frontier that could absorb added population; and third, to add greater support to the Alaskan economy by producing food.

The first list of prospective colonists was made from county relief rolls. More than 90% of the 202 families had assets of less than \$1,000.

50 years later, writer still has role in colony

By Arville Schaleben

Special to The Journal

It was a wonderful night in May 1935, not because of the stars and the moon, not because of the cheers of the spectators, but because of the families boarding at the Rhinelander train depot, singing through tears and cheers, "There's a long, long trail a winding, into the land of my dreams."

Their dreams were to get off the relief rolls, and about all they knew about the land was that it was north and afar.

The Milwaukee Journal had assigned me to report on that land and on those dreams for the, well, mostly woebegone families from the cutover upper counties

Arville Schaleben was a Journal associate editor when he retired in 1972.

of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. Among the 69 Wisconsin families, Bill and Lulabelle Boywens, of Rhinelander, had the most children.

"Good grief," I said to myself, "11!" But they made out fine and attracted the most attention at every railroad stop to Seattle and aboard the ship St. Mihiel as we made those miserably seasick steps up the "ladder of latitudes" to Seward, Alaska. We went by rail to tents at Palmer in the fertile Matanuska Valley, between the Chugach and Talkeetna ranges, north of Anchorage.

Lived in tents

I lived in tents with the colonists while they beat the wilderness and winter to get houses built. From the day the contingent left Rhinelander, I thought the best way to cover America's first-ever attempt at colonization was to get close to the families, to be one of them and yet be an observer.

I ate and slept with them, rode herd to their Guernseys, played marbles with their kids, fought with and against them in their disputes with government plans and administrators. I cheered their successes, scolded their faults and sorrowed at their hardships and despair — and helped them barbecue two cows on the Fourth of July.

Days at a time passed when no one referred to me as a journalist. I had access to their every affair, not as a reporter but as a "colonist." For example, when roll was called for the first community council, with two delegates from each of seven tent camps and four from the larger headquarters camp at Palmer — I had helped design the council — my scratch paper became ballots to elect a chairman. It was the first "local citizen" expression in the government-planned and financed colony. Indeed, it was a throwback to the town-meeting style of citizen sovereignty of colonial America.

Making history

I scribbled down every word to preserve the discussions accurately; I knew that the events of that night were history in the making. I felt satisfaction when my notes helped straighten out the official minutes.

I took about 90 minutes to write the story. With a Palmer June 12 dateline, my lead paragraph said:

"Eighteen sturdy men and women made history Tuesday night out of garbage, dogs and cows."

Those were the three subjects dealt with before the midnight adjournment that stirring night 50 years ago.

That first chairman, Harry Campbell, out of



Arville Schaleben in Palmer in 1935

Abrams, Wis., did me a big favor. I had whispered to try to get adjourned so I could get my story filed before the telegrapher fell asleep.

Not many of the original colonists are still in the Matanuska Valley. Campbell is. I suppose I'll choke up some when I see him, 50 years after last we met. That will be in a few days. The colony has set up a golden anniversary celebration for next Friday, Saturday and Sunday in Palmer. It'll be big, like the state.

Trick with a map

Would you believe that when you lay the Alaska map on a map of the 48 contiguous states, its borders touch all four mainland borders? Tricky, well kind of; it's because the Aleutian Islands stick way out there in the Pacific and that long Alaska panhandle hangs far south along the coast toward Seattle.

I'll be the speaker at the dinner Saturday night. There will be a large crowd from Alaska and the "lower 48" states, and those who survive my memories will join an even larger crowd at a closing picnic Sunday.

Hope I get a taste of moose and bear steak again, but I suppose not. They're modern up there now. Those pioneers helped move Alaska, the great land a fifth the size of the mainland US, from territory to statehood and the Matanuska Valley from a daring and unique social experiment into history, an all-American social achievement within the lifetime of those who lived it.