Principals study policy

By VALERIE MEEHAN

A tough attendance policy was rejected by the Mat-Su Borough School Board Monday night, because it would exempt Palmer High School.

"I have a real problem with this, I feel we're dividing into two districts," School Board Member Pat Humicker said of the proposal, which is a watered-down version of the pilot commissioner said High School, but much stricter than the current district-wide rules. It would have applied to Susitna Valley and Wasilla high schools.

"If it's not good enough for the third school, it shouldn't be good enough for the other two," said School Board Member Pat O'Hara.

Palmer High School Principal Charlie Akers' opposition stopped the proposal from becoming a district policy. He said he does not oppose the thrust of the stricter attendance regulations, but thinks more study is needed.

"It needs to be carefully looked at from all angles," Akers said. "It's the most important policy of the district, the only one we use every day."

Because of Susitna Valley High School's interest in the 1984-85 Wasilla pilot attendance policy, the two schools' principals and assistant principals drafted a comment.

(Continued on Back Page)

Colony coins back in circulation

By JIM SPRINGER

Bingles don't jingle the way they used to, but in this 50th-anniversary year of the Matanuska Valley colonization, they are making a comeback.

In 1935, the coin tokens that colonists called bingles could be traded for groceries, drugs, hardware and whatnot at the trading post in what is now Palmer. Bingles were coins minted specifically for use in the Matanuska farming colony, to substitute for regular coinage, which was scarce in that depression era.

Each of the 202 colonists who settled in the Valley were issued $30 worth of bingles each month, said colonist Louis Osdacher. An extra $5 worth was thrown in for each child in a family.

Bingles were in circulation for about a year and a half in the early days of colonization, Osdacher said. They filled a need during the first months of colonization by simplifying the bookkeeping at the trading post.

The settlers were able to get credit at the trading post to buy the goods they needed, and had 30 years to pay back their debt. But with 202 families needing goods, the paperwork to keep track of the purchases and the debits overwhelmed the accounting system, said Osdacher.

The bingles were minted to simplify the paperwork, with the debt being recorded in $30 amounts each month, and the coins being used for small purchases. They were also traded between individuals for small transactions, said Osdacher.

While there are very few original bingles still around, the dies for the minting were recently discovered in Seattle and a commemorative minting has been done for the upcoming 50th Year Colony Celebration.

The celebration committee has had 2,500 complete sets of the coins minted, and they are being sold to help pay for expenses of the celebration.

The Colony Days celebration is scheduled for the weekend of June 7, 8 and 9 in Palmer. It will honor the families who came up from farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan to Alaska as part of a Federal Emergency Relief Administration plan in 1935.

Commemorative sets of bingles can be purchased at the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corp. building at 248 East Dahlia St. in Palmer.

NEWFANGLED BINGLES—George Crowther, manager of Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, displays sets of commemorative bingles minted to benefit the upcoming Colony Days Celebration.
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 her father died in 1965, she married another colonist, Ray Reherchek, 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 Louis Osasther, of Palmer.

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

Osasther, 74, who was a colony employee 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 colony for several months in 1935 for The Journal and other major U.S. newspapers.

Osasther 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 employees have been invited.

The concept for the Matanuska Colony development was generated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935 for the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation 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 1931.

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

The first list of prospective colonists was made from county relief rolls. More than 90% of the 500 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, but 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 after.

The Milwaukee Journal had assigned me to report on that land and on those dreams for the, well, mostly unknown 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 Lilibelle Boyens, 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. Mihuel as we made those mischievously smooth 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 went to houses built. From day one the colonists looked to me as their one contact with the outside. I was the best way to cover America's first-ever attempt at colonization to get close to the families, to be one of them and yet be an observer.

I ate and slept with them, rode hard to their Germany, playing 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 I first referred to the last 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 know that the events of that night were history in the making. I felt satisfaction when my notes helped straighten out the official minutes. I look back over 90 minutes to write the story. With a Palmer June 12 deadline, my lead paragraph said: "Eighteen sturdy men and women made history Tuesday night out of garbage, dogs and cows."

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

That first chairman, Harry Campbell, out of
Colony Village - A taste of Alaska's historical past

By JIM SPRINGER

After months of preparation, including the moving of an original colony house, Colony Village, on the Alaska State Fairgrounds, had its grand opening last week.

Two buildings, the Hesse-Smith House and the Wineck Barn, are open to the public and have displays of original colony-era artifacts.

In what used to be the living room of the Hesse-Smith House, the walls are hung with historic colony photographs, and a glass display holds cartons and containers once used for colony farm products.

An antique postal counter, which is actually a branch office of the U.S. Postal Service, is behind the living room. During the Alaska State Fair, the post office cancels letters using a special cancellation mark.

What was once a bedroom in the original house is being used to display typical colony-era living-room furniture, including an organ.

The house itself is an artifact as well as a museum building. The house was built for the Claude Hesse family in 1935, using plan number three colony house plans were based on five different options. The Hesse's modified their house after it was built, adding a large enclosed back porch, with several windows.

The south-side addition is probably the only one of its kind, said Colony Village historical director Jim Fox, and it worked well for starting plants early in the spring.

The house was originally located on tract 101 just north of Palmer. It was later bought by the Smith family and moved to Wasilla until acquired for the Colony Village display in 1977.

Wineck Barn, was built for the Ed Wineck farm near Bodenburg Butte in 1935, and was also acquired in 1977. It follows the plan for all of the colony barns and is essentially a cube, 32 feet on a side, said Fox.

Inside the barn is a lifesize canvas tent of the type used in the first summer of colonization. The tent is furnished with authentic beds, chairs, tables and a large coal-burning stove.

On one wall of the barn is a photo display of settlement and farming in the Valley before the arrival of the colonists.

Colony Village is a project of the Alaska State Fair, Historical, Educational and Arts Association. It is open to the public Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Fox or Lucille McSorley are usually on hand to guide tours of the village, located next to the Transportation Museum on the south end of the fairgrounds.
D and D House Moving company from Palmer moved their first colony barn last Monday. The barn was built in 1935 by long-time resident Johan Johnson and was bought by Lerol Heaven. Heaven saved the structure from certain destruction as the previous owners were planning to tear it down due to subdivision.
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 freight 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.
PIONEER SPIRIT
Lee Hartley helped build Palmer through hard work and strong family business

BY GREG JOHNSON
Frontiersman

“If the three most important things in business are location, location, location, a close second is recognizing potential. Acting on that potential is what defined Lee Hartley, the 95-year-old patriarch of one of the Valley’s most prominent businesses and families. Hartley’s Aug. 5 death brought the family together again at their 40-acre Springler system spread—all 50 of them, except for one who has a commitment for military basic training.

Hartley’s life is more than an example of a successful businessman as founder and owner of Hartley Brothers and later the Valley’s first Ford dealership. It’s also a story of achieving the American Dream while colonizing the Matanuska Valley with his wife of nearly 70 years, Marlyn.

In fact, it wasn’t for her, there may not have been Hartley Brothers.

“Lee and I were going together and his folks lived at the Butte,” Marlyn said. That courtship took him past the familiar location of Hartley Brothers at the corner of Arctic Avenue and Valley Way.

“He would pass that corner every day and say, ‘What an ideal place for a service station,’” she said.

Lee and Marlyn Vasanoja would marry Oct. 30, 1940, and in 1947, he teamed up with his brothers and father to open Hartley Brothers, a fuel service and repair station in Palmer. It’s a partnership that continues today.

The family still owns the property, now a Hartley Davidson dealership, with the familiar “Hartley Brothers” on the building.

Although Lee never finished high school and spent time during the Valley’s colonization in 1935 and 1936 digging ditches, being a business owner was in his blood, Marlyn said.

“He was just born that way,” she said. “His dad was a businessman, and he was born into that. His dad said if he wasn’t going to finish school he had to work. His dream was to always have a service station.”

As the years went by, Hartley Brothers became a key business in the growth of Palmer, she said.

“I know a lot of kids in Palmer grew up selling gas at the gas station. Lots and lots of them, that was their first job,” she said, adding there was always a humble pride in being part of the town’s progress. “We were just amazed at the growth, because we grew with it. We helped it grow. Lee never said, ‘I did that, I did this.’ He never bragged about things that happened. It amazed me now when driving to Wasilla or even to the hospital.”

Lee went on to build Hartley Motors Inc., the first Ford dealership in the Valley, but sold the dealership to Harold Nye in 1984.

See HARTLEY, Page A7

IF YOU GO
A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. today at the Palmer Elks’ Lodge, 2600 Barry’s Resort Drive in Wasilla. All who wish to attend are invited to bring a dessert or salad for a potluck.”