

OUR PUBLIC LANDS . . .



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500 million acres of land that belong to us and to our neighbors and to all the people of the United States . . . public lands that are rich in natural resources . . . timber, rangeland, water, minerals, and land for every use . . . "active acres" that must be carefully and wisely managed for the welfare of the Nation . . .

As a forum for the exchange of ideas and information on development, utilization, and conservation of the resources on public lands, this periodical contains no copyrighted material. If pictures or material are reprinted, a credit line should be given OUR PUBLIC LANDS and the Bureau of Land Management.

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SMALL TRACTS IN ALASKA

by GEORGE E. M. GUSTAFSON, *Agricultural Economist (Land)*

The most popular method of land disposal in Alaska today is by means of the Small Tract Act of June 1, 1938.

The first land leased under this act in the vicinity of Anchorage was classified for lease and disposal on May 17, 1949. Since that date there has been a total of 4,321 tracts, comprising 12,101 acres, opened for lease and sale as homesites, cabin sites, and business sites in the Territory, of which 1,283 tracts, comprising 3,681 acres, are located in the Anchorage area. In spite of the large number of tracts made available, there has been a steady and ever-increasing pressure by the public to open additional lands under this act. Only on very few occasions has the Bureau been able to open for drawing sufficient number of tracts to have a few left over from the 91-day veterans' preference period so the general public could have a chance to secure a tract, and these have generally been inaccessible at the time of opening.

Since the opening of the first small tracts in the Anchorage area, various questions have been raised, i. e.: (1) Are the lands actually proceeding to patent or are they merely standing vacant? (2) Are the lands being leased, and after expiration of the 2-year lease period reverting back to the Government to be released to someone else? (3) Are nonveterans circumventing the veterans' preference filing period by getting a veteran to file for the tract and then having it assigned to the nonveteran? (4) Are the tracts too large, thus putting the veteran lessee into the real estate business by furnishing an incentive for subdividing upon obtaining title? (5) Are the lands actually being used for the purpose for which they were originally classified and leased, or are the veterans merely taking them for speculation?

In order to determine the answers to these questions as well as provide a guide to the future planning in small tracts, a survey of some of the small tract units in the Anchorage area was made in the fall and winter of 1953. Nine small tract units were selected for the survey. These were the units which were originally opened to entry in 1949 and 1950. Within the 9 small tract units included in this survey, 336 tracts, or 38.9 percent were examined in detail.

In reply to the first question, i. e., are the lands actually proceeding to patent? An analysis of the data collected revealed that 239 out of 336 leases, or 71.2 percent, had proceeded to patent.

The major portion of these were the original lessees, but the figure does include the tracts on which the original lease had expired and the new lessee obtained patent. As for question No. (2) pertaining to expiration of the leases, 89, or 26.5 percent, of the original leaseholders permitted their leases to expire, but the major portion of these tracts were subsequently patented by the new lessee.

Ninety-four of the 336 lessees, or 27.9 percent, were granted renewal of their leases, in order to complete their improvements. This is considered to be a remarkably low percentage when one takes into consideration the short building season and the fact that all of these areas were relatively inaccessible at the time they were leased.

As for question No. (3), i. e., "Are veterans circumventing the veterans' preference filing, etc.," the statistics reveal that only 6 out of a total of 336 tracts were assigned. This figure emphatically refutes any assumption that nonveterans were using veterans to file for them and then having the tract assigned to the nonveteran. In the area of rapid population turnover such as the greater Anchorage area, one could expect a normal assignment of leases greater in number than the figures indicate.

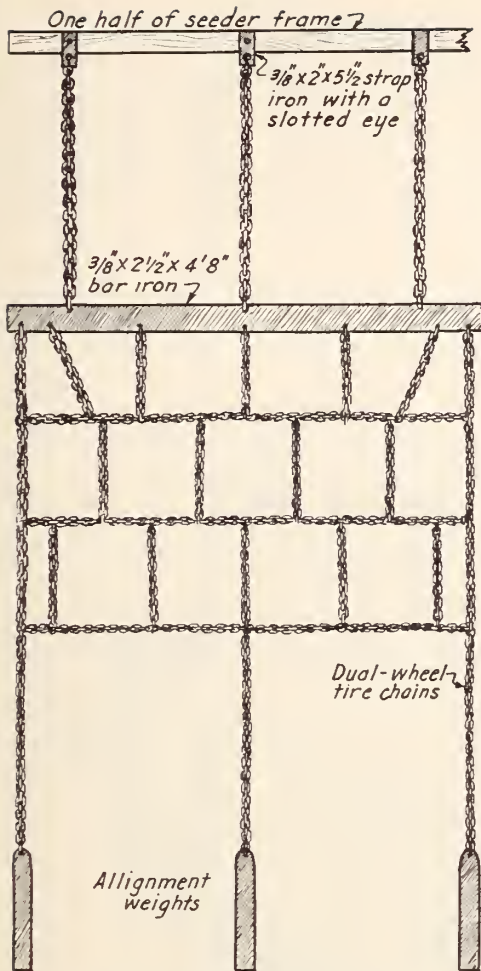
In reply to question No. (4), i. e., "Are the tracts too large, thus putting the veteran lessee into the real estate business by furnishing an incentive for subdividing upon obtaining title?" the statistics show that only 23 out of the 239 patentees, or 9.6 percent, subdivided their small tracts into lots. Of the 23 that subdivided, 12 were located in the area adjacent to the military reservation, and occupied predominantly by military personnel stationed in Alaska for a definite tour of duty.

The fact that 71.2 percent of the leased tracts proceeded to patent is remarkable but doesn't reveal the actual use, if any, being made of the land. In order to arrive at an answer to question (5), i. e., "Are the lands actually being used, etc.," a

(Continued on page 15)

SMALL TRACTS IN ALASKA

(Continued from page 13)



Drag for covering seed (Top view).

tract this year. The land is rocky. The plowed surface is strewn with plowed brush and boulders. These drags hug the ground closely and do not hang up on boulders or clog with brush. There has been no breakage and they require very little attention during operation of the seeding equipment.

These drags have given better seed covering than any other such equipment which has been used in the district. They have saved a lot of time in seeding operations because they require practically no attention or repair.

check was made of a total of 320 tracts in the 9 small-tract units. It was encouraging to find that 138 families were making the small tracts their permanent year-round residences, or a total of 43.0 percent of the tracts checked. In addition to the 138 full-time residents, there were 16 families, or 5 percent, making their small tracts their part-time residences, and three additional tracts being used as business sites.

In addition to the above uses being made of the tracts, 42 leaseholders or patentees, or 13.1 percent, were using their tracts for recreational or weekend use. If we group all of the full-time and part-time users of small tracts into a grand total, it is encouraging to note that 199 families, or 62.2 percent, are making good use of their land. Included in the 199 tracts are 3 business sites. This is a substantial percentage when one realizes that the majority of the tracts are relatively isolated, due to the lack of good year-round roads. **With the building of additional major access roads by the Alaska Road Commission during the summer of 1954, it is anticipated that many more leaseholders and patentees will make the small tracts their permanent homes.** The story of the small-tract program in the Territory points out that as soon as an area becomes accessible by the construction of good roads, the use made of the tracts increases tremendously. **It is now the policy of the Bureau in Area 4 to plan jointly with the Alaska Road Commission on the construction of access roads into a small-tract area before it is actually opened to filing.**

Finally, if one were to wax sentimental in this land of the midnight sun, picturing a snug log cabin nestled in the spruce forest, this would be the exception rather than the rule. A survey of the type of construction used in the small tracts showed that 70 percent of the leaseholders stuck with the conventional frame type of construction, and 3.7 percent used either concrete block, quonset huts, or trailers placed on permanent foundations. Seventeen and two-tenths percent of the tracts examined had no improvements on them. Only 9.1 percent of the leaseholders resorted to log construction.

There is a need for additional small tracts. Every effort is being made by the Bureau of Land Management to supply the demand.