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The Matanuska Colony: The New Deal in Alaska

by [Murray Lundberg](#)

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To the younger generation, the term "Dirty Thirties" is virtually meaningless except in the most abstract of ways. Of the millions of people who suffered through the combined economic depression and drought, though, most still remember clearly, some 65 years later, going without even what we now consider basic amenities, and often without a substantial meal for long periods. Men who had always prided themselves on being able to take care of their families, who had in many cases built up prosperous farms, were gradually forced to admit that they either had to rely on the charity of strangers, or let their children starve. In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt offered 203 families from the hardest-hit areas of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan the chance to start fresh in a new land, in a fertile Alaskan valley with the melodic name Matanuska.

The Matanuska Colony was part of Roosevelt's [New Deal](#), his plan to help Americans recover from the Depression, partly through massive public works projects. The Matanuska Colony was not a solitary project; other rural rehabilitation colonies which were established during this period include Cherry Lake Farms, FL; Dyess Colony, AR; and the Pine Mountain Valley Rural Community, GA. Virtually from the day of its announcement, the Matanuska program in particular received both flowery praise for its role in helping people rebuild their lives, and bitter condemnation as both a waste of money and a politically dangerous social experiment. Both the Alaska territorial legislature and the Alaska Chamber of Commerce warned that if the project failed, Alaska was unable to care for that many indigents.

Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan were chosen to be part of the project because it was felt they most closely resembled the climate in Alaska, and because they had an extremely high percentage of residents on social assistance programs. Local aid workers were given the responsibility of choosing people to be included in the project. The guidelines they were given were fairly loose:

As far as possible, families should be selected first on their farming ability and secondly, those who may have secondary skills and who may adjust themselves to a diversified farming activity and can assist with carpentry on their homes and then those who may know something about machinery and blacksmithing and who have leadership qualities" (Atwood, 32)

Of the people chosen, all but 19 couples had children, the average age of the men was 33 years, and 28 years for the women. A high percentage were of Scandinavian ancestry. There were some mistakes made - one man arrived in Alaska and was found to have a wooden leg, 8 had active TB, and one had to be committed to a mental hospital before even reaching Alaska.

Given the speed at which most government projects seem to move these days, it's rather hard to believe how fast the Matanuska Colony Project was put together. Following a survey which was made in June 1934 to ascertain whether or not an agricultural colony was feasible in Alaska, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Department of the Interior agreed on January 15, 1935 to undertake the project. Three weeks later, 80,000 acres of land in the Matanuska Valley was withdrawn from homestead entry (another 180,000 acres was set aside on March 13), and by April 23, the first construction workers and freight were on their way north. Three days later, the first of the colonists left Minnesota!

The Matanuska Valley had received little attention previously - only a handful of people had settled before the arrival of the Alaska Railroad in 1916. Within a year, however, there were enough farmers to form an agricultural co-operative, and over the next few years, about 400 homesteads were applied for, with the new settlers' efforts being aided by being able to take occasional work in the coal mines at Chickaloon, or the gold mines near Willow. Despite generally positive reports from the Agricultural Experiment Station which had been established in 1917 (6 others had been built in Alaska since 1899). the optimism of the farmers often didn't last long, and many of those settlers soon left. In 1935, only about 100 families remained in the valley. Included in the 260,000 acres set aside for the Colony were most of the homesteads which had been abandoned.

The community of Palmer had been established in 1916 as a stop on the Alaska Railroad's branch line to the Chickaloon coal mines, but very little development had occurred since that time. When Palmer was chosen as the base of operations for FERA's project, the community grew quickly. The tent city erected for the colonists and



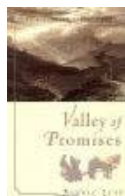
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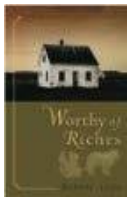
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government officials changed configuration rapidly as colonists moved to their tracts, offices were built for the officials, and other services and facilities were constructed. Among the buildings constructed at this time, the Central School, Alaska Railroad Depot, and the Lutheran and United Protestant churches still stand.

The first of the Minnesota contingent arrived at Palmer on May 10, 1935. Things did not go smoothly for the first few weeks, to put it mildly. There were shortages of many supplies, there was mud, there were complaints that government was charging too much for supplies. There certainly were errors made in freight scheduling - perishable food supplies were shipped without refrigeration and went bad, school desks arrived before lumber for the school, grindstones before axes, electric meat slicers long before there was any electricity. But, bit by jerky bit, the colony was coming together.

On May 23, 1935, the drawing was made for the colonists' tracts of 40 acres each. Arthur Hack drew the first piece of paper out of the box, and it took 3 hours to draw all the rest. "After the drawing was over and the excitement had died down, mutterings of dissatisfaction and disappointment could be heard here and there. Some had drawn such poor parcels of land that they were permitted to draw an additional forty acres, making 80-acre tracts altogether. Some who did not like what they got went around offering barter for a trade" (Atwood, 62)

An important event in the social history of the colony occurred on July 10, 1935, when the first baby was born - Laura Norena was the second child of Howard and Bernice Van Wormer. The birth brought joy to the community as a whole, in the same way that the recent deaths of three children, all under 4 years old, had spread sadness.

Colonists had few options in housing, and no options for barns. Government architect David R. Williams designed 5 houses, which could be built of logs, or of frame construction.

"Four of the plans were for one-and-a-half-story houses, with bedrooms in the half story; four of them had a combined living room and kitchen; and none had a separate dining room. The houses had side-gable roofs and were either L-shaped or had some other element, such as a vestibule, projecting from the mass of the building. Owners could make minor variations. The barn designs were standard, a 32-foot-square gambrel-roofed structure, often constructed with logs on the lower portion and frame above." (Hoagland, 71)

A fair number of these buildings remain, and on a drive around the Matanuska Valley, it's fairly easy to pick out Colonist homesteads, with the small barns usually being the clearest signature. The Palmer Historical Society is currently restoring the original home of Oscar and Irene Beylund, as well as some of the outbuildings. Located on what was Tract 94, it is now within the Historic District of Palmer, and close to the Visitors' Center. Once the home is completed, and the society's collection of farm implements is displayed, visitors will be able to get a good idea of what life on a Colony homestead was like in the late '30s.



Getting homes and barns built was not accomplish without problems; Raymond Rebarchek recalls the incompetence of the workmen who were building his home: "twice they took the partially built house down and started over. The third time, they used logs sawn flat on two sides, and then three sides, and the work proceeded more smoothly" (Hoagland, 134)

In many respects, the problems faced by the Matanuska colonists are similar to those faced by the agriculture industry today - the short growing season leaves little room for error (or bad luck). High freight prices, high labor costs and fairly small, distant markets all combined to make life in the valley a constant challenge to farmers, but that seems to have been part of the attraction to those who remained. The massive military projects which started in 1940 enabled many of the Matanuska colonists to hang on to homesteads which would otherwise have been abandoned.

A common question that people have when looking back at a project such as this is "Was it a success?" There is no clear answer to that, however - the project cost about \$5,000,000 (the original estimate had been \$982,000!) - 60% of that money went into public improvements, and the hired workforce reached a peak of 910 people in early August 1935, so compared to other programs of its type it was reasonably successful. But did it accomplish its stated goals? Within 5 years, over half of the colonists had left the valley; in 1965, only 20 of the original families were still farming in the valley, and that number has dropped to a handful. But there is no question that the project gave Alaska a profile that it had not enjoyed for many years, and it would be difficult to measure the impact that had on not only the colonists (both those who stayed, and those who left), but others who chose to come North as a result of the excitement that the project caused, and the dreams that it sparked in others.

The 90-minute film [Alaska Far Away: The New Deal Pioneers of the Matanuska Colony](#) tells the story of this bold government program, and the families who suddenly found themselves thrust into the national spotlight.

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The 203 families on the list which follows are those who were in the Matanuska Valley at the first draw for land tracts, on May 23, 1935. It should be noted here again that these were not the original settlers in the Valley, merely the first of the Colonists.

Alexander: Harold, Francis and 4 children - William Gene, Bonnie Lee, Winston and Harold (Robbinsdale, MN)
Anderson: Chris, Grace and 3 children (Shell Lake, WI)
Anderson: Clarence, Clara and 2 children (Draper, WI)
Anderson: Walter, Garnet and 4 children (Kenton, MI)
Archer: Pearle, Dorothy and 4 children (Nelma, WI)
Arndt: Lawrence, Etta and 1 child (Nelma, WI)
[Bailey](#): Ferber, Ruth and 2 children (Lena, WI)
Barry: Earl, Louise and 7 children (Rhineland, WI)
Bell: Lloyd and Dorothy (Brook Park, MN)
Bennett: William, Ruth and children (Empire, MI)
Benson: Henning and Irene (Barnum, MN)
Bergan: Leonard, Alice and 1 child (Carlton, MN)
Beylund: Oscar and Irene (Rice Lake, WI)
Billier: Robert, Dorothy and 2 children (Fence, WI)
Boice: Harold, Lona and 6 children (Merritt, MI)
Bouwens: William, Lulubelle and 11 children (Rhineland, WI)
Bradley: John, Sylvia and 2 children (Lake Nebagamon, WI)
Brown: Otis, Grace and 3 children (Enterprise, WI)
Campbell: George, Onabelle and 2 children (Mio, MI)
Campbell: Harry and Theodora (Abrams, WI)
Carson: Arnold, Hortense and 2 children (Milaca, MN)
Carter: Clifford, Dorothy and 2 children (Muskegan, MI)
Casler: William and Elsie (Mesick, MI)
Chaney: Escar, Louise and 3 children (Stephanson, MI)
Christianson: Martin, Leota and 1 child (Ogilvie, MN)
Church: John, Julia and 5 children (Mountain, WI)
Clayton: Walter, Rose and 3 children (Spooner, WI)
Connors: George, Edith and 4 children (South Range, WI)
Cook: Clyde, Jessie and 7 children (Longville, MN)
Cousineau, Charles, Reba and 1 child (Lansing, MI)
Covert: Albert and Catherine (Cable, WI)
Davis: Harold, Edith and 2 children (Lansing, MI)
Dean: Ballard, Marion and 3 children (Fence, WI)
DeLand: Nile, Helen and 5 children (Winter, WI)
Dingman: William, Mildred and 3 children (Frankfurt, MI)
Doughty: Glendon, Hulda and 2 children (Milaca, MN)
Dragseth: Joe, Velma and 2 children (Rice Lake, WI)
Dreghorn: Lawrence, Grace and 5 children (Wolverine, MI)
Durphy: Robert, Gladys and 3 children (Cheboygan, MI)
Eckert: Virgil, Lillian and 2 children (Cloquet, MN)
Ellison: Carl, Ruth and 1 child (Billings Park, WI)
Ellsworth: Lester, Senia and 5 children (Merriweather, MI)
Emberg: George, Evelyn and 3 children
Engebretson: Oscar, Johanna and 3 children (Richfield, MN)
Ennis: Max, Lila and 3 children (Tower, MI)
Erickson: Carl, Inga and 3 children (Rhineland, WI)
Ferguson: Walter, Mable and 2 children (Iron River, WI)
Fitzpatrick: Theodore, Leona and 5 children (Roscommon, MI)
Foster: Kenneth, Marion and 2 children (Stephenson, MI)
Fisher: Otto, Frances and 1 child (Kanabec, MN)
Fox: Waldo, Mable and 1 child (Hulbert, MI)
France: Grant, Iva and 5 children (Grand Rapids, MN)
Frank: Darrell, Lois and 2 children (Mio, MI)
Fredericks: Albert, Audrey and 2 children (Sturgeon Lake, MN)
Fredericks: Allen, Lenore and 3 children (Sturgeon lake, MN)
Giblin: Theodore, Jennie and 1 child (Brookston, MN)
Greene: Clarence and Alida (Hancock, MI)
Greise: Raymond, Hazel and 3 children (Starks, WI)
Gulberg: Bernard, Beatrice and 2 children (Medford, WI)
Hack: Arthur, Mabel and 3 children (Ogilvie, MN)
Hammon: Leroy, Gretchen and 2 children (Iron River, WI)
Havemeister: Arnold, Emmy and 1 child (Wallace, MI)
Hemmer: Patrick, Cora and 4 children (Wright, MN)
Henry: Francis, Ella and 1 child (Viroqua, WI)
Hermon: John, Hilda and 6 children (Plymouth, WI)

Herried: Leonard, Ella and 2 children (Trempealeau, WI)
Hess: Frank, Florence and 3 children (Cavour, WI)
Hesse: Claude, Helen and 1 child (St. Louis Park, MN)
Higginbotham: Robert, Clara and 2 children (Stambaugh, MI)
Hoeft: John, Adeline and 1 child (Rogers City, MI)
Hoganson: Harold, Mayme and 3 children (Ewen, MI)
Holler: John and Gertrude (Pine City, MN)
Hopkins: Roy, Ada and 2 children (Arcadia, MI)
Huntley: Walter, Beatrice and 2 children (Sault Ste. Marie, MI)
Huseby: Einer, Inez and 3 children (Pembine, WI)
Hynek: William, Neville and 5 children (Faithorn, MI)
Ising: William, Marie and 2 children (Saginaw, MN)
Jacobson: Adolph, Mable and 2 children (Mohawk, MI)
Jahr: Paul, Emma and 4 children (Pine City, MN)
Jensen: Harry, Viola and 4 children (Tipler, WI)
Jenson: Henry, Edna and 2 children (Littlefork, MN)
Johnson: Arvid, Edith and 2 children (Crystal Falls, MI)
Johnson: Clinton, Doris and 2 children (Winter, WI)
Johnson: Harold, Fannie and 1 child (Houghton, MI)
Johnson: Johan, Irene and 1 child (Anatol, MN)
Johnson: Victor and Klaria (Harshaw, WI)
Johnston: James and Lillian (Shell Lake, WI)
Jones: Vernon, Eleanor and 2 children (Onamia, MN)
Juvette: Eugene and Mary (Winter, WI)
Kalliosaari: John, Letta and 1 child (Copemish, MI)
Kenser: Grant and Gertrude (Swatara, MN)
Kertulla: Oscar, Elvi and 2 children (Deer River, MN)
Kindgren: Oscar, Saima and 1 child (Duluth, MN)
Kirsch: John, Rose and 3 children (Solway, MN)
Klienpier: Kenneth, Grace and 3 children (Anatol, MN)
Koenen: Henry, Bernice and 2 children (South Range, WI)
Kurtz: Cecil, Mary and 2 children (Suring, WI)
Laako: Henry, Ruth and 1 child (Mohawk, MI)
LaFlam: Claire, Emma and 3 children (Shell Lake, WI)
Lake: John, Magdalene and 3 children (Superior, WI)
LaRose: Henry, Clystia and 4 children (Phillips, WI)
Larsh: Emil, Gertrude and 2 children (Iron Mountain, MI)
Larson: Fred, Laura and 4 children (Ranier, MN)
La Valley: Edward, Florence and 4 children (Houghton, MI)
Leander: Rudolph, Inez and 1 child (Onamia, MN)
Lee: Francis, Eugenie and 3 children (Forest Lake, MN)
Lemmon: George and Josephina (Littlefork, MN)
Lemmon: Gilford and Catherine (Littlefork, MN)
Lentz: Joseph, Zuleika and 6 children (Merrill, WI)
Lentz: William, Viola and 1 child (Merrill, WI)
Lepak: Thomas, Irene and 1 child (Duluth, MN)
Lipke: Henry, Mary and 2 children (Harrietta, MI)
Loyer: Joseph, Naomi and 4 children (Harrisville, MI)
Lund: John, Margaret and 1 child (Saginaw, MN)
MacNevin: Leon, Loraine and 5 children (Atlanta, MI)
McCormick: Martin, Margaret and 3 children (East Tawas, MI)
McKechnie: Loren, Edna and 5 children (Cloquet, MN)
McKendry: Howard, Edith and 1 child (Winter, WI)
Manginen: Walter, Vivian and 1 child (Champion, MI)
Martin: Clyde and Arbutus (Mackinaw City, MI)
Mattson: Runar and Eleanor (Ashland, WI)
Meehan: John, Viola and 5 children (Cloquet, MN)
Meier: Carl, Edith and 5 children (Duluth, MN)
Miller: Neil, Margaret and 3 children (Blair, WI)
Monroe: Lester, Mary and 3 children (Hiles, WI)
Moses: Arthur, Blanche and 1 child (Bigfork, MN)
Moss: Edward, Myrtle and 1 child (Pine City, MN)
Nelson: Arthur, Isabel and 2 children (Shell Lake, WI)
Nelson: Paul, Margaret and 1 child (Riverview, WI)
Newville: Irving, Lila and 1 child (Boyne City, MI)
Nichols: Harry, Virgil and 1 child (Georgetown, WI)
Novak: George, Catherine and 1 child (Ashland, WI)
Nutilla: Eino, Betty and 2 children (Ironwood, MI)
Olmstead: Vernon, Pearl and 3 children (Remer, MN)

Olson: Hilmer, Gwendolyn and 2 children (Duluth, MN)
Olson: Walter, Minnie and 1 child (Duluth, MN)
Onkka: David, Saina and 6 children (Bruce Crossing, MI)
Pakonen: Russell and Madelon (Long River, MI)
Parks: Clarence, Beulah and 3 children (Merriweather, MI)
Parlette: Paul and Violet (Rapid River, MI)
Patton: Claire, Margaret and 1 child (Long Siding, MN)
Peterson: Otto, Meryle and 5 children (Wrenshall, MN)
Pfeiff: John, Clara and 6 children (Stephenson, MI)
Piaskowski: Frank, Frances and 5 children (Ironwood, MI)
Pippel: Walter, Melva and 4 children (Robbinsdale, MN)
Poore: Chaney, Florence and 1 child (Littlefork, MN)
Porter: John and Alice (Champion, MI)
Porterfield: Ernest and Almeda (Harrieta, MI)
Powell: Ores, Lorenzie and 2 children (Duluth, MN)
Puhl: Joseph, Blanche and 2 children (Ashland, WI)
Quarnstrom: Clarence, Sadie and 1 child (Daggett, MI)
Rasche: August, Anna and 1 child (Wentworth, WI)
[Rebarchek](#): Raymond, Edna and 1 child (Graceton, MN)
Reitan: Bernard, Alice and 2 children (Superior, WI)
Retallic: Arthur, Alice and 1 child (Amasa, MI)
Ring: Frank, Lucille and 6 children (Beecher, WI)
Rorrison: Lawrence, Vera and 2 children (St. Louis Park, MN)
Rossiter: Henry, Mary and 4 children (Cloquet, MN)
Rotz: Fred, Emma and 2 children (Plymouth, MI)
Roughan: Henry, Minnie and 5 children (Monico, WI)
Ruddell: Charles, Ada and 6 children (Duluth, MN)
Runyan: Scottie, Irene and 2 children (Winter, WI)
Saaralla: Matt, Olga and 1 child (Swan River, MN)
Sandvik: Ingolf, Agnes and 6 children (Moose Lake, MN)
Scheibl: Gustave, Alethea and 3 children (Sheboygan, WI)
Schultz: William, Martha and 1 child (Tomahawk, WI)
Schutt: Claus, Hattie and 3 children (Lucas, MI)
Sexton: Allan, Minnie and 5 children (Pelican lake, WI)
Sieber: Joseph, Albertine and 5 children (Grasston, MN)
Sjodin: Clarence, Alice and 2 children (Onamia, MN)
Smith: Lauren, Hollis and 5 children (Bennett, MN)
Smith: Martin, Margaret and 7 children (Ewen, MI)
Smith: William, Alice and 5 children (Bennett, WI)
Snyder: Thomas, Freda and 4 children (Manistee, MI)
Sorenson: Clarence, Vivian and 1 child (Rice Lake, WI)
Soyk: Martin, Genette and 1 child (Minocqua, WI)
Spencer: Milan, Margaret and 1 child (Mesick, MI)
Spencer: Nelson, Olive and 3 children (Chauncey, MI)
Splittgerber: Herman, Violet and 2 children (Hinckley, MN)
Stahler: John, Elizabeth and 6 children (Chaney, OK)
Stebbins: Dewayne and Evelyn (Mesick, MI)
Stephan: Vincent, Betty and 1 child (Grasston, MN)
Strang: Eldred, Helen and 1 child (Strang, MN)
Sturdy: Norris, Leona and 1 child (Crystal Falls, MI)
Sullivan: Carl Francis, Elizabeth and 1 child (Cheboygan, MI)
Swanda: Frank, Wilhelmina and 2 children (Pine City, MN)
Taylor: Neil, Violet and 1 child (Florence, WI)
Ubert: Lawrence, Alice and 2 children (Kingsdale, MN)
Usher: Robert, Helen and 3 children (Copemish, MI)
Van Wormer: Howard, Bernice and 1 child (South Boardman, MI)
Vasanoja: Laurence, Helen and 5 children (Cloquet, MN)
Venne: George, Irene and 3 children (Bear Lake, MI)
Vickaryous: Anthony, Alys and 4 children (Bandette, MN)
Walport: Paul, Edith and 1 child (Stone Lake, WI)
Way: Sherman, Esther and 1 child (Lyon Manor, MI)
Weiler: Nicholas, Elsa and 4 children (Medford, WI)
Wilding: John, Viola and 4 children (Iron Mountain, MI)
Wilkes: Ray, Ruth and 5 children (Wahkon, MN)
Wilson: Amedee, Leah and 4 children (Cooks, MI)
Wirtanen: Eino and Fannie (Iron River, MI)
Worden: Frank, Margaret and 5 children (Three Lakes, WI)
Yohn: Victor, Manila Bay and 3 children (Tomahawk, WI)
Zook: Harold, Clara and 3 children (Central Lake, MI)

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