



Alaska's Matanuska Colony

National Curriculum Standards for History and Social Studies

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About This Lesson

Objectives

1. To understand the effects of the Great Depression and drought of the early 20th Century;
2. To describe the New Deal resettlement program;
3. To explain the challenges of establishing a New Deal colony in Alaska;
4. To plan and conduct a local history project related to a historic site;
5. To plan and conduct a history project related to a New Deal Resettlement community;
6. To explain how changes in the use of a historic building over time relate to changes in the community where it is located.



Getting Started

What did the New Deal Resettlement Program Mean for Alaska?



(The Colonists' Arrival at Palmer 5:20 PM, May 10th, 1935. Mary Nan Gamble photograph collection, 1935-1945, Alaska State Library - Historical Collections.)



Photo Analysis Worksheet

Step 1: Read the caption and examine the photograph. Write one or two sentences that describe the overall photograph.

Step 2: What details--such as people, objects, and activities--do you notice?

Step 3: What other information--such as time period, location, season, reason photo was taken--can you gather from the photo?

Step 4: What questions do you have about the photograph? How might you find answers to these questions?



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Setting the Stage

When asked why his father, Leroy Hamann, brought his family to Alaska, Dennis Hamann responded that it was for the "same reason everyone else did. There was no work. There was nothing to eat. Dad had two kids and was trying to figure out a way to feed them." The Great Depression was deep and long lasting and affected millions of Americans. After the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, the economy quickly fell into a depression. Unemployment rose to over 20%, with 13-15 million people out of work. Shelters were overwhelmed and shanty towns sprung up in parks and vacant lots in cities across the nation as unemployed people lost their homes and had nowhere to turn. In 1930, a severe drought swept across the Great Plains. High winds stripped dry topsoil and caused huge dust storms that darkened the skies. Vast areas of farmland, as much as 100 million acres, became unusable. In the drought stricken Great Plains farmers watched as their crops and soil dried up and blew away. People caught in the dust storms compared it to having a shovel of fine sand being thrown in their face. Before the drought farmers had struggled to make a living because overproduction led to low prices for farm goods. With the drought many farmers lost their farms. Over the next ten years about 3.5 million people moved out of the Great Plains states.

President Hoover believed that direct assistance was fundamentally wrong and that the depression should be allowed to run its course. However, as the economy worsened he responded with policies aimed at stabilizing banks and industry. Hoover believed that this would result in a trickle-down effect that would pull the nation out of depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who campaigned in 1932 on economic plans that built from the bottom up, believed in putting "faith in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." President Hoover's hands off approach was the traditional way of responding to economic crisis. Roosevelt's plans for taking government assistance to the people was a truly revolutionary approach in that it was the first time that the welfare of the people was stated as a government responsibility. He won the 1932 election with nearly 60% of the vote, entering office in 1933 with a mandate for action. President Roosevelt implemented his plans to ease the country's economic problems through a series of relief, recovery and reform programs called "The New Deal". His broadbased policies focused on helping unemployed workers, farmers, migrant-workers, and minorities. Nearly 20% of the families that received assistance from the Roosevelt's resettlement programs were African-American farmers, farm workers, share croppers, and tenant farmers.

The Resettlement Administration (RA), Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and Farm Security Administration (FSA) were programs to get displaced families off relief. Helping people affected by drought and economic depression was the catalyst for the resettlement program but they were not the only people the program assisted. Resettlement communities were envisioned to give tenant farmers and farm workers a chance to own their own farms; to give unemployed miners and timber workers a chance at a new beginning; to get failing farmers off poor land and onto productive land; and to give industrial workers land on which to grow their own food.



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Resettlement communities were planned communities. Moving to a resettlement community typically meant moving to the next county or across the state. They varied in size but were planned by the government, including locations, building designs, and how they would be governed. Some were complete towns with a community center, while others were a collection of farms intended to help people grow their own food. The community center was the heart of the resettlement community. All of the public buildings needed to support the colony were located in the community center. These usually included a school, store, hospital, administration building, and staff housing. Other buildings were built based on the type of colony. In farm colonies this might include dairies, mills, and canneries for processing farm goods for market. Farms were located so that they were close to the essential services provided at the community center and for the ease of getting their crops to the processing facility.

In the upper midwestern states of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where most of the Alaskan colonists came from, many people were already struggling when the Great Depression struck. Low agricultural prices and drought added to their troubles. From 1870 to 1920, logging and mining had been the mainstays of these states. As a result millions of acres were clear cut, leaving a treeless, brush covered landscape, dotted with tree stumps, called the Cutover Region. As logging ended land speculators established hundreds of offices across the nation and began marketing the land as farmland. It did not matter that the land, with its thin, sandy layer of topsoil was not well suited for farming. They sold the land cheaply and misrepresented its farming potential.

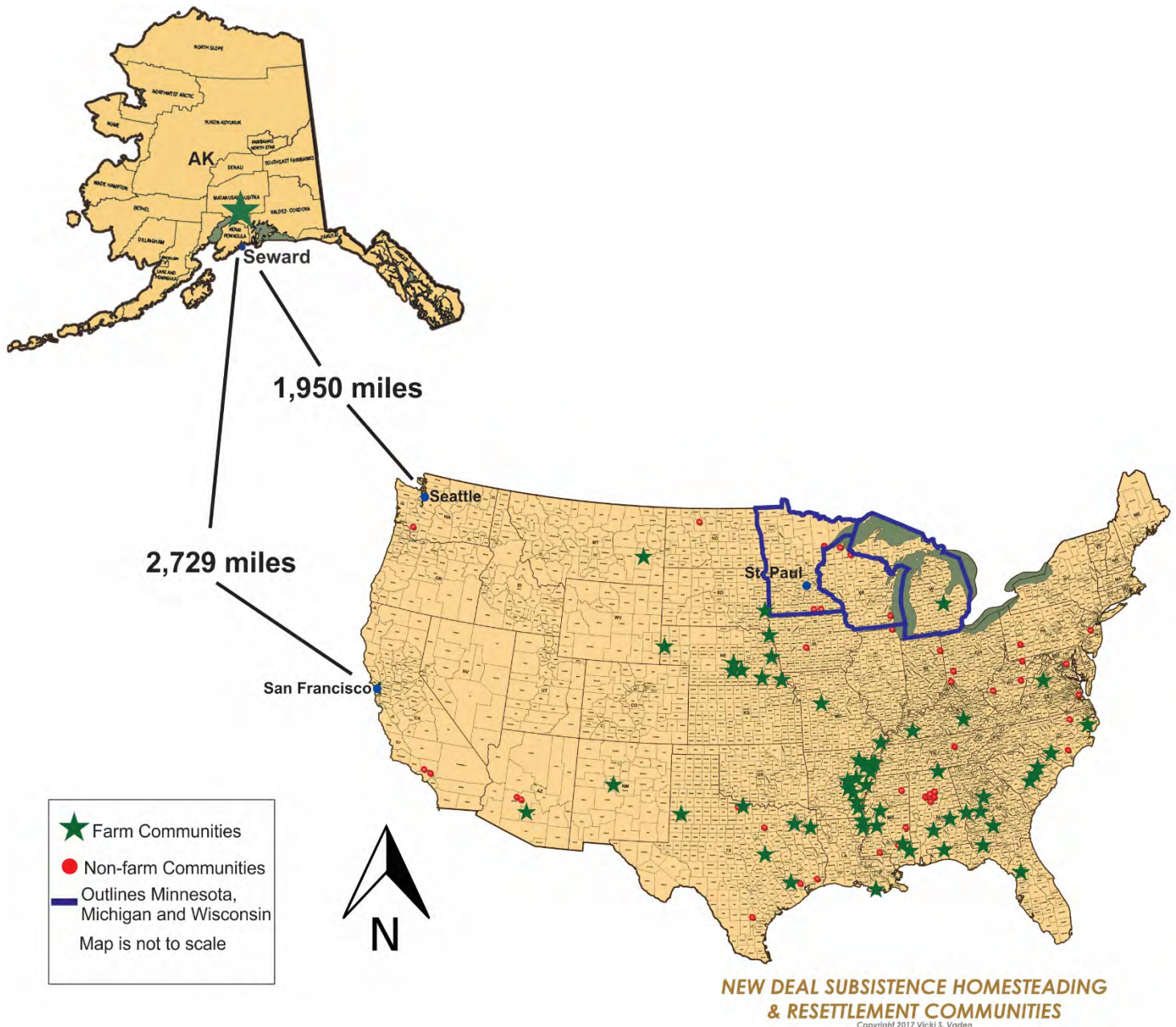
Many immigrants and young families from the Midwest and Great Plains bought Cutover Region land. They found that establishing a farm there was more difficult than they had been led to believe. In addition, to the hard work of removing stumps, rocks, and brush in preparation for farming, fire had swept through many areas stripping the soil of its nutrients and further hindered efforts to farm. It was estimated that a family needed two years of funds on hand to support themselves while they worked to prepare the land for farming. Many families did not have this much savings. Thousands became stranded, unable to make a living, and dependent on public assistance, to survive. Many lived in small homes made of cobbled together materials with tar paper siding. In 1935, federal officials identified the Cutover Region as "one of the nation's critical social and economic problems," observing that 70% of the population of Michigan's Upper Peninsula was on relief.

The New Deal involved the federal government in the welfare of U.S. citizens in a way that had never been seen before. Millions of people were employed in government projects and thousands resettled in planned communities, like the Matanuska Colony. Planned communities were not new but they had always been started by churches and private entities, and never on a scale initiated by the federal government. The New Deal was a defining moment in American history for the way it changed the relationship between the federal government and the American people. More than eighty years after the Matanuska Colony was established much of it remains to tell the story of the New Deal resettlement program in Alaska.



Locating the Site

Map 1: New Deal Resettlement Communities in the United States



New Deal Resettlement Communities, stars represent farm communities and the dots represent non-farm communities. Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, where the colonists came from, are outlined. Map created by Vicki S. Vaden, Cumberland Homesteads, Tennessee, 2017. (Adapted with permission, by Darrell Lewis, Historian, National Park Service).



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Questions for Map 1

1) In what region of the nation (northwest, southwest, northeast, or southeast) was the largest concentration of resettlement communities? What might this concentration of communities tell you about how the Great Depression impacted the population in that part of the nation?

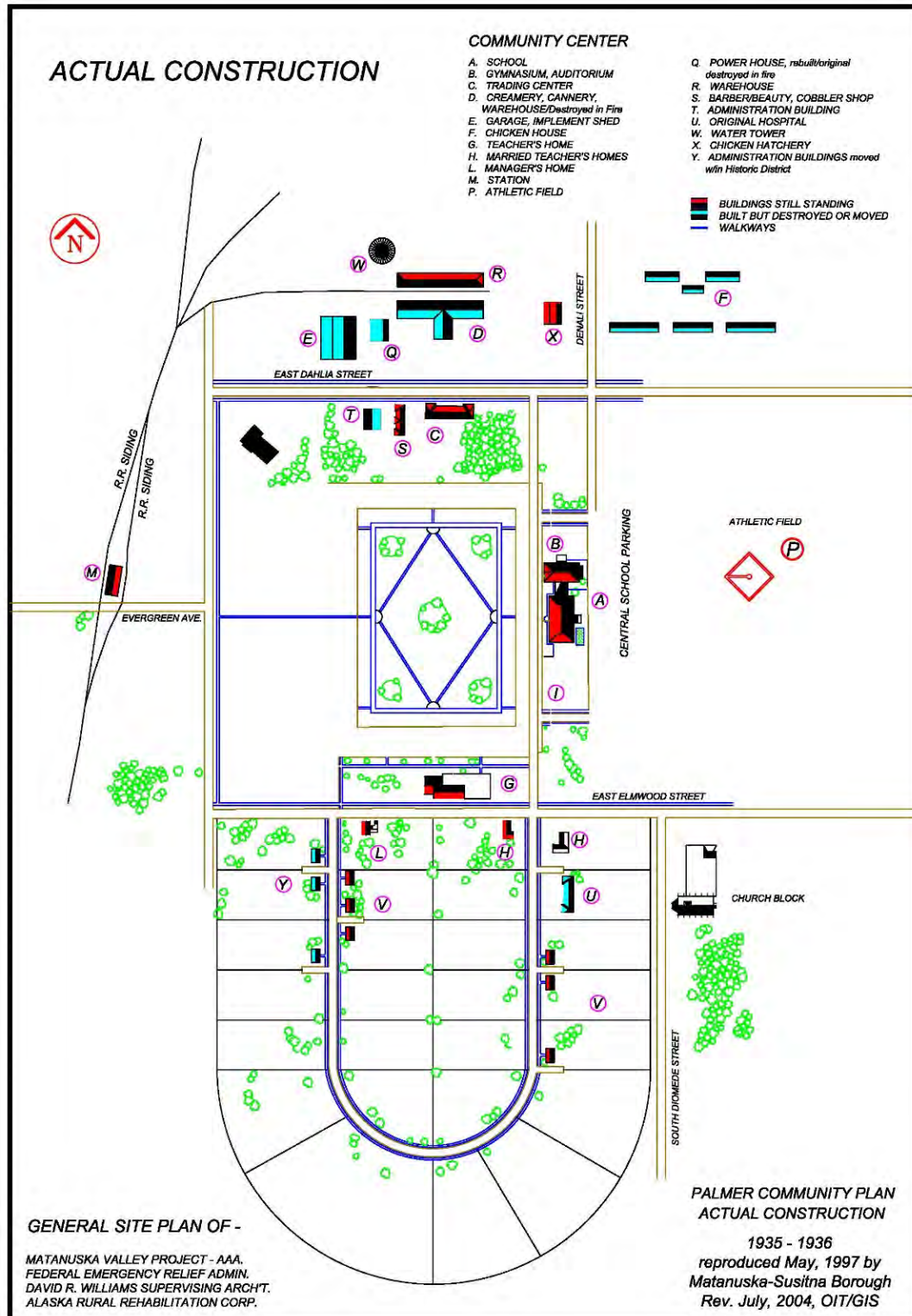
2) Note that a large number of farm communities were established in the area of eastern Arkansas and western Mississippi and Tennessee. Using a classroom map or atlas find the major geographic feature that is located in this part of the nation that would explain this concentration of farm communities. What is the feature? How might it help explain this concentration of communities?

3) Travelling in two groups from St. Paul, Minnesota to Palmer, Alaska, the Matanuska colonists travelled further than any other group of New Deal settlers to their new home. Travelling by train, the first group went to San Francisco, California, while the second group went to Seattle, Washington. From San Francisco and Seattle they travelled by ship to Seward, Alaska and then by train to Palmer. Using a classroom map or atlas find the distance each group travelled to get to Alaska.

4) What does the colonists' willingness to travel such a great distance to start a new life tell you about their lives in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan?



Map 2: Matanuska Colony Community Center as constructed in 1935-36



(Palmer Community Plan, Actual Construction, 1935-1936, reproduced by Matanuska-Susitna Borough)



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Questions for Map 2

1) Looking at the legend, what kinds of services could the colonists get in the community center?

2) Compare and contrast the Matanuska Colony Community Center with your own community. How is it different? How is it similar?

3) What buildings from the original Community Center were gone by 2004? Choose one of these lost buildings and explain what it might tell us about the Matanuska Colony.



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Determining the Facts

What follows is a colonist's letter to a Seattle friend that was published in the *Evening Star*, in Washington, D.C., on June 27, 1935.

Reading 1: *Woman Colonist Cheerful*

WOMAN COLONIST CHEERFUL.

Letter to Seattle Shows All Pioneers Not Resentful.

By the Associated Press.

SEATTLE, June 27.—She had to use wash bluing for ink, but there's nothing "blue" about the letter from a former Wisconsin woman now keeping house in the Government colony of the Matanuska Valley in Alaska.

The letter, written to a Seattle friend, was made public today by E. W. Knight, publisher of the *Alaska Weekly* here. He described it as "a great deal more typical of the attitude of the colonists than the kind of stuff we are getting from the malcontents who always make the most noise."

Federal authorities are investigating charges of some Matanuska colonists that the project had been misrepresented to them.

The housewife, whose name was withheld by Knight, wrote that on arrival at Palmer, the colony capital, "the fun began."

"Many were so shocked," she said. "They had left the States with a very vague conception of what pioneer life in Alaska was to be like—and instead of being game enough to face the music, they were miserable enough to want to make every one else miserable."

Column #1

"For a few days no one knew just where he or she was supposed to be, but now I believe they all are located in tents and being well fed, and surely they should expect no more."

"We are at the main camp, just about a block from the post office, a low, tiny frame building about 12 by 14 feet, and it is usually just packed. Alongside the post office is a low log building called Lunch and Bake Shop. They are operated by the same family—very intelligent people—and I sometimes wonder how they like the idea of this army of civilization marching in on them and disturbing their peaceful life."

"We have chosen plans for our new home, and I believe they will be working along those lines within a few days. * * *

"It is a much larger project than most of us dreamed. But the plans are splendid, and we must just be patient and give them a chance to carry them out. Our tents are 16 by 20—a floor made of rough lumber about 12 inches wide with cracks of half an inch or more between boards. The stoves look good, if you don't use them—they are not successful bakers."

"It is difficult to keep clean, as it is such a dusty country."

"But, you see, we constantly keep trying; therefore we are always busy, thus keeping ourselves contented. We have church services—Catholic and Protestant—and they are organizing a Boy Scout troop, so, you see, in time we shall be quite well taken care of."

Column #2



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Questions for Reading 1

1) What do you think the publisher's purpose was for printing this letter? Who do you think the publisher's intended audience was for the letter? What reason do you think publisher may have had for not including the writer's name?

2) What sources could you use to fact-check the claims made in the letter? List them below.

3) What was life like for the colonists at first? List some of the colonists' experiences described in the letter.



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Determining the Facts

Reading 2: Success and Challenges of the Matanuska Colony.

The mild climate of the Matanuska Valley has drawn people to the area for thousands of years. The Dena'ina Athabascans, the only coastal Athabaskan group, displaced an earlier people in the area about 1,500 years ago. When Russian fur traders arrived in the Cook Inlet Region in the late 1700s approximately 5,000 Dena'ina lived in semi-permanent villages, hunting, fishing, and gathering food throughout Southcentral Alaska. The 1880 U.S. Census identified seven Dena'ina villages in the Matanuska Valley. Russian colonists introduced the Russian Orthodox religion and built churches at the Dena'ina villages of Knik and Eklutna. Over the next several decades, Russian introduced diseases had a devastating effect on the Dena'ina population. After the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867, Euro-Americans began moving into the Territory. Gold seekers moved into the Matanuska Valley in the late 1800s, followed closely by traders and merchants, and then by homesteaders in the 1910s.

Although it is unclear what impact homesteaders had on the Dena'ina's seminomadic way of life, it is likely that land clearing associated with early farming disrupted their hunting practices. Like the Russians the Euro-Americans also brought new diseases, which further diminished the Dena'ina population. During the 1920s, with their population decimated and the loss of traditional hunting and fishing grounds, the Dena'ina settled into more permanent villages such as Tyonek or Eklutna to be closer to schools, hospitals, stores and churches. By 1935, the population of Eklutna Village was about 160. The Matanuska Colony was established about ten miles north of Eklutna Village.

Planning of the Matanuska Colony followed a similar pattern as in the American west whereby railroad companies induced people to settle along the railroad in order to boost freight and passenger service. Planners identified three reasons for establishing the Matanuska Colony: to take Midwestern families off, or to keep them off, relief; to increase Alaska's population; and to increase production of locally grown food and lower Alaska's dependence on expensive imported food. In addition to the existence of the railroad planners selected the Matanuska Valley for its mild temperatures and good soil. The Valley's agricultural potential had been known since 1900, when a Matanuska Valley trader and Dena'ina natives living in the area, successfully grew a large variety of vegetables from seeds provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s homesteaders established a number of farms in the Valley, further proving the area's agricultural potential.

With 201 families the Matanuska Colony was a large project compared to most resettlement communities. Only nine of the nearly 100 resettlement communities exceeded 200 families in size. Most resettlement communities were built near the people in need. The Colony was unique in that it was developed to help people thousands of miles away. And most communities were established near towns or cities with infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and hospitals. The Matanuska Valley's infrastructure was limited, with most of its 100 miles of roads being more like trails. There was no electricity and the closest hospital was in Anchorage, about forty miles south of the Matanuska Valley. The only transportation between Anchorage and the Matanuska Valley was by an Alaska Railroad train that came once a week. Resources required to build the Colony, such as building materials, tools, farm equipment, and livestock, had to be shipped from thousands of miles away.



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Most New Deal projects were carried out with a sense of urgency, driven by the need to get millions of people off relief and back to work. The Matanuska Colony was no exception. Five months passed from the time the decision was made to establish the colony to the time the colonists, consisting of nearly 1,000 people, arrived at Palmer. Initially, administration of the Colony was split between offices in Washington, D.C., California, and Alaska. This led to confusion about what supplies had been ordered, what supplies were needed, and to the wrong kinds of tools being ordered. This delayed construction of the Colony, which angered and frustrated many colonists.

As Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) officials were planning the Colony, social workers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan were given the task of selecting the colonists. Most rural Midwestern farmers at the time were white northern European settlers, primarily of Scandinavian descent. FERA officials drew comparisons between the climates of these states observing that it was similar to that of Alaska's Matanuska Valley, and to the Scandinavian countries of northern Europe, where people had been successfully farming for hundreds of years. In establishing requirements for the Matanuska colonists FERA officials stated that families should be "sturdy people, mainly of Scandinavian ancestry, familiar with farm activities in timbered country." Parents were to be between 25 and 35 years old, physically strong with a pioneering spirit, and be selected first on farming ability and then secondary skills such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and knowledge of machinery.

FERA recruited 400 workers from California and Washington to build the Colony. Upon arrival they began building tent camps for themselves and the colonists. Although some of the colonists participated in construction of the homes the transient workers did most of the work. They surveyed land for over 200 farm tracts, cleared and graded roads, built farmhouses, barns, and other farm buildings for each colonist family, completed the trading post, warehouse, and power plant and began work on the school. This was all done within about six months between May and October. By late October all but about fifty workers were sent home. The remaining workers labored through the winter to complete the community center buildings, and were sent home in the spring of 1936.

Some have called the Matanuska Colony a failure. At over \$5,000,000 it cost nearly five times what was estimated. Of the 201 families selected for the Colony, 67 left or were asked to leave within the first year. An additional 59 families left by 1939, and it was not until 1940 that all families that left were replaced. Illness, dissatisfaction, or poor suitability for farming were the major reasons for leaving. Delay in home construction and disagreement about what was required from the colonists were the main reasons for dissatisfaction. With so many families gone, land clearing was delayed and this slowed farm development. It was not until 1943 that Colony farmers grew enough produce to send to market in Anchorage. Just as today Matanuska Colony farmers produced a large variety of produce including onions, carrots, cucumbers, cabbage, lettuce, celery, potatoes, and dairy products.

Others argue that the Matanuska Colony was a success and that the problems it had in the beginning were a result of the desperation of the times, distance, and a lack of knowledge about Alaska. It accomplished its goals of assisting Midwestern families, increasing the population of Alaska, and increasing production of locally grown food. In 1930, about 400 people lived in the Matanuska Valley. Ten years later the population numbered nearly 3,000. By 1940, the value of agricultural products was rising with increasing demand from a growing population in Anchorage and the newly established Fort Richardson. Between 1940 and 1948, the value of agricultural products from the Matanuska Valley increased more than tenfold. Today most of the state's 500 farms, are located in the



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Matanuska Valley and the total value of production in 2016 was nearly \$60 million. In addition to a growing fruits and vegetables, ranchers are now raising reindeer, muskox, and bison in the Valley.

Today the community of Palmer takes great pride in its Matanuska Colony heritage with annual Colony Days and Colony Christmas celebrations and a Colony house museum. The Colony was responsible for beginning today's popular state fair, famous for huge vegetables, such as a 127-pound cabbage, a 76-pound rutabaga, and a 19-pound carrot. The Matanuska Valley Annual Fair, first held in 1936 in the community center, grew into the Alaska State Fair in 1960 and is now located just south of the community center on former Matanuska Colony farmland. Pride in its heritage also includes preservation of many original Colony buildings a number of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These include the community center, which is a historic district, and several farms. The Community Center includes the Trading Post, Central School, Dormitory, Water Tower, and a number of Staff Houses. A number of colony farms continue to be farmed and some still have their original homes and barns.



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Questions for Reading 2

1) How was the Matanuska Colony a success? Use evidence from Reading 2 to support your answer.

2) How was the Matanuska Colony a failure? Use evidence from Reading 2 to support your answer.

3) What long term impacts has the Matanuska Colony had on Alaska? Use evidence from Reading 2 to support your answer.



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Visual Evidence

Photo 1: First church services held in the colony two days after their arrival



(Mary Nan Gamble photograph collection, 1935-1945, Alaska State Library - Historical Collections.)

Caption for Photo 1: First church services held in the colony, 11 am May 12, 1935, two days after arrival. Between 1935 and 1944 photographers of the Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information took nearly 300,000 photographs of life in America. These included thousands of photos of resettlement communities. The photographs of the "Official Photographic Album ~ Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corp. ~ Matanuska Colonization," part of the Mary Nan Gamble collection, were part of this effort. The collection includes nearly a thousand photographs documenting the Matanuska Colony during its first few months. The photo of the "First church services held in the colony" is one of these photographs. Reverend Bingle, pictured standing in the photo, was the first church representative at the Colony



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Questions for Photo 1

1) Read the photograph caption. What do you think the photographer may have been trying to communicate by taking this photograph?

2) How do the people in the photograph reflect the selection criteria for the colonists discussed in Reading 2?

3) What does the photo suggest about the racial makeup of the Matanuska Colony? How did settler selection influence the racial makeup of the Colony? What evidence from the photo and the readings supports your answer?



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Visual Evidence

Photo 2: Matanuska Valley Homestead, 1938



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

(Ickes Collection, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.)

Caption for Photo 2: Matanuska Valley Homestead, 1938. Farmsteads included a farmhouse, barn, chicken coop, brooder coop, outhouse, well house, and shed. Colonists were given five farmhouse plans from which to choose. They were one or one and one-half stories with either two or three bedrooms. Wood stoves were used for heating and cooking, and there was no running water, electricity, phones, or televisions. Colony farms were located no more than 12 miles from the community center so that the colonists had access to a school, hospital, general store, food processing facilities, and the Alaska Railroad.



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Questions for Photo 2

1) The photo shows a Matanuska Colony farm. What kinds of buildings do you see in the photo? Compare and contrast the house in the photo with your house. How is it different? How is it similar? Explain your answer.

2) If you were a colonist coming from the Upper Midwest during the Great Depression how do you think you would have viewed a Colony farm? Would you have a positive or negative view? Use information from the photo and the readings to explain your answer.

3) Describe what you think it would have been like to live on a Colony farm. Would you want to live on a Colony farm? Why or why not? Use evidence from the photo and readings to support your answer.



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Visual Evidence

Photo 3: Trading Post Cooperative Store in the Community Center, ca. 1935



(Palmer Historical Society photo.)

Photo 4: Trading Post Cooperative Store in the Community Center, 2006



(National Park Service photo.)

Photo 5: Trading Post Cooperative Store in the Community Center, 2016



(National Park Service photo.)



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Caption for Photos 3, 4, and 5. Photos 3, 4, and 5 show the Trading Post Cooperative Store at various times in its history: first, in about 1935 after it was built; then in 2006 when its future seemed uncertain; and then in 2016 after it was restored and turned into a restaurant. Located in the community center on the north side of the green, the Trading Post was the Matanuska Colony's general store. Over the years the Trading Post building has served a variety of other functions since its construction, including a recreation center, law offices, several restaurants, and as offices for the City of Palmer. It was typical to use similar building designs from one community to the next, often for different functions. For example, the designs of the Trading Post and Hospital were very similar at the Matanuska Colony.

Questions for Photo 3, Photo 4, and Photo 5

1) Compare and contrast the Trading Post in the three photos. What changes have been made to the building over time?

2) What is your impression of the Trading Post? What does the fact that the building has been used for so many functions tell you about its design? Explain your answer.

3) The Trading Post is one of many Matanuska Colony buildings that have been preserved. Why do you think it is important to preserve and continue to use historic buildings?