

Matanuska Valley Agriculture Production

Supplemental Reading Part 1

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough is considered the commercial “heartland” of Alaska agriculture, having the largest number and concentration of farms and farm-related businesses. The valley is the state's leading producer of potatoes, carrots, lettuce, cabbage and other vegetables, and has a reputation for producing record-size vegetables, especially cabbages. Matanuska-Susitna agriculture accounted for 70 percent of all state farm income in 1963. This number had fallen to about 50 percent in 1995.

Commercial agriculture in the valley is constrained by realities of the marketplace and by ongoing pressure to shift productive agricultural lands to other uses. Local growers have a difficult time competing economically with products brought into local markets at a lower cost from outside the state. In addition, during the 1980s and '90s, the region saw a rapid conversion of agricultural lands to residential and other uses, as the Mat-Su valley grew into a “bedroom” community for nearby Anchorage. Nevertheless, while agriculture does not play the vital role it once did in the local and regional economy, it remains economically significant, an integral element of valley social and business life, and an important supplier of locally grown and produced food products. Fifty-nine businesses in the Borough are listed as agricultural producers in the State Division of Agriculture's 2007 Mat-Su Food and Farm Products directory. These include limited economies of scale, particularly adequate volumes to consistently meet contract requirements; limited infrastructure for processing and storage; marketing, to inform the public and potential buyers about the quality, diversity and availability of Alaska products; and the weather, which can dramatically affect the volume and quality of produce.

--Mat-Su Agricultural Narrative from DCED website

Supplemental Reading Part 2

NEW DEAL AGRICULTURE in the MATANUSKA VALLEY by Sean Murphy

2007 marks the 110th anniversary of the United States Government's interest in agriculture in the Matanuska Valley. Reports from early Russian traders and gold prospectors about the mild climate, moderate rainfall, fertile soil, and long hours of daylight prompted Congress to send three men on an agricultural reconnaissance in 1897.

Not long after, homesteaders and miners moved into the area in earnest. A symbiotic relationship was soon formed as the hungry miners bought surplus vegetables from the homesteaders.

Railroad construction leading to the nearby coal fields of Sutton and Chickaloon brought more hungry mouths in the form of workers and with the new activity, more homesteaders looking for a place to settle. With the mines operational in 1915, a fledgling agriculture business flourished keeping the miners and support crews fed.

Encouraged by this news, the government authorized the funding of the Matanuska Experimental Station in 1915 and two years later, it was a reality. This 960-acre farm on the present day Trunk Road near the Parks Highway was deeded to the University of Alaska in 1931, but not before producing promising results.

By the 1920s and early 1930s there were several successful potato and vegetable farms in the Matanuska Valley and even some attempts at dairy farming on the Palmer Hay flats.

The reports of the success of the Experimental Station and the remarkable results of some of the pioneer farms eventually reached the desks of officials in the Roosevelt Administration. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was just initiating many of the New Deal programs that sought to bring the country out of the grips of the Great Depression. The president sought to aid farmers from the Midwest and northern tier states who had experienced crop failures, other disasters, and who were now on public assistance. He instructed the administrators of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to buy up privately held valley property, withdraw public land from homestead consideration, and add Alaska to the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. This set in motion a series of events that would lead to America's only colony.

The colony project had four main goals: 1) Re-settle Depression victims and get them off welfare 2) Increase Alaska's population 3) Aid the military (by providing a fresh food supply) and 4) Prove that farming was feasible in Alaska, thereby reducing dependence on outside food supplies.

The Rural Rehabilitation Corporation decided to pick 200 families from the relief rolls. These were to be fairly young, hardy pioneer-type farmers who were generally of Scandinavian background. As it turned out, 202 families were selected, but many of them had no farming experience.

In May 1935, with a maximum of one ton of allowable household items, the pioneers headed for Palmer, a stop on the Alaska Railroad spur line to the coal fields. The federal government provided transportation from San Francisco and Seattle by Army transport ship; and by rail from Seward to Palmer where a tent city with all necessary provisions awaited the colonists.

Each family was given forty acres, a house, farm equipment and livestock. This set-up cost \$3,000 per family at 3% interest for 30 years with the first payment not due until 1940, thereby giving the colonists time to get on their feet before paying the debt. In addition, the families were given debt accounts at the government stores for whatever supplies were needed.

Permanent housing was constructed by the government using a choice of five house plans. Construction crews were provided by workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), who arrived in Palmer by the hundreds. These so-called transients worked by themselves. In the beginning the colonists (even those with construction backgrounds) were initially forbidden from doing any work on their own houses. They were eventually allowed to help, especially when it came to the community buildings.

A few families were disappointed at the prospects of their new life in Alaska and returned stateside as early as July. Most stuck it out that first year. A common feeling was that they had nothing to lose as they were at rock bottom already. Many felt that they would just “come up for the ride” and see what transpired. Some saw the colony project as their last chance and convinced themselves to work harder than they had ever worked before, to prove they weren't failures, to get off of the government dole, to get out of debt, work the land and raise their families.

The results of the Matanuska Valley colony project are mixed. It has been called a “successful failure” in that it met the original goals but prohibitive costs for production and lack of a substantial market base led to many farmers moving on to other endeavors and about 70 percent of the original colonists moving out of the valley. Still, the legacy of those hard-

working pioneers is evident. Beginning in 1939 when they held a three-day festival to celebrate the harvest, Palmer has been the site of an annual end-of-summer celebration. It is now known as the Alaska State Fair and attracts thousands of visitors. That same year the U.S. Government transferred the cooperative marketing and purchasing association of the colony to the member farmers. This co-op is today known as Matanuska Maid and still provided fresh dairy products to thousands of Alaskans through this year.

Today agriculture is still important to the valley and the state. In 2005, 61 percent of the state's value of farm production came from the Matanuska Valley. Successful farms like the Vander Weele Farm cultivate hundreds of acres of potatoes and do quite well. Fields of hay and vegetables dot the landscape, but in the 21st Century an agricultural irony has developed. Many of the old farms have been turned into subdivisions to house many of the people who have joined the suburban creep from Anchorage. As they have helped reduce the number of acres under cultivation, the growing population of the valley now demands fresh agricultural products; providing a potential market for those farmers who have stuck it out since the old days, their descendants, and newcomers willing to challenge the land. Agriculture may once again be a “new deal” in the Matanuska Valley.

These readings are part of the Alaska Ag in the Classroom lesson by Sean Murphy, “The History & Economy of Matanuska Valley Ag Production.”