

# Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

January 2022

Join us on the Wisconsin Historical Society Press Facebook page Wednesday, January 5 at 7pm for another in the series of live book talks exploring all things Wisconsin!

**"Book Bites" - Matt Blessing discusses**

## **"Alaska, Ho! Arville Schaleben and the Matanuska Valley Colony"**



This New Deal resettlement project moved 202 families from the upper Midwest to southcentral Alaska in an effort to alleviate rural poverty in one region and populate a fertile valley in America's vast northern territory.

In the summer of 1935 the *Milwaukee Journal* reporter Arville Schaleben began chronicling this farming community. Working and sleeping in a government-issued tent Schaleben filed nearly 150 stories for the *Journal* providing a vivid portrait of these modern pioneers as they set up housekeeping, found creative ways to earn a living, and raised their families.

Wednesday, January 5th 2022

7:00 PM - 7:30 PM

Free and online on the

**Wisconsin Historical Society Press Facebook page Online Webinar**

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Event/EV8295>



Matt Blessing recently retired from the Wisconsin Historical Society but remains actively engaged in studying the history of the conservation and environmental movements in Wisconsin, including the legacies of John Muir and Aldo Leopold.

You can read Matt Blessings' award winning article, "Alaska, Ho! Arville Schaleben and the Matanuska Valley Colony", in the Wisconsin Magazine of History: Volume 103, number 2, winter 2019

<https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/wmh/id/53200/rec/7>

In the era of the Great Depression of the 1930's, President Franklin Roosevelt focused on the programs of the New Deal. These agencies had three goals: relief, recovery, and reform. In early 1934 the Roosevelt administration secured \$500 million, the equivalent of \$9.5 billion today, from Congress to fund the Federal Emergency Relief Agency. It was determined that a portion of this money, \$900,000, would be used in a dual plan to (1) help alleviate the financial hardships of the cutover regions of northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, and (2) add to the population of the Alaskan Territory, in danger as the Japanese eyed its rich resources.

Families were selected from these northern regions on the basis of their ability to survive the tough pioneering challenges homesteading would demand in the Matanuska Valley in Alaska, a fertile valley at the base of the Chugach Mountain range.



In 1935, Palmer, Alaska, became the seat of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation and a supply center for one of the most unusual experiments in American history: the Matanuska Valley Colony, a planned agricultural colony of 203 families. Since the climate of the Alaskan valley was somewhat similar to the areas they would come from, it was believed this group possessed the traits that set them apart for consideration for this New Deal program.

Although many farms failed during the social experiment, Palmer survived as the sole Alaska city whose economy is dominated by farming. Despite criticism and conjecture, the colony was a testament to those 203 families that traveled by train and ship, their housing being a tent city for that first Alaskan summer, each family drawing lots for individual 40-acre tracts and a \$3,300 start up loan.



1935 Margaret and Wesley Worden and children — Richard, Jackie and Joyce, and dog Fritz, waiting for the mailman (Oscar Lawonn) to bring the mail about going to Alaska.

**Wesley and Margaret Worden** and their young children from **Three Lakes, Wisconsin**, were chosen to join this group of settlers to carve out a new life.

You can read an account of the experiences of Wesley and Margaret, covering almost a half-century of pioneering experiences, written by Margaret Worden, in *The Pine the Plow and the Pioneer, volume 2*, available for purchase at the Three Lakes Historical Society website, or at the Museum Visitor Center or Demmer Library to view.



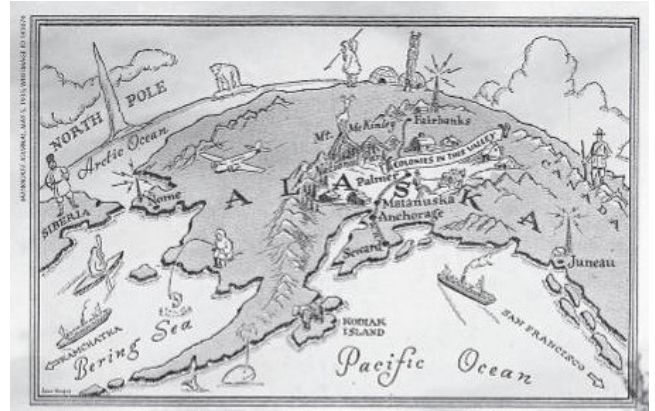
the following are excerpts of the Worden family's experiences

"My parents, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Worden lived on the island in Planting Ground Lake, Three Lakes. It had been a lumber camp operated by Bill Knott of Antigo. We operated the farm, had horses, cows and a truck garden, strawberries and chickens."

"After Wesley Worden and I were married I remember Wesley working in the (Antigo) logging camps for \$35 a month and board. We had one youngster then. When Wesley and I moved back to Three Lakes in 1930, we lived on Wesley's stepfather Ezra Worden's old homestead for a time (No. 19 on Pioneer Farms Map)."

"January 1935. Wesley came home from town with news that the Government was sending families from Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota to Alaska to settle the Matanuska Valley.

We talked about it a lot and we got books - everything we could find on Alaska - and read about the climate and other pertinent facts. By the time the Government was ready to sign up people, we were ready. We had our interviews and physicals and in no time at all, it seems, we were on our way."



**Camp 4 — Palmer, Alaska, first "Home" for the homesteaders, 16 x 20'**

"We were allowed 2,000 pounds of freight. We joined families from Michigan in Minneapolis, then on to Seattle, Washington, where we boarded the troop carrier *St. Meheil* for our trip to Seward, Alaska."

"...the men went ahead to draw tracts of land and get our 16x20 ft. tents set up in which we were to live for the first summer while our houses were being built. We moved into our home on Labor Day."

"Life on a farm in the Matanuska Valley was rough. Everything seemed to be against us. If it wasn't the weather doing us in, it was the cut-worms in spring."

"We left the Valley in 1943 and moved to Anchorage. We lived there and in Eagle River, Alaska until 1952. Wesley worked on the Army Base and did carpentry in town. In 1952 we drove back to Wisconsin where Wesley passed away on March 8, 1953."



**Wesley Worden, Richard, Jack, Joyce and Ken, and neighbor children going to where they were building their home — 1935.**

Find additional reading at -

*The 1935 Matanuska Colony Project*, by Helen Hegener  
<https://matanskacolony.wordpress.com/chapters/>

*Farming in Alaska: A Look At the Lush Mat-Su Valley*  
<https://visitpalmer.com/history/farming-in-alaska/>