

Heritage Speaker Series | November 15, 2009

1:30 p.m. at the Russell J. Rassbach Heritage Museum, Menomonie

Western Wisconsin Premier Film Screening

Panel discussion with the Matt Carter, UWEC history student & the film's producers

ALASKA FAR AWAY

The New Deal Pioneers of the Matanuska Colony

A documentary film by Paul Hill and Joan Juster

In the midst of the despair of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal gave over 200 struggling Midwestern farm families an extraordinary opportunity: the chance to start over on the Alaskan frontier. *Alaska Far Away* tells the story of this bold government experiment, and the families who found themselves thrust into the national spotlight along the way. Sixty-eight families from Wisconsin participated including residents of Dunn, Barron, Taylor, Polk and Trempealeau counties.

Story (396 words)

ALASKA FAR AWAY

The New Deal Pioneers of the Matanuska Colony

A documentary film by Paul Hill and Joan Juster

The Matanuska Colonization Project of 1935 was among the most unusual and controversial of the many New Deal programs designed to help ordinary citizens devastated by the Great Depression. The project relocated over 200 struggling farm families from the northern Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin to the Matanuska Valley in Alaska to start an experimental farming colony, to open up Alaska for settlement, and to give these families a fresh start. Sixty-eight families from Wisconsin participated including residents of Dunn, Barron, Taylor, Polk and Trempealeau counties. It generated tremendous publicity and controversy at the time, not only as a very expensive federally-funded social experiment, but also as one of the last pioneer movements in America.

The Matanuska Colony isn't just a fascinating footnote to the history of Alaska. More than just a local story, the history of the Matanuska Colony covers broad themes of interest to general audiences: the difficulties and despair of the Depression, the creative energy of the New Deal, the adventure of pioneering in Alaska, the excitement and challenge of building a new community far from home, and the best and worst of both our government and ordinary citizens in facing those extraordinary challenges.

The Matanuska colonists weren't pioneers blazing trails through a silent wilderness. They were shipped to Alaska by Uncle Sam, and were dogged every step of the way by reporters, photographers, tourists, and critics. They were glorified, vilified, and mythologized by the national press. One day they were lauded as national heroes, the next scorned as "cream-puff pioneers."

However, the colonists were ultimately neither heroes nor villains, but simply ordinary people who shared an extraordinary experience, struggling to make a new home, far from family and friends in a place considered forbidding and exotic, under the constant scrutiny of the press and the politicians. Creating a new community under such an unforgiving microscope forged unbreakable ties between the colonists that exist to this day.

Americans have always been fascinated by the pioneer experience and frontier mythology: the hardships, dangers, and excitement of leaving behind everything familiar to settle a new land. ***Alaska Far Away*** reflects that sense of challenge and adventure, and the energetic pioneer spirit that brought these colonists to Alaska and helped to build it into a state.

More info at: <http://www.alaskafaraway.com/>