

construction slowed and gold mining tapered off. Population declined in the territory of Alaska as people sought employment elsewhere; with fewer mouths to feed, the agricultural markets fell, and many of the region's farmers entered the coal industry.

After the war the Railroad began to encourage settlement in Alaska, attempting the first organized colonization effort. M.D. Snodgrass, of the agricultural experiment station, headed a program that brought 55 families to the Valley between 1929 and 1934. Felton and Ward took over the post office in 1931, changing the town's name to "Warton" (a combination of their names).

Palmer was transformed from a tiny outpost to a bustling tent city when, in 1935, the U.S. Government sponsored the Matanuska Valley Colonization Project. As part of the New Deal, 202 families were chosen from the government relief rolls of Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and Oklahoma. The colonization program was intended to open up Alaska to new settlement, supply food to the military in case of war, and give people who had lost their farms a new start.

The population in the Matanuska Valley soared. Houses, barns and community buildings were constructed by a 400-man team of transient workers. The post office was renamed 'Palmer', and what had been a small farming community was now a bustling town with businesses, churches and a school for hundreds of children.



The town of Palmer retains its farming roots today, and is famous worldwide for its giant vegetables.

The History of Palmer, Alaska
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The Early History of Palmer, Alaska Until 1936



Nestled in the glacier-carved valleys of the Knik and Matanuska rivers is the town of Palmer, Alaska. Located between two mountain ranges and adjacent to major waterways, the town is along a natural transportation corridor that was used by native peoples for thousands of years, and later by the Russian fur traders who first encountered those original inhabitants.

Though less than a hundred years old, Palmer has had a sensational history full of interesting characters and grand exploits, even before it became famous as the site of the New Deal program that moved two hundred Midwestern families to the far north. Read on to learn about this fascinating place.

Prehistory and Russian Occupation

The first inhabitants of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley were Dena'ina and Ahtna Athabascans. In small groups they moved extensively throughout the area, developing a high level of subsistence and trading with other native groups. Their trade route followed the west bank of the Matanuska River, where they exchanged fur, copper, fish and other goods.



The Russians came to Alaska in 1741, and though their interest was in furs rather than settlement, they occupied the land for 126 years. They traded with seafaring native peoples for the pelts of marine mammals, captured in hunts such as the one pictured above. Unconfirmed reports indicate that a fur trading post may have been established in the mid 1800's at the confluences of Knik River, Matanuska River and Knik Arm, not far from present-day Palmer.

A combination of factors finally ended Russian trade and expansion into Alaska. Sea otter populations collapsed due to overhunting, and the political strife caused by the Crimean War disrupted trade. In 1867, 586,400 square miles were sold to the United States for two cents per acre.

Though the Russian traders left few permanent colonists, their cultural influence can still be seen in the many beautiful Russian Orthodox churches all over Alaska.

Early American Activities

Interest in furs continued after the U.S. took control. The Alaska Commercial Company (formerly the Russian American Company) started building stations on Cook Inlet in the late 1860's. Smaller trading companies offered competition and also built stations along Cook Inlet. George Palmer, one of the first white settlers in the area, operated a trading post on the Matanuska River. By the turn of the century the otter had all but disappeared and many other fur species were declining, but the rush for gold had just begun.

Gold was discovered near Grubstake Gulch on Willow Creek in 1897. The town of Knik, economically depressed as a result of the fur industry decline, boomed as a supply center for the new Willow Creek mines. George Palmer moved his trading post from the Matanuska River to Knik, where he joined an interesting assortment of individuals that included merchants, natives, miners and homesteaders. The town of Knik reached a population of over 5,000 people during the gold fever era.

In 1898, Captain Edwin Glenn explored and mapped overland routes to the Yukon and Interior Alaska. Glenn's Lieutenants Castner and Learnard led the expeditions up the Matanuska and Susitna Rivers, and the U.S. Government, which had funded the operation, got its first report on the region.

In the late 1800's, the U.S. Government became interested in the Matanuska coal

fields north of Palmer, as a source of engine fuel. The quest for coal sparked a group of financiers to begin construction of the Alaska Central Railroad in 1904. Their plan failed, but when Alaska became a territory in 1912 there was renewed interest in the Matanuska coal fields. Congress allowed leasing of the coal reserves in 1914, and in 1915 railroad construction began along the Seward-Tanana route.

Along with the railroad construction came an influx of homesteaders who settled between Matanuska Junction and Palmer. In 1916, a siding was constructed at the present site of Palmer. On July 6, 1917, the Palmer Post Office (shown below) began operation. The town of Palmer then consisted of a section house, small depot and homestead cabin turned post office.



The railroad provided accessibility to new markets for agricultural products in Anchorage and the mining towns. Between 1915 and 1917, farming was a self-supporting venture in the Matanuska Valley. Seeing the potential of agriculture in the region, the U.S. Department of Agriculture built the experimental station near Matanuska in 1917.

During World War I, national resources were pulled from local projects and reinvested in the defense effort. Alaska Railroad