

SOIL CONSERVATION -- ALASKA STUDIES AND PROJECT PLANNING
(1938-1952)

At the time of the Klondike gold rush, one of the older boys from my home town of Fremont, Nebraska, got the "gold bug." His move to the far north placed Alaska on a pedestal in my eyes, and sparked my initial interest in Alaska. Indeed, the name "Alaska" was a magic word to nearly every boy at the turn of the century. It was just as alluring as were such names as London, Calcutta and Cape Horn, perhaps even more so.

In February 1935 at a meeting in Portland, Oregon, I had discussed with Don L. Irwin of Palmer, Alaska, plans of the Alaska Railroad to bring to the Matanuska Valley midwest farmers who had "gone broke" during the depression. It was noted by Irwin that every land clearing there on sloping land would bring immediately a severe erosion problem, pointing up the need for adoption of a land use policy for Alaska that would prevent the mistakes of agriculture that had happened in the "lower 48." Irwin was on his way to Washington, D.C., to secure approval for these plans and then to find funds to carry them out.

Unfortunately, when the colonization of the Matanuska Valley received governmental approval in Washington some weeks later, the ultimate plan was barely recognizable as the plan which Irwin had brought into Washington for approval. Politics had been substituted for plans, so that instead of farm families, the colonists were largely city families selected by county governments in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. In too many instances the county officials selected those families which were costing the county the most in "relief" funds, without regard for their suitability and adaptability as colonists committed to agriculture in a new land. In fact, some of the 200 families who made the long trip by train and ship to Alaska refused to disembark from the ship when it arrived at Seward, Alaska, and were given a free trip back to the town or city from which they had been recruited. The plans had called for these new settlers to be brought gradually to the Valley, with farm buildings ready for occupancy when they arrived. However, politics dumped them all at once onto a swampy, boggy campsite where they had to drag their tents around through the mud before they had even a place to sleep. Life was rough for them during their first few weeks in the Matanuska Valley where their new homes were to be built, but most

of the unnecessary and unwarranted hardships and difficulties were corrected during the first few months of the colony's existence.

Although the problems of good land use were under intensive study in the lower 48 states during the 1930's -- especially in the Soil Conservation Service -- the problems had received very little attention in Alaska. There was so much undeveloped land that good land use had not yet seemed of much importance.

Soon after the start of the Matanuska Colony in 1935, and based upon many reports I had received about the different land problems the new settlers were having, I proposed to Hugh Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, that the Service undertake a comprehensive study of Alaska's agricultural possibilities from the standpoint of soil conservation and good land use. Since the Chief had made some soil surveys in Alaska, including parts of the Matanuska Valley, more than 20 years before, my suggestion aroused his deep interest, especially since I had suggested conservation surveys of those lands being newly developed by the Matanuska colonists. Most of the difficulties they encountered were the direct result of inadequate information as to the farms' suitability regarding either soil or climate. As I had mentioned earlier, coupled with my resignation in June 1938 as Regional Conservator was the approval of the Chief for me to undertake a comprehensive study of the main areas of potential agricultural land in the Territory of Alaska. The first phase of the study was for a three man reconnaissance team of Bennett, Louis P. Merrill (an S.C.S. Regional Conservator with headquarters in Fort Worth) and myself, to investigate the erosion conditions. The primary purpose was to pinpoint one or more potential areas for detailed study and survey during the succeeding year.

I returned to Spokane from Washington, D.C., in early July 1938, announced my resignation to the personnel in the Spokane office, and prepared for an imminent departure for Alaska. As it developed, Bennett did not make the trip. Merrill and I met in Seattle on July 19, and left for Alaska by Alaska Steamship on July 20. As we went through Juneau we met briefly with Alaska Acting Governor Watson, Regional Forester Frank Heintzleman, and John Keyser of the U.S. Weather Bureau. On our return

in early September we stayed in Juneau for eight days, during which time we met with Alaska Governor Troy, and again with Heintzleman and Keyser.

At the Experiment Station at Palmer in the Matanuska Valley we conferred with Don Irwin, whom I had first met in Portland as mentioned earlier. This was the forerunner of many years of a good working relationship as well as a close friendship. During the next two months Merrill and I spent considerable time in this area with Irwin and other Experiment Station personnel (Figs. 56 and 57). While in the Fairbanks area we conferred with President Bunnell and Dr. Otto Geist at the University of Alaska, and to a greater extent, Mr. Lorin T. Oldroyd, Extension Director, at the Fairbanks Agricultural Experiment Station. This included a study of a "pitting" problem at the Station which I continued over the next two years (Publication 39).

In addition to time spent in the Juneau, Palmer and Fairbanks areas, we travelled to many outlying areas to become more familiar with the

Territory, from Kodiak Island in the south to Wiseman, north of the Arctic Circle (Figs. 58 and 59). Wiseman was the locale for Bob Marshall's best seller, *Arctic Village*. I had a chance meeting with Bob during my trip to Wiseman, and we renewed our friendship that had begun in Idaho during my work in Blister Rust Control in the 1920's. It proved to be one of the last times I saw him before his untimely death the following year.

After my return to Spokane in the latter part of September, much of my time was taken completing reports of the 1938 field work and preparing plans for the 1939 field season (Fig. 60).

In early July 1939 I returned to Alaska for four months, with my headquarters in Palmer (Fig. 61). I conducted a detailed soil conservation survey of the Matanuska Valley, and in addition, began more general studies of the Kenai Peninsula, the Susitna Valley, and the Tanana Valley.

During the summer I worked closely with Don Irwin and Ross L. Sheely, General Manager of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, Matanuska Valley Colonization Project, as well as many of the



Fig. 56. W.A.R. observing results of land clearing, 3 miles south of Palmer. Stumps of birch and spruce mixture, 40-50 feet high, 6-12 inches d.b.h., slashed, logs snaked out, tops piled and burned. Very bad example of soil removal in land clearing, 5-6 inches of vegetative layer and mineral soil is being removed with stumps. Total depth of soil is about 24 inches.

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Fig. 57. Soil Conservation Field (and Stream) Work, August 1938. L. P. Merrill on left.



Fig. 58. Flower and vegetable garden at Olne, a ghost mining town a few miles north of Fairbanks. "Mayor" Ed Fahrney, center, is 65 years old and has spent 38 of them in Alaska. A merchant at Olne during the boom days of 1904-05, he now owns the 10-15 vacant buildings that remain. Dr. Otto Geist, the best informed man in Alaska, on right; W.A.R. on left.



Fig. 59. L.P. Merrill, Tanana, August 1938.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
TERRITORY OF ALASKA
March 21, 1939

Office of the Director
College, Alaska

Mr. W. A. Rookie
Assistant Regional Conservator
Soil Conservation Service
Spokane, Washington

Dear Mr. Rookie:

I have received your report on the work you did last summer in the Tanana Valley, Matanuska Valley, and the Kenai Peninsula. It is more than interesting and I feel it will be of great benefit to us in carrying on our work in agricultural development. I was particularly interested in the statement you made regarding the methods of clearing soil in the Matanuska Valley. I very much agree with the observations that you have made and feel that your report will have a beneficial effect.

We have written to Dr. Bennett and Mr. Christ suggesting that the Soil Conservation Service establish an office in Alaska and I am in hopes you will be able to spend next summer in the Tanana Valley.

I shall be pleased if you will keep me in touch with developments along this line. If you come to Alaska, we can arrange to have you use our office at the Experiment Station at Fairbanks or the one at Matanuska while you are doing your work here. We shall be glad to cooperate with you in every way possible.

Please give my regards to Mrs. Rookie and bring her along with you when you come to Alaska.

Very sincerely yours,

Lorin T. Oldroyd
Director of Extension

Fig. 60. Letter to W.A.R. recommending continuing soil conservation work in Alaska. March 21, 1939.



Fig. 61. Palmer, Alaska, looking east, 1939. Old Palmer is in lower center. Matanuska Colony government buildings are in the upper center. Matanuska River is in middle distance, Lazy Mountain beyond.

colonists who had settled in the Valley (Figs. 62 and 63). Time was also spent in the Fairbanks area, both in the field, and with Mr. Oldroyd and others at the Fairbanks Agricultural Experiment Station. The field survey party I directed for the Matanuska Valley project included James E. Caudle, Charles R. Buzzard, Herbert A. Hopper, Clinton H. Morgan, and John P. Thomson (Publication 48).

After my return to Spokane in late 1939 I saw an article in the Spokesman Review that Robert Marshall, Assistant Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, had died of a heart attack on a train between Washington D.C. and New York City. Several weeks later I had a telegram from Alaska Governor Ernest Gruening that he would stop to see me as he came through Spokane enroute home to Alaska. During his brief stop we discussed our mutual sorrow about Bob's death. Neither Governor Gruening nor I could accept the heart attack explanation for his death. We both believed he had committed suicide.

In 1940 I spent nearly seven months in Alaska and during the summer my wife and our younger son joined me. Edith and I had a small house in



Fig. 62. Oscar Anderson farm, Matanuska Valley, 1939. Note the prevailing type of haystack which allows better drying under the typically wet weather during haying season.



Fig. 63. Matanuska Valley, October 12, 1939, looking southeast, showing a large haybarn of the homesteader still unfilled. The snow-covered hay was intended for the barn. Pioneer Peak on the right.



Fig. 64. William Cassler farm two miles north of Palmer, July 1940. Oat strips are planted between vegetables to break the force of the winds.

Palmer, and our son worked for the Alaska Railroad. He worked on a section crew and lived a few miles north of Palmer at the Moose Creek section house, so we were able to get together frequently on weekends.

I completed the survey of the Matanuska Valley (Fig. 64) and continued general studies of other localities in what proved to be my last season of field work in Alaska. During the summer I spent a number of days both conferring and conducting field work with Meredith F. "Pete" Burrill (Fig. 65) and John Leighly. At the time Burrill was with the General Land Office, and Leighly was a climatologist with the U.S. Weather Bureau.



Fig. 65. M.F. "Pete" Burrill, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska, about 10 miles north of Homer, August 17, 1940. Pete commented in 1982 about the hike in 1940: the grass was loaded with water drops after a prolonged rain, so every step was a cold shower!

During 1941 I worked on the detailed report of the Matanuska Valley study, as well as other reports from the field data obtained during 1938-40. Plans were also made for initiating detailed studies of other areas, to be started as soon as funds became available. Then came the war, and the plans were shelved indefinitely. When the plans for further Alaska studies were put on hold, I assumed new duties as the Chief of the Project Plans Division of the Pacific Northwest Region. As a result, I worked more closely with J.H. "Heinie" Christ, the man who had been appointed Regional Conservator in 1938 after my resignation (Fig. 66). Also, in the spring of 1942 nationwide reorganization of the Soil Conservation Service resulted in the closing of the regional offices in Spokane and Berkeley, California, and a new Pacific Coast Regional office was opened in Portland, Oregon.

In early April 1942 prior to our move, Stuart Chase, the noted economist, visited our regional office in Spokane. I escorted him on a tour of the Palouse country (Fig. 67), and many in our office conferred with him during his week's visit.

In June I attended the American Association for the Advancement of Science meetings in Salt Lake City, and gave a paper on Mexico at the



Fig. 66. W.A. Rockie (L) Chief, Project Plans Division, and J.H. Christ, Regional Conservator.



Fig. 67. Stuart Chase (L) and W.A. Rockie, near Thornton, Washington, April 6, 1942.

Pacific Coast Geographers Session (Publication 42). In July we started house hunting in Portland, and moved from Spokane to Portland in August 1942.

Even though my involvement in Alaska surveys was no longer a primary assignment, there were continued activities related to the Territory. I continued to keep abreast of the problems and development of Alaskan agriculture and published several articles and reports (Publications 36, 39, 40, 47, 48 and 49). Because of my close contact with Alaska development, even after I retired I was being encouraged to resume my Alaska studies (Fig. 68).

One aspect of Alaska development that

TERRITORY OF ALASKA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
JUNEAU

June 2, 1953

Mr. W. A. Rockie
8330 S. W. 11st
Portland, Oregon

Dear Bill:

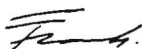
I enjoyed your letter of May 26, and was very much interested in learning of your proposed trip to Africa for a study of the vegetation and soils over a large section of that continent. Knowing of your interest in that class of work, I am sure you will have a very good time on this assignment.

Charlie Wilson came through Juneau yesterday, and I had a long talk with him last evening. He passed on to me the information on the work ~~we~~ plan to do, as you had explained it to him in Portland.

I again want to renew my invitation that you visit Alaska at the first opportunity. Particularly, I would like to see the Soil Conservation Service put you on as a collaborator for a season to make further studies of soils on the Kenai Peninsula.

My very best regards to Edith and you.

Sincerely yours,



B. FRANK HEINTZLEMAN
Governor

Fig. 68. Letter from Governor of Alaska, Frank Heintzleman, to W.A. Rockie.

particularly interested me was the potential of Alaska for homesteading. Certain magazine articles and newspaper feature stories in the early 1940's presented rosy-hued prospects for homesteading, while still other articles and stories presented quite an opposite picture. These divergent viewpoints regarding the progress of the Matanuska Valley Colony may have resulted from the publicity it received. If one accepted the statements of the enthusiastic proponents of the colony, every colonist was living in "milk and honey" and was wading knee deep in "clover and strawberries." He had been transformed in a few years from the status of relief client to that of an independent, highly successful farmer. If, on the other hand, one believed the opponents of the colony, there wasn't a chance of those former relief clients ever being anything else, that the Matanuska Valley was a cold, sterile land of snow and ice, and that it was a mistake to consider that agriculture had any chance of development there (Publication 35). I think my views in the 1940's regarding the matter of homesteading in Alaska were pretty well summarized in a letter written to my son in March 1945, in response to his request for advice about the advisability of an Alaskan homestead:

Dear John:

You wrote me for advice about taking a homestead in Alaska after you get out of the Service. Although my answer might be influenced by when you get out, it is not likely to be greatly changed.

I don't have to tell you a lot of things about Alaska, for you learned a good deal the summer you worked on the railroad section crew at Moose Creek in 1940.

A lot of people are making some ridiculous statements about the number of farmers and others who will go to Alaska during the next two years. Take it from me, if too many go, somebody's going to get cold when they can't find or can't pay for a bed and someone is going to be mighty hungry.

It's absolutely impossible to give you a simple yes or no answer. Let me say in the first place that if present indications are borne out, there will be several service men or women wanting each piece of land that is suitable for making a future home.

I hope that not too many people,

especially you service fellows, remember a news release some years ago in the Washington Evening Star saying that, although there are no homesteads left in the U.S., there are 364,000,000 acres open to homesteading in Alaska. Since a homesteader is allowed not more than 160 acres, the article in effect stated that there were 2,275,000 homesteads in Alaska. That's all bushwa!

And there are government reports out which state there are 65,000 square miles suited to tillage and 35,000 square miles suited to grazing. These total 100,000 square miles or 64,000,000 acres, less than 1/5 the earlier figure, but they are still much too high.

I confidently believe that successful permanent agriculture will materialize in some portions of the Territory, but I am also confident that the total acreage will never be as large as even the smaller figure. And never is a long time too. So I think the 400,000 homesteads represented by the currently published figure is so exaggerated that it is not funny, McGee. To begin with, there won't be more successful farms than the local population in Alaska will support. I heard one recent estimate that predicted 100,000 new farmers in Alaska right after the war. The lowest estimate I have heard quoted is 15,000 new farmers in the next two years. I believe that if even 10,000 farms are started in Alaska in the next 10 years, you may be better off to start farming down here. Up there you will have so many untried and unsolved problems with no easy way to solve them, while down here so much more is known about how to farm that it's like comparing daylight to darkness.

I could cite instances of farmers who have succeeded beyond their dreams in southeastern, southern, southwestern and central Alaska, but for every one who has succeeded I believe there are five who have failed in their farming. The abandoned farms of those who have failed are, on the average, I believe, every bit as good land as are those places which have developed into successful farms.

So, if we base our thinking on experience up to now, you would be mighty lucky if you proved to be one of the successful. The chances are several to one against your making a financial go of an Alaska homestead. These are my opinions today.

With love from your dad,
WAR March 10, 1945

(Note: The postwar boom in homesteading and agricultural development in Alaska was much more restrained than was indicated by some of the inflated estimates of postwar agricultural potential -- bearing out the opinions in Rockie's letter.

Except for the preceding few pages, Rockie had done virtually no writing for this monograph for the years from the early 1940's until his retirement from the Soil Conservation Service in 1952 (Figs. 69-70). Noteworthy accomplishments for these years include: (a) completion of his chapter on "Soil Conservation" for Conservation of Natural Resources [Publication 53]; (b) publication of various technical articles [Publications 41, 42, 44, 45, 50-52, 54-57]; (c) in June 1951 he piloted a group from Oregon State College Institute of Northwest Resources through eastern Oregon and Washington; and (d) in August 1951 he conducted a University of Connecticut Conservation tour through eastern Washington.

Also, for reasons not known, the writing done by Rockie in the late 1970's for this monograph did not include any mention of his involvement in the Northwest Scientific Association, and his involvement is worthy of comment. He was very active in the Northwest Scientific Association from 1925 well into the 1950's. He presented papers at most annual meetings from 1925 to 1939, including general session lectures in 1932 (Publication 18), 1934 and 1938, and the retiring president's address in 1936 (Publication 30). He also served on the Board of Trustees in the early 1940's and again in the early 1950's. He was honored as a 25 year member in 1949, was program chairman in 1952, and was elected Honorary Life Member in 1958.

The cooperation of a number of Pacific Northwest scientists was instrumental in the writing and publishing of The Pacific Northwest (1942), edited by Otis W. Freeman and Howard H. Martin. Fifteen of the thirty-one contributing authors (including Rockie) were members of the Northwest Scientific Association. Rockie contributed one chapter and coauthored another [Publications 37 and 38].)



Fig. 69. W.A. Rockie Retirement Party, March 13, 1952. Edith Rockie (L), J.H. Christ (R).

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Soil Conservation Service
Pacific Region

March 20, 1952

To: All SCS Personnel in Region 7
From: W. A. Rockie, SCS, Portland, Oregon

It is with the deepest regret that I am leaving the Soil Conservation Service. This work has been for a long time and still will be in future years, a major life interest for me. Undoubtedly, there will be many many moments when I will feel regretful at having taken this action at this time.

However, my interests have included other fields of endeavor, some closely related to soil conservation, and others not so close. I am making this change at this time to satisfy some of my desires in these other fields before it is too late.

I have known and worked with a few of you for about 35 years, with many of you from 20 to 30 years, and with hundreds of you from five to 20 years. I have enjoyed those years with you. I think of every SCS'er as a friend, and I hope that every SCS'er feels that I am his friend.

The wonderful farewell party that was given for me on March 13th told me many things that I had hoped (but did not know) were true. I will always remember my multitude of SCS friends, especially as I use the beautiful inscribed fountain pen desk set which was presented to me at that time.

Although I will see most of you less frequently than has been the case in past years, I do not want to entirely lose my personal contact with you. My interest in our work and my personal friendship with many of you is too deep to thus end so easily. However, on the chance that I may never again have the pleasure of seeing some of you, and to those of you whom I have never been privileged to meet, I wish to extend my best wishes both officially and personally and to also send you my personal farewell greetings.

W.A. Rockie

Fig. 70. Retirement letter from W.A. Rockie to SCS personnel in Region 7.