

Colonies for DISABLED VETERANS in Minnesota



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THE PROBLEM of demobilizing four and a half million servicemen following World War I brought forth many suggestions—among them a proposal to settle at least a portion of the veterans in organized farming communities. Although some aspects of this idea were new in 1917, the tradition of turning soldiers into farmers had a long history. From colonial times through the Spanish-American War the United States had pursued a policy of rewarding veterans with grants from the public lands. At first this was done by the warrant system and later through preferential treatment in homesteading.

The idea of establishing government-sponsored farm colonies found support also in the long-standing American preference for the agrarian way of life. This bias, together with revulsion against the growing evils of an industrial, urban society, had produced a strong “back-to-the-land” movement by the turn of the century, and supporters of it eagerly endorsed soldier settlement. The organized colony scheme stemmed from the planning concepts of the Progressive movement—with perhaps older roots in the many Utopian experiments of the nineteenth century. Reclamation

necessarily became a part of most colonization proposals, since the nation’s desirable farm lands had long since been fully settled. Efforts were therefore made to pass national legislation which would provide for making use of swamp, arid, and cutover areas.

The most important bills were prepared by Franklin K. Lane, secretary of the interior, William B. Wilson, secretary of labor, Raphael Zon of the forest service, and officials of the American Legion. Sufficient congressional support never developed, but six states experimented with planned colonies during the 1920s, and veterans were given some preference in homesteading. Moreover, a substantial effort at soldier settlement was carried out in the upper Midwest under the guise of vocational rehabilitation.¹

Lane, author of the most widely discussed proposal, believed that community settlement was preferable to individual colonization, or “infiltration,” because of the economic and social advantages that large colonies would possess over single homesteads. The Lane idea, or “Interior Plan”

¹ Bill G. Reid, “Proposals for Soldier Settlement during World War I,” in *Mid-America*, 46:172–179 (July, 1964); W. A. Hartman, *State Land-Settlement Problems and Policies in the United States*, 30–46 (United States Department of Agriculture, Technical Bulletins No. 357—Washington, 1903).

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as it was often called, also provided for prior development of farms so that settlers would not be compelled to undergo a "hard scrabble" period before their first crops matured.²

Although Congress was unenthusiastic about colonization, it did react favorably toward a rehabilitation program for disabled veterans. By an act passed on October 6, 1917, the lawmakers provided for "rehabilitation, reeducation, and vocational training" for veterans who had been injured as a result of their service. Training was placed in the hands of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance.³

A second law, known as the vocational rehabilitation act, passed on June 27, 1918, maintained the original definition of a disabled veteran as one who had sustained physical injuries, but it made the Federal Board for Vocational Education responsible for carrying out the program. This law was amended in 1919 to provide for retraining former soldiers suffering from mental and physical diseases caused or aggravated by military service; the veteran had to prove at least ten per cent disability. The measure carried a two-million-dollar appropriation and set a maximum training allowance of \$80 a month for a single man and \$170 for one with several dependents.⁴

The Veteran's Bureau was created by an act passed in August, 1921, and promptly took over the functions of the Federal Board for Vocational Education in training disabled veterans. According to the law, rehabilitation was to be carried out under a decentralized system with district offices in various parts of the country. These offices were to be closed in 1926; therefore, by implication, the period of training would ordinarily be five years.⁵

That officials of the Veterans' Bureau leaned strongly toward the Lane idea of group settlement is shown by a plan which they submitted to President Warren G. Harding in 1922. The proposed act would have created a veterans' settlement board to be headed by the bureau's director and

would have carried an appropriation of twenty-six million dollars. It would in effect have put the director of the Veterans' Bureau in charge of some aspects of public land control—a feature officially opposed by the interior department, which had historically managed the public domain. Because of this shortcoming, and since Congress was in no mood to pass any soldier settlement legislation, the proposition was shelved.⁶

In 1923 the bureau stated that the "outstanding" development of that year in agricultural rehabilitation was the increase in the number of veterans participating in "project" training on farms as compared to those being taught under academic conditions. It went on to warn, however, that even if men were renting, leasing, or purchasing farms for training purposes, "The fundamental act under which the bureau operates does not permit the extension of financial assistance or of financial backing other than the ordinary allowance for maintenance, support, and equipment for purposes of training during the period of training."⁷

An act passed in June, 1924, intended to be a summation and improvement of the earlier laws, definitely terminated allowances and training as of June 30, 1926, and stated that the "test of rehabilitation shall be employability, to be determined by the director."⁸

² Bill G. Reid, "Franklin K. Lane's Idea for Veterans' Colonization, 1918-1921," in *Pacific Historical Review*, 33:447-461 (November, 1964).

³ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 40:407.

⁴ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 40:617, 619; United States Veterans' Bureau, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 4, 281, 323.

⁵ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 42:149.

⁶ C. R. Forbes to Warren G. Harding, April 8, 1922; Memorandum by Chief Counsel, United States Reclamation Service, Relative to Proposed Bill Drafted by United States Veterans' Bureau, April 25, 1922, both in General Records of the Reclamation Service, Record Group 115, in the National Archives. Hereafter records in the National Archives are indicated by the symbol NA, followed by the record group (RG) number.

⁷ Veterans' Bureau, *Annual Report*, 1923, p. 419.

⁸ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 43:628.

OUT OF this background emerged an important experiment in soldier settlement. Veterans' Bureau personnel in district ten, which included the states of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana, put farm training of wounded veterans into effect on a substantial scale. Agricultural rehabilitation was carried out in all parts of the country, but district ten had by far the largest number of farm trainees. In 1925 ninety-one per cent of all its students—approximately nine hundred—were undergoing "project" training, which bureau officials claimed was analogous to "on the job" instruction in industry. The majority of these "practical" trainees were in Minnesota.⁹

Farm training in district ten went through three distinct phases. At first students attended classes in the winter and worked on "projects" in the summer—a procedure somewhat similar to the activities of present-day 4-H clubs or Future Farmers of America. This program was under the general supervision of Professor Dexter D. Mayne of the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture. The second period began in 1920 when Mayne, after attending a Washington conference on agricultural training, enthusiastically endorsed the "col-

ony" idea of settlement. He still wanted the trainees to return to school in the winter, but this was discouraged by district ten officials, who preferred a system of local instruction throughout the year. District ten then embarked on a program of "establishment," or farm ownership, which brought a good deal of criticism from the Washington office of the Veterans' Bureau, since the law made no provision for helping trainees purchase land. The ex-soldiers would have to pay for their farms on credit terms out of their meager training allowances.¹⁰

Committees of disabled veterans traveled throughout Minnesota during the winter months of 1922 seeking suitable sites for colonies and reporting their findings back to the college of agriculture, bureau officials, and other ex-soldiers. By the end of that year groups were established at Argonne Farms, Veteransville, Silver Star, Onamia, and Moose Lake.¹¹ Argonne Farms was at Orchard Gardens, twenty miles south of Minneapolis. Veteransville and Silver Star were near the town of McGrath in Aitkin County. The Moose Lake colony was scattered, some of the men being located closer to the town of Barnum. All except Argonne Farms were in the cutover country of northern Minnesota. The number of veterans in each colony varied from time to time, but in April, 1923, Argonne Farms included 23; Veteransville, 35; Silver Star, 15; Onamia, 15; and Moose Lake, 50. A few trainees were eventually located also at Brainerd, Bemidji, Grand Rapids, and Aitkin.¹²

THE COLONIES were started with high hopes, and they had certain advantages, which—at least early in their history—gave them some prospect of success. One of these was the settlers' propensity to engage in co-operative activity. This was encouraged by district officials of the Veterans' Bureau. Argonne Farms, Veteransville, and Silver Star were organized colonies and co-operative effort was common at all three. The land at Argonne Farms

⁹ C. D. Hibbard to Veterans' Bureau, March 3, 1924; March 5, 1925, in the Records of the Veterans' Bureau, NARG 15.

¹⁰ F. J. Mabrey, Regional Agricultural Agent, to Chief, Agricultural Training Subdivision, September 13, 1924, in NARG 15.

¹¹ George P. Ahern, "General Report, Investigation of Land Settlement of Trainees in Minnesota," May 25, 1923, p. 4, in NARG 15. This is hereafter cited as Ahern Report. A microfilm copy is in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹² Ahern Report. The numbers of veterans in each project are given in tabular statements included with reports on the individual projects, which are attached to the general report and identified by number as "exhibits." The Ahern Report covers only the five larger settlements. For information on veterans at Brainerd, Bemidji, Grand Rapids, and Aitkin, see "Report of the Committee on Land Colonization, American Legion, Department of Minnesota," p. 4-9, in NARG 15. This is hereafter cited as Legion Report. A microfilm copy is in the Minnesota Historical Society.

was purchased and subdivided by the group as a whole; houses of a common type were agreed upon and their construction was conducted as a group enterprise. Later the Argonne Farms Egg and Berry Association was utilized to advance the specialized agricultural interests of the settlement.¹³

Little community activity is recorded at Silver Star, but at Veteransville the men formed an association and rented a community center which was used for classes, social gatherings, and as a barracks for single men. The trainees at Moose Lake worked together on building a road to serve the part of the group whose adjoining land formed a "settlement" and also organized a co-operative association for marketing produce and buying building materials, farm equipment, livestock, seeds, and other supplies. Although Onamia was not a colony in the strict sense, there was nevertheless some co-operative activity among the scattered trainees. An example was the organization of the "Disabled Soldiers Welfare," whose main objective was co-operative buying and selling of farm supplies, livestock, and seed. All these ventures were evidence of intelligent self-help on the part of the veterans.¹⁴

A second advantage was the selection of crops and products which were well adapted to the conditions of the area. The veterans at Argonne Farms specialized in berries, poultry, and bees. The men at Veteransville and Silver Star proposed to convert eighty-acre homesteads into dairy farms and to utilize smaller forty-acre tracts for poultry production. The Veteransville Association planned to standardize the breeds of livestock, concentrating upon Guernsey cattle and White Leghorn chickens.¹⁵

At Moose Lake, where the size of plots ranged from five to forty acres, the settlers intended to establish themselves as poultry specialists, with some production of berries. Trainees near Barnum, four miles from Moose Lake, went into egg production extensively, since Barnum was already a rec-

ognized poultry center. The type of farming decided upon at Onamia varied. As at Veteransville, the men who intended to specialize in poultry took the smaller tracts, while those who wanted to go into general farming established themselves on larger farms.¹⁶

Since the cutover country of Minnesota was best known for its poultry, bees, and berries, the veterans' selections were on the whole good. One deficiency noted later was a general absence of vegetable gardens, although a good many men, especially in the Moose Lake area, maintained milch cows as one means of reducing living costs and also as a source of income. Larger plots of land would in many cases, however, have been a wiser choice. It was later pointed out that some of the holdings at Argonne Farms, which ranged from two and a half to six and a half acres, were too small for successful poultry production—or for supporting a family, no matter how intensive the cultivation. Since land in the other colonies was often uncleared, the acreage did not represent the amount which was usable for crops in the earlier years. Later it also became apparent that the small size of most farms created difficulty in securing long-term credit.¹⁷

THE PROBLEMS of the colonies far outweighed their advantages. By 1923 the veterans had become bitter in their resentment, which centered not only around the inadequate size of plots, but upon imperfections in land titles, the quality and price of farms purchased, and weaknesses in the instruction program. This resulted in a series of investigations, first by the district office, then by the central office of the Veterans' Bureau, and finally by the American Le-

¹³ Ahern Report, Exhibit 7.

¹⁴ Ahern Report, Exhibits 8, 9, 10, 11.

¹⁵ Ahern Report, Exhibits 7, 9.

¹⁶ Ahern Report, Exhibits 8, 11; F. J. Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Division, May 10, 1923, in NARG 15. A microfilm copy is in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁷ Ahern Report, Exhibits 6, 11; p. 10.

gion, to which a number of the dissatisfied trainees had appealed.

The most intensive of these was conducted by Major George P. Ahern for the Washington office of the Veterans' Bureau in April, 1923. He was assisted by John D. Black, a University of Minnesota farm economist, and Fred J. Mabrey, the bureau's regional agricultural agent, whose territory included districts eight and nine as well as ten. All three men wrote up their conclusions separately, although Black's findings were filed as a part of Ahern's overall report. Later in the same year a "land colonization committee" created by the Minnesota department of the American Legion submitted a report to the organization's national office. Members of the Legion committee numbered eight, but apparently only three or four of these took an active part in the investigation. Copies of their report were sent to the Veterans' Bureau, but the findings were not otherwise publicized.¹⁸

The surveys revealed that in all the settlements except Onamia there were questions concerning title to the land and the terms under which it had been bought. The tract at Argonne Farms had been purchased from the fee-simple owner, R. H. Benham of Minneapolis. The contract included construction of houses (later criticized for their costliness) for which Benham made the arrangements with Thompson Yards, Incorporated. He then assigned "all lands and improvements in the trainees' settlement . . . including contracts made with the trainees" to the construction firm, which handled dealings with the veterans from that time.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Ahern Report, p. 1; Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Division, May 10, 1923; Legion Report, p. 14-16; Charles E. Pew and William T. Kroll to C. D. Hibbard, November 19, 1923 (copy), in NARG 15. A microfilm copy is in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁹ Ahern Report, Exhibit 7.

²⁰ Ahern Report, p. 2; Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Service, May 10, 1923; Legion Report, p. 11; Hartman, *State Land-Settlement Problems*, 45.

²¹ Ahern Report, Exhibits 9, 10.

Despite numerous complaints and suspicions that Benham "lacked integrity," both Mabrey and the American Legion investigators concluded that his operations had been entirely legal. The Legion report pointed out, however, that "No provisions were made in the contract for a reduction for cash or the completion of the contract previous to the time specified." When, therefore, most of the men received loans from the Minnesota Department of Rural Credit and paid up the original contracts, they were obligated for the full amount of the interest, not receiving the "substantial and customary reduction in price."²⁰

At Veteransville and Silver Star the trainees purchased land from Ernest O. Buhler, a banker and land agent in nearby McGrath, who held it on a contract of sale from the fee-simple owner. The veterans had no assurance except Buhler's word that their payments would actually be credited to the purchase of the land. Not until 1923 was Buhler required to furnish bond that he would fulfill his contract to buy the land, nor was any agreement made with the actual owner. Ahern estimated that Buhler received a monthly total of \$3,000 from veterans' payments, and as treasurer of the McGrath school board he controlled another \$1,500 paid by the bureau for instruction of the trainees. Neither in the case of Benham nor of Buhler had district ten officials checked closely on the validity of land titles, since they felt the veterans were dealing with "reliable" businessmen.²¹

This attitude reflected among other things a failure to understand the peculiar situation regarding land titles and financing which prevailed throughout much of the cutover country. There were virtually no credit sources in the area except the local bankers, who were usually land agents as well. These men were keenly aware that "wild land" was in far less demand than developed or even partially improved farms. An original settler on such untamed land often worked it for a few years and then drifted on, leaving no one to defend his

equity in it. The holder of the contract thus benefited not only by such payments as he had collected, but by the improvements to the land. The temptation was great, therefore, to steer the groups of veterans toward unimproved tracts for which there was little market. In most cases the agent did not own the land outright but held only a contract for purchase.²²

At the Moose Lake project most of the controversy centered around the so-called "Smith Tract," which was the only "colony" portion of the settlement, the rest of the veterans being scattered in the vicinity. The 240-acre holding had originally been school land and had been purchased from the state in 1902 by John F. Hynes, a Carlton banker, for \$5 an acre. In 1921 Arthur C. Smith, an instructor of poultry husbandry in the University of Minnesota, bought the land from Hynes for an average price of \$40 an acre. At the time Smith had been teaching poultry production to disabled veterans for a year and Mayne was advocating "group" settlement of trainees in Minnesota.²³ Smith undoubtedly bought the land with the intention of subdividing it for poultry farms.

Early in 1922 a group of disabled veterans visited Moose Lake in company with a district ten official to inspect the land. Smith's local agent was Richard J. Lewis, president of the Security State Bank, whose wife had been the teacher's secretary for a number of years. According to one account the men were "herded" into the bank, rushed to dinner and a show, and "herded" to their train, being given no opportunity to speak with local people. The men contracted to pay from \$57 to \$100 an acre for the land. Ahern concluded that Smith's position as a teacher had constituted an "unusual influence to purchase."²⁴

Whatever may be thought of the propriety of Smith's role in the affair, the title to the "Smith Tract" remained with the State of Minnesota. Both Hynes and Smith merely had contracts of purchase. In the winter of 1922-23 an official investigation was held. As a result of pressure from the bureau,

Smith agreed to an arrangement whereby the two banks in Moose Lake took over financing the land and made adjustments in its price. The average reduction was \$16 an acre, in consideration of which the trainees agreed to construct a road through their holdings, although under the original contract Smith had promised to have the work done.²⁵

In spite of the reduced price Mabrey felt the land was not worth the amount paid, but he thought that because of local conditions the compromise agreed upon was the best the veterans could obtain. The Legion investigators felt that "the prices charged . . . are still excessive and further adjustment . . . should be made, and the new contracts should run directly from the fee owner to the trainee in recordable form." Ahern also pointed out that the problem of fee titles had not been fully solved.²⁶

The colony near Onamia was what Veterans' Bureau officials termed an "infiltrated" or individually settled project. Thus the bureau personnel did not become directly involved in negotiations for land. In most cases the ex-soldiers located at Onamia purchased directly from the fee-simple owner, but in some instances a local banker, W. A. Benzie, bought the land and sold it to the veterans on a contract basis. No sharp dealings were reported in this area.²⁷

SOIL CONDITIONS and the prices paid for farms created a bitter controversy between Ahern and the district officials. The major, supported in his opinion by Professor Black, felt that the ex-soldiers could have obtained better and cheaper land. In his report Black stated that "a piece of land that costs \$75 per acre to clear, and will be

²² Ahern Report, p. 8.

²³ Ahern Report, p. 11.

²⁴ Ahern Report, p. 12.

²⁵ Legion Report, p. "B"; Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Service, May 10, 1923.

²⁶ Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Service, May 10, 1923; Legion Report, p. "C"; Ahern Report, Exhibit 11.

²⁷ Ahern Report, Exhibit 8.

worth \$127.60 per acre in 5 years, and rent for \$7 per acre is worth only \$16 per acre as wild land today." A cursory survey of the prices paid by the trainees reveals that the lowest was almost double the figure allowed by Black. Payments ranged from a high of \$350 an acre to a low of \$25. Ahern openly blamed the poor bargains on the close relationship between district officials and local land agents.²⁸

Argonne Farms was among the most expensive of the colonies. Land there was purchased for an average of \$200 an acre, its high price being the result of proximity to the Twin Cities and to a paved highway. As the investigators were quick to point out, however, possible speculative values did not justify paying such a price for purposes of agricultural rehabilitation. At Moose Lake there was little disagreement over the fact that the land was excessively priced despite its advantageous location for the marketing of poultry products. Even at Veteransville and Silver Star, where the lowest per acre amount had been paid, the Legion investigators found land prices "very high" in relation to soil conditions and the great difficulty of clearing and development.²⁹

Again Onamia drew the least criticism. Prices there had ranged from \$30 to \$112 per acre, but Ahern reported that "Clearing is not too difficult, the soil is good if properly treated. A prosperous farming community in the vicinity testifies to the possibilities of the region."³⁰

The soil at the various settlements varied a great deal in quality, amount of sand and stone, and the extent of standing brush and timber. It is significant, however, that in none of the reports, not even in comments supplied by the officials of district ten, can one find a description of "excellent" or even "good" land conditions. The nearest to this

was at Onamia, but even there it was necessary to "improve" the soil by fertilization and other methods.

Ahern found that some trainees were quite dissatisfied with their farms after they had had a chance to inspect the soil closely. One veteran on the "Smith Tract" at Moose Lake reported that: "Mr. Lewis said it was all like this (pointing to the fair looking acres of cleared land nearby), then he hurried us off, and when I returned to examine my land more closely, I found a very large area of stony land and stumps that will be impossible for me to clear on account of my disabilities."³¹ Others told of similar experiences.

Closely related to the quality of the soil was the problem of clearing land and putting it under cultivation. In general, cutover lands require an extremely long development process to bring them into profitable production. From this fact followed numerous problems for the veteran — especially if he were located on a wholly unimproved tract. In order to achieve a producing farm before his training allowance was discontinued, he had to devote most of his time to clearing and building. Not only did this entail backbreaking labor, but it nearly ruled out a chance for practical instruction in farming on his "project," and thus defeated the very purpose of the training program.

Once the period of rehabilitation ended, most veterans faced the need for long-term credit. The best source for this was the Federal Land Bank, which required a forty-acre improved homestead. In most cases the plots of land were too small to qualify for a federal loan, but even those veterans located on larger tracts stood little chance of clearing enough land to meet the definition of an "improved" farm in the limited time available to them.³²

TRAINING at the colonies was both academic and practical. At first instruction was handled by contract with local school boards. The quality and cost of the resulting

²⁸ Ahern Report, p. 8, 13; Exhibits 9, 11. The statement by Black is in Exhibit 6, p. 12.

²⁹ Ahern Report, Exhibit 7; Legion Report, p. 3, 10.

³⁰ Ahern Report, Exhibit 8.

³¹ Ahern Report, p. 12.

³² Ahern Report, Exhibit 6.

programs varied widely. The most expensive projects were Argonne Farms, Veteransville, and Silver Star. There the Veterans' Bureau paid an average of \$30 per man for each month of instruction. At Onamia the cost was \$25 and at Moose Lake only \$20. For the most part theoretical instruction was concentrated in the winter months when the men could be assembled in classrooms.³³

At Argonne Farms virtually no practical instruction was given during the first year, since the trainees were fully occupied with land clearing and house building. The same was true at Veteransville and Silver Star. Ahern criticized the latter program sharply for its high cost and inefficiency, suggesting that the expenses be audited and the exact function of one of the three instructors be closely investigated.³⁴

Despite its low cost, the training program at Moose Lake was one of the best in the district. Mabrey reported that the five instructors had definite routes, required regular assigned lessons, and called upon specialists for technical assistance. Training at Onamia was furnished by one full-time teacher and was generally judged adequate.³⁵

In all settlements the veterans received some group equipment plus individual training equipment to the value of \$300. The latter became their personal property

at the date of rehabilitation. Ahern reported some errors in the distribution of this material—such as the furnishing of a few wagons without horses at Veteransville and the absence of incubators at Onamia.³⁶

The major also pointed out that instructors had not been furnished with full information on the men they were training. They had “no knowledge of the trainees’ program of instruction in the University Farm School, no data as to the trainee’s disability, period of training, date of rehabilitation, etc.”³⁷

Although on the whole Ahern’s criticisms of the schooling program were not severe, the district officials later transferred control of it from local boards to their own office and the University of Minnesota. One reason for this was the approach of rehabilitation dates and the need to reduce overhead expenses.³⁸ The most serious indictment of the training program—the concentration upon land clearing—was a weakness of the colonization plan itself and could not be remedied by administrative changes.

³³ Ahern Report, p. 9.

³⁴ Ahern Report, p. 9; Exhibit 9.

³⁵ Mabrey to Chief, Agricultural Training Subdivision, September 13, 1924; Ahern Report, Exhibit 8.

³⁶ Ahern Report, Exhibits 8, 9.

³⁷ Ahern Report, p. 11.

³⁸ C. D. Hibbard to Frank J. Kuboushek, February 28, 1925, in NARG 15.



*STUMP blasting
in northern
Minnesota*



CLEARING cutover land with horse power

DISTURBING doubts as to the capabilities of the trainees are found in all the reports on the Minnesota projects. The native ability of the ex-soldiers at Argonne Farms seems to have been lower than the average. There was some trouble with alcoholism, but the major problem was a lack of realism in financial matters. The veterans constructed bungalows of a rather elaborate type, and expensive chicken houses were erected before some of the trainees had need of them. Black, Mabrey, and the American Legion investigators all scored the Argonne Farms settlers on this point. It should be noted, however, that personnel from the college of agriculture drew up plans for the buildings.³⁹

The settlers at Moose Lake were average in ability for the district. As at other settlements, there were a few men not suited for farming under "pioneer" conditions. Ahern described one such trainee as follows: "His disability, ulcers of the stomach, has left him rather frail, and not fit for hard work. This man's outlook is not hopeful. He is not

thrifty; he apparently has a low mentality; is inexperienced in farming, and not keen about it." Fortunately this veteran was not typical of the student farmers at Moose Lake.⁴⁰

As at Argonne Farms, however, many of the men incurred excessive financial burdens. Automobiles, not houses, were the nemesis at Moose Lake. The commander of the American Legion was also the town's Ford dealer, and he sold trainees automobiles for \$20 down and \$20 a month. Of the fifty disabled veterans in the area, twenty-seven eventually owned cars. Combined with their unusually heavy land payments, this was a serious drain on their resources.⁴¹

Among the trainees at Onamia there were some excellent prospects for rehabilitation. Ahern reported: "These men average seven months on this project, and have made a fair showing in improvements. . . . No elaborate attempts at residences, expensive poultry houses, barns, or automobiles are in evidence." Mabrey described one Onamia veteran in the following terms: "This man has ninety-three acres and the timber on his land is rather heavy. He has nine acres now under the plow and six acres brushed, has built a house and barn, has eight cows, three horses, forty sheep and four pigs. This man is a very hard worker and has gone very heavy on the building and livestock program, considering the number of acres he has cleared."⁴²

³⁹ Dixon Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 382 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1944); Legion Report, p. 9; Mabrey to Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Service, May 10, 1923; Ahern Report, Exhibit 7.

⁴⁰ Ahern Report, p. 15; Exhibit 11.

⁴¹ Ahern Report, p. 15.

⁴² Mabrey to Chief, Agricultural Training Sub-division, September 13, 1924; Ahern Report, Exhibit 8.

Not all were so successful, however. Ahern's comments upon one veteran who had reached his termination date indicate that there were failures: "One rehabilitated trainee at this place . . . has paid \$450 of the \$1200 due on his forty acres. He has no income from his land. In addition to his debt on the land he owes \$117 on his insurance. He had brushed ten acres of his land and plowed one acre. His only income is derived from his compensation \$12.50. He has applied to the St. Paul subdistrict office for retraining. He is a typical result of conditions as brought out in the main report."⁴³

Of the men at Veteransville Ahern wrote: "This group . . . includes quite a number of unusually fine men with all the fighting spirit that made our great West what it is today." The problem of clearing the land was so difficult, however, that discouragement and physical breakdown were both frequent. Nowhere is the personal tragedy involved in the colonization experiment more clearly brought out than in a partial list of the men who had left Veteransville within the first year. Four had quit in discouragement—three to relocate in other projects. Of four who had dropped out because of health problems, one was dead, two were in tuberculosis sanatoriums, and the last, an epileptic, told Ahern that the work had been so heavy he "broke down several times and could not carry on."⁴⁴

THIS, however, was only the beginning. By 1930 the director of district ten estimated that more than seventy-five per cent of the Minnesota settlers had abandoned their holdings. Many had left their farms at the expiration of the training period.⁴⁵ Without sufficient income and unable to obtain long-term credit, they had little choice. One more blow of fate had been added to those under which they had already suffered.

The reasons for this failure are to be found in nationwide economic trends and in the blunders, false assumptions, and mismanagement by the officials charged with

directing the settlements. By the time investigation had revealed the latter, little could be done to correct them.

The first and most crucial mistake was locating the settlements in undeveloped cutover country. Ahern's query, "Why were disabled veterans placed on such lands?" is not only a haunting question, but is an essential key to understanding the collapse of the colonies. As Professor Black pointed out, "none but the physically fit should start on cutover land."⁴⁶ Clearing it is backbreaking, time-consuming, and expensive. Yet the men who were supposed to accomplish this development during a relatively short training period were without capital and were in varying degrees disabled—often mentally and emotionally as well as physically.

Another major stumbling block was the absence from the outset of low-interest, long-term credit. The veterans' limited training allowances covered no more than subsistence, and local bankers made a profit not only on their land contracts, but on loans to the trainees for seed, equipment, and other supplies. These advances were carried at eight per cent interest and were therefore more lucrative than the credit extended to the veterans on their farms. District officials of the bureau reported that interest rates were generally reasonable, citing the six per cent charged on real estate contracts and neglecting to mention the higher rate on equipment loans. Ahern was not so complacent. In one case he pointed out that the First National Bank at Lakeville, when lending the Argonne Farms trainees each \$100 for the purchase of raspberry bushes, had contracted for repayment of the loans by nine-dollar installments over twelve months. The men thought they were paying eight per cent but were actually being charged nearly twelve per cent.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ahern Report, Exhibit 8.

⁴⁴ Ahern Report, Exhibit 9. The list of men who had left is an unnumbered page attached to Exhibit 9.

⁴⁵ Hartman, *State Land-Settlement Problems*, 46.

⁴⁶ Ahern Report, Exhibits 6, 9.

⁴⁷ Ahern Report, Exhibit 7.

Between high interest rates, the inflated prices they had paid for land, and their own unwise expenditures, most of the veterans were soon carrying an impossible burden of debt. Meanwhile the district officials persisted in a futile hope that more federal assistance would be forthcoming at the end of the rehabilitation period. None was. Some of the settlers — especially those at Argonne Farms — were aided by the Minnesota Department of Rural Credit, but this was not enough.⁴⁸

Although based in theory upon the Lane idea of community soldier settlement, the agricultural rehabilitation of disabled veterans in Minnesota fell short of the actual outlines of that plan. A serious weakness

⁴⁸ Hartman, *State Land-Settlement Problems*, 45; Legion Report, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Hartman, *State Land-Settlement Problems*, 30-46.

THE PICTURES of clearing cutover land are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The cartoon on the title page is from the September, 1918, issue of *Carry On*, a magazine for disabled veterans published by the American Red Cross.

would have been avoided if the predevelopment feature of the Lane scheme had been put into effect, but this was impossible, since Congress refused to pass enabling legislation.

Yet one may fairly question whether even the best conceived of rural settlement programs could have succeeded in the 1920s. During those years of low commodity prices and a declining farm economy, not only the Minnesota veterans' colonies but the six state-sponsored plans and numerous private land settlement ventures ended dismally.⁴⁹ All were based on the assumption that the demand for farm products, which had reached a peak in the years of World War I, would continue to increase. In the Lake States there was also the persistent faith that soil which had produced vast stands of pine timber could, merely by clearing and plowing, be turned into productive farm land. Both ideas proved mistaken, and, as the grip of depression tightened across the nation's farm belt, the little colonies of disabled veterans in Minnesota were not alone in facing the bleak reality of failure.

An "unexpected calamity" in 1822

WHAT may have been the first recorded damage caused by the flooding Minnesota River is revealed in a letter written by Colonel Josiah Snelling, commandant of Fort St. Anthony, to Colonel George Gibson, the commissary general, on July 12, 1822. The communication has been preserved in the National Archives. Snelling, then struggling to complete construction of the isolated frontier fort which was later to bear his name, was also expected to see that his troops supplied a good share of their own rations. In reporting on this effort, he wrote:

Sir/

It has heretofore been my misfortune to fall far short of your expectations in relation to the cultivation of the Public Lands in this vicinity; the present season I exerted myself to the utmost of my means to raise the vegetable part of

the ration, and with some prospect of success, but an unexpected calamity has in a measure disappointed me again; the spring was unusually wet and for the first twelve days in June we had a constant succession of thunder storms, on the 13th the St Peters having passing it's [*sic*] banks overflowed all our fields and gardens on the Bottom, after rising eighteen feet above its ordinary level, it remained stationary three weeks, by which every trace of vegetation was destroyed.

Our losses are twenty acres of corn, six of Potatoes, five of Peas and Beans sowed for the commissary, and sixteen laid out in lots for the use of the Officers and Soldiers; if the black-birds do not renew their ravages, I still hope however to do something in aid of your department, although I cannot at present venture to state the amount.



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