

The Plight of the Colonists: The Pragmatics of Requests

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Overview

The letter examined in this analysis was written by my great grandmother, Inez Huseby, on April 30th, 1939. Therein, she pleads with a friend in the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation on behalf of her husband, Einer, and their family to accept her application for a job in Palmer so that they might avoid destitution. This was forty-three days before they announced together that they could no longer maintain their farm.

The plight described in her letter is used here as a case study for an experience that was common among the settlers in Mat-Su. Untrained farmers were poorly supported, and would often be put into positions where they needed to make uncomfortable requests. My artifact analysis looks at the way English communication was used to maintain relationships in a poorly connected territorial Alaska. This analysis examines the pragmatics of politeness when making requests, and considers the role of letter writing in a fledgling Alaskan town. I also explain the historical context of the Palmer Colony and its conditions of life, as well as the broader context of the Great Depression that led to its existence.

The Context of the New Deal

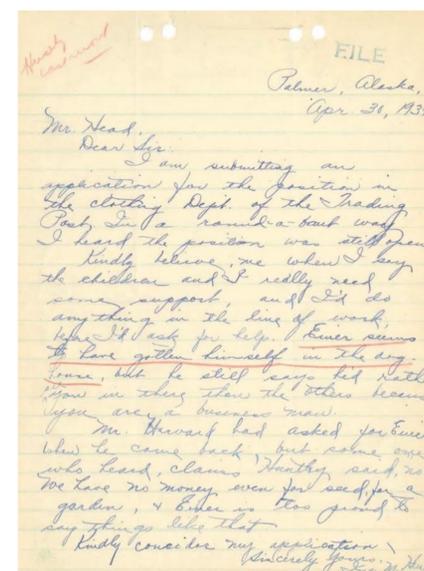
- 1929: The stock market crashes and the Great Depression begins.
- 1933: Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected and his New Deal policies begin to be enacted.
- 1933: The Federal Emergency Relief Administration is established with the aim of providing loans to states so that they might operate relief programs. Within a year, the organization began to explore Alaska as a possible place for relocation (Lively, 16).
- Across America, workers became under- or unemployed, and the agricultural sector of the economy in particular suffered significantly. FERA led to the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, which relocated suffering families (Hegener, 34).
- Alaska became one such location, with a three-fold intention: "1. To take people off, or to keep them off, relief as a result of depression in the United States. 2. To demonstrate whether or not Alaska provided a settlement frontier that could absorb excess population. 3. To add greater support of the Alaskan economy by production of more locally produced food which would lessen dependence on costly and vulnerable waterborne transportation" (Lively, 16).

The Palmer Colony

- In 1935, 202 colonists and their families were transported from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to the Palmer Colony. As explained by Miller, these families were chosen from the northern regions of these states "partly because these regions had some climatic similarity to Alaska and partly because the people there were largely of that North European stock thought to have a special Sturdiness and fondness for pioneering" (Miller, 48).
- Many of the colonists had little experience with farming. As colonist Hollis Smith describes, "They didn't get people who were farmers or anything ... They didn't know anything about farming or even living ... They just gave up" (Brooks, 24).
- The Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation was established as an arm of the government to oversee the colony. Each colonist would enter into an agreement with the ARRC, and costs to operate their farms for the first five years would be charged to their accounts. In the end, however, the total debt was much higher than was advertised to colonists (Miller, 76).
- Each family was provided a 40-acre farm, generally considered to be too small to support commercial agriculture, and access to additional land was extremely limited. Every colonist had to build their own house and farm, as well as clear their land, upon arrival (Lively, 16; Miller, 65).
- By 1939, within four years of the creation of the colony, 60% of colonists had left due to their inability to maintain their farms, with another ten percent leaving over the next ten years (Lively, 16; Miller, 65).
- Communication in the area was limited: an earlier settler, Jetret Peterson explained that "the steamer came in once a month from Seattle bringing up the mail. You had your mail once a month" (Brooks, 22). During the colony, the ARRC had access to telegram services.

A Partial Timeline Leading up to the Palmer Colony:

- 1898: Captain Glenn represented the U.S. government in their attempt to create more accurate maps when he and his party explored along the Matanuska River (Lively, 5).
- 1898-1908: Charles Georgeson investigates Alaska's agricultural potential through experimental stations (Hegener, 12).
- 1912: Alaska becomes a territory of the United States (Lively, 6).
- 1914-1915: Alaska Railroad is built, connecting Fairbanks to Seward through the Mat-Su Valley. Part of the purpose of the railroad is to facilitate agriculture (Lively, 6; Hegener, 12).
- 1935: Executive Order 5967 is signed by F.D.R., allocating 8,000 acres of land for agriculture in the colony. Shortly after, 18,000 acres of land were allocated for grazing (Hegener, 42).



Mr. Head
Dear Sir:

I am submitting an application for the position in the clothing Dept. of the Trading Post. In a round-a-bout way I heard the position was still open.

Kindly believe me when I say the children and I really need some support, and I'd do anything in the line of work, before I'd ask for help. Einer seems to have gotten himself in the dog house, but he still says he'd rather

see you in there than the others because you are a business man.

Mr. Harvard had asked for Einer when he came back, but some one who heard, claims Huntley said, "no." We have no money even for seed, for a garden, + Einer is too proud to say things like that.

Kindly consider my application

Sincerely Yours,
Inez M. Huseby

Palmer, Alaska
Apr. 30, 1939



Einer and Inez Huseby, c. 1971, personal photo, reproduced with permission

The Pragmatics of Requests

- In the field of linguistics, pragmatics "focuses on how meaning is constructed and interpreted in a given context" (Krutatz, 2).
- In pragmatics, one of the primary ideas is that of face. This refers to "one's public self-image and how this self-image is maintained in interactions with others" (Krutatz, 17). Speakers use politeness strategies to maintain the face of their audience.
- One such method is through indirect speech. "[One of] the most common occurrences of indirect use of language [is] found in the face threatening situations in which a speaker ... requires a favour from a hearer" (Porayska, 2).
- Through her request, the core of which is "Kindly believe me when I say the children and I really need some support, and I'd do anything in the line of work, before I'd ask for help," Inez presents an on-record request made with redressive indirect language meant to accommodate negative face (Porayska, 3).
- By praising the recipient and observing his superiority when she says "he'd rather see you in there than the others because you are a business man," Inez demonstrates Lakoff's rule of camaraderie (Krutatz, 24).
- By providing the recipient with the option of either accepting or refusing her request when she says "Kindly consider my application," Inez demonstrates Leech's conversational maxim of Tact (Krutatz, 21).
- It is noteworthy that Inez, as opposed to Einer, wrote the letter, as epistolary writing has long been a genre favored by women (Patterson, 2).

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