

The Last Settlers

Jennifer Brice

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As a word, Alaska creates thoughts of independence and freedom. As a state, Alaska conjures up images of wildness, a kind of separate reckless place beyond the safety of home. This wanting to be far beyond home is the basis for *The Last Settlers*. In the early 1980s thousands of acres in central and eastern Alaska were opened under the federal Homestead Act. The availability of free five-acre parcels called out to those seeking beyond home. Although thousands headed to the Great Land to stake their claim, today less than 100 hold onto the wilderness property.

Brice and Mason put two families at the center of this intriguing book. The Hannans and their children settled along Dead Fish Lake in the center of Alaska. They raise their children on five acres with countless thousands as a back yard. Another family, the Spears, settled a tiny tract of land near the village of Slana in eastern Alaska. *The Last Settlers* is a collection of well-written essays that describe, in sometimes poetic detail, the lives of these interesting people. The photographs wonderfully capture the remoteness and hardship abundant in the far north. They also capture something else. Reality.

One thing this book does not do is candy-coat the Alaskan frontier and the people who desire it as home. Far from glossy tourist brochures and finely directed videos, Brice and Mason cut National Geographic gloss to the bone. And the bone is both hard and wonderful. They have created a straightforward look into hardy people who chose a life filled with difficult remoteness. This is a fine collection for anyone seeking an armchair guide to wilderness settlement or those for whom home is somewhere beyond.

ALAN L. WHITE (July / August 1998)

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