This Alaska makes cheese, not snow

Say cheese: Pat and Clarence Vanness, along with their grandson Sean and son Randy, show some of the cheeses on display at the Alaska Farmer's Cooperative, a cheese factory in the Kewaunee County community of Alaska.

Kewaunee County hamlet's name came from the state

By Gary Dodge
Press-Gazette

ALASKA — When residents of Alaska visit elsewhere, the first question they're asked is, where's Alaska?

"The name is probably the biggest thing," says lifetime resident and farmer Roger Teske.

When people find out he's from Alaska, "They look at you twice," quipped Clarence Vanness, operator of the Alaska Farmer's Cooperative, a cheese factory.

As if that's not enough, someone always steals the "Alaska" sign as they enter this Northeastern Wisconsin community, residents say.

For the record, Alaska is in the Kewaunee County town of Pierce, between Algoma and Kewaunee along State Highway 42. In the lull of winter, the hamlet's population, consisting mainly of retirees, reaches between 30 and 40 people.

But the population doubles, maybe triples, in the summer, residents say. The increase is due to summer cabins and an influx of people on the weekends hoping to take advantage of Alaska's two lakes, Teske said.

The Teske family has owned a farm in this town almost as long as the town has existed.

Teske, 45, lives on the fourth-generation farm with his wife, Laurie, 36, and daughters, Tammy, 17, Tricia, 16, and Tiffany, 9.

The community was founded in the 1850s, and Teske's ancestors began operating a farm in 1864.

Today, Teske operates a dairy farm and grows crops for canning companies. He also grows cash crops such as winter wheat.

Alaska received its name from an Alaskan who came to Northeastern Wisconsin in the 1850s, Teske said.

"The story goes that Pierce, which the town of Pierce is named for, came down from Alaska and made the comment that it's as cold as Alaska. It kind of stuck," Teske said.

The official version published in the 1989-90 *Kewaunee County Directory* states:

"Pierce came into political existence in April 1857, and it took its name from a somewhat romantic pioneer personality, who, at an early day, made the place his home — his exact settlement being upon the present County Farm.

"James Pierce was a Canadian insurgent who rose in arms against the Queen's government, was captured with his fellow conspirators and sent to banishment.

"He made his escape, and after a series of adventures, brought his family to the woods of Kewaunee County. Alaska was the name given to the new post office established at the Hitchcock & Mashek pier the same year that the United States acquired its great northwestern possessions from Russia."

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— Alaska farmer Roger Teske

In its heyday, Alaska had a sawmill operating on the northeast corner of East Alaska Lake, and a cheese factory was started in the late 1800s by one of Teske's relatives. Another relative operated a general store, he said.

The elementary school closed in 1961. Students now get their education from either the Algoma or Kewaunee school districts, depending upon which side of the boundary one lives.

"There's one house where the line runs right through. If you move in one bedroom you can go to Kewaunee and if you move into another bedroom you can go to Algoma. That's the truth," Teske said.

Teske pays taxes to both school districts.

While some things that made the town bigger are gone, Alaska still sports a motel, golf course, restaurant and tavern.

It still offers the same recreational opportunities Teske enjoyed while growing up here, including fishing, hunting, ice skating and sledding.

And the cheese cooperative, serving 40 patrons, continues operation.

The factory is operated by the Vanness family. Clarence, 59, is the manager. His wife, Pat, operates the cheese store, and their son, Randy, 31, is the factory's assistant manager. The factory employs seven others.

The Vannesses have lived next to the Alaskan plant for 20 years and have greeted visitors from many areas.

A map on the wall in the cheese store has stars marking the homes of visitors.

People have come from as far away as Australia, Portugal and the Soviet Union.

"We even had people here from the real Alaska," Pat Vanness said.

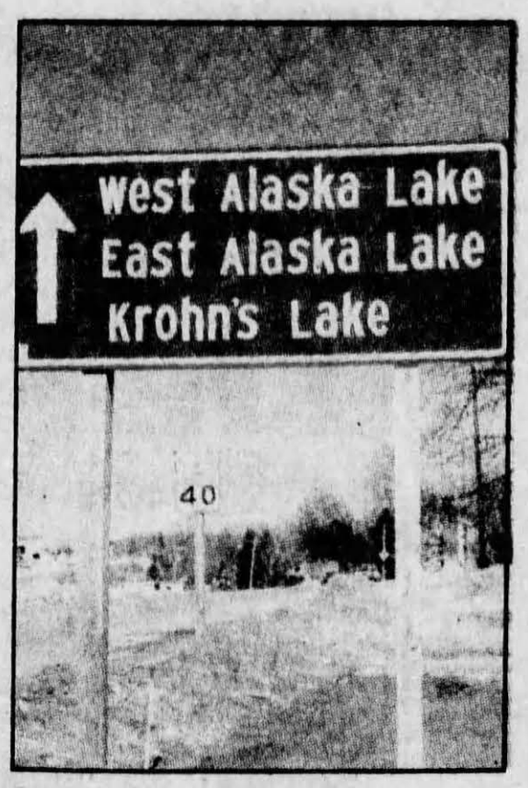
■ **Next week:** Peshtigo in Marinette County

The Alaska file

People & Places

☐ **Religion:** People attend churches in surrounding communities.
☐ **Mail:** Home delivery.
☐ **Lakes:** East Alaska and West Alaska lakes. Lake Michigan is 1 mile away.
☐ **Businesses:** Alaska Farmer's Cooperative; Alaskan Motor Inn with a nine-hole golf course; Alaskan Supper Club; and Gen's Sky Club.
☐ **Population:** 30 to 40 in the winter. Doubles, sometimes triples, in the summer.

Press-Gazette photos by Ken Wesely



Go north: Many visitors go through Alaska to get to one of the popular lakes near the Kewaunee County community.

Farm family: Roger and Laurie Teske live on their fourth-generation farm in Alaska with their three daughters. Roger Teske's ancestors began operating a farm there in 1864.