

Documenting Alaska's Past: The Alaska Records Survey

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For years, the writing of Alaskan history has been hampered by the lack of primary source materials. Although many records and papers relating to Alaska are retained in museums, libraries, historical societies, and federal, state, and university archives, it was not until 1966 that an attempt to survey Alaskan historical resources was first initiated.

In 1966, Robert Fredericks conducted a survey of 300 repositories in the United States and Canada; he published his results, "Caches of Alaskana," in the *Alaska Review* in 1967. He listed 99 repositories with Alaskan archival materials, of which 44 indicated manuscript materials. He also included references to books, newspapers, and periodicals. His effort was admirable, but lacked both comprehensiveness and value, the latter caused by the limited distribution of the *Alaska Review*. Moreover, he also limited his survey to those repositories known to have Alaskan holdings.

Fredericks's work stood alone until 1981 when this author began a personal survey of repositories in the United States and Canada for records and papers relating to Alaskan aviation. In addition to numerous collections on aviation, I discovered an incredible array of additional Alaskan materials on a wide variety of topics, ranging from archaeology to zoology. This led, in turn, to a grant from the Alaskan Historical Commission to survey 2,000 repositories in the United States and Canada on their holdings of Alaskan archival records. The grant was awarded in November 1984.

Logistically, the survey was a massive undertaking. Despite the great number of surveys mailed, it was necessary to limit

their distribution. Accordingly, surveys were sent to major college and university archives and libraries, city libraries, museums, and local historical societies. A special effort was made to send surveys to institutions in regions with historical ties to Alaska, such as the whaling museums of the East Coast, the Pacific Northwest states and Canadian provinces, and the Great Lakes states because of their association with the Matanuska Valley Colony in south central Alaska during the 1930s.

By the end of January 1985, the responses had begun to pour in. Of the 2,000 surveys mailed, 538 were returned, of which 152 stated they held Alaskan materials, while 386 did not. The project, now known as the Alaska Records Survey, coded these responses into a simplified format. This consisted of the repository or institution's name, contact person, address, and description of Alaska-related holdings. These coded citations were then organized alphabetically by state and province, except for Washington, D.C., which was organized alphabetically by institution.

As with many grant-funded projects, the primary limitation to the Alaska Records Survey was time. The grant period ended in mid June 1985. Consequently, some positive responses received after that time were not included. Another difficulty was the ambiguity of some of the responses, such as "our museum is open only from April through June," or "our collections have yet to be indexed," or "your request cannot be filled by our limited staff, however we encourage you to visit." Other responses expressed interest if the use of the survey results were further defined, or encouraged the project to

purchase guides to their holdings. The time deadline allowed only a very few cases of further inquiry if the initial response looked promising.

The results, published as the *Alaska Records Survey*, were quite valuable.¹ The 152 repositories in the United States and Canada reported 341 collections of business records and personal papers, in addition to maps, photographs, oral histories, and other materials. For the first time, students, historians, librarians, and archivists in Alaska had access to a great wealth of archival material both within and outside the state's borders. The data was used almost immediately in April 1985 to help prepare a guide for the Alaska Women's Commission, *Women in Alaska's Past: A Guide to Archival Manuscripts*.² The time deadline had not allowed the preparation of a comprehensive index to the published survey results nor inclusion of the author's initial list of Alaskan aviation material. Thus, a second grant was awarded from the Alaska Historical Commission in November 1985 to update and complete the mail survey. Between December 1985 and May 1986, the results of the personal aviation survey and late responses of the mail survey were incorporated into the existing listing. Introductory material (acknowledgements, foreword, preface, and intro-

duction) also was prepared, and most importantly, a comprehensive subject, place, and person index was compiled, thus making the new *Alaska Records Survey* (Alaska Historical Commission Studies in History, No. 209) an especially useful reference tool.³ Once again, the value is difficult to assess in words, but numbers tell the story—173 repositories in the United States and Canada with 557 reported collections.

This is not, however, the ultimate guide. It is only a beginning as many more Alaskan archival materials are discovered, identified, and reported. As with most reference efforts, there must be a starting point; the *Alaska Records Survey* is that start. Other efforts will follow. A newer and promising effort is the computer-based guide proposed and partly developed by Paul McCarthy of the Alaska and Polar Regions Department at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, which will account for Alaska-related archival resources in North America as well as Europe and Asia. Until that and other efforts are fully developed, the *Alaska Records Survey* serves the needs of students, historians, librarians, and archivists with an interest in or desire to disseminate information about Alaska's past.

¹Alaska Historical Commission Studies in History, no. 167 (Juneau: the Commission, 1984).

²Reference Publications #3 (Juneau: Heritage North, 1985).

³Alaska Historical Commission Studies in History, no. 209 (Juneau: the Commission, 1986).