

Industry / Health Care

C. EARL ALBRECHT, M.D., Alaska Health Pioneer

By Tricia Brown

Dr. C. Earl Albrecht was 30 years old and had just completed work as an intern and chief resident physician at Pennsylvania's Abington Memorial Hospital when he made the move to Alaska in 1935. Albrecht had been hired to assist Alaska Railroad Hospital superintendent Dr. John H. Romig. His arrival coincided with the year of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal plan of establishing a farming colony in the Matanuska Valley, north of Anchorage.

For the territory and for Albrecht himself, the timing was perfect. The need for an ambitious, talented physician was great. Later that year, Albrecht was invited to relocate to Palmer, where ultimately he worked the equivalent of two full-time jobs: physician for the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation's Matanuska Colonization Project and medical director of the Matanuska Valley Hospital. Albrecht also found time to participate in launching Palmer's United Protestant Church, serving as chairman of the committee to write the articles of incorporation.

Albrecht served the valley residents and new colonists from 1935 to 1941, when he entered military service. During the next four years, he was stationed at Fort Richardson, where he was elevated to post surgeon and commanding officer of the 183rd Station Hospital.

Few physicians in Alaska's history were able to bring about as much positive social change as did Albrecht. He served as the territory's first full-time Health Commissioner under the Department of Health, from 1945 to 1956, an appointment by Gov. Ernest Gruening. During those years he battled against the "scourge of Alaska," targeting tuberculosis as Alaska's greatest health crisis.

Dr. Robert Fortuine, in his 1998 article about Albrecht in the *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, discussed the physician's effectiveness in attempts to control the tuberculosis epidemic in Alaska: "When Dr. Albrecht became commissioner, the epidemic was at its peak. With an obvious zest for battle, he organized a campaign on many fronts, with initial emphasis on case-finding, establishing a tuberculosis register, and making available hospital beds both for orthopedic and pulmonary tuberculosis. Later, BCG vaccination, ambulatory chemotherapy, and chemoprophylaxis were added to the battle plan. The results were strikingly successful. He became an eloquent spokesman and advocate for health in both Juneau and Washington, and was successful in obtaining greatly increased territorial and federal appropriations, not to mention surplus military buildings, ships, and supplies."

Albrecht also served on the University of Alaska Board of Regents from 1949-1958, and during his tenure promoted rural education. Recognizing Albrecht's stellar work in medicine and education, the University of Alaska awarded him an honorary doctoral degree in 1964.

When Albrecht relocated to Ohio and Pennsylvania for more than a decade, he continued a career marked by achievement. From 1956-58, he worked as Assistant Director of the Ohio Department of Mental Hygiene and Correction, and from 1958-63, he served as Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Health. From 1963-70, Albrecht

accepted a teaching position, taking the post of Professor of Preventive Medicine at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia.

Returning to Alaska in 1970, Albrecht entered in private practice once more, and “doctored” his patients for five years until retirement in 1975. Still, he continued to serve as a medical consultant. In the 1970s and ’80s, Albrecht threw his efforts into fighting the effects of alcoholism, particularly among rural Alaskans.

Never content to retire completely, Albrecht was a president and board member of the American Society for Circumpolar Health and was counted among the founders of the International Symposium for Circumpolar Health, participating in that organization’s activities for forty years. After a long and fruitful life, Alaska’s pioneer physician died in Bradenton, Florida, on July 18, 1997, at age 92.

LINKS:

University of Alaska Board of Regents recognition:

<http://www.alaska.edu/bor/minutes/1997/970815.minutes.html>

History of the United Protestant Church, Palmer:

<http://yukonpresbytery.com/YukonPresbytery/Southcentral/Palmer.htm>

University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library:

<http://consortiumlibrary.org/archives/CollectionsList/CollectionDescriptions/ALBtoB/ALBRECHT.wpd.html>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the early days of Juneau and the people who shaped it. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ALBRECHT ALASKA** or **PUBLIC HEALTH HISTORY ALASKA**

MORE READING:

Albrecht, C. Earl. "Public Health in Alaska—United States Frontier." *American Journal of Public Health*, Nations Health 1952 42: 694-698. Scanned copy of the text:
<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1526216>

Albrecht, C. Earl. *Tuberculosis in Alaska*. Report. Part I: Tuberculosis in Alaska. Part II: Hospital Needs in Alaska (Non-military) and Congressional Legislation Pertinent to Alaska Health Programs, 1940-1949?

Fortune, Robert. "C. Earl Albrecht and the Struggle against Tuberculosis in Alaska." *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 1998; 57 Suppl 1:237-41.

Fortune, Robert. *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1989.

Jordan, Nancy. *Frontier Physician: The Life and Legacy of Dr. C. Earl Albrecht*. Fairbanks, Alaska: Epicenter Press, 1996.

Albrecht Reports on Alcohol Abuse in Alaska:

Albrecht, C. Earl and Margery Albrecht. *Alcohol Abuse in Rural Alaska: 1980 Study, Bethel, Alaska*. Juneau, Alaska: State Office of Alcoholism, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Alaska, 1981.

Albrecht, C. Earl and Margery Albrecht. *1980 Study, Barrow, Alaska*. Juneau, Alaska: State Office of Alcoholism, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Alaska, 1981.

Albrecht, C. Earl, Eileen Goggans, and Margery Albrecht. *Alcohol Abuse in Alaska: Prevention's Time Has Come*. Juneau, Alaska: State Office of Alcoholism, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Alaska, 1982.

Albrecht, C. Earl, Eileen Goggans, Elaine H. Boyer, and Margery Albrecht. *Alcohol Abuse in Nome*. Juneau, Alaska: State Office of Alcoholism, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Alaska, 1982.

Albrecht, C. Earl, Eileen Goggans, Elaine H. Boyer, and Margery Albrecht. *Alcohol Abuse in Ketchikan*. Juneau, Alaska: State Office of Alcoholism, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Alaska, 1982.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Public Health in Alaska, U.S. Frontier. Presented by C. Earl Albrecht at the 79th Annual Meeting, American Public Health Association, November 1, 1951. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer Rasmuson Library.

C. Earl Albrecht Papers, 1931-1993. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of papers and publications documenting Dr. Albrecht's career in medicine and public health administration, primarily in Alaska. It is divided into nine parts: Personal Papers; the Matanuska Colony; 183rd Station Hospital; Alaska Department of Health; University of Alaska, Board of Regents and related papers; circumpolar health related papers; health related subject files; publications; and visual materials. The personal papers include biographical materials, correspondence, speeches, testimony, and professional articles and papers. The health related subject files include materials on alcohol abuse, American Samoa, conferences and conventions, legislation, prostitution and venereal disease, tuberculosis, and the Violent Crimes Compensation Board. The visual materials consist of photographs, post cards, filmstrips, color photographic slides, and 8mm and 16mm motion picture film. Subject matter of the visual materials include the Matanuska Colony, the 183rd Station Hospital at Fort Richardson during World War II, Albrecht's tenure as commissioner of health in Alaska, the University of Alaska Board of Regents, Albrecht's tenures as Assistant Director of the Ohio Department of Mental Hygiene and Correction and as Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and international circumpolar health meetings.

Elaine Schwinge Journals, 1946-1996. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of a copy of Dr. Elaine Schwinge's journals from her service in The Alaska Territorial Department of Health from 1946 to 1950. The journals are divided by year and include diary and journal entries, narrative reports, correspondence, articles, stories, photographs, and other selected documents. Elaine Schwinge, M.D., served as a field physician for the Alaska Territorial Department of Health under health commissioner C. Earl Albrecht from 1946 to 1950. She served on the Mobile Health Unit, the ship *M.S. Hygiene*, the BCG (tuberculosis vaccine) Program, and the Alaska Native Service Hospital in Bethel. Schwinge received her Master of Public Health degree from the University of Michigan in 1948. She later worked in psychiatry for the United States Public Health Service, the National Institute for Mental Health, and the state of Pennsylvania.

Medicine in Alaska, Kenneth George Kastella, 1982-83. Alaska State Library; University of Alaska Anchorage. Collection includes typescripts of interview with fourteen men associated with health care in Alaska; also includes introductory material. Interviewees include: C. Earl Albrecht, Vernon Cates, Robert Fraser, Milo Fritz, George Hale, Lloyd Hines, James Lundquist, Asa Martin, Philip Moore, Francis Phillips, Howard Romig, Joseph Rude, Robert Wilkins, and Arthur Wilson.

FILM:

C. Earl Albrecht Papers, 1905-1997. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection contains the papers and publications documenting Dr. Albrecht's career in medicine and public health administration, primarily in Alaska. Part I, Series 4, consists of Albrecht's personal color and black-and-white motion picture film of his family and various

locations in Alaska (5 reels, 16mm, 1,425 feet; 5 reels, 8mm, 585 feet; 2 VHS cassette reference tapes; 2 MiniDV master tapes).

AUDIO:

Alaska Historical Commission Studies in History, No. 212, Science Series, 1986.

University of Alaska Anchorage. Sound recordings in two cassettes of radio programs produced at KUAC-FM, Fairbanks, Alaska. Based on oral histories of Alaskan scientists, the original scripts were researched and written by Dan O'Neill, with the assistance of the Alaska Polar Regions Department of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The project was funded by the Alaska Historical Commission. Interviewees include: Leslie A. Viereck, C. Earl Albrecht, Gunter Weller, Syun-Ichi Akasofu, T. Neil Davis, David M. Hickok, Robert B. Forbes, and David R. Klein.