

Industry / Health Care

Land, Sea, Air / Ships & Boats

The Floating Clinics: M/V *Health* and M/S *Hygiene*

By Tricia Brown

In post-World War II Alaska, the battle against tuberculosis was the territory's major health issue, especially among Alaska Natives. The crisis led to the creation of a unique health program overseen by Dr. C. Earl Albrecht, Alaska's first full-time Commissioner of Health. Most rural patients could not come to the cities for treatment, so instead the treatment came to the patients in the form of mobile health units traveling on the roads, railroad, and on waterways. This was not the first effort of its kind. In earlier decades, the Bureau of Education operated a "hospital boat" called the *Martha Angeline* along the Yukon River, and had created a network of rural hospitals and clinics, some staffed, and some served by itinerant doctors and nurses.

In the late 1940s, the Yukon *Health* tended to villagers' medical needs along the Yukon River. And coastal villagers—from the Alaska Peninsula to the Aleutian Islands to western Alaska—were served by two "floating clinics": the M/V *Health* and M/S *Hygiene*. Juneau was the homeport for the "health boats," as well as headquarters for the Territorial Department of Health.

Motoring between the coastal communities each Spring and/or Fall, the ships would radio ahead to each village, letting them know when they expected to anchor. At the ship's horn, local people would take their skiffs out for a check-up or on-the-spot medical care. Today's grandparents tell stories of their teachers canceling school for a day as the children lined up for lung X-rays, inoculations, and teeth-pulling.

In Unga, students wrote up a visit from the *Hygiene* for their school newspaper, *The Alaska Pen*. “On the 8th of September (1946), the Public Health boat, the *Hygiene*, came into the outer harbor of Unga and, after hooting its horn several times, Howard Bentsen responded in a dory and brought the crew ashore. Soon after landing, Dr. Krusich, the medical doctor in charge, made known her plan to have the entire townfolk taken to the boat for X-rays. . . . Howard and Kenneth Foster, being quite familiar with the harbor, volunteered their knowledge and ability to pilot the *Hygiene* into the inner harbor. To these two boys . . . the people of Unga are indebted for their safe and comfortable trip to and from the boat.” The story and others from 1934-1955 were gathered in a book titled *An Illustrated History of Unga*, by Thor Lauritzen, Peggy Arness, and Edward Melseth.

Although the work of the clinic ships and the other mobile health units improved many lives, TB continued to spread. A 1994 report by the Alaska Natives Commission Health Task Force recounted the numbers: “The territory . . . opened a 150-bed tuberculosis sanatorium at Seward in 1946. Despite these efforts, tuberculosis continued to ravage Alaska Natives. The annual death rate from tuberculosis for Alaska Natives was 653 deaths per 100,000 at a time when the total Native population was only about 34,000. Faced with a Native population being decimated by tuberculosis, Congress in 1949 approved funding for a 400-bed Native hospital in Anchorage that opened in 1953.”

Harold Anderson of Chignik Lagoon recalled the “health boat” in 1998 while telling stories about the early days of health care on the Alaska Peninsula, when both traditional healing and modern medicine were used. Born in 1930, Anderson was the son of Olaf Anderson, a Norwegian who arrived on a sailing ship in the early 1900s to become a fish trap boss for the Alaska Packers Association. He fell in love with an Aleut woman and they married and raised a family of eleven children, with Harold as the youngest. They settled in a place called “Greek Point” and Chignik Lagoon became a company settlement for the Norwegians and Swedes who were working the traps.

In the early years, the cannery doctors were on hand to help with medical emergencies, Anderson said. And, once a year, usually in spring when there was still ice in Chignik Bay, the M/V *Health* arrived and residents boated out to see a doctor or dentist on the floating clinic.

“They did a lot of good, I’m sure,” he said, “but we only saw it once a year.” Otherwise, if somebody had a toothache, the tooth was pulled with a pair of forceps following a swab of whiskey on a piece of cotton. That’s what happened to Anderson when he was seventeen.

Today, nearly every Alaskan village has a clinic and/or a CHAP aide trained through the Community Health Aides Program established by Dr. Walter Johnson. In 2005, Karen Brewster interviewed Dr. Johnson for Project Jukebox, a digital branch of the University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program. In his interview, Dr. Johnson included a discussion about the history, the present, and the future of rural health care in Alaska. To learn more about CHAP hear Johnson’s interview (tape number H2004-17-06), see the LINKS section below.

LINKS:

UAF Oral History Program, Project Jukebox homepage (Click on “Community Health Aides Program”)

<http://uaf-db.uaf.edu/jukebox/PJWeb/pjhome.htm>

Regional Health Corporations:

Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation:

<http://www.bbahc.org/chap.html>

Kodiak Area Native Association:

http://www.kodiak.org/relocation_medical.html

Maniilaq Association Village Clinics:

<http://www.maniilaq.org/villageClinics.html>

Norton Sound Health Corporation “Stop TB” Partnership:

http://www.stoptb.org/partners/partner_profile.asp?PartnerID=1214

Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium:

<http://www.searhc.org/>

Tanana Chiefs Conference Health Services Information Page:

<http://www.tananachiefs.org/health/index.html>

Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation Village Health Clinics:
<http://www.ykhc.org/511.cfm>

Alaska Natives Commission, Volume II, Report of the Health Task Force, 1994. View it online through the University of Alaska Justice Center site:
http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/rlinks/natives/ak_commission.html

The Alaska Pen, about Unga:
<http://www.thealaskapen.com/aboutunga2.htm>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the territory's efforts to combat tuberculosis with its Mobile Health Units program. 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 **ALASKA TUBERCULOSIS**.

MORE READING:

Alaska Natives Commission, *Report of the Health Task Force, Volume II*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Natives Commission, 1994.

Alaska Tuberculosis Association. *ATA Newsletter*. Bimonthly serial publication. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Tuberculosis Association, 1948-?.

Dale, George A. and Frances Paul. *Home Care of the Tuberculous in Alaska*. Lawrence, Kansas, 1947.

Fortune, Robert. *"Must we all die?": Alaska's Enduring Struggle with Tuberculosis*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 2005.

Fortune, Robert. *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1992.

Graham, Effie A., Jackie Pflaum, Elfrida Nord. *With a Dauntless Spirit: Alaska Nursing in Dog-Team Days*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 2003.

Jund, Lois M. *Teaching Aids on Tuberculosis and Its Prevention, Territorial Schools of Alaska Bulletin No. 1 [-6]*. Juneau, Alaska: Department of Education and Department of Health, 1946.

Lauritzen, Thor, Peggy Arness, Edward Melseth. *An Illustrated History of Unga*. Book Publishers Network, November 2006.

Meredith, Susan, Kitty Gair, Elaine Schwinge. *Alaska's Search for a Killer: A Seafaring Medical Adventure, 1946 to 1948*. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Public Health Nursing History Association, 1998.

Nice, Philip and Walter Johnson. *Alaska Health Aide Program: A Tradition of Helping Ourselves*. Alaska: The author, 1998.

Van Hagan, George E *T.B.*: *Alaska's Time Bomb* Anchorage, 1947. First appeared in the *Forty-Ninth Star*, August 10, 1947.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Department of Health and Social Services photo collection, 1940s-1960s. 1940s-1960s Alaska State Library, 1,405 black and white photographs, ca. 50 slides. This collection documents health programs in Alaska from Territorial days including efforts of the Alaska Department of Health, U.S. Indian Services, and U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Doctors, nurses, public health commissioners, village health centers, marine hospitals, tuberculosis control and rural health providers and resources are depicted in the photographs.

The M/S *Hygiene*. Alaska Department of Health archival materials, 1947. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer Rasmuson Library.

Kitty Gair collection, 1930s-1980s. Alaska State Library. The collection consists of personal and professional papers and photographs of Kitty Gair, her husband, Angus Campbell Gair, and her in-laws, Annie and Alexander Gair (Scottish immigrants). Two scrapbooks, dedicated to the career of Dorothy Russell contain biographies and photos of employees of the Alaska Dept. of Health, Alaska Health Dept. and the M/S *Hygiene*. A signed guestbook for the M/S *Hygiene* (1946-1947), approximately 1,200 color slides and four reels of film are included with the collection. Images of the *Hygiene*, employees and coastal villages are found in her slides and photographs. Among her personal papers are degrees, awards, certificates, and numerous recognitions of service.

Dixie West photograph album; Otto Schallerer, photographer, 1942-1945. University of Alaska Anchorage Archives and Manuscripts. The collection consists of the photograph album of Dixie West. The collection contains: a xerographic copy of the original 31-page photograph album, 194 original black and white prints from the album, six photo post cards from the album (five black and white and one color), and a photograph clipping from the Louisville Courier-Journal showing her holding an abandoned baby at Louisville General Hospital. Subjects of the photographs include: Dixie West, friends and family, Ketchikan area scenery, fellow medical staff at the Bishop Rowe Hospital in Ketchikan, the ship M/S *Hygiene* at a Ketchikan dock, and two groups of nurses or nursing students. Subjects of the photo post cards include: Bishop Rowe General Hospital, a street scene of Wrangell, an aerial view of Wrangell, Chief Shakes Community House and totems at Wrangell, Franklin Street in Juneau (all taken by photographer Otto Schallerer), and a color aerial view of Juneau.

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Scrapbooks, 1948-1970. Alaska State Library. Includes reprints of articles by staff, department publications, material collected by department, photographs, and newspaper clippings.

Frances Lackey Paul (1889-1970) Memoir, 1910-1970. University of Alaska Anchorage Archives and Manuscripts. The collection consists of the "Memoirs" of Frances Lackey Paul, covering the period 1910-1970. *Bio/History:* Frances Lackey graduated from Whitworth College in Washington in 1910. While there, she met William Lewis Paul. They were married in 1911. They moved to southeast Alaska in 1920. William Paul became involved in legal and native affairs. Frances Paul taught in Native schools and worked in her husband's law office. In 1933, she became involved in the National Tuberculosis Association. She served in that association in various capacities until her retirement in 1957. She wrote three books. She died in Seattle, Washington.

F. Leigh Kerr slide collection, 1948-1949. Alaska State Library. These color slides were taken during the first X-ray survey conducted north of the Arctic Circle and reflect Kerr's experience during his time in Alaska. The survey was conducted to determine the extent of tuberculosis in Alaska. The collection contains, primarily, village scenic views but also Alaska Natives, modes of transportation, schools, canneries, hospitals, local businesses.

Journals of Elaine Schwinge, 1946-1996. University of Alaska Anchorage, Archives and Manuscripts. 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. The journals also include tables of contents and time lines. Also included in the collection is an expanded version of her journals from 1996, which has typed versions of the journal entries and documents, and a corresponding CD-R computer disc.

Lois M. Jund slide collection, 1940s-1970s. Alaska State Library. *Bio/History:* Lois M. Jund was born Nov. 11, 1921, in Dayton, Ohio. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1943 and received a Masters in Public Health from Yale University Medical School in 1945. She was acting executive secretary for the National Tuberculosis Association in Arlington, Va., then civilian health director for the Signal Security Headquarters, War Dept. in Arlington, in 1945. After the war, Dr. C. Earl Albrecht offered her a position as territory-wide tuberculosis education consultant with the Alaska Territorial Department of Health. Arriving in Juneau in 1946, her job consisted of (often perilous and unpredictable) travel from Ketchikan to Barrow preparing communities for the tuberculosis unit that would follow. She organized teenage volunteers in each community to set up the examination areas and to work for medical staff. Lois Jund was deputy director of the Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services Division of Public Health from 1974 to 1975 and deputy commissioner for program management from 1975 to 1978. She wrote a series of tuberculosis control teaching guides and the Dept. of Health's first staff manual. She compiled Alaska's first health laws and regulations. She was a member of the American Public Health Association, Alaska Public Health Association and Circumpolar Health Association. Alaska Department of Health awarded her a Meritorious Service Award in 1977. During her career she received three Extra-Meritorious Service Awards from the Department of Health and Social Services and the

Arctic Health Research Center. In 1978 she was given an Alaska State Legislative Citation. She received the Woman of Distinction Award from the Soroptimist Federation of the Americas, NW Region (1965) and from the Sitka Club (1993). Sheldon Jackson Museum named her Volunteer of the Year in 1994. Lois Jund retired to Sitka in 1982 and continued public service. She died November 19, 2002, at age 81.

FILM:

Scenes of Seward, Chenega, Valdez and Cordova before destruction by the 1964 Alaska earthquake, by Kitty Gair, 1950s. Alaska State Library, 16mm film, 1 reel. Title from accompanying sheet of introductory notes by Catherine Gair. Filmed in the 1950s by Catherine Gair, a public health nurse on the M/S *Hygiene*, operated by the Territorial Health Department.