

**Alaska State Library  
Historical Collections**

Guide to Collection

**Alaska Communications Systems**

**Alaska Communications Systems Papers & Photographs, 1900-1972**

**MS 11**

11 Boxes  
2.5+ linear ft.

Revised by: Anastasia Tarmann  
June, 2010

**ACQUISITION:** The U.S. Air Force presented the Alaska Historical Library with a collection of photographs, publications, and news clippings about the Alaska Communication System and its work. The Alaska Historical Library acquired 8 loose-leaf binders of news clippings. Some published materials as ship to shore telephone directories were received and added to Library files. Box 11 was bought at an Estate sale at the home of Thomas A. Riviere, formerly with the U.S. Army Signal Corp. The collection of papers and photographs were donated by Marilyn B. Sutherland to the Alaska State Library Historical Collections November 24, 2006 and is accessioned as 2006-60.

**ACCESS:** The collection is unrestricted.

**COPYRIGHT:** Request for permission to publish or reproduce material from the collection should be discussed with the Librarian.

**PROCESSING:** This collection has been described at the folder level. Original order has been maintained as much as possible. All items were placed into pH-neutral folders.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

The Alaska Communication System (ACS) operated as a military telegraph line in Alaska from 1900-1969, playing an important part in Alaska's history. General Adolphus Greeley was an early advocate for a reliable Alaska communication system. In 1882 Greeley participated in an Arctic exploring expedition, but it is said that he found it took an intolerable length of time for messages to reach Washington, D.C.

It was the 1898 Alaskan gold rush that focused attention on Alaska's communication needs. In 1900 Congress allocated funds for the purpose of linking Alaska's army posts by military telegraph and cable lines which were eventually to connect with Washington, D.C. Accordingly, the Secretary of War was authorized to set up the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (later referred to as the WAMCATS) under the U.S. Army Signal Corps. General Greeley was designated Chief Signal Officer, and then Lt. Billy Mitchell was assigned as trouble shooter for the project. Mitchell was sent over 2000 miles to map the telegraph line route which was to run south along the Pacific Coast at Valdez and west from the Tanana and Yukon to Nome. He then returned to headquarters at Valdez to work on line construction under General Greeley.

By 1903 there were six telegraph circuits which included 559 miles of line between Fort Gibbon at Tanana and Fort Egbert at Eagle City. Also at this time, headquarters at Fort St. Michael began telegraphic communication over 2,500 miles to the United States. It is speculated that the year 1903 marks the transmission of the first commercial wireless message in the world. This communication took place between Port Safety (near Nome) and Fort St. Michael.

The ACS remained under control of the Signal Corps, but in 1936 the name was changed to Alaska Communications System. The original ACS group numbered about 100 men, but by World War II it had grown to more than 2000. It was then involved in linking military posts in the Aleutians to main headquarters at Adak, Kodiak, and Anchorage. Also during this time, ACS constructed land lines composed of 72,000 poles which covered 2,020 miles along the Alcan Highway.

By the 1950s ACS manned 33 stations and 7 branch offices in Alaska, with its main station located in Seattle. These stations were a combination military-commercial installation.

In 1962 the Air Force took over the ACS from the Army Signal Corps. The system was still publicly referred to as ACS, but officially known by the Air Force as the 1929th Communications Group.

The Air Force began transferring the commercial facilities of the ACS to RCA Global Communications, Inc. in 1969. RCA is a subsidiary of Radio Corporation of America. The Air Force continues to operate the military parts of the system in Alaska. RCA presently provides the principal commercial communications network for the state.

Historical note for Box 11: Thomas A. Riviere worked with the U.S. Army Signal Corp during WW II and later. He is on file at the Montgomery Co. Maryland Historical Society (301 340-2825); the Historical Archives at Fort Gordon, Georgia and U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania where many of his papers were sent.

### SCOPE AND CONTENTS NOTE

Press documents, historical accounts and data, photographs, circulars, reports, speeches, Congressional Records, correspondence, and other items relating to the history of the ACS. Material from Judge James Wickersham's personal library: photographs, extracts from the Alaska-Yukon Magazine and extracts from the annual reports of Chief Signal Corp officers. Reprints of correspondence between Judge Wickersham and War Department officials, as well as excerpts from Wickersham's diary. Photographs of Mendenhall Glacier. ACS notebooks and news clippings: 8 volumes. News items and clippings; notebooks: 6 volumes.

### SUBJECTS

Alaska Communications System, Mendenhall Glacier, William (Billy) Mitchell, Adolphus Greeley, Judge James Wickersham, U.S. War Department, U.S. Army Signal Corps, Alaska, Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, WAMCATS, submarine cable, cables, cable ships, cable barge, whales.

### INVENTORY

- 11-1 ACS Historical data, 1900-1916. (notebook) 1 v.
- 11-2 ACS News Items, 1962-1965.  
Taken primarily from Alaskan newspapers.
- 11-3 ACS News Items and Clippings, 1966, 1967.
- 11-4 ACS News Items and Clippings, 1968.

- 11-5 ACS News Items and Clippings. Jan. - June, 1969.
- 11-6 ACS News Items and Clippings. July - Dec. 1969.
- 11-7 ACS News Items and Clippings. 1970
- 11-8 ACS Participation in Alaska '67 Centennial. Contained in this album are photographs, news clippings correspondence pertaining to exposition exhibits, and ACS newsletters.
- 11-8 Photographs and clippings regarding the ACS participation in the Alaska 67 centennial. (notebook) 1 v.
- 11-9 Publications and material by or about the Alaska Communication System. One box.
- 11-9-1 U.S. Army radio and training pamphlets 1918-1919. 6 items.
- 11-9-2 Manuals for recorders, keyboard perforators, direct writers, polarized relays.
- 11-9-3 ACS history, sample forms, station diagrams and miscellaneous records.
- 11-9-4 ACS publications ACS Bulletin. 1948-1949. Three issues
- 11-9-5 ACS publications QUA ACS. 1949-1951. Four issues
- 11-9-6 ACS publications Totem ACS Telegraph. 1956-1958. 17 issues
- 11-9-7 Articles, photocopies of newspaper clippings
- 11-10 Scrapbook, 1942-1969. Photocopies of newspaper clippings on the U.S. Army Signal Corps and ACS activity. 1 v. (*Located in MS Oversize*)
- 11-11 Folder one: *Press packet: 97<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Army Signal Corps (Historical Feature) United States Army Alaska Communication System* and other documents about ACS history. Six folders with historical ACS photographs related to press packet.