

Alaska State Library
Historical Collections

Guide to Collection

Culbertson, Richard G., 1895-1969

Richard G. And Mary S. Culbertson Papers, 1924-1931

MS 4-22-9

1 folder (6 items)

Processed By: Gladi Kulp
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Provenance: The papers were donated by Richard K. Culbertson in 1998 (Accession no. 98-22). R.K. Culbertson is the son of Mary S. and Richard G. Culbertson.

Access: The collection is unrestricted.

Copyright: Request for permission to publish material from the collection must be discussed with the Librarian. Photocopying does not constitute permission to publish.

Processing: The letters from the Culbertsons are arranged chronologically. Other items have been placed after the personal correspondence.

Scope and Contents Notes

The Richard G. And Mary S. Culbertson Papers are primarily the correspondence of the family while living on St. George and St. Paul (Pribilof Islands) from 1924-1931. Mary wrote most of the letters to family back home. The Papers also include a description of the Pribilofs titled "The Mist Islands," written by Richard.

The Culbertsons taught Aleut school children in the Pribilofs. Richard also worked as U.S. Commissioner; this position included many different functions, such as storekeeper, jailer, and "keeper of the spirits." The letters, while largely personal, reflect the Culbertsons unique life experiences in rural Alaska.

Photographs form a separate collection, PCA 390. Baskets collected during their time in the Pribilofs were donated to the Alaska State Museum in 1989. Other correspondence and photographs were loaned to the St. Paul Bicentennial Commission in 1986. At this date they have not yet been returned to the Culbertsons.

Biographical Note

Richard Guy Culbertson was born at Woodleaf, NC in 1895. He attended King Business College in Charlotte, NC and joined the Navy in 1917 when the U.S. entered World War I. He served first as a yeoman and then as a commissioned officer aboard the U.S.S. Nanshan, a supply ship, as supply officer. The Nanshan was ported in Seattle and regularly served ports on mainland Alaska and in the Aleutians.

After the war, in 1920, Culbertson went with the Bureau of Fisheries (Dept. of Commerce) as senior schoolteacher on St. George Island in the Pribilofs. He later became assistant agent and then agent there. Employees of the Bureau were given periodic furloughs of several months after long tours on the islands. On a furlough in 1924, he got to know Mary S. Sandidge, a schoolteacher from Lynchburg, VA. She was born in 1897 and attended Farmville Teachers College in VA. Mary was teaching in Mooresville, NC where Richard was temporarily employed. They met while staying at the same boarding house, fell in love, and were married in Lynchburg on March 1, 1924; they left the same day by train for Seattle where they took the ship for St. George.

On St. George, they lived in "Government House" and took meals in the dining hall. There were only about 6-8 other non-Aleuts living on the island which, in the tradition of that time, limited social contacts. With limited social activities and not much to do during the short days, she organized and began teaching a kindergarten-age group of Aleuts.

In 1926, the Culbertsons took a furlough and then went to St. Paul where Richard became the storekeeper, disbursing officer, jailer, "keeper of the spirits," agent and U.S. Commissioner -- all at the same time. In 1929 he was reassigned to the Bureau in Washington, DC. Son, Richard K. was born on St. Paul in April 1928 and came to the states in October 1929 aboard the U.S.S. Sirius, a navy supply vessel.

Richard G. Culbertson left the Bureau in 1931 to go with the Dupont Company. He returned to active duty with the Civilian Conservation Corps from 1935 to 1939. He went back to Dupont in 1940. From December 1941 to September 1945 during World War II he went back to active duty.

During the war, he had two tours in Alaska, the first as supply officer at Sitka and then at Adak. He retired from the Navy as a Captain and then retired from Dupont in 1960. His final years were in Greenville, NC. He died there October 3, 1969 on his 74th birthday.

After her husband's death Mary lived in Virginia Beach and Blacksburg, VA for several years. She died in 1988, two months shy of her 91st birthday.

Adapted from the account by Richard K. Culbertson