

Kathryn Dyakanoff Seller

Aleut Teacher, Community Leader, Census Enumerator



Alaska Women's Hall of Fame (accessed 1 Sep 2017)

From the beginning, the United States vacillated on how to enumerate American Indians. The U.S. Constitution specifically excluded “Indians not taxed” (defined as those living in tribal relations as part of a sovereign community) from the census count. However, the federal government soon recognized that they would have to count the American Indian population, even if the numbers were not part of the apportionment decisions. In 1850, the United States began sporadically conducting separate censuses for these communities, a practice that continued for almost 100 years. In 1860, for the first time, American Indians not living on tribal lands had their own racial category on the census. The 1880 Census contained the first full count of Alaska Natives, while the 1900 Census was the first to count and classify all Indians living in the United States, regardless of their status. Throughout the evolution of the enumeration of American Indians and Alaskan Natives, census officials have embraced the hiring of a diverse

workforce representative of the local communities.

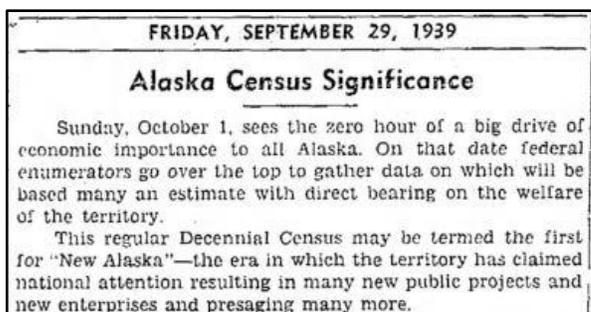
Ekaterina Pelagia Dyakanoff, known as Kathryn, was born on December 7, 1884, on the Aleutian Island of Unalaska to Nikifor and Pelagia Dyakanoff, both Aleut Indians. Kathryn began attending a local Methodist boarding school in 1894. At the age of 12, the Alaska Commissioner of Education recognized her intelligence and sent Kathryn to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, where she graduated in 1906. After receiving her teaching degree from the West Chester Normal School in 1909, Kathryn returned to Alaska to teach at Sitka. On June 1, 1910, while visiting Seattle at the close of the school year, Kathryn married Harry G. Seller, an Englishman who had emigrated to the United States after the Boer War. They met while she was studying on the east coast and eventually they had a total of seven children.



Kathryn and Harry, c. 1910

Bruce Parham, “Seller, Harry G.,” Cook Inlet Historical Society, *Legends & Legacies, Anchorage, 1910-1940*, <http://www.alaskahistory.org> (accessed 1 Sep 2017)

Following their marriage, Kathryn and Harry were commissioned



Fairbanks Daily News-Miner (Fairbanks, AS) 29 Sep 1939

by the U.S. government to build a government school in Atka in the Aleutian Islands—an area so remote that it only received mail once a year. They lived in Atka for 4 years and helped to establish the first cooperative store, radio station, and library. Harry also acted as a game warden. The family then moved to the Alitak Bay area on Kodiak Island, where they taught at various villages for 6 years.

In 1919, Kathryn lost both her parents to the Spanish flu. In 1920, Harry served as one of the enumerators on Kodiak Island, where Kathryn helped her husband as an Aleutian translator.



Kathryn and her children, c. 1922
Sunset Magazine (Dec 1922), Vol 49, No. 6

The Seller family then moved to Tyonek on Cook Inlet, where Kathryn was both a teacher and the school superintendent for a year. Following their move to Anchorage, Kathryn was able to take a break from teaching to raise her children. She remained active in the community and kept house while her children attended high school. Harry continued working in various government jobs as well as for the railroad, until he passed away in 1936. Following the death of her husband, Kathryn returned to Akhiok village on Kodiak Island where she resumed teaching.

As a well-respected local with previous official government and census experience, Kathryn stood out as a perfect candidate for census taker and received the assignment to enumerate parts of Kodiak Island in 1940. Despite Census Day falling on April 1, 1940, for most of the United States, the census of Alaska commenced on October 1, 1939, or as soon after that date as enumerators could be assigned and trained. From

previous experience, the U.S. Census Bureau realized that the distances and difficulties of enumerating Alaska's sparse population required significantly more time, and census officials allocated a year for the completion of census schedules.

The 1940 Census marked the start of a separate schedule for housing questions. Although previous censuses had recorded information on dwellings, the new schedule expanded on previous questions. The late adoption date of the housing schedule meant that some enumerators found themselves compelled to complete two rounds of questioning after waiting on delayed schedules. Despite these potential difficulties, which compounded those provided by the Alaskan environment, Kathryn commenced taking the population census on November 5, 1939, and finished on December 16, 1939, during which time she enumerated 82 people.

Kathryn's self-enumerated 1939 Census

Kathryn retired from teaching in 1948. Although she moved to California to be near her remaining children, Kathryn never forgot her roots. Long known as one of the best basket weavers among the Aleutians, Kathryn continued to educate and share her native culture with others during her retirement. In 1950, the U.S. Department of the Interior recognized her life of public service and Congress awarded Kathryn a medal. Kathryn passed away in San Francisco on June 17, 1980. In



Kathryn, left, weaving baskets, 1924
Alaska State Museum Concepts (Jul 1994) No. 8

2017, Alaska honored her with induction into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame as "an outspoken advocate and strong activist for the rights and culture of her people...In her career, she influenced thousands of adults and children across Alaska."

The Census Bureau is thankful for Kathryn's contributions to our nation and her community.