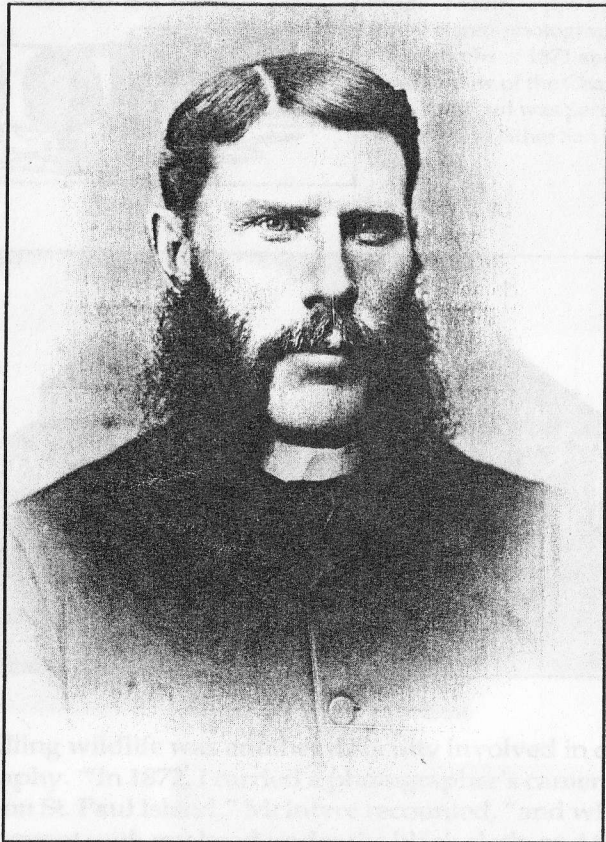


## The Pribilof Islands in the 1870s: The Stereo-Photographs of Dr. Hugh H. McIntyre

Robert E. King



Dr. Hugh Henry McIntyre, 1887. All photographs courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.

In the summer of 1871, Dr. Hugh Henry McIntyre, a physician and Civil War veteran from Vermont, began taking stereo-photographs, called stereographs, on the Pribilof Islands. These images, captured less than five years after America purchased Alaska from the Russians, are the earliest-known stereo pictures of this part of western Alaska,<sup>1</sup> and may be the earliest of any type of photograph ever taken on St. Paul and St. George Islands.

McIntyre came to the Pribilof Islands in 1870 as the newly-hired superintendent of the seal fisheries for the Alaska Commercial Company. Previously, he had been employed as a special agent for the Treasury Department in Alaska during 1868-1869. His work in his new post started in June and would last for twenty years. During this time, McIntyre commuted seasonally from Vermont to the Pribilof Islands, except for three years in the mid-1880s.<sup>2</sup> In 1871 McIntyre and his new bride, Emma, stayed over the winter. It was during July of 1871 and continuing into 1872 that McIntyre used a stereocamera in recording over thirty scenes on the Pribilof Islands.<sup>3</sup>

Photography on St. Paul was extremely difficult. McIntyre lamented of a group of images he sent home: "Could you but know the difficulties under which they were produced you would pronounce them good however bad they may be. The weather does not allow me to work more than one day in two weeks." McIntyre developed some of "the poorest views" while he was on the island, waiting until he was home in "a more salubrious climate" to develop his choice photographs.<sup>4</sup>

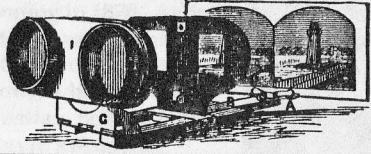
Adding to problems with the climate was the difficulty of doing any type of photography in the early 1870s. McIntyre's work was by the "wet-plate" method, where a glass plate negative had to be prepared just prior to exposure with light-sensitive chemicals, put into the camera wet, and then developed soon after the picture was taken.<sup>5</sup> This meant that McIntyre had to be near make-shift developing facilities in quarters provided by the Alaska Commercial Company, or take along a traveling photographic studio, such as when he took stereo photographs on St. George Island.

Robert E. King is the lead archaeologist for the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska and an avid collector of stereographs of the state.

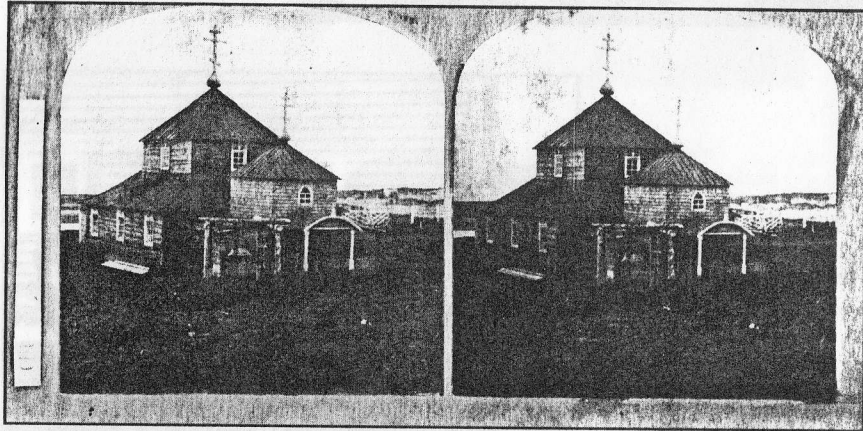
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Stereoviewers, such as the one advertised at the left, were common entertainment in late-nineteenth-century homes. Stereo-photographs were two nearly identical images produced simultaneously by special stereo cameras. Seen in a stereoviewer, they produced a three-dimensional image. McIntyre produced at least four sets of stereo-photographs from his photographs of 1871 and 1872. The image below of the Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul was part of a set published in either San Francisco or Vermont.



Unwilling wildlife was another difficulty involved in doing photography. "In 1872, I carried a photographer's camera near the . . . rookery on St. Paul Island," McIntyre recounted, "and while focusing the instrument with my head under the black cloth, and the attention of my attendant was diverted, two old bulls made a savage attack upon me, which I avoided by dodging and running. The camera was left where I had placed it and could not be recovered until seal clubs had been sent for and one of the bulls killed and the other knocked down and stunned."<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, McIntyre stopped taking photographs on the islands after 1872. The views he did capture, however, are among the earliest and rarest stereo photographs taken anywhere in Alaska, and the insights they provide into the culture of the Pribilofs are unique.



McIntyre's note on this photograph indicated that it depicted all of the American citizens on St. Paul Island in 1872, with the exception of himself, the photographer. McIntyre's wife is third from the right. Pioneer Alaskan naturalist, Henry Wood Elliott, is at the far left. Stereograph courtesy of Hugh McIntyre.

### Notes

1. McIntyre's use of a stereo camera in 1871 was not unique. Another pioneer stereophotographer, Alphonse Pinart, used one at least by September of 1871 at Unalaska and perhaps on Kodiak. The stereographs of Pinart, a French ethnologist, linguist, and adventurer, are located in the Bancroft Library. One was published in George Dyson, *Baidarka* (Edmonds, Washington: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1986), 59. The only earlier Alaskan stereographs known at present were taken by Eadweard Muybridge in 1868 in southeast Alaska.

2. McIntyre was absent in 1883, 1884, and 1885. House, Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, *Investigations of the Fur-Seal and Other Fisheries of Alaska*, 50th Cong., 2d sess., 1889, xxx, 116. McIntyre testified before this committee, which also viewed his stereographs.

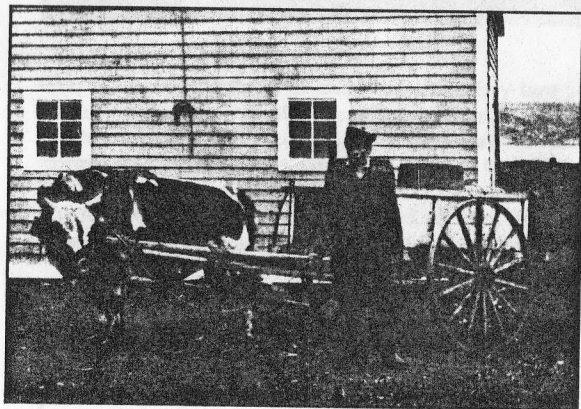
3. Eighteen of these are owned by the author. Others are owned by McIntyre's descendants, with scattered copies privately owned or in photo archives elsewhere.

4. Hugh Henry McIntyre to friends at home, July 20, 1871. McIntyre's grandson, Hugh McIntyre, graciously provided the author with this correspondence.

5. The improved, "dry-plate" method was not widely available until later in the 1870s. See, William Welling, *Photography in America: The Formative Years 1839-1900* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1978), 223, and George Gilbert, *Collecting Photographica: The Images and Equipment of the First Hundred Years of Photography* (New York: Hawthorn/Dutton, 1976), 279.

6. Quoted in Laurance Wolfe, "Stereogold: Stereography of Alaska, the Yukon, the Klondike—1868 to 1987," *Stereo World* 14 (July/Aug 1987), 10-11.

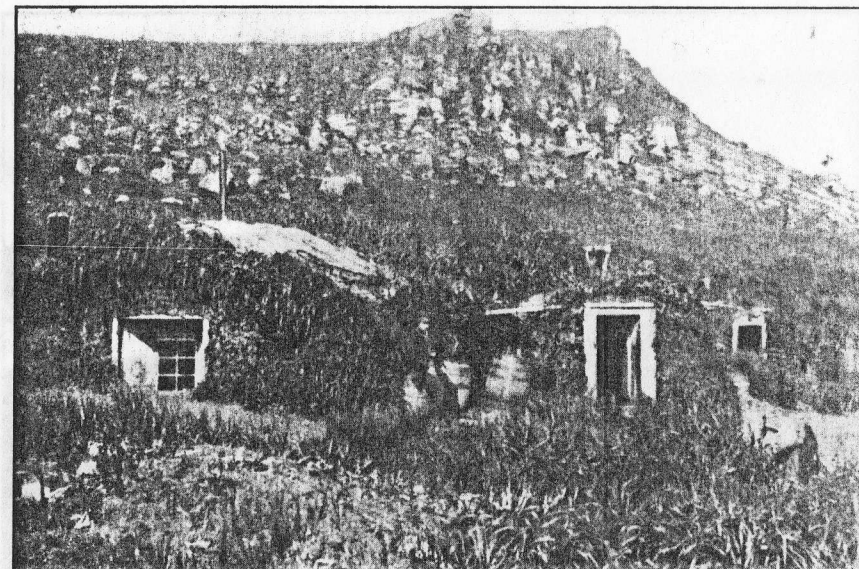
Aleuts furnished most of the labor for the seal fishery on St. Paul Island, first under the Russian colonizers, and later for the Alaska Commercial Company for two decades beginning in 1870. At the right, a group of men, mostly Aleuts, but at least one man who appears to be Russian, pose next to McIntyre's residence.



An Aleut man delivered water using this ox and cart. The ox was reported to be the only one in Alaska at the time.

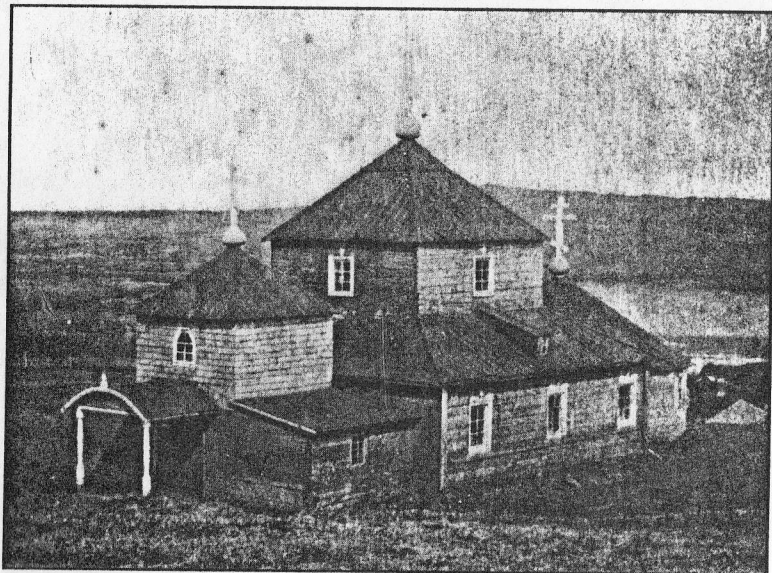


Aleuts boiled seal blubber for personal use. They depended on it for cooking and lighting and heating their homes. Stereograph courtesy of Hugh McIntyre.

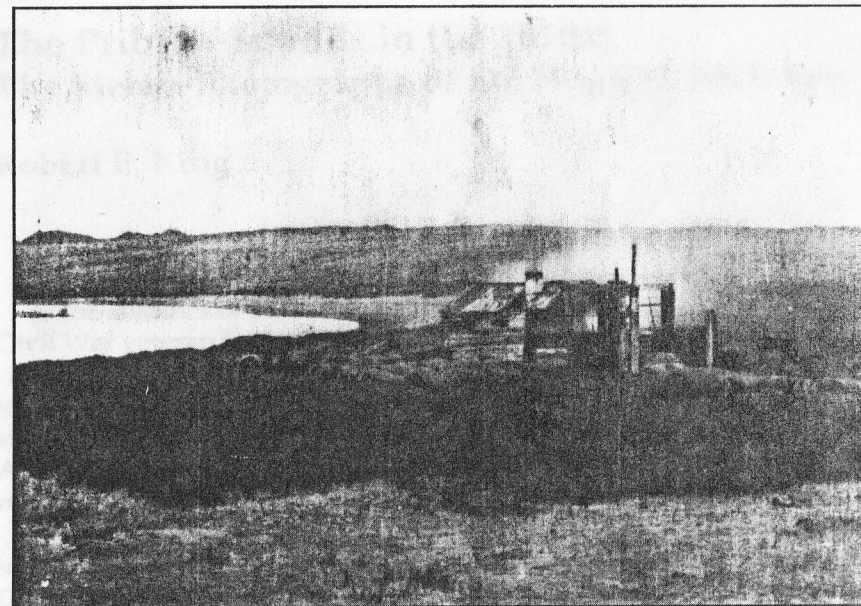
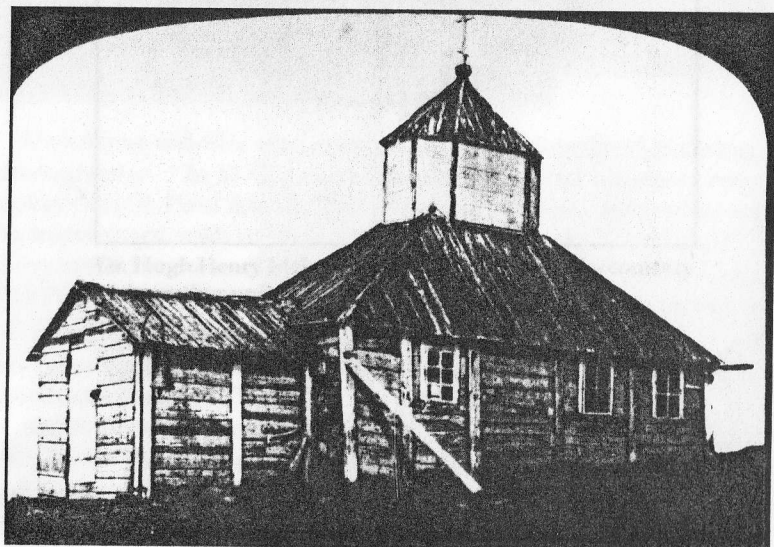


The above Aleut homes mix traditional low-lying, sod construction with glass windows, metal smokestacks, and western-style sills and hinged doors. In the picture below, McIntyre shows Aleuts grouped in front of a row of new homes recently built for the Natives by the Alaska Commercial Company. Below stereograph courtesy of Hugh McIntyre.





The Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul was thirty-two years old when McIntyre snapped the above photograph in 1872. The Russian-American Company built it of imported Sitka spruce at the village of St. Paul. The company built the Chapel of St. George the Great Martyr, pictured below, in 1833 on St. George Island. This may be the only existing photograph of the first Russian church on the island. A new church was built in 1875. The above stereograph is courtesy of Hugh McIntyre.



The primary purpose of western settlement on the Pribilofs was economic exploitation of the islands rich fur seal fishery. The above structure, apparently dating to the Russian period, provided oil used in tanning seal skins. The lumber yard shown below was critical to the Alaska Commercial Company's improvement of St. Paul Island's housing and production facilities. In this structure on the island, the company processed imported wood into lumber. The barrels at the left were used for water storage and to ship cured seal pelts to the West Coast.

