

REFERENCE CODE: AkAMH

REPOSITORY NAME:

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Guide prepared by: Amy Valentine, Archivist

TITLE: William J. Niemi Family Collection

COLLECTION NUMBER: B1996.031

OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTION

Dates: 1915 - 1973, 1996

Extent: 4 boxes

Language and Scripts: The collection is in English.

Name of creator(s): Alaska Engineering Commission, Alaska Road Commission, Anchorage Daily Times, Joseph W. Alexander, Army Service Forces, Co-Op Photo Shop, The Daily Alaska Empire, Camerson Edmondson, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, Field Force Headquarters – Intelligence Section, The Frontiersman, George M. Gary, R. F. Gliniecki, Celia (Niemi) Handley, Olaf C. Helland, J. R. Hershey, Phil R. Holdsworth, Jessen's Weekly, L. A. Lawson, F. McQueany, William J. Niemi, Pana-Vue, Joachim Ries, Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, Joe S. Rychetnik, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Territory of Alaska, U.S. Department of Transportation, Vacation Films

Administrative/Biographical History:

William J. Niemi was born in Michigan, in 1904, and moved to Alaska in 1910. He received a mining engineering degree from the Colorado School of Mines in 1926. In 1929, he married Bernice Kingsbury, and they had two children, Miriam Anne and Celia Beth.¹

After college, in 1927 and 1928, Niemi returned to Alaska where he worked as Instrumentman for the Alaska Railroad around the Anchorage area. In 1929, he was Chief of Surveys for the

¹ Handley, Celia Niemi. "Niemi, William J." *Gastineau Channel Memories*, <https://iuneau.org/library/museum/gastineau-channel-memories-browse/entry/17620>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2025.

U.S. Smelting, Mining, and Refining Company in Fairbanks. Later, he became construction engineer for the Alaska Road Commission, and in 1932-1933, he was responsible for the construction of the Eyak Lake Airfield near Cordova. In 1935 he worked on the Anchorage-Palmer Highway as Assistant Superintendent. Niemi remained in Anchorage until he was called to active duty as a member of the Alaska National Guard as a Captain in 1941.

During his military service from 1941-1945, Niemi attained rank of Colonel in the Army and served as Commander of a battalion of Aviation Engineers. The battalion saw action for three years in the Aleutian Campaign, and went on to construct airfields and aviation facilities in Okinawa, Japan.²

In 1946, Niemi returned to civilian service as an engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation Columbia Basin Project in Washington. He returned to Alaska as Chief Engineer for the Alaska Road commission in Juneau in 1950. In 1956, The Alaska Road Commission was abolished, and the Bureau of Public Roads assumed those responsibilities. Bill Niemi remained as Regional Engineer until his retirement in 1967, when he moved to California. In 1964, Niemi received the Department of Commerce Meritorious Service Silver Medal for federal highway work. He was elected to Alaska Press Club's 49er Hall of Fame in 1967. He died in California in 1992³ and is recognized for the many roads, bridges, and landing strips built under his administration.

Scope and Content Description:

The collection consists of 225 black and white photo prints and postcards, 652 slides, and documents and newspaper clippings.

The photo prints document various projects Niemi worked on, including the construction of Eyak Lake Airfield at Cordova from 1932-1933 (.1-.43), the 1935 Eklutna Bridge construction (.61-.71), and Richardson Highway construction (.85-.106). There are images of his time working in various areas of Alaska, from his early work in the Chitina District (.107-.140) to his later years in Juneau (.199-.225).

The documents and newspaper clippings highlight Niemi's work history throughout Alaska, including press releases, military records, letters, reports and studies, certificates, employment paperwork, booklets, appointments, memorandums, and awards. Unrelated to his work, the collection also contains an Easter booklet, Russian Orthodox Church mailouts, and several Deed of Mining Claims issued to his father, August Niemi, between 1915-1916.

The slides document primarily Southeast and Southcentral Alaska where Niemi lived and worked, including marine travel throughout the Inside Passage, various hunting and fishing trips, Niemi in uniform, 1964 Earthquake destruction, construction images, scenery along

² Alaska Road Commission. "William J. Niemi to be Appointed Chief, Operations Division, of the Headquarters, Alaska Road Commission." 17 Aug. 1950. Press release.

³ Handley, Celia Niemi. "Niemi, William J." *Gastineau Channel Memories*, <https://juneau.org/library/museum/gastineau-channel-memories-browse/entry/17620>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2025.

various highways, and some commercial slides of Indigenous communities in Northwestern Alaska.

Arrangement: Collection arranged by format and subject.

CONDITIONS GOVERNING ACCESS AND USE

Restrictions on Access: The collection is open for research use.

Physical Access: Photographic prints and documents in good to fair condition. Slides range from good to poor condition.

Technical Access: No special equipment is needed to access the materials. A lightbox may be used to view transparencies.

Conditions Governing Reproduction and Use:

The Anchorage Museum is the owner of the materials and makes available reproductions for research, publication, and other uses. Written permission must be obtained from the Anchorage Museum before any reproduction use. The Anchorage Museum does not necessarily hold copyright to all of the materials in the collections. In some cases, permission for use may require seeking additional authorization from the copyright owners.

Preferred Citation: William J. Niemi Family Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1996.31

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Acquisition and Appraisal Information

Donated by Celia (Niemi) Handley in 1996.

Processing Note

The slides received with the original 1996 donation had become disassociated from the collection but were re-associated in 2009. The slides were numbered in September 2025 when much of the collection was rehoused. At this time, newspaper clippings were also photocopied and originals discarded.

Collection contains outdated language that does not reflect the values of the Anchorage Museum.

Separated Materials

Medals and patches received with the donation located with Art & Cultural Belongings, 1996.067 William J. Niemi Family Collection.

Oversize Diplomas from Folder 11 moved to map case April 2013.

RELATED MATERIALS

B1972.041 AHFAM McDade

B1975.130 Worklan Collection
B1979.002 Alaska Railroad Collection
B1988.012 Morgan C. Edmunds Collection
B2013.052 Alaska Road Commission Portrait Photograph
B2015.024 Kenneth M. Roberts Negatives
1996.067 William J. Niemi Family Collection

SUBJECTS

Adak / Adaax (Alaska)
Alaska Earthquake, 1964
Alaska Engineering Commission
Anchorage / Dgheyaytnu (Alaska)
Boats and boating
Bridge Construction
Bristol Bay (Alaska)
Chitina / Tsedi Na' (Alaska)
Cordova (Alaska)
Denali National Park and Preserve (Alaska)
Eagle / Tthee T'äwdlenn (Alaska)
Eklutna / Idlughet (Alaska)
Fairbanks (Alaska)
Ferries
Fishing
Fishwheels
Fourth of July celebrations
Glaciers (Alaska)
Glenn Highway (Alaska)
Highway construction
Hunting
Juneau / Dzánti K'ihéeni (Alaska)
Mining claims
Mount Denali
Nome / Sitnasuaq (Alaska)
North Pole (Alaska)
Railroads – Alaska
Richardson Highway (Alaska)
Seward Highway (Alaska)
Sterling Highway (Alaska)
Tlingit (Indigenous people) – Alaska
United States. Alaska Road Commission
United States. Army. Corps of Engineers
University of Alaska (College)
World War II, 1939-1945

Detailed Description of the Collection

B1/F1 - Photos and Report

Cordova Landing Field, 1933-1934 (.1-.43)

- Report of the Construction of the Cordova Landing Field, August 1933 – July 1934

B1/F2 – Photos

Adak, Military service (.44-.60)

Eklutna Bridge construction, 1935 (.61-.71)

Road construction (.72-.84)

B1/F3 – Photos

Richardson Highway (.85-.106)

Chitina District and Valdez, 1930-1935 (.107-.140)

.107 – Broadway and Fifth Avenue, Nabesna City. For Jack Coates [View of buildings at Nabesna Mine lining unpaved street]

.113 – [Alaska Road Commission, Indigenous crew on Nabesna Road to Slana, canvas tents in background. Similar B2013.052.1]

.114 – [Group photo of primarily Indigenous crew. Same as B2013.052.1 – Alaska Road Commission crew on Nabesna Road to Slana. At AFN 2013, people identified as follows from right to left: Patty King of Chitina, Mentasta Pete of Mentasta, Paul Snell of Gulkana, Bill Joe of Gakona/Chistochina, (unidentified person), Frank Charley of Chistochina. At AFN 2015, person 5th from left identified as Ralph Sanford and person 4th from left identified as Buster Gene.]

.134 – [Indigenous adults and children seated on the side of road or trail, with bags and two dogs wearing packs.]

B1/F4 – Photos

Bridge Construction, Transportation, Southcentral and Interior Alaska, Alaska Road Commission (.141-.173)

.143 – Rte 46D. Snow Drift. Mile 19. May 1936. SW District. [View down plowed road, an automobile and person at distance beside wall of snow]

.152 – John Borges (left), Jack Coates (center) [Three people with automobile in front of the Alaska Road Commission office]

.155 – Steam Donkey replaces 40 Diesel. September 6 [Bridge construction]

.159 – Tatalina Bridge, Route 32G Kuskokwim – Takotna Road. November 1939 [Incomplete bridge]

.163 – Fairbanks – Chena Flood [Flooded street view, Samson Hardware and Machinery at center]

.165 – Independence Mine [Birdseye view of mining operation]

.167 – October 25, 1935. Diesel 75 and Diesel Shovel – Palmer [Crew posed with heavy machinery]

.171 – [Three people with airplane on snowy field, crates in foreground]

B1/F5 – Photos

Seward Highway Opening, 1952 (.174-.183)

.175 – Hugh Wade [Ribbon cutting ceremony, Wade at center with four others, spectators in background]

.176 – 1952 Seward Highway [View of automobiles driving past crowd of people along unpaved highway]

Sterling Highway, 1957-1958 (.184-.189)

B1/F6 – Photos

Ferries (.190-.198)

Office and Juneau (.199-.215)

.205 – August 1, 1967. Left to Right: Harold Tipton – Assistant Regional Administrator, Donald Bolton – Bridge Engineer (15-year certificate), William P. Cameron – Maintenance Engineer (35-year certificate), William J. Niemi – Regional Federal Highway Administrator [Niemi handing certificate to Cameron]

B1/F7 – Photos

Miscellaneous (.216-.224)

- Postcard

B1/F8 – Booklets and Documents

WWII Corp of Engineers

- "The Battle of the Aleutians..." booklet
- "Secret" poem
- "Easter" 1943 booklet
- 807th Engineer Aviation Battalion "A History" with letters, commendation, and press releases, 1945-1947

B1/F9 – Documents and Newspaper Clippings

Miscellaneous

- Mining Claims, Deeds and Notices, 1915-1916
- 807th Aviation Engineer Battalion newspaper articles
- "Saint Herman of Alaska" narrative by St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Juneau

B1/F10 – Documents and Newspaper Clippings

Work History and Press Clippings

.225 – [Photo with 1967 Federal Aviation Agency letter]

- Letter with meritorious service document, 1996
- Alaska Highway Study by William J. Niemi, 1963
- Newspaper clippings, 1959-1964
- Variety of work history documents, including military records, memorandums, position descriptions, employment paperwork, press releases, and travel certificate.

B1/F11 – Documents

Diplomas, Appointments, Awards

- Colorado School of Mines Scholarship Certificate, 1921
- Letter of federal recognition, 1941
- Appointment as Infantry Captain, 1941
- U.S. Army Certificate of Service, 1945
- Appointment as Lieutenant Colonel, 1945
- Appointment as Corps of Engineers Colonel, 1947
- Promotion letter, 1947
- Retired Reserve Certificate with letter, 1958
- Retired Pay letter, 1964
- Award for Meritorious Service, 1964
- Certificate of Service, 1967
- Appointment as Reserve Commissioned Officer, 1952

B2 – Slides

Niemi in uniform (.226-.230)

Southeast Alaska (.231-.314)

.270 – NOV 63 [Tlingit carvers working on totem pole in field at Fort William H. Seward in Haines]

Juneau (.315-.373)

.322 – 4th of July Juneau 1951 [Tlingit Elders in regalia on parade float]

.347 – 4th of July Juneau 1953 [Filipino Community parade float]

.348 – 4th of July Juneau 1954 [Filipino Community parade float]

.351 – 4th of July Juneau 1954 [people wearing grass skirts on parade float]

.367 – 4th of July Juneau 1953 [Tlingit Elder wearing naaxein (Chilkat blanket) walking down street]

Alaska Highway (.374-.388)

Southcentral Alaska (.389-.422)

.420 – Pink & Chum Salmon – Cordova 1952 – Record year. Wm. J. Niemi [people standing in salmon holding area]

Anchorage (.423-.435)

Alaska Railroad (.436-.441)

B3 – Slides

Hunting and Fishing (.442-.543)

.442 – Sport fishing for salmon, Tee Harbor. 1952 Salmon Derby [scenic water view]

.448 – Celia 1955 [Celia Niemi beside weighed salmon]

.450 – Otis Beasley – Tee Harbor May 1955. 30# salmon [Otis holding large salmon on shoreline, dock and boats in background]

.536 – DEC 68 [hunter in red and black jacket holding deer by antlers on beach]

Glenn Highway (.544-.575)

- .552 – Glenn Hwy near Mentasta Pass “Tok Cutoff” [scenic mountain view from highway. 1950s?]
- .564 – Matanuska Glacier. WM. J. NIEMI [Matanuska Glacier view from Glenn Highway near mile 101. 1950s?]
- .566 – Trappers Den – Glenn Highway about Mile 150 [exterior view of the Trapper’s Den Bar log building. Figural poles and cache at left. 1950s?]

Taylor Highway (.576-.595)

- .577 – Approaching South Fork of Forty mile River. Taylor Highway 1951 [landscape]
- .590 – Bob Smith Engr. Wyman Fritz Foreman. Eagle 1952 First car [two people with orange truck next to building with Eagle Trading sign. First car through to Eagle - Taylor Highway. Han territory, Tthee T'äwdlenn (Eagle)]
- .593 – Taylor Hwy between Liberty and Eagle 1954 [scenic landscape from Taylor Highway]

Richardson Highway (.596-.612)

- .601 – Phelan Creek Isabel Pass 1954 Richardson Hwy WM. J. NIEMI [River view, bridge at distance]
- .607 – JULY 63 [Fishwheel]

Sterling Highway (.613-.614)

- .613 – JUL 63 [exterior of Alaska Wild Berry Products giftshop at Homer]

Interior Alaska (.615-.643)

- .615 – Temporary Bridge Nenana River Denali Hwy Spring 1951 WM. J. NIEMI [winter view of bridge under construction]
- .618 – Episcopal Mission Church Eagle 1953 [exterior of red building with bell tower. Han territory, Tthee T'äwdlenn (Eagle)]
- .620 – [Indigenous] fishwheel on Yukon River at Eagle (Harold Schultz) 1953 WM. J. NIEMI [Schultz on shoreline near fish wheel. Han territory, Tthee T'äwdlenn (Eagle)]
- .629 – Oct 59 [Wickersham Hall on University of Alaska Fairbanks campus]
- .631 – SEP 61 [Santa Claus House exterior, North Pole]

Mount Denali and Park (.644-.664)

- .644 – Old East Fork Bridge Mile 42 McKinley Park 1952 WM. J. NIEMI [three people standing near river bridge]
- .647 – Headquarters Mt. McKinley Park 1952 [log building exterior, Denali National Park and Preserve]
- .652 – Looking down on McKinley Park Station [aerial view of Denali National Park station, roads, and river bridge. 1953 or 1954?]

B4 – Slides

Southwest Alaska (.665-.675)

- .665 – Dillingham, Alaska 1954 [distant view of community. Central Yup’ik territory, Curyung (Dillingham)]
- .667 – Naknek 1954 Bristol Bay [Aerial view of coastal erosion near community. Central Yup’ik territory, Nakniq (Naknek)]
- .669 – [two people standing beside fish racks with drying salmon]

Northwest Alaska (.676-.687)

.677 – [three people beside upside down umiak]

.680 – Nome, Alaska [Aerial of Sitnasuaq (Nome), Inupiaq territory]

Alaska Earthquake, 1964 (.688-.767)

.689 – APR 64 WM. J. NIEMI [person standing in crack of damaged highway]

.728 – APR 64 WM. J. NIEMI [damaged boat laying on train tracks]

.729 – APR 64 WM. J. NIEMI [“Celtic” boat washed ashore, black smoke billowing at distant outcropping]

Misc. Alaska (.768-.862)

.768 – North end of wrecked bridge May 1949 ARC WM. J. NIEMI [person at distance walking near snowy, damaged bridge. Alaska Road Commission.]

.769 – Darling Cr. Bridge washout during Constr. ARC WM. J. NIEMI [two people walking around underside of bridge. Alaska Road Commission. 1949-1954?]

.774 – [cows alongside road]

.778 – [wildflowers]

.805 – FEB 60 [airplanes on the tarmac at Juneau airport]

.826 – NOV 62 [Skunk Cabbage]

.844 – JUN 65 [SS Yutana sternwheel riverboat, likely Tanana or Yukon River]

.845 – JUN 65 [SS Yutana sternwheel riverboat, likely Tanana or Yukon River]

.847 – JUL 65 [red river bridge]

.862 – OCT 73 [person with luggage walking towards Alaska plane on tarmac]

Commercial Slides (.863-.877)

Guide written: October 10, 2025