

# Women receive Honorary Degrees

Being honored for their work in Alaska, **Mary Demientieff** and **Fredericka Martin** will be receiving honorary doctor of humanities degrees at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks 1986 Commencement on May 11.

When she was 10 years old in 1917, **Mary Demientieff** announced that she wanted to be a registered nurse. She hoped to leave home and take the necessary training, but her father's death made it impossible. It was not until 1968 that she was able to obtain health aide's professional training.

By then, she had already worked as a nurse's aide for more than a decade.

According to her granddaughter, Shirley Demientieff, Mary Demientieff was born in 1906 in Flat, Alaska. Married in 1927 to Alphonse Demientieff, she lived in the Iditarod area where the family trapped.

Her granddaughter wrote that "while they lived in that area, they had 10 children. She (Demientieff) watched five of them die due to childhood diseases and other illnesses, such as

the flu. The feeling of helplessness while watching her children suffer strengthened a childhood ambition to work in nursing."

After moving to Nenana in 1945, the Demientieffs had four more children. They raised nine of their children to adulthood.

It was in Nenana that she started helping Public Health Service nurses in the early 1950's. Without formal training, she served the community as a volunteer health aide. The extent of her training, according to Physician's Assistant Ron Corte, was in addition to "helping during the nurse and doctor visits. Mary was given a few medicines and a book which was published by the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) on first aid." Corte works with Demientieff as health aide instructor for the Tanana Chiefs.

Co-worker and Public Health Nurse Janet Lokken remembers that "for many of her working years, Mary's skills and knowledge came from experience and self-teaching. But when

formal education became available through the Community Health Aide Program, she eagerly took all that was offered, despite her advancing years."

She was in her 60s when she began taking classes. A few years later her husband died. "Gram continued on as  
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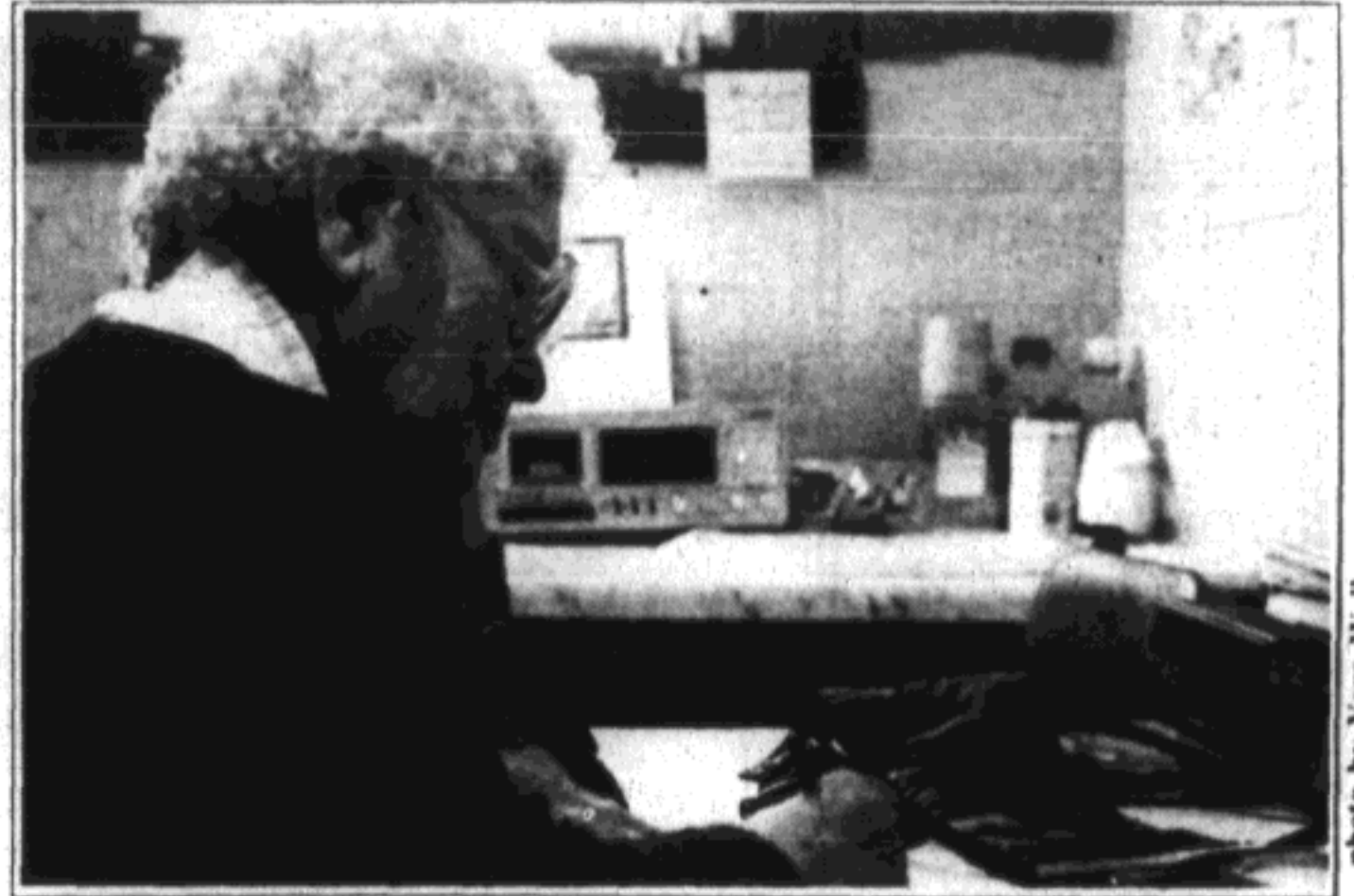


photo by Vera Wells

*Mary Demientieff, a public health nurse in Nenana, has spent her life helping others. she will be given an honorary doctor of humanities degree from the Univerisy of Alaska-Fairbanks at the 1986 Commencement on May 11.*

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a full-time health aide, part-time student and part-time employee of the Alaska National Bank," wrote her granddaughter.

She has also found time to serve as president of the Nenana Senior Citizens, on the Nenana School Board and on the Nenana Native Council. The Jaycees named Demientieff the Senior Citizen of the Year for the northern district in 1977. In 1982, the Tanana Chiefs Conference selected her as their employee of the year. Demientieff was one of Alaska's two delegates to the National White House Conference on Aging in Washington, D.C., in 1981.

Today, Demientieff continues her work. She concentrates on working with Nenana's elderly — many of whom are younger than she. She regularly visits them in their homes, bringing cheer as well as medicine.

"During the years I have known

Mary, I have been greatly impressed by her egalitarian attitudes. Natives, whites, blacks and others receive the same friendly consideration. Indeed, she has refused to implement programs which excluded one group or another, she would say 'I will either do it for everyone, or not at all,' " Lokken said.

"In all aspects of her life she is a great humanitarian."

**Fredericka Martin** is a conservationist and activist for Alaska Native rights. "Perhaps her most significant contribution to the state of Alaska was her tireless struggle to help the Pribilov Islanders gain their independence from direct control of the federal government," said Robert Williams, chairman of UAF's honorary degree recipient committee. Her role in helping the Aleuts was linked to the conservation and preservation of Alaska's fur seals. "It took great courage and uncommon dedication to keep up the fight for more than a decade. During this time, Fredericka often found herself challenging the testimony of the unscrupulous bureaucrats who were largely responsible for the untenable plights of both the Aleuts and the fur seals."

She first lived on the Pribilovs in 1941. She and her physician husband were assigned to the islands by the Public Health Service. Martin was the head nurse. They were forced to leave during World War II when the islands were evacuated.

Pribilov Islanders were kept in what she felt was virtual slavery by federal officials who dedicated every aspect of their lives. Officials controlled all employment. Permission was required to leave the island. In the early 1950s, a congressional committee investigated the problem. The hearings were a direct result of Martin's work.

While championing the rights of the inhabitants, Martin also fought for better conservation of the islands' fur seals. Two books she wrote, "The Hunting of the Silver Fleece, Epic of the Fur Seal" and "Sea Bears: The

Story of the Fur Seal," helped change the way the herds were managed.

Martin edited and arranged for the publication of an Aleut dictionary compiled by R.H. Geoghegan. She also edited Geoghegan's translation of "Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District." The original work, written

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by Bishop Veniaminof in the 1830s, was at that time considered to be the basic work on the Aleuts. Geoghagan, who was fluent in many languages, was Judge James Wickersham's clerk of the court for many years. During his life in Alaska, he collected papers and Alaskan works for his personal library.

At his death as a pauper in 1943, the Territory put the library up for sale. Martin used her own money to buy to entire collection to prevent it from being broken up and sold. Later, she donated the Alaskan portions of the collection to the University of Alaska library. Today the Geoghegan collection is part of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Rasmuson Library's Alaskan collection.

That donation was the first of many contributions to the university's library.

Retired Director of Libraries Ted Ryberg said, "She spent many months in Spain and Mexico researching historical collections on Spanish voyages of the 18th century to what is now Alaska and arranged for photocopies or microfilm copies to be made available to Rasmuson Library. She also spent many, many hours translating the 18th century Spanish documents into English for the benefit and convenience of students, faculty and researchers at UAF."

"And all of her work, both in the Spanish and Mexican archives, was as a volunteer. She lived very frugally to conserve her own funds so that she could dig out this information for us to have here for future generations to use."

Before coming to Alaska, Martin served as head nurse with the Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. She now lives in Mexico.