

Doctor treated many Natives

by Henry S. Kaiser
for the Tundra Times

June 1950 saw a black Packard automobile in a cloud of dust speeding north — destination, Seward Sanatorium, Seward, Alaska.

The driver was a man who was totally dedicated to a mission — to step into the frontline of Alaska's most menacing epidemic and health problem — tuberculosis. His name was Dr. Francis J. Phillips.

Dr. Phillips, 84, died at Anchorage's Providence Hospital April 12.

Dr. Phillips was no cheechako to Alaska; he had been a medical officer in World War II's Aleutian Campaign. Eventually he became a public health officer with Gen. George Patton's Third Army in Western Europe during and after the famous Battle of the Bulge.

Like many of Alaska's WWII veterans, Dr. Phillips' first priority was to return to Alaska to help open and develop this northern territory. He was the medical director and thoracic surgeon of Seward Sanatorium for seven years, 1950-1957.

As the first thoracic surgeon to practice in the territory, he performed more than 50 major surgical chest operations each of those years and hundreds of minor surgical procedures.

At the Seward Sanatorium much more than medical and surgical treatment was dispensed under the direction of Dr. Phillips. It became a "full service institution." The 150 patients were, on the average, 700 miles from home. Included were children 4 years of age or less and adults up to 84.

The patients were white, Alaska Natives, Black and Asians. Their length of hospitalization varied from two weeks to 10 years.

As the battle of TB progressed with the help of new miracle medicines, the average treatment time was reduced from two and a half years to less than one year.

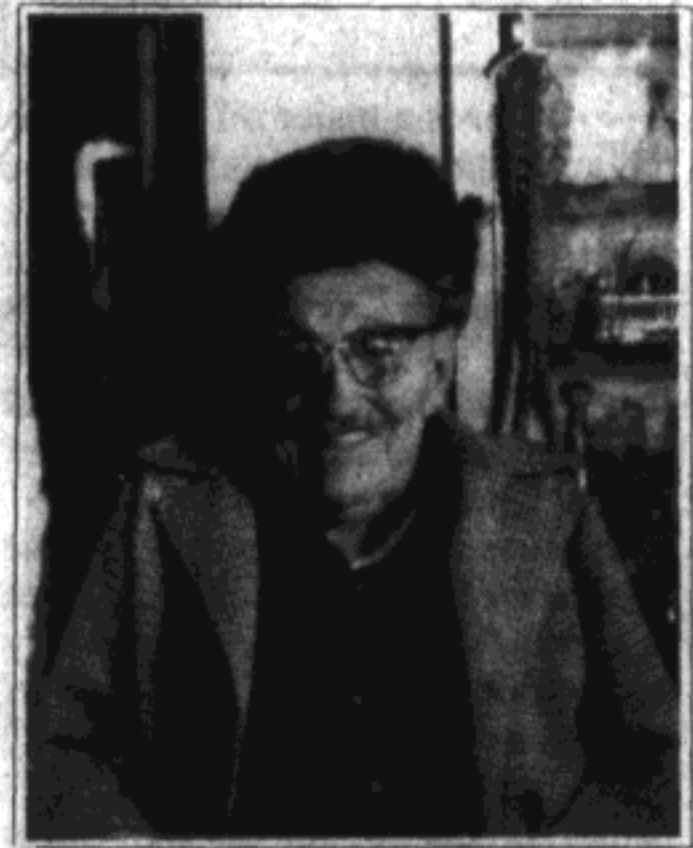
Dr. Phillips brought to Seward Sanatorium one of Alaska's first Rehabilitation Programs. As a patient's condition improved he or she was counselled, and most were enrolled in a training program. Courses were taught in an on-site location in an actual grocery store, shoe repair shop, photographic studio and an automotive service station.

Also, secretarial training and book-keeping were taught. Children were taught at bedside by two teachers from the Territorial Department of Education.

Dr. Phillips left Seward in 1957, two years before the sanatorium closed, and established a medical-surgical practice in Anchorage. He served as part-time chief of the TB Section for the state of Alaska.

After "retirement" in 1972, Dr. Phillips tackled another of Alaska's number one diseases — alcoholism. He and co-worker Barbara Hoffman authored and published an alcoholic treatment textbook for the Northwest Indian Training Institute.

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Dr. Francis J. Phillips

• Dr. Phillips

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During Dr. Phillips' almost 40 years of practice in the territory and state of Alaska, many honors came his way. In 1979, the residents of Bethel named their alcoholic treatment facility the Phillips Alcohol Treatment Center.

Dr. Phillips continued to be a friend to hundreds and hundreds of his patients and their descendents. They often paid homage to him in his Anchorage residence. Dr. Phillips always listened, and he counselled them whenever they asked for his advice and support.

Today there are fewer than 100 Alaskans who are tuberculosis patients, a far cry from the known 4,000 plus TB victims in the early 1950s. Helping them were a few dozen doctors, hundreds of nurses and allied health professionals. These men and women during the past three or four decades have brought about and witnessed a gigantic victory over one of mankind's most dreaded grim diseases, tuberculosis.

Dr. Phillips for 40 years was at the forefront of the battle. His name will not be forgotten when the history of Alaska's public health is reviewed by future generations.