

FRANK H. SLOSS
70 MC CORMICK LANE
ATHERTON, CALIFORNIA 94025

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Dear Jim:

I have your letter, and I am able to answer one of your questions fully and the other in part.

Yes, the present Alaska Commercial Company indeed exists, and I suppose it has as good a right to use the name as anyone could under the circumstances. Here's the story:

As you know, the Northern Commercial Company, consisting of a group of former employees headed by Volney Richmond, bought the A.C.Co.'s commercial business in the American and Canadian Yukon in 1922, and became in effect its authorized successor. In 1940 Northern Commercial also bought the A.C.Co.'s last remaining posts outside the Yukon Valley -- those at Dutch Harbor and Unalaska. Thereupon, the Alaska Commercial Company was liquidated and legally dissolved. Although I took part in that transaction, I don't remember whether the right to the name of the A.C.Co. was included in the formal transfer to Northern Commercial, but I'm sure they could have had it if they had asked for it, just as they had acquired the name Northern Commercial in 1922 from the earlier A.C.Co. subsidiary of the same name when they acquired its assets.

By 1977, Northern Commercial, then headed by Volney Richmond, Jr. and still owned by its original families, was ready for liquidation in its turn. It sold its three largest department stores -- those in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Kenai -- to Nordstrom's. It had also gone into the heavy machinery distribution business, and it sold that business, with the right to the Northern Commercial name, to the Skinner Corporation. That left the old Northern Commercial owners with eleven small outlying stores, for which they had to use a different name. For this purpose they revived the old Alaska Commercial name, which struck ~~me~~ me at the time as a fitting sentimental gesture. They then sold those stores to a native corporation, CEDC SALES, INC., a subsidiary of the Community Enterprise Development Corp. of Alaska, doing business as Alaska Commercial Co. So the line of corporate descent is established, and your shirt has a respectable origin. Wear it with pride.

Now, the naturalization question: I know no details about Lewis Gerstle's naturalization, but I do know about that of Louis Sloss. According to an old family anecdote, at some time in the late 1850's or thereabouts, ~~LOUIS SLOSS~~ while he was still living in Sacramento, Louis Sloss was asked to serve on some public body - perhaps a grand jury. To his embarrassment, he had to decline on the ground that he was not eligible as he had never gotten around to completing his naturalization, though he had taken out his first papers years before and fully intended to become a citizen. The man to whom he confessed this rebuked him, and told him he ought to go to court at once to straighten his status out. He answered that he would be embarrassed to appear in court in Sacramento, where he was well known, and confess his neglect in the matter. The friend then suggested that he go to San Francisco and have it done in the federal court there, which had jurisdiction over Sacramento residents, although the San Francisco state court would not have had; and that's what he did. Now, this anecdote, which my father recalled, became useful in the late 1920's, when it became necessary to produce documentary proof of his citizenship. But for the story, one would have looked at the court records in Sacramento without success, but the anecdote led straight to the San Francisco federal records, which had escaped destruction in 1906, and there it was!

There's another phase of the story that you might like. In the same investigation, it was also necessary to prove the marriage of Louis and Sarah Sloss. This required letters to Philadelphia, which were finally successfully answered but the delays were awkward. Meanwhile, my brother had a brilliant inspiration. We could prove the marriage by the affidavit of an eye-witness, and we had one, although the marriage had occurred in 1855, and this was around 1928. Yes - Aunt Hannah, your great-grandmother, then around 90, but clear as a bell. She gave her affidavit, and it was accepted without having to await the document from Philadelphia.

Well, in view of all that, it's unthinkable that Lewis Gerstle would not have been naturalized, and the record should be available -- but it too just might be in the federal archives here rather than in Sacramento.

Enough! In fact, too much. Forgive me for running on so. Elly joins in warmest greetings to you and Liz.

Frank
* SEE POSTSCRIPT ON REVERSE *

P.S. It just occurred to me that of course both Sloss and Gerstle must have been naturalized, as the 1870 Act of Congress authorizing the seal lease expressly provided that no one who was not an American citizen could participate. Now, this may cause you to wonder how Captain Niebaum could qualify, as he had not been in the United States long enough to be naturalized. The answer is that the treaty for the purchase of Alaska gave residents of Alaska the choice of retaining their Russian allegiance of becoming American citizens, and Niebaum elected to become an American.

F. H. S.