

London Mathematical Society Lecture Note Series. 231

Semigroup Theory and its Applications

Proceedings of the 1994 conference
commemorating the work of Alfred H. Clifford

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 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data available

British Library cataloging in publication data available

ISBN 0 521 57669 5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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Reminiscences of a Friendship

D. D. Miller

It was at a party in Ann Arbor in the summer of 1938 that I first met Al Clifford. He was one of a small squadron of mathematicians pausing for refreshment on their journey westward from the Institute for Advanced Study. We didn't meet again until the Spring of 1942, when, having been called to active duty as lieutenants (junior grade) in the Naval Reserve, we found ourselves in the same office in Washington. Within a few weeks I was ordered to the Pacific, and he, meanwhile marrying the talented linguist Alice Colt, who served in the Office of Strategic Services, was sent to the European theatre in 1943. In the Spring of 1945 he returned from the U.K., and I from Pearl Harbour, and this time we began to talk mathematics together.

Brought up as a point-set topologist, I was ignorant of algebra, and Al gently set me on the right path in his always kindly way. (I have seen him do this with other mathematicians – leading them to discover the answers to their questions without ever letting on that he knew the answer all along. A skillful director of dissertations!) Making a detailed analysis of the group axioms, I stumbled on the concept of what we later called “zeroid elements” (a term we both regretted subsequently!); I suspected that the things formed a subgroup, but was unable to prove it. Al could, and did, and this became the main theorem in our first joint paper.

Al returned to inactive duty late in 1952, and in 1953, before returning to civilian life, I was happy to be around to rejoice with Al and Alice at the birth of their second son, Karl. After Al moved to Tulane in 1955 he and Alice sometimes visited with me in Knoxville, and more often I visited them in New Orleans. After Alice's death in 1976, Al wanted to travel in the summers. One year we went down the Colorado River on a raft, in another we hopped from island to island in the Lesser Antilles on board a working craft, a converted trawler that sailed like a cork and made me (but not Al) seasick, in another we cruised up and down the Norwegian coast, flew to Glasgow and with the help of Douglas and Clare Munn rented a car in Treon, drove through the English lake district, then into Yorkshire and back to Scotland, enjoying the hospitality of John and Dorothy Howie in Saint Andrews. We took turns driving and took pride in returning the car undented and unscratched after weeks of driving on what was, for us, the wrong side of the road.

It was a profound joy and high privilege to know Alfred and Alice Clifford so long and so well, to be an honorary uncle to their sons, to share many of their moments of happiness and sadness. My mathematical life was turned around by Al's freely and generously given guidance. He was a staunch and loyal friend, a mathematician of impeccable taste, a model of high integrity and deep scholarship. *Requiescat in pace.*