

**Lewis Varick Frissell Papers**  
**A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress**



**Manuscript Division, Library of Congress**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
**2024**

Contact information: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

Catalog Record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm77055277>

Additional search options available at: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms014060>

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 2014  
Revised 2024 January

## Collection Summary

**Title:** Lewis Varick Frissell Papers

**Inclusive Dates:** 1917-1970

**Bulk Dates:** 1925-1931

**ID No.:** MSS55277

**Creator:** Frissell, Lewis Varick, 1903-1931

**Extent:** 650 items

**Extent:** 5 containers

**Extent:** 2 linear feet

**Language:** Collection material in English

**Location:** Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**LC Catalog record:** <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm77055277>

**Summary:** Explorer and cinematographer. Correspondence, diary, drafts of writings, film scripts and other production materials, business papers, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and other papers relating chiefly to Frissell's explorations and the production of the films, *The Great Arctic Seal Hunt* (1928) and *The Viking* (1931). Later materials relate to Frissell's disappearance in a shipwreck while on location for *The Viking* and attempts by members of his family to ascertain and publicize the facts of his career.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

### People

England, George Allan, 1877-1936--Correspondence.

Flaherty, Robert Joseph, 1884-1951--Correspondence.

Frissell, Lewis Fox, 1872-1934--Correspondence.

Frissell, Toni, 1907-1988--Correspondence.

Frissell, Varick, 1903-1931.

Grenfell, Wilfred Thomason, Sir, 1865-1940--Correspondence.

### Organizations

Explorers Club.

Royal Geographical Society (Great Britain)

### Subjects

Documentary films--Production and direction.

Motion pictures--Production and direction.

Rivers--Newfoundland and Labrador.

Shipwrecks.

### Places

Arctic regions--Discovery and exploration.

Churchill River (N.L.)--Discovery and exploration.

Newfoundland and Labrador--Discovery and exploration.

Unknown River (N.L.)--Discovery and exploration.

### Titles

*Great Arctic Seal Hunt* (Motion picture)

*Viking* (Motion picture)

### Occupations

Cinematographers.

Explorers.

## Acquisition Information

The papers of Lewis Varick Frissell, explorer and cinematographer, were given to the Library of Congress by his sister, Toni Frissell, in 1975.

## Processing History

The Lewis Varick Frissell Papers were processed in 1977 by David Van Tassell and expanded in 1985 by David Mathisen. The finding aid was revised in 2012. The finding aid was updated in 2024 by Maria Farmer as part of a division-wide remediation project by the Inclusive Description Working Group.

## Transfers

Some photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

## Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Lewis Varick Frissell is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

## Access and Restrictions

The papers of Lewis Varick Frissell are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

## Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Lewis Varick Frissell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

## Biographical Note

Date	Event
1903, Aug. 29	Born, New York, N.Y.
1920	Traveled to Newfoundland
1925	Explored Unknown River region of Labrador
1926	B.A., Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
1927	Filmed <i>Great Artic Seal Hunt</i> (released 1928)
1928	Elected member of Royal Geographic Society and Explorer's Club
1929	Filmed newsreel footage of Mexican Revolution
1930	Began to film, as producer, <i>The Viking</i> (released posthumously 1931)
1931, Mar. 15	Killed in shipboard explosion off the coast of Labrador

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of Lewis Varick Frissell (who was known throughout his life as Varick Frissell) span the years 1917-1970, with the greatest portion of the material dated 1925-1931. The diary, correspondence, writings, and business papers of these

years reflect a short but intense career of arctic exploration, writing, and documentary and feature film making. Earlier papers are Frissell's juvenilia (mostly fiction), and later papers are those of his family. The collection is organized by type of material.

Frissell's expedition to the Unknown River region of Labrador in 1925 resulted in his identification of the Lower Twin Falls and in the first photograph of the Grand Falls on the Hamilton River (now Churchill River and Falls). The journey is documented in the diary, correspondence, and articles in the collection. This and subsequent explorations in Labrador earned Frissell election as a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and as a member of the Explorer's Club.

Much of the general correspondence and most of the business papers, as well as the scripts and related papers in the collection, pertain to the two feature films produced by Frissell. *The Great Arctic Seal Hunt* (1928), a silent documentary, was written, produced, and photographed by Frissell while he worked as a sealer off the Labrador coast in 1927. *The Viking* (1931), the first feature-length sound film produced entirely on location, was written and produced by Frissell and was directed by George Melford. The writings file in the collection includes synopses for both films and scripts, continuity notes, and a negative film record for *The Viking*. Distribution contracts and agreements, schedules of showings for both films, and copies of correspondence between third parties about these arrangements are included in the business papers.

In addition to the papers related to motion pictures, the writings contain numerous articles on Labrador and the Arctic, reflecting Frissell's interest in the promotion and development of the region. Other writings include Frissell's fictional pieces and his poetry.

The largest sequence of general correspondence is between Frissell and Sir Wilfred Thomason Grenfell and his philanthropic organization, the International Grenfell Association. Grenfell, with whom Frissell had stayed on his first and on many later visits to the North, was a well-known medical missionary to the Inuit people of Labrador. Other prominent correspondents are Robert Joseph Flaherty, the noted documentarist, and George Allan England, whose story "Vikings of the Ice" Frissell adapted for *The Viking*.

Family correspondence in the papers contains letters to and from Frissell and his father, Lewis Fox Frissell, regarding Frissell's plans for and experiences on his northern journeys. A large portion of the correspondence of Frissell's father relates to the search for Frissell that was instituted during the spring of 1931, after the ship on which he was retaking some scenes for *The Viking* exploded. Frissell was never found, but the search for him is closely chronicled in telegrams and letters, as well as newspaper clippings in the subject file and in scrapbooks.

The much later, 1965-1970, correspondence of Toni Frissell in the family correspondence reflects her attempts to ascertain and publicize the facts of her brother's career. Several of these letters contain enclosures that are copies of Frissell's correspondence with his lawyers and with the Royal Geographic Society.

## Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged alphabetically by type of material.

# Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1	Diary, written on bound-in interleaves of A. P. Low, Report on <i>Explorations in the Labrador Peninsula</i> (Ottawa, 1896), 1925
BOX 1	Family correspondence, 1925-1931
BOX 1	A-G (2 folders)
BOX 2	H-Z and unidentified (3 folders)
BOX 2	Writings, 1917-1930
BOX 2	Articles
BOX 2	"Explorations in the Grand Falls Region of Labrador"
BOX 2	"Flying South with Arctic Gales"
BOX 2	"To Grand Falls and the Unknown River of Labrador"
BOX 2	"In Darkest Labrador"
BOX 2	"Labrador and Another Niagara"
BOX 2	"Labrador as I Like It"
BOX 2	"A Niagara in the Heart of Labrador"
BOX 2	"Two Hundred Miles Down Newfoundland by Dog Team"
BOX 2	"Vast Treasure Lies in 'God's Dump Heap"
BOX 3	"What I Saw of the German Submarine U-53"
BOX 3	Untitled narrative of experiences during the Mexican Revolution
BOX 3	Untitled narrative of a sea voyage
BOX 3	Scripts and related papers
BOX 3	<i>The Great Arctic Seal Hunt</i> , synopsis
BOX 3	<i>Viking of the Ice Fields</i>
BOX 3	Script
BOX 3	Continuity notes
BOX 3	Picture negative record
BOX 3	Short stories
BOX 3	"Actors"
BOX 3	"Humgumption"
BOX 3	"One of Those Trivial Matters"
BOX 3	Poem, "So Often Have I Seemed a Puny Thing"
BOX 3	Subject file, <i>The Viking</i> disaster
BOX 3	Documentation
BOX 3	Clippings
BOX 3	Business papers
BOX 3	General, 1928-1931, undated
BOX 3	Banking records, 1929-1931
BOX 3	Miscellany, 1927-1970
BOX 3	Annotated lists of Frissell's writings and other papers
BOX 3	Biographical notes on Frissell
BOX 3	Film reviews

## Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 3	Memorial service and tribute to Frissell
BOX 3	Opinion cards for film <i>White Thunder</i>
BOX 4	Press clippings (2 folders)
BOX 4	Printed matter, 1927, 1930-1968 (2 folders)
BOX 4	Writings by others, typescript
BOX 5	Scrapbook, "Varick Frissell, Producer, The Viking"
BOX 5	Press clippings
BOX OV 1	Oversize negative photocopies of articles about Frissell, <i>Los Angeles Times</i> and other newspapers