

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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SPONSOR STATEMENT SB 144 - WALTER HARPER DAY

Walter Harper left an indelible mark on Alaska history when, at the young age of twenty, became the first person to stand atop the summit of Denali on June 7, 1913. The sheer stamina and exceptional self-composure he displayed during this expedition were the trademarks of this great Alaskan's impeccable character.

Born in Tanana in December 1892, Walter was the youngest child of an Athabascan mother and an Irish father. Walter's thorough integration into his father's Western culture without forfeiting an ounce of his mother's Athabascan heritage serves as a beacon to Alaska Native and other Indigenous youth the world over.

In 1909 Walter met Archdeacon Hudson Stuck at a fish camp. The Archdeacon convinced Walter's mother to send him to school at St. Mark's Mission in Nenana. The following year, being so impressed with Walter's ability, the Archdeacon chose him to be his riverboat pilot, winter trail guide and interpreter as he traveled throughout Alaska's Interior as a missionary. Walter was seventeen years old. For the next three years, Walter excelled under Stuck's tutelage culminating with his historic ascent of Denali in the expedition led by Stuck and Harry Karstens in the spring of 1913. In the fall of 1913, Walter traveled outside with Stuck to continue his formal education in Massachusetts where he attended the Northfield Mount Hermon preparatory school through 1916. That same year he returned to Alaska to continue working with Archdeacon Stuck in preparation for college.

Tragically, Walter died at the age of 25 along with his new bride of only seven weeks, Frances Wells Harper. They both perished along with the rest of the passengers aboard the *Princess Sophia* when the steamer ran aground in the Lynn Canal on October 25th, 1918. Walter and Frances were on their way to the Lower 48 so Walter could attend medical school after which he planned to return to Alaska and serve his people as a medical missionary. Walter's untimely death denied Alaska the benefit and the legacy of a respected Elder a full life would surely have provided.

Mary Erhlander said it best in the epilogue of her book, *Walter Harper Alaska Native Son*. "Harper's self-knowledge, purposefulness, and faith stand as a paradigm for resilience in the global society of the twenty-first century, just as they did a century ago in Alaska. The ethos that Walter Harper embodied transcends time and culture. His self-restraint and positive attitude would win admirers and promote success anywhere. As young people today search for meaning in life amid a bewildering array of signals, Walter Harper's experience offers guidance and wisdom. This legacy is all the more remarkable in that he lived but twenty-five years."