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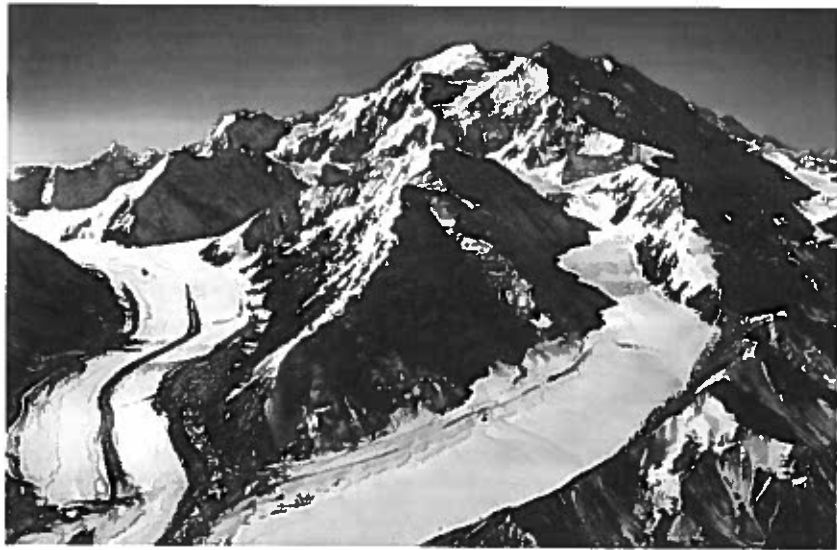
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Denali (20,310') in the Alaska Range. [Photo] Bradford Washburn Collection, Museum of Science

Walter Harper: The First to Reach the Top of Denali

In March 1913, four men and two boys, led by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, left Fairbanks to begin their long approach to Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. Their journey to the apex of the continent would take more than two months. From their cache beyond the Kantishna mining camp, the peak was still some fifty miles away, and the 20,310-foot summit rose high above a vast expanse of foothills and glaciers.

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On June 7, 1913, one of the expedition members, twenty-one-year-old Walter Harper, an Irish-Athabaskan man, became the first to reach the top of Denali's highest peak. His teammates—Harry Karstens, Robert Tatum and Stuck—soon joined him on the summit. Below them, sunlight flashed off countless lower peaks, as the Alaska Range arched toward the ocean.

This feat was not repeated for nearly two decades.

IN 1992 MY HUSBAND and I visited the Evergreen cemetery in Juneau, Alaska, well southeast of Denali, where my great uncle Walter Harper and his bride, Frances, are buried. The markers are concrete, flat, broken and falling apart, as are many other gravestones nearby. The bright sunlight reflected off the overgrowth of weeds and wildflowers that surrounded the markers on the hillside. I wondered about my uncle and Frances and about who else might have visited them.

Walter was born in 1892, in what was then known as Nuchelawoya, near the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon rivers. His mother, Seentaana—later called Jenny—was Athabaskan. Walter's father, Arthur Harper, was from Ireland, and he was twenty-five years older than Jenny. He'd fled the potato famine in his home

country at age twelve. At first, he'd lived in Brooklyn with relatives. As years passed, he'd made his way through Canada and then to San Francisco. The news of the gold stampede pulled him north to the Yukon, where he partnered with Cap Mayo, Jack McQuesten and Joe Ladue (sometimes called Jake). There they "grubstaked" would-be miners, providing equipment, tents and sleeping and cooking gear. The three men received payment after the prospectors struck gold.

Harper and Ladue later built a lumber mill near Circle City where I once saw a wooden sign with their names painted in large faded letters. It had fallen to the ground and lay among the weeds. It seemed to be the only relic left.

Because Arthur had been impressed with the education system in California, he insisted on sending their first six children to Mill Valley and San Francisco "for their schooling." Jenny was grief-stricken by their absence. Then, after Arthur and Jenny were married for eighteen years, Walter was born. Unable to believe the handsome boy was his, Arthur promptly disowned him. Jenny felt relieved. No longer grieving, she bragged to friends and relatives, "This is one chilt that old bastard won't get!" Walter's parents soon separated, and when Arthur came down with tuberculosis, he left Alaska for Arizona, where he died in 1897.

Some of Walter's older siblings struggled to readjust to Alaska Native life after they returned home from California. But Walter was raised in Athabascan ways. From his mother and her people, he learned how to honor nature and the spirit world; how to burn sage and spruce boughs to clear the air of bronchial coughs and influenza germs; how to use tree sap and the pulp from devil's club plants to clear the skin of cuts and rashes. He became skilled at interpreting the dialects of Indigenous Alaskan villages. He could handle boats and dogs, and he knew how to survive in the forest. He could find safety in a whiteout and start a fire in any weather.



A portrait of Walter Harper (1892-1918) at the Mount Hermon School. [Photo] Yvonne Mozee Collection, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Unlike his brothers and sisters who attended boarding schools and became accustomed to electric lights and flush toilets, Walter didn't see either one for much of his youth. He also didn't learn to read or write until age sixteen, after he met the English-born priest Hudson Stuck, known as the "Archdeacon of the Yukon." Stuck's duties included visiting remote villages in central Alaska. When he looked for a Native man to help him with these journeys, he found Walter.

Walter began working for Stuck as his translator, dog handler and boat engineer. The two men traveled year-round, often by dog team, across muskeg and over rivers, ice and snow. During the coldest months, temperatures could drop to more than sixty degrees below zero. In the summer, however, people and animals alike suffered as temperatures climbed and mosquitoes and gnats bred by the millions amid Alaska's multitude of swamps, lakes and rivers.

In a 1916 book, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled*, Stuck praised Walter as "adept in all wilderness arts. An axe, a rifle, a flaying knife, a skin needle with its sinew thread—he could construct a sled or a pair of snow-shoes...and could pitch camp with all the native comforts and amenities." From November 1910 to April 1911, the Archdeacon and Walter spent more than five months traveling 2,000 miles in the regions around Iditarod City and Fort Yukon. Along the way, Stuck conducted services in villages, and he continued to teach Walter reading and writing, as well as geography, history and other subjects. At camp at night, they pored over Shakespeare and the popular adventure novels of the day, such as *Treasure Island*.

Stuck was also an amateur climber, and he became fascinated by the staggering snow-covered peaks of Denali, the "High One" to Alaska's Natives. He read everything he could about past expeditions to the mountain. Climbers might face altitude sickness, avalanches, sudden shifts in the ice, widening crevasses, freezing winds and blinding whiteouts. It was no wonder that all earlier attempts to summit Denali's highest peak had failed.

Nevertheless, Stuck began planning his own expedition. He recruited Walter; Robert Tatum, a postulant for holy orders; Harry Karstens, an experienced outdoorsman; and two young Athabascan teenagers, John Fredson and Esalas George. After the team arrived at the foot of the mountain, Fredson would remain to manage base camp for the duration of the expedition, while George would be charged with taking one of the dog teams back to Nenana.

In preparation for the climb, Stuck ordered supplies from outside of Alaska. Most arrived unusable or didn't arrive at all. "The ice-axes sent were ridiculous gold-painted toys with detachable heads and broomstick handles...the points...splintered the first time they were used," he wrote in *The Ascent of Denali*. The regulation alpine boots were too small so Stuck attached leather soles and nails to rubber snowpacks. The men alternated these with large moccasins worn over five pairs of socks. Out of what remained of a tiny budget, Stuck had silk tents, extra axes and crampons (which he sometimes referred to as "ice-creepers") made in Fairbanks.

By March 1913, the four men and two boys arrived at a mining settlement fifty miles from Denali's base. Once they'd picked up a cache that Karstens had left there, their equipment totaled one and a half tons. With fourteen dogs and two sleds, they made several trips transporting the supplies to the base of the mountain.

After they'd started up the Muldrow Glacier, they discovered that an earlier earthquake had left giant blocks of icy rubble over the once relatively smooth northeast ridge (today known as Karstens Ridge). It took them an exhausting three weeks to chop a three-mile staircase into the ice before they could advance.

Under Stuck's tutelage, Walter documented the expedition in his diary:

May 11th.... This morning when we got up, the sun was shining brightly.... We had heavy packs on our backs and we toiled up the ridge gasping for breath....

May 12th.... [The clouds] came up...hovering [about] the whole ridge and the surrounding peaks. We were forced to leave the ridge and return to our camp down below on the glacier. The steps we made going up were all filled in with snow....

May 14th.... The weather is still uncertain. The clouds from down below are moving up as usual and the ridges on both sides of us are invisible in places. We saw very little of the sun.... Archdeacon gave me [a] dictation lesson from one of Shakespeare's small pocket edition[s].

May 17th.... We heard an avalanche.... It was very interesting watching it rolling down the mountainside like a roaring thunder and afterwards raising a cloud one thousand feet or more up in the air.

May 18th.... Snowing heavily. We had morning service.... Today is Trinity Sunday. It has been two months and two days since we left Nenana. It is very tedious staying in the tent all day waiting for the weather to clear....

May 21st.... Mr. Karstens and I went up on the ridge this morning for it looked promising; the sky was clear and the clouds managed to keep off the ridge till we were finished. But Oh! How hard the work was of clearing the steps. It took us six solid hours to make one mile....

June 3rd.... It blew all night and part of the day. For the first time on this trip I suffered with my feet. They were so cold that I thought they were going to freeze.... This morning while we were moving the camp we sat down to take a rest... and we began to talk about the flag staff that was supposed to have been put up on the [lower] north peak of Denali by Anderson and Taylor, and as we were talking about it I suddenly looked up to the ridge that was running down from the north peak and to our great surprise I saw it standing out against the blue sky.... It has been there for three years.

June 7th.... [Tatum, Karstens and Stuck felt unwell, and Harper assumed the lead.] It was one o'clock when we got to the top [of the highest point, the south peak]. I was ahead all day and was the first ever to set foot on Mt. Denali. We lost no time in setting up the little instrument tent and while the Archdeacon was reading the mercurial barometer I boiled the boiling point thermometer. It was extremely cold and a keen wind [was] blowing and [we] could not stay long.



Robert Tatum on the summit of Denali, June 7, 1913. [Photo] Hudson Stuck

June 8th.... We took a last glimpse of the north and south peaks of Mt. Denali and turned our faces toward the lowlands.

June 9th.... It was a wonderful transformation we went through today. This morning we were at the glacier camp in the season of winter and now we are at the base camp in the season of summer, thus jumping from winter to summer in one day.

IN A LETTER TO A FRIEND, Stuck later noted his intention to use the royalties earned from a book about their travels to help pay for Walter's university tuition. "Have I climbed a mountain?" Stuck wrote in acknowledgment of his debt to Walter. "I climbed it largely by his legs."

During the autumn of 1913, the Archdeacon, with the support of Alaska's Episcopal Church, enrolled Walter at the Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts. Walter was the second of five Alaska Native students sponsored at the school by Stuck and the Episcopal Church. To Dr. Henry Cutler, Mount Hermon's headmaster, Stuck explained, "The church's goal is to groom these young men for later service to Alaska's people."

At first, Walter struggled with the different style of education. Cultural differences also weighed heavily. As an Athabascan, Walter had been taught to avoid engaging in conflict, which was considered rude by his people. Debate, however, was part of his English class.

In a letter to the Archdeacon, he wrote, "My mark in English is low because it is so hard for me to grasp it as quickly as the others, besides, I'm not a good debater. I dislike arguing and that is what our English course consists of this term."

By his third year, his grades had improved, but the Archdeacon was discouraged by the curriculum, which he felt didn't relate to Walter's desire to become a medical missionary. He decided to take Walter back to Alaska and to work independently with him to help prepare him for university.

One year afterward, a typhoid outbreak struck Alaska—and Walter with it. During his lengthy recovery at Fort Yukon's mission hospital, he met a young nurse from Philadelphia named Frances Wells. Their relationship turned to romance, and in September 1918, Stuck officiated at their wedding.

A month later, on October 23, Walter and Frances boarded the *Princess Sophia* in Skagway on their way to Seattle. The *Sophia* was the last ship leaving Alaska before the freeze-up, and she was crowded with some 353 passengers and crew, plus horses and dogs. For the young couple, this journey was more than a honeymoon: Walter had been eager to fulfill his military duty by enlisting in the Army before pursuing his medical studies. But now that World War I was nearly over, he could go to college much sooner than he'd planned, and Frances intended to cover his tuition with money she'd inherited.

The only route south out of Skagway was through the Lynn Canal, a ninety-mile inlet famous for its unpredictable weather and narrow shipping lanes. In its center, a red and black buoy marked Vanderbilt Reef, the top of a submerged mountain. Although the buoy could be seen during the day, often gleaming against the water, it became invisible at night.

That evening, the north winds blew fiercely across the mountains causing the *Sophia* to sail off course into a blinding storm. Battling heavy rollers, she ran aground on Vanderbilt Reef around 2 a.m. with a grinding jolt that flung her crew about and knocked passengers from their beds.

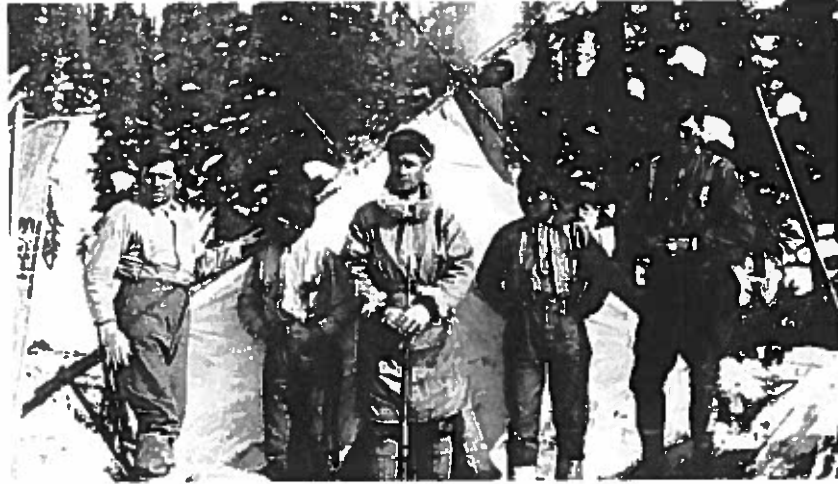
During the next day, ten ships responded to her distress call, but they were forced back by the thick blizzard, the surging waters and the high winds. The *Sophia's* Captain Locke hoped that as the tide came in, the *Sophia* would float free.

On October 25, however, when the tide came in, the gale was still raging, twisting the *Sophia* on the rocky reef and shattering her hull. Her boiler burst, and thousands of gallons of bunker oil spilled and congealed in the icy waves. Passengers panicked and began leaping overboard, only to be weighed down by the windblown oil particles.

By October 26, the storm finally abated. Only the top of the *Sophia's* mast appeared above the calm, glassy surface of the water.

AS I SOUGHT TO LEARN MORE about my great-uncle's life, I found three sobering and eerie, black-and-white photographs of the *Sophia* in her final moments, the dark silhouette of the vessel still poised above the churning waves. They were taken from one of the would-be rescue ships, none of which was able to approach the *Sophia* for fear of crashing into her. The only survivor of the *Sophia* shipwreck, an English setter, was found two days later at Auke Bay, near Juneau. The dog was terrified, half-starved and coated with bunker oil.

A saddened Archdeacon Stuck sent news of Walter's death to Cutler at the Mount Herman School: "He has left behind him...the light of bright example. He was at once the strongest and the gentlest...the most resourceful and capable man I have known in Alaska."



Robert Tatum, George Esalas, Harry Karstens, John Fredson and Walter Harper during the 1913 first ascent of Denali. [Photo] Hudson Stuck

Walter's ascent of Denali occurred at a time when Alaska Native people were suffering from poverty, disease and racial discrimination. Many were struggling to integrate into the white communities, which held nearly all the power in Alaska. And as Indigenous residents tried to transition from subsistence living to a cash economy, many found themselves confronted by a lack of opportunity and choices.

Sam Harper, Walter's older brother, felt forced to send four of his children, including my mother, Flora Jane, to Chemawa Indian School in Oregon. "So we would have food to eat," she later told me. "We were so homesick; we were there for ten years. There was no money [to go home when school was out], so every summer I made sure we all got jobs picking berries and working in canneries so we'd have spending money and could buy shoes and tickets to see school games. Well, not John, he was only four years old when we got there and the youngest in the school."

I tried to talk about Chemawa to Mom's younger brother, John Harper, but he wanted none of it. "Nah," he said waving his hands, dismissing my question. "That was awful. God awful." From others I learned that, as the youngest child at the school, John had to learn to defend himself. By the time he returned to Fairbanks, he was feared by schoolboys and even older men for his fighting ability.

Walter's fame made otherwise humbled people proud. *One of our own made it.* His legacy to his Harper descendants is more personal: a constellation of dreams and stories. My mother—Walter's niece—overcame tuberculosis twice while in college, but became the first Alaska Native woman to graduate from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks in 1935, where a building was named after her in 1992. My cousin Michael Harper worked as Governor Jay Hammond's assistant in the 1970s and later became president of a large Native corporation. Another cousin, Phyllis Fast, obtained a PhD in Anthropology from Harvard University and went on to head the Department of Alaska Native Studies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

Although Walter was experienced with dog teams and working outside in cold conditions, Denali was his first technical alpine ascent. When interviewed for an Alaska Native publication, Walter's nephew Don Harper was asked what preparations and training Walter had made for Denali. Don shook his head. "To my knowledge I don't think he had any [climbing] experience."

Walter's sister Margaret was closer to him. She told me, "Walter had personality, scads of it. Everybody liked him...the girls were crazy about him."

My mother said my grandmother was infatuated with Walter before she married his older brother Sam.

"So why didn't she marry Walter?" I asked.

Mom shrugged. "All the girls knew Archdeacon Stuck had plans for his education." Those plans didn't include marriage and kids.

Mom told me a humorous story about Walter and his mother. He was then about eighteen and handy with tools. He had just been paid, possibly for building a couch for a neighbor. Wanting to do something for his mother, he bought her a pair of high-heeled, red leather shoes with button tops. She was surprised, or perhaps aghast, since she usually wore Native-made mukluks, which consisted of fur-trimmed animal hide.

Jenny managed to put on the red shoes and get to her feet, but after a step or two, she tripped and fell down. Based on what I've heard of her temperament, I don't think anyone laughed. Not about to waste her son's hard-earned money, Jenny took the shoes to a chopping block and whacked off the heels with an axe.

I was horrified. "Did she ever wear them?"

Mom nodded. "She did, but I'm not sure where. They were city shoes, and I don't think she was ever in town."

IN DENALI NATIONAL PARK, a few years ago, I had a glimpse of what my great uncle had faced in 1913 when a pilot friend offered to fly me partway up Denali in his Cessna 180. I thought it would be exciting to see where Walter had made his climb, but I had no idea what to expect.

While we flew, I asked why we couldn't go all the way to the top? "It's the weather," my friend said. "It's unpredictable at that height. As we go higher, we can't see, and I don't have enough gas if we run into trouble."

The plane rose and then seemed to level off; a rugged wall of mountain filled the windows all around us. Although we were still climbing, it seemed as if we weren't moving. In the midst of the vast landscape, I felt like a mosquito. Everything outside the plane was purple and white and gray, icy and forbidding.

I spun my head like an owl all the way left, then all the way right. We were flying at 125 mph, and yet we didn't seem to be moving. We weren't even halfway up the mountain, and I realized I was seeing only a small part of it.

It was beyond overwhelming. Denali was a universe.

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