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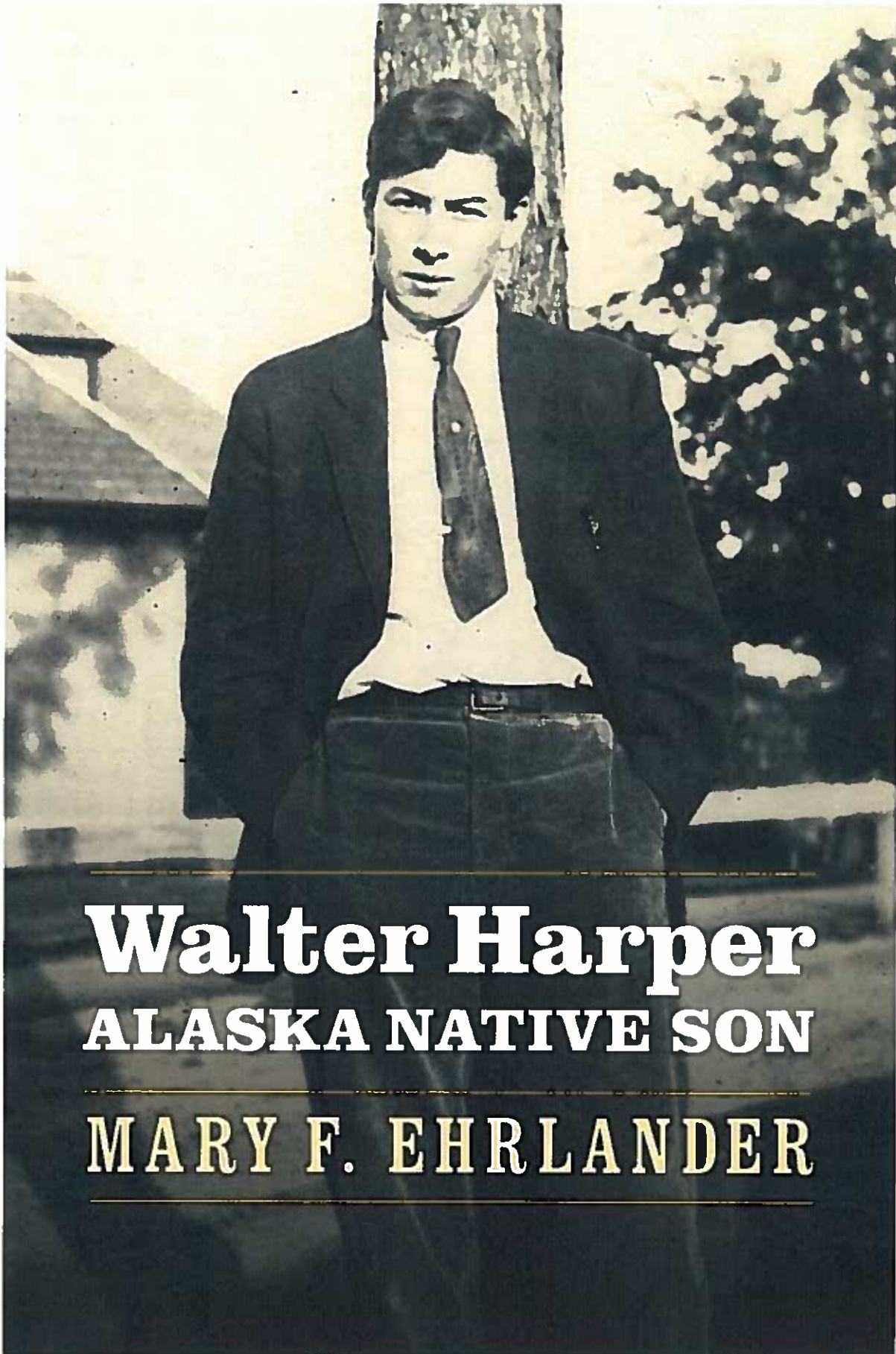
## **In story of the legendary 'Walter Harper: Alaska Native Son,' Denali is just the beginning**

 Author: David A. James  Updated: December 16, 2017  Published December 16, 2017

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**"Walter Harper: Alaska Native Son"**

*By Mary F. Ehrlander; University of Nebraska Press; 2017; 216 pages; \$29.95*



**Walter Harper**  
**ALASKA NATIVE SON**  
**MARY F. EHRLANDER**

*"Walter Harper: Alaska Native Son," by Mary F. Ehrlander*

Walter Harper lived just 25 years, yet became known throughout Alaska and around the world. Born in 1893, this son of an Irish immigrant father and a Koyukon-Athabascan mother grew up immersed in the Interior Alaska Native subsistence culture at a time when Western influences were only beginning to penetrate the region.

Despite his tremendous skills and unflappably optimistic personality, Harper would be unknown today but for a chance meeting that led to a brief but extraordinary series of adventures as a guide and assistant, ultimately resulting in his being the first person to set foot on the summit of Denali. For this moment alone he remains famous, but as Fairbanks author Mary Ehrlander demonstrates in her new biography of Harper, the climb was but one part of a life few could equal.

"Walter Harper: Alaska Native Son" tells the story of a young man born in humble circumstances whose capabilities were recognized by the famed Episcopal missionary Archdeacon Hudson Stuck. The two became inseparable partners over a series of trips through Interior Alaska in both summer and winter, culminating in an epic wintertime loop around the Arctic coast. Harper proved himself an invaluable assistant without whom Stuck would never have accomplished what he did, a fact that Stuck freely and frequently acknowledged. Placed in this context, the summiting of Denali is but one of many attainments.

Ehrlander, a professor of history who directs the Arctic and Northern Studies program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, is well suited for telling this story. A skilled writer, she vividly recreates Alaska as it was in the first two decades of the 20th century and plants Harper, Stuck and the others who pass through these pages deeply within their time period. Of Alaska circa 1910, she writes:

"Mainstream American norms clashed with Alaska Native traditions. The highly masculine, liberal alcohol culture competed with conservative Christian mores. Insufficient law enforcement, coupled with antiauthoritarian attitudes among non-Natives, contributed to an 'anything goes' atmosphere in which migrants exploited Alaska Natives. In the midst of this free-for-all, missionaries took opportunities where they arose, often in unconventional venues, to rein in lawlessness and promote Christian teachings."

Rather than approach the era from the viewpoints of the present, she looks at this world as it was and explores how the people she writes about navigated it. Hence, while Stuck's relationship with Harper can be seen today as overly paternalistic, readers discover how it developed in a time when the gulf between peoples of widely varying backgrounds were much broader, and when many white people held deeply racist views toward Alaska Natives.

It was into this world that the British-born Stuck arrived in 1904, driven by the social gospel ideals then widely held by American Christians. He sought to bring religion to Alaska Natives, but not to change their fundamental culture. He deeply respected their ability to survive in such a challenging environment and became an advocate for their rights and needs at a time when only white voices would be heard by those in power.

Stuck met Harper at a fish camp when the young man was 16 and quickly saw his potential. Harper's parents separated when he was 3 years old and he was raised by his mother in what is now the village of Tanana. Stuck convinced Harper's mother to send her son to boarding school, where he quickly distinguished himself as a good student in addition to his outdoor skills. The combination prompted Stuck to employ Harper in 1910 as his guide and assistant. The pair traveled from village to village ministering and providing needed medical aid. Along the way, Stuck continued Harper's education and religious training, and the two developed a father-son relationship that continued until Harper's death.

For his own part, Harper was indispensable to Stuck. Though hardly without abilities, Stuck lacked Harper's innate know-how to fix anything from dogsleds to tents to engines in the field, as well as the youth's sharpshooting ability when it came to hunting. Stuck could never have wandered Alaska as he did without Harper at his side.

Thus when Stuck and Harry Karstens plotted to climb Denali in the spring of 1913, it was a given that Harper would be needed. Ehrlander devotes a lively chapter to that well-documented expedition, after which all involved proclaimed Harper's boundless good cheer as the factor that held it together and brought success, even as the relationship between the equally strong-willed Stuck and Karstens rapidly deteriorated.

*[Book review: In 'Historic Denali National Park,' the storied history of an Alaska icon]*

Ehrlander is focused on the broader story of Harper's life, however, and in this book she gives greater attention to his and Stuck's journeys across the territory, evoking daily life on the rivers and trails, conditions in the villages, and the relationship between the pair. Readers will feel like they're along for the ride at every mile.

Harper spent three years after the climb attending school in Massachusetts but struggled in some subjects. He was happy to return to Alaska and resume working for Stuck. Both he and Stuck envisioned Harper attending medical school and returning to minister to the Athabascans. It was only when Harper met and fell in love with Frances Wells, a medical missionary from Philadelphia, that he began to assert his independence. The two married, and in October 1918, boarded the Princess Sophia in Skagway, bound for Harper's medical schooling. A day later the ship ran aground and ultimately sank with all aboard.

For Ehrlander, the tragedy of Harper's life is what didn't happen. At a time when fierce conflicts raged between Alaska Natives and the the expanding white population, Harper moved easily between both cultures. A potentially vital bridge was lost.

Thanks to Ehrlander, however, we get this wonderfully written testament to a life of adventure. The Walter Harper we come to know is immensely likable, and his escapades irresistible. He was one of the great Alaskans of his time. This book is a fitting tribute.

## Comments