

National Park Service**Denali**National Park & Preserve
Alaska

ALERTS IN EFFECT

DISMISS 

PARK CLOSURES

Winter Season: Road Open to Mile 3 (Park Headquarters)

The Denali Park Road is currently open to Mile 3, Park Headquarters. Wintry conditions beyond that point prevent vehicle travel, though pedestrian travel is permitted. The Winter Visitor Center is open daily, 9:30 am - 5 pm, at Mile 1.5.

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A Brief Account of the 1913 Climb of Denali



Grand Basin Camp 2

Project Gutenberg

by Tom Walker

On June 7, 1913, four Alaskans became the first climbers to reach the 20,310' summit of Mount McKinley.

Harry Karstens, climb leader, Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, climb organizer, Robert Tatum, and Walter Harper, an Alaska Native, had travelled cross country by dog team in sub-zero cold to reach the mountain. Shortly after Easter they began relaying their ton and a half of supplies from the Kantishna mining district to the base of McKinley, fifty miles away.

In mid-April, the expedition established camp in the last timber in Cache Creek, a few miles below McGonagall Pass an opening onto the Muldrow Glacier. Here they hunted for meat and gathered firewood and willow twigs for use during the ascent.

The assault began with Karstens breaking trail up the Muldrow, a route Stuck called "the highway of desire." Using willows as markers Karstens laid out a route from McGonagall Pass to a cache at 8,000'. Once the trail hardened, team members followed with loaded dog sleds, the first of numerous relays.

Day after day men and dogs toiled to move their supplies up the Muldrow to its head. The route rose gently in its first four miles, but where the glacier turned south, it inclined steeply between towering, slab-sided ridges. In a maze of lethal crevasses and huge blocks of ice, the team built numerous snow bridges in order to proceed. Avalanches were a constant threat.

In early May, the expedition completed the first relay from their midway cache to 10,800', the site chosen for their last glacier camp. Several hours later as they again approached the site with another load, they saw smoke. "Had some mysterious climber come over from the other side of the mountain?" Hudson Stuck wondered. "Had he discovered our wood and our grub, and perhaps starving, kindled a fire?" The climbers pressed forward and found their cache in flames. They frantically doused the mystery blaze, but lost vital gear including three silk tents, clothing, and food stuffs. Sifting through the embers, Stuck determined that a careless match or spark dropped earlier had smoldered to life, igniting the fire.

Six weeks into the expedition, the fire was the first setback in the press toward the ultimate prize. The work of the next few days would determine if they could continue on or be forced to retreat. Makeshift substitutions allowed the expedition to continue.

Harry Karstens led the initial assault up the "central north-eastern ridge" that bypassed an enormous icefall at the head of the glacier. Instead of the easy snow slope that a previous expedition had described, the ridge was a dangerous, shattered mass of ice and snow. The climbers set aside their packs and began chopping steps upward. An earthquake the year before had turned what otherwise would have been a simple, three-day climb, into three weeks of grueling, dangerous work.

On that knife-edged ridge, Walter Harper, 21, quickly proved his mettle. Karstens described him as "fearless." Periodic storms slowed their work and kept the team tent-bound for days at a time. "We did not dare venture upon the ridge for fear of wind and avalanches," Harper explained.

Finally on May 30, the weather broke and after six exhausting relays, the climbers established a new camp at the top of the ridge beneath a rock outcrop, now known as Browne Tower. The laborious step cutting was behind them. Stuck later rejected any credit for conquering the ridge. "[I] would like to name that ridge Karstens Ridge," Stuck said, "in honor of the man who, with Walter's help, cut that staircase three miles long..."

Here the storms abated and the team quickly exploited the window of superb weather to push upward. After several long hard relays, and an intermediate stop, the expedition soon established its high camp at 17,500' in the Grand Basin between the North and South Peaks.

With two full weeks of food and fuel on hand, which could be stretched to three if necessary, the climbers were well-provisioned to wait out an extended storm, or even establish yet another, higher camp. Everything seemed primed for success but on Mount McKinley, there is no sure thing.

Archdeacon Stuck, so near his long-cherished goal, was failing. For days, he had been convulsed by choking and shortness of breath, even blackouts. Only his extraordinary will and the excellence of his companions had gotten him this high. "Deacon having hard time breathing but we will get him there somehow," Karstens declared.

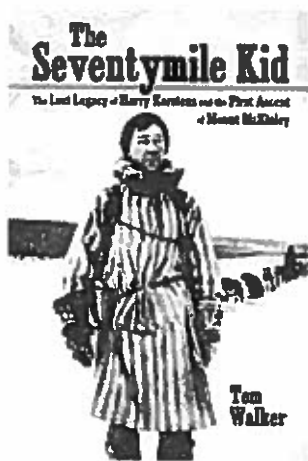
On the evening of June 6, the eve of the summit attempt, Harper cooked a meal that quickly wrought internal havoc on his companions. After a few hours of fitful rest, the men left camp for the summit at three a.m. The temperature was -21°F.

Above 20,000' a sub-zero wind slashed at the four haggard climbers inching up the icy slope. Everyone stopped often to catch their breath and pound warmth into their hands and feet. Altitude sickness pummeled them all. They labored on with pounding headaches and churning stomachs.

Just past mid-day, Walter Harper stopped. He could go no higher. After weeks of toil, he had reached the top of North America's tallest mountain. Karstens and Tatum came seconds behind. Stuck, the last man on the rope, collapsed unconscious on the summit.

Despite the stabbing cold and draining fatigue, the climbers exulted in the stunning vistas. Even in full sunlight, the temperature was just 7°F. The team spent an hour-and-a-half on the summit reading instruments and holding a brief prayer service before the cruel wind drove them down. Before leaving, they planted a small cross and unfurled a handmade American flag.

Only during the weary descent to high camp, did the full enormity of their triumph sink in. "I remember no day in my life so full of toil, distress, and exhaustion, and yet so full of happiness and keen gratification," Stuck explained. Karstens put it more simply: "Hurrah. The south summit of Mount McKinley has been conquered."



Tom Walker is the author of more than a dozen books on Alaska, including his latest title, *The Seventy Mile Kid: The Lost Legacy of Harry Karstens and the First Ascent of Mount McKinley*.

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