

National Park Service

Series: Denali History Nuggets

The Ultimate Triumph and Tragedy: Remembering Walter Harper 100 Years Later

Denali National Park & Preserve

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Over one hundred years ago, Alaska and the Yukon experienced a tragedy sometimes referred to as “The Unknown Titanic of the West Coast.” On October 25, 1918, the *Princess Sophia* sank en route from Skagway to Vancouver. All 350-plus people on board perished, including one of the most significant figures in Denali history.

Walter Harper will always be remembered as the first person to summit Denali in 1913 as a part of the Karstens-Stuck Expedition.^[1] Harper, who was among the *Princess Sophia* victims, was only 25 when he died.

At the time of his death, Harper was traveling to the contiguous United States to be trained as a medical missionary. His plan was to return to Interior Alaska to help people in need. Harper had just been married to Frances Wells, a missionary nurse from the Philadelphia area who was stationed at Fort Yukon. Frances was with Walter on the



Walter Harper

Princess Sophia.

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Harper was born in late 1892 and was the son of a Koyukon-Athabascan mother, Seentaána, and a legendary gold prospector father, Arthur Harper.^[2] Walter was raised by his mother and was fluent in Koyukon-Athabascan. Tanana was his home village and he eventually attended the Saint Mark's Mission school in Nenana before becoming a guide for Missionary Hudson Stuck. Stuck's faith in Harper as a skilled guide and outdoorsman eventually led to his participation in the Denali summit expedition. Harper's physical abilities and character were respected by those he encountered and many believed he was destined to be a future leader in Interior Alaska.

A Man of Many Talents

Harper achieved small-scale fame after the successful ascent of Denali. In 1914, the New York Times published a story about Harper's incredible display of strength as well as shooting and throwing accuracy when he visited the Coney Island amusement park. He slammed a 20-pound hammer onto the strength-measuring machine and hit the block so hard it spun the dial twice around the scale, ringing the bell twice and breaking the machine. He apologized for wrecking the machine and walked over to a shooting gallery where he left onlookers in disbelief by shooting three tiny moving balls in succession. The impressed Times reporter remarked, "Harper hadn't even seemed to aim at them, he had shot so quickly." According to the article, Harper, who never threw a baseball in his life, walked to the dunk tank and tossed consecutive strikes to knock a man off the platform and into the water. As he wandered the amusement park from game to game, Harper's athleticism and strength became a local sensation.

^[1] In 2013, Senator Lisa Murkowski sponsored legislation naming the Talkeetna Ranger Station the "Walter Harper Talkeetna Ranger Station." The formal dedication occurred on July 2, 2014.

^[2] There are published references to Seentaána's English name being Jenny Albert or Jennie Bosco.

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