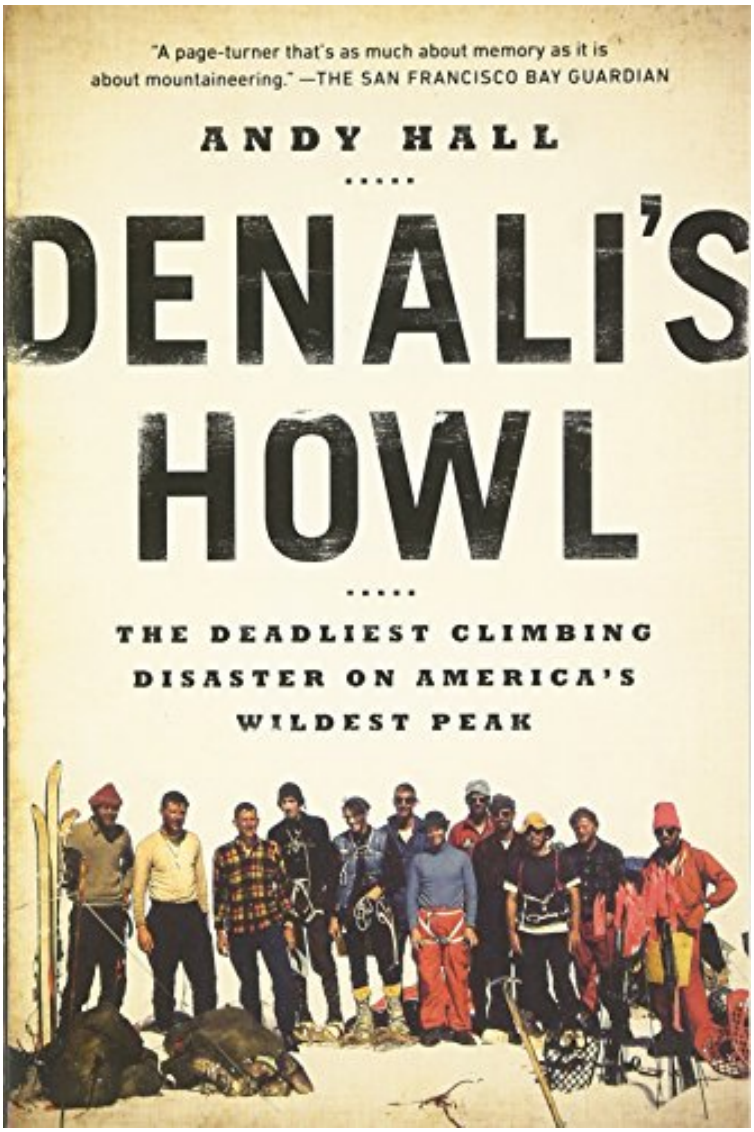
Denali's Howl: The Deadliest Climbing Disaster on America's Wildest Peak

Andy Hall
*audiobook | *ebooks | Download PDF | ePub | DOC*



#84924 in Books Andy Hall 2015-04-28 2015-04-28Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.00 x .63 x 5.30l, .64 #File Name: 0142181951272 pagesDenali s Howl The Deadliest Climbing Disaster on America s Wildest Peak | File size: 53.Mb

Andy Hall : Denali's Howl: The Deadliest Climbing Disaster on America's Wildest Peak before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Denali's Howl: The Deadliest Climbing Disaster on America's Wildest Peak:

114 of 117 people found the following review helpful. "An engrossing account of one of North American

mountaineering's most controversial and heart-rendering stories."By Jeffrey T. BabcockIt is hard to imagine another book being published about the Wilcox Tragedy on Denali, which happened 47 years ago. Four books have already been written about the disaster to date--the last came out in 2012--and was penned by me.My brother Bill Babcock, was the leader of what would become the rescue team. He had invited me along for the ride the previous fall of '66. I was then living on the East coast and attending college in Maine. The Mountaineering Club of Alaska had asked Bill to lead an expedition (the 53rd), which by chance trailed a week behind the Wilcox team. Both teams used the standard Muldrow Glacier / Karstens Ridge approach on the North side of Mount McKinley. When the worst storm in Denali's history exploded on top, our team was positioned to assist the five survivors, and to search the upper slopes and hopefully find the 7 missing climbers. At 19, I was not only the youngest and least experienced member of our group. I was also terrified by what lay ahead for our group.Andy Hall, whose father was Park Superintendent at the time has given us another version of this sad story, which he calls 'Denali's Howl.' Andy was five and living with his family in the park when the event took place in the summer of 1967. George Hall was Andy's father.Andy's book offers readers a carefully researched and thoroughly engrossing account of one of North American mountaineering's most controversial and heart-rendering stories. HIs narrative offers many varied and personal accounts of what happened, and he paints a vivid picture of each of the men on the 12-man Wilcox team. As I read Andy's descriptions I found myself changing some of my impressions of the climbers I met so many years ago.I also found Andy's description of Blaine Smith's 1997 ordeal on the upper slopes above Denali Pass enthralling--and very similar to what happened to my eight-person team on the South side of the mountain in 1977. Unless you have been caught out in the open during a frigid high altitude mountain storm, with winds of hurricane force, it is difficult to appreciate the thin line that truly exists between life and death. Andy describes this sheer terror with all the skill of a gifted writer. If you can't find shelter in such circumstances, you will most likely die in a very short span of time.'Denali's Howl' is a wonderful book, extremely well-written, well-documented, and a classic rendering of one of mountaineering's most terrifying tragedies.Jeff BabcockAuthor, 'Should I Not Return'[[ASIN:1594332703 Should I Not Return]1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Good ReadBy jwhI've spent time climbing Denali and participated in rescues and I find it a Great book.Stories and reports of our climb and the rescue we participated in are/were incomplete and missing material facts. I can see how different authors with different points of view, and incomplete information, can come to different conclusions.Also read "White Winds: America's Most Tragic Mountaineering Expedition, Wilcox", "Hall of the Mountain King, Snyder", "Forever on the Mountain, Tabor", "Should I Not Return, Babcock"Reading these books is an exercise in a "Blame Game":- 2 group leaders blaming each other- Bureaucratic incompetence of the park service- weather a super-storm.Seems to me that bad things happen, and sometimes that's just the way it is. People just need to move on and maybe that is why these books were written. Authors Babcock, Snyder, and Wilcox all have some sort of personal stake in this tragedy.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Compelling ReadBy L. S. BonelliAn excellent read (but please don't compare it to Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air). This is a compelling story and a page turner. I read it during a visit to Alaska where we hiked a few mountains (but not in Denali) and it really put the events into perspective. Great writing about a tragic story. The only bad thing I can say is that it had me staying up late to finish it.

In the summer of 1967, twelve young men ascended Alaska’s Mount McKinley—known to the locals as Denali. Engulfed by a once-in-alifetime blizzard, only five made it back down. Andy Hall, a journalist and son of the park superintendent at the time, was living in the park when the tragedy occurred and spent years tracking down rescuers, survivors, lost documents, and recordings of radio communications. In Denali’s Howl, Hall reveals the full story of the expedition in a powerful retelling that will mesmerize the climbing community as well as anyone interested in mega-storms and man’s sometimes deadly drive to challenge the forces of nature.

Praise for Denali’s Howl“In this straightforward, balanced account of the greatest mountaineering disaster in Alaskan history, Andy Hall allows the full tragedy of that episode to emerge. In resisting the facile urge to lay blame, his narrative captures with gripping immediacy the intersection of seemingly small human decisions with one of the most powerful storms ever to descend on Denali. As one who was climbing elsewhere in the Alaska Range at the time, I had long pondered just how the catastrophe came to pass. Thanks to Hall, I understand it better than ever before.” —David Roberts, author of The Mountain of My Fear and Alone on the Ice “A haunting, meticulously-researched account of twelve men’s encounter with the awesome fury of nature.”—Amanda Padoan, author of Buried in the Sky: The Extraordinary Story of the Sherpa Climbers on K’s Deadliest Day “Twelve men went up the slopes of North America's highest mountain in the summer of 1967. Only five made it back. The ill-fated Wilcox expedition to Denali finds an able chronicler in Andy Hall's gripping account of mountain majesty, mountain gloom, and human doom.”—Maurice Isserman, co-author of Fallen Giants: Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes “One of those couldn’t-put-it-down books! This harrowing story of a more than 40-year-old mountaineering tragedy is raw and immediate as it marches relentlessly towards the final, devastating end.”—Bernadette McDonald, author of Freedom ClimbersAbout the AuthorANDY HALL grew up in the shadow of Denali. He is the former editor and

publisher of Alaska magazine. He lives in Chugiak, Alaska.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof***Copyright © 2014 Andy HallPROLOGUEA STRANGER IN THEWILDERNESS Joe Wilcox may not have been the first man to reach the summit of Denali, but on Saturday afternoon, July 15, 1967, he felt like it. A rare clear day reigned on the mountain outsiders call Mount McKinley. Wilcox and his three companions had savored it for the last few hours as they trudged upward on crusty, wind-carved snow. Atop the continent, Joe's deep-set eyes swept over the Alaska Range— some of the tallest and most rugged peaks in North America— reduced to so many white waves of rock and ice lapping at the mountain's base. But along with the grandeur there was an edge of tension. After twenty-seven days on the mountain, Wilcox knew that the window of good weather could close just as quickly as it had opened. The four men on the summit, along with the rest of their twelve-man team waiting for their turn just a couple of thousand feet below, had no time to waste.Wilcox had been on the mountain for nearly a month, and as he approached the summit the final steps seemed insignificant when compared to the tremendous effort the team had made to get there. The sweeping panorama instilled in him a sense of gratitude. He had worked hard, but that hard work did not guarantee success; he felt lucky.Two weather systems had been developing as Wilcox and his companions worked their way toward the summit: one to the northeast and one to the southwest. Rainclouds mustered over the Beaufort Sea, a stretch of ice-bound ocean that spans 1,200 unbroken miles between Alaska's North Slope and the North Pole. In those days the sea was largely devoid of human traffic, save the occasional Eskimo* hunter. The low-pressure system spun to life and grew in intensity as it marched southwest carrying potent moisture-laden winds toward the Alaska Range. At the same time an equally strong high-pressure system developed over the Aleutian Islands, a windswept, treeless archipelago, known by mariners as the Cradle of Storms, southwest of Denali. The development and location of both weather systems at that time of year was unusual.These massive weather systems, separated by a thousand miles of forest, mountain, tundra, and taiga, were on a collision course, headed straight toward Joe Wilcox.On the summit at an elevation of 20,320 feet, Wilcox watched wind-whipped cirrus clouds high above him. These clouds marked the margins of the two massive weather systems as they began to brush against each other. In a matter of hours one of the most violent storms ever recorded on the mountain would engulf the peak and leave seven of Joe Wilcox's twelve-man expedition dead.Joe stood six foot one inch tall. He was twenty-four years old. I was five. I don't know why my dad took me along on the drive in his light-green Park Service sedan deep into the park that midsummer night. It might have been because I'd been cooped up in the house by days of rain, or maybe he just wanted the company of his son. Whatever the reason, there I was, wearing my red-topped rubber boots next to Dad on the wide bench seat as we weaved along the endless muddy road deep inside Mount McKinley National Park. Two more light-green park vehicles, with rangers at the wheels, followed behind. With the sun low on the horizon it was light out, but low-hanging clouds obscured Denali and the alpine vistas that flanked the road. The small black spruce and willow trees, stunted by the high altitude and latitude, marched up the hillsides and disappeared into the mist as we passed by. The creek beds roiled with muddy, brown water from bank to bank, the result of the steady rain that had not yet stopped.Most of the time, I loved riding shotgun with Dad. He was a gregarious man who sang while he drove, mostly military songs he learned in the Army Air Corps during World War II. When he wasn't singing, "Over hill, over dale, as we hit the dusty trail . . ." he was whistling, telling stories, pointing out landmarks and wildlife, or expounding on historical facts that were usually without much meaning to my young mind. I'd lean against him on the seat and steer the car while he kept us on the road with his thumbs secretly pressed against the bottom of the steering wheel.That night, he was a different man. His National Park Service–issue tan Stetson sat between us on the seat; it rarely left the hat rack at park headquarters. I was used to being quiet, since he usually did all the talking, but this time Dad was almost as mute as I was. The air hung heavy with the absence of his chatter and gave the car a closed-in, somber feel. He whistled a little at first, but the songs trailed off, like his heart wasn't in it. Soon the rhythm of the windshield wipers and the slosh and ping of the muddy gravel road under our wheels was our only accompaniment.We drove far into the park, the distance elongated by the strange silence, and finally stopped at a pullout near a rain-swollen river. Dad got out, slipped a green raincoat over his uniform, and huddled with the other men. The air was sharply cool, and carried the tang of freshly cut earth. I noticed places where the riverbank had fallen into rushing water. Bored, I walked toward the river, tossed in sticks, and watched the current sweep them away. The last time we'd stopped here on a family outing, the river looked completely different—a series of gravel bars laced with narrow braids of flowing water. Now it was a single channel of brown water, wider than the park road.Dad returned to my side, but the others waited in their vehicles with engines idling and headlights shining in the rainy gloom. We ambled slowly along the swollen river. I skipped stones while Dad trailed behind, one eye on me while he scanned up and down the riverbank. He didn't join in the rock skipping or find flat rocks for me; I was on my own. The turbulent water made skipping difficult, so I turned my attention to bigger rocks, heaving in big clunkers to hear the satisfying thunk and the muffled, bowling-alley crashes as they careened along the rocky riverbed in the swift current.We were nearly out of sight of the vehicles when Dad looked up and suddenly stiffened."Andy, get back to the car," he said. "Now." I froze and looked at him in confusion.He didn't look back at me but gazed downstream. "Go," he said, calmly but firmly.I turned, took a step, and promptly tripped and fell onto the rocks. I saw blood trickle onto my palms. He moved quickly and grabbed my hand, took two strides,

and then swung me ahead of him, repeating the process as we scrambled over the rocks and driftwood along the riverbank. He set me down on a sandy stretch and I ran, but I was too small to keep up, so he reached down and grabbed my hand again. I held his hand with both of mine, lifted my feet off of the ground, and ventured a look behind as he swung me ahead toward the idling cars. Far downstream, maybe a couple hundred yards, a dark, hulking shape had emerged from the brush along the river and loped toward us.Grizzly bear, I thought. He never said the words, but I was pretty sure Dad was thinking the same thing.Fear seized me. I'd seen plenty of grizzly bears, but always from the safety of our car, never on foot with nothing between us but rain and wind. Children who lived in the park were warned to retreat indoors at the first sign of the big animal. Doors to the homes in the small enclave that surrounded park headquarters were not locked, and we all understood that it was OK to enter any home at any time, if necessary, to avoid wildlife. Running wasn't advised when encountering a bear, but we'd also been told that when refuge is close, it's always wise to seek it. Dad was following that advice. Paralyzed with fear and dangling from Dad's grip like a rag doll, I looked backward rather than forward, watching the intruder's slow progress as Dad hustled us to where the others waited.Back in the car, we watched as the dark shape shambled along the bank where we had stood minutes earlier. Just as suddenly as he had grabbed my hand and retreated, Dad relaxed, his shoulders slumping and the firm, set line of his lips upturning in relief. He opened the door and walked toward the approaching figure as it came into focus. I stayed in the backseat, still scared, even though I could see that it was no grizzly but a man wearing a huge backpack and caped by a billowing brown rain poncho.Mountaineers were rare in those days. About twenty came to the park each year to climb, and they were enigmas to me, even more unusual than the moose and bear and sheep that frequented this two-million-acre wilderness preserve. Somehow I knew he was a climber, though he was the first one I'd seen. He was tall and his wet clothes hung loosely on his lean frame. I peered over the dashboard to get a closer look at this rare creature, taking in his unbuttoned flannel shirt, mud-covered high-water pants, thick-knuckled fingers, and battered boots. At first I thought he was as ancient as Dad, but when he turned his head and saw me watching him, he smiled. His teeth were dazzling against his brown beard and sunburned face, and I realized he was not much older that the teenage boys who lived next door.I don't know what they said to each other—I stayed in the car, watching from my perch behind the dashboard as they talked. The young man unshouldered his pack and did most of the talking, gesturing with his hands and occasionally pointing into the foggy distance. Dad and the rangers listened intently, their faces serious, rain dripping from the brims of their Stetsons. After what seemed like hours, the circle of men broke, the climber got into one of the other vehicles, and we began the long drive home, slithering and bouncing along the muddy park road.I peppered Dad with questions about the strange man who had emerged from a wilderness that I thought was home only to moose, caribou, sheep, and bear: Who is he? Where did he come from? Why had we come all this way to meet him?After a long silence my father said there had been a climbing accident on Denali and some boys had died. His voice was heavy and sounded tired, as if the words were difficult to pronounce. His tone told me the moment was grave, and part of me knew I should share his sadness. But I was just a kid and I was both scared and excited by the thrilling sprint along the river."What happened, Daddy, did they fall off a cliff ?" I asked. "There was a bad storm, kiddo. We don't know what happened to them yet, but we're trying to find out.""Why don't you just fly up and get them?" I continued. "We did, but the boys we found were already dead." "Are you going to bring them down?""No, we'll probably leave them buried in the snow." "What if the snow melts?""They're in snow that never melts." CHAPTER 1THOSE WHO CAMEBEFORE The Athabaskan people have lived in the shadow of the great mountain for ten thousand years and know it by many names. To the people of the Lower Tanana, it is Deenaadheet or Deennadhee. The Dena'ina call it Dghelay Ka'a; the Koyukon, Deenaali. Each tribe's name, though unique, translates to roughly the same meaning: the Big One, the High One, the Great One.Neither legends nor oral tradition indicate that Alaska's Native people desired or attempted to climb it. Though it was revered, no taboo appears to have kept Alaska's indigenous people from standing on the summit. A healthy aversion to the treacheries of glacier travel and perhaps common sense were enough.The subsistence life was hard. The icy slopes and inhospitable mountaintop held no allure to those whose lives were focused on the already-difficult challenge of surviving off the subarctic wilderness; in fact, they avoided the desolate terrain. When Alfred Brooks made the first approach to the mountain in 1902 during a US Geological Survey he knew he was the first white man to see it up close, and speculated that no Alaska Native had been so near to it either. I was far beyond, where the moccasined foot of the roving Indian had never trod. The Alaska Native seldom goes beyond the limit of smooth walking and has a superstitious horror of even approaching glacial ice. ---Among the world's high mountains, summits in excess of 20,000 feet are surprisingly common. In the South American Andes, more than forty exceed 20,000 feet in height; in the Himalayas, hundreds rise higher. But height alone does not define a mountain. While Denali is the tallest mountain in North America at 20,320 feet, it also is arguably the biggest mountain on the planet.The Denali massif is bounded on the west by Kahiltna Pass and to the east by the Traleika Col. The Peters Glacier, at the base of the Wickersham Wall, is its northern boundary. The Ruth Gap marks its southern edge. Within those margins is Denali, a 144-square-mile mass of rock, snow, and ice that rises abruptly from a 2,000-foot plateau, soaring 18,000 feet from base to summit, the greatest vertical relief of any mountain on Earth, with the exception of the Hawaiian seamount Mauna Kea, the bulk of which lies beneath the Pacific Ocean. In comparison, Mount Everest, though 29,029 feet above sea level, rests on the 17,000-foot-high

Tibetan Plateau and rises just 12,000 feet from base to summit. A similar plateau boosts the Andes; without those geologic booster seats, those peaks all would lie in Denali's shadow.Denali is the apex of the Alaska Range, a cordillera that arcs 600 miles across Alaska, dividing the coastal lowlands around Cook Inlet from the Yukon lowlands of interior Alaska. The great range is about 60 miles wide near Denali and home to twenty peaks taller than 10,000 feet.Most of the cordillera is composed of sedimentary shale, limestone, and sandstone that is between 100 and 400 million years old, but a handful of peaks—among them Denali, Foraker, Hunter, and the Moose's Tooth—arise from a younger 35-million-year-old granite intrusion. Tectonic activity continues to push the entire range upward at a rate of about one millimeter a year even as the erosive action of wind, water, and ice wear it down. The durable gray-and-pink granite ensures that millions of years from now Denali and its granite brothers will endure long after their sedimentary neighbors have been reduced to glacial dust and carried away by wind and water.Europeans began exploring Alaska a little more than two hundred years ago and, upon seeing the mountain dominating the interior skyline, were immediately impressed by its evident size. Russian trappers were the earliest to push into the hinterlands and, like the Alaska Natives, were prosaic about the mountain, referring to it as Bolshaya Gora, or Big Mountain. British Navy captain George Vancouver made the earliest written reference to Denali in 1794 after navigating the silty shoals of Knik Arm at the head of Cook Inlet. Standing on the deck of the HMS Discovery, he looked north and noted the horizon "bounded by distant stupendous snow mountains."When prospector Frank Densmore visited Lake Minchumina in 1889, the big mountain rising to the south so enthralled him that he couldn't stop talking about it—so much so that for years it was known among prospectors as Densmore's Peak.Denali was already well known in Alaska when it entered into the national consciousness on January 24, 1897. An article in The New York Sun written by William Dickey ignored millennia of indigenous tradition and decades of local custom by replacing the name Denali with Mount McKinley, after an Ohio politician who had just been nominated for the presidency of the United States. William McKinley had no connection to Alaska, but was a proponent of the gold standard, a fact not lost on Dickey, a gold prospector. Alaskans and others familiar with the territory challenged Dickey's label, saying a traditional name was more appropriate. The issue had not yet been settled four years later when an assassin killed President McKinley, and his name became permanently affixed to the mountain. In the same article, Dickey estimated the mountain's elevation at 20,000 feet. His controversial christening and astonishingly accurate elevation estimate put the mountain on the map, and for the next twenty years virtually all travel to the region was for exploration and mountaineering.Judge James Wickersham and four companions made the first serious attempt to climb Denali during the summer of 1903. The party journeyed into the remote region aboard the riverboat Tanana Chief, starting on the Chena River and navigating down the Tanana and up the Kantishna River before disembarking for the final overland approach. On May 19, Wickersham and his party left the little steamboat behind and camped with "Nachereah, the moose hunter" and "Olyman the wise." Their hunting party was composed of fifty Athabaskan Indians and a hundred malamute dogs.With the help of an interpreter, Wickersham described the quest to their nomadic hosts At my request he tells them of our journey to the big mountain and our wish to reach its summit. Ju-dan told us in broken English, "Mountain Sheep fall off that mountain— guess white man no stick 'um." Incredulity appeared on every unwashed face at the statement of our purpose. "What for you go top—gold?" No, we go merely to see the top, to be the first men to reach the summit. This information imparted by the interpreter caused Olyman to remark in brief Indian phrases, which McLeod translated after the rude laughter had subsided as; "He says you are a fool." Undaunted by the ridicule of the pragmatic Natives, the party hiked south and entered the folds of the mountain via the Peters and Jeffery Glaciers. They soon came to the mountain's massive north face, a nearly vertical escarpment that rises all the way to the 19,470-foot north summit. But they could find no way to the top and ended their quest at an elevation of about 8,000 feet on what has since proved to be one of the mountain's most technically challenging routes. Wickersham's party wore wool, canvas, and leather, adequate to protect them from the cold weather encountered on the mountain. Their climbing tools, however, were rudimentary by today's standards. They climbed with alpenstocks—six-foot-long, steel-tipped, wooden staffs first used during the Middle Ages by shepherds in the Swiss Alps. In the latter half of the eighteenth century mountaineers added an ax head with a pointed pick on one side and a flattened adz blade on the other. The pick was used to gain purchase on the steep slopes and the adz blade was used to chip out ice steps. Crampons of the day were more like spiked horseshoes, providing good traction underfoot, but little help on steep or vertical ice. In light of the many obstacles found on the impossibly steep wall, including overhanging rock and ice, chimneys, and fissures, the long-handled ax would have been unwieldy at best. In the hands of Wickersham and his companions, hardened Alaska sourdoughs but novice mountaineers, they weren't enough to assist them in getting where they wanted to go—the summit.Wickersham's June 20 journal entry captures the moment of surrender. I was then convinced that no possibility existed of our overcoming the apparent obstacles to our higher climb— we were climbing on a spur as sharp as a house roof, rapidly rising to where it was nearly perpendicular—solid glare ice, and above it rose thousands of feet of glacial ice undermined and even falling by reason of the hot weather and constant sliding out of the softer snow. Though he never made the summit, the north face of the mountain, where he ended his quest, was named for him, today known as the Wickersham Wall, a 3-mile-wide precipice that sweeps skyward for 14,000 feet from the Peters Glacier to the summit of the north peak, making the façade of rock, ice, and snow one of

the largest on Earth.Snow falls down to 6,000 feet on Denali in every month of the year, giving it one of Earth's greatest permanently snow-covered vertical reliefs. And that extraordinary snowfall spawns some of the highest and longest glaciers in the Alaska Range. The Harper Glacier originates in the perpetual snow between Denali's twin summits and feeds the Muldrow, a 41-mile-long ice river that scours a U-shaped valley on the mountain's northeast side. To the south, the 44-mile-long Kahiltna is the longest glacier in the range. The Ruth Glacier spans 38 miles as it flows through the spectacular Don Sheldon Amphitheater. There the ice is a mile thick and the granite walls rise a mile above that.Two months after Wickersham's attempt, Dr. Frederick Cook's expedition followed a similar route, pushing deeper into the massif to the Peters Basin and ascending the steep and treacherous Northwest Buttress to an elevation of 11,000 feet. Cook, like Wickersham, was just a mile from the summit as the crow flies, but then, crows can fly. He had underestimated the size of the wall and soon realized the route was too difficult and time-consuming for him and his companions. Still, it was a notable achievement for the four men, three climbing with the aid of alpenstocks and the fourth relying on a tent pole. Undaunted, Cook returned to Denali in 1906 with three other climbers including Belmore Browne and Herschel Parker. After an initial summit bid failed, Cook set out again while Browne and Parker remained in camp, and returned claiming to have reached the top. Irrefutable evidence soon revealed that this claim was fraudulent, though the Frederick A. Cook Society claims to this day that Cook was the first to summit.During the winter of 1910, four Kantishna miners, incensed at Cook's deception and fueled by a barroom bet, set out for the summit. The Sourdough Expedition spent three months approaching the mountain by dogsled and ascending via the Muldrow Glacier. Three men climbed an astounding 8,000 feet on their summit day, carrying two thermoses of hot chocolate and half a dozen doughnuts in a burlap sack. Two of them, William Taylor and Pete Anderson, reached the top and spent two and a half hours on the north summit taking in the view and planting a fourteen-foot spruce pole in a location they thought could be seen in Fairbanks, 150 miles distant. They had topped the 19,470-foot north peak not realizing, or not caring, that it was 850 feet lower than the south peak. Alaskans were enthused that a group of hardened Alaska miners found success where East Coast cheechakos had failed. Still, the highest summit in North America had yet to be conquered.On February 1, 1912, with spring still far off, Browne and Parker set out from the port town of Seward for the great mountain, at first hitching rides on dogsleds to the settlement of Knik near present-day Anchorage. With neither road nor rail links yet established, it was the only mode of overland travel that would get them to the interior in winter. At Knik they met up with Arthur Aten and Merl LaVoy, veterans of an unsuccessful 1910 expedition mounted by Browne. The two men arrived two months earlier to begin caching food and supplies along the trail. They kept to the Iditarod Trail mail route at first but not long after leaving Knik set out across the trackless wilderness ascending the Susitna River. Highways and a railroad now span much of the 500-mile route they and their dogs would follow.The four-month odyssey took the adventurers north from tide-water, across the Cook Inlet lowlands, and through the Alaska Range, a tremendous feat in and of itself. Once on the north side of the range, they established base camp in the willows at the head of Cache Creek. While Aten tended the lower camp, Browne, Parker, and LaVoy began their ascent, following the route the Sourdough miners had established in 1910, accessing the upper mountain via the Muldrow Glacier and climbing what would later be named Karstens Ridge. On June 29, after three weeks of arduous climbing, Browne, LaVoy, and Parker left their camp at 16,600 feet on the Harper Glacier, intent on reaching the summit. A blizzard blew up as they methodically cut steps into the icy slope above them. Cresting a rise, the full force of the gale struck Browne and he realized that even though the summit was enticingly close, to continue would be suicide. As I brushed the frost from my glasses and squinted upward through the stinging snow I saw a sight that will haunt me to my dying day. The slope above me was no longer steep! That was all I could see. What it meant I will never know for certain—all I can say is that we were close to the top! Browne's party most likely reached Farthing Horn at 20,125 feet, a few hundred yards away, and just 200 feet lower than the summit. There, they tried to wait out the weather but quickly realized their extremities were freezing and began a harrowing return to camp. They spent June 30 resting and set out the following day, only to be thwarted again by dense, wind-driven snow.Exhausted and heartbroken, the party descended to base camp two weeks later than planned, where they reunited with a relieved Aten and turned for home. On July 6 a massive earthquake jolted interior Alaska, bringing down massive avalanches and rock falls on Denali and the surrounding peaks.Had they remained to make another summit attempt rather than turning back when they did, Browne and his companions almost certainly would have died there.The race for the top ended in 1913 when Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, Harry Karstens, Robert Tatum, and Walter Harper set out from Fairbanks by dogsled, headed for the Kantishna mining district and on to McGonagall Pass, the gateway to the Muldrow Glacier. Though Stuck organized the expedition, Karstens, a veteran of the Klondike Gold Rush, led the climb. The expedition lasted three months and again followed in the footsteps of the Sourdoughs even though the earthquake had shattered Karstens Ridge, leaving it a jumble of massive ice blocks.Where deception, confusion, and poor weather had stymied earlier attempts, the Karstens/Stuck Expedition succeeded with hard work and no small amount of good luck. Harper, an Athabaskan Indian, was the first to set foot on the summit.On June 7, 1913, Karstens, who later would become the first superintendent of Mount McKinley National Park, noted the event with pride, compassion, and poor grammar: Cold Clear. "Hurrah" The south summit of Mt. McKinley has been conquered. Everyone out of condition on last night no one slept we tried from 7 to 10 but not

go so we all sat arround primus stove with quilts on our backs waiting for 4 Oclock. My stumach was bad and I had one of the most severe Headaches if it where not final climb I should have stayed in camp but being the final climb such a promising day I managed to pull through I put Walter in lead an kept him there all day with never a change. I took 2nd place on rope so I could direct Walter and he worked all day without a murmur. During the ascent, Walter Harper had spotted the spruce pole planted on the north peak by the Sourdoughs. Once he pointed it out, Tatum and Karstens confirmed it with field glasses, saying “it was plain and prominent and unmistakable.” A monument to the power of hot chocolate, doughnuts, and perhaps barroom bets.Even during the long days of the boreal summer, when the sun barely sets and midnight is more like dusk, the summit is known as one of the coldest places on the planet with the average temperature remaining below zero. During the dark days of January the average temperature is closer to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit.The mountain’s subarctic latitude and great elevation combine to produce its especially harsh conditions. Earth’s atmosphere tapers at the North and South Poles and as a result, the troposphere— the life-supporting lowest layer—is shallower at extreme northern and southern latitudes. At the equator it is 10 miles thick, at the North Pole, about 5. A mere 1,800 miles from the North Pole, Denali rises 4 miles high and is closer to the top of the troposphere than many higher peaks at lower latitudes, like Mount Everest.Proximity to the top of the troposphere means two things. First, there is less oxygen near the summit of Denali than there would be at a mountain of identical elevation at the equator, and 42 percent less than at sea level. At the summit it takes two gasps to bring in the amount of oxygen that one breath delivers on the beach in Hawaii. Second, the thinner troposphere means the jet stream, wind that constantly moves through the upper troposphere near the boundary with the stratosphere, is closer than anywhere on the planet. Atmospheric conditions can drive the jet stream lower, commonly bringing winds of 100 miles per hour or more to bear on Denali’s heights.And when those high-speed air currents encounter the peak’s morphology (the shape of the mountaintop), their velocity can increase dramatically. At Denali Pass, between the north and south summits, a stream of air moving perpendicular to the peaks creates a relative vacuum and pulls wind through the pass at speeds much greater than that of the prevailing wind. When the wind blows through Denali Pass, it is compressed and accelerated like water through the nozzle of a fire hose.On Denali, where 100-mile-per-hour winds are common, meteorologists agree that downslope winds three times that velocity are possible, peeling away snow, ice, loose rock, and any climber unfortunate enough to be in their path. The phenomenon takes place when fast-moving air piles up against a peak or ridge, boils over the top, and plummets down the lee side. Denali, with its particular geography, is the perfect crucible for such extreme wind events. Mountaineers have never reported such velocities, but then again, surviving such conditions would be unlikely.The fastest wind speed ever recorded on land by a measuring device was a gust of 231 miles per hour on Mount Washington in Maine on April 12, 1934. A comparison can be made between both the 1967 storm and the storm that produced that record-setting gust. Both involved strengthening high- and low-pressure systems that created an abnormally powerful pressure gradient between them that was also precisely over a large mountain—Denali in one case and Mount Washington in the other.While the rest of the Alaska Range bathes in sunlight, Denali often is shrouded in mist or capped by saucer-shaped lenticular clouds. Because of its height, bulk, and permanently icy mantle, it often creates its own weather. The Alaska Range acts like a mountainous bulwark, separating the moist coastal air coming from Cook Inlet to the south from the drier conditions to the north. The great wall arcs across the lower third of the state of Alaska, from Canada to the Alaska Peninsula, with Denali at its apex acting like a sentry to the comings and goings of snow and wind and rain. When the cool highs and moist lows breach the wall and clash over the range, storms can arise with little warning. Moisture, condensing when pushed into the air surrounding the frigid peak, can transform visibility from crystal-clear to something like being on the inside of a Ping-Pong ball in a matter of minutes. Avalanches are frequent, as year-round snowfalls are released by changing temperatures; crevasses are strewn everywhere, hidden beneath thin layers of snow and ice.The idea that such a place can be conquered may seem foolish.---As the decades passed following the first ascent of Denali, climbing waxed and waned as the Depression, two world wars, and finally peace and postwar prosperity brought mountain climbing into the mainstream. In 1954, my father joined the National Park Service as the first historian at the Sitka National Historic Park. The parameters of the job were unclear, so he defined it himself. The federal government was actively suppressing the religion, language, and customs of the Tlingit people who had lived in the region for thousands of years. When he arrived in Sitka, my father realized that young Tlingit people were not learning about their own culture and an entire generation of tradition bearers were dying—and with them the region’s indigenous culture and language. Carrying a suitcase-size reel-to-reel tape recorder, he visited villages throughout Southeast Alaska, interviewing elders and recording their songs, stories, and traditions.My father worked out an agreement that put many Tlingit artifacts on permanent loan from Tlingit clans and families to the Sitka National Historical Park with the understanding that they would remain available to the owners when needed for ceremonial or other purposes. The agreement remains in place today and those totem poles, blankets, robes, hats, house fronts, and other cultural items are still held in trust at the Sitka National Historical Park’s visitor center. To honor his work, Tlingit elder Alex Andrew adopted my father, made him a member of the Kiks.adi clan, and they named him Shakshanee Ish. He later learned that a man named Shakshanee Ish had lived in Sitka and died in the early part of the century. Reincarnation is part of the Tlingit belief system and many of the elders in Sitka had known the first Shakshanee Ish. They told my father, “You’re just like

him.”Perhaps due to his demonstrated success in working with Tlingit people, the National Park Service drafted my father for a management training program in Washington, DC. With the birth of my sister, Gerianne, in 1960 and me two years later, he began to think about his career. Gone were the days of roaming the islands of the Alexander Archipelago in the Park Service boat to interview ancient men and women who spoke of an earlier time in Tlingit, the only language they’d ever known. In late 1964 our family traveled to Washington, DC, where my father went to work at the Department of the Interior, ultimately working in the office of National Park Service director George Hartzog.My parents had met and started our family in Sitka, a small island town. Though my father grew up in Chicago, and my mother in Connecticut, Alaska had changed them. The heat, the traffic, the social pecking order, and the proximity to so many other people in Washington, DC, was oppressive after life among the giant spruce trees and dignified Tlingit elders. Early in their tenure back East they agreed that if they could get back to Alaska, they’d never leave. When the Mount McKinley superintendent’s job was offered, my father called my mother to tell her the news and by the time he got home, she had already listed our house with a Realtor.When my family and I arrived at Mount McKinley National Park in April of 1967, barely fifty years had passed since Walter Harper first stood on the summit. In that half century, 420 mountaineers had attempted to scale the mountain, 213 had succeeded, and 4 had died trying. Allen Carpe and Theodore Koven fell into Muldrow Glacier crevasses in 1932. Park ranger Elton Thayer tumbled to his death while descending Karstens Ridge in 1954, and just prior to our arrival, in February of 1967, Jacques Batkin had died in a crevasse on the Kahiltna Glacier.Denali was still a remote and exotic climbing destination, known to be a challenging and unpredictable mountain, but not particularly deadly.That was about to change. * “Eskimo” is commonly used in Alaska to refer to all Inuit and Yupik people of the world. It is considered derogatory in many other places because it was given by non-Inuit people and was said to mean “eater of raw meat.” Linguists now believe that “Eskimo” is derived from an Ojibwa word meaning “to net snowshoes.”