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The Seventymile Kid: The Lost Legacy of Harry Karstens and the First Ascent of Mount McKinley

By Tom Walker

The Seventymile Kid: The Lost Legacy of Harry Karstens and the First Ascent of Mount McKinley. Tom Walker. Mountaineers Books, 2013. 304 pages. Paperback. \$19.95.

Tom Walker's *The Seventymile Kid* is an antidote to one of the least-read books from the highest peak on North America: Archdeacon Hudson Stuck's *The Ascent of Denali*. "The preacher," as his partner Harry Karstens referred to him, wrote in stilted and lofty language, deterring all but the most determined Denali aficionados or historians. Until Walker's skillfully researched book, a dearth of information had elevated the Archdeacon as visionary leader. This quirk of history passed over the pivotal role played by the laconic Harry Karstens in the first ascent of Denali.

Walker's "just the facts" biography of the forgotten Harry Karstens introduces his early mining and mushing days, including deeds on the Seventymile River in eastern Alaska, until the narrative moves, with Karstens, to his work around "the Great Ice Mountain." Through Walker's substantive mining of forgotten letters and diaries, the climbs preceding the 1913 first ascent are put in a unique Alaskan light.

At times, the author uses vernacular such as climbers "conquering a ridge." Or he mistakenly describes the Harper Icefall as "unclimbable except by technical experts," not knowing that its frequent and thunderous collapses would turn the best technicians to jelly.

Still, Walker gets it mostly right and uncovers a lot of forgotten gold. Nuances of the early climbs—detailing the sponsors and personalities—are newly revealed, despite no shortage of books on the pioneers. We learn that the lordly Stuck proved a burden to his three partners, who were forced to carry his weight, cook for him, and put up with his sing-alongs. While Stuck confessed to his diary about having teammates "who will save me all they can," Karstens alternately blew up at the English preacher or told him "to quit his whining.... We were out roughing it not at a first class hotel. He promised to do better but forgot about it the next day."

To set the record straight, "the Archdeacon of the Yukon" (his self-anointed honorific) was an ambitious, prickly, yet generous soul. As recorded in Walker's book (after Harry Karstens is thoroughly introduced), Stuck inoculated, educated, and defended the natives of Alaska and the Yukon. Unlike most missionaries of the day, Stuck foresaw the dangers of assimilation and fought to preserve indigenous customs and language. He also became an outspoken champion for restoring the mountain's original name, Denali.

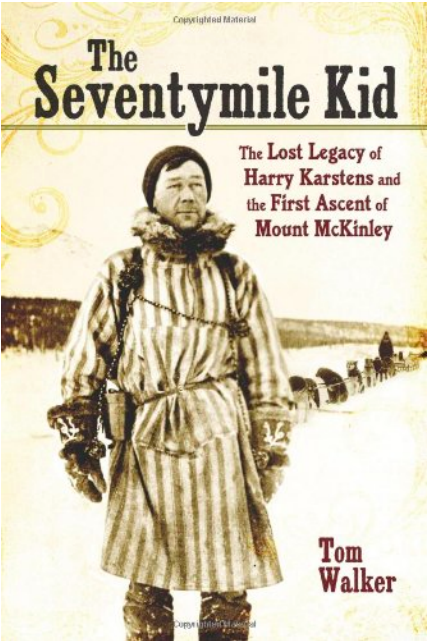
When he first began visiting remote Alaskan villages, being guided on dogsled and riverboat trips, the mountain proved an irresistible beacon to the Archdeacon. While Stuck had once been guided up Mt. Rainier, and was a hardy, well-educated soul, he didn't have the resources or the stamina to climb the mountain on his own. So Stuck shrewdly enlisted the legendary Seventymile Kid as both leader and guide.

Walker definitively shows that Denali would not have been climbed in 1913 without Karstens. Nor

would the first-ascent team have succeeded without essential advice from previous attempts. With no climbing experience, the Seventymile Kid kept everyone alive, found the route, avoided (or, strangely enough, built bridges over) crevasses, and chopped miles of steps. Rather than castigating the petulant Stuck, Tom Walker carefully analyzes the seldom-seen diaries and letters, then brings the neglected Harry Karstens to life, showing a pioneer ascent rent by personality conflicts.

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Images



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