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Chasing Denali: The Sourdoughs, Cheechakos, and Frauds Behind the Most Unbelievable Feat in Mountaineering

By Jonathan Waterman

CHASING DENALI: THE SOURDOUGHS, CHEECHAKOS, AND FRAUDS BEHIND THE MOST UNBELIEVABLE FEAT IN MOUNTAINEERING Jonathan Waterman. Lyons Press, 2018. Hardcover, 184 pages, \$24.95

In the early 1900s, the town of Fairbanks still bore many of the characteristics of the fading Wild West era. A massive gold strike turned a ramshackle trading post into a boomtown. Prospecting for gold in the rugged Alaskan wilderness required a unique blend of mental fortitude and physical toughness. Extreme cold, barren spaces, and solitude tested the capacities of even the most hardened miner. These “Sourdoughs,” as they came to be known, took great pride in their ability to survive and thrive up in the frozen north. In one of North America’s most famous mountaineering tales, a group of these men is said to have climbed Denali’s 19,470-foot north peak in 1910.

Many Alaskans have long questioned whether a group of upper-middle-aged Fairbanks miners, some nearly clinically obese, could really have raced up the mountain. Coupled with the fact that none of them had any climbing experience, they were reported to have lugged a 14-foot spruce pole to the summit. Spurred by a bar bet, they had ventured to disprove the highly questionable claims of Dr. Frederick Cook, but their own claims soon came under fire.

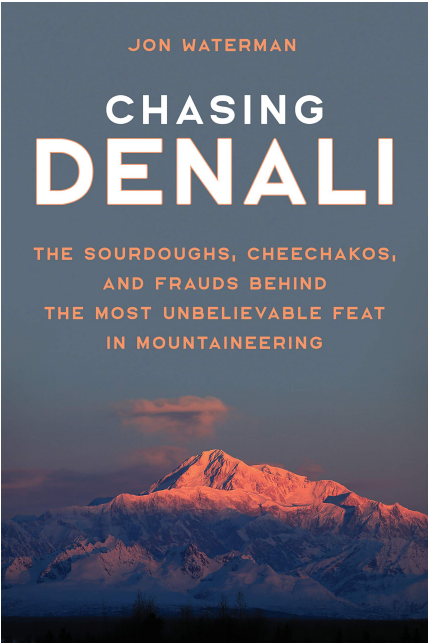
Jon Waterman knows Denali as well as anyone. It has been an intimate part of his life for the better part of four decades. Not only was he an early climbing ranger on the mountain, he was a member of the team that made the peak’s second winter ascent, via the difficult Cassin Ridge. Denali has been Waterman’s muse for many books, including *High Alaska* and the must-read for any Alaska climbing aspirant, *In the Shadow of Denali*.

In *Chasing Denali*, Waterman goes into great detail on the history of Alaska around Fairbanks as well as attempts on Denali, then known as Mt. McKinley. Through his own experiences on the peak, he weaves concise analysis and memories from countless trips. I was on the mountain in 2016 when Waterman returned and summited on his 60th birthday. Despite his prior experiences and intimate knowledge of the route, Waterman readily admits that he struggled at certain points throughout his three-week climb. How then could four miners without any mountaineering experience, using rudimentary equipment, dash up the final 11,000 feet (and back) in 18 hours?

Waterman does a fine job of presenting facts and a careful analysis without forcing his opinion upon the reader. “You could never prove that they didn’t do it, you could only prove that they did,” he told me while we acclimatized together at 14,000 feet. As I finished the last page of *Chasing Denali*, I wished for two things: to know once and for all if aging miners actually got anywhere near the summit and that I, an experienced and trained alpinist, could climb as fast as they supposedly did on a diet of donuts and coffee.

– Clint Helander

Images



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