

ORAL HISTORY 2017-19

Mary Ehrlander, Johanna Harper, Dana Wright, Sam Alexander, and Bishop Mark Lattime discuss the life of Walter Harper on October 25, 2017 in Fairbanks, Alaska

Brandon Boylan welcomes everyone to the event celebrating the life and adventures of Walter Harper and to recognize the new book about Harper written by Mary Ehrlander, *Walter Harper, Alaska Native Son*. He said he works with Mary at the university and he has the honor of introducing Mary Ehrlander. She is the director of Arctic and Northern Studies and professor of history at UAF. In addition to Walter Harper's life her research includes historical, political, and social issues in Alaska including alcoholism, sexual violence, missionary influences and whale politics. She is co lead on Model Arctic Council. A simulation design which teaches students about Arctic politics and in 2016 she co-organized the first fully international Model Arctic Council at UAF. She teaches courses in Arctic and Northern Studies and in the department of history. Her students praise her classes, kindness and words of wisdom. She has won the Usibelli Distinguished Teaching Award. He talked about her degrees and family.

Mary Ehrlander thanked Brandon for the introduction and commented about the audience. She introduced the other four panelists: Johanna Harper, Dana Wright, Sam Alexander, and Bishop Mark Lattime. She wanted to recognize a few people in the audience: Mike and Jane Harper, Wally Carlo, Poldine Carlo, Diana Campbell, Rev. Helen Peters, Rev. Scott Fisher, and Shirley Gordon. She talked about one of her students, Chris Cannon, who has been helpful. She acknowledged her husband and siblings. She recognized Dean Todd Sherman and Terrence Cole.

Ehrlander said Walter Harper was the eighth child of Arthur and Jenny Harper. They were married in 1874 when she was fourteen and he was 39. Arthur was a legendary figure in Alaska and in Yukon history because he was the first to recognize the gold potential of Alaska and the Yukon. After Arthur and Jenny were married they moved about for the next twenty years. They were living at trading posts in various places as gold was discovered in different places in Alaska's Interior and up into the Yukon. They had eight children. Walter was the youngest. When Walter was about two years old his parents divorced. Jenny returned to Tanana and Walter was raised in the Athabaskan traditions. He had a natural talent for subsistence skills. When he was sixteen he met Hudson Stuck at fish camp. He was taken to Nenana for school. After being at the school for a short time he showed a great aptitude for learning. He impressed the teachers and students with his subsistence skills. The following spring Hudson Stuck saw so much progress he hired Walter to be his assistant, trail guide and river boat pilot. He accompanied Hudson Stuck on his travels throughout Alaska's Interior. This began an eight year relationship that developed into a father son relationship. Their relationship developed each individually. In the end Walter's most distinct traits were his resourcefulness, his social skills and charisma that allowed him to navigate in both cultures, and his sterling character. Hudson said the basis of Walter's character lay in an intense self-respect. Harper was not religious in a formal and pretentious way, he lived his faith. All of his traits won Walter Harper admirers from all walks of life. She showed photographs of Walter. He was able to serve as a bridge between the two cultures.

After three years on the trail, Hudson Stuck's long-term dream of climbing Denali came to fruition. Stuck formed a team to climb the mountain which had not been summited yet. She showed a photo of the team including Harry Karstens, Walter Harper, Johnny Fredson, Esaias George (both Johnny and Esaias

were Athabascan students at St. Mark's Mission), and Robert Tatum. Walter played an essential role in the success of that expedition. Walter was first to the summit. After the ascent Walter and Hudson Stuck traveled to Massachusetts and Walter was enrolled in the Mount Herman School for Boys. It was a Christian-based school. It was known for educating Native students for leadership in their communities. She showed a photograph of Walter at Mount Herman. Walter was homesick for Interior Alaska. After three years he returned to Alaska where he once again thrived on the winter trail and summer circuit. Frances Wells was a nurse from Philadelphia who arrived at the mission. She fell in love with Walter Harper. Hudson Stuck wanted Walter to go to medical school and return to Alaska to serve his people. This was Walter's dream by then. Ehrlander described Stuck's and Walter's final winter trip – a winter circuit of Alaska's Arctic coast. They returned to Fort Yukon in the spring. Walter told Stuck his plans to marry and join the Army Air Corps. Walter and Frances were married on September 4, 1918. They went on a three week hunting trip / honeymoon to supply the mission at Fort Yukon with meat for the winter. They then boarded the steamer Alaska to Whitehorse and then a train to Skagway and then boarded the Princess Sophia. Two days later the ship foundered and all aboard died. Normally biographies are not written about people who lived twenty-five years, but Ehrlander found a lot of value in Walter's life story. She said Walter's life story sheds light on an era when western immigrants and culture inundated Alaska Native peoples and cultures. The effects of new belief systems, products, habits and diseases ranged from liberating to crushing. The story also illustrates Episcopal mission efforts to protect Native peoples from harm even as they too introduced change. Walter's story illustrates the capacity for human interaction to maximize the individual's potential, and he exemplifies resilience in a young man's physical, mental and moral excellence reflective of acculturation in both Athabascan and western lifeways. Ehrlander also added that she is honored to be able to tell Walter's story. She would like to think that she captured his story fairly accurately. Ehrlander turned the program over to Johanna Harper.

Johanna Harper said Walter Harper was her great uncle. She talked about the other relatives of Harper at the program. She thanked Mary Ehrlander for writing the book about Walter. Johanna said as you read the book you can't help but wonder what kind of influence Walter would have had if he had lived. Ehrlander talked about Walter being the youngest of the Harper children and his father had sent the older children out to boarding school even though their mother objected. Since Walter was a few years old when his parents divorced he did not have that chance to get that education. She and Ehrlander have discussed these turning points in his life working out to his advantage; even though he didn't have that education he was learning something more valuable – the traditional Athabaskan lifestyle. Walter was sixteen when he met Hudson Stuck. At that point Walter did not speak English and he couldn't read or write. Hudson Stuck saw potential and convinced Harper's mother to let him attend school in Nenana. That brings out one of Walter's personality traits – a positive attitude. He didn't let his late start in education hold him back. He earned the respect of his fellow students because of his subsistence skills. He had the marks of a potentially great leader. St. Mark's Mission was only one of many missions and Hudson Stuck was in charge of a huge area. Alaska was facing challenges at that time. There were diseases and social ills such as alcoholism. Stuck believed that only the church could save Alaska's Native people by shaping the Native leaders of tomorrow. The missions taught their Native students the habit of hard work and values such as honesty, respect, and religious service. Johanna wonders what would have happened to Walter if he hadn't attended St. Mark's Mission. His brother at that time was a wood chopper for the steamers along the Yukon River. Another thing that Walter did in his travels with Hudson Stuck was meet a wide variety of people and leaders. All the adventures would have added to

his ability to lead people. While traveling on the river Hudson Stuck learned about a small pox outbreak. He contacted the church and the church saw to it that vaccines were provided to the missions. With a doctor on board they traveled the rivers and provided immunizations to every town and village. Walter got to witness how effective it was when people pulled together to accomplish a single goal. Mount Herman was also focused on making future leaders as well. Others from Alaska also attended Mount Herman. Johnny Fredson attended and later became a great leader. Moses Cruikshank also attended Mount Herman. Johanna said Cruikshank had a very commanding presence.

When Walter and Hudson Stuck traveled on the Arctic circuit they stopped in Barrow and visited with Charlie Brower who was interested in hearing about the Great War. This spurred Walter on and he wanted to serve as well. This is what led Walter and bride to be on the Princess Sophia. She said the greatest Alaska maritime disaster of the Princess Sophia happened 99 years ago today. With all the leadership traits Walter had she couldn't help and wonder what his potential leadership would have been. She turned the microphone over to Walter's great grandnephew, her son, Dana Wright.

Dana Wright said Walter Harper was his great granduncle. He is very proud to be related to him. He thought one of Walter's notable accomplishment was being the first man to be able to summit Denali in 1913. The successful ascent was widely credited to Hudson Stuck and to his advantage. Walter was a work horse and was an agreeable member of the expedition. Wright said he knows from experience it is good to be able to play nice with your teammates. You can't make it up alone and you have to play your part. Walter did an excellent job of that. Wright said he was lucky enough to be at the right place and healthy when 2013 rolled around. He represented Walter Harper in the Denali 2013 Expedition. Descendants of the original climbing team all got together and retraced the same route about the same time as the original ascent. They didn't start in March by dogsled. They started at Wonder Lake. They got off the bus and took off into the wilderness. It was a twenty-seven-day trip. It was twenty days up and five days back down. They wanted to pay tribute to the original climbing team. They wanted to give credit to Walter Harper who was virtually unknown as the first man to summit. The other thing they were pushing for was a name change from Mt. McKinley back to Denali. They were trying to bring notice to the change. A few years ago the name was changed back to Denali. The original trip was full of disasters and unforeseen circumstances. There were avalanches and a tent fire. He showed a photo of their flag. They had a replica of the original ice axe. He carried this ice axe all the way to the top. He had a photo of day one of their climb with the crew. He listed the members of the climb: Dustin English, Hunter Dilbert, Elle Gadding, Sam Tatum, Sam Alexander, Dana Wright, Ken Karstens, Ray [Schuenemann], and Dan Hopkins. There were descendants or family members from all the original climbers. They were dropped off right in front of the McKinley River. They all carried between eighty and ninety pounds on their backs. They had to carry their sleds they used later. Their first night it was cloudy and one of their guides said it was a good thing they couldn't see how far they were going to walk. He talked about the route they took up to Muldrow Glacier. He talked about the dangers of walking over the glacier. The weather was nice for a Denali trip. They climbed up the Harper Glacier and Karstens Ridge, both named for members of the pioneer expedition. He talked about summit day. There were a few members who had medical problems and couldn't summit. He described the hike up the mountain on the last day. It is the highest mountain in America and the largest gain climb in the world. He could just think about food on the way up. On the way back down as the air changes you gain strength. They got down a lot faster than they climbed up. It is more dangerous going down, though. On the way down it was raining and they could hear rockslides. The guides had a hard time getting them going. There were

a lot of forest fires at this time. They could see cracks in the glacier. They had to cross the McKinley River again on the way out. It was a long trip and he felt like he was there to represent Walter. He was thankful for the opportunity. It has been a positive impact on his life. He handed off to Sam Alexander.

Sam Alexander said he wanted to note that if it wasn't for Dana he wouldn't have made it to the top. He said it was an incredible climb and experience. The story for the 2013 climb began much earlier. He grew up in Fort Yukon where Hudson Stuck is buried. He had heard stories about Hudson Stuck when he was growing up. There were many stories about the impact this one man had. His legacy is still alive today. He doesn't think the story of Walter Harper has been told as well as in Ehrlander's book. He wonders who he would have been if the accident not occurred. He thinks it is wonderful that they can now share the life of Walter Harper. He wonders how many people present knew about Walter Harper before tonight. He said he likes to see the younger generation learning about Walter. Like Walter Harper he left Alaska to go Outside for school and it was a struggle. They had very few role models. John Fredson was one of them. Fredson graduated from college and then it was decades before another Gwich'in person graduated from college. He said Walter Harper is another person to look at as a role model. He represented the future for Alaska. He could bridge the divide. At the university he teaches a leadership class. He would like to point out that you can't have a person like Walter Harper without having a person like Hudson Stuck. The mentorship was critical. He is amazed by the progressive nature that Stuck had towards education. He recognized the value of a Native education. He didn't push the western ways on the people he worked with. Alexander said Native education is just being recognized. Alaska Native languages have just recently been recognized as official languages in the state. He is a person who grew up in two worlds. He said it is a testament that Walter Harper was at the peak in both worlds.

Bishop Mark Lattime said one of his favorite quotations from Hudson Stuck spoke about the ruthless arrogance of people who come into a land and have total disregard for names and places where people have been living all their lives. He used this referring to the renaming of Denali to Mt. McKinley. It was one of the things that motivated him to summit that mountain. It was his dream that Walter reached the top first. This afternoon there was a memorial ceremony for the twentieth year in a row at the graveside in Juneau for Walter and Frances. He said Walter Harper's story reveals many stories of strength and resilience in Alaska particularly amongst the Native people. He mentions Annie Farthing. He said there are many women that were part of the story of Walter Harper and Hudson Stuck. It was mentioned that if there was one person in the world that Hudson Stuck was afraid of it was Annie Farthing. There were many people who were dedicated to Native tradition and Native life in Hudson Stuck's books. Lattime said after having a 16 and 23 year old he is amazed that Walter Harper didn't leave Stuck out on one of the trails. He thanked Ehrlander for her information in the book about the Episcopal Church. There was an effort to maintain culture and language. They are continuing this by having their prayer books translated into western Gwich'in. He had the joy of preparing for the reenactment climb with the Denali group up until four or five weeks before the climb. Sam Tatum joined the group and Lattime did not go. He said it is wonderful to think about the influence of Walter Harper.

Ehrlander thanked the panel. She said one of the things they hoped to do tonight is to add information to the Harper family tree. She wanted people who have a connection to the family or people in the Harper family to leave their information. She said she would open up the program for questions.

Diana Campbell, the granddaughter of Johnny Fredson, talked about walking in two worlds and how difficult it must have been for Walter Harper. She talked about the Pelican which had been used by Hudson Stuck which was later used for tourism.

Question from the audience.

Someone from the audience commented about the Harper Building at the university and the Harper Conference room named after Walter Harper. Ehrlander said the building is named for his niece who was the first Alaska Native to graduate from the university.

Wally Carlo commented about the book. He said he does a lot of talking to classes. He now uses the book as motivation. He said his family came to Fairbanks in 1957. He later returned to his home. He talked about a Tanana song about Denali.

Athabascan Elder Poldine Carlo said she was involved in a lot of different things after coming to Fairbanks. She has been involved with the Fairbanks Native Association. She went out to Anchorage to meet the president at Elmendorf. She was able to speak with the president. She sings the Denali song.

Question from the audience how Walter got interested in the Army Air Corps. Ehrlander said when the call came out for men to join the service and serve the country Native Americans were not included in that call. That hurt a lot of Native Americans including Walter Harper. When they were in Barrow they heard that Charlie Brower's sons were serving in the war. Walter realized that something must have changed, because Brower's sons were half Inupiat. He wasn't intending to go into the Army Air Corps to be a pilot he wanted to be a mechanic. It happened that on the day Walter and Frances left Fort Yukon they heard that the Kaiser was willing to sign an armistice so they knew the war was ending. Walter and Francis left that day knowing he would not be going off to war and he could attend medical school.

Question from the audience about the person at the camp waiting for the 1913 climbing team to return. Someone from the audience said there is a debate about his age. He was still a teenage boy. Everyone kept diaries. Johnny Fredson's diary was lost in the 1967 flood. He could see part of the way they were coming down. He hunted and had the dogs with him.

Someone from the audience said there was a family from Tanana who followed the 1913 group part way up the mountain.

The Reverend Helen Peters said she will tell a story about changing the name of the mountain and mentioned Mary Pick was an elder from Canada. She saw three well-dressed Indians coming down to her and singing a song. She talked about growing up. She said there were many fine people before her. She said she is proud to be part of the program s thank you.

Dana Harper said two or three years ago he and his girlfriend decided to go to Juneau. He was told by his mother that Walter Harper was buried there. He brought his diary with him. On the anniversary of the 1913 summit day he went to Harper's grave and read to him his passage from his own summit day diary and left pressed flowers from McGonagall Pass. It brought him full circle.

Ehrlander thanked people for coming to the event.