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DENALI FLYERS AND MOUNTAINEERING

5 minute introductory slide show script

Sequence

1-5

In the early years it took a full-scale expedition to get to Mount McKinley - called Denali, "The High One," by Athabaskan Indians. Only then, after hundreds of miles and months of hard trekking, could the climb begin.

In time, the railroad and the National Park road gave easy approach to Denali's north flank and the classic climbing route via Muldrow Glacier. But it was still a long hike before the 17,000-foot climb began.

7-8

Though there had been a few glacier landings earlier, not until 1954 did the airplane change the pattern of mountaineering on Mount McKinley. That year pilot Don Sheldon, based 50 miles southeast at Talkeetna, took the first commercial party to the 7,000-foot level of Kahiltna Glacier. From there climbers could strike for the summit via the South Buttress route, pioneered a few years before by explorer/cartographer Brad Washburn.

6

Just that quickly, except for die-hard trekkers, the approach march across rugged terrain became a thing of the past.

Don Sheldon's glacier-landing breakthrough coincided with the start of the jet age. Talkeetna, until then a fairly remote mining-supply and railroad town, would soon witness strange events: Jet-set mountaineers, flying in from Europe and the Orient, from South America and Australia, would strip off their suits and ties, jump into bunny boots and climbing gear, hop into a Cessna 185, and fly off to the mountain. The day before--even the same day--they might have waved good-bye in Munich or Tokyo.

It was a revolution. Other pilots, some of them already flying out of Talkeetna with mining supplies, mail, or hunting parties, joined the glacier-pilot ranks. The convenience of air access high onto the mountain attracted ever more climbers, some of them inexperienced in mountaineering. This in turn attracted climbing guides; the guides, in time, became outfitters. You could come to Talkeetna clad in sweats and running shoes, or that out-of-place business suit, and in an hour or two be equipped and provisioned for a 3-week guided climb to Denali's 20,300-foot summit.

From this point on (pics 9-30) simply place the modern climbing sequence to end of script

-4-96

Bill Brown did not give us a release specifically for this tape. However, we are assuming that since this is his project, he would want it to be used. -RCR

So mountaineering on McKinley became the goal of lots of people who would never have thought of it before the glacier landings began. Long distance jet travel, air-taxi access to a glacier airstrip one-third of the way up the mountain, combined with guide/outfitting services drove the system. For that's what McKinley mountaineering had become--a system. The time elapsed between the first party that stood on the summit in 1913 and the next one in 1932 was 19 years. Then it was another 10 years before the third success. Within a few years after Sheldon's pioneering commercial venture, scores and then hundreds of people were climbing the mountain every year. In recent years an average of about a thousand people have attempted the climb each season.

It is this modern era of fly-in mountaineering that this oral history describes. Who are the pilots who fly their small craft into this towering terrain to land uphill on rivers of ice? How do they do it and why do they do it? Who are the people they take to the mountain--experienced, inexperienced? awed by the mountain or arrogant? How do the guides pace their climbs and ^{make} build climbing teams from their diverse clientele? How has Talkeetna fared under the impact of all this attention? What is the role of the National Park Service, with its climbing rangers and its inescapable responsibilities for both the integrity of the mountain and the safety of park visitors? --for the climbers are, among other things, park visitors. What of those who get stranded in a storm or sick with altitude? What of the fatalities, the falls, the rescues--and the moral dilemmas they cause? And finally, what of the mountain itself, its weather, its changeability? Denali, so like an ancient god--a thing of beauty one moment, a malevolent killer the next--at least in human terms. Now hear the voices of people who have been there and have answered these questions for themselves.