

THE SOURDOUGH ENIGMA

BY JONATHAN WATERMAN

A hundred years ago, three Alaskan pioneers with no climbing experience made one of the greatest climbs of all time. Or did they?

In 1910, a trio of Alaskan miners unknowingly introduced the world to alpine-style climbing on high-altitude mountains. Called the Sourdoughs, these mountaineering neophytes, or so we are told, lugged a 25-pound, 14-foot flagpole up Denali. In winter. Using sheet-metal crampons, coal shovels and wood-chopping hatchets, the three men took on North America's highest peak. In lieu of 19th-century alpenstocks, they made six-foot-long, double-picked 18th-century alpine poles to help them balance up knife-edges or gullies.

These Sourdoughs, likely the earliest sponsored alpinists in North America, had an astonishing touch for fund-raising. Their leader, Tom Lloyd, talked three supporters into donating \$1,500 (worth \$36,000 in 2017). In the town of Fairbanks, where these itinerant miners organized their expedition, bets for and against them summing ran from two cents to \$5,000.

This is a tale of unassuming pioneers who, while trying to prove an earlier Denali ascensionist a fraud, raised a new set of enduring questions. Years of twists and turns would follow as the tale of the plucky Sourdoughs alternately gained and lost and gained credence. In modern times—as every façade and gully of the mountain has been explored—more specific questions have arisen as to their superhuman speed on what remains a difficult climb over a century later. And while appropriately studying the feat in the context of its time, we are aided by modern technology that may finally shed new light on the veracity of their ascent.

"CHEECHAKO"

In early December 1909, the Sourdoughs were mostly driven by angry talk at the Washington Saloon in Fairbanks. As proud northerners, they



THIS IS THE ONLY discernible photograph from the Sourdough expedition—the climbers had a camera, but no one could reliably operate it. This image, taken at 11,000 feet, is of Charley McGonagall (left) and the portly Thomas Lloyd. They are carrying alpine poles that they had custom made for the climb, using a design from the 1700s.

Alfred Brooks and Belmore Browne during previous Denali sorties in summer.

The group was two days out when a typical miner brawl sent three of the seven—William Lloyd (no relation to their leader), Robert Horne and Charles Davidson—back to Kantishna and Fairbanks (no injuries were reported, although Horne's knee had been acting up). Still in the team were Tom Lloyd (age 50), Charley McGonagall (40), Billy Taylor (33), and Anderson (42). Although shrinking the team allowed the remaining climbers to move faster, losing the talented Davidson (later Surveyor General of Alaska) meant that no one could work the team's aneroid altimeter and camera. Hereafter the Sourdoughs would bungle most every photograph and take wild guesses about how high they were on the unknown mountain.

The remaining four traversed onto the 32-mile-long, sinuous Muldrow Glacier—originating on the north side of Denali beneath the Harper Glacier Icefall—by a hidden pass discovered by McGonagall. Anderson reassured the jumpy Lloyd not to worry about the glacier creaking and shifting beneath their fur bedding atop quill mattresses.

The four spent much of latter February and March bridging open crevasses with hauled-in dead trees and shoveling snow over the makeshift bridges. Eventually, they would build a continuous trail up the Muldrow Glacier to the real climbing. Since they had only a half-dozen dogs, they mostly backpacked monster loads of food and gear progressively higher from three camps, placed seven miles apart. Choking on coal-oil fumes in their canvas and wood-poled tents, they switched to cooking with firewood on their cast-iron stove. When they ran low on wood and food, they walked dozens of miles back out to the forest for more fuel and bridge material, while shooting more caribou and moose, or catching more fish for the dogs.

The prospectors may have lacked climbing experience, but as McGonagall later told an interviewer, Norman Bright,

derided less capable outdoorspeople from south of their territory. Although none of these aspirant Denali climbers were born in Alaska, their years of suffering in the mosquito-hung and frost-shattered wilds—carrying fermented pouches of sourdough “starter” around their waists for baking bread and donuts—elevated them to the elite cultural status of “Sourdoughs.” These outspoken men of the trail had long been incensed by the claims of the mendacious Dr. Frederick Cook. This “Cheechako” (meaning someone who lived outside Alaska) had claimed the first ascent of Denali in 1906 during an improbable six-day, round-trip dash. Every red-blooded outdoorsman in the north wanted to prove Cook a fraud.

Several weeks later, at 1 p.m. on December 22, 1909, six avenging Sourdoughs mounted up, in a winter solstice departure offering them a scant three hours and 57 minutes of daylight. Cheered on by a crowd, they rode out of town on sleds driven by three horses, two dog teams and a mule, bound for their mining claims and cabins in Kantishna, 175

miles away and within 35 miles of Denali. Their secret weapon, a rangy fellow miner named Pete “The Swede” Anderson, had mushed out a couple of weeks earlier. For the next week—as the six ferried canvas tents and caribou-robe sleeping pads to Kantishna—temperatures hit 60 below zero. The new arrivals joined “The Swede” and drank whiskey, played cards, hunted and prepared game meat. Then they bided their time waiting for—as Alaskans call it—“the return of daylight.”

On February 11, 1910, in lengthening days, they started their final approach. Denali, the High One, rose 18,000 feet out of the tundra in front of them, the greatest base-to-summit relief on earth.

Trail conditions were ideal: 30 below zero temperatures had frozen their McKinley River crossing solid. The Sourdoughs were attempting the peak in winter in the belief that extreme cold would allow them to avoid the melting crevasse bridges and avalanches that had stymied the Cheechako “dandies” Dr. Cook (despite his claim),



THE SOURDOUGHS Thomas Lloyd, expedition leader, is seated. He claimed to have summited the North Peak (19,470 feet) and that the team had climbed to both of Denali's summits, including the taller South Peak (20,310 feet). His assertions would cast doubt on whether any of the Sourdoughs reached either summit. Left to right, standing, are: Charley McGonagall, Pete "The Swede" Anderson and Billy Taylor. McGonagall himself said that he had reached the top of the North Peak, but later said he stopped at about 18,500 feet, where the three allegedly planted a spruce flagpole. Anderson and Taylor may have reached the North Peak summit.

During the last week of March 1910, they chopped and shoveled a continuous 3,500-foot-high, 1.5-mile-long staircase up the unclimbed crux buttress (later named Karstens Ridge) of today's *Muldrow Glacier Route*. On April 1, they left at first light from their 11,000-foot camp—which they believed to be at least 15,000 feet high—below the ridge. They carried sacks of donuts and thermos flasks filled with hot chocolate. The donuts, according to McGonagall, were a perfect winter trail food because

sourdough kept them fluffy, and they didn't freeze in subzero cold like teeth-breaking biscuits. Several hours later, after they reached the top of Karstens Ridge, a storm forced them back.

When the weather cleared on April 3, Anderson, McGonagall and Taylor set out again. Lloyd, the overweight Welshman, stayed behind. The threesome didn't know it, but their previous day's foray up to what they claimed had been within a few hours of the summit gave them valuable high-altitude acclimatization.

Twenty-seven years later, when another mountaineer tried to get the affable Taylor to fill in the blanks about their speedy and controversial ascent, Taylor said they left at 3 a.m., but said "I don't know the exact time. 'We never paid no attention to that.'"

LIMITLESS ENDURANCE

Although controversy didn't begin until their conflicting accounts emerged after the climb, at least three of the four miners were known for their integrity and strength. Of Taylor, who was widely known as "Honest Bill," Lloyd would tell the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* editor, "[Taylor] is beyond question one of the finest men you ever met." He had left his Ontario home as a

teenager after the death of his parents to seek his fortunes in the Klondike. As Lloyd's wisely chosen mining-business partner, Taylor backpacked 150-pound loads up hills where other miners carried one-third the weight.

In the Lloyd interview, later sold by the *News-Miner* editor to the *The New York Times*, Lloyd referred to their mining employee Anderson as "a world's wonder" who could've climbed a mountain twice as high as Denali. "He is a tower of strength," Lloyd said. "His endurance seems limitless." Taylor, who unlike Lloyd eschewed overstatement, concurred about Anderson. "Hell of a good fellow on the trail," Taylor said to Bright in their interview years after the climb. "Him and I'd go along and never have no trouble at all."

A widely traveled Denali climber, Hudson Stuck, author of *The Ascent of Denali* (about his 1913 first ascent of the higher South Peak), wrote in his book that Anderson and Taylor were "two of the strongest men, physically, in all the North."

McGonagall, who also worked for Taylor and Lloyd back at their Kantishna mining claim, was the only U.S.A.-born member of the four, from Chicago. While in photos he looks diminutive standing alongside the hulking Anderson and Taylor, he carried a reputation, driving mail dogsleds through extended 50-below-zero snaps, surviving unscathed while his companions were severely frostbitten.

Legend has it that they jogged up their Karstens Ridge stairway in three hours. Anderson led the way, closely followed by Taylor. McGonagall brought up the rear but took his turn shouldering or using a hand line to drag the heavy 14-foot spruce pole.

"On the glacier below we packed it," he would later tell the Denali authority and cartographer Bradford Washburn. "But up on the ridge it was too long to carry and it threw you off balance."



THE SOURDOUGHS' ROUTE. According to their account, leaving camp at 11,000 feet on the glacier at first light on April 3, 1910, McGonagall, Taylor and Anderson climbed 8,400 vertical feet through unknown terrain. Unroped, unsupported, they broke trail, dragging and shouldering a 14-foot flagpole. At 18,500 feet they paused to erect the pole and a flag, with McGonagall later admitting to stopping there. Many tales and reports of the climb have the Sourdoughs planting the flag on the summit, but the climbers saw no need to drag the embrance any further than the couloir's final rock outcrops. From there, with McGonagall staying behind to rest, Taylor and Anderson pressed on, reaching the 19,470-foot North Peak summit. The three then descended to camp in a round-trip time of just 18 hours. The speed is impressive even by today's standards. Consider that in 1978 the highly experienced mountaineers Galen Rowell and Ned Gillette climbed from 10,000 feet on the well-traveled West Buttress to the South Summit, a gain of over 10,000 feet, and back in 24 hours. And their speed climb was in the summer. The Sourdoughs climbed Denali in winter conditions. If they succeeded, they completed one of the boldest and most advanced alpine climbs of all time, an almost incomprehensible achievement considering that they were all ignorant of all climbing techniques.

AN "AWFUL FAT" LEADER

Denali has twin summits: the lower yet steeper North Peak (19,470 feet) and two miles away the higher South Summit (20,310 feet). The summits are separated by the Harper Glacier and Denali Pass at 18,200 feet. The Sourdoughs' goal to climb what looked to be the highest summit, the North Peak, would allow Kantishna residents to see the pole festooned with their sponsors' 6-by-12-foot American flag. Later, informed that the South Summit was higher, Taylor shrugged the news off, telling Bright, "That's the toughest peak to climb—the North."

During their ascent, as they completed the steep ridge and walked up the Harper Glacier, McGonagall's nose began bleeding (from the dry air), and he lost feeling in his toes. Anderson had already frostbitten a toe, which was oozing with blood and pus, but he didn't complain, undoubtedly ashamed to in front of his mining employer and teammate. Nonplussed and competitive, the trio continued without ropes. They climbed from 16,000 feet up the steep 2,000-foot couloir

that would prove more dangerous—at least to future climbers—than crossing the Yukon at breakup. Somehow they sped up the couloir, which, unlike their stairway below, they had not prepared. Not knowing the accepted step-chopping techniques of the day, the Sourdoughs may have simply kicked and shoveled steps up the steepest parts.

On the easier Northeast Ridge, at 18,500 feet, as Taylor described it in 1937 to Bright, they dug down into the ice two and a half feet, guyed the 14-foot pole out with four cotton ropes, and fastened it to rocks. They inscribed their names on an eight-inch square board with the date and buried it—some say along with their double-bladed hatchet—at the pole's base.

Their duck-down cotton parkas and huge fur mitts were iced over as they walked up the last thousand feet to the North Peak. "It was 30 below," Taylor said, then equivocated: "I just know it was colder than hell." They languished in the weak sunlight, admiring Mt. Foraker poking its head out of a thick cloud blanket. "It shut off a lot of the view," Taylor said.

Taylor and Anderson felt no ill effects of the altitude on their rapid ascent. "The altitude made you feel light-like," Taylor recalled in his laconic interview, the only one he ever gave, with Bright. "You had to watch yourself or your feet would come up quick."

As others later considered their feat, it was clear that without perfect step-kicking snow in the couloir, completing this climb so quickly would stretch all credibility. Washburn, who knew McGonagall well, wrote in his book *Moutly McKinley*: "That they descended the gully with no rope, no ice axes, and nothing but 'creepers' [rude crampons]... is a miracle."

Washburn told a skeptical University of Alaska interviewer in 2000, "How they ever got down that without getting killed I don't know."

The three returned to their 11,000-foot camp in what modern alpinists still consider an extraordinary 18-hour round trip, gaining 8,400 feet and then descending the same distance. Yet the Sourdoughs, believing they'd started above 15,000 feet, probably wondered why their perceived 4,000-foot

climb had taken them so long. Taylor still had three of his six donuts left. They briefly joined Lloyd, who cooked them a huge meal.

As McGonagall, Taylor and Anderson returned to Kantishna, back to working their claims on Glen Creek, their erstwhile leader Lloyd hurried back to town, directly to the offices of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. Under the banner "ALASKANS REACH TOP OF SUMMIT," the April 12 front-page story told—in a short and vague narrative—how the stars and stripes were planted atop the continent by all four men, and that they saw no trace of Cook's passage. President Taft cabled congratulations.

Apprised of this news through the miner

existence of the flagpole on the ridge remained unverified. A surveyor claimed to see it with his small telescopic transit from dozens of miles away on the tundra; a fur buyer said he saw it with binoculars from the same area. In 1952 a park service expedition looked from atop the North Peak but couldn't see the flagstaff; in the 1950s military jet pilots claimed they saw it while buzzing the mountain. Until mid century, sighting the mythical pole became the Alaskan equivalent of spying the Abominable Snowman.

In any case, at the time, a week after their story broke to the world, McGonagall, Taylor and Anderson put down their pickaxes and boated out to Fairbanks. In

Sheldon (who in 1908 had showed Lloyd, from a hill above his mining claim, the route up the mountain), publicly announced that the press didn't have all the facts. Privately, he wrote to a friend: "Lloyd is a windbag and cannot climb. If he climbed McKinley (he is over 60 and fat and full of whiskey pickled in it) any 15 year old boy can do it."

Lloyd's team received further credibility, though, in 1913, after Harry Karstens' team made the first ascent of Denali (to the higher South Summit). That team's triple-exposed photograph shows them on top after a two-month expedition-style, load-carrying siege that became the template for climbing Denali. All four climbers' diaries verified seeing the rime-plastered flagpole up on the Northeast (later named Pioneer) Ridge. The Sourdough climb, once believed, then doubted, was again celebrated: a second mythical act to that of the Athapaskan demigod thrusting a huge spear into a tidal wave and freezing it solid, creating the High One. Except that no one ever credibly laid eyes on the 14-foot Sourdough spear again.

If true, the first ascent of Denali's North Peak could be seen as setting the gold standard as the world's first alpine-style ascent of a difficult high-altitude mountain. The Sourdough Couloir has never been repeated. The team's immoderate time to the North Peak—let alone to the South Peak—has never been even closely equaled on the *Muldrow Glacier Route*.

Today, more than a century later, fit parties on the easier and oft-trod *West Buttress Route* rarely equal the Sourdoughs' practically unbelievable sprint. In 1978, the professional mountaineers Ned Gillette and Galen Rowell performed what is commonly known as the first "speed ascent" of that well-traveled route. They left from 10,000 feet in summer, using fixed ropes, and reached the South Summit. Still, Rowell contracted high-altitude pulmonary edema, and if a guide had not nursed him back to health in a tent at 17,200 feet during the descent, the two might not have skied back down safely in just under 24 hours. In 2014, their time was halved by the professional ski mountaineer and runner Kilian Jornet of Spain. By the standards of 1910, the breakneck summit day of these unsupported, trail-breaking miners up terra incognita in winter conditions is highly implausible.

Nor has it helped the miners' credibility that they were handier with shovels than



JEFF BABCOCK

cameras. Their only discernible mountain photograph, shot at 11,000 feet, shows the rotund Lloyd and the compact McGonagall wielding awkward-looking alpine poles, while clad, a la Daniel Boone, in fur caps, rubber "shoe-pac" boots and moose-hide moccasins.

The time of year in which they traveled also raised doubts, although other events may answer those. While the miners said they reached the North Peak two weeks after the calendar winter ended, early April still offers relatively little daylight on Denali. Without headlamps, if Taylor had it right, the men's 3 a.m. departure time and return "an even 18 hours" later would have had them out several hours before and after dark in faint moonlight: on April 3, 1910, the moon entered its last quarter.

UNLETTERED MEN OF THE NORTH

For years I believed the Sourdoughs, like most mountaineers do. Until I examined the details more closely—then their feat, while still enigmatic, also seemed quite suspect. To more than a few latter-day Denali climbers, willing to confront the myth of these revered predecessors, the mystery continues. Sensible Denali climbers now avoid the Sourdoughs' intemperate winter climbing strategy. Through late April the upper mountain is armored in blue ice and rock-hard snow, raked by near-constant winds backing the meat-freezer cold. Even worse, the north

side's Harper Glacier is known for a venturi-wind phenomenon, created by air roaring through the constricted Denali Pass and funneling downhill with otherworldly, shrieking gales that have repeatedly blown away, buried, killed or severely frostbitten scores of modern climbers equipped with radioed weather reports and state-of-the-art gear.

In winter and early spring, tropospheric depressions further thin the atmosphere over the earth's upper latitudes. In this kind of cold the mountain becomes, physiologically, a 25,000-foot Himalayan peak—as if these three unacclimated miners weren't already hobbled enough by their lack of acclimatization. The Sourdoughs apparently climbed unroped on sheet-metal crampons, yet had no prior experience climbing or protecting steep slopes that offered death-fall exposures.

They left mountain historians precious little to go on, aside from their word. Even taking Lloyd out of the balance, their contradictory stories and retractions outweigh their confessions. Lloyd's fables mostly silenced them, with no other options: they were unlettered men of the North, without diaries or memoirs or children to advance their legacies.

Did these donut-eating Sourdoughs really climb the North Peak? All we'd need is a blurry image—something just a little better than the triple exposure the 1913 climbers left us from the South Summit—proving their ascent.

For 40 years I have made pilgrimages

GUNNAR NASLUND with a 14-foot pole on one of the Sourdough line's two cruxes, the 1.5-mile-long Karstens Ridge, in 1977. Naslund, with Jeff Babcock and five others, attempted to re-create the Sourdoughs' feat. They turned back in the 30- to 40-degree Sourdough Couloir when rockfall began pelting the slopes. They climbed roped up, placing protection on a route that the Sourdoughs supposedly did without a single belay.

to Denali and thought about these Sourdoughs. On the first, a trip in 1976, while triple carrying loads with external-frame packs up the West Buttress, I envied that long-ago team of lightly knapsacked miners speeding to the North Peak and back in a day. Seven friends and I spent a month on the mountain. We retreated shy of the summit in a storm, chastened.

After a long apprenticeship I abandoned cumbersome expedition-style climbing. My two alpine-style ascents up Denali—inspired by the Sourdoughs—proved among the best outings of my life.

If these miners actually succeeded in their super-human feat, they deserve a spot in the pantheon of great alpinists. Think Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler ticking off the first alpine-style ascent of the 8,000-meter Gasherbrum I by its Northwest Face in 1975; Charlie Porter running alone up Denali's Cassin Ridge in 1976; or Jean Troillet and Erhard Loretan speeding up the *Japanese-Hornbein Couloir* on Everest in 1984.

Beginning with Messner, there's no reason to doubt these alpine-style achievements. The climbers took photos or had witnesses. And their most landmark climbs were logically preceded by impressive resumes.

But in the absence of reliable summit photos or witnesses, a resume doesn't prove a landmark climb. The otherwise stellar alpinist Tomo Česen borrowed another team's summit photo (among other discrepancies) to show that he soloed the Himalayan giant Lotse by its South Face in 1990. He's now widely disbelieved. The accomplished Dolomite climber Cesare Maestri told whoppers about twice summiting Patagonia's Cerro Torre. Since his partner died in a fall on the first climb, there were no witnesses, nor pitons placed high on the route.

Even photos can be questionable proof. On Denali in 1903, Dr. Frederick Cook first

IF TRUE, THE FIRST ASCENT OF DENALI'S NORTH PEAK COULD BE SEEN AS SETTING THE GOLD STANDARD AS THE WORLD'S FIRST ALPINE-STYLE ASCENT OF A DIFFICULT, HIGH-ALTITUDE MOUNTAIN.

grapevine out in secluded Kantishna, the other three were horrified by Lloyd's boast to have climbed with them and his untruthful story—soon to be widely circulated—that they had reached both the South and North Peaks.

On June 5, the *News-Miner* editor sold his "First Account of the Conquering of Mt. McKinley" article to *The New York Times Magazine*. The three-page story became a nationwide sensation and appeared the following day in the *London Telegraph*. Lloyd told of crevasses dropping to China, of air so thin that your nose alone wouldn't work for "windgetting," and of Taylor falling down the mountain with the speed of an express train. "Honest Bill" Taylor never verified this near miss; McGonagall told Bright in 1937 that Lloyd was "a teller of tall stories."

Beginning with Lloyd's bluster, doubts arose. One Alaskan who knew Lloyd told C.E. Rusk—leading a team of "Cheechako" Denali climbers later that summer—that "I wouldn't believe him under oath. He can't travel 10 miles a day on [flat] ground."

Lloyd inconsistently conflated friends that he didn't reach the top, while the

an act of damage control engineered by Lloyd, they signed a sworn and notarized statement on June 11—essentially lying—that on April 3 all four of them had planted their pole on the North Summit and "at the hour of three twenty-five o'clock p.m. unfurl[ed] a United States flag." The statement did not mention the higher South Summit.

The shrewd Lloyd got away with it. Tall tales in the northern frontier were deeply ingrained into this subculture, inspiring pioneers to chase the myth of striking it rich (or in this case, climbing to the top of the continent) through toughness and self-sufficiency. Also, conquering Denali's higher South Summit versus its twin, the lower North Peak, struck those who had never climbed a mountain as an irrelevant abstraction.

Other than that, the trio who'd done all the work cannily avoided talking about their climb. In 1937, with Lloyd dead since 1917, Taylor said that his "awful fat" leader had "balled"—muddled—"it up ... [W]e never dreamed he wouldn't give a straight story."

Later that year of 1910, the visionary behind Denali National Park, Charles



A PAIR OF SOURDOUGH CRAMPONS, exhibited by the National Park Service as part of its centennial celebration. The crampons were found on the Muldrow Glacier in 1932. Even today, the crampons, cut from sheet metal, haven't rusted. Far from crude, the crampons were revolutionary for the era, having nine long points and a stiff foot platform that would have provided needed stability and support when worn with the Sourdoughs' soft footwear. Unknown to the 1910 climbers, the Englishman Oscar Eckenstein invented the first 10-point crampon for use in the Alps in 1908 and never had to chop a step again. Eckenstein's story and a diagram of his crampons appeared in an obscure Austrian Alpine Club newsletter that same year, published in German. The article would have been inaccessible to the Sourdoughs and others outside of Europe. Somehow, in remote Alaska, McGonagall came up with a lighter crampon that improved upon Eckenstein's design and anticipated the future of ice climbing.

attempted the Northwest Buttress and then completed a difficult and still respected circumnavigation of the mountain. Three years later, he claimed that his weird East Buttress circling route to the summit had been successful; his 1908 book, *To the Top of the Continent*, brashly included a summit photo. Then in 1909 his partner Ed Barrill signed an affidavit stating that they hadn't done it. Following their route by using a map that Barrill made, climbers in 1910 showed that Cook's summit photo had been faked: shot on a peak 19 miles away from and 15,000 feet below Denali.

In the way of many who fabricate such

LLOYD CHOSE A TEAM WHO LIVED IN THE WILDERNESS, DIGGING AND SLUICING FOR GOLD, AND WHO PAID NO ATTENTION TO NEWSPAPERS.

tales, Maestri, Cesen and Cook never recanted, despite evidence disproving their climbs. Tom Lloyd, the Sourdough, also maintained his assertion of his ascent, while also (unlike his cohorts) claiming both the North and South summits.

As for such people's motivations in deceiving us, David Roberts concludes in his book *Great Exploration Hoaxes* that fraudulent adventurers are paranoiacs and megalomaniacs. A surprising number of hoaxers, Roberts told me in a phone interview, lost a parent at an early age and appear to be compensating, covering up their weaknesses or sense of loss through

the pursuit of excellence—in Cook's case, conquering an unclimbed mountain. Often these damaged souls are conveniently shy of a reliable eyewitness because they traveled alone or exploited their companions' deaths.

Lloyd chose a team who lived in the wilderness, digging and sluicing for gold, and who paid no attention to newspapers. And they trusted Lloyd, who was widely beloved in Fairbanks. (When he died six years after the climb, hundreds came to his funeral, despite pouring rain.) So his "boys" dutifully signed the affidavit because Lloyd asked them to, as tight partners and employees—who didn't give a damn about the rest of the world—routinely letting their boss deal with the paperwork.

A MISSING FLAGPOLE

As a mountaineering historian, I felt obligated to re-examine the legend of the Sourdoughs. Lacking photographic proof, the sticking point for most experts has been whether the three could've so speedily completed an 8,400-foot round-trip day and climbed the couloir in question, which could, mind you, be proved by finding the flagpole or its remnants.

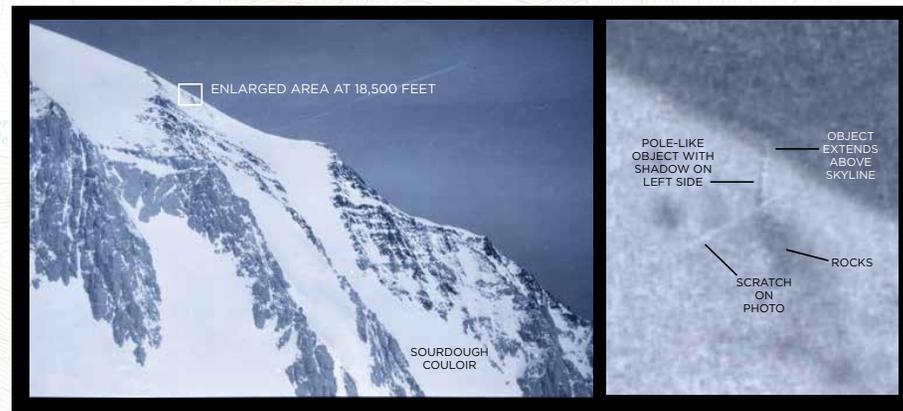
Brian Okonek, a longtime Denali guide who has repeatedly walked by this out-of-the-way, daunting couloir and studied the early climbs, can't "get my head around the idea that the Sourdoughs climbed the

route so quickly." He believes that the 1913 Karstens team who said they saw the pole may have seen an iced-over rock wall, distorted by distance and shadows to resemble a flagstaff. At least one other Denali expert, Ranger Mark Westman, believes that the Stuck-Karstens party pole sighting could be a conspiracy of Alaskans incensed by Cheechako outsiders. It would seem to be a stretch for them to lie, particularly for the minister Stuck, but by validating the Sourdoughs on the North Peak, as part of their 1913 climb on the South Summit, the Stuck-Karstens party would have ensured that Alaskans fully owned Denali.

This 1913 "flagstaff" sighting by an Alaskan team could also have been concocted to refute a 1912 outsider team's claim of not seeing the flagpole.

That year of 1912, Belmore Browne, during an attempt on the South Peak, considered the alleged route up to the North Peak skeptically. "Every rock and snow slope of that approach had come into the field of our powerful binoculars," Belmore Browne wrote about the Pioneer Ridge in his book *The Conquest of Mount McKinley* (the name non-Alaskans used for the mountain). "We not only saw no sign of a flagpole but it is our concerted opinion that the Northern Peak is more inaccessible than its higher southern sister."

In 1910 on the south side of Denali, Browne had debunked the Cook climb by repeat photographing Cook's "summit" photograph on the 5,330-foot rock outcropping called Fake Peak. Browne's 1912 attempt was his final and third try over six years, and his team climbed all but the last 200 feet of the *Muldrow Glacier Route* to the South Summit. A sudden storm forced them down. Despite Browne's tenacious summit attempts, let alone that he showed Cook to be a fraud, Alaskans—ever suspicious of outsiders who professed knowledge of Denali—referred to his team as "the Egghead Expedition."



LEFT PHOTO, from the Belmore Browne papers collection at Dartmouth College, was taken in 1912 by Meri LaVoy, the expedition photographer, during Browne's attempt on the South Peak. It was shot from 18,000 feet and exposed onto a 3 x 5-inch negative. It shows the Pioneer Ridge and Sourdough Couloir a mile and a half away.

Proof of the Sourdoughs' climb has long hinged on finding—or at least seeing—the 14-foot spruce pole, held by guy lines and rocks, at 18,500 feet on the summit ridge. From this the miners hung a 6 x 12-foot American flag.

The most credible sighting of the pole was by four summit climbers who made the first ascent of Denali's higher South Summit, in 1913. After that, the spruce pole was never seen again. Today, while the pole and flag are probably long gone, the guy lines and other remnants might still remain. As part of a recent investigation, last year LaVoy's negative was digitally scanned to 45 x 27 inches and re-examined. That is the photo you see here.

RIGHT PHOTO is a 400-percent enlargement of the area marked on the left photo. In it, a dark vertical line extends from a rock outcrop at the point where the Sourdoughs claimed to have planted their pole. Analysis of the image has ruled out a scratch in the negative—the white line angling across the base of the "pole" is a scratch, as is the "contrail" in the sky in the photo on left. Careful examination of the entire photograph did not reveal any other vertical lines, nor any straight lines at all. The object itself has light falling on the right side and a shadow on the left, congruous with the lighting on other terrain features, and the object extends above the skyline, the only feature in the photograph to do so.

After the Browne and Karstens-Stuck expeditions, since the mountain had been successfully climbed, two decades elapsed before climbers returned. Due to its remoteness and the fact that most Denali aspirants are more interested in reaching the higher South Peak, 66 years elapsed before climbers touched the Sourdough Couloir again.

The first return came on July 12, 1976, as six climbers on the Pioneer Ridge Route decided to split up. The stronger two, including Steve Swenson (now an accomplished alpinist, who is skeptical of the 1910 feat), climbed over the North Peak and down to Denali Pass via an easier route than the Sourdoughs' directissima.

Unbeknownst to Swenson and Bruce Blume, one of the other four behind them contracted altitude illness. Since those climbers needed to descend immediately, they started boot-axe belaying in two rope teams down the Sourdough Couloir.

A sudden fall sent all four plummeting 1,500 feet to the Harper Glacier; two died immediately from massive head and chest trauma. Of the two survivors, Bill Joiner was knocked unconscious and hung upside-down for hours in a cocoon of rope. He lost all of his fingers to frostbite and has no memory of what caused the fall. The other survivor, Larry Fanning, suffered two broken legs but wouldn't talk about the accident.

No matter the cause, unlike the rope-less Sourdoughs, they were properly equipped modern climbers experienced in belay techniques and glacier travel.

The next visitation was in spring of 1977. Denali veteran Jeff Babcock, leader of a seven-member team, took turns carrying a 14-foot spruce pole across the Alaska Range and up the Muldrow Glacier. The pole was awkward, but not a burden to this large crew.

After two months of load carrying, Babcock and Andy Butcher left their Denali

Pass camp on a pleasant May morning with two thermoses of hot drinks, packing energy bars instead of donuts, and strolled an hour down to the infamous couloir. They strapped on 12-point crampons over bulbous-looking white Bunny Boots—invented by the military for subzero temperatures and similar to the floppy Sourdough moccasins. Then they began step-kicking, placing pickets and zigzagging up 30- to 40-degree snow. Both felt the climb was in the bag.

They were a third of the way up when softball-sized rocks began zinging by. "Let's get the hell out of here," Babcock said to Butcher. Thwarted, they speared the pole into rocks alongside the couloir and descended. The duo returned to camp, humbled, 10 hours after leaving. In half of the time taken by the Sourdoughs, they'd made one-tenth the altitude gain. All the same, they didn't doubt the 1910 feat—under safer conditions, the couloir would have gone.

CARIBOU MEAT AND DONUTS

The Sourdoughs never climbed another mountain. Twenty-seven years after their deed, when asked if he'd do it again, Taylor said he would "if there was enough money in it. But not just for sport." Anderson was never interviewed after the climb. He worked for his remaining years as a tinsmith in Nenana, Alaska.

McGonagall was interviewed more than his partners, but said a lot less than Lloyd, whom his interviewers ended up quoting at length to fill in McGonagall's characteristic blanks. Once Lloyd died, so did the flow of information. And McGonagall, hardly loquacious, would only tell one reporter: "We did it on stubbornness, caribou meat and donuts."

When Norman Bright interviewed both Taylor and McGonagall in 1957, the gruff McGonagall told Bright he had not wanted to go on the climb—like Anderson, his own mining claims gone bust, he might've felt obligated to please his more prosperous employers, Taylor and Lloyd. "I got nothing

out of it but a lot of hard work," McGonagall said. But he still claimed to have summited with Taylor and Anderson, a matter soon to become its own issue.

In another twist to an already labyrinthine story, when, 11 years later, McGonagall was questioned in front of his close friend Karstens by the California climber and historian Francis Farquhar, he recanted one part of the story. While McGonagall maintained that he took his turn getting the flagpole to the ridge, he also said he turned around there due to altitude sickness rather than continue the last 900 feet to the summit. "My job was to haul the pole and that was as far as it would go," he said. "Why go farther?"

The first time I saw the Sourdough route, in late May 1983, streaks of blue ice surrounded the bergschrund gaping below the bottom of the couloir. Seeing it again in June 1993, three weeks out after dog mushing into the Muldrow from Kantishna, and having spent a week climbing Karstens Ridge, I couldn't imagine how the miners made such short work of their climb.

Last summer, as I was descending from the South Summit, their couloir appeared two miles away through a brief opening in the clouds as a surreal, yet fun-looking, snow climb. I thought of how committed the Sourdoughs must have felt a century ago, but then my roped companion below stumbled from oxygen deprivation, and, preparing for a possible self-arrest, I didn't look up again. Conversations with other climbers had all but convinced me that the Sourdough climb was too incredible to be true.

With no plans to go back to Denali, I flew to examine the Sourdough crampons under a glass case shared by a bust of "Honest" Abe Lincoln at the Atlanta International Airport, in Georgia. Part of a Centennial National Park Service exhibit, the nine pointers were still sharp and unruined. They'd sat on the Muldrow Glacier for 22 years, hauled off by a team in 1932.

But while studying these crampons I realized they were not crude creepers—as Washburn had described the gear. Before and for decades after the Sourdoughs' climb, hob-nailed boots and small-pointed

creepers would remain the tools of choice for step-chopping English and American climbers until mid-century.

Except for McGonagall. Toward the end of 1909, knowing that ordinary creepers wouldn't suffice on steep snow and ice, McGonagall invented a thick yet lightweight galvanized sheet-metal crampon with revolutionary nine long points that could be sharpened with a file. The crampon's platform soles would have provided rigidity to the Sourdoughs' flexible footwear. With these revolutionary crampons, the Sourdoughs could have climbed most of the long couloir by intuitively flatfooting, effectively using what would later be called French technique across the steep. Sidestepping in those crampons would have saved the time-consuming, creeper-footed process of chopping steps.

MYSTERY SOLVED?

Hoping for a conclusion, I followed Brian Okonek's lead and turned to the Belmore Browne papers and photographs archived

at Dartmouth College. Browne and one of his teammates had publicly doubted the Sourdoughs before their 1912 climb, and during the expedition they never saw the flagpole.

Among Belmore Browne's papers was a photograph by Merl LaVoy, the expedition photographer. During Brown's attempt on the South Peak in 1912, LaVoy used a Graflex camera to photograph, from 18,000 feet, the mile-and-a-half distant Pioneer Ridge, which included the Sourdough Couloir and the rocky outcrop where the Sourdoughs claimed to have planted their flagpole and flag.

Studying a high-resolution scan of this photograph (that I emailed to Okonek) we used computers never dreamed of by the Denali pioneers. A magnification of the image revealed an intriguing detail, a vertical pole-like object contrasted against a snowfield and surrounded by pixelated-looking summit shale of the same tonality.

I felt exhilarated. At the top of the blustery couloir, in the final rocks, the object is right where the 1913 climbers described seeing it the next year. There's

nothing like the object anywhere else in the image. I shared the photo with several professional photographers and an image-analysis researcher. They all concluded that the line (or pole) is not a scratch; no one could say that the Graflex camera wouldn't be able to resolve an object at that distance. Nor could these pros say for certain that the 1912 photograph reveals a flagpole. But if the object isn't the Sourdoughs' mythical flagpole, what is it?

So there's one final step to resolving the mystery. It'll demand a modern-day Sourdough team, climbing to 18,500 feet on the Pioneer Ridge, digging down in the last rocks above the couloir and uncovering a wooden board, some frayed rope, maybe a hatchet, and the remnants of a pole. Good luck finding the flag. Still, I'll bet a lot more than two cents that you'll find proof. Bring donuts.

Jonathan Waterman has written three books about Denali and climbed four different routes on the mountain, including the Cassin Ridge in winter of 1982.

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