

The sinking of the Princess Sophia

“On October 23, 1918, the Canadian Pacific steamer Princess Sophia” left Skagway, Alaska, on her last run of the season to Vancouver and Victoria. A storm rose and at 2:00 A.M. she ran aground on Vanderbilt Reef. A fleet of rescue vessels was quickly assembled and circled the Sophia for hours, waiting their chance to take off passengers and crew. But late in the afternoon the storm worsened, and they were forced to take shelter themselves. When they returned the following morning, all that was left of the Princess Sophia was a 20-foot section of mast jutting out of the waters of Lynn Canal. There were no survivors.”

Ken Coates & Bill Morrison



Among those who perished were new wed Walter and Frances Harper. Walter, the 25 year old Irish Athabaskan had intended to enlist in the Air Corps. The 29 year old Frances, a nurse from Philadelphia, who had served in the hospital at Ft. Yukon, was to have joined the Red Cross. They had planned to return to Alaska as medical missionaries after Walter completed medical school.



Walter was born in 1893 to Jennie Albert of Koyukuk Athabaskan heritage and Arthur Harper, a well known Irish prospector and trader who lived to be called “The Father of the Yukon.” Walter became a protégé of Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, an Episcopalian missionary priest, traveling as his companion on journeys throughout the Alaskan wilderness, serving as his guide, interpreter, boat operator and dog team handler.

Stuck said later of his protégé: *“In all the arts of travel, in all the wilderness arts he was past-master. With a rifle, an axe, a dog team, a boat of any kind from a birch bark canoe to a power launch he had few superiors in Alaska. I had rather he were by my side in time of stress or danger than any other I ever knew.”*

At age 19 Walter became a member of the team led by Hudson Stuck, including Harry Karstens and Robert Tatum that successfully reached the summit of Denali, the highest mountain in North America. Walter was the first person to set foot upon the top of its highest peak June 7, 1913.

A Word from the Top

“With keen excitement we pushed on. Walter, who had been in the lead all day was the first to scramble up; a native Alaskan he is the first human being to set foot upon the top of Alaska’s great mountain, and he had well earned the lifelong distinction. Karstens and Tatum were hard upon his heels, but the last man on the rope, in his enthusiasm and excitement somewhat overpassing his narrow wind margin had almost to be hauled up the last on feet...As soon as wind was recovered we shook hands all round and thanked God that he had granted us our hearts desire and brought up safely to the top of His great Mountain”

Hudson Stuck, The Ascent of Denali

The Sign of Our Redemption

Then they turned to their scientific tasks.

They pitched a small instrument tent with Tatum’s hand sewn American flag streaming from the top. Inside Stuck read the boiling point thermometer and the mercurial barometer. Outside Tatum took readings with the prismatic compass.

Once the tent was struck Harper fashioned a cross from the tent pole and a transverse piece already prepared and fitted – lashed securely to it and he and Karstens planted it securely at the highest point.



“the sign of our redemption – high above North America”

Then everyone gathered around it and said the *Te deum*, an early Christian hymn of praise.