

# Barrill and Dr. Cook

D R. FREDERICK A. COOK in 1906

claimed that he and Edward Barrill, a horse packer from Darby, Montana, had made the first ascent of Mount McKinley. This claim has been hotly disputed over the years. A great many books and articles have been written, supporting or disclaiming Dr. Cook. Backed up by substantial evidence, Bradford Washburn and Ann and Adams Carter published a detailed article with many telling photographs in the *American Alpine Journal* of 1958 on pages 1 to 30; after a careful reading of the article, most readers will doubtless find it difficult to credit Dr. Cook with the ascent.

There is a second point about which there has also been disagreement: namely the spelling of Edward Barrill's name. To clear up this point, Washburn wrote in January 1988 to the Town Clerk of Darby, Montana to see what the town records had to say. To his amazement, an answer came back, not from the Town Clerk, but from Barrill's daughter. He then sent her a copy of the 1958 *A.A.J.* We quote her reply in full. The letter is on file at the American Alpine Club. This letter not only clears up the question of the spelling of the name but also gives new evidence about the validity of the ascent.

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January 29, 1988

Dear Mr. Washburn,

I have begun to read the book you sent me but it will take a long time as I want to get every word of it. I do wish there was a map showing the position of the different peaks in relation to Mt. McKinley. Otherwise it is a very interesting story and I will treasure it.

I am sorry that I have no first-hand knowledge of the climb as I was not born until 1910. I have only Dad's stories to go by and he told and retold them so often and they were always the same so I believe he was telling the truth. So many people have worked so many hours trying to prove or disprove the climb. My Dad was not a man who would exaggerate or lie about anything he did to make himself look good. He always said they did not climb Mt. McKinley and so I believe him.

It was a very harrowing trip from the beginning. They had a pack train of horses to carry the equipment but it was a mistake to bring horses. The trail was too rough for them and the poor animals fell & injured themselves over and over, and some broke their legs and had to be destroyed. One remarkable old mare was swept over a waterfall, pack and all, and was still alive and sound when she was rescued. Even her pack was not too badly damaged. Anyway, the men finally wound up carrying all the supplies themselves.

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**Foraker and McKinley from Southeast. Upper line shows Cook's line up the Ruth Glacier and possibly his highest point. Lower line is up the side glacier. His false "summit" peak marked by an arrow. The point to the right was where he took his "15,400-foot" photo.**



When they reached their destination they began setting up base camps and on the day that the climbers started up on the real climb, the others had all dropped out except Dad and Dr. Cook. It must have been a grueling climb with no oxygen, no special clothing, nothing a climber can get now. Dad said that if you stooped over and put your head at knee level, you could see the blue shadows of deep crevases (sic). Finally Dr. Cook said, "Ed, let's just *say* we climbed Mt. McKinley." He and Dad started back down after taking the picture of Dad with the flag on a side peak. I always felt that if that had been the real top of McKinley, it would have been Cook getting his picture taken.

Just before they got back to the base camp, Cook said, "Now Ed, I don't want you to say anything about this to the men. Just tell them they will have to talk to me." When they arrived the men crowded around and said, "Well, did you make it?" Cook went to his tent and shut the flap and Dad repeated what Cook had told him to say. "You'll just have to talk to Cook."

Cook stayed in his tent for three days then suddenly came out, rubbing his hands and stamping his feet. "Well boys," he said. "We made it." Dad said he nearly fell over into a snowbank. He said, "I didn't think he would really lie about it. But he did."

In 1909 the Alpine Club or the Explorers' Club contacted Dad and offered to pay his way to New York City to testify at Cook's trial. While Cook was planning the North Pole trip, he wrote Dad & said, "If you will keep quit (sic) about the McKinley trip, I will bring you back a chunk of the pole." He never paid the wages Dad earned as a guide for the expedition and I guess this is what he meant. Dad got mad and threw the letter away but my mother rescued it & kept it and took it along when they went to New York. That letter is probably still in the files of one of those clubs or the National Geographic, which I believe had been in on some part of it. One of those clubs later paid Dad's wages. Cook never did.

As to any documents the family might have had, I don't know anything. My sister Delia Costello of Sunnyside, WN was very interested in this bit of family history, but she is gone now.

My sister Alaska is the one who put the E on the end of our name and Dad began using it to please her. However, the real spelling is Barrill. My own middle name is Mt. McKinley and altho I was proud to be named after such a grand mountain, it was a bit top heavy for general use so I shortened it to McKinley. May any Gods on Mt. Denali forgive me.

Cook came to Montana after the trial to "Face Ed Barrill" as he said, but everyone here knew Dad & believed in him. Cook didn't seem to want to face Dad after he got here, he only wanted to talk about the trip. He was booed and hissed so many times that he finally stalked off the stage in a rage.

His daughter defended him fiercely in a Life Magazine article I read, and I can understand that, but in later years Cook was arrested for selling phony oil leases. This climb is now part of our history and as such we must forgive them for their past mistakes.

This letter got too long but I hope it is what you wanted. Thanks again.

Sincerely, Marj. Barrill