

Henry P. Karstens—1878-1955

FRANCIS P. FARQUHAR

NO one has been more intimately connected with Mount McKinley than Harry Karstens, who died November 28, 1955, in Fairbanks, Alaska. He lived the greater part of his life within sight of the mountain, and it was never far from his thoughts. He was the climbing leader of the first complete ascent of McKinley's highest peak, the loftiest point in North America, and was the first superintendent of the National Park which was established to embrace that great mountain area with its abundance of wild life. Henry Peter Karstens was born in Chicago in 1878. In 1897, as a young man of 19, he came to Alaska to try his luck in the gold rush. He was too active and energetic for the grinding work of placer mining and soon took up what was then the truly heroic occupation of transportation—dog teams in the winter and river launches in the summer. In the winter of 1903 he brought the first mail by dog team from the Copper River to the newly established town of Fairbanks. From that time on he was a Fairbanks man. There are many tales of his skill and fortitude on the long winter runs over the snow. When Charles Sheldon, naturalist and big-game hunter, came to Alaska, Karstens was for several seasons his companion and assistant. In his book, *The Wilderness of Denali*, Sheldon pays high tribute to Karstens' sturdy qualities. It was at this time that Harry began to make definite plans to climb Mount McKinley. He wanted Sheldon to go with him, but when that didn't work out he began to pay more attention to the letters of Hudson Stuck, an Episcopal missionary at Tanana. Stuck had long wanted to try the climb, but lacked the strength and experience to undertake the leadership alone. In Karstens he found a partner with just the qualities he needed, and presently an agreement was entered into by which Stuck was to provide the equipment and provisions, while Karstens was to furnish the leadership on the mountain. Before they started in the spring of 1913 they were aware of the discovery of the Muldrow Glacier route by the Sourdough party of 1910 and the almost successful exploitation of the route in 1912 by the Parker-Browne party. Following very closely the steps of the pioneers, the party of four—Karstens, Stuck, Harper, and Tatum—favored by perfect weather on the final day, overcame the few hundred feet that had been denied to Parker, Browne, and LaVoy and, on June 7, 1913,

stood on the highest point. (Stuck: *The Ascent of Denali*, New York and London, 1914; Farquhar: "The Exploration and First Ascents of Mount McKinley," in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, June 1950.)

Soon after Mount McKinley National Park was established, Karstens was appointed its first superintendent. He served from 1921 to 1928, supervising the construction of entrance roads and trails and the park headquarters and ranger stations, as well as organizing the ranger force to protect the game. Subsequently he engaged in business enterprises in Fairbanks and in later years usually spent the winters in Texas or Colorado with his son. He is survived by his wife, Louise, and by a son, Colonel Eugene Karstens, U.S. Air Force.

