A photograph of an older man with a grey beard and hair, wearing a dark t-shirt, looking intently at a computer monitor. The monitor displays a webpage with two black and white photographs of men in historical, heavy clothing. The man's right arm is extended towards the desk. The background shows a cluttered office or study with framed pictures and shelves.

# A trek to the archive reveals a mountainous surprise

By Rod Boyce

Above: Professor **Matthew Sturm '83, '89** points at a map that pinpoints locations on Denali where a member of the 1910 Sourdough Expedition stopped to take photographs. UAF/GI photo by JR Ancheta.

**Somewhere at  
about 15,800 feet  
on Mount McKinley  
on April 1, 1910, a  
man standing on a  
yet-to-be-named  
glacier below a  
yet-to-be named  
ridge opened the  
shutter on a simple  
Kodak camera.**

The weather, always capable of a quick change from friend to foe on North America's tallest mountain, was good on this day. The late

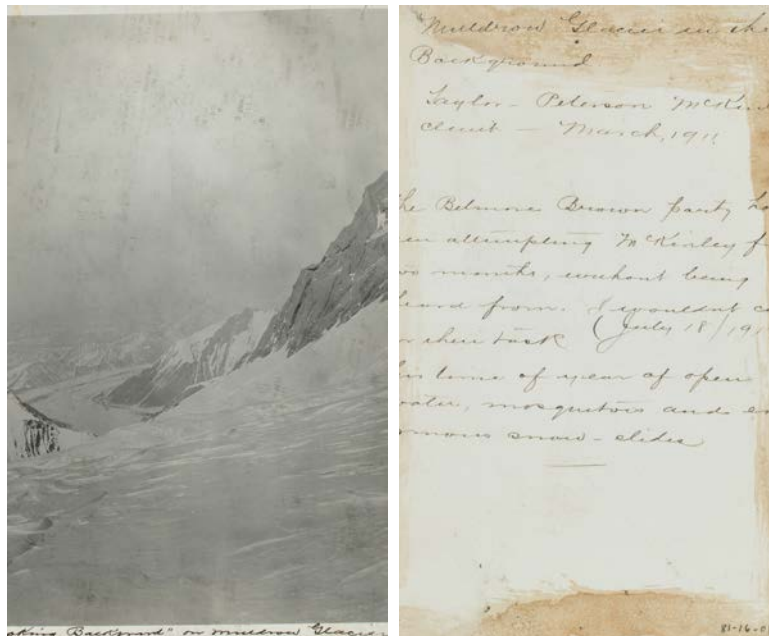
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afternoon sun cast lengthy shadows on the  
downslope between the glacier's cradling walls.

It made a fine day for photography.

This particular stop on the climb upward, aiming  
for a high point where no human had before  
stood, was one of a handful of pauses at which  
the camera did its work.

The lens at various places captured the  
mountain's scoured and fissured snow surfaces,  
its fallen blocks of snow and ice, its rocky  
features protruding from the white.



At left, the Muldrow Glacier lies far below Parker Pass in this  
photograph taken during the 1910 Sourdough Expedition. At right,  
on the reverse side of the photograph, text written by an

*unidentified person provides a mistaken date for the Sourdough Expedition and also remarks on Belmore Browne's 1912 attempt, which got within 125 feet of the southern summit. Photos from Dorothy Jean Ray Collection, Rasmuson Library Archives.*

It captured a human's sunken boot prints, likely the first ever made on the high ridge.

Much of what the camera captured, however, would be forgotten to time.

Forgotten, that is, until someone noticed the writing on the tab of a file folder 112 years and six months later.

## **A mislabeled folder**

That someone is Matthew Sturm.

Sturm went to the University of Alaska Fairbanks Rasmuson Library archive on one October day last year to look through some gray cases the archive staff had readied for him. The cases held the donated family collection of Dorothy Jean Ray, daughter of a woman who came to Alaska in the gold rushes of 1897 through 1903.

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Sturm was doing some glacier research unrelated to the 1910 climb of North America's highest mountain.

Materials of the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives are held in special slender flip-top cases, each about 5 inches wide and holding varying numbers of file folders. Sturm sat at one of the eight neatly arranged 3-by-5-foot tables, opened a case and began looking through the file folders.



*Rasmuson Library archivist Rachel Cohen, left, and professor Matthew Sturm look at Sourdough Expedition photographs that Sturm unexpectedly found during unrelated research. UAF/GI photo by JR Ancheta.*

Folder by folder he went. His eyes lingered on a few words on one otherwise ordinary folder:

"Taylor-Peterson McKinley Climb, March 1911."

This wasn't why he had come to the archive that fall day, but he knew at that moment that something was off and that he may have found a treasure.

Sturm, a mountaineer with some experience on Denali and extensive knowledge about the mountain's climbing history, knew there was no 1911 climb of McKinley, now officially known as Denali.

He knew the folder he would soon pull from the case could only be a trove of mislabeled photographs of the oft-debated 1910 Sourdough Expedition. That climb occurred in the first week of April and was the first ascent of either of Denali's two summits.

Now wearing the required pair of latex gloves before handling photographs, Sturm took them out. They show a climbing party at about 15,800 feet – far higher on the 20,310-foot mountain than previously seen.

"The photographs took my breath away. We have never seen pictures of these men climbing," he said. "This is photographic evidence that we've never had before."

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## A discredited story

The New York Times on June 5, 1910, carried three full pages about the climb under the headline “First account of conquering Mount McKinley” and included a photograph made at about 11,000 feet. Other photographs were from lower elevations and included a fake photo created to illustrate the summit.

The Times coverage included a lengthy overview story by Fairbanks Daily News-Miner Editor W.F. Thompson and a separate detailed account of the ascent told by climb organizer Tom Lloyd. The News-Miner had been a big booster of the summit claims.

Within weeks, parts of the Times account were discredited. So the climb was widely viewed as a hoax until 1918 when Hudson Stuck published his book on his successful 1913 ascent of Denali's southern – and higher – summit.

The Sourdoughs – Lloyd, Pete Anderson, Charlie McGonagal and Billy Taylor – didn't know at the time that the North Peak is about 850 feet lower than the South Peak. The 1910 Sourdough Expedition climb is believed to be the first to summit either peak.

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The archive photographs and Sturm's additional research in the diaries of the Stuck party support the claim by Sourdough Expedition members that they indeed planted a flag on the North Peak in 1910. All of Stuck's team saw the 14-foot spruce flagpole three years after it was erected.

## Analyzing the photos

How did those photographs end up with Dorothy Jean Ray, whose family donated them to the library? Ray acquired the photographs upon the death of her mother, who was editor of another Fairbanks newspaper and a friend of Taylor's.

Sturm and climbing partner Philip Marshall used maps and digital software to locate where each of the photographs in the Times story and the newly discovered photographs were taken.

The folder contains pictures of the climbers en route, a unique alpenstock climbing staff carried by Anderson and the flagpole. The folder also holds several scenic photos.

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Top: Charlie McGonagal, left, and Pete Anderson, two of the four-man Sourdough Expedition, pause during their climb. The men are misidentified in the hand-written caption. Bottom: A climber leaves tracks at about 13,000 feet on what today is known as Karstens Ridge on Denali. Indentations to the left of the footprints are believed to be from a 14-foot spruce flagpole strapped across a climber's back. The pole was planted near the top of Denali's North Peak. Photos from Dorothy Jean Ray Collection, Rasmuson Library Archives.

One photograph shows a climber and his tracks heading upward below Browne Tower on what today is named Karstens Ridge, a well-known segment of a popular route to the true summit. It is named for Harry Karstens, the guide on Stuck's successful 1913 climb and later the first superintendent of Mount McKinley National Park, now Denali National Park and Preserve.

"It's 1910 and nobody has ever been up that ridge," Sturm said, "so it really ought to be called Taylor's Ridge or something, because the first guys who go up that ridge are these guys. They are at 13,000 feet in this photo."

At this point on the mountain, the climbing party consisted only of Anderson, McGonagal and Taylor. Lloyd descended to a lower camp.

The photograph shows a climber, unidentifiable in the distance, holding a 7-foot alpenstock in his right hand. The stock's snow indentations can be seen alongside the right of the climber's footprints.

During his research, Sturm discovered that the University of Alaska Museum of the North has Anderson's alpenstock from that climb. It was donated early in the museum's history, marked as item No. 55 in the museum's vast collections.

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*Pat Druckenmiller, the University of Alaska Museum of the North's director, and **Angela Linn '99**, senior collections manager, inspect the alpenstock used by Pete Anderson during the first ascent of Denali in 1910. UAF/GI photo by JR Ancheta.*

"The only climbers ever on Denali with a staff that tall were there in 1910," Sturm said. "This is one of the Sourdoughs in this photograph."

The photograph also shows tell-tale diagonal snow indentations from what Sturm said can only be the 14-foot spruce pole. The pole, which would have been strapped across the back of a climber,

repeatedly bounced into the snow on the climber's left.

Another photo looks back down the mountain from about 14,500 feet. Sturm determined from the shadows in this photo that the time was about 4 p.m., too late in the day for the men to reach the summit but light enough for them to climb a little higher and make another photograph.

That higher photograph, also in the folder, is a panorama looking down from the surface of Harper Glacier at about 15,800 feet elevation. No known photograph shows them any higher.

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This April 1910 photograph, taken at about 15,800 feet, looks down the Harper Glacier toward the Muldrow Glacier far below. Matthew Sturm and colleague Philip Marshall used maps and digital software to pinpoint the location where the photograph was made. The hand-written date on the photo, March 1911, is incorrect. Photo from Dorothy Jean Ray collection, Rasmuson Library Archives.

## A richer tale

From the photographs and other research, Sturm is fairly certain that, after ascending on the day the photos were taken, the men reached the summit two days later.

By relating the Times photos and the newly found photos to the correct locations on a map, and using information from a 1939 Taylor interview, Sturm and Marshall reasoned that Taylor, Peterson and McGonagal left camp in the predawn hours from 11,000 feet. McGonagal faltered at some point and was left to wait. Taylor and Peterson continued and planted the 14-foot pole and flag in a rocky area a few hundred feet shy of the frozen and rockless North Peak.

Lloyd returned to Fairbanks later in April, about two months before the other three men, and announced all four climbers had reached the mountain's "two summits." He was met with local skepticism, however, because he had no summit photographs and was not physically fit for climbing.

The other climbers remained at Kantishna, working their mining claims, and didn't return to Fairbanks until June – after the exaggerated claims of the New York Times story had been published.

Questions about the Sourdough Expedition have persisted for more than a century. Photos and research by Sturm add to the story.

"What has emerged is a better, richer, more human story about these men and their climb," Sturm said.

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*This view, photographed by a member of the 1910 Sourdough Expedition, looks northeastward from the surface of the Muldrow Glacier through what is today known as McGonagall Pass, at an elevation of about 5,500 feet. Charlie McGonagal, one of the Sourdoughs, named the pass after Bill McPhee, a Fairbanks bar owner who helped finance the expedition. In 1916, the name was changed to McGonagall (sic) Pass, according to the U.S. Geological Survey's National Map database. Photo from Dorothy Jean Ray Collection, Rasmuson Library Archives.*



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