

Chapter One: The Roof of the Continent

On a clear day in south-central or interior Alaska, the sight is inescapable – and breathtaking. For more than a hundred miles in every direction, it looms over everything and dominates the scene. The Mountain, the Big One, the Tall One. The Koyukon called it *Deenaalee*, the Lower Tanana named it *Deenaadheet* or *Deenmadhee*, the Dena'ina called it *Dghelay Ka'a*, and at least six other Native groups had their own names for it.¹ In the late 18th century various Europeans came calling, and virtually everyone who passed by was moved to comment on it. The Russians called it *Bulshaia* or *Tenada*, and though explorers from other nations were less specific, even the most hard-bitten adventurers were in awe of its height and majesty. No American gave it a name until Densmore's Mountain appeared in the late 1880s, and the name that eventually stuck—Mount McKinley—was not applied until the waning days of the nineteenth century.² Government geologists soon recognized that the mountain was higher than any other in North America; thus it is not at all surprising that visitors, of all stripes, would forever be attracted to take in its view, rhapsodize about its ethereal beauty, record it in silver nitrate and celluloid, and hike on its flanks.

Mount McKinley, highest point on the North American Continent, viewed from the north. Charles Ott Photo, DENA 3557, Denali National Park & Preserve Museum Collection.

A Land of Rugged Contrasts

As outstanding as it is on its own, Mount McKinley is merely the highest point in the long, sinuous cordillera that winds from the Aleutian Islands to the Alaska-Yukon border. The Alaska Range, which forms the highest and northernmost portion of that cordillera, extends from the Lake Clark country, 160 miles southwest of McKinley, to the Tok-Tetlin area, 250 miles to the east. Within this range are a number of majestic mountains: more than a dozen reach at least 12,000 feet above sea level, and peaks exceeding 10,000 feet high are so numerous that several are as yet unnamed. Towering over the rest are Mount McKinley—which has two peaks, each more than 19,000 feet high—and Mount Foraker, with an elevation of 17,400 feet. The high country surrounding these peaks is so extensive that one can fly for more than 90 miles in a straight line and see almost nothing but glaciers and snowfields. Because most of the range above the 7,000 foot level is covered by snow and ice all year long, some 17 percent of Denali National Park and Preserve is perpetually snowbound.³

Mountains and snowfields, however, are just one element in the remarkable high country of

the central Alaska Range. Much of the range, to be sure, is snow-clad only in winter, and many Alaska Range peaks beyond the immediate vicinity of Mount McKinley top out at 9,000 feet elevation or less. To the south of the mountain's backbone lies a broad band of rugged foothills incised by glacial tongues that reach 30 miles or more beyond the high ramparts. Beyond the glaciers' termini lies the great Susitna Lowland, which drains the entire area south of the Alaska Range crest and occupies the entire broad area south to Knik Arm and Cook Inlet.

North of the Alaska Range and northeast of the McKinley River, the mountain fastness gives way to a discontinuous series of highlands—the Outer Range, the Kantishna Hills and adjacent high country—with elevations reaching 4,500 to 6,000 feet above sea level. Between these peaks are located various low, rolling valleys that are between two and ten miles wide. West of these highlands, and north of the Alaska Range at the western end of the park and preserve, is a broad, high plain, dotted with lakes and wetlands, that stretches out into the Tanana and Kuskokwim River drainages.⁴

Because of the huge differences in altitude between the Alaska Range and the adjacent country to the north and south, a stark contrast in life forms is evident to even the most casual observer. In the higher elevations, and particularly in glaciated areas, resident plants and animals are either scarce or nonexistent. Below that zone is a hundred-mile-long oval of sparse dry tundra. On the north side of the Alaska Range, a broad, pockmarked band beyond the dry tundra is dominated by moist tundra. Interspersed within the moist tundra, however are various river valleys and lower slopes where a mixed evergreen and deciduous forest (of white and black spruce, poplars, white birches, and various willow varieties) holds sway. Other areas more distant from the mountain heights, both to the north and south, are also composed of mixed-forest species. And several areas north of the Alaska Range, including much of the land in the vicinity of Lake Minchumina, is dominated by brush muskeg.⁵

The area's animal life is similarly diverse. The region is justifiably well known for its so-called charismatic megafauna, and Denali's bus drivers

Denali caribou frequently rest on snow patches during the summer. DENA 3861, Denali National Park & Preserve Museum Collection



are quick to note that many visitors equate a successful trip along the park road with their ability to spot five major mammals: barren ground caribou, Dall sheep, moose, wolves, and grizzly bear. Those same bus drivers, however, are quick to point out that the area offers excellent habitat for many other large animals, such as coyotes, lynx, red foxes, and black bear. They might also note that other species of mammals inhabit the park (for a total of 25), along with one amphibian species, 15 species of fish, and 166 bird species.⁶ These animal species occupy a variety of habitats, and regarding most of the large mammal species, the areas that they inhabit may vary considerably from one year to the next.

The Denali caribou herd, which inhabits the park and preserve, graze in many areas outside of the high country. Of other major mammal species, Dall sheep inhabit the Outer Range foothills and the lower slopes of the Alaska Range, and moose may be seen throughout the area below the 3,000-foot isopleths. Wolves, in several packs, inhabit many areas in the northern half of the “old park” as well as in certain areas in the

so-called “northern additions” and in drainages south of the high peaks; and grizzlies are found both north and south of the Alaska Range, primarily in tundra and in adjacent riparian taiga vegetation. Only the higher, glaciated slopes are bereft of large mammals. Although most of the large mammalian species are found on both sides of the range, these animals (according to a recent management plan) “occur within the park in greater concentrations north

of the Alaska Range than south of the range.” Furthermore, viewing opportunities are excellent on the northern slopes; by contrast, “most areas to the south of the range are not expansive and open and thus do not afford a comparable viewing experience.”⁷

Early Residents and Visitors

Although the present park and preserve supports a broad spectrum of plant and animal species, conditions in most of this area are fairly marginal for year-round human subsistence. Factors contributing to this marginality, all of which are a function of the area’s relatively high elevations, include a preponderance of tundra vegetation (and thus a lack of firewood) and relatively severe winters (with poor hunting prospects and periodic high winds). Thus it is perhaps no surprise that the earliest known sites in the area—Dry Creek, Walker Road, and Moose Creek, each more than 11,000 years old—are located outside of the park. The Carlo Creek and Panguingue Creek sites, which date from at least 8,000 years B.P., are also located just outside of the park boundaries.⁸

Archeological excavation at the Teklanika West site, Teklanika River, 1961. DENA 19-17, Denali National Park & Preserve Museum Collection



Based on the archeological record, human populations appear to have existed within the present-day park boundaries for more than 7,000 years. The first known evidence of human occupation, a piece of charcoal from a bluff near the Teklanika River, has been radiocarbon dated to $7,130 \pm 98$ B.P.⁹ Humans appear to have stayed at that site, off and on, for more than 5,500 years. More recent prehistoric sites are found at Lake Minchumina, just northwest of the park, which are between 1,000 and 2,600 years old.¹⁰ Archeologists thus far have recorded 84 prehistoric or protohistoric sites in the park and preserve. Most of these sites consist of one or more lithic artifacts, and it is hypothesized that they are related to former hunting camps, overlooks, or butchering locations. Because of their lack of cultural context, however, archeologists can only guess at the age of most of these artifacts and at the functions they served.¹¹

Because of the lack of broadly applicable evidence, there is considerable dispute about the cultural tradition of these early peoples. Some researchers consider the development of a recognizable Athabaskan cultural pattern began roughly 6,000 years ago. Others, however, feel that the earliest peoples were called Amerinds, while the separate Athabaskan tradition represents a later migration. And still others consider that people representing the Athabaskan tradition began living in Alaska as early as 11,000 B.P.¹² Regardless of when they began, Athabaskan culture and ethnic identity has been traced back 1,500 years or more according to linguistic evidence, and about 1,000 years through their material culture.

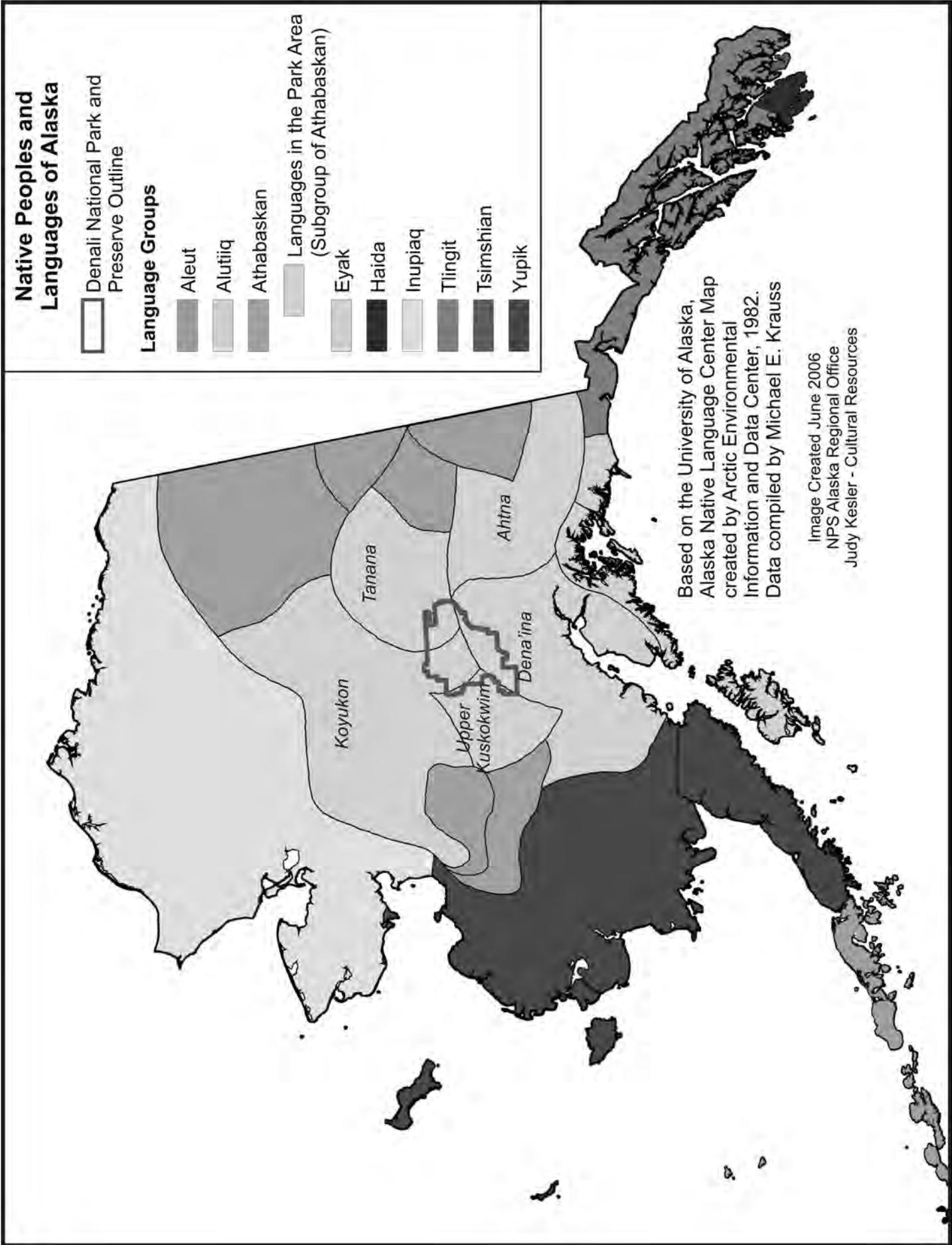
For the past several hundred years, five groups of Athabaskan-speaking Indians have lived in the park and surrounding areas. (See Map 1.) These groups include the Ahtna, the Dena'ina, the Upper Kuskokwim (Kolchan), the Lower Tanana, and the Koyukon.¹³ The Ahtna, whose culture was centered on the Copper River valley, includes the southeastern part of the present park and preserve within its territory. The Dena'ina, a coastal group of Athabaskans centered along upper Cook Inlet, includes the southcentral part of the park and preserve. The Upper Kuskokwim culture, based on several villages along the Kuskokwim River, utilized lands near the western end of the park and preserve. The Lower Tanana people, based on various villages along the Tanana River, has long been centered on the present-day vicinity of Fairbanks and includes the northeastern corner of the park and preserve. And the Koyukon Athabaskan culture encompassed a vast stretch of the Yukon, Koyukuk, and Tanana River drainages, including the northern

and western end of the park and preserve.¹⁴

Non-native exploration of the area surrounding the present-day park unit was slow in coming, primarily because it was distant from the coast and remote from easily navigable rivers. The Russians, who held a nominal jurisdiction over present-day Alaska from 1741 to 1867, never penetrated within 50 miles of the park unit. And while it is indisputable that virtually all of Alaska was being either directly or indirectly influenced by European-based explorers—indirect influences being trading networks and disease transmission vectors—the reality is that non-Natives, during this period, impacted the lives of those who either occupied or used the lands in Denali's shadow less than other groups who lived along the coast or along major inland trading routes.¹⁵ By all accounts, non-Natives' only direct influence on the area during this time was a series of uncoordinated attempts to apply names to the area's mountains: Russian Creole explorer Andrei Glazunov, in 1834, applied the Ingalik name "Tenada" to the "great mountain" that loomed more than 100 miles northeast of his route along the Stony River, and William Dall, who took part in the ill-fated Western Union Telegraph Expedition of 1865-67, proposed that the mountain chain that divided the Yukon River from the coastal country to the south be named the "Alaskan Range." Locals, over time, shortened his suggestion to the Alaska Range, a name that still stands.¹⁶

The purchase of Russian America by the U.S. government, at first, had few immediate impacts on Alaska outside of Sitka, and for more than a decade afterward, few Americans ventured north. But in 1880, a major gold strike took place along Gastineau Channel, and Juneau erupted into life. Soon afterward, more gold was discovered at nearby Douglas, and before long, an increasing number of prospectors headed north and began fanning across the north country. Gold was discovered along the Fortymile River, near the U.S.-Canada border, in 1886; and in 1892-95, additional discoveries took place along Birch Creek (which caused Circle City to spring into existence) and along Resurrection Creek (which created the Hope and Sunrise boom towns, on the shores of Turnagain Arm).¹⁷

Most prospectors were far less fortunate. As a group, however, they were willing to go virtually anywhere in search of the elusive yellow metal. A party led by Frank Densmore, for example, crossed from the Tanana to the Kuskokwim drainage in 1889; though he found no Eldorado along the way, his enthusiasm over the huge, unnamed peak to the southeast prompted his peers



to call it “Densmore’s Mountain.” Densmore, or perhaps other prospectors during this period, may have entered the boundaries of the present park unit.¹⁸

Seven years after Densmore’s trek, another prospector, William A. Dickey, was one of several who approached the mountain from the south. Confronted at first by torrential rains and cloudy skies, Dickey was not able to get a clear view of the Alaska Range until he reached the so-called “great forks” of the Susitna River, near present-day Talkeetna. Although he and his fellow prospectors continued to ascend the Susitna until they reached “an impassable canon, whose upper end was blocked by a high waterfall,”

along a tributary of the Klondike River, and although that discovery took place more than 300 miles to the east, the impacts of the Klondike gold discovery soon reverberated throughout the north country. Individual prospectors were first to respond to the promise of riches, but before long, the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Army began to play strong supporting roles; the two agencies engaged in various expeditions into Alaska’s unexplored hinterlands and searched for viable routes between the coast and various Interior prospecting areas.²⁰

The fervor surrounding the Klondike strike resulted in the two agencies conducting five different expeditions into the countryside surrounding



Mt. McKinley, from the south side, as William Dickey viewed it. The Chulitna River, near Talkeetna, is in the foreground. Candy Waugaman Collection

they probably got no closer to the present-day park than Densmore. Unlike his predecessor, however, Dickey decided to publicize his trip in an influential Eastern newspaper. In the January 24, 1897 issue of the *New York Sun*, he gave an avid, detailed description of the mountain he had encountered. In addition, he gave the mountain a new name—Mount McKinley—and justified it because both he and McKinley were avowed proponents of a gold standard, and McKinley’s nomination as the 1896 Republican presidential candidate “was the first news we received on our way out of that wonderful wilderness.” Dickey’s contention that the mountain was the highest in North America—soon corroborated by others—gave additional credence to his verbiage, and a short time later the U.S. government accepted Mount McKinley as an official designation.¹⁹

Dickey’s sojourn up the Susitna River took place the same year as a huge gold strike took place

Mount McKinley in 1898 and 1899. In 1898, a USGS party headed by Josiah Edward Spurr and William Schuyler Post ascended the Yentna and Skwentna rivers, crossed over Rainy Pass, and left the area via the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River. That same year two other parties ascended the Susitna drainage, much as William Dickey had done two years earlier: George H. Eldridge and Robert Muldrow of the USGS, and Sgt. William Yanert of the U.S. Army. Both of these expeditions went farther inland than Dickey; both traversed the Broad Pass area and reached the north-flowing Nenana River before retreating back to Cook Inlet.

The following year, two more Army parties entered the area. The first, led by Pvt. George Van Schoonhoven, ascended the Susitna drainage and reached the Broad Pass area before reversing course, much as the other exploring parties had done a year earlier. The other expedition,

Facing page: Five different Athabaskan-speaking Indian groups have utilized the area now contained in Denali National Park and Preserve.

In the words of photographer Stephen Foster: "Chief Dearfan and his tribe of about 50 Indians—chief fourth from the left. Sesui second from right and wife who saved Lieut. Herron and 8 soldiers on first Govt. expedition in this section. March 10, 1919."
 Stephen Foster
 Collection, 69-92-330, University of



led by Lt. Joseph Herron, began by following in the footsteps of the 1898 Spurr-Post expedition; it ascended the Yentna River. This party, however, ventured north to the Kichatna River, crossed the Alaska Range via Simpson Pass, then made its way to the Kuskokwim River's South Fork. Herron's group differed from the Spurr-Post expedition in that its goal was a route to the interior. As a result, Herron and his men nearly starved in the area's swamps until rescued by the Natives of Telida village. Chief Sesui of the village accommodated the men until freeze-up that fall, after which villagers led the party to the headwaters of the Kuskokwim's North Fork, near Lake Minchumina. Guides then led the party down the Cosna River to Fort Gibbon, the Army camp that had recently been built at the Yukon-Tanana river confluence.²¹ As a result of these combined efforts, military authorities were now familiar with the southern, eastern, and western margins of the present park unit, and at least one of these groups may have been the first to tread within the boundaries of Denali National Park and Preserve.²²

By the fall of 1899, the Klondike rush was over; interest moved on to the beaches of Nome, and in 1902, a gold strike near the Tanana brought a new rush and prospectors began flocking to Fairbanks. During this same period, a flurry of new interest was shown in the Mount McKinley region; at least four unrelated expeditions were launched to the area in either 1902 or 1903. In the spring of 1902, the USGS dispatched Alfred H. Brooks, along with topographer De Witt Lee Reaburn, to explore "the largest unexplored area in southern Alaska and [run] a traverse to the Yukon which should connect the previous surveys of the Susitna, Kuskokwim, and Tanana

ridges." The Brooks-Reaburn party responded by ascending the Yentna River drainage to Rainy Pass, after which it dropped down to the northern flank of the Alaska Range and skirted it—first to the northeast and then to the east—all the way to the Nenana River, near present-day McKinley Park Station. The party then crossed the river, ascended the Yanert Fork for several miles, headed north over the Alaska Range and descended the Nenana River to the Tanana.²³ And that same year, engineers working for the Alaska Central Railroad began a two-year survey



Alfred H. Brooks led the first U.S. Geological Survey expedition exploring along the north slope of the Alaska Range in 1902, through what is now Denali National Park and Preserve. Portraits, #246, U.S. Geological



A prospector's camp on Eureka Creek typifies camps on the creeks of the Kantishna Mining District during the gold rush. Prindle Collection, #526, U.S. Geological Survey

effort that brought them from the Susitna Valley up to Broad Pass and on to the Tanana Valley.²⁴

The following year—1903—witnessed the first attempt to climb Mt. McKinley. James Wickersham, the U.S. District Judge for Alaska, left the Fairbanks gold camp with four others. They floated down the Tanana River, then began ascending the Kantishna River. Upon reaching its confluence with the Toklat River, the party climbed Chitsia Peak, then headed southwest along the margin of the Kantishna Hills. They decided to ascend the mountain via Peters Glacier. They continued on to Jeffrey Glacier but were stopped cold by a “tremendous precipice,” now known as Wickersham Wall, that separated them from McKinley’s North Peak. The disappointed party had no choice but to descend from the mountain and return to Fairbanks. Just a few weeks later, another party came to the area with similar intentions. Led by Dr. Frederick Cook, a recent medical school graduate, the 18-man party followed a route much like Brooks and Reaburn’s the year before. They made several unsuccessful attempts to approach the mountain from the west; and they, like Wickersham, tried to climb McKinley via the Peters Glacier. The party then meandered along the base of the Alaska Range, probably as far east as the Easy Pass area; it then surmounted the ridge, rafted down the Chulitna, and descended the Susitna to Cook Inlet.²⁵

Wickersham’s party, during its 1903 sojourn, stumbled across some “colors” along Chitsia

Creek and filed mining claims that were recorded at Rampart.²⁶ Spurred by the news, prospectors soon filtered into the area. The following year, Joe Dalton spotted gold along Crooked Creek in the nearby Toklat River drainage, and after Jack Horn and Joe Quigley struck pay dirt along Glacier Creek in early 1905 and returned to Fairbanks with the news, the Kantishna gold rush ensued. In July and August of that year, hundreds if not thousands of prospectors flocked to the hills and staked their length and breadth, and several instant towns sprang up: Roosevelt along the Kantishna River, Diamond City at the Moose Creek-Bearpaw River confluence, Glacier City near the Bearpaw River-Glacier Creek confluence, and Eureka (later Kantishna), where Moose Creek and Eureka Creek meet.²⁷

Up until this time, the area surrounding Mount McKinley was being explored and developed in a way similar to most of the rest of Alaska. Because of its isolation from navigable waterways, European-based peoples had filtered into the area somewhat later than many other areas in Alaska. The recent gold rush, however, suggested that this area might soon develop to an even greater degree. The possibilities seemed limitless. New visitors, however, would soon intrude upon the scene. These visitors are discussed in the following chapter.

Notes - Chapter 1

1 James Kari, *Native Place Names Mapping in Denali National Park and Preserve*, draft

final report (Fairbanks, UAF Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., December 1999), 7-8. Earlier sources, such as Donald Orth's *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, USGS Professional Paper 567 (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1967, pp. 266-67, 610) stated that the primary Native names for the peak were "Denali," used by the Tanana, and

“Doleika” or “Traleika,” used by the Dena’ina (Tanaina).

2 Orth, *Dictionary*, 610; Gail E. H. Evans, *From Myth to Reality: Travel Experiences and Landscape Perceptions in the Shadow of Mount McKinley, Alaska, 1876-1938* (unpublished M.A. Thesis, U.C. Santa Barbara, February 1987), 57.

3 Alaska Planning Group, *Final Environmental Statement, Proposed Mt. McKinley National Park Additions* (Washington?, U.S. Interior Department, October 1974), 67; Phil Brease interview, June 6-7, 2004.

4 Alfred H. Brooks, *The Mount McKinley Region, Alaska*, USGS Professional Paper 70 (Washington, GPO, 1911), 43-48; APG, *FES*, 66-67; Clyde Wahrhaftig, *Physiographic Divisions of Alaska*, USGS Professional Paper 482 (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1965), 29, 35-36, plate 1. The “Outer Range” is of local usage and is not a recognized place name.

5 Brooks, *Mt. McKinley Region*, 201; APL, *FES*, 79-81.

6 Carol McIntyre to author, email, June 20 and June 22, 2006.

7 APG, *FES*, 81-104, 577-81; NPS, *General Management Plan, Land Protection Plan [and] Wilderness Suitability Review [for] Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska* [Denver, the author, November 1986], 131, 135.

8 Kristen Griffin, *An Overview and Assessment of Archeological Resources, Denali National Park and Preserve* (Anchorage, NPS, September 1990), 19, 22.

9 Ted Goebel, “Recent Research at Teklanika West: Site Stratigraphy and Dating,” in Frederick Hadleigh West, *American Beginnings; the Prehistory and Paleoecology of Beringia* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 341-43; Frederick H. West, “Teklanika West,” in same volume, pp. 332-41. West, the University of Alaska archeologist who first investigated the Teklanika site, originally estimated that earliest human activity there dated back to 8,000-12,000 B.P., but due to methodological advances, that date has since been revised several times. Ted Goebel to Research Coordinator, DENA, April 10, 1991; Griffin, *Overview and Assessment*, 22.

10 Griffin, *Overview and Assessment*, 26-28.

11 *Ibid.*, 81-82, 179-98, 235-70.

12 *Ibid.*, 28-29.

13 *Ibid.*, 34-36. Dena’ina Natives were formerly known as the Tanaina.

14 *Ibid.*, 37; James Kari, *Native Place Names Mapping in Denali National Park and Preserve*, draft final report (December 1999), Figure 1; Michael E. Krauss, comp., *Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska* (map), revised edition, 1982.

15 William E. Brown, *A History of the Denali-Mount McKinley Region, Alaska* (Santa Fe, NPS, 1991), 11, 13.

16 Brown, *A History*, 14; Evans, *From Myth to Reality*, 58.

17 Michael Gates, *Gold at Fortymile Creek; Early Days in the Yukon* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1994), 32, 35-37, 65-67; Virginia Doyle Heiner, *Alaska Mining History, A Source Document* (OHA Series #17, July 1977, 263-64, 405; Mary J. Barry, *A History of Mining on the Kenai Peninsula* (Anchorage, Alaska Northwest, 1973), 37-45.

18 Evans, *From Myth to Reality*, 59, 61.

19 Brown, *A History*, 16-18; *Anchorage Daily Times*, September 9, 1971, 9.

20 Brown (*A History*, p. 18) noted that in 1898, Congress asked the USGS to “become the Nation’s chief trailblazer in Alaska,” and as a result, the agency sent out several exploring parties that year. But other expeditions were the sole responsibility of the U.S. Army.

21 Brown, *A History*, 19-20; Evans, *From Myth to Reality*, 64-68, 382-85; Alfred Hulse Brooks, *Blazing Alaska’s Trails*, second edition (Fairbanks, Univ. of Alaska Press, 1973), 285-90; Morgan Sherwood, *The Exploration of Alaska, 1865-1900* (New Haven, Yale, 1965), 160, 164-67, 174-76.

22 Lt. Herron’s 1899 expedition entered the present-day national preserve when it crossed Simpson Pass, and either the Eldridge-Muldrow or Yanert expeditions (both in 1898) may have entered the present-day national park when they crossed Broad Pass and arrived at the Nenana River. As noted above, Frank Densmore or another prospector may have entered the park earlier, in the late 1880s to mid-1890s.

23 Evans, *From Myth to Reality*, 71-74, 386-87; Brown, *A History*, 23-27; Brooks, *The Mount McKinley Region, Alaska*, 169-80.

24 Brown, *A History*, 19; Mary J. Barry, *Seward, Alaska; A History of the Gateway City, Vol. I: Prehistory to 1914* (Anchorage, the author, 1986), 35-36.

25 Evans, *From Myth to Reality*, 75-80, 388-89; Brown, *A History*, 32-38, 55. Two excellent accounts of the Wickersham and later Mount McKinley expeditions are Terris Moore, *Mt. McKinley: The Pioneer Climbs* (Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press, 1967) and Tom Walker, *Kantishna: Musher, Miners, and Mountaineers* (Missoula, MT, Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 2005).

26 Brown, *A History*, 34. Gold miners had established Rampart, along the Yukon River, in 1896.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-64.

