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# Summiting in the Last Wilderness: A Cultural and Environmental History of Mountaineering in Alaska

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**CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE**

Summiting in the Last Wilderness: A Cultural and Environmental History of  
Mountaineering in Alaska

SUBMITTED TO

Professor Tamara Venit-Shelton

AND

DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY

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for

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION	.....	2
ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMBERS	.....	13
COLONIZING CLIMBERS	.....	39
WOMEN CLIMBERS	.....	61
CONCLUSION: A BETTER WAY TO CLIMB	.....	83
BIBLIOGRAPHY	.....	89

## Introduction

Climbers, backpackers, and skiers are an elite corps, you might say, in preserving the values of the environment. Who better knows that we need the wilderness to bring people closer to their original nature, that we need a place to be alone, where nature can bring us its good tidings. But we outdoor people know full well that we also need, for survival, the raw materials found in nature. Our backpacks of aluminum, our pitons of steel. We need synthetic fabrics and insulation- the products of petroleum. Even as we stand alone on some outcrop of rock looking at a landscape few may have ever seen, we know we are very much a part of the world of men and women, of industry and energy, of expanding demands on the fragile environment of the planet... There must be a balance. To find it is an awesome challenge.<sup>1</sup>

-Jim Whittaker, quoted in an REI catalog

The above quote, from the CEO of the outdoor climbing store REI during the 1960s and the first American to reach the top of Mt. Everest, points to some of the central themes of climbing history in Alaska. From the Duke of Abruzzi's 1897 ascent of Mt. Saint Elias to women's treks into the mountains around their homesteads, climbing has connected people to the land and the mountains. It facilitated interactions between humans and their environments that informed climbers' environmental ethics and spurred them to fight for the preservation of the wilderness grew to love through their sport. Yet as Whittaker points out, climbers were not alone on mountain peaks, but parts of communities of other climbers and influenced by the culture and ideas in the broader society around them. Climbers brought these ideas into the mountains, allowing cultural norms and dynamics to influence the way they climbed and what meaning they instilled

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<sup>1</sup> Whittaker, Jim quoted in Agosti, Dona. *The High-country Backpacker*. Tulsa, OK: Winchester, 1982. 217.

in their activity. For example, climbers used the sport as an extension of imperialism when it first emerged in Alaska in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and later used the sport as an organizing platform for women's communities in the 1960s and 1970s. Climbers also carried society's ideas about the environment into the mountains, allowing their mountaineering activity to reflect their ideas about the relationship between humans and the environment, but also to inform their desire to protect or develop the land. From conquest and dominion over nature, to ecofeminist notions of union with the natural world, mountaineers in Alaska have used their activity as a vehicle of informing their environmentalism.

Despite the complexities of the sport's cultural and environmental history, a quick browse through any library's sport section and will likely result in a wealth of literature on prime time sports such as football, baseball, basketball and merely a few mentions of climbing, skiing, and mountaineering. Even in Alaska, where there are no professional teams and there is a wealth of pristine climbing and skiing areas, historians have neglected to analyze the place of these sports in Alaska's history.

Before the last decade historical scholarship on sports such as skiing and climbing anywhere in the United States focused on the technical developments in each sport's history, and overlooked the sport's broader social implications and meanings.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, several historians have published works that argue that sports such as climbing, skiing, and mountaineering played a larger and more complex role in the social, cultural, and environmental history of a specific place than acknowledged by previous

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Fry, John. *The Story of Modern Skiing*. Hanover: University of New England, 2006, and Wicken, Ingrid P. *Pray for Snow: The History of Skiing in Southern California*. Norco, CA: Vasa, 2001.

scholarship, and that these sports deserve more attention than a few references on the library shelf. These new cultural histories focus on a sport's impact and influence on the people and environment of a specific area, and show how the sport reflects social and cultural trends. From Colorado skiing to climbing in Yosemite, these works illuminate how sport, place, and society merge.

In J.B. Jackson's essay "The Places We Play," Jackson argued that alternative sports, such as mountaineering and skiing, expressed, "a basic impulse to search for a new identity," and forged new relationships between man and environment.<sup>3</sup> His ideas, published in 1998, forged a new space for considering and analyzing wilderness sports. Annie Gilbert Coleman's *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* analyzed the cultural history and meaning of skiing in the Colorado Mountains, and built on the theory that individual sports in wilderness areas reflected and formed identity.<sup>4</sup> Joseph Taylor's *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*, also critically examined the history of a sport through a social and cultural analysis of climbing in Yosemite National Park.<sup>5</sup> Jackson's ideas and Coleman and Taylor's books complicate the role of wilderness sports in history, and by focusing on sports that traditionally took place in nature areas they sought to understand how skiing and climbing informed and influenced perceptions of self, community, and environment.

My own research builds on the projects undertaken in *Pilgrims of the Vertical* and *Ski Style* by analyzing both how the people and land in Alaska were affected by

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson, J. B. "The Places We Play." *The Wilson Quarterly* 21.3 (1997): 72-89. *JSTOR*.

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, Annie Gilbert. *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies*. Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Joseph E. *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010.

mountaineering, and how the sport's development reflected trends in Alaskan history. While others before have undertaken the project of recording the first ascents of major peaks in the state and compiling the topography and terrain of the mountains, which is no small feat considering the extensive mountain ranges and popularity of climbing, this work focuses on what some of the first major ascents meant for mountaineering communities and Alaskan residents. As historians Maurice Isserman, Weaver Angas and Dee Molenaar argue, "mountaineering history can be more than the record of "one damn peak after another." Mountain climbing is an endeavor that takes place above but not apart from the world at large."<sup>6</sup> The cultural and political trends of Alaska influenced mountaineering and reflected the values ascribed to it, and this thesis attempts to unpack some of these trends.

Additionally the forms of mountaineering that this thesis examines are not only the technical, challenging climbs on peaks such as Denali or Mount Fairweather that require roping up, ice axes, crampons, extensive knowledge of rock and ice climbing, and multiple day or week long travel, but also the climbs requiring only a pair of hiking boots and the will to propel oneself uphill. For the purpose of this thesis, the qualification of mountaineering as sport is the presence of humans in the mountains for recreation purposes.

In undertaking research that has not yet been tackled by historians, the main sources used are the letters, newspaper articles, autobiographies, and interviews with athletes. These sources provide valuable insight into the sport and the mountaineering

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<sup>6</sup> Isserman, Maurice, Stewart Angas. Weaver, and Dee Molenaar. *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

community, but do not reflect the mountaineering community as a whole, or the individual experiences of all mountaineers in Alaska. In particular it is difficult to find documentation of the type of “backyard” mountaineering, or climbing and hiking in local areas, especially in the years before World War II and the creation of mountaineering clubs. By offering insight otherwise unavailable, the memories of participants and their accounts of this activity are invaluable to the history of mountaineering. Despite the noted difficulties of relying on interviews for research, this thesis attempts to navigate the inevitable bias of interviews by supplementing research with primary source evidence.

Yet while the work undertaken in this thesis relies on primary sources and interviews, the ideas and framework for interpreting this information relies on the work of several prominent historians of Alaska. In particular, the works of Stephen Haycox and Morgan Sherwood have influenced my interpretation of Alaskan history. In *Alaska: An American Colony*, Haycox argues that Alaska’s past is dominated by the colonization of its indigenous peoples and of its land, first by Russians and later by Americans. Furthermore, this process of colonization continues to this day, with the constant structural impediments and economic undermining of traditional practices of Native culture within rural Alaskan villages.<sup>7</sup> In his book *Frigid Embrace*, Haycox extends the ideas on Alaska as a colonial territory to the land as well. While Alaskans have changed their practices over the years, white Alaskans have continued to exploit the natural resources of Alaska through the domination of the land, just as they have dominated the Native peoples.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Haycox, Stephen W. *Alaska: An American Colony*. Seattle: U of Washington, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Haycox, Stephen W. *Frigid Embrace: Politics, Economics, and Environment in Alaska*. Corvallis: Oregon State UP.

Sherwood also engaged with the concept of Alaskans' connection to the land. This thesis relies in particular on his essay "The Wilderness and Alaska," which illuminates how to define wilderness in the Alaskan context. In an argument posed originally by Roderick Nash in his seminal work *Wilderness and the American Mind*, wilderness ceases to be a place, but rather a flawed idea that humans and nature could exist apart.<sup>9</sup> In seeking to define the term "wilderness," Sherwood argues that there is no land unaffected by humans, especially in this age of technology, and as such there is no wilderness. This thesis employs the theory that people adhere to a concept of wilderness in Alaska in which humans exist in a degree of separation from the land and wildlife, when actually they are inescapably interconnected. Moreover, in critiquing this connection to land posed by the wilderness ideal, ideas from both William Cronon, in his groundbreaking essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," and from the famous conservationist philosopher Aldo Leopold provide the basis to suggest a different land ethic and conceptualization of wilderness in Alaska.<sup>10</sup>

The first chapter deals with the relationship between Alaskans and their environment, as influenced by mountaineering. In focusing on a sport that takes place outdoors and relies entirely on man's interaction with the environment, mountaineering has informed the conceptualization of land and environment in Alaska, as seen through the eyes of people who relied on it for recreation. Yet while mountaineering intimately connected people to the land, participants have chosen to interpret the meanings of their

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<sup>9</sup> Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion on concepts of wilderness see: Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1.1 (1996): 7, and Leopold, Aldo, and Michael Sewell. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.

connection to nature with a variety of environmental ethics. While conservationists such as John Muir used mountaineering as a key to connecting them to a nature they sought to preserve, the Klondike Gold Rush prospectors separated their mountain recreation from their development and resource extraction agenda. During World War II Alaska land provided the military with two important resources: mountaineering in the peaks of Alaska served the nation by preparing men for battle in the Alps and provided servicemen with an escape from the doldrums of military life. Beyond preservation and development, the land was co-opted by mountaineering servicemen for the good of the nation and embedded with the idea that humans could escape and rejuvenate in the mountains. Yet in the two decades after World War II the debate between developers and conservationists again resurfaced, this time with the added complication of huge population increases in the state. In response to the growing number of people in the mountains and trails previously kept undeveloped, mountaineers organized to both connect people to the environment through promoting specific ways of interacting with the land and fighting in Alaskan politics for environmental policies and protections. Yet both mountaineers and developers viewed the land as a resource, and mountaineers' view of the wilderness as a recreation resource created a problematic environmental ethic.

The second chapter addresses a central theme in Alaskan history: colonization. Alaska Natives held certain beliefs about the mountains in the territory that did not promote climbing in their communities. As mountaineers traveled to claim first ascents, they engaged in an activity foreign to indigenous peoples, and pioneered a connection to the land between white residents that stands apart from the indigenous ways. Moreover, from its start mountaineers conformed to the prevalent 19<sup>th</sup> century general racist policies

and ideas about indigenous peoples, and Alaska Natives more specifically. Their actions in the mountains reflected their imperialism, and furthered the colonial project in Alaska by metaphorically and physically claiming the peaks for the United States. With the steady encouragement of national parks and wilderness reserves throughout the territory, mountaineers once again marginalized Alaska Natives by turning the land over to federal control, but through preserving land also prevented development that would be in the disinterest of Alaska Natives.

The final chapter examines the role of women in mountaineering. From its roots in imperialist Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were discouraged from participating in mountaineering as sport. While in Alaska they were never formally barred from climbing mountains, women did not have access to the same resources as men that were required for expeditions in the territory. Yet the primarily white, middle to upper class women that moved to Alaska participated in mountaineering by exploring and hiking in the mountains around their newly established settlements as an extension of their homemaking project. Barbara Washburn continued to make mountaineering an extension of the domestic expectations for women by climbing alongside her husband in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet until the late 1950s and the formation of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska (MCA), women did not have formal training or avenues for women specific recreation in the mountains. With MCA, white Alaskan women formed communities around mountaineering activities that connected them to the land and informed their political activity in environmental battles across the state.

In order to better understand this thesis and the ideas I attempt to convey about both Alaskan history and mountaineering, it is important to understand several key terms used in the descriptions of Alaskan people and the sport.

Today Alaska Native is the accepted political term for recognizing the indigenous peoples of Alaska. The term is an umbrella for a variety of indigenous peoples including seven or eight broad cultural groups and at least twenty different languages.<sup>11</sup> I use the term to indicate indigenous to Alaska, but in no way mean to group together these distinct cultures and peoples into a single unit or belittle the experiences of the various groups across Alaska. For convenience I refer to these groups with term Alaska Native and attempt to use more precise language whenever possible. In comparison to the term Alaska Native, “white settlers,” refers to the primarily white American people that moved to Alaska in two large migrations. The first migration was the Gold Rush of 1897, where gold was discovered along the Yukon. Gold was also found in Nome and other areas around the territory, prompting a decade of migration intent on striking it rich. The second large influx of people to the state occurred when the military occupied Alaska in World War II in order to protect the land from Japanese invasion. Once troops withdrew and the war ended, thousands of primarily white Americans moved to the territory and doubled its population in the order of a decade. Alaskans also have several terms to refer to people that are not from Alaska, or outside the state. “Lower forty-eight” is a term I use often to indicate the contiguous United States.

In order to better understand the dynamics of climbing, it is also important to understand a few key differences between climbs in Alaska and elsewhere. Most climbs

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, Maria Sháa Tláa. "Alaska and Its People: An Introduction." *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 4.

require organization of an expedition due to lack of settlements and vast distances. The weather is another obstacle: there is permanent snow and ice on peaks over 15,000 feet and prolonged storms year round. Due to the distances from towns and the risks involved in mountain rescue, many climbs cannot call for help. Northern mountains are only accessible by air, and most southern mountains by boat or car. Many mountains are still unnamed and unknown, and to this day the possibility of climbing an unclimbed mountain still exists, even though the larger peaks were long ago claimed.

Though this thesis relies less on discussion of the technicalities of climbing gear and equipment, a generally understanding of what constitutes a technical climb as compared to a hike requires some understanding. A technical climb is one that faces particularly steep aspects, icy conditions, or glacial traverses and requires equipment such as ropes, crampons, and ice axes. Many of the mountains in Alaska that avid mountaineers pursued were technical climbs. The local mountaineers, however, often climbed mountains that required far less gear, skill, and persistence. While climbs such as Mount Blackburn or Denali require multiple days and weeks to wait for the right window of weather and to acclimate to the altitude, many of the mountains in Alaska can be climbed in a day or a few hours without gear. I refer to both types of climbs under the broad category of mountaineering.

While this thesis is an environmental history in that it tells the story of specific interactions with land, the environment includes humans and the varied groups that have interacted with the land in Alaska through mountaineering. In tracing the roots of mountaineering to 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas of manhood and nature, and its progressive development through the Gold Rush years, World War II, and in the two decades of

following post-war population surges, this thesis will unpack some of the complexities and meanings embedded in the practice of mountaineering and complicate the seemingly simplistic act of climbing and hiking up mountains.

### **Environment and Climbers**

In 1879, a mere 12 years after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, climber and preservationist John Muir toured the Southeast coast. From the abundant vegetation, steep cliffs, expansive glaciers and dramatic mountains, Muir found a “home in Alaska.”<sup>12</sup> The scenery “so hopelessly beyond description,”<sup>13</sup> inspired him to climb the peaks he approached for the sublime views and to record his trips in a journal later published with the title *Travels in Alaska*. Muir was one of the first climbers and nature lovers to explore the wilderness of Alaska, and the first in a long legacy of mountaineers and preservationists to point to the potential for Alaska to become a national resource for rejuvenating wilderness experiences.

While Muir saw the primary value of Alaskan land in its natural beauty and recreation possibility, the early non-Native residents of Alaska primarily recognized the land its mining, logging, and fishing potential. White settler Alaskans viewed their relationship to the land as pioneers in development that held dominion over the natural world. This environmental ethic echoed the sentiments of many early climbers as well, who climbed as conquerors, seeking the tops of peaks to prove their domination and mastering of the natural world. Yet as climbing developed in the region and the population demographics and values shifted, climber’s relationship to nature shifted as

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<sup>12</sup> Muir, John, and Marion Randall Parsons. *Travels in Alaska*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Muir, *Travels in Alaska*. 16.

well. While conquering the mountain remained an essential element in the appeal of mountains, some climbers also understood themselves as advocates for wilderness and the protection of their wilderness playgrounds in the mountains, and still others viewed their climbing activity as a unique way to connect to the land.<sup>14</sup> The development at all costs ethos characteristic of the Gold Rush Era was kept at bay by conservation ideas, which eventually progressed towards more complex environmentalisms. Climbing attitudes showed both the legacy of conquering nature and the new ideas for conservation, preservation, and connection to nature.

When the United States purchased Alaska in 1867 the land remained predominately populated with indigenous peoples. While indigenous cultures connected to the land, they did not climb mountains like white settler colonists from U.S. Rather, indigenous peoples from the high Arctic named the peaks around their settlements “dooneraks,” meaning devils.<sup>15</sup> When John Muir traveled through Southeast Alaska and broke off from his tour group to climb various peaks, his companion Tlingit guides reasoned that Muir was “communicating with the evil spirits that resided in the mountains.”<sup>16</sup> Mountains, for the indigenous peoples, did not serve to connect people to the natural world. Instead, the indigenous people, such as the Tlingit, derived their identity from their relationship of interdependence with the land. As historian Theodore Catton articulated, “The Tlingit relationship to the environment was rooted in a seasonal pattern of resource extraction for their subsistence needs and interpreted through oral

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<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, Jeffrey Mathes. *Contact: Mountain Climbing and Environmental Thinking*. Reno: U of Nevada, 2008. Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, Robert. *Alaska Wilderness*. Berkeley: University of California, 1956.

<sup>16</sup> Catton, Theodore. *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and National Parks in Alaska*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1997. 8.

traditions describing their ancestors long association with particular places and totem animals.”<sup>17</sup> The Tlingits were in and of nature, but mountains were a foreign and uninhabited place.

Unlike Native Alaskans, Muir derived his connection to the natural world through his exploration of mountain peaks. Climbing allowed him to experience nature, and through nature experience the divine. Muir articulated his passion for nature as an enlightenment that allowed him to find God in natural world. Writing about the foundations of his beliefs, Muir expressed his ideas on a simple flower. “Like everybody else I was always fond of flowers, attracted by their external beauty and purity. Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing glorious traces of the thoughts of God, and leading on and on into the infinite cosmos.”<sup>18</sup> For Muir, a flower held the key to experiencing and knowing God, and allowed humans to connect the presence of God by appreciating the flower’s beauty and complexity. Yet while humans could access God through nature, humans themselves were not a part of the natural world. Instead, Muir believed that where humans went they destroyed the wilderness and lived in squalor.

Mountaintops, devoid of the human presence and pristine examples of nature unaffected by the dirty influence of man, represented the ultimate connection to nature. By climbing mountains, Muir experienced the divine, and came closer to God by reaching beyond the confines of civilization. Muir once described the transcendence he found in mountains through his appreciation for the light that fell on the peaks of the Sierra Nevada: “This was the alpenglow, to me one of the most impressive of all the

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<sup>17</sup> Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Muir, John. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913. 283.

terrestrial manifestations of God. At the touch of this divine light, the mountains seemed to kindle to a rapt, religious consciousness and stood hushed and waiting like devout worshipers.”<sup>19</sup> Muir, unlike Native Alaskans, understood mountains as religious symbols, granting man access to the divine through climbing and realizing their beauty.

Muir pioneered an Alaskan environmentalism that conceptualized the land as a wilderness full of natural beauty and the opportunity to experience nature, especially through climbing the hundreds of unclimbed peaks across the territory. In his book *Travels in Alaska*, Muir introduced his ideas about mountains and nature in the Alaskan context to a broad audience of not only Alaskan residents, but also to the larger public outside of Alaska. The book was a log of his journal entries, and influenced generations of preservationists that imagined Alaska as a pristine wilderness, untouched by humans.

The publication of the *Harriman Alaska Series*, the accounts from the various scientists and naturalists on Muir’s final trip to Alaska in 1899, further championed the conservationist cause in Alaska by making the case for the protection of Alaska’s natural resources for future generations. The greatest resource of Alaska, to Muir and his companions on the Harriman Expedition, was its tourist potential. Already in the 1890s the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, operating out of Tacoma and Portland, sailed fortnightly to Glacier Bay on tourist excursions, and as word spread about the natural wonders in Alaska, tourism steadily grew. Muir and the scientists and naturalists of the Harriman expedition championed the idea of protecting this wilderness for future generations of tourists that would flock to Alaska to experience nature, and as Muir believed, experience the divine in that nature.

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<sup>19</sup> Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961. 66.

Yet while Muir and his romantic and preservationist ideas greatly impacted the conceptualization of Alaska in the lower forty-eight, not all of the Americans that traveled to Alaska held the same views on mountains, divinity, and nature. In the same year Muir made his last trip to the southern Alaskan coast, Prince Luigi Amedeo, Duke of Abruzzi, ventured to Alaska with a different goal. Prince Luigi Amedeo was an established climber by the time he traveled to Alaska, and his visit was motivated by the sole purpose of climbing Mount St. Elias, the most prominent peak along the southern Alaskan coastline. In the *Ascent of Mount Saint Elias*, written by an accompanying climber Filippo de Filippi, the author notes how, “His Royal Highness’s expedition was exclusively Alpinistic. Its sole object was to reach the summit of Mount St. Elias, and all else was naturally subordinated to that aim.”<sup>20</sup> Prince Luigi Amedeo’s expedition echoed a sentiment amidst the climbing community in which climbing did not signify an act of communing with nature like it did for Muir. Rather, for groups like the Mount St. Elias expedition, climbing was an extension of their desire to conquer and explore new lands. Filippi frames the expedition in its historic context in the preface of the book, explaining that as mountaineers had climbed all the peaks of the Alps, and “thus began a series of Alpine expeditions to remote and inhospitable regions, little known or totally unexplored...” There were only a few alpine peaks unclimbed by earlier explorers in other territories, and Mount St. Elias represented one the few unconquered mountains warranting a great mountain exploration. Filippi documented how mountaineers thought of the peaks and mountains as places to triumph over, and with their symbolic climb to the top of a mountain, these explorers dominated the mountain. In Filippi’s final chapters,

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<sup>20</sup> Filippi, Filippo De, and Luigi Amedeo Di Savoia. *The Ascent of Mount St. Elias*. Trans. Linda Villari. Westminster: Archibald Constable and, 1901. ix.

the climbing crew celebrates their success, noting the “exultation of that moment of victory.”<sup>21</sup> In the battle of man against the wild and undeveloped peak, Prince Luigi Amedeo’s team believed it had won and prevailed over the natural world.

The rhetoric of domination and conquering found in Filippi’s account echoed the language used by climbers across the globe. In climbing, the predominately white, elite class of men that subscribed to the sport expressed their desire to master the mountain. As Susan Schrepfer points out in her history of mountains, gender, and American environmentalism, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century men “sought arenas in which to exercise control over the external world and their own bodies,”<sup>22</sup> and found them in the wild peaks of Alaska. Men sought to dominate through their climbing, and their domination of the nature in the mountains, their victory over the mountain, translated into their ideas about how to treat the environment beyond the mountain peaks as well. Instead of keeping humans out of the wilderness, as Muir advocated, the domineering mountaineers sought to show their control over nature by documenting their presence in it. In the mountains, this meant planting flags for the nation, blazing trails, and placing cairns, or stacks of flat rocks, along the path. Within the Alaskan territory, the dominion of nature presented itself in less symbolic and much more destructive ways.

When rich deposits of gold were discovered along the Yukon River in 1896, prospectors flocked to the territory to stake a claim in the prosperous gold mining industry. Alaska, despite notably accurate information in the continental United States

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<sup>21</sup> Filippi, *The Ascent of Mount St. Elias*. 163.

<sup>22</sup> Schrepfer, Susan R. *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*. Lawrence, Kan.: U of Kansas, 2005. 4.

regarding the vast resources in the Northern land<sup>23</sup>, remained sparsely populated by pioneer settlers and missionaries and loosely governed by the U.S. military until the influx of gold miners. In total the Gold Rush from 1902 to 1912 accounted for the estimated migration of approximately 40,000 men and women to Alaska.<sup>24</sup> The prospectors arrived in Alaska with the goal of making money, and just as Prince Luigi Amedeo's party subordinated all else to the goal of reaching the summit of Mount St. Elias, gold rushers subordinated the environment to their moneymaking efforts. Prospectors' environmental ethic was the control nature for the express purpose of making a profit, and gold miners understood their connection and dependence on the land for its economic benefits in an industrialized western economy. As environmental historian Kathryn Morse outlines in her work on the Klondike Gold Rush, "Gold seekers stripped vegetation from the earth, rerouted streams, and completely altered long stretches of stream valleys. In order to produce gold, they consumed whole ecosystems, or rather the pieces of whole ecosystems..." Gold miners subjected the land in Alaska to the intrusive, destructive gold mining practices in order to produce a profit off of a highly valued metal in western economies, and built their primary connection to the land around their reliance on the land for gold.<sup>25</sup>

In their desperate race to get to Alaska in 1897 in particular, miners were forced to test the limits of their physical ability in the mountainous terrain of the trail from

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<sup>23</sup> Welch, Richard E., Jr. "Buying Alaska: The Myth of "Icebergia"" *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. Ed. Mary Childers. Mangusso and Stephen W. Haycox. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Berton. "'Klondicitis:' Seattle and the Rush North." *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. Ed. Mary Childers. Mangusso and Stephen W. Haycox. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 180.

<sup>25</sup> Morse, Kathryn Taylor. "The Nature of Gold." *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush*. Seattle: U of Washington, 2003. 93.

Skagway into Alaskan territory. One of the most famous photographs from the Klondike Gold Rush is not of panning for gold, but instead of the arduous Chilkoot Pass trail, where men and women formed a constant, packed line of hikers to the top of an impossibly steep and snowy mountain pass. The adventurous spirit of the people that fell under the spell of gold mining, as well as the practical mountaineering skills learned on the trail to Alaska permeated the frontier settlements of the miners that made a home in Alaska.<sup>26</sup> Of this new population of Alaskan residents, gold miners spent nearly all of their time on the heavy labor of prospecting, but as gold fever subsided and the boom towns established more permanent settlements, people had more time and leisure to pursue hiking and climbing. Photographs from the early 1900s show how the new white, American population ventured to the mountains for recreation, often in large parties including both men and women.<sup>27</sup> Hikes and outings into the mountain trails were even advertised in local newspapers and clubs formed between active participants. In 1917 Seward residents celebrated solstice by climbing Mount Marathon, and held a dinner party on the mountain later that summer.<sup>28</sup> One of the town's clubs, the Seward Athletic Club, also actively promoted outdoor sports, from mountaineering and hiking in the

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<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the Klondike Gold Rush culture see Wharton, David. *The Alaska Gold Rush*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> See Alaska's Digital Archives, in particular Andrews, Ed. *Douglas, Alaska, People. ASL-P162-134*. 1896-1936. Ed Andrews. Photographs 1900-1936. ASL-PCA-162, Douglas. *Alaska's Digital Archives*. <<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cdmg21/id/9963/rec/41>>., and Andrews, Ed. *Juneau, Alaska, People. ASL-PCA-162*. 1896-1936. Ed Andrews. Photographs 1900-1936. ASL-PCA-162, Juneau. *Alaska's Digital Archives*. <<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cdmg21/id/9986/rec/64>>.

<sup>28</sup> Barry, Mary J., *Seward, Alaska: A History of the Gateway City. Volume III: 1914- 1923. The Alaska Railroad Construction Years*, Anchorage, AK: M.J.P. Barry, 1986. 166-171.

summer to winter mountain activities such as downhill skiing and tobogganing.<sup>29</sup> White Alaskan residents explored and ascended many of the peaks around their homes, and though their activity was not labeled “sport,” their recreation in the mountains illustrated a less exploitive connection between the white Alaskan resident population and their environment.

As the fever for striking it rich in gold abated, the white settler Alaskan residents began to connect to nature through their recreation in the mountains. For these hikers and climbers, nature’s value lay not only in gold, but also in its recreational opportunities. The appreciation for beauty in nature that hikers and climbers held, as shown in extensive photographs of the natural mountain scenery, and acts as simple as picking bouquets of wildflowers, connected them to nature in a different way than mining. Nature held worth in resource extraction and profit, but also in its recreation and aesthetic resources.

Yet though the white population of Alaska connected to nature through hikes in the mountains and the exploration of the hills near their homes, their environmental ethic was still primarily informed by their desire to strike it rich in Alaska. As a frontier society, white Alaskan residents viewed economic development as their principal aim, and while they connected with nature and appreciated their environment through mountaineering, they also believed that Alaska’s undeveloped land was so vast that their own economic endeavors were inconsequential in the face of such a great wilderness.<sup>30</sup> Alaskan newspapers from the era in particular reflect the attitudes of its white residents, noting the battles between conservationist policies administered by the federal

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<sup>29</sup> "Ski-Toboggan Slide Being Built Near Second Lake." *Seward Gateway* [Seward] 28 Nov. 1933: 4.

<sup>30</sup> Haycox, Stephen W. *Frigid Embrace: Politics, Economics, and Environment in Alaska*. Corvallis: Oregon State UP. 33, 49.

government and responses from residents. As historian Stephen Haycox noted, white Alaskan residents believed, “The enemy was whoever threatened economic development.”<sup>31</sup> The federal government, which controlled the territory politics and government until statehood in 1959, was often viewed as working against Alaskan residents’ goals for resource extraction.

As the exploitive attitudes toward nature from Alaskan residents was made clear first through intrusive gold mining practices, and later the depletion of moose in the Kenai Peninsula area and salmon along the Southeast and Southcentral coast, conservationists from the lower forty eight became concerned with the future of Alaskan land. Several important political figures that were involved with the conservation movement agreed with Muir’s preservationist principles for Alaskan land. Theodore Roosevelt was enraptured with the abundance of game and descriptions of ample wilderness, and championed legislation in Congress to set aside various tracts of land throughout the state. While Roosevelt was primarily concerned by the conservation of game for future generations, the methods the government took to establish laws on hunting and game also worked to preserve the land from what Muir saw as the destructive human influence on nature. From 1899 till the 1920s, Roosevelt worked in tandem with Gifford Pinchot and other conservationists and preservationists to fight for the preservation of land in the form of national parks, monuments, and wilderness preserves across the territory.<sup>32</sup> Their efforts to keep hungry developers at bay resulted in

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<sup>31</sup> Haycox, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Brinkley, Douglas. *The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1960*. New York: Harper, 2011.

the creation of the Tongass National Forest, Katmai National Park, and Mt. McKinley National Park.<sup>3334</sup>

Many of the established parks included mountainous areas, where climbers could access the parkland for expeditions to the peaks, but development and resource extraction were restricted.<sup>35</sup> From their beginnings, the parks encouraged specific interactions between humans and the parkland environments:<sup>36</sup> an article reporting on the dedication ceremony for Mt. McKinley National Park in 1923 noted how the speakers emphasized the role of National Parks in “building up a love for outdoors.”<sup>37</sup> Federal reserves of land were dedicated toward the use of a natural setting for recreation, such as mountaineering, and the appreciation of beauty in nature. Following the rising trend of outdoor sport across America, the parks planned to allocate land for this express purpose in Alaska as well. For those who longed for a “breath of mountain air,” Alaskan parks would serve as the remedy for the polluted city life bemoaned by authors such as Muir.<sup>38</sup> While the parks discouraged exploitive resource extraction, development, and the hunting, harvesting and other activities that had long defined the Native Alaskan connection to the natural world, they sanctioned and encouraged outdoor recreation. Moreover, with the creation of protections for certain areas, the land not under park jurisdiction was largely considered fair game for developers and industry.

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<sup>33</sup> Mt. McKinley National Park was later renamed Denali National Park, reflecting the original name for the mountain used by the Native Alaskans in the area.

<sup>34</sup> Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See Douglas. *The Quiet World*.

<sup>36</sup> Sellars, Richard West. *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History: With a New Preface and Epilogue*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009. 10.

<sup>37</sup> "Under Shadow of Mt. M'Kinley National Park Is Dedicated by Brooklyn Eagle Tourists." Anchorage Daily Times 10 July 1923.

<sup>38</sup> Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 35.

Amateur mountaineers within the territory could take advantage of the recreational resources provided by national parks, but tourists from outside Alaska were the majority of visitors to parks.<sup>39</sup> One such tourist, Bradford Washburn, was already a famous mountaineer in the America following the publication of a series of short books on his climbs aimed at youth audiences. At the age of sixteen, Washburn had ventured the Alps, and under the tutelage of his guides, completed more technical climbs than any other American in 1926. Washburn's first visit to Alaska was an attempt to climb Mt. Fairweather, located in the Mount St. Elias Range. While his expedition failed to reach the summit, Washburn was still able to circulate stories of his adventure within the lecture circuit for National Geographic and Life magazines. Funded through his book sales and travel lectures, Washburn attempted another summit of Mt. Fairweather again the following summer, and while foul weather prevented a successful climb, Washburn managed to climb Pointed Peak nearby, and followed with ascents of Mt. Crillon in 1934, Mount Lucania in 1937, and Mount Marcus Baker and Mount Sanford in 1938. In order to fund these trips, which required payments for bush flights, food, gear, and other supplies, Washburn lectured extensively across the nation on his adventures and published several small adventure chronicles, including *Bradford on Mount Fairweather*. His lectures were huge successes, exemplifying Washburn's strategic capitalization of the American public's obsession with wilderness adventure.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Palka, Eugene Joseph. *Valued Landscapes of the Far North: A Geographical Journey through Denali National Park*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts, David. *The Last of His Kind: The Life and Adventures of Bradford Washburn, America's Boldest Mountaineer*. New York, NY: William Morrow, 2009.

While Washburn was not the first mountaineer to visit Alaska and attempt difficult peaks,<sup>41</sup> his subsequent publications and lecture series on Alaskan mountaineering boosted his status in the mountaineering community, in particular within the ranks of the American Alpine Club, and his fame in the broader public.<sup>42</sup> Washburn made Alaskan mountaineering visible to the public, not only from his lectures and books, but also through his aerial photography of Alaskan peaks. He was an accomplished photographer, and his photos served the dual purpose of creating maps for climbs and visually publicizing Alaskan wilderness. The dramatic photographs of peaks rising from clouds, glaciers stretching for miles, and the expansive undeveloped land were works of art, and managed to portray an Alaska untouched by humans, but conquered by the climbers on top of the sharp, snow capped peaks.<sup>43</sup> With the portrayal of the wilderness areas devoid of humans besides climbers, Washburn's photos furthered the National Park Service goal of promoting the access Alaskan land through recreation, and preserving land from the impact of humans except for in their recreation and tourist pursuits.

Washburn not only built on the idea of the wilderness ideal of Alaska through his photography, he added a new element of environmental practices to his approach in mountaineering. Though he did not have [formal scientific training](#), Washburn made the collection of data on glaciers, geology, and arctic and alpine conditions each of his

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<sup>41</sup> Washburn's party was denied the first ascent of Mount Fairweather when Allen Carpe reached the summit in June 1931. See "Mount Fairweather Conquered." *American Alpine Journal* (1931): *American Alpine Journal Online*.

<[http://c498469.r69.cf2.rackcdn.com/1931/426\\_Fairweather\\_aaj1931.pdf#search="mount%20fair-weather%201931"](http://c498469.r69.cf2.rackcdn.com/1931/426_Fairweather_aaj1931.pdf#search=)>.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *The Last of His Kind*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> For both photographs and discussion of their reception, see Washburn, Bradford, and Antony Decaneas. *Bradford Washburn: Mountain Photography*. Seattle, WA: Mountaineers, 1999.

expeditions a priority.<sup>44</sup> In his various ascents across Alaska he collaborated with the military to study cosmic rays and test cold weather gear. Washburn's scientific endeavors eventually earned him a position as Honorary Director of the Boston Museum of Science, and lent him the credibility to climb for the purpose of advancing scientific study in the mountains. The 1940 ascent of Denali, for example, was funded partially by the Boston Museum of Science, and a short video on the climb and the scientific recordings at the base camp was later released with the title "Operation White Tower." In the subtitle, the film advertised itself as "a pictorial record of the first scientific conquest of Mount McKinley."<sup>45</sup> The science employed by Washburn to legitimize and fund his mountaineering expeditions also contributed to the growing rule of science over nature. With the understanding of how nature functioned, humans could regulate, protect, and actively create the ideal wilderness. Scientific knowledge helped humans better understand their environment, but by using science to control nature humans once again promoted imperialist views toward the relationship between humans and nature.

Scientific management of nature from the impact of humans in particular was exemplified in the regulation of mountaineering activity along the West Buttress route on Denali. Washburn first climbed the route along with a team of climbers, scientists, and his wife in 1940. The route, unlike previous access routes, was not as difficult to climb and could be completed by mountaineers with far less experience than Washburn. Eventually the route became a hugely popular, as people flocked to Denali to attempt to

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<sup>44</sup> Washburn, Bradford, and Lew Freedman. *Exploring the Unknown: Historic Diaries of Bradford Washburn's Alaska/Yukon Expeditions: Mount Crillon, The Yukon, Mount McKinley*. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter, 2001. 19-46.

<sup>45</sup> *Operation White Tower*. Prod. Jay Bonafield. Perf. Bradford Washburn, Barbara Washburn. RKO Pathe Pictures, 1948. Youtube.com. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQJfvgtoBWA>>.

reach the top of the continent. Unfortunately the steady stream of climbers along the same route left behind trash, extra supplies, and sewage along the path. In a mountain environment like Denali where ice and snow persists yearlong, the debris left behind by climbers was particularly noticeable.<sup>46</sup> The Park Service became concerned with the image of Denali as wilderness, and was forced to implement a strict permitting system for potential climbers and a general policy of “leave no trace” for the route.<sup>47</sup> Through the management of the natural area, the Park Service created a space on the mountain that while once was littered and full of mountaineering remnants, became a pristine wilderness again.<sup>48</sup> Though the regulation through scientific principles upheld the wilderness standard for Denali by erasing the evidence of humans on the mountain to some degree, it also functioned to help ease the impact of climbers on an area where humans had never been before in such numbers.

Washburn’s employment of science in the mountains, from the study of cosmic rays to the testing of winter equipment, was often proposed and funded by the military, and anticipated a new era of mountaineering activity for the military. As World War II intensified, the military engaged in mountaineering activity within the territory in anticipation and response to Japanese attack. Mountaineering taught the troops about the conditions and skills necessary to battle in the frigid temperatures and extreme weather of

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<sup>46</sup> United States. National Park Service. Department of the Interior. *Mountaineering Summary 1979. National Park Service.* Denali National Park.

<[http://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/upload/1979\\_Mtnrg\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/upload/1979_Mtnrg_Summary.pdf)>.

<sup>47</sup> Washburn, Bradford. "Philosophical Differences in Attitudes to the Wilderness." Interview by Dave Kupra. *Project Jukebox.* University of Alaska Fairbanks, 8 July 2000.

<<http://jukebox.uaf.edu/denali/html/brwa.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> United States National Park Service. *Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska: General Management Plan, Land Protection Plan, Wilderness Suitability Review.* Denver: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 1987.

Alaska, or even apply those lessons to battles in the Alps. The Tenth Mountain Division, for example, was a special unit of the military, was specifically created to learn mountaineering skills, skiing, and to improve on the gear and equipment used in order to prepare for battles in the Alps.<sup>49</sup> Mountaineering during the war became a service to the protection of Alaska and the nation. Mountain land was viewed as a resource for learning the skills necessary for alpine battle, and soldier's connections to the land was informed by their desire to serve and protect the country.

While mountaineering in the war encouraged physical activity in the outdoors, it also promoted more environmentally invasive activities in the mountains. The military cut various trails throughout the Southcentral and Aleutian Islands, and built new roads for easier transportation of supplies and troops.<sup>50</sup> Whereas many of the trails between settlements and towns prior to the surplus of military troops and attention in World War II were built for winter dog sleds and wagons in the summer, the military began to pave and break ground for roads suitable for cars, trucks and military vehicles. The military understood the importance of learning how to maneuver and survive in the mountains as mountaineers without the conveniences of urban settlements, but they also facilitated the building of infrastructure across the territory that contradicted the established wilderness principles of the National Parks, conservationists, and tourists.

From both Alaskan divisions and the Tenth Mountain Division, which was based in the contiguous United States, vast improvements on the gear and equipment for cold weather outdoor recreation, and climbing in particular, entered the market. The

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<sup>49</sup> Sanders, Charles J. *The Boys of Winter: Life and Death in the U.S. Ski Troops during the Second World War*. Boulder: U of Colorado, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, Kaylene. *Trails across Time: History of an Alaska Mountain Corridor*. Cooper Landing, AK: Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm Corridor Communities Association, 2005. 32.

mountaineers that flocked to Alaska before World War II were often tourists, and local mountaineering activity was limited by gear and skill levels. Alaskan residents, while previously had little exposure to mountaineering equipment, could purchase skis, cold weather clothing, and other gear from army surplus stores after the war ended.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the territory wide improvements to roads and transportation opened up areas previously only accessible by bush plane or arduous miles of bushwhacking and trekking.<sup>52</sup> Unwittingly, the military occupation of Alaska created the infrastructure necessary for the resident population to access natural areas for recreation and mountaineering more easily, comfortably, and conveniently.

Yet while certain divisions of the military employed mountaineering as a battle tactic, more commonly mountaineering was suggested as a recreation and escape from the routine stress of military life. In order to accommodate the needs of its ranks, including rest and rejuvenation away from the ordeals of the military, Denali National Park was transformed into a recreation center for personnel to hike, fish, ski and skate. An editor for the National Park Association noted in 1944 that “the human need for sanctuary,” found in the wild of Alaska, had never been so vital for America.<sup>53</sup> Through the Park system, the military connection to the environment reflected the romantic ideas proposed by such environmental figures as Henry David Thoreau, who proposed that

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<sup>51</sup> Cited in interviews with multiple mountaineers: Brann, Dave. "Mountaineering in Homer, Alaska." Telephone interview. 18 Jan. 2014, and Gillespie, Tom. "Mountaineering in Seward, Alaska." Personal interview. 13 Jan. 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Bushwhacking, as it is commonly referred to in Alaska, is breaking trail through the dense forest growth in most of the Southern coast.

<sup>53</sup> McDonnell, Janet A. "World War II: Defending Park Values and Resources." *The Public Historian* 29.4 (2007): 15-33. *JSTOR*. 27. From *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, 1943, 200; Porter, "National Park Service War Work, Supplement, June 30, 1944–October 1, 1945," 8; *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, 1942, 160.

nature was a tonic for man against the malady of urban life.<sup>54</sup> Soldiers could escape the brutal war front and violent lifestyle in the military in the wilderness of Alaskan national park lands.

Even with better gear and improved roads and trails, the residential Alaskan population did not enthusiastically embrace mountaineering. Rather, mountaineering appealed to the adventurous population that moved to Alaska during the Cold War. This influx of white Americans to north, which nearly doubled the Alaskan population each decade between 1939 and 1960, consisted mainly of employees to the expanded Department of Defense military complex and others who came searching for a taste of the adventure they had experienced during the war.<sup>55</sup>

Two such women, Celia Hunter and Ginny Wood, first came to Alaska in 1946, and later permanently moved to the territory. Both women were pilots during World War II, and flew into Fairbanks in the middle of winter in temperatures of fifty degrees below zero Fahrenheit. The small town of Fairbanks, which has since grown to be the second largest city in Alaska, answered Wood and Hunter's desire for an escape from the "opulence and affluence" of the "Lower Forty-Eight."<sup>56</sup> Both women pursued a home that offered more exploration and excitement than what was offered in the developed cities of the contiguous United States, and found their place in the foothills of Denali National Park. Just as servicemen had found their escape from military life in Denali

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<sup>54</sup> Schneider, Richard J. *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*. Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2000. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Kollin, Susan. *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2001. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Sumner, 52.

National Park recreation centers during the war, these women found an escape from the monotony of postwar domestic life in the wilderness of Denali as well.

Wood explained in a later interview, “the camaraderie and challenge during World War II was great, but I wanted to go on and do other things. That wasn’t all there was.”<sup>57</sup> After being introduced to the adrenaline and excitement of flying during the war, the women found a place to recreate the thrills of adventure in the harsh climate and frontier style towns in Alaska. Both women also took to mountaineering, especially in the foothills of their newly acquired land near Denali. Together with Wood’s husband, they began the first ‘wilderness camp’ in Alaska. Consisting of several small cabins and a main lodge for guests to gather, Camp Denali was the most basic lodging they could provide for tourists without using tents. In designing Camp Denali, the women recreated the elements of a frontier style settlement. Rather than build a luxurious tourist resort, they kept the Camp small and less developed in order to create an atmosphere of rugged wilderness and adventure. They wanted tourists to experience the Alaskan adventure they had stumbled into as pilots flying in the frigid winter into a town full of cabins, and while at first the simple cabin system they dreamt of was all they could afford, preserving the rugged character of Camp Denali required intentional action from Wood and Hunter as the Camp grew. They created the wilderness and primitive atmosphere by keeping the number of visitors low, refusing to implement running water, sewage, or electricity, and emphasizing the wildness of the surrounding environment through nature hikes, tours, and information sessions. For the tourists that visited Camp Denali, the undeveloped cabins answered the desire to find an authentic “adventure wilderness experience,” yet

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<sup>57</sup> Sumner, 53.

the intentional creation of this adventure wilderness spirit at Camp Denali often went overlooked. The women's impact on Alaskan tourism was to incorporate elements of their own frontier Alaskan experience, which centered on adventure in wilderness, into a structured tourist destination that made wilderness adventure appear as a natural phenomenon.<sup>58</sup>

In designing Camp Denali in the spirit of a frontier, the women also had conservationist and ecological principles in mind. As people flocked to Camp Denali, Wood and Hunter created more programs to connect their guests with wilderness, and educate them in what Wood described as, "wilderness science." They planned hiking trips every day, cut a trail to view the mountain from atop a ridge, included a 10-day natural history program, three day backpacking trips, and even "Shutter Safari," for wildlife photography. Yet while the activities taught people how to access nature, each program also focused on the natural systems and the potential for destructive human impact within them. They encouraged their guests to minimize their presence in the mountains, by practicing principles of "leave no trace," hiking on trails only, and not interacting with or feeding wildlife. Wood had been inspired by the hut system in Europe, where she recalled the Europeans she knew "would hike, get to know the country, just explore the region... They stayed in one spot where nature predominated. You touch it, you feel it, you smell it, and you hear it."<sup>59</sup> Camp Denali helped Wood facilitate tourists' experience with nature, which often incorporated physical activity in wilderness through

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<sup>58</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted was a master at creating landscapes that mimicked and improved on nature. For his writings and ideas about creating a natural landscape see, Olmsted, Frederick Law. *Civilizing American Cities; a Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted's Writings on City Landscapes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1971.

<sup>59</sup> Wood, Ginny, and Karen Brewster. *Boots, Bikes, and Bombers: Adventures of Alaska Conservationist Ginny Hill Wood*. University of Alaska, 2012. 191.

hikes and treks in the mountains.<sup>60</sup> They helped pitch the image of wilderness in Alaska, and focused the tourist experience on physical activity in a deliberately constructed nature in order to promote conservationists principles.

While Camp Denali fueled tourists' connection with wild Alaska, resident Alaskans also started to form organizations that facilitated their mountaineering and environmental experiences. While white residents especially had always ventured into the hills for hikes and less technical climbs, the people that moved to Alaska after the war solidified these activities into clubs. University of Alaska Fairbanks students formed the Alaska Alpine Club (AAC) in 1952, and Vin Hoeman formed the Mountaineering Club of Alaska (MCA) in 1958. Both of these clubs had crossover with the environmental organizations forming around the territory at the time as well. Between 1950 and 1970 a variety of environmental groups, from the Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund, and National Audubon Society sprang up in response to the growing number of people in Alaska concerned with keeping the wilderness from the throes of a resource extraction intensive economy.<sup>61</sup> From the pages of the AAC's journal, *Descent*, and the MCA's publication, *Scree*, climbers were subscribed to regular calls for participation in the environmental clubs.<sup>62</sup> Several important club members, like Helen Nienhueser and Hans Van der Laan, became instrumental in the creation and leadership of the Alaska Conservation Society (ACS) and the Sierra Club, which were involved in environmental

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<sup>60</sup> Wood and Brewster, *Boots, Bikes and Bombers*. 238.

<sup>61</sup> Nelson, Daniel. "Idealism and Organization: Origins of the Environmental Movement in Alaska." *Journal of Alaska History* 28 (2003): 13-35.

<sup>62</sup> Examples of such articles can be found in *Scree*, Vol 2. No. 11. August 1960, and Van der Laan, Callie. "Not Blind Opposition..." *Scree*. Vol. 10. No. 3. January 1968.

struggles throughout the territory.<sup>63</sup> Many of the people involved in these clubs were new residents in the territory, who had moved for the scenery and relative emptiness of the land in the north. In forming environmental organizations, people sought to “protect something of what attracted us here in the first place,” and the formation of mountaineering clubs facilitated and solidified the access and connection with the undeveloped land that drew people to move to Alaska.<sup>64</sup>

Yet while mountaineering clubs shared the common goal of preserving the scenery and emptiness of the territory with the emerging environmental movement, mountaineers undertook some projects that seemingly ran contradictory to their principles of keeping the land undeveloped. Because mountaineers sought to preserve an ideal wilderness that would include access for their recreation purposes, their actions in environmental clubs centered on establishing wilderness recreation areas. In order to create the image of wilderness, or land untouched by humans, mountaineering clubs built trails and structures to keep human presence at a minimum in the wilderness. The MCA built several small “huts,” or cabins across the Chugach Mountains and just north of Anchorage. These huts were permitted by the NPS, and rented out by MCA to member climbers.<sup>65</sup> MCA also actively cut and bushwhacked trails throughout the territory. The huts and trails were contradictory to the idea of a wilderness undisturbed by humans, but they also encouraged a specific interaction with the wilderness. The rental of huts ensured that humans only remained in the wilderness for a few nights, reinforcing the notion that

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<sup>63</sup> Nienhueser, Helen. “Mountaineering in Alaska.” Telephone interview with the author. 26 Feb. 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Margaret E. Murie, *Two in the Far North* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Book, 1997), The Margaret Murie Papers, Box2, contain the background correspondence.

<sup>65</sup> For records of the huts, see the MCA journal, *Scree*.

humans were mere visitors in the nature and wilderness. The privileged climbers in MCA could extend their visit to wilderness by using the huts, but eventually returned to their homes in the towns or growing city of Anchorage. The trails also delineated the place of climbers in nature. With a clear, distinct trail, climbers were no longer carving their own path or exploring, but following a path lined out for them. The trails discouraged people from accessing all of the land, and focused the human presence and impact in smaller areas. Both the trails and huts from MCA and other mountaineering clubs contributed to the creation of an environmentalist informed protocol of how humans should interact with the land.

Yet while these specific ways of existing in wilderness areas limited human interaction with nature, they also functioned to encourage more people to climb and hike in the mountains. By creating straightforward ways of accessing wilderness, people required less skill and knowledge about the outdoors in order to recreationally climb. Accounts from the mountaineers in *Scree* document the increasing number of people seen outdoors on the trails between 1960 and 1980 especially. Several publications sponsored by MCA and various other out of state mountaineering clubs also facilitated greater use of the trails. A booklet published in 1967, “30 Hikes in Alaska,” was circulated both in Alaska and Seattle. Nienhueser, working in conjunction with the MCA and inspired by the booklet, published *55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska* in 1972. These guides to the trails in Alaska enabled more people to climb and hike, and connect to the wilderness through their hiking and climbing activity.

Unsurprisingly, not all the avid outdoor enthusiasts and climbers in Alaska pitched the wilderness and mountains of Alaska as a wilderness experience that

everybody had a right to experience. Some members of the AAC vehemently opposed the “selling of Alaska’s mountains” to tourist climbers or sightseers and selfishly discouraged the growing ranks of hikers and climbers. In the opinion of one anonymous member, writing for the AAC journal *Descent*:

However negative and anti social, it is perhaps, the wilderness experience, or a mountain ethic, or some such thing. A GOOD THING FOR TEN PEOPLE IS NO LONGER A GOOD THING WHEN DIVIDED AMONG A HUNDRED. Who takes care of hills anywhere in the world? Governments? Governments manage only to name mountains after bureaucrats. Visiting climbers? I rather wonder what the Nepalese living the shadow of Chomoungma think of the space age feces strewn over their hill by climbers of other concepts. Local climbers I think care most for local hills. For their own selfish interests (care of the hills and their climbing) it might be appropriate to at least consider keeping their hills out of national attention.<sup>66</sup>

The author also echoed a growing sentiment among mountaineers that their ownership and knowledge of the mountains in Alaska put them in the unique place to protect mountains. The mountaineer, by climbing and intimately connecting with nature through physically being present in the nature, knew what was best for the mountains. Yet that relationship was threatened when too many people entered the wilderness and the mountains. The national attention that Alaska received for its tourism and recreation potential concerned mountaineers that viewed the influx of people into the land as the destruction and degradation of their wilderness backyards.

In keeping the visiting climbers out, and limiting the use of wilderness areas, these mountaineers echoed sentiments that ran deep within the history of mountaineering in Alaska. The original environmental legislation to pass for the territory was influenced deeply by John Muir, a visiting climber that advocated for the preservation of wilderness

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<sup>66</sup> John D. "A Mountain Ethic Concept Opinion." *Descent* (1969): 19-20. Courtesy of University of Alaska Archives, Vin and Grace Hoeman Collection.

in Alaska, and created the wilderness space that mountaineers are now privileged to enjoy. Yet preservation of land necessitated the limited use and prohibition of humans within that nature, unless for recreation purposes. Muir's idea that tourists would flock to the state for a glimpse and experience of the wilderness grandeur promoted the growth of an Alaskan tourist industry, and prevented the resource extractive economy base that white resident Alaskans had fought for. In promoting the wilderness experience as a prime resource of Alaska, however, mountaineers invited large numbers of people into the undeveloped land, which undermined the image of an untouched wilderness. In order to compromise between the need to connect people to the mountains through mountaineering and wilderness experiences while simultaneously maintaining the image of land without human influence, mountaineers depended on the National Park Service, and later created a distinct protocol for how people who ventured into the wilderness should interact with nature.

In promoting wilderness as resource for humans, and further distancing humans from nature by enforcing the concept of humans as visitors in the mountains, mountaineering communities epitomized similar goals to the pro-development advocates in Alaska. Both parties viewed the Alaskan land as a resource. Mountaineers, however, rather than extract the resources, engaged in projects of creating or preserving the wilderness resource in order to facilitate the wilderness experience that tourists and residents alike sought out. In viewing nature as a resource for wilderness experiences, mountaineering reinforced the image and representation of Alaska as wilderness in both the minds of its residents and tourists. Wilderness, however, limited the presence of humans in nature, and painted humans as separate from the wilderness in which they

climbed. Mountaineering was a way that people could connect with the land, but that connection only existed as an experience in the mountains, and not as a full-time connection and dependence on nature. While mountaineers cared for the wilderness, the land around their homes in cities or towns was less of a concern in ensuing environmental battles across the state.

### **Colonizing Climbers**

The history of mountaineering in Alaska is not only a story of how the differing land ethic of traditional Alaska Native culture engaged with the exploits of white tourist and settler mountaineers, but also of how the sport has reinforced the United States colonial project following Alaska's purchase in 1867. In the first decades of American control, mountaineers employed nationalist rhetoric and practices that furthered the American claim to Alaskan land. These practices deliberately undermined the Alaska Native right to ancestral lands by promoting stereotypes of an inferior or primitive culture that feared the mountains, and supposedly demonstrated how mountaineers held a veritable claim to the peaks they climbed. Later climbers operated in the territory without directly involving Alaska Native in their expeditions, yet the environmental ideas and legislation sponsored by climbers indirectly impacted Alaska Natives.. By promoting wilderness areas that prohibited commercial development and destruction, mountaineers enabled the federal and state governments to control land that belonged to Alaska Natives in the name of protecting wilderness. Climbers supported national parks and state lands with certain ideas of wilderness and mountains that acted as part of a continued colonial project that marginalized Alaska Native.

While Alaska Natives inhabited Alaska for thousands of years prior to white settlement, no records of mountaineering exploits or activity remain. Nevertheless, the lack of written records and physical evidence indicates that Alaska Natives did not seek to climb to the top of mountains as eagerly as the Westerners that later came to Alaska,

Alaskans Natives did, however, interact with the high country. The most concrete proof of their connection to mountains is the naming of Denali, which pioneers later renamed Mount McKinley. To the Athabascans, the people that lived in the foothills of Denali along the middle Yukon river, the name of the mountain meant “Mother,” and its sister peak, now called Mount Foraker, was known as “Denali’s Wife.”<sup>67</sup> The Athabascans, and the people to the south living along the Susitna River, knew the mountains as “Mother” and “Denali’s Wife” in their own dialect. The naming of these mountains shows the Athabascans’ knowledge of the mountain, at the very least distant observations of the mountain, which were later ignored when white explorers renamed the peak without seeking its original name.

Yet despite the clear indication that Alaska Natives connected with the mountains in their land, as white settlers moved into Alaska the Alaska Natives ways were disregarded. The Russians first undertook the colonial project of disenfranchising Alaska Natives from their land by establishing settlements across the coastal areas and enslaving Alaska Natives in the lucrative fur trade. In 1867 the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, and colonization fell on the shoulders of Americans. At first Congress classified Alaska as “Indian territory” and neglected to set up any formal government. Between 1867 and 1897, military and navy informally ruled Alaska. The informal rule allowed American settlers to abuse the Alaska Natives who occupied the land around American towns; in Southeast Alaska especially the Tlingit and Haida people were denied their rights and submitted to violent acts from settlers and military, while the interior areas of Alaska experienced limited changes as very few settlers traveled further

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<sup>67</sup> Stuck, Hudson. *The Ascent of Denali (Mount McKinley) a Narrative of the First Complete Ascent of the Highest Peak in North America*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914. viii.

north.<sup>68</sup> In 1897 gold was discovered in the Klondike, and the ensuing series of Gold Rushes brought an influx of 40,000 men and women to Alaska in the span of a few years. In their rush to strike it rich in Alaska, prospectors disregarded the Alaska Native ways of operating in community with the land and continued to abuse Native peoples and communities. Wherever white settlers came in contact with Alaska Natives, the need to justify American takeover of the land and people resulted in explicitly racist and marginalizing practices in order to discredit the Alaska Natives' right to sovereignty of their own land.<sup>69</sup>

The mountaineers that visited the territory also employed to the discriminatory ideas and practices of American settlers both in their contact with Alaska Natives and in their nationalist practices. As yet another element of justifying the American occupation of the land, mountaineers worked in tandem with settlers to demonstrate their superior use and knowledge of the land. While Alaska Natives held expertise and survival skills that enabled early expeditions, the primarily white male climbers consistently belittled the Alaska Natives' contributions to their expeditions and sought to demonstrate the inferiority of character and culture as compared to white explorers. The climbers that visited Alaska used Alaska Natives for their knowledge and guidance, but rather than credit their guides for the success of their journeys, the accounts of their exploits explain how mountaineers supposedly harnessed Native knowledge to access the land in a superior way than Alaska Natives.

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<sup>68</sup> Mangusso, Mary Childers and Stephen W. Haycox. "Alaskan History: A Perspective." *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 11.

<sup>69</sup> For discussion on the process of colonization see Haycox, Stephen W. *Alaska: An American Colony*. Seattle: U of Washington, 2002.

John Muir's accounts of his Alaskan experiences exemplify early mountaineering attitudes towards Alaska Natives. Muir, who described himself as "hopelessly and forever a mountaineer," traveled the coast of Alaska in a series of trips between the years 1879 to 1890.<sup>70</sup> His travel log, which was published 1914 as an anthology named *Travels in Alaska*, expressed some of the views of the explorers and people attracted to the Far North. The accounts focus on the natural beauty of the area, and the general ingenuity and hardiness of the sourdough white settlers. Yet his accounts of Native villages, which he encountered regularly and depended on for food, directions, and other resources, were often depreciating and dismissive. Muir referred to the expedition's two Native guides as "my Indians," and lamented the spreading practice of brewing whiskey in Native villages as a sign of immorality and weakness.<sup>71</sup>

On this trip Muir would regularly break from his group of travelers and guides to climb mountains to gain "noble, telling views" of nature, yet never climbed with the Alaska Natives in the group while he did attempt to introduce climbing to his white companions.<sup>72</sup> Instead of including and introducing the Alaska Natives to mountaineering and Muir's distinct way of connecting to nature through physical recreation in mountains, Muir depended on the Alaska Natives as guides to help him access climbs, and otherwise dismissed indigenous ways of connecting to nature. Climbing mountains was reserved for the elite white males that accompanied Muir on the trip.

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<sup>70</sup> Bade, William Frederic. Preface. *Travels in Alaska*. By John Muir and Marion Randall Parsons. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915. V.

<sup>71</sup> Settlers and missionaries later deplored the Alaska Native appreciation of whiskey, though settlers originally introduced whiskey to Alaska.

<sup>72</sup> Muir, *Travels in Alaska*. 213.

Frederick Cook also believed in reserving the glory of mountain ascents for his party of American men, despite relying on the knowledge of Alaska Natives to guide him through the wilderness on his journey to the mountain.<sup>73</sup> After using Alaska Native guides to help him get to the mountain, which at the time had no roads or trails for access, Cook left his guides to complete the ascent with a group of all white male climbers. Cook was an avid explorer of the northern frontier, with past voyages to the arctic already under his belt when he attempted to summit Denali in 1903 and again in 1906. For his expedition Cook traveled briefly with several Natives, but neglected to credit them with the help they provided for the expedition. In his accounts Cook also presented some misinformed ideas about Alaska Natives' culture and tradition. As an avid big game hunter, Cook argued that the rights Alaska Natives held to hunt at will was "a misfit" because Alaska Natives "is today, and always has been, a fish eater."<sup>74</sup> In reality, some cultures relied heavily on fish, but they also supplemented their diets with big game. The hunting that primarily concerned Cook, however, was when Alaska Natives hunted for revenue in the emerging western economy. In Cook's opinion, indigenous peoples had no right to hunt game for money, which was one of the only avenues where they participated in the western economy that slowly took hold in rural Alaska. Instead, Cook believed the "Indians... the greatest enemies to the game, should be carefully watched."<sup>75</sup> His warning echoed the concerns of other Western frontiersmen, who portrayed indigenous peoples of

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<sup>73</sup> Bayers, Peter L. *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 2003. 19-35.

<sup>74</sup> Cook, Frederick Albert. *To the Top of the Continent; Discovery, Exploration and Adventure in Sub-arctic Alaska. The First Ascent of Mt. McKinley, 1903-1906*. New York: Doubleday, Page &, 1908. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Cook, *To the Top of the Continent*. 47.

the West as poor managers of their environments, and through this argument eventually justified the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands.<sup>76</sup>

Cook also dismissed the language of his guide, Stephen, who was the son of a chief, as “Indian mutterings” described as a “grunt” and “an ugly Indian word.” In his account of his two expeditions into interior Alaska to summit Denali, Cook wrote that he never encountered the Alaska Native’s name for Denali. Instead, in a brief discussion about the name of the mountain, Cook mentions the Russian’s word for the general area, and neglects to mention the Tanaina, or Athabascan, and Susitna’s name for the mountains: Denali, meaning “Great One,” and “Denali’s wife” for Mt. Foraker immediately beside it. Cook insists that, “...to the present have been unable to trace a name which was previously used to specifically designate this particular peak,” leaving it open for an American name. Cook concludes that because the peak had no other legitimate name, “the new name Mt. McKinley finds a proper setting to a fitting monument as a token of appreciation to the memory of one of our greatest statesmen.”<sup>77</sup> By arguing that the proper name for Denali was Mt. McKinley, named in honor of the late president McKinley, Cook claimed the mountain for American interest, and denied the legitimacy of Alaska Natives to name the land they lived on. The renaming of Mt. McKinley was a colonial tool used to devalue the indigenous presence and knowledge of the mountain in order claim it for the United States instead.

Cook only employed Alaska Native guides for small sections of the expedition, and the summit party consisted entirely of white American men. The act of reaching the

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<sup>76</sup> Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.

<sup>77</sup> Cook, *To the Top of the Continent*. XIII.

top of the continent, to climbing where no other man had stepped foot and to literally be above the rest of the continent, was symbolic. As historian Peter Bayers argues, “In the minds of these males, the Far North of Alaska was an important extension of the frontier, for it offered an imaginative proving ground to relieve masculine anxieties concerning the closing of the frontier.”<sup>78</sup> Denali was the epitome of the final frontier, with its unclaimed slopes attracting climbers from across the globe. Climbers often pitted themselves against the mountain, and reaching the top meant claiming victory over the mountain. Cook and his party spoke of “conquering” the mountain, and proving the dominance of man over mountain. Moreover the act of conquering would physically place them above the rest of the continent. In selecting an all white male party, Cook included a selective group to display both the dominance of man over mountain and the ability to climb above the rest of the continent. The elite white males on the trip represented the conquerors of the land in Alaska, and excluded Alaska Natives and women from the narrative of conquering the mountain.<sup>79</sup>

While Cook’s climb would have positioned elite white males as the conquerors of the highest peak in North America, both of his two summit attempts failed. Cook, however, deceived the public after his second attempt, and announced that two men from his party had reached the top. He was lauded by the mountaineering and exploration communities, invited to become the president of the prestigious Explorer’s Club, and encouraged to lecture about his expedition throughout America. Yet when Cook’s book was published in 1908, his summit picture revealed two larger peaks in the distant background, and discredited his account. Alaskans were not shocked by Cook’s

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<sup>78</sup> Bayers, *Imperial Ascent*. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Bayers, *Imperial Ascent*. 18.

deception, however. Northern communities had come to doubt Cook's authenticity long before official news of his failed summit reached the North.<sup>80</sup>

Hudson Stuck, a missionary living in Alaska at the time, had little previous mountaineering practice, but despite his inexperience decided to attempt the feat. Stuck's expedition sharply contrasted with Cook's early attempts. While Cook was merely a visitor to the territory in the summer months, Stuck chose a party of men that resided in Alaska. Stuck also climbed on a low budget, making his own pemmican<sup>81</sup> from mountain sheep and caribou killed along their trek to the base of the mountain, and fashioning his own silk tents when the tents he had ordered failed to show.

Yet where Cook and Stuck differed most was their treatment and approaches to Alaska Natives. Cook had chosen two Native guides for the early part of the voyage to the mountain, whereas Stuck's party included three Alaska Native climbers out of the total party: Walter Harper, who was "Indian-bred till his sixteenth year," Johnny, who attended the base camp while the climbers summited, and Esaias, who accompanied the party until the base camp and returned home with the unneeded supplies. In his account of the expedition, Cook was dismissive of Alaska Natives, but Stuck chose to focus on the issue of Alaska indigenous peoples throughout his book, *The Ascent of Denali*. Beginning his account with a discussion of why Denali should retain its native name, Stuck sets the tone for an account that appeals to mountaineers to become "generous champions" of the Alaska Natives that were "threatened with a wanton and senseless extermination." Stuck portrays himself as less of a mountaineer than a missionary. While

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<sup>80</sup> Hudson, *The Ascent of Denali*, 165.

<sup>81</sup> A mixture of protein, usually a type of game such as deer or bison, and fat used as a calorie dense food for long treks and arctic expeditions especially.

the first ascent was his ultimate goal, and even part of the appeal in moving to Alaska in the first place, Stuck was “concerned much more with men than mountains.”<sup>82</sup> Stuck belonged to a group of missionaries in Alaska that wished to preserve Alaska Natives, but to assimilate them into western culture and ideas.<sup>83</sup>

Stuck deliberately referred to the mountain with its Native name, Denali. In his introduction, Stuck explained his reasoning in using the native name, stating that he “resolved that if it were in his power he would restore these ancient mountains to the ancient people among whom they rear their heads.” Rather than the nationalist language employed by Cook in referring to the mountain as Mt. McKinley, Stuck believed in the indigenous right to the land. Stuck promoted a degree of sovereignty for Alaska Natives, arguing that they had a right to their land despite the stereotypes and racist views of Natives. “Savages they are, if the reader please, since “savage” means simply a forest dweller, and the author is glad himself to be a savage a great part of every year, but yet, as savages, entitled to name their own rivers, their own lakes, their own mountains.”<sup>84</sup>

Yet while Stuck believed in indigenous rights to the land and returning the land to its original people, he only argued for a certain degree of native sovereignty. Stuck’s views were informed by a belief in his own religious and cultural superiority. While Stuck wanted to “champion” the “gentle and kindly race” of Alaska Natives, his methods to help them relied on reeducation through boarding schools and the introduction of western principles and ways of life. While Stuck did not want to eliminate and erase the presence of Alaska Natives as Cook did in his own narrative of exploration, Stuck wanted

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<sup>82</sup> Hudson, *The Ascent of Denali*. XIII.

<sup>83</sup> For discussion of missionaries in Alaska, see Banner, Stuart. *Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers, and Indigenous People from Australia to Alaska*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Stuck, *The Ascent of Denali*, X.

them to assimilate to western culture and ways in order to create better lives for Alaska Natives. While waiting for suitable weather for summit day at their base camp on the glacier, Stuck spent nearly two weeks teaching Harper to write, read aloud, geography, history, and physics. Stuck's goal was to persuade Alaska Natives to adopt western lifestyles, values, and especially religion.

Stuck's ascent was not did return the mountains to the indigenous peoples as he stated he wished to do, but rather the ascent represented yet another piece of western culture that the Alaska Natives had to adapt to. Alaska Natives did not climb mountains, and by adopting the western narrative of conquering land by climbing, the Alaska Natives on the expedition were conforming to western ideas about how to connect to the land. While Walter Harper, a Alaska Native, was the first man to step foot on top of the mountain, and on top of the continent, Harper had been Stuck's pupil for three years. Denali was not returned to the native peoples by including a Alaska Native on the expedition, but rather Harper was introduced to yet another western way of connecting to and claiming land: first ascents. On the top of the mountain, the party's actions displayed the intentions as westerners. They placed a flagpole with the United States flag into the snow and said a Christian prayer before descending. Stuck and his climbing party, while not as offensive to Alaska Natives as Cook, still employed nationalist tendencies and western ideas of conquering the peak.

The accounts of Muir's travels, Cook's attempts at Denali, and Stuck's complete ascent demonstrate climbing practices and ideas that persisted in climbing. Climbing parties consisted primarily of white males that visited the territory from various climbing clubs in the contiguous United States and Alaska Natives were primarily involved as

guides. Alaska Natives were not credited with their contributions to the expeditions, although Stuck highlighted the “half-breed” status of Walter Harper, the first man to set foot on top of Denali. The use of nationalist rhetoric and practices, such as planting a US flag on the peak and naming peaks for statesmen, created an extension of the colonial project in Alaska within the mountaineering community.

Mountaineering as a tool of colonialism did not occur without the influence of a rapidly changing and emerging Alaskan identity, however. Changes in the Alaskan population, demographics, resource extraction, infrastructure, and its global political importance greatly influenced the territory and shaped how mountaineers used their activity as a colonial tool.

When the US first purchased Alaska, many lower forty-eight residents understood that the land held a rich variety of resources.<sup>85</sup> Yet the federal government, which was in control of the territory, as well as the US public, disregarded its development and colonization until the Klondike Gold Rush. Prospectors in the Gold Rush realized their connection and dependence on the land, and fought for their rights to develop it as an extension of their knowledge that without a domineering interaction with nature, they would not be able to survive the harsh climate and conditions in the North. The exploitive character of Gold Rushers might have determined the fate of Alaskan land, and the people that inhabited it, had federal legislation not intervened. A growing concern for the protection of Alaska’s resources permeated the American public, which had witnessed the extinction of the buffalo and the passenger pigeon due to similar frontier actions. In

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<sup>85</sup> Welch, Richard E., Jr. "Buying Alaska: The Myth of "Icebergia"" *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. Ed. Mary Childers. Mangusso and Stephen W. Haycox. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 142.

1906 President Theodore Roosevelt outlawed all coal extraction, to the uproar of white settlers in Alaska, and in 1912 when the Alaskan Territorial legislature was established, fishing and hunting regulators remained under federal jurisdiction. Resident white Alaskans continued to fight for economic development and resource extraction, and federal legislative action combatted their aggressive stance by establishing various national parks. The Tongass and Chugach National Forests were created prior to 1910, Mt. McKinley National Park in 1917, Katmai National Monument in 1918, and Glacier Bay National Monument in 1925.<sup>86</sup>

By placing land under federal jurisdiction, Alaskans no longer laid claim to the development of its resources, and instead required permits, fees and regulated activity within the boundaries of any park. Yet while the parks staved off the hungry Progressive-Era developers, they also set up a troubling system of access to undeveloped land. Settlers could not access the land for its development, and Alaska Natives especially lost their ability to decide what to do with the ancestral land. The mountaineers that advocated for parks had particular agendas. They desired to preserve lands for its recreational purposes, and advocated for park systems that would encourage a specific interaction with the preserved lands. Alaska Natives' modes of connecting and understanding the environment were denied in favor of an agenda in line with mountaineering activity. Federal and state government maintained control of how people used and connected to the land through their creation of national parks, forests, and

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<sup>86</sup> Catton, Theodore. *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and National Parks in Alaska*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1997, 3.

wilderness areas, and systematically discredited the indigenous ways of connecting to the land.<sup>87</sup>

One of the most prominent mountaineers and advocates for parks was Bob Marshall. Marshall was Director of Forestry of the Office of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1937, and became the US Forest Service Chief of the Division of Recreation and Lands until his death in 1939. His positions allowed him to travel to Alaska, where he fulfilled his boyhood dream of exploration and made several long trips along the Koyukuk River and Doonerak Mountains in the high Arctic between 1929 and 1938. Yet although Marshall only spent a total of 210 days exploring the northernmost lands in Alaska, his influence on both the perception and popular knowledge about Alaska Natives and his recommendations for parks and wilderness areas were remarkable.<sup>88</sup> He founded the Wilderness Society, and published several shorter accounts of travels. His book *Arctic Village* became a best seller after its publication in 1935, and his strict belief that Alaska should remain a wilderness largely untouched by human development was instrumental in the creation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).<sup>89</sup>

Marshall's deep appreciation for wilderness and constant advocacy on its behalf was in large part informed by his activity as a mountaineer. Marshall reveled in climbing for quenching his "bug of exploration."<sup>90</sup> From an early age Marshall took joy in traversing the peaks in his hometown area in the Adirondacks. Later, as Marshall traveled

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<sup>87</sup> Banerjee, Subhankar. "Terra Incognita: Communities and Resistance Wars." *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. By Maria Sháa Tláa Williams. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 184-192.

<sup>88</sup> Marshall, George. Foreword. *Alaska Wilderness; Exploring the Central Brooks Range*. By Robert Marshall. Berkeley: University of California, 1970. Xxxvi-lvi.

<sup>89</sup> Haycox, Stephen W. *Frigid Embrace: Politics, Economics, and Environment in Alaska*. Corvallis: Oregon State UP, 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness*, 3.

to Alaska, he managed to climb at least twenty-eight peaks in the northern Koyukuk region, most of which were first ascents. Yet Marshall not only encouraged and celebrated exploration for the joy it brought the explorer, but also because he believed that in opening up the Northern lands, pioneers “enabled those that came after them” to “lead happier lives.” For Marshall, enabling people to be better off than before justified the colonial project of opening the north to white explorers and even settlers. Marshall believed that even the Alaska Natives’ lives improved with the opening of their land. “If one grants that the lives of those who came after are happier than the lives of the Indians, such statements are essentially true,” wrote Marshall.<sup>91</sup> The improved lives of Natives and pioneers alike justified the United States colonial project for Marshall, though he only had limited interactions with Alaska Natives in his brief visits to wilderness areas.

Yet while Marshall applauded pioneers for opening the territory to future explorers and climbers, he also actively promoted halting further opening of the arctic. Marshall advocated for simultaneously for territory where one could find the “thrills in adventure” in exploration, while also maintaining the less developed, frontier-like character of the territory. He believed that the greatest resource in Alaska was its “pioneer conditions yet prevailing throughout most the territory” that would provide a “unique recreational value” to the land. While Marshall was not opposed to the exploration and opening of the North, he argued that the chief purpose of the northern lands should be recreation rather than resource extraction. In preserving the land for recreation purposes, such as the climbing that gave Marshall such a thrill, Marshall advocated for a specific purpose for Alaska in the national context. Rather than the “last

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<sup>91</sup> Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness*.

great frontier,” as Alaska is nicknamed, Marshall encouraged people to view Alaska as the “last great wilderness,” and to create parks and wilderness areas to maintain its extensive wilderness.

Yet while Marshall noted that Native populations in Alaska were “happier” after the opening of the Arctic, he also realized that the Native populations could benefit from his proposed wilderness regions. “Sociologically, the country of northern Alaska is inhabited chiefly by native populations which would be much happier, if United States experience is any criterion, without either roads or industries.”<sup>92</sup> Marshall understood that the indigenous peoples of the north did not want the same development that had swept across Southeast Alaska, and subjected Natives to discriminatory and abusive settler actions. Instead, Marshall’s proposal for wilderness areas included consideration of the indigenous population interest and potential benefits to both recreation enthusiasts like mountaineers as well as Alaska Natives.

While Marshall never saw the realization of his proposed wilderness area north of Yukon River, Congress authorized the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in 1960 despite the chagrin of white Alaskan residents that wished to open the area up for development. White settler Alaskans did not hold the same conservation ideas as Marshall, and they especially did not hold the same ideas about Alaska Natives. As Congress set aside land for preservation in the park system and national forests, Alaskan residents came to view the federal government as working against its white residents’ interests to create the wealth, independence, and reproduction of a western society in the

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<sup>92</sup> “Comments on the Report of Alaska’s Recreational Resources and Facilities,” in US National Resources Committee, *Alaska- Its Resources and Development*. US Congress, House Doc. No. 485, 75<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3d sess., Appendix B, p. 213, Washington, D.C., 1938.

Alaskan environment. Historian Stephen Haycox contends that, “The control the Alaskans wanted was for the purpose of commodification; to them the resources and land meant money, which translated into the replicated culture they all sought to establish and enjoy in Alaska.”<sup>93</sup> White Alaskan residents, with few exceptions, viewed the establishment of parks for recreation use as a blow to their own abilities to profit from resource extraction from the land. The federal government, in the case of establishing parks, worked against white Alaskans and favored the interests of the indigenous peoples.<sup>94</sup> Mountaineers such as Marshall that promoted parks for their own interest therefore also supported Alaska Native interests in staving off hungry developers. While Alaska Natives no longer held sovereignty over the future of their lands, they also found an ally against prejudiced, white Alaskan developers in the federal government and the mountaineers that had a vested interest in preserving the “frontier quality” of Alaska for recreation purposes.

Yet the complicated relationship between mountaineers and indigenous peoples, where mountaineers simultaneously furthered the nationalist, colonial agenda while promoting the preservation of land against the wishes of white residents, once again evolved as Alaska experienced large population changes. The population in Alaska, after nearly doubling between the years of 1890 to 1910, remained relatively stable until World War II. Between 1940 and 1960, however, the white population surged again. As a strategically positioned battle ground during World War II, the military stationed troops across the territory to ward off Japanese invasion. While stationed in Alaska troops

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<sup>93</sup> Haycox, *Frigid Embrace*. 49.

<sup>94</sup> For more discussion of white Alaskan views of conservation, see Slotnick, Herman. "National Politics and Alaska." 1971. *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. By Mary Childers. Mangusso and Stephen W. Haycox. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 233-44.

developed new infrastructure, such as roads, telegraph wires, and better naval transportation, as well as improved cold weather gear.<sup>95</sup><sup>96</sup> People moved to Alaska in even greater numbers during the post-War years. As men returned from war, they sought adventure and took advantage of the financial benefits of the GI Bill by attending school at the University of Alaska. The 1960 census reflected the dramatic growth in Alaska: the population had once again nearly doubled within a decade. Of the 226, 167 people residing in the territory, nearly half lived outside the state in 1955. As the white population grew, however, the Alaska Native population dropped.<sup>97</sup>

A growing population of whites in Alaska contributed to the rising statehood movement. Alaskans wanted the right to self-determination, and the right to decide what to do with their own land and resources. In 1959 Congress approved Alaska as the 49<sup>th</sup> state, awarding its citizens with their own congress and representation within national politics. Yet while statehood held impending disaster for Alaska Natives, who were systematically discriminated against and marginalized by whites, the federal government maintained control over large portions of Alaska through national parks, forests and wilderness areas. The National Park System (NPS) had a plan for preventing Alaska from becoming a solely resource extraction based economy. Echoing the voice of Bob Marshall in the 1930s, NPS issued a report on the state of recreation called *Operation Great Land*. The report argued that Alaska's greatest value lay in its undeveloped,

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<sup>95</sup> Bezeau, M. V. 1985. *Interpreting Alaska's History: An Anthology*. By Mary Childers. Mangusso and Stephen W. Haycox. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Pacific UP, 1989. 402-412.

<sup>96</sup> For transportation developments see Johnson, Kaylene. *Trails across Time: History of an Alaska Mountain Corridor*. Cooper Landing, AK: Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm Corridor Communities Association, 2005.

<sup>97</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1960*. Vol. I, *Characteristics of the Population*. Part 3, Alaska. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1963.

rugged, frontier-like character, where tourists would flock to take advantage of the romantic scenery. In order to preserve this character and draw in tourists and their dollars was to make recreation the main section of Alaska's economy. The NPS, in turn, held the responsibility to convince and provide the opportunity for a recreation-based economy.<sup>98</sup>

While the NPS view that white Alaskans could only be convinced to support conservation efforts if they understood the economic benefits of maintaining the "last great wilderness" seemed to some like a shallow reason for people to support the NPS actions, the campaign to make recreation central to Alaska's wilderness welcomed a new generation of conservation efforts and outdoor activity. Several white Alaskan residents, including Vin and Grace Hoeman, Hans Van der Laan, Ginny Woods, and Celia Hunter, were some of the few that organized both as mountaineers and environmentalists. Vin Hoeman, as long-time mountaineer, organized the Mountaineering Club of Alaska, which evolved into the largest Alaskan mountaineering organization. Ginny Woods and Celia Hunter pioneered one of the first wilderness lodges in the state, attracting tourists to the remote destination for "wilderness experiences" and "nature hikes" in the foothills of Denali. The MCA journal, *Scree*, assumed in its articles that all readers were conservationists, with calls for new environmental campaigns and groups, such as the Alaska Sierra Club chapter, issued regularly in its volumes. In a 1965 article in *Scree*, Ron Linder observed the growing trend of outdoor sport: "More Americans are participating in a great variety of outdoor recreational activities. Among these activities can be found mountaineering which gaining popularity."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*, 151, from *Operation Great Land*, report prepared for the Department of the Interior, National Park Service, January 1965.

<sup>99</sup> Linder, Ron. *Scree*. Vol. 7. No. 12. October 1965.

Yet as mountaineers and climbing gained a following within the state and as a tourist activity, it also encouraged a specific way of interacting with the environment that ran contrary to the indigenous framework. Climbing encouraged a system of preserving land for recreation purposes, instead of interacting with the land as the indigenous peoples of Alaska. Historian Theodore Catton points to the controversy between park use and traditional indigenous use of the land, arguing that Alaska faced a distinct dilemma in attempting to “provide for resident peoples’ traditional use of lands where those lands were dedicated to the preservation of nature, and to strike the right balance between the inhabitants’ desire for freedom and the wilderness users’ desire for the primitive.”<sup>100</sup> While mountaineers advocated for wilderness areas because they could then use the wilderness for the expression of the desire for adventure in undeveloped area, Alaska Natives wanted parks and refuges to inhibit the encroachment of developers on Native land. Some Alaska Natives did advocate for development, but the Alaska Natives that wished to maintain their culture and tradition recognized the need to keep developers at bay. Climbers and Alaska Natives differed in their motivations to set up parks and preserves, but together the two forces provided a strong ally to the NPS and federal control of Alaska’s wilderness.

While mountaineers and Alaska Natives often advocated for similar goals, there was also a sharp divide between the lives of climbers and Alaska Natives. With the improved road systems, increased access to bush plane flights, and better maps of the area that began to take shape during military occupation, mountaineers relied less on Alaska Native guidance and knowledge in order to access the mountains. Enhanced

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<sup>100</sup> Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*, 220.

equipment for the outdoors, such as tents, cold weather clothing, ski gear, and other climbing tools became available at first through army surplus stores, and later from Paul Denkewalter's store, Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking, and a branch of REI<sup>101</sup> made the preparation and equipment needed for climbs more readily available to a greater number of people.<sup>102</sup> The two climbing clubs at the time, the Alaska Mountaineering Club based out of Anchorage and the Alaska Alpine Club (AAC) based out of Fairbanks, facilitated the skills and support necessary for climbers as well. As the need for indigenous knowledge to aid expeditions diminished, climbers began to view their activity as separate from the activity of Alaska Natives. The connections between the indigenous peoples and early climbers, like Muir, Cook, and Stuck, were replaced by the substantial growth in mountaineering activity and infrastructure within the white communities.

Though white mountaineering communities grew substantially during the postwar and Cold War years of population boom, Alaska Native participation did not add to the growth of mountaineering clubs and activity. While growing numbers of Alaska Natives moved to the urban, Southern regions of Alaska where climbing was most prevalent, Alaska Natives did not join the ranks of MCA or AAC, nor did they complete any major first ascents. Climbing was a popular mode of connecting and interacting with nature for the white population of Alaska, but for Alaska Natives the act of reaching the summit of a mountain did not hold the same cultural value and prestige. Native cultures did not have the same tradition of connecting and interacting with nature through the physical activity

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<sup>101</sup> Started as the Recreational Equipment Cooperative for mountaineers in Seattle, REI (Recreational Equipment Incorporated) came to Alaska in the 1980s.

<sup>102</sup> "Paul Denkewalter." Interview by Dave Kupra. *Project Jukebox*. University of Alaska Fairbanks, 7 July 2000. <<http://jukebox.uaf.edu/denali/html/pade.htm>>.

of climbing peaks, while in the white population climbing was a popular option available to people with the leisure.

Despite the cultural differences between white climbers and Alaska Natives, however, some climbers did attempt to make mountaineering and outdoor recreation popular for several Native villages. In the spring of 1976, Bill Spencer, who had just returned from the winter Olympics for Nordic ski racing, and a friend traveled to the Northwest Arctic villages to try to “establish skiing for the Native community.”<sup>103</sup> While the program encouraged skiing, not mountaineering, the premise was to support outdoors athletics. While there were quite a few people involved in the programs, Nordic skiing never became as widespread amidst Alaska Native communities as white ones. Spencer noted that the villages, “have some real talented athletes,” but the outdoor recreation that permeated southern, urban, and primarily white communities did not spread to northern, rural and primarily Native towns. A few exceptional Alaska Natives, including Paul Winken, a skier from the small town of White Mountain who became a Nordic racer at Dartmouth College, chose to become involved in outdoor athletic communities, but as a rule Alaska Native populations did not participate in mountaineering and outdoor recreation at the same rates as white populations. The Alaska Native way to connect and interact with their environment did not promote climbing and mountaineering activity like the white population.

Mountaineering was a foreign concept to Alaska Natives when mountaineers first traveled to Alaska, and it remained a tool of foreigners to claim and conquer Alaskan land traditionally inhabited by indigenous peoples. Their physical act of climbing worked

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<sup>103</sup> Spencer, Bill. “Mountaineering in Alaska,” Telephone interview. 23 Jan. 2014.

to promote nationalist interests in Alaska, and the racist and assimilationist policies of some mountaineers worked off the slopes to promote ideas about Alaska Natives that served to justify their marginalization from American society. Not all climbers' ideas disenfranchised Alaska Natives, however. In promoting parks and wilderness areas, climbers helped prevent development of Native land, but they also promoted the federal control of land that Native Alaskans held sovereignty over. Mountaineering ideas about wilderness and keeping the mountains from the destructive influence of people represented a distinctly white way to connect to the land, and this foreign way of interacting with the environment both aided and worked against the Alaska Natives' best interests. In viewing humans separate from the wilderness, mountaineers neglected to acknowledge the presence and interdependent relationship Alaska Native cultures held with the land, and the consequences of mountaineering community action regarding the preservation of wilderness held dire costs for the indigenous peoples that connected with the land.

### **Women Climbers**

From its roots in the masculine culture of imperial Europe, the forms of mountaineering that gained the most attention and publicity in Alaska remained informally off limits to most women. Women were not immune to the fever for first ascents, but the structural barriers that impeded women's participation in the sport in Europe limited the number of women who had access to the funds, equipment, and skills to climb in Alaska. With the exception of a single extraordinary climber, women did not climb the challenging peaks that male climbers eyed. Instead, from the Gold Rush until World War II, the main mountaineering activity of women in the territory was exploration and recreation in the mountains around their homes. Their adventure into the wilderness surrounding settlements helped build homes in Alaska, and disproves the myth that men dominated colonial activity.

Women were generally not involved in the race to claim first ascents like men in the territory, but both Barbara Washburn and Betty Kauffman managed to climb some impressive peaks by accompanying their husbands. In postwar Alaska, however, white upper class women formed their own culture of climbing that did not depend on their husbands through the organizational platform of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska (MCA). Women took advantage of the possibilities for organizing communities around mountaineering afforded by the resources of MCA, and not only created and facilitated welcoming communities for white, upper class women, but also connected women with

the land and solidified their interest in preserving it. Climbing reflected women's assumed place in Alaskan society, from efforts to make a home in frontier Alaska and later as women's activity encouraged more participation in outdoors recreation as an extension of environmental and community building labors.

Yet while women eventually carved out a distinct space within mountaineering communities in Alaska, women were discouraged from participation and mocked for their accomplishments when the sport first emerged.<sup>104</sup> Upper class British men, raised with the ideals of adventure and masculinity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, discovered a venue for these ideals in climbing the European Alps.<sup>105</sup> As historians have documented, the feminization of workplace and family in industrialized England prompted men to seek an escape from the "female" civilization in order to express their true masculine identities. These male identities centered on a number of principles, such as athletic prowess, honor, and courage, and included the idea of primitive masculine compulsions, the expressions of men unhindered by the influence of industrialized society. As historian Susan Schrepfer points out, "in order to cultivate the "primordial" impulses" so central to the concept of masculinity, men visualized nature as "metaphorically feminine."<sup>106</sup> In viewing nature as feminine, men stimulated their urges to climb and subordinate nature as an extension of their masculine expression. Climbing mountains, which were referred to as "her," metaphorically placed men above women, and represented men prevailing over the threatening female force of nature. Unclimbed peaks were labeled "virgin" peaks, and

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<sup>104</sup> Mazel, David. *Mountaineering Women: Stories by Early Climbers*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1994, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Hansen, Peter H. "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain." *Journal of British Studies* 34.3 (1995): 312.

<sup>106</sup> Schrepfer, Susan R. *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*. Lawrence, Kan.: U of Kansas, 2005. 5.

the climber that first reached her summit described the activity as “a unique consummation.”<sup>107</sup> Men viewed their climbing activity as subjecting feminine nature, and their conquest of peaks proved their triumph over feminized mountains.

Because mountaineering was inextricably tied to the demonstration of masculinity, and especially the dominion over female nature, women’s participation in the sport directly challenged men’s exhibition of masculine superiority and escape from the female world.<sup>108</sup> The London Climbing Academy, established in 1857, and considered the premier climbing organization in the world at the time, explicitly excluded women from membership. The club emphasized the maleness of mountaineering, within its bylaws, membership requirements, and even the language used to describe the act of climbing. Without the support of the club, women did not have access to the knowledge, gear, and funding afforded to privileged club members. They faced not only explicit obstacles in climbing, but also faced structural barriers from the lack of resources women had in comparison to men.

Yet despite the exclusion from the London Climbing Academy, the general disapproval for women’s climbing, and the lack of resources needed to climb, there were women who avidly pursued the sport. As early as 1808, Marie Paradis climbed the 15,771-foot Mount Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps, and other bold women followed with summits of some of the most challenging peaks in the Alps.<sup>109</sup> Despite the skill and strength of these women climbers, even the Alpine Club of London did not accept women’s membership until the 1970s. When Anne Lister became the first to climb

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<sup>107</sup> Taylor, Joseph E. *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010. 6.

<sup>108</sup> Hansen, Peter Holger. *British Mountaineering, 1850-1914*. Diss. Harvard University, 1991.

<sup>109</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*. 2.

Vignemale in 1838, her guide discredited her feat until Lister refused to pay him for the trip and forced him to sign an affidavit as proof that she had been the first to reach the top. Excluded from the male, elite world of climbing, the dedicated women climbers in London created their own club, the Ladies Alpine Club, in 1907.<sup>110</sup>

While women were actively rejected from the male climbing community in England, climbing clubs in the US took a different approach to female climbers. Clubs across the nation, from the Alpine Club of Williamstown (1863), to the Colorado Mountain Club (1912), accepted women climbers. David Mazel, in his introduction to the anthology *Mountaineering Women: Stories by Early Climbers*, surmises that the American idea that women should participate in robust physical activity for their physical and mental health helped encourage this equal treatment, but also points to the strong undercurrents of feminist rhetoric that female climbers expressed in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In their writing and lectures many women climbers encouraged other women to view their climbing activity as empowering the female sex. By exercising their bodies and exhibiting the courage and determination required to climb, mountaineering served as a way women could use their bodies beyond the realm of home and family life, and participate in a realm traditionally reserved for men.<sup>111</sup>

One mountaineer that promoted women's participation in the sport was Dora Keen. Keen expressed her desire to involve more women in climbing in order to "pass on the courage I have gained from my wonderful experiences."<sup>112</sup> For Keen climbing was a way to provide women with a realm in which they could find successes and fulfillment

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<sup>110</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*. 10.

<sup>112</sup> Miller, Dorcas S. *Adventurous Women: The Inspiring Lives of Nine Early Outdoorswomen*. Boulder, CO: Pruett Pub., 2000. 63.

beyond their family and home. Her successful climb of Mt. Blackburn in southern Alaska in 1912 represented her own search for empowerment beyond the traditional women's realm during the Victorian era, and her accomplishment promoted women's participation in the sport. Keen's feat gained national acclaim, including a notification in the *New York Times* immediately following her success, and an invitation to present on her expedition at the prestigious American Alpine Club.<sup>113</sup> Her subsequent lecture tour across the US and continued expeditions in Alaska proved to the American climbing community that women could hold their own with the male climbers claiming first ascents across Alaska.

Yet while Keen's climbing activity was a tool to empower her and support women's advances into traditionally male realms, Keen's drive to climb also stemmed from the same desire to bag first ascents that men expressed in Victorian Britain. As soon as she heard the U.S. Geological Survey description of Mount Blackburn: a mountain "worthy of the hardest mountaineer," she decided to climb the peak.<sup>114</sup> With both the funds and the skill to climb in Alaska, Keen was able to pursue first ascents unlike other women climbers that did not have access to the same resources. She had trained in the Alps, and climbed peaks in Canada, Italy, Ecuador and California. Alaskan trips also required large sums of money to fund the travel, food, and payment for guides. Fortunately Keen had sufficient funds from family money to pay for transportation, hire men for the journey, and purchase supplies. Her identity as a woman climber did not

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<sup>113</sup> "Woman Reaches Top of Alaskan Peak." *New York Times* 26 May 1912: *WOMAN REACHES TOP OF ALASKAN PEAK*. nytimes.com.

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9C05EED8103AE633A25755C2A9639C946396D6CF>>.

<sup>114</sup> Hall, Henry Jr. S. "In Memoriam: Dora Keen Handy, 1871-1963." *American Alpine Journal* 13.2 (1963): 465. *AAC Publications*.

make her immune to the value placed on being first in the climbing world, but she was unique among her women peers for her access to ample climbing resources. To this day Keen remains the only woman to ever successfully lead a first ascent expedition in Alaska, and bring feminist rhetoric centered on climbing to the territory.<sup>115116</sup>

The focus of mountaineering clubs during the Victorian Era centered on first ascents and difficult climbs that required gear, guides, and extensive rock climbing experience, but mountaineering was not limited to the most exciting and dangerous peaks. The daily life of male climbers consisted more of hiking, camping, and trekking in the mountains for physical training, preparation for larger ascents, and daily recreation. While mountaineering journals, newspaper and magazine articles, and popular culture focused on the most dramatic and physically demanding climbs, these climbs were most difficult for women to access due to their status as second-class mountaineers. Instead, women participated less in the mountaineering that garnered attention from the media and climbing clubs and instead climbed along with men for recreation. Especially in the West, women actively and regularly participated in mountain sports without publicizing and recounting their climbs. In her piece on “Victorian Ladies Outdoors: Women in the Early Western Conservation Movement, 1870-1920,” historian Glenda Riley points to numerous examples of women that chose to “vacation” outdoors in the mountains of the West, including some Colorado women in 1871 that a journalist described as “well-

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<sup>115</sup> Miller, *Adventurous Women*, 66.

<sup>116</sup> For photographs from Keen’s expedition, see Keen, Dora. *Dora Keen Photograph Collection*. Digital image. *Special Collections, UW Library*. University of Washington Library, <<http://digital.lib.washington.edu/findingaids/view?docId=KeenDoraPHColl453.xml;brand=default>>.

muscled females.”<sup>117</sup> Anna Mills reached the summit of Mount Whitney, the largest mountain in Southern California, in 1878, and Fay Fuller climbed Mount Rainier in 1890. Both women climbed with male companions, but still managed to keep up in their cumbersome skirts and lady’s clothing.<sup>118</sup> While climbing was relatively popular among women, they did not draw attention to their exploits as men did.

Women across the Western United States also regularly walked, explored, and trekked through the mountains. While this activity was not always labeled mountaineering and sanctioned by the most prominent clubs, mountaineering includes a host of alpine activity with varying degrees of difficulty for climbers of all abilities. Historian Susan Schrepfer notes, “The rock climber hanging suspended by pitons and nylon ropes from a vertical face is largely a mid-twentieth-century phenomenon, whereas the sport of alpinism in North America and Western Europe dates back at least two hundred years.”<sup>119</sup> Many years after the first women pioneers began hiking and climbing in their backyard mountains, a writer for the Mountaineering Club of Alaska explained how the sport of mountaineering applied to a broader range of activity than many assumed:

Many people associate mountaineering with the conquests of such well-known giants McKinley, Aconcagua, Annapurna and Everest. Mountain climbing is not limited to those few experts who scale the vertical face of a peak, which has trails on the opposite side well worn by a local Boy Scout troop. A Sunday afternoon picnic excursion to an alpine meadow and a large scale Mt. Everest expedition represent two extreme concepts of mountaineering. The physical and mental adventure of mountaineering is not solely possessed by those few great heroes of climbing. It is also found in the reactions of a group of college students as they

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<sup>117</sup> Riley, Glenda. "Victorian Ladies Outdoors: Women in the Early Western Conservation Movement, 1870-1920." *Southern California Quarterly* 83.1 (2001): 59-80. *JSTOR*. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41172052>>. 62.

<sup>118</sup> Riley, "Victorian Ladies Outdoors." 63.

<sup>119</sup> Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 3.

tread those last few steps to the summit of old Flattop and view the rugged snowcapped peaks across the valley below. In nearly every area of the United States can be found a challenging peak that anyone of sound health and some skill can climb. Most Americans have their own personal Mt. Everest within a few miles from where they live.<sup>120</sup>

Pioneer women's mountaineering in Alaska did not require ropes, pitons, and large expeditions, but instead consisted of hikes and exploration of the alpine areas around their homes. These women, arriving during the 1898 and 1912 Gold Rushes, had acquired a hardiness and sense of adventure from their long overland travel to the territory and readily took to climbing in the mountains around their early settlements.<sup>121</sup> They were expected to hike in heavy skirts, blouses, and slippery boots, and despite the cumbersome and impractical fashions, had to keep up with the men that dressed in much more practical clothing. Yet pioneer women accustomed to heavy physical burdens from their daily homesteading and housekeeping in harsh climate, continued to climb despite their setbacks in Victorian fashions.

Women's activity in the mountains encircling their homes was an extension of the colonial project of taming the wilderness in Alaska and making it home to the new white settlers from the Gold Rush. Historically the Gold Rush has been framed as a migration composed primarily of male prospectors, but women also moved to Alaska in large numbers.<sup>122</sup> The role of these migratory women in this progression of claiming and settling Alaska has received little academic attention. As historian Sandra Myres points out, "Historians have rarely considered women as a part of the frontier process... dismissed women as invisible, few in number, and not important to the process of taming

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<sup>120</sup> Linder, Ron. Scree. Vol. 7. No. 12. October 1965.

<sup>121</sup> Movius, Phyllis Demuth. *A Place of Belonging: Five Founding Women of Fairbanks, Alaska*. Fairbanks: U of Alaska, 2009, 141.

<sup>122</sup> Berton, Pierre. *The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958.

a wilderness.”<sup>123</sup> Alaska in particular has been portrayed as a male frontier. Yet the experiences of women in the mountains during the years following the Gold Rush in Alaska directly contradict the myth that women were passive partners to the men’s settlement and development of the land.<sup>124</sup> As early as 1898, photographs and personal journals exhibited the presence of pioneer women hiking, climbing and exploring the mountains. Women climbed in small parties, sometimes with men, and sometimes in women-only parties.<sup>125</sup> Mountaineering in the land around pioneer women’s homes represented the project of taming and getting to know the land in Alaska.

Although white women made up only 3% of the population at the turn of the century, they were held to the same ideals as male counterparts in colonizing the wilderness of Alaska.<sup>126</sup> Yet while both men and women undertook the tasks of prospecting, building, hunting and fishing, women were uniquely charged with the task of making not just houses, but homes in the new land.<sup>127</sup> An article in an Alaska newspaper recalled that women played a large part in the colonial project in Alaska both with their economic activity and their efforts to produce a comfortable life in a foreign land. “Many not only shared in the great work of developing mines and conquering the frontier,” the article noted, “but did the women’s part in founding here a land of permanence, rearing families and establishing homes- making Alaska a homeland, which

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<sup>123</sup> Myres, Sandra. “Women in the American West,” from *Women in Alaska History: A Seminar*, Alaska Historical Commission Studies in History No. 70. November 5, 1983, Sitka, “Alaska Women in Alaska History,” 4.

<sup>124</sup> Myres, 6.

<sup>125</sup> "Alaska State Library-Historical Collections." *Alaska State Library-Historical Collections*. <<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/cdmg21>>.

<sup>126</sup> Movius, *A Place of Belonging*.

<sup>127</sup> Armitage, Susan. "Tied to Other Lives: Women in Pacific Northwest History." *Women in Pacific Northwest History: An Anthology*. Ed. Karen J. Blair. Seattle: University of Washington, 1988. 6.

is the first great essential in building an enduring state.”<sup>128</sup> The exploration and climbing in the hills around their settlements furthered the project of making a home by proving that pioneers were not only surviving on the land, but also enjoying the land. Alaskan women “recorded with pride how they not only adapted to a harsh climate but thrived in it.”<sup>129</sup> Mountaineering was the way women connected to their new homes and created a place where they not only lived, but also appreciated living.

Fannie Quigley was a prime example of woman that climbed in the backwoods around her homestead. She arrived in Alaska on the heels of the Kantishna Gold Rush in 1905, eventually married Joe Quigley, and set up a homestead near Denali. In 1907 Charles Sheldon, a well-known big game hunter and naturalist, visited Alaska for a year to study Dall Sheep and established a camp near the Quigleys. In February, the Quigleys visited Sheldon, and Fannie Quigley deeply impressed him with her fitness and hunting skills. “On this day I went hunting with Mrs. Quigley,” wrote Sheldon in his journal. The pair had completed, “an arduous mountain climb, which she (Fannie) made as easily as any man.”<sup>130</sup> Fannie represented but one of many pioneer Alaskan women during the Victorian Era that contradicted the idea that women’s’ place was inside the home by actively participating in outdoor recreation as a part of her homemaking project and managing to keep pace with her male counterparts on the mountainsides.

Women also pioneered one of the ascents of one of the most famous mountains in Alaska: Mount Marathon in Seward. While Mount Marathon was best known for its race that followed a trail directly up and down the steepest sections of the mountain, it was

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<sup>128</sup> Movius, *A Place of Belonging*, quote from “Pioneer Women of Northland,” unidentified newspaper article, Member’s Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, Rust Family Papers.

<sup>129</sup> Movius, *A Place of Belonging*. 141.

<sup>130</sup> Jones, Cherry Lyon. *More than Petticoats*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2013. 24.

also home to a more leisurely climb up to the bowl, or the section of the mountain carved out by past glaciers.<sup>131</sup> The trail, which began right behind the town, became a popular destination for lively groups of men and women, with various accounts of climbing parties appearing in the local newspaper, *The Seward Gateway*. A picnic party in 1917, consisting of both men and women, ascended the mountain in celebration of the solstice, and a supper party ascended later that summer. The newspaper described the exercise of climbing to the top of Mount Marathon, as “an excellent tonic.”<sup>132</sup> Women’s bodies, in this case, were not considered too fragile to climb a taxing and steep route up a mountain, and instead the town newspaper congratulated the climbing parties.

Yet while women connected to the land by climbing up mountains around their homes in the process of staking out a home in Alaska for white settlers, women did not seek first ascents and difficult climbs like the men that visited the territory. Dora Keen encouraged other women to climb because of the empowerment it offered to women, but no other women mountaineers ventured to Alaska to lead expeditions in unexplored territory. The lack of women climbers in Alaska was unique to the northern territory, however. Women in the lower forty-eight were often as active and dedicated to the sport as their male counterparts within various local and regional mountaineering chapters, but many climbed for the social atmosphere in climbing clubs rather than to competitively bag peaks.<sup>133</sup> Though they climbed challenging peaks, they climbed as a part of social exercise rather than as a race claim first ascents. Moreover, unless a woman was independently wealthy and already a skilled mountaineer, there were no resources and

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<sup>131</sup> Spezialy, Millie. *Mount Marathon: Alaska's Great Footrace*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest, 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Barry, Mary J., *Seward, Alaska: A History of the Gateway City. Volume III: 1914- 1923. The Alaska Railroad Construction Years*, Anchorage, AK: M.J.P. Barry, 1986. 166-171.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 65.

opportunities available for those who wished to climb the difficult, unclimbed peaks in Alaska. Accessing the unclimbed peaks in the wilderness required both money and skill that most women did not have.<sup>134</sup>

Barbara Washburn, however, found a way to climb without either independent wealth or extensive mountaineering experience by joining her husband's expeditions. Bradford Washburn was a famous mountaineer in the United States and traveled to Alaska for numerous expeditions with Barbara alongside, recording first ascents on Mount Hayes in the Eastern Alaska Range, and Mount Bertha in the Southeast in 1938. Barbara's accomplishments as a mountaineer were relatively unnoticed, however, until she became the first woman to summit Denali in 1947. By climbing alongside her husband and taking advantage of the expertise and funding afforded to an expedition led by a well-established male mountaineer, Barbara circumvented the structural barriers to climbing in Alaska as a woman, and represented a new way for women to gain access to the challenging peaks in uncharted Alaskan territory.

Yet when Barbara was first invited on her husband's expeditions she expressed hesitancy to leave her children behind in order to undertake a dangerous climb. Especially in postwar America, where women were expected to act as full time homemakers,<sup>135</sup> Barbara was concerned that climbing mountains and leaving her children behind would invite public criticism. While Barbara was devoted to her children, she also managed to justify climbing as an extension of her domestic service by emphasizing that

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<sup>134</sup> For discussion of women's roles in US society, see Buechler, Steven M. *Women's Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.

<sup>135</sup> For discussion of women's roles in postwar America and during the 1960s, see Friedan, Betty, Kirsten Lise. Fermaglich, and Lisa M. Fine. *The Feminine Mystique: Contexts, the Scholarship on the Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

climbing was a way to stay close to her husband. Voicing her motivations in joining the exclusively male expeditions, Barbara reminisced that, “It would be nice to say that I considered myself to be a pioneer and that I wanted to climb Mount McKinley to prove something for all women. But that would not be true... To be perfectly honest, the main reason I wanted to go to Mount McKinley was the my husband was going and I wanted to be with him... I did not feel I had anything to prove.”<sup>136</sup> As documented in the way she expressed her desire to be with her husband rather than her desire to climb, Barbara’s climbing helped fulfill the goals of taking care of her family. Much like the Victorian Era women of middle and upper classes that expanded their domestic sphere to include the outdoors,<sup>137</sup> Barbara’s domestic sphere included an ascent of Denali. In her perspective, her various first ascents were not personal records or driven by the need to reach the top, but rather served as a unique way to keep her family together and safe. Though she often felt that reporters were disappointed when she failed to espouse feminist rhetoric or ideas about how she could be a role model, Barbara maintained her position she climbed merely so she could stay with her husband, Years later she realized she had done “something special,”<sup>138</sup> but like many women at the time, Barbara’s main concern was her family and children. She filled the role of homemaker in a very untraditional sense, but with an avid climber husband as her partner, her actions were entirely in line with other women at the time that wanted to raise a family and be good wife.

Barbara not only opened new avenues for women to climb alongside male partners rather than attempting to seek funding they were structurally barred from, the

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<sup>136</sup> Washburn, Barbara, and Lew Freedman. *The Accidental Adventurer: Memoirs of the First Woman to Climb Mount McKinley*. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter, 2001. 11.

<sup>137</sup> Riley, “Victorian Ladies Outdoors.” 59.

<sup>138</sup> Washburn, Freedman. *The Accidental Adventurer*. 124.

entire nation was able to visually experience her ascent of Denali in 1947. The Denali expedition was filmed the entire way, and the result, a short film entitled “Operation White Tower” played in theaters across the country.<sup>139</sup> For the first time people visually pictured a woman on the snowcapped peaks of Alaska, and the image fascinated and inspired them. When Barbara returned home from her climb she anticipated that people would not have cared or noticed her climb, and if they had she expected admonishment for her having left her children behind. Instead, the nation received the news that the first woman had reached the tallest peak in North America with a flood of support and acclaim. Barbara noted, “my parents were very proud of me, and I thought they were very excited, and very supportive,”<sup>140</sup> which reinforced Barbara’s ideas that climbing was a form of domestic service for her family. Furthermore, Barbara remembered, “that other women mostly admired what I had done.”<sup>141</sup> Barbara’s climb fascinated women, who for the first time saw the possibility of a woman climbing alongside her husband as fulfilling the dual role of loyal wife and adventurer.

Despite Barbara’s initial reservations about climbing to the top of the continent as a woman and a mother, she also proved herself capable of physically matching her male counterparts during the climb. Though she was not driven to climb by the enticement of a summit, she was a strong climber amidst the men that eyed the top. In a much later interview Barbara noted the difference between her mountain experience and her male counterparts:

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<sup>139</sup> *Operation White Tower*. Dir. William Deeke. Perf. Harry Wismer. RKO Radio Pictures, 1948. Film. *YouTube*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQJfvgtoBWA>>.

<sup>140</sup> "Barbara Washburn." Interview by Dave Kupra. *Project Jukebox*. University of Alaska Fairbanks, 8 July 2000. <<http://jukebox.uaf.edu/denali/html/bawa.htm>>.

<sup>141</sup> Washburn, Freedman. *The Accidental Adventurer*. 11.

Of course to me it wasn't important getting to the top, I didn't give a rip whether I got to the top or not. My main concern was that I get home safely to my children, you know I had three at that point, and to not be a nuisance to the group. You know to not have anybody say, "Why did he bring his wife along?" So I was extra cautious about never complaining, about being a good sport the whole time.<sup>142</sup>

On the mountain Barbara was keenly aware that as the only female and her husband's companion, she had to keep up with the group and demonstrate that she was capable. She needed to validate herself as a woman climber, despite her professed disinterest in the glory of climbing, in order to climb with a group of men. With Barbara's summit, and her success broadcast to the entire nation, women were presented with a role model and example for their own climbing endeavors that proved women could keep up with men on long expeditions at altitude, even without the drive to reach the top motivating them in the same way it did for men.

Washburn bridged the gap between domesticity, the traditional women's sphere, and climbing in Alaska, and pioneered a way for women to access elite climbing circles. In 1946, the year before Barbara became the first woman to climb Denali, Betty Kauffman also took advantage of her position as the wife of a mountaineer and accompanied her husband Andy Kauffman to the top of Mt. Saint Elias.<sup>143</sup> Kauffman became the first woman to summit Mt. Saint Elias, and the team became the first Americans to ascend the mountain.<sup>144</sup> Teri Viereck also climbed alongside her husband, and was the first Alaskan woman involved in the creation of a mountaineering club. In 1952 a group of students at the Geographical Physical Institute and the University of Alaska formed the Alaska Alpine Club (AAC), based out of Fairbanks. The Club planned

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<sup>142</sup> "Barbara Washburn." Interview, *Project Jukebox*.

<sup>143</sup> Miller, Maynard M. "Yahtsétsha." *American Alpine Journal* 6.3 (1947): 257. AAC Publications.

<sup>144</sup> Miller, Maynard M. "First American Ascent of Mount St. Elias," *National Geographic* 63. February 1948. 229-48.

various impressive climbs, including two new routes on Denali. Viereck was the only female member in the club, and was able to participate in the club's pioneering climbs through her association with her husband.<sup>145</sup> Through their husbands, Kauffman, Washburn and Viereck climbed with elite teams of mountaineers throughout Alaska.

Women continued to climb alongside their partners, but with the founding of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska (MCA) in 1958, women gained a platform to create avenues of participation in the sport that did not rely on men. MCA's mission statement reflected its openness to women climbers: "to maintain, promote and perpetuate the association of persons who are interested in promoting, sponsoring, improving, stimulating and contributing to the exercise of skill and safety in the Art and Science of Mountaineering."<sup>146</sup> The club did not deliberately discriminate against women climbers like the original climbing clubs in 19<sup>th</sup> century London, and instead it welcomed everybody, including women, that were interested in mountaineering. Founded by Vin Hoeman, a prolific climber at the time with numerous first ascents to his name, MCA accepted all levels of mountaineering expertise, including day hikers as well as professional mountaineers. Hoeman wrote hundreds of letters to prospective members inviting them to join the club, and kept membership fees to a minimum (\$2.50 annually). MCA also published a monthly newsletter, named *Scree*, to inform its members of club events, relay mountaineering stories, and plan future climbs. By keeping the club easily accessible to women and climbers of all levels, and circulating a newsletter to keep members informed on mountaineering activities, Hoeman created the space for women

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<sup>145</sup> Mueter, Franz. "History - Alaska Alpine Club." Alaska Alpine Club, <<https://sites.google.com/a/alaska.edu/alaska-alpine-club/history>>.

<sup>146</sup> "About the MCA." *Mountaineering Club of Alaska*. <<http://www.mtnclubak.org/index.cfm/About-Us/>>.

mountaineers to organize independently from men, and develop communities around mountaineering that promoted a distinctly female way of climbing.

Women in the club often climbed with their husbands on the weekends, but also began to organize women only hikes. Many of the women involved in MCA had husbands and children at home, so MCA organized day hikes and climbs for the women with families during the hours their children attended school. In 1965 Gwyn Wilson, an active member who published often in *Scree*, proposed “Housewife Hikes.”<sup>147</sup> Wilson advertised these outings for women specifically, by indicating in the newsletter that, “The hikes will be on weekdays during school hours approximately and are for anyone free at this time who would like to go.” The hikes were designed to attract women that were available while their children attended school, and who often had little experience in mountaineering. Emphasizing that the hikes were for recreation rather than mountaineering exploits, Wilson added that the hikes, “will be geared to the invigorating outdoors but will not aim to grueling or difficult,” Though Wilson was an experienced climber, the hikes were designed for recreation rather than physical challenge. The series of hikes drew 13 wives on its first outing, and provided them with the support and community to become involved with mountaineering.<sup>148</sup> Through the organizing platform of MCA’s newsletter, women interested in mountaineering began to organize as women mountaineers independent of their husbands.

Within the ranks of MCA, several prolific women members also organized more challenging women only climbs. Helen Nienhueser, a resident and member of MCA, and two other women, along with Nienhueser’s husband, trekked through the Nepal and up to

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<sup>147</sup> Wilson, Gwyn. *Scree*, Vol. 7, No. 10. August 1965.

<sup>148</sup> Wilson, Gwyn. *Scree* Vol. 8. No.1. November 1965.

the base camp on Mt. Everest in 1969.<sup>149</sup> Though there was a man along on the trip, he followed the lead of the women organizers. In 1970 Grace Hoeman, the wife of MCA founder Vin Hoeman, partnered with four other women climbers from outside Alaska to complete the first all woman ascent of Denali.<sup>150</sup> Various other trips recorded in the annals of *Scree* noted the rise in women only or primarily women hikes and climbs across Alaska. The organizing power afforded to women through their membership in MCA allowed them to create a space for women to climb without requiring the leadership of men.

Women-only climbs not only opened the climbing world to women, but also encouraged more women to participate in the sport. From “Housewife Hikes” to sponsored tutorials on climbing, MCA facilitated the participation of people who had little previous mountain experience. Many of these people were women, who after years of structural barriers and discouragement from the sport finally had an avenue to explore climbing. In collaboration with the Seattle Mountaineers, MCA also published several small brochures on hiking in Alaska, and in 1972 Nienhueser published *55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska*, a hiking guide for beginner to expert hikers and climbers.<sup>151</sup> The publications further engaged inexperienced mountaineers and hikers and taught mountaineering skills to vast numbers of people through the detailed descriptions of hikes and climbs within their pages. The women involved in MCA worked to create and expand a community of mountaineers across the state that included women and others that had never previously climbed.

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<sup>149</sup> Nienhueser, Helen. "Helen Nienhueser." Telephone interview with the author. 26 Feb. 2014.

<sup>150</sup> Blum, Arlene. *Breaking Trail: A Climbing Life*. New York: Scribner, 2005.

<sup>151</sup> Nienhueser, Helen. *55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska*. Anchorage: Mountaineering Club of Alaska, 1972.

The community that women built around mountaineering also reflected the different way women climbed in comparison to men. The women involved in mountaineering in Alaska, by encouraging climbing communities based on recreation instead of peak bagging, corresponded to the larger trend of women organizing in postwar America. As historian Susan Lynn argues, women between the years of 1945 to 1960 were driven to participate in organizations based on a set of ethics distinct from men:

Postwar women also experimented with newer strategies and styles of organizing that relied on a more specifically female ethic...women tend to emphasize connectedness to others and to devote more energy toward nurturing personal relationships and building networks of support, whereas men are more comfortable emphasizing their separateness.<sup>152</sup>

The women in MCA especially highlighted the connections and community that mountaineering provided for people. Gwyneth Wilson reflected on the “Housewife Hikes” program that, “Although absolutely no breathtaking mountaineering exploits took place nor were any difficulties encountered, the hikes were marvelous fun.”<sup>153</sup> The end goal of women’s climbing was not to claim first ascents or compete against mountaineers on difficult pitches, but rather to enjoy each other’s company. “For a long time that was the nucleus of our social life,” Helen Nienhueser reflected on her mountaineering activity in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the articles from early *Scree* issues described mundane climbs instead of the courageous exploits on big mountains. Women’s mountaineering facilitated a connection to a community based on socialization in the mountains.

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<sup>152</sup> Lynn, Susan. *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992.

<sup>153</sup> Wilson, Gwyn. *Scree* Vol. 8. No.1. November 1965.

Mountaineering women also considered their activity a mode of connecting to the mountain environment. Women expressed the special relationship between the climber and the environment as a form of community, placing them in the unique position to recommend land policies and engage in the political battle to protect the land. Dana Agosti, who served as hiking chairman for the MCA, articulated the connection she felt with the environment through her climbing experience: “Log books record the ecstasy of bagging a summit, but I like to think of it not so much as conquering the mountain as achieving a union with it.”<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Marilyn Carter experienced the pull of climbing in the wilderness, noting in 1975, “I find myself up there often, roaming mentally the silence and space of that incredible landscape; it doesn’t let go of one easily.”<sup>155</sup> For women climbers, mountaineering connected them to the wilderness and informed their desire to protect the land they felt they were in community with.

Several women acted on both their organizing experience and their desire to preserve the wilderness they connected to by forming some of the most influential environmental chapters in the state. In 1960 Celia Hunter and Ginny Wood, members of MCA and owners of the famous tourist wilderness destination, Camp Denali, collaborated with other conservationists to form the Alaska Conservation Society (ACS).<sup>156</sup> Later that year an advertisement for membership was published in *Scree*. Similarly, calls for members for an Alaskan chapter of the Sierra Club and the Fairbanks Center for the Environment were published in *Descent*,<sup>157</sup> the Alaska

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<sup>154</sup> Agosti, Dona. *The High-country Backpacker*. Tulsa, OK: Winchester, 1982. xiii.

<sup>155</sup> Elder, Carolyn. *Hiking in Muir Inlet*, National Park Service, May 1975. Foreword.

<sup>156</sup> Nelson, Daniel. "Idealism and Organization: Origins of the Environmental Movement in Alaska." *Journal of Alaska History* 28 (2003): 13-35.

<sup>157</sup> *Descent*, Unknown Volume or Issue, February 1975.

Alpine Club journal, and *Scree*. Women occupied prominent positions within each of these environmental organizations, and worked to preserve the land they had grown to appreciate through their mountaineering activity and community.

Yet the environmental battles that women mountaineers undertook exposed the failure of mountaineers to consider themselves in community with nature when they were not physically present in the wilderness. Environmental organizations among mountaineers primarily championed legislation to preserve land for recreational use. Mountaineers were instrumental, for example, in establishing Chugach State Park and the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, but their efforts to set aside land for recreational use promoted the use of land for mountaineering, and did not extend the same environmental care and protection to the cities or towns in Alaska. Both women and men instead sought to escape their lives in the towns or cities by turning to recreation outdoors. Exemplifying women's simultaneous connection and disconnection to nature through recreation, Agosti wrote in her book, "I needed therapy after raising seven kids, so I turned to hiking."<sup>158</sup> Though she felt connected to the land when hiking, hiking represented an escape from her daily life. Women mountaineers, while innovators in creating community and organizing around the land, viewed the wilderness as a place to protect because it provided humans to escape from their urban lives.

Women's climbing has emerged despite the sport's inauspicious roots in Victorian Era expressions of masculinity and imperialism over nature. By linking domesticity and climbing in the postwar era, and later by taking advantage of the organizational platform of MCA and other mountaineering clubs across the state, women

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<sup>158</sup> Agosti, *The High-country Backpacker*, 217.

forged a distinct culture of climbing. Women's climbing connected them to both their companion mountaineers and the environment and created a sense of union between women and the mountain environment. The expressions of community with nature in the mountains, however, echoed the broader problems with environmentalism in Alaska. While women felt connected and driven to protect the wilderness in the mountains, they did not promote their environmental activity to the same degree in their homes in the towns and cities. Mountaineering, while connecting women to the mountains and spurring organization to protect the mountains, also disconnected women's town and city lives from the wilderness in which they climbed.

### **Conclusion: A Better Way to Climb**

As an Alaskan athlete I have long been interested in mountaineering. Growing up in a community that prized physical activity and ability, and especially activity in the outdoors, I could not help but be drawn to the mountains that encompass my small hometown. When an outsider, which the term which many Alaskans use refer to anybody from outside Alaska, would ask about what it was like to live in Alaska, my answer inevitably drew on some form of my experiences in the mountains. My own identity as an Alaskan, and the Alaskan identity of my peers, seemed to derive from our outdoor, mountaineering activities. And my own association with the mountains is hardly unique. One local hero, Braun Kopsack, told reporters in 1989, “I love the mountains... I live to be in the mountains.”<sup>159</sup> Certain communities of Alaska, primarily the white upper and middle class, identify mountains with the Alaskan lifestyle and identity, and celebrate their participation in mountaineering as the quintessential Alaskan activity. Alaska has a unique connection in the identity of its people and place to mountaineering.

Perhaps most prominent example of the enthusiasm around mountaineering is the popularity of the Mount Marathon race in Seward. Participants run up and down the peak directly behind the town, in a race that an article in *Scree* once described as “instant

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<sup>159</sup> “Kopsack Triumphs on Lazy Mountain,” *Anchorage Daily News*, 27 August 1989.

mountaineering.”<sup>160</sup> The *Anchorage Daily News*, the largest newspaper in the state, now covers the race extensively and recently dubbed it the “Super bowl of Alaska.”<sup>161</sup> Racers are featured on the front page of the news, with a large spread on the danger, athleticism, and courage required to complete the race. Yet this version of an Alaskan identity, and the celebration of the sport, is a distinctly classed and racially exclusive phenomenon. The mountaineers’ Alaska is distinct from the Alaska known to Native Alaskans, people of color, many women, and those who do not have leisure or access to this sport. Moreover, it hides the problematic history of the sport.

One of the greatest ironies in mountaineering is the great pride its participants take in recording, researching, and remembering its past. Yet the past that mountaineers refer to glorifies past participants just as much as its current climbers, hiding the more complex history of relations between mountaineers and Alaska Natives, women, and the environment. The past of the sport is not as simple as who climbed which peak and when, or even as simple as what the land looked like when the peak was climbed and the scientific measurements that were recorded at the time. Mountaineering in Alaska is a past of the cultural and environmental ties of people to the mountains, and what participation implied for the land and its people. Often that story is riddled with forwarding the colonial project in Alaska, excluding women from participation, and creating a pervasive wilderness ethic that separates humans from nature by portraying them as visitors. If mountaineers understood their history in this context, the praise for past first ascents might not be so highly prized.

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<sup>160</sup> Hamilton, Scott. “Mt. Marathon,” *Scree*. Vol. 4. No. 9. July 1962.

<sup>161</sup> Woody, Doyle. “ADN.com.” *SEWARD: Rookie Christy Marvin Wins Mount Marathon Women’s Race*. Anchorage Daily News, 4 July 2014.  
<<http://www.adn.com/2013/07/04/2963979/rookie-christy-marvin-is-womens.html>>.

Yet the physical activity of climbing uphill is not in itself an act that necessitates problematic ideas and actions towards certain groups of people or even nature itself. The cultural meanings that people have embedded in mountaineering hold the danger of marginalizing certain populations and encouraging unharmonious ideas about the human relationship to the environment. When mountaineers project ideas about humans as visitors in nature mountaineering becomes a vehicle for reinforcing ideas about the environment that absolve Alaskans from their responsibility to the whole environment. For example, the opinion expressed by climber Tim Kelley that Alaska is, "one of the last places in the world where you can live a normal life -- have a house, go to a job -- and in your free time go to places people have never been before,"<sup>162</sup> shows how climbers think of their daily lives and their climbing in wilderness as two different places. The spaces we need to protect, those wilderness spaces where humans merely visit to climb, in turn paint the house and the job as spaces apart from wilderness. The wilderness is what we seek to preserve, but not to live with.

Yet mountaineering is also linked to the environmentalist community that has championed environmental legislation and activity that has kept Alaska from the hungry hands of development and industry. While the connections between mountaineers and environmentalists seemed logical and natural to me growing up, illuminating the historical relationship between environmentalism and outdoor recreation offers some valuable insights into both why mountaineers are motivated to engage with certain environmental issues and what kind of environmental ethic they adhere to. A wealth of

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<sup>162</sup> Campbell, Mike. "ADN.com." *Peak Bagger: Climber Tackles Alaska's Unnamed Peaks*. Anchorage Daily News, 13 Dec. 2008. Web. <<http://www.adn.com/2008/12/13/622388/peak-bagger-climber-tackles-alaskas.html>>.

scholars has theorized that outdoors recreation such as mountaineering adds to the appreciation of nature, and should therefore predicate environmental advocacy.<sup>163</sup> Yet there are multiple ways to connect to the land, and mountaineers have supported images of Alaskan wilderness that run contrary to environmentalism at times. By publicizing their climbs, mountaineers promoted increased tourism and foot traffic in the mountains, and further developed the idea that a key importance of wilderness was its value as a recreation resource. By keeping themselves visitors in the mountains, mountaineers imagined their home lives in the town separately from their wilderness adventures, increasing the dichotomy between wilderness and humans. While they might strive to protect the wilderness in the mountains, the land near their home, or terrain that does not hold the recreation potential, was fair game for development.

Conservationist Aldo Leopold once argued that, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” Mountaineering in Alaska has not posed the land as a community, but rather as resource to attract tourists, or a place for those wealthy, knowledgeable, and skilled enough to play. Yet this view of wilderness turns nature into a commodity for profit or an exclusive space where class and race dynamics are displayed as certain people access recreation that others cannot. While some mountaineers feel they are intimately connected with the land through their physical activity, they need to feel intimately connected to all land, and form communities of love and respect around this relationship.

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163

Some mountaineers do see the central irony in the Alaskan image of wilderness, the wilderness in which climbers play and wildlife abounds, but where humans are absent. Dave Brann, an advocate for trails and an educator in Homer, pointed to the discrepancy in people's ideas about what Alaska looks like and how it actually exists: "Alaska has this certain mystique about it... it has that rustic back to the land kind of image, even though in Anchorage you have everything that any other city might have."<sup>164</sup> While Alaska relies on its image of wilderness, the "back to the land" image, 50 percent of Alaskans live in urban areas, and can only pretend that their state is a vast undeveloped wilderness.<sup>165</sup>

My intention with writing this thesis was not to attack or blame any climber or climbing community. In fact I will readily climb again, even after understanding that the sport is racially select, classed, and gendered. On the same hand, the cultural meanings of mountaineering are not set in stone. Alaskan and visiting mountaineers give the sport its meaning and place within our culture. The story of how women, who were both structurally and explicitly barred from participation in the past managed to turn the sport into a basis for forming a welcoming and empowering community from the 1950s to the 1970s shows that mountaineering is merely a tool to be used and interpreted by its participants. Climbing is not the problem, but rather the context in which a person chooses to climb, and what they allow it to mean to them that matters. Mountaineers today use the terms "conquer" and "virgin peaks" without understanding their ties to a gendered and imperialist past. Yet these words are slowly coming out of vogue and

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<sup>164</sup> Brann, Dave. "Outdoor Activity in Homer," Telephone Interview. January 18, 2014.

<sup>165</sup> Sherwood, Morgan. "The Wilderness and Alaska." *Environmental Review* 9.3 (1985): 197-209.

women are also participating in greater numbers. Yet while these signs hold promise for the future of the sport, the central issue of connecting to nature remains problematic.

Rather than framing mountaineers as the caretakers of a wilderness due to the connection that the physical action of climbing uphill affords them, mountaineering holds a complex relationship between nature and humans that does not always benefit nature.

Mountaineers should understand that their actions as visitors in the mountains do not absolve them of taking care of the land near their home, or for that matter the land that could be mined for gold, drilled for oil, or harvested from till the fish disappear.

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