



Chasing Denali: The Sourdoughs, Cheechakos, and Frauds behind the Most Unbelievable Feat in Mountaineering

Jon Waterman

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Is the legend of the four neophyte climbers who, all in one day, summited Denali unharnessed and unroped, inadequately dressed, using primitive equipment and lugging a fourteen-foot-tall, twenty-five-pound tree trunk up treacherous slopes to plant the American flag in the rocky, frozen ground before turning around and descending the mountain, true? Or is it merely another example of Alaskan bravado?

Birthered in 1910, the legend has long been shrouded in mystery. If true, it grants the four gold miners (“Sourdoughs”) the distinction of having been the first to reach the summit of America’s highest peak. On the cusp of his sixtieth birthday, photographer and writer Jon Waterman dedicated his last climb of Denali to finding out.

Waterman had felt called to the mountains early in life, inspired by the legend of the four rugged men who supposedly had done the impossible, then disappeared into the wilderness. “If I wasn’t out in the mountains or planning the next trip, I succumbed to depression—like most climbers do,” he writes. The thrill of pushing himself to extremes with the wind in his face, knowing that each step he took had consequences, gave his life meaning. But awareness that the path to Denali’s summit was marked by the corpses of those who had died on the mountain’s unforgiving slopes led him to a career as an adventure writer promoting mountaineering history and safety.

Waterman, whose previous climb had been forty years ago, prepared himself for the challenge. But would he be able to keep up with climbers half his age? Surprisingly, the answer was yes. Read his story, relish his adventures, and decide for yourself if the evidence supports the legend’s claims, or if it’s just another good tale to be told around the fireplace, beer in hand, on long, chill Alaskan nights.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January/February 2019)

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