



Alaska's Denali Legacy

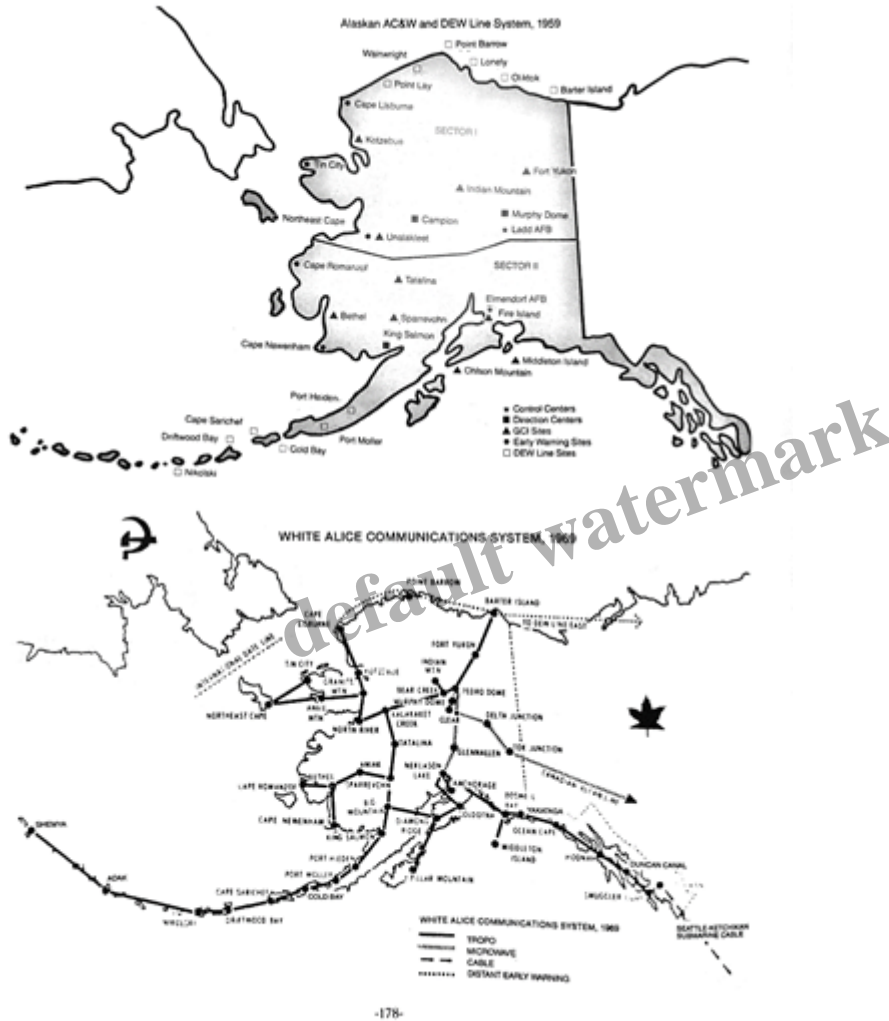
Description

Sheldon Air Service knows this Mountain!



An enclave dining area features a model of the Piper Cub flown by legendary pilot **Don Sheldon** at the **Coast Inn at Lake Hood**. A large banquet room is being remodeled in honor of Sheldon and a grand opening is planned, themed with memorabilia provided by Sheldon's daughter, **Holly Sheldon Lee**, who runs **Sheldon Air Service** in Talkeetna.

As a kid delivering and selling the *Anchorage Daily News* at old time bush pilot operations along Anchorage's Merrill Field during the late 1960s, I witnessed a way of life that is rare today. Gritty pilots flew through all kinds of weather to deliver people to places they needed to be. My father often flew as a civilian contractor out of Merrill to the military Installations serving as "Top Cover for America."



Graphic from *Top Cover for America* book.[1]

This was the time when our US military monitored the *United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR)* from Alaska. And, as the eldest of three kids, my parents had provided a letter saying I could fly excess baggage if any Merrill pilot was willing to take me along for the ride.

I had conned adults on both sides into this deal

Sometimes the ride was naturally rough, and sometimes the pilots would do maneuvers to get my attention, but I reflect on this as a time of wonder for a boy from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

According to *Top Cover for America* by **John Haile Cloe** the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II did not end the need for a strong military presence in Alaska, the only place in the United States besides Hawaii that had actually been attacked by Japanese forces. The Soviet Union had quickly taken advantage of postwar confusions and uncertainties to assert its dominance in Eastern Europe and parts of the Far East. By the end of 1949 the Soviets had developed an atomic bomb with means for delivery. Alaska's strategic location astride anticipated bomber routes required a strong military presence during what became **The Cold War**.

From Cloe's book:

In early 1949, the *Joint Chiefs of Staff* concluded that all nations capable of waging war on the U.S. were located north of the 45th parallel. The shortest attack route lay across the polar regions, and the only means of countering the attacks was an air defense system stretching across Canada and Alaska.

I have written previously about the experience of having a father who worked as a communications technician on the *White Alice System* during The Cold War:

<https://donnliston.net/2018/07/nike-site-reflections.html>

Meet Holly Sheldon



Photo by Waneta Borden

About this same time another Alaskan was experiencing a different aspect of the bush flying life. **Holly Sheldon** was also the eldest of three children. Her father was the legendary Denali Mountain pilot **Don Sheldon** and her mother was **Roberta Sheldon**. Roberta was the oldest daughter of **Bob** and **Tilly Reeve** who established and operated **Reeve Aleutian Airways**. I talked recently to Holly about our varied Alaskan experiences during lunch at the **Sheep Creek Lodge** located on the Park's Highway north of Willow and South of Talkeetna.

My memories as a child were of tagging along with my dad, who tied the seat belt to my ankle so I wouldn't fall out of the airplane when we were air-dropping to the early climbers of Denali, explained Sheldon. Dad flew the pioneer climbers from all over the world and now we have the honor of transporting some of the grandchildren of the first climbers who ever climbed Denali!



Mount McKinley / Denali ("The Great One") - 6194 metres / 20,320ft - in Alaska is the highest mountain in North America.
One of the Seven Summits of the world and lies in Denali National Park.

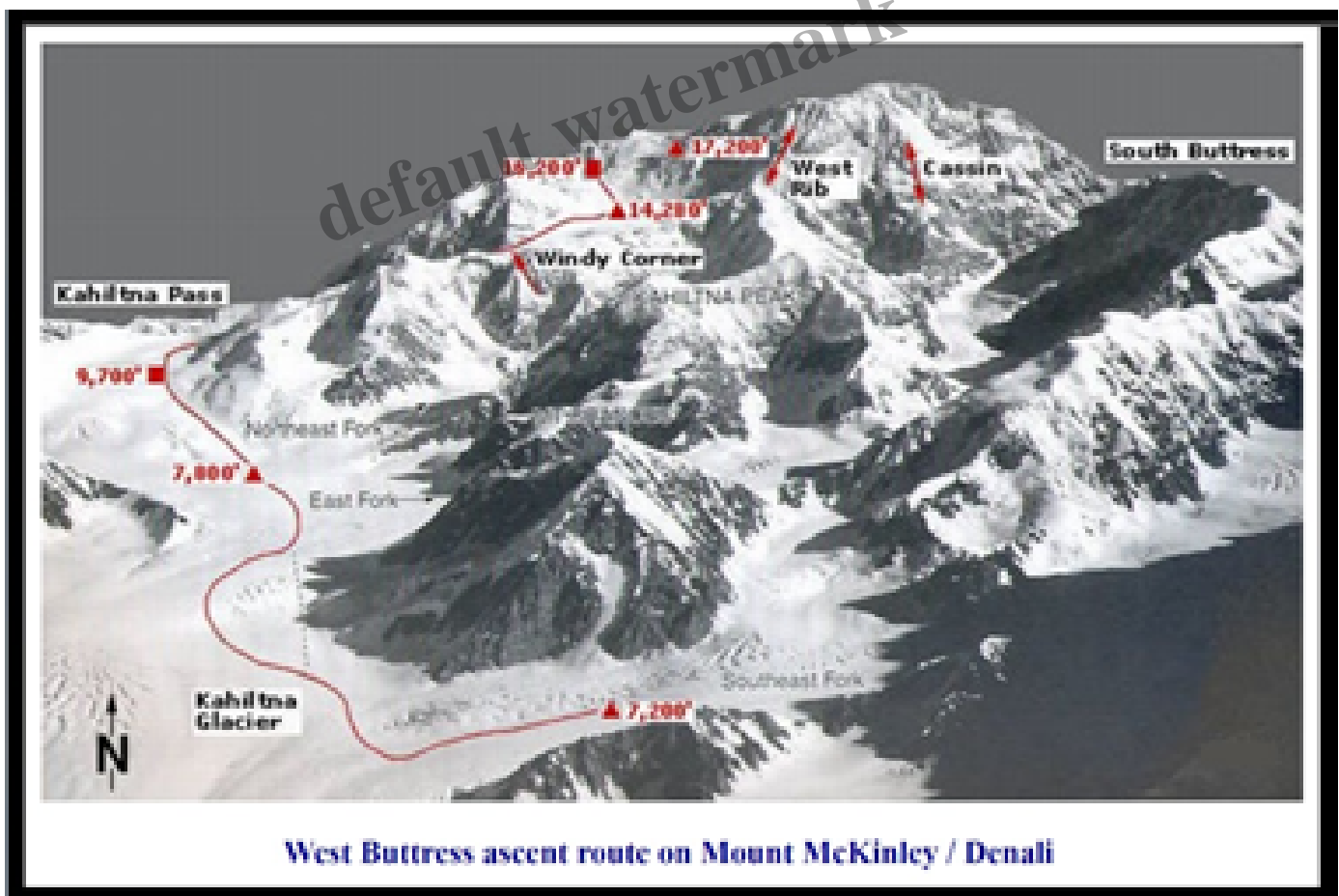
Don Sheldon was also instrumental in mapping Mt McKinley over a decade with **Bradford Washborn**.

Unassuming and precise, Holly Sheldon's eyes sparkled as she shared her rich experience inspired by her father. She and her husband, David Lee have owned and operated **Sheldon Air Service** in Talkeetna since 2010. Previously Lee flew for all the air services at the Talkeetna Airport and owned **Talkeetna Air Taxi** during the 1990s.

In the beginning of our air service I had planned on being one of the pilots, adds Sheldon. But getting into and operating a successful air service in the 21st Century has required much more than when Dad was doing it. I have predominantly run the business, my husband has flown, and we have had other support pilots. I have had a great experience interacting and networking with all the climbers of the world and generations of flight-seers and folks who want to be transported into Alaska wilderness to homesteads, or just camping on the glacier.

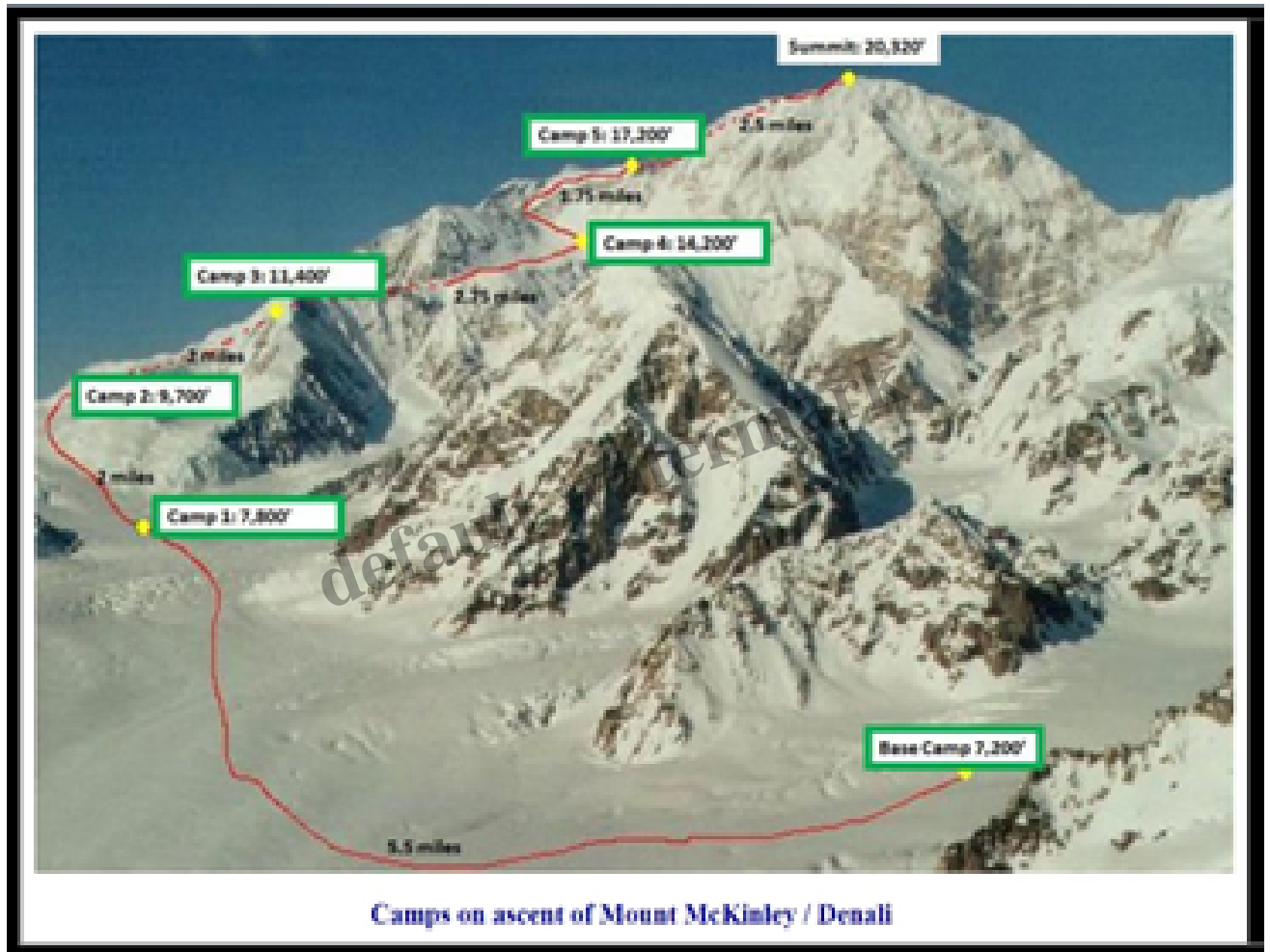
An old time Alaskan business run by Alaskan values.

When climbers come from international locations or the lower 48 to climb Denali they are flown to the ***Kahiltna Base Camp***, which is at the 7,200-ft level, of the Kahiltna Glacier. They start their ascent of the west buttress, or other peaks of the area, from the Kahiltna side. Earlier in the season, say in April, *Sheldon Air Service* flies rock climbers up the west fork of the Ruth Glacier, into the amphitheater, or into the gorge or what is known as the Root Canal. Husband **David Lee** is one of the few pilots who land there regularly because it is very challenging—with a fantastic landing area—and only one way out.



West Buttress ascent route on Mount McKinley / Denali

Modern technology has done wonders for our ability to know the status of climbers on the mountain, continued Sheldon. Normally we put up a base camp tent at the landing area with radio communications so when climbers come back into the area they alert us and we fly up as soon as practicable—according to weather and conditions—to bring them back. This year we used devices that are satellite driven to communicate with climbers at the landing area. We were not sure as to how far the Covid concerns would go so we didn't put in the base camp radio but the alternative communication techniques this year have worked out really good.



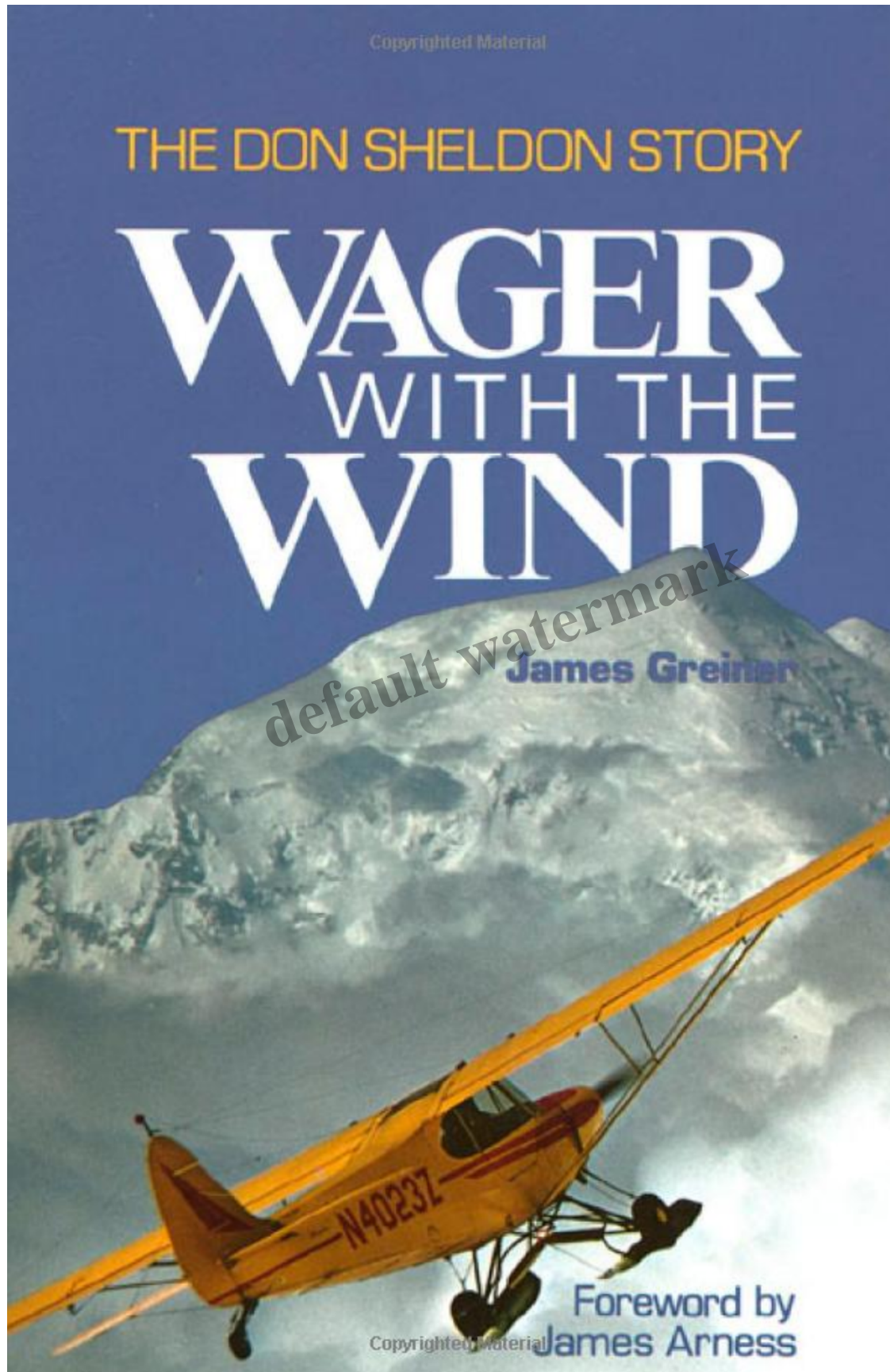
Beginning at the end of April what are known as the “Long Liners” arrive to climb Denali until the glacier “melts out” or rots at the beginning of July. The world renowned climbing season ends soon after that, but the business continues to fly people to various locations in the Alaska Range. David Lee and *Sheldon Air Service* flew generations of customers to the Sheldon “Mountain House,” located on a 4.9 acre rock outcropping on Ruth Glacier, staked and built by Don Sheldon. This occurred over 30 years while Roberta was still living. This Mountain House was a treasured part of Holly’s childhood. As an inholding of *Denali National Park*, Holly says to her knowledge neither of her siblings has ever visited this special tourist destination in their adulthoods—until they took it over upon Roberta’s death.

Dad and I had a quartz vein up there and he would have me put pieces of bright white sparkly quartz under my arm while I played so the quartz would heat up, reflected Sheldon. Then I held those warmed pieces of quartz in my hand on the walk back down to the glacier landing strip to the airplane. The quartz comforted me as a child as it continued to keep my hands warm on the flight home in our Cessna 180 or the Super Cub.

Sheldon Air Service is based on traditional Alaskan values, flying traditional glacier aircraft; a Cessna 185–300 hp with on-wheel skis—and a DeHaveland Beaver with an Alaskan Door. It is a great aircraft to bring climbers and their gear including the kitchen sink up onto the glacier or other points around the country, added Sheldon.

David Lee is the longest-time, highest-time pilot in southcentral Alaska flying to the Mountain. He is going into his 42nd year of flying, with over 16,000 mountain hours and approximately 20,000 glacier landings, all with an excellent safety record. Don Sheldon would have been proud of his son-in-law.

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*Dad started with a Piper Cub, and purchased a Super Cub in 1964, which I still fly—23Zulu—the plane shown on the cover of the book about him, **Wager With the Wind**, said Sheldon. He also flew a Cessna 180. Those were predominantly his aircraft until the fall of 1974. He passed in January, 1975.[2]*



Don Sheldon at Ruth Glacier

From the Forward of that book:

Don is a rare combination of warmth and efficiency, mirth and seriousness, conservativeness, and just sheer guts. Few professional pilots are blessed with his refreshingly youthful joy at drinking in the wonders of the country over which they ply their daily trade—and few pilots anywhere on earth have such a superb spot in which to ply it.

Bradford Washburn

Cambridge Massachusetts

February 18, 1974

Two other flight businesses serve passengers from Talkeetna and another one flies out of Healy using de Havilland Twin Otters with turbine engines capable of carrying 10 passengers.

They leave a different mark in the terrain, they sound different and they smell different with the turbine engines, said Sheldon. So, Talkeetna over 10 years has seen up to 30 busses a day of tourists from the big industrial tour companies. They have changed the nature of the little town I grew up in and the mountain experience.

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I once witnessed this myself in Juneau during the tourism buildup of the 1980s-90s. Every year more tourists were disgorged from the giant tour ships to walk around town or take advantage of featured activities including flight-seeing. I have always favored independent travel myself.

From *Wager With the Wind*:

For millions of years, the upper reaches of the mountain have been held in the almost-constant grip of severe coastal storms, which travel inland from the Pacific Ocean and crest along McKinley's South and West Buttresses. These storms consistently produce winds well in excess of 100 miles per hour, with accompanying chill factors that commonly exceed 125 degrees below zero during the summertime. When the ubiquitous coastal storms are not pummeling the mountain above 17,000 feet, McKinley, which seems to thrive on malicious perversity, is making its own weather. Due to its tremendous vertical dimension and the accompanying cloud stratification and temperature variation, McKinley is, within itself, a veritable weather factory.

Prior to the year 1930, venturing on foot into this world of freight-train winds and temperatures that make rubber snap like glass was considered pure folly, even by the eternally optimistic Alaskans. In the adolescence of aviation, to fly over the area was known to be highly perilous, and to land upon the flanks of the giant mountain was considered madness. But there were some bush pilots who believed there was a method to flying in the cold, thin air at high altitudes, a method waiting, like the proverbial plum, for the right man.[3]

Author James Greiner tells of the various pioneer expeditions and their successes and failures through the eyes and voice of Don Sheldon. Holly and her siblings have grown up in the shadow of their famous father, but she alone has had to deal with the challenges of the business she and David built from his inspiration.

We are very conscious of our responsibility to provide the safest possible transportation and support while considering the environment, she states with pride. Having grown up here we are familiar with the conditions, landmarks going in and coming out, and we are very sensitive to the weather. We ask that our clients provide as much of a window as possible to design their trip during the time they will be here. We really offer a personalized traditional service. We provide a flight of a lifetime not available anywhere else.

Being raised in Talkeetna by my Dad and my Mom I always knew I could be anything I wanted to be if I put in the work, said Sheldon. I have put in 20 years preparing a future for Sheldon Air Service. I attended the University of Alaska at Merrill Field to learn the technical aspects in the 21st Century for such an endeavor, in addition to earning my private pilot certificate, my instrument rating, and my commercial certificate. My goal has always been to fly our clientele to the Mountain House that my dad built. I have now passed through the traumatic experience of not having things go as planned.

Roberta Sheldon died June 4, 2014 and brother **Robert Sheldon** is executor of the estate. He has taken steps to block *Sheldon Air Service* from utilizing the Mountain House destination in its business, or even visit it personally. In fact he has arranged for a competitor air taxi company to fly turbo otters and helicopters full of tourists to the family heirloom and blocked *Sheldon Air Service*. Of course everything is now tied up in the courts.

<https://donnliston.net/2021/01/destiny-happens.html>

I have had challenges that have taught me a lot, concluded Sheldon. I am very grateful to my siblings for all that I have been through because I wouldn't be where I am at today without those experiences. They have been painful and have actually forced business from our clientele who we flew to our Mountain House for 30 years. But, as an Alaskan we've got to keep the sunny side up so I just keep on truckin'.

This is the spirit successful climbers must embrace to be successful ascending Denali.[4]

Alaska courts will determine what Don and Roberta Sheldon would have wanted to happen to their legacy among warring siblings. The new Don Sheldon Banquet Room at Coast International Inn will keep the sunny side up, regardless.

References:

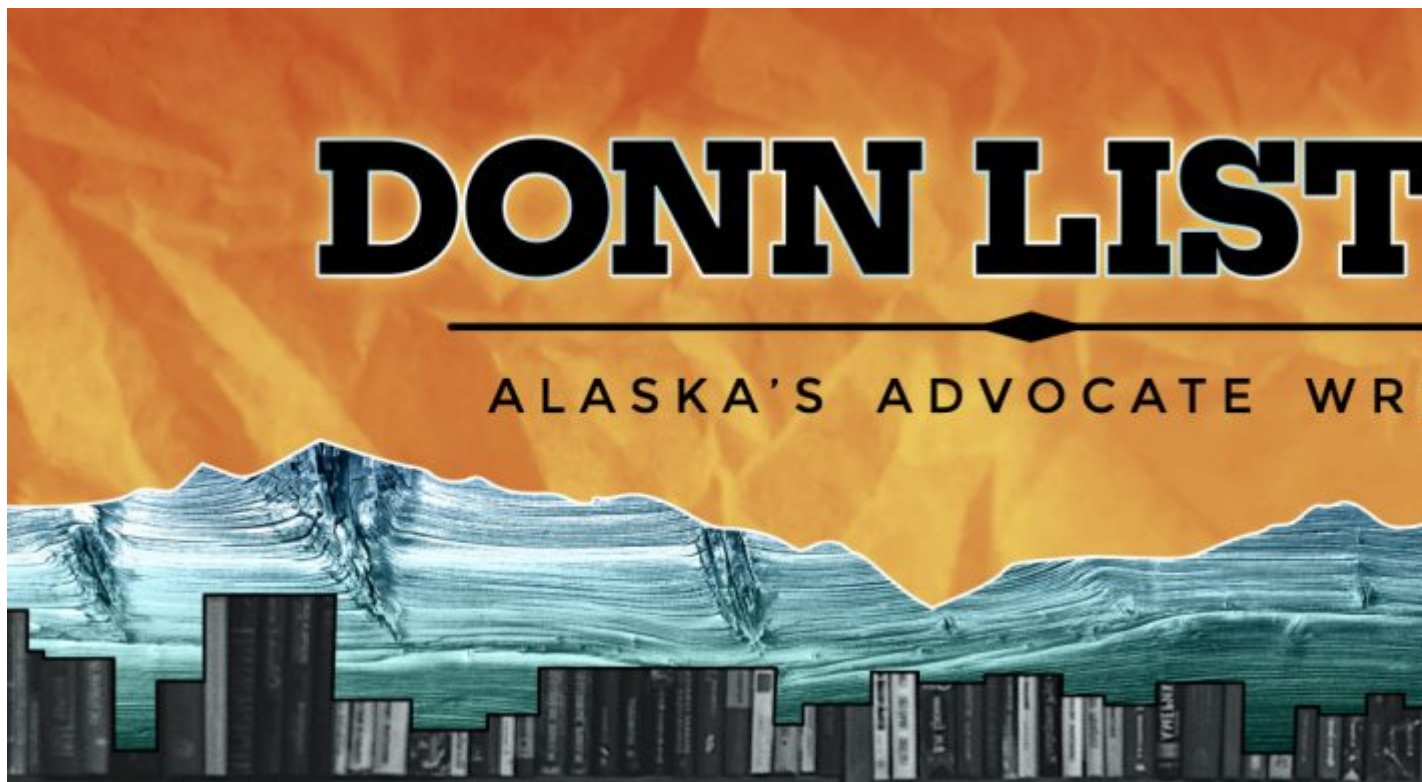
[1] Top Cover for Alaska, John Haile Cloe and Michael Monagan, Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 713 South Third St. West, Missoula, MT 59801, June 1984

[2] Wager With the Wind; the Don Sheldon Story, James Greiner, Rand McNally & Company, 1974.

[3] Ibid, Page 73.

[4] One Man's Guide to Climbing Mt. McKinley (Denali)

<https://climber.org/reports/images/1500/1519-McKinleyClimbingGuide.pdf>



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