

The 46er Vespers Tradition

By Barb Traver, delivered at the Fall 2014 annual meeting as part of Vespers

What do we know of the tradition of holding a Vespers service at the 46er spring and fall annual meetings? To start at the beginning, what is Vespers? I am sometimes asked this question and the answer is simple. Vespers is an evening worship service. Many, probably most of you, know that Vespers became a Forty-Sixers tradition because of our roots in the 1930s in a Sunday School Class in the Grace Methodist Church in Troy, New York.

Grace Hudowalski, Forty-Sixer #9, told me some years ago that Vespers became our tradition because many members had only Sundays for climbing. Being church-centered folks, it never would have occurred to them to omit worship. When they worshipped around a lean-to campfire after a challenging and satisfying day in the High Peaks they were experiencing Vespers in the original strictest sense of *evening* worship.

However, it seems that the Forty-Sixers of Troy and later the Forty-Sixers used the term Vespers to worship at other times as well. For example, when the Forty-Sixers celebrated the 100th anniversary of Esther McComb's ascent of the mountain named for her, a *dawn* service was a natural part of things. The meditation given by Clarence Craver stressed themes that we still hear in nearly every Vespers message: It's not only about getting to the top, but about the knowledge, satisfaction, and inspiration gained from the climbing experience.

When they finished arm-in-arm on Dix Mountain, Grace's husband, Ed Hudowalski, 46er #6, and Rev. Ernest Ryder, Grace Methodist's pastor, 46er #7, offered a prayer of praise and thanks for their accomplishment. Perhaps we could call this one of the first formal, albeit brief, instances of Forty-Sixers' worship.

Of course, there have always been many instances of personal worship in the mountains. Church-going and non-church-going members alike still breathe prayers for safety, experience feelings of gratitude for success, and regard the beautiful sights with awesome appreciation of Creation's

mountain wonders. Not everyone would consider these various emotions to be prayer, nor is it necessary to label them as such, but many of us do regard them that way.

When Grace Hudowalski found the going on a climb to be particularly tough, she sang a Christian hymn from her Sunday School roots, "It is Better Farther On"

Hark! I hear Hope sweetly singing
Softly in an undertone,
Singing as if God had taught her,
"It is better farther on."
Night and day I hear her singing—
Singing while I sit alone,
Singing so my heart may hear it,
"It is better farther on."

The earliest Vespers services of the Forty-Sixers of Troy would most probably have resembled the Christian-based services at their church. In the years since, Vespers messages have been given by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant clergy, though the vast majority are given by laypeople, many with no particular formal religion. The Forty-Sixers perpetuated many of the Vespers traditions by retaining the practices of singing hymns while adding special mountain-related songs; reading Psalms while adding other inspired readings related to the climbing experience; and delivering a message, but one particularly relevant to the sense of spirituality we find in the mountains. Our traditional service still finds room for the moving hymn, "How Great Thou Art", as well as the songs written by Forty-Sixers Rev. Ryder and Orra Phelps. It is only natural that we each express hope and appreciation in our own ways.

The In Memoriam, where we pause for a moment of silence to remember those 46ers who have passed away since our last meeting, would not, of course, have been a part of the early services, but it has become an integral feature today. "Taps" is most undeniably an evening worship component. It reminds many people of their camp days. It remains a fitting closing for each Vespers service.

The content of Vespers has gradually become more and more ecumenical, drawing on secular sources and other faith traditions beyond just Christian.

Take note of the African and Native American contributions to tonight's service.

Worship, including Vespers is one of the oldest Forty-Sixers traditions. The tradition could not have survived if the need for change had not been accommodated over the years, as climbers of all backgrounds have joined the ranks of the Forty-Sixers. But its roots remain the same—the desire to commune with the Creator and/or the Creation, which definitely includes ourselves. Regardless of the direction Vespers may take in the future, no doubt we will always find ways to fulfill this fundamental need of the spirit.