

Warren Harding

Semper Farcissimus

June 18, 1924 - February 27, 2002

“Warren Harding? Well, what can I say?”

That’s exactly how Warren would have started his own obituary. His usual demeanor was self-deprecating: To the question, “Are you the famous Warren Harding?,” he would retort, “Well, I used to be.” He believed that people are never what they were. They all grow... older.

Harding died at home in Anderson, California, well aware that the end was near. He had been in failing health for over three years and refused to exchange his lifestyle for an extended life span. He approached his end with the same wit that he exhibited throughout his life. From his bed, just days before he died, he quipped that he was definitely never going to buy any more 50,000-mile-warranty tires.

Warren was introduced to climbing at the age of 27 in 1952 and within a year had found his niche in Yosemite Valley. Most of us remember Harding as the Yosemite pioneer -- the prime mover in the first ascent of El Capitan in 1958, via the Nose, a milestone that marked the first time a wall of such size and difficulty had been climbed anywhere in the world. His first ascents of El Cap, the East Buttress and North Buttress of Middle Cathedral Rock, the West Face of the Leaning Tower, the East Face of Washington Column (later freed as Astroman), the South Face of Mount Watkins, the Direct Route on the Lost Arrow, and the South Face of Half Dome spanned the next two decades. In the Sierra high country he established first ascents on the East Face of Keeler Needle and the Southwest Face of Mount Conness.

Beyond his groundbreaking ascents, Warren was characterized variously as a rebel, iconoclast, and rogue. In his outrageous book *Downward Bound*, published in 1975, Harding described himself as “an undersized individual ... [with] neither any outstanding physical attributes nor burning ambition. But I have a mind of my own and a love for the mountains.” Despite this self-description, Harding was a dashing figure in his heyday, well known for his penchant for good-looking women, classy sports cars, and Red Mountain wine.

And he did have a mind of his own and used it in formulating his climbing philosophy. He looked upon climbing as “an individual thing, not some kind of organized religion.” He was unimpressed and refused to be intimidated by admittedly “better climbers” when they espoused certain “climbing ethics.” Warren never hesitated to take on those whom he referred to as the “elite” of the climbing community and didn’t mince words in his castigation of “these gentlemen who, in effect, presume to tell me how to do my thing.” Climbing to him was something he did because there were no rules.

When he and Dean Caldwell completed their 27-day first ascent of the Wall of the Early Morning Light (a.k.a. the Dawn Wall) on El Cap in 1970, their placement of 330 bolts re-ignited a controversy that had smoldered in the Valley since Warren drilled his first bolt-hole. Was Harding putting up routes where no route existed or should exist? Excessive bolts and fixed ropes were being judged as “unethical.” To that sentiment Warren replied, “Climbing requires many disciplines, not the least of which is plain old ass-busting work, which is what bolts amount to!”

Royal Robbins, in concert with a few other well-respected Yosemite climbers, decided that the route should be erased. Two months after the first ascent, Robbins and I started up for the second ascent, chopping the bolts as we climbed. On the first bivouac, after four pitches, the question of interfering with an established route -- especially one with some admirably difficult nailing -- began to eat at Robbins. By morning we agreed to quit chopping. Robbins later wrote, "[It's] good to have a man around who doesn't give a damn what the establishment thinks ... Harding stands out as a magnificent maverick."

By the late 1970s Warren put serious Yosemite climbing behind him and dedicated his time to writing, lectures, slideshow tours, and the occasional sojourn into the mountains. Never giving up his union card, he worked off and on as a surveyor for the State of California. As he put it, "I'll just plug along. Climb, work, climb, have an occasional glass of wine." Into the 1980s there was a lot less climbing, a lot less work, and finally retirement -- and a lot more glasses of wine. He did, however, return to the Nose in 1989 to become, at that time, the oldest person to ever climb El Capitan.

Harding's affinity for Red Mountain wine was his eventual and inevitable undoing. By the time he reached his 70s, he had been warned that his liver would not last if he continued to imbibe. When the end was near and his body began to shut down, he became confused and a little delusional. He wanted to know what was happening to him. The conversation led to discussing the Buddhists' belief that the soul leaves the dying body and enters an embryo to emerge anew in a child. Harding pleaded weakly, "But how will you find me?"

During these last days, many of Harding's old climbing friends began to visit. On one occasion it was planned to videotape Warren and some of his friends while they swapped stories of the golden era of Yosemite climbing. When his friends arrived they spent an hour or so greeting one another. Warren became impatient and whispered to the cameraman, "Do they realize there's not much time left?"

During one of these story-swapping sessions, someone asked Warren which of all his bivouacs was the worst. He answered without hesitation that the storm-bound bivouac on Half Dome's South Face route was his worst. Immediately he was asked which was his best. He grinned, and almost in a whisper, answered, "You'll have to ask my girlfriends." Finally someone asked what he would do differently if he had it to do over again. He replied, "I would be taller, smarter, and less nasty."

Warren Harding? Have we said enough?

-- Don Lauria