Grace Dolbeck Leach Hudowalski was born in Ticonderoga on February 25, 1906, and grew up in the surrounding foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. She was the youngest of six children born to James Casper Leach and Alice Luella Dolbeck Leach. Her father operated a boat delivery and tourist service on Lake George. In the early 1920s, he bought a hotel/tavern in Minerva and moved the family there. In 1921 Grace moved to Troy, NY with her sister, Nora Leach Sproule, ten years her senior, so she could attend Troy High School. While living in Troy, she met her eventual husband, Ed Hudowalski, who was attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. They married on September 5, 1926, and settled in Lansingburgh (North Troy).

After graduating from RPI in 1927 with a degree in electrical engineering, Ed joined the state Department of Architecture as an electrical draftsman (1928). His state service was interrupted in 1942 when he joined the Army Signal Corps. He rose to the rank of major and was honorably discharged in 1947. Following the war he returned to state employment in the Department of Public Works as an electrical engineer for the canal system. For 13 years he was Assistant Superintendent of Operations and Maintenance of Canals and Waterways.

Ed and Grace bought a summer home on the eastern side of Schroon Lake in 1954. The camp, which they called Boulders, brought Ed and Grace closer to the area to which they had such strong personal connections. They worked together to promote the Adirondacks and were active in public policy issues that affected the region. Ed, in particular, was very vocal in the debate during the late 1950s over the placement of the Northway (I-87) through the Adirondack Park. The couple also sponsored an annual folklore writing contest for eleventh grade students in the Schroon Lake Central School from 1957 through the mid-1980s. The purpose of the contest was “to uncover early history and folktales of the Town of Schroon and adjacent townships (North Hudson, Minerva, Chester, Ticonderoga, Crown Point).”
The essay winners were awarded $50 U.S. Savings Bonds that Grace and Ed donated, and their essays were considered for publication in *New York State Folklore* and *North Country Life* magazines.

Ed passed away at the couple’s home in Albany on September 30, 1966, three days before his official retirement from state service, at the age of 62. Following Ed’s death, Boulders became Grace’s haven in the mountains.

**Professional Service with the State of New York**

Grace devoted her talents and energy, in both her professional and personal life, to promoting the exploration of New York State and in particular the Adirondack Mountains. While in school, Grace developed an interest in storytelling. Following high school she enrolled in evening classes in creative writing and public speaking. Those interests led her to her first job with the New York State Commerce Department in 1945 as a publicity writer. She wrote travel releases highlighting the folklore and history of the state. “[I]f I was to sell travel, the easiest way was to sell it by telling about the people who lived and loved and worked here,” she explained.

She was promoted to Travel Promotion Supervisor for the department in 1948 and served in that position until her retirement in 1961. Representing the state at travel shows throughout the United States and Canada, Grace spoke regularly on radio and television programs across the country. Her boss, Joseph R. Horan, director of the Travel Bureau, referred to her as “a super-saleswoman for New York State.”
Many of the human-interest news releases that Grace wrote about tourist destinations across the state focused on some aspect of the Adirondack region. Several highlighted the activities of the Adirondack 46ers.

Grace also used her expertise in public relations and her contacts around the state to invite hiking clubs and government officials to participate in the centennial climb to the summit of Mt. Haystack on August 20, 1949, to commemorate the first known ascent of that mountain. “My job is even more enjoyable since it is the outgrowth of my hobby,” she once said.

In her local area, Grace was featured on a weekly broadcast heard on radio station WGY in Schenectady. An expert on folklore, she also presented a regional history program on public television station WMHT in Schenectady and was a much acclaimed and sought after public speaker during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Personal/Volunteer Service on behalf of the Adirondack Mountains**

Grace’s hiking accomplishments and lifelong love of the Adirondack Mountains are legendary. She was the first woman to climb the 46 Adirondack High Peaks and the ninth person to achieve the feat. She made her first ascent of Mt. Marcy, the state’s highest peak, on August 2, 1922.
Reflecting on that trip years later she said,

   It was tough. I was on all fours sometimes. I didn’t think I was going to get there. But I had to get to the top – there was some reason. God knows what it was but I had to go on. And on the top just for a fraction of a moment, the clouds lifted while I was there and I looked down and there a mile below me was Lake Tear of the Clouds, the Hudson’s highest source. And you know, that did something to me. I had seen something – I felt it. I never forgot the mountain and I never forgot that trip.

From that point on she said, “I never talked about anything but mountains. I talked about them, I wrote about them. I gave speeches about them.”

Grace was so captivated by her first climb and talked so much about those mountains that finally her husband Ed decided he’d take five members of his Sunday School class from Grace Methodist Church, Troy, NY, to climb Mount Marcy in July 1932. The weekend trip, which included an overnight stay at an Adirondack-style lean-to, was deemed an unqualified success. Throughout the 1930s Ed and the Reverend Mr. Ryder, the minister at Grace Methodist Church, led numerous trips to the Adirondacks to climb the 46 peaks over 4,000 feet in elevation. Grace joined them, returning to the area which had captured her attention when she climbed Marcy as a young lady.
Ed and the Rev. Ryder finished climbing the Adirondack 46 High Peaks arm-in-arm on Dix in the pouring rain on September 13, 1936. Less than six months after the Rev. Ryder and Ed finished their 46, the duo organized a club, comprised mainly of Ed Hudowalski’s Sunday School class, known as the Forty-Sixers of Troy. The goal of club members was to climb the 46 Adirondack High Peaks.

Grace started keeping track of the climbs of each member of the Forty-Sixers of Troy, noting the dates of each climb and who was on the trip. She encouraged members to write a summary of what they experienced on each climb. So began Grace’s lifelong commitment to maintaining individual climbing folders for each hiker who was working toward the goal of climbing all of the 46.

Grace completed her climbs of the 46 high peaks on Mt. Esther on August 26, 1937. She hiked in men’s composition-sole work boots from Montgomery Ward and blue checkered cotton shorts with pearl buttons.

The shorts, which she wore on all of her climbs of the 46 high peaks, are part of the collection of the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake. She carried a small musette bag, which contained only a few items: lunch, a thermos of tea, a map, a sweater, and long culottes, which she wore when hiking the trailless peaks, and, at the request of her husband, when visiting
Adirondack hermit Noah John Rondeau. Grace noted that the availability of hiking equipment when she was climbing was as limited as were her funds to purchase them.

For a woman growing up in the first half of the twentieth century, Grace was clearly a pioneer. Not only did she hold a high-ranking position in state service but she also engaged in a hobby in which relatively few women participated at the time.

In an interview that appeared in the *Buffalo Courier Express* in 1955, she encouraged other women to experience the great outdoors.

Too many women stay indoors. It is good to get out of doors, to get lots of fresh air to bring color to your cheeks and zest to your step. It’s more outdoor exercise we women need.

I’ve never even twisted an ankle climbing the mountains, but last year I smashed my toe in my own home.

How did I get interested in mountain climbing? Well, the mountains just happened to be all around me, so I climbed them.

As interest in climbing the Adirondack High Peaks grew, Grace was instrumental in expanding the scope of “46ing” beyond the Forty-Sixers of Troy. She was a founding member of the Adirondack Forty-Sixers, Inc. and helped to organize its first meeting on May 30, 1948. She served as the new club’s first president (1948-1951). From the early days of the Forty-Sixers of Troy, Grace also kept detailed records of the ascents of those working on climbing the High Peaks, a task which she continued until she was well into her 90s.
For over 60 years Grace was the guiding spirit and the very embodiment of the Forty-Sixer experience. She encouraged letter-writing and wrote thousands of replies – as many as 2,000 per year for several years – to those hikers who were reporting their climbs of the 46 Adirondack High Peaks.

Grace’s emphasis on personal correspondence is a tradition that the club has maintained to monitor the progress of hikers seeking membership in the club. She considered the climbing of the 46 to be a life-affirming and often life-altering accomplishment that deserved reflection and contemplation. “It’s important,” she often said, “for hikers to write about what they saw and felt as they climbed and to share that experience with others.” “Any mountain worth climbing is worth talking about” was one of her favorite sayings.

She described her views on the quest to become a 46er in a profile that appeared in the Albany Times Union: “There is something spiritual in it. The mountains mean something different and special to each person. They are what connect us as a group. But the journey is an inward one, learning about yourself.”

Grace was interested in hearing people’s stories: what happened and why it happened. She said that she “sold New York State with its stories” in her job with the Commerce Department, and she extended that passion for history and for the tales behind events, places, and people to her work with the Forty-Sixers. Her goal (and her reward) was to instill in hikers the notion that every mountain, just like every person, is different. “They are individual peaks and they all mean something different,” she once said. For Grace it was through the telling of stories from each hiking experience that the differences were revealed.

In her letters she took on the roles of compassionate mother (although she and Ed never had any children), stern teacher, loyal companion, spirited cheerleader, and sage philosopher. In recounting their climbs, hikers shared with her not only the stories of their adventures but also the highlights of their lives. News of marriages, divorces, births, deaths, illnesses, and job changes were related with frequency and with the familiarity and comfort of old friends. Grace in turn shared her sympathetic ear, her encyclopedic knowledge of Adirondack history, accounts of her personal hiking experiences, and her life wisdom.

The correspondence between Grace and those climbing the 46 is housed permanently in the New York State Library Manuscripts and Special Collections to preserve a unique and significant historical record of the High Peaks region.
Grace was also active in other Adirondack region organizations. She served as executive secretary for the Adirondack North Country Association (now the Adirondack Park Association) for 21 years, writing brochures, press releases, and other informational pieces. An active member of the Adirondack Mountain Club, Inc., she was contributing editor of its publications, *High Spots* and *Adirondac*, and editor of the Albany Chapter’s newsletter *The Cloud Splitter*. She was also a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and a president of the New York Folklore Society.

There was a maxim by which she ordered her life: “‘Can’t’ never accomplished anything.”

In 1995 Grace established the Adirondack 46R Conservation Trust, a private charitable endowment with a mission to provide financial support for conservation and educational projects which advance, promote, and encourage the responsible recreational use of the Adirondack High Peaks.

In addition to supporting the work of the Forty-Sixers’ Office of the Historian and education and conservation programs, the Trust is a major source of funding for the Summit Steward program, which places trained educators on the busiest summits – Marcy, Algonquin, Colden, Haystack, Wright, and Cascade – during the summer months to inform the hiking public about the fragile alpine environment, conduct plant inventories, and assist in restoration projects. The Trust continues Grace’s legacy of “giving something back” to the mountains.
Grace’s contributions to the Adirondacks have been repeatedly recognized. The Adirondack Mountain Club, at its annual banquet on March 13, 2004, conferred on Grace its highest honor, the Trail Blazer Award. It was the evening of Grace’s passing, March 13, 2004, at the age of 98.

In recognition of her lifelong service to the state and the Adirondack region, the Adirondack Forty-Sixers have spearheaded an effort to rename East Dix, “Grace Peak,” in her honor.