

# POLLY DYER



Washington conservationists formed a strategic bond with The Sierra Club to protect the North Cascades. Polly Dyer shows local splendor to Harold Bradley, Sierra Club president, at a 1958 conference. *The Seattle Times*

# A SWEEPING LEGACY

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A trio of Mountaineers club backpackers had spent five days in the Cascades near the north end of Lake Chelan when their serenity was shattered. A helicopter buzzed over their snowy campsite, its rotor blades slapping the crisp air. It was ferrying equipment to a mining expedition in the jagged wilderness some called the American Alps.

Stewing over the miners' incursion, Polly Dyer and Phil and Laura Zalesky later sat in a Stehekin café awaiting a ferry. Their ice axes caught the eye of Jane McConnell, who was in town to collect her mail. She came barreling toward their table.

"Oh, you've got to meet my husband," McConnell told the three strangers. Grant McConnell, a University of California professor, was passionate—almost religious—about the Stehekin Valley. He had recuperated from a World War II injury in a cabin there. He believed the majestic North Cascades deserved national protection.

The importance of this chance meeting of the McConnells and the nascent Seattle conservation movement in the summer of 1955 "would become increasingly clear over the next decade," says Olympia historian Lauren Danner in her book *Crown Jewel Wilderness*.

The Stehekin encounter sparked a connection between Washington and California conservationists that helped politicize and professionalize local amateurs. It accelerated a budding movement of middle-class professionals who had the leisure time to savor and defend the natural world. And it propelled a local concern into a national cause.

With crucial support from U.S. Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, the American Alps would be spared from mining and clearcutting.

On October 2, 1968, amid the war protests, assassinations and riots that shook the world that year, came a bright spot, the political equivalent of a mountain meadow. With the stroke of a pen, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the North Cascades National Park, Washington's third national park. It stretches from the Canadian border to the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area.

Central to the long campaign for the North Cascades was Polly Dyer, a cheerfully tenacious Seattleite whose living room became a sort of academy for coffee-chugging, envelope-stuffing, stamp-licking activists.

Scoop Jackson may have been the single most important player in creating the park. And Patrick Goldsworthy was probably the most prominent of local activists. But Polly Dyer, who shied from taking credit, is one of the less celebrated characters in the drama. She embodied the new breed of conservationist. (“Environmentalist” hadn’t yet been coined.) She was at the vanguard of women in the movement. And she’d leave a sweeping 50-year legacy before she died in 2016 at 96.

At the time of the helicopter sighting, Dyer was already leader of the Mountaineers’ Conservation Committee, and was researching the North Cascades for wilderness protection. She then became co-founder of the North Cascades Conservation Council, which spearheaded the push for a national park.

Nearly every conservation leader in the Pacific Northwest learned how to fight for wilderness in Polly and John Dyer’s large living room, said Dick Fiddler, the Sierra Club’s vice-president. They’d be “sitting at the long Dyer table, drinking Dyer coffee and absorbing Dyer wisdom.” John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892, Fiddler noted, then quipped, “and most of the rest of us can’t figure how he did it without Polly.”

Dyer “didn’t shout because she didn’t have to,” says former Governor Dan Evans, a lifelong avid outdoorsman. The three-term Republican came to support the North Cascades park and first worked with Dyer to regulate billboards. “She was the best prepared person I think I’ve ever run across on issues. She knew the facts. It wasn’t just a pitch based on emotion, although there was plenty of that because she had put a *lifetime* into this.”

Dyer’s decades of organizing, training, strategizing and buttonholing came at a personal cost. The thing she loved most—hiking or at least getting outside on a sparkling day—took a back seat to the endless meetings and letter-writing. That work was anything but glamorous, says Dyer’s goddaughter, Laura Dassow Walls, author of a 2017 biography of Henry David Thoreau. “These were real tedious discussions, legal and technical stuff. But that’s what it took. What makes this remarkable is that Polly got that. And she was OK with it.”



Although she was one of the few women conservationists in the 1950s, Dyer said it didn’t occur to her she was unusual. *Phil Zalesky photo*

IN THE BEGINNING, this was a Polly-meets-Johnny, backpacker love story:

In the spring of 1945, Johnny Dyer was a young chemical engineer in Ketchikan. Though World War II was grinding toward an end, Johnny was still manufacturing Vitamin A to sharpen the night vision of American bomber pilots. Alaska, not yet a state, was the far-north front lines of the war, the battle of the Aleutian Islands having raged for more than a year in 1942-43.

Dyer often turned to recreation as a kind of therapy. He developed ulcers while a student at the University of California at Berkeley. His doctor told him to “get outdoors, walk, exercise.” So he joined the Sierra Club, be-

came a serious rock-climber and was among a quartet of the first climbers to scale the peak of Shiprock in New Mexico.

Meanwhile, Pauline “Polly” Tomkiel had followed her father’s latest Coast Guard assignment to the same isolated fishing village. She couldn’t afford to go to college. And she saw Alaska as an adventure she didn’t want to miss. She landed a job as a secretary for the Coast Guard.\*

Johnny first spotted her at a folk dance. Failing to arrange a date, he headed home very disappointed.

He didn’t squander his second chance.

Six weeks later, Polly and her current boyfriend hiked up 3,000-foot Deer Mountain outside Ketchikan. At the summit they encountered Johnny, whose cap sported a red Sierra Club Rock Climber pin.

Polly’s boyfriend was fascinated at the way Johnny had rigged his skis to his backpack.

Johnny was more interested in Polly. He ended up sending the boyfriend home with the skis. Johnny and Polly continued hiking together.

During a break, Polly buried her orange peels in the snow. She’s a conservationist at heart, Johnny thinks. As Polly would later tell the story, she went up Deer Mountain with one man, and came down with another.

In six weeks Polly and Johnny were engaged. (They’re wed on August 7, the day after the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.) Polly liked to say she married into



Polly and husband Johnny Dyer were together 63 years, until his death in 2008. *Dyer collection*

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\* Polly would graduate from the University of Washington in 1970, a self-described “middle-aged co-ed.”

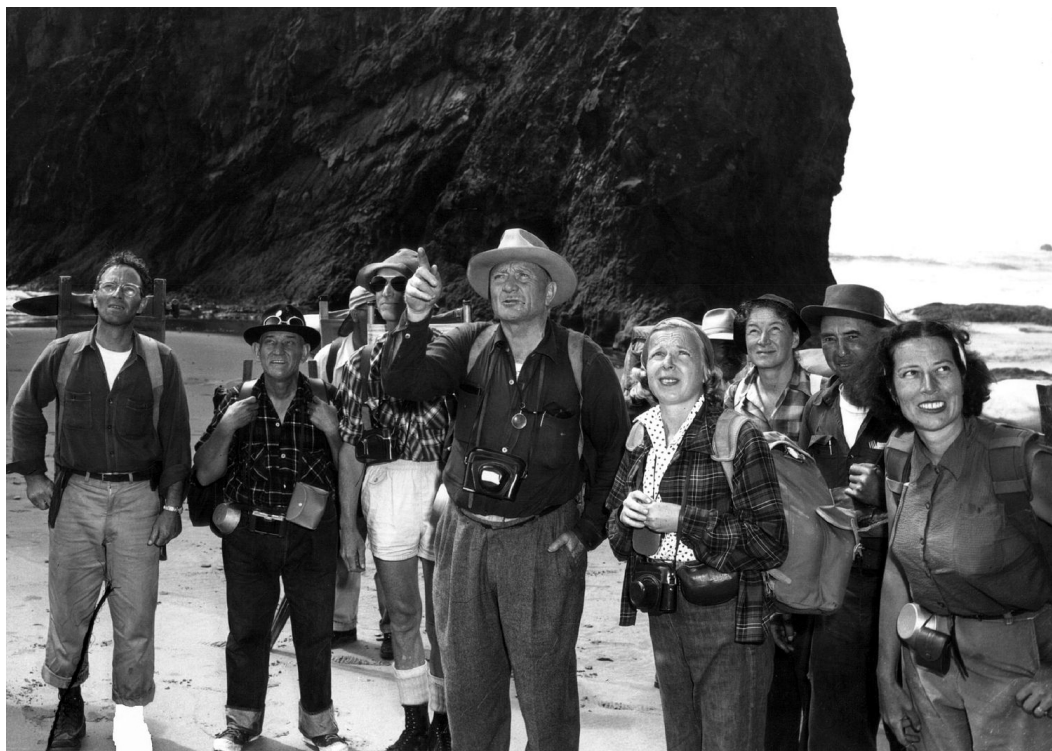
the Sierra Club. It wasn't long before Johnny's work as a chemical engineer supported Polly's work as a conservationist.

The Dyers visited the McConnell's Berkeley home in the fall of 1955, just months after the Stehekin meeting, to discuss ways to protect the North Cascades. When the McConnells' eight-year-old daughter Ann was introduced, she was told that Mrs. Dyer wanted to protect the North Cascades wilderness. "In that case, you are welcome in our home," Ann responded.

Polly followed up by hosting a meeting the next year with Grant McConnell, Patrick Goldsworthy, the Zaleskys and a dozen other Mountaineers.

In 1956, Polly put her secretarial training to use in a way that showed how attention to detail could lead to significant results.

The setting: a tense meeting between conservationists and Conrad Wirth, the National Park Service director, at Sea-Tac Airport. The subject: summer rangers in the Olympic National Park had tipped Dyer and Phil Zalesky that "salvage logging" was being used to take as many big trees out of the park as possible. Polly took shorthand notes of the meeting with Wirth, writing on her lap, just below the table-top they were sitting at. Wirth said there



Polly (far right) organized a 22-mile beach hike led by U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a Washington native, (center pointing) to protect a threatened stretch of Olympic National Park. *The Seattle Times*

would be no more salvage logging in the national parks, period. Dyer transcribed her notes and sent them to Wirth to check for accuracy. “I guess I did say it,” he admitted. “I didn’t know I was being recorded.”

Thanks to Dyer’s note-taking, Wirth couldn’t backtrack from his unofficial statement changing national policy.

Olympic National Park, Dyer’s great passion at the time, also became a showcase for her talent at connecting and organizing people.

A road-building proposal in 1958 threatened a particularly primitive stretch of coast from Lake Ozette to Rialto Beach. Dyer arranged a three-day 22-mile hike of the shoreline with U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas—valedictorian for his Yakima High School class—conservationists and journalists. She called the hike a “walking national town meeting.” In photos, Dyer stands at the periphery, but still cuts a striking figure with her wood-frame backpack, tin cup on her belt, and cheekbones that suggest her mother’s native Hawaiian ancestry.

The road plan fizzled. The North Cascades beckoned.

McConnell, who was friendly with David Brower, had written the Sierra Club leader in late 1956. At the time, he felt the conservation movement was fragmented and drifting. He was relieved to learn, from Dyer and gang, that somebody else was worried about the North Cascades. He thought it might prove a national test for wilderness protection. He told Brower it was time for a single-purpose group to lead a North Cascades movement. The group should be local and small, its sole mission to “preserve the scenic wilderness of the northern Cascades.” Brower agreed.

The new watchdog was named the North Cascades Conservation Council, or N3C. Its members were political amateurs for the most part. Goldsworthy was a University of Washington biochemistry professor. Phil and Laura Zalesky were Everett schoolteachers. Polly Dyer had previously described herself as a “footloose, fancy-free housewife.” But, like Grant McConnell, they had economic security and they cared deeply about their natural surroundings. The Sierra Club lent its experience and a national luster to the cause, says Danner



Happy to let others take credit, Polly was often at the edge of photos, as in this one with Sierra Club leader David Brower (center) and William O. Douglas (right).

*Museum of History and Industry*

in her comprehensive book about the creation of the North Cascades park.

Scoop Jackson later told N3C President Goldsworthy, “I can’t give you a national park, but if you get up a big enough parade, I’ll step out front and lead it.”

The council got busy working on the North Cascades and national wilderness protection. “Wilderness cannot and should not wear a dollar sign,” Polly Dyer told a U.S. Senate committee in 1957, as the second-largest copper company in the world was poking around Glacier Peak in the North Cascades. “It is a priceless asset which all the dollars man can accumulate will not buy back.”

The N3C printed an 11-page brochure, *Are You Aware?*, about the North Cascades peaks, so sharply serrated that the seven-mile Picket Range alone features 21 peaks, with names such as Fury and Terror, over 7,500 feet high. The Sierra Club produced a stirring half-hour film that described the North Cascades as “an amazing wilderness of rugged Alps... unsurpassed anywhere in the United States.” Polly Dyer lugged the film around and showed it over 100 times to groups around the state. The Sierra Club later produced a lush coffee-table book about the North Cascades, that included photos by Ansel Adams, sent to every member of Congress. In 1960 Dyer became a rare non-Californian on the Sierra Club’s board, further linking Evergreen and Golden State conservationists.

She left her mark on the 1964 federal Wilderness Act, which has led to the protection of over 100 million acres of backcountry. That law defines wilderness as “untrammelled by man.” Dyer supplied those words. The Wilderness Society’s Howard Zahniser, who drafted the legislation, credited Dyer for the term, recalling how she used it so effectively to describe the imperiled beaches in Olympic National Park.

“‘Untrammelled’ means not caught up in a net. It was kind of typical for her to latch onto a lovely word,” says her goddaughter, Laura Dassow Walls, now the William P. and Hazel B. White professor of English at the University of Notre Dame.



Polly passed on her love of the natural world to goddaughter Laura Dassow Walls (right) who wrote an acclaimed biography of Henry David Thoreau in 2017. *Laura Walls collection*

The Dyers moved in 1963 to Seattle’s Lake City neighborhood. They picked their new house because its living room was large enough to host meetings. “I do think Polly saw herself as the glue,” says Walls, recalling the meetings her parents took her to when she was a child. (Her mother edited the N3C’s *Are you Aware?* brochure.) “She was a profoundly social person who wanted to pull peo-

ple together...That was the only way you could do the work. There were no conference calls, cell phones, computers. It was social. You all got together for a work party. It was all face to face.”

Dyer still found time, though, to take her goddaughter hiking. Walls remembers riding in Dyer’s Volkswagen Beetle, with “MARMOT” vanity plates, bouncing up remote roads to a hiking trail. “I’ll never forget the thousands of snow geese Polly and I startled once on Skagit Flats, and how they rose up and around us in flickering, deafening clouds of white.”

WASHINGTONIANS HAD ADVOCATED for a North Cascades park since the late 1890s. But those voices were muted by hunters, miners, loggers and locals who saw a park or protected wilderness as a threat to their lifestyles and livelihoods.

The balance was shifting. Washington’s population increase during World War II outpaced every state but California. The Boeing-fueled growth continued. Between 1940 and 1960, the state’s population grew 64 percent; King County’s swelled by 85 percent.

Many of the people who came were educated and affluent. The booming middle class increased the appetite for outdoor recreation and parks accessible by car. Coincidentally, they also increased the demand for more timber for their houses and furnishings. And when they hiked in Northwest forests they saw evidence of more logging and clearcutting.

Scoop Jackson could see changes in his hometown of Everett, a timber town transitioning to an aerospace hub. Washington hadn’t led the country in timber production since 1938. Thirty years later, Boeing employees in Snohomish County outnumbered timber workers almost three-to-one.

Jackson had impeccable standing with labor unions. “They were his people,” says his son Peter Jackson. “He began his work as sort of a timber Democrat.” But he also appreciated the Cascades from childhood hikes and camping trips.

Known for his hawkishness on communism, Jackson’s ambition was to chair the Senate Armed Services Committee. Instead, in 1963 he found himself heading the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, charged with overseeing federal public lands. Jackson’s ascendance was something of an accident. It happened only because President John F. Kennedy asked incumbent Interior chairman, Clinton Anderson of New Mexico, to lead the relatively new Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences.

Stars were aligning. Many of JFK’s “best and the brightest” stayed during LBJ’s administration. JFK appointees such as Department of Interior Secretary Stewart Udall would prove key allies to the conservation movement.

With publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, the roots of an environmental movement were taking hold. Public sentiment mounted for preserving the North Cascades. More than 22,000 petition signatures, collected mostly between Seattle and Everett, were entered into the Congressional Record.





With the stroke of a pen, President Johnson created the North Cascades National Park on Oct. 2, 1968, with crucial support from U.S. Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson (r). *National Parks Service*

Still, Jackson was coy about his stance on the issue. "I think from the outset he wanted a park," says Peter Jackson. "I think he wanted it for his legacy."

But before he had staked his position, Jackson had floated a compromise of sorts. He suggested taking 59,000 acres out of the Olympic National Park so that they could be logged. It was clearly an attempt to pacify the timber industry before he announced his preference for the North Cascades, Danner says. The reaction from conservationists was quick and hostile. Jackson dropped the idea.

Historian Hal Rothman saw a tipping point, a moment when the environmental movement took precedence over the old extractive economy. "It was an acknowledgment that things had really changed," Danner says of Jackson's retreat.

In January 1967, LBJ told Congress it needed to act to preserve places of "irreplaceable beauty," including the North Cascades. "I think we owe one to Scoop," the president reportedly said, advocating a park.

(Peter Jackson thinks LBJ's sentiment was a response to Scoop's loyalty during the run-up to the 1968 election. Jackson had stuck by the president, despite Bobby Kennedy's looming candidacy, before LBJ dropped out of the race on March 31st, worn down by Vietnam, public criticism and the prospects of a grueling re-election campaign.)

In March, President Johnson requested a bill to create a North Cascades National Park. Washington's senators, Jackson and Warren Magnuson, co-sponsored it as Senate Bill 1321, which proposed 570,000 acres as the North Cascades National Park, adjacent to the Ross Lake National Recreation area of 100,000 acres. (The park and adjacent recreation areas now comprise 685,000 acres.)

Opposition was full-throated. Hunting, logging and mining interests testified in public hearings that they should not be deprived of their livelihoods by urban elites and their pristine playgrounds.

"At first we were amazed at the lack of concern for the welfare of the whole country exhibited by the proponents of the new North Cascades Park, but we are now convinced that they are completely selfish in their desire to set up another vast area as a private club for their own personal enjoyment," said Marion Newkirk, representing the Washington State Grange.



Called the American Alps, the North Cascades are so sharply serrated that the seven-mile Picket Range alone contains 21 peaks over 7,500 feet high. *Daniel Hershman photo*

Newkirk went on to ask if the wealth of the city dwellers was inherited from ancestors who had wrested it from the soil—"an opportunity they now want to deny others."

William O. Pearson, mayor of Sedro Woolley, said he resented the Seattle and Sierra Club activists trying to change local ways. "We resent the fact that the wishes of the people of this area are being ground beneath the heels of people who have little personal knowledge of the area, people who help extend the tentacles of mushrooming cities but deny us the pleasure and use of our hinterland."

In response, Jackson would politely point out how little the park designation would affect hunting and logging.

A federal study had claimed no major hunting areas would be inside the proposed park and less than 1 percent of the area proposed for protection contained commercial timber.

After hearings in Washington, D.C., Seattle, Wenatchee and Mount Vernon, Jackson didn't even have a chance for a floor speech, the Senate so quickly passed his bill by voice vote.

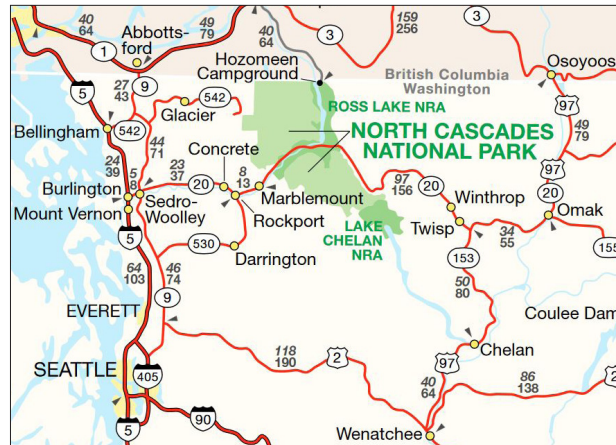
But when the legislation went to the House for consideration, it hit a snag: Jackson's counterpart in the lower chamber, Rep. Wayne Aspinall, a Democrat from Colorado. Aspinall's district was largely agricultural and he didn't see the point of wilderness protection. A key moment in the standstill came during hearings held by Aspinall. At one juncture, Gov. Evans was being queried about the state's preference. Asked what he wanted if the choice was between no park and a large park, Evans (who still has the REI card he acquired at 15 in 1941) said a large park. Aspinall

was also unhappy that Jackson's committee was holding up a bill Aspinall wanted passed. Among other things, the bill would've allowed a study of diverting Columbia River water from Washington to Colorado for irrigation. Appreciating the importance of the Columbia to Washington's economy, Jackson opposed it and wouldn't budge. Finally, the two struck a deal. The Columbia River study was dropped from Aspinall's bill, which then won Senate approval, and he passed Jackson's bill out of his House committee. Washington got its third national park.

Such a negotiated outcome—conservationists were disappointed the park wasn't larger—seems improbable today. "In 1968 you have a very similar situation," Danner says. "Political strife, wilderness preservation support, support for environmental protection... There are so many parallels across this 50-year span and public support is similar in ways. Yet we have a federal government today who seems bent on ignoring it as opposed to a federal government who was responsive, at least in the environmental sphere."

All of which is concerning given that national parks face a \$12 billion maintenance backlog, declining per capita attendance, the prospect of increased visitor fees, and existential threats from climate change. The North Cascades park's more than 300 glaciers lost up to 40 percent of their volume between 1984 and 2007. Forest fires are more frequent and damaging.

The park has another problem, some say. Of the national parks in the lower 48 states, its attendance was second-lowest over the last two decades, with just over 23,000 visitors per year. That ranks ahead of only Isle Royale in Michigan, which requires a five-hour ferry ride to visit. (Ross Lake National Recreation Area, which is part of the North



The North Cascades National Park and adjacent Ross Lake National Recreation Area had more than 750,000 visitors in 2017. But the park itself, with only six miles of road, accounted for just 23,000 of those. *National Parks Service*

Cascades complex, had 759,656 visitors in 2017.)

Some may like it the way it is. But Danner believes the North Cascades park, with just six miles of road, needs to be more accessible. It and other national parks need to attract visitors who reflect the country's diversity, she says.

THE NORTH CASCADES was just a part of Polly Dyer's legacy. Her credits include: founding board member of the Alliance for Puget Sound Shorelines, education director for the University of Washington's Institute for Environmental Studies, and president of Olympic Park Associates, a watchdog group, from which she led the fight to add spectacular Shi Shi Beach and Point of the Arches to the park. She won awards from the League of Women Voters, Washington Environmental Council and Sierra Club. Her tradition lives on in the Polly Dyer Cascadia chapter of a national group, Great Old Broads for Wilderness.

At the age of 89, she and Goldsworthy went out on the Baker River Trail in Whatcom County with a newspaper reporter and photographer to pitch a campaign for expanding the North Cascades park. "Using two hands to lift a leg over a fallen log, Dyer has never lost her passion for hiking, or conservation," wrote Lynda Mapes of *The Seattle Times*.

As she approached her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010, Congressman Jay Inslee paid tribute in the *Congressional Record*. "My family and I have hiked the trail and slept under the stars on land she fought hard to save for future generations," Inslee said. Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn proclaimed her birthday "Polly Dyer Day."

Although she was one of the few prominent women conservationists in Washington in the 1950s, Dyer said it didn't occur to her she was unusual.



"She was a profoundly social person who pulled people together," says goddaughter Laura Dassow Walls about Polly (far right), who organized a beach hike she called a "walking national town meeting."

Bob and Ira Spring photo

Talking about one of her mentors, the Seattle Audubon Society's Emily Haig, Dyer said, "Nobody's looking at whether it's a woman or a man; she's just a leader, is what it amounts to."

Dyer invited herself to industry meetings in Seattle and Portland "all the time," she said. "I still remember, in the old Olympic Hotel, being the only woman in a room of 500 men, but not even thinking about it until after it was over with."

Still, gender norms were sometimes a consideration, she said. Early in her activism she would identify herself as Mrs. John Dyer. (Polly and Johnny, who never had children, were together 63 years, until his death in 2008.)

What most distinguished her from others in the cause?

"Humility," Peter Jackson says without hesitation. "She had grace and presence. She was perfectly happy to let others take credit." Jackson, a board member of the nonprofit North Cascades Institute, pointed to photos of her beach walks with William O. Douglas. "She is literally way in the background though she was the chief organizer... Her greatest attribute may have been her greatest downfall from a public relations perspective."

"It goes back to that cheerful tenacity," Danner says, "and she just didn't care about credit. She cared about the outcome. And when you focus on the outcome and you put your ego aside and you're positive, you will probably get some stuff done."

Her straightforward civility won respect from adversaries. Dyer reminded Weyerhaeuser CEO Jack Creighton in 1994 that a company executive had once called her a "black hat." A few days later, Creighton sent her a big white Stetson.

Dyer said her militancy had limits. "I'm not the kind who will put sawdust in the crankcases of snowmobiles, even though I might like to... I don't go so far as to vandalize something even though I might be opposed to it."

Nature writer Tim McNulty, who considered Dyer a mentor, called her a coalition-builder. "I've heard politicians as well as government officials joke that no one could say 'no' to Polly. I think it was simply because she wouldn't let them."

Her goddaughter Laura Walls recalled how Polly impressed upon her the "10 Essentials" for hiking. (And so impressed her that Walls says she spent almost as much time



"Polly Dyer Day" was proclaimed by Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn on her 90th birthday. Congressman Jay Inslee also paid tribute in the Congressional Record. *Laura Walls collection*



At 89, Polly took a news reporter out to Whatcom County to pitch a campaign for extending the North Cascades Park. “Dyer has never lost her passion for hiking, or conservation,” wrote Lynda Mapes of *The Seattle Times*.

packing and unpacking, checking and rechecking, as she did hiking.) But it was the “I<sup>th</sup> essential,” Polly’s love of nature, that powered her activism, Walls says. Nature was her Bible. And the North Cascades and Olympic National Parks were her children.

**Bob Young**  
**Legacy Washington**  
**Office of the Secretary of State**

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**“I’m struck because it’s 50 years,”** Danner to author, 1-31-2018

**All of which is concerning,** Danner to author

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**Some may like it that way,** Danner to author, 1-31-2018.

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**Although she was one of the few,** Dyer oral history, p. 9

**Talking about one of her mentors,** Dyer oral history

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**“Humility...”** Jackson to author, 2-5-2018

**“It goes back to that cheerful tenacity,”** Danner to author, 1-31-2015

**Her straightforward civility,** “Polly Dyer: A Fighter By Nature”

**“I’m not the kind who will put sawdust,”** Dyer oral history, p. 83

**“I’ve heard politicians,”** quoted in “Polly Dyer, driving force for Northwest Conservation”

**Her goddaughter Laura Walls recalled,** “Polly’s Eleventh Essential”