



Barbara Farrow Walker

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Barbara Farrow Walker turned a long-forgotten vision of a city of linked parks and greenways into a lifelong passion. A tireless advocate for urban parks and trails, Barbara focused her energy on helping connect people to nature within the city of Portland, Oregon. Her greatest achievement rests in helping to fulfill a plan for the region's 40-Mile Loop, a system of trails and greenways that connect parks and circle the Portland area.

Barbara was born on July 3, 1935, in Burbank, California, together with her twin brother Craig. A sixth-generation Oregonian on her mother's side—and always a proud Oregonian—Barbara considered it a trick of fate to be born in California.

In World War II, Barbara's father, Claud Golder Farrow, Jr., later simply known as "Colonel," was in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. When Barbara was six years old, he was shipped overseas and Barbara's mother moved the family to southwest Portland.

Barbara's father was away throughout WWII serving in the South Pacific and Europe. His assignments placed him in extreme danger, often alone behind enemy lines. After a few short years at home, he was recalled by the U.S. Air Force to Alaska for the duration of the Korean War. Barbara always considered her father's Legion of Merit medal the first thing she would take if the house were burning.

Barbara's mother, Jane Irvine Thompson Farrow, descended from families that had arrived in Oregon in the mid-19th century. In addition to caring for her children, Jane Farrow was an active community volunteer, devoting energy and time to the Portland Junior Symphony (now called the Portland Youth Philharmonic) and other organizations. Barbara believes that her mother's commitment to the community set a pattern for her own volunteerism.

Despite her father's extended absence, Barbara enjoyed a rich, nurturing family life. She lived within a few minutes walk of her maternal grandmother, a great grandmother, and other extended family. Barbara attended the private Catlin School (now Catlin Gabel) on a scholarship, graduating from high school in the spring of 1953. The Catlin School promoted a spirit of public service that Barbara carried with her into adulthood. Her hard work, good grades, and support of the faculty helped her earn a scholarship to college.

In the fall of 1953, Barbara enrolled at prestigious Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, then as now one of the nation's leading small colleges. Barbara majored in Government, with an emphasis on International Relations. She spent her junior year in Geneva, Switzerland, where her French became fluent, and received her B.A. cum laude in spring 1957. To have achieved at Smith College, she later observed, armed her with the confidence that enabled her to pursue a number of daunting goals in life. Though Barbara was offered a Fulbright to study an additional year in Europe, she turned down the honor and returned to Portland.

Barbara became a reporter and columnist for the Oregon Journal. In 1960, she met Wendell O. Walker on a blind date to a concert conducted by a visiting Leonard Bernstein. Barbara and Wendell became constant companions, and they were married on December 22, 1961. A year and a half later, the Walkers welcomed their first son, Angus, who was born on May 27, 1963. Angus soon had two younger brothers to contend with; Ian was born October 11, 1964, and Duncan on September 2, 1966. Though Barbara was happy to be a full-time mother and wife, she also worked for Wendell's business, a distributor of outdoor power equipment.

In 1968, Barbara's life took an unplanned turn that set her on a path toward becoming a civic leader who spearheaded the creation of Portland's 40-Mile Loop greenway. Her lifetime's work began "selfishly," according to Barbara. A group of investors planned to build a massive 800-unit apartment complex in the wild, wooded ravine below the Walker's house in Portland's West Hills.

Rather than simply stonewalling the proposed development, Barbara and a few others came up with a positive alternative. They held coffees, knocked on neighbors' doors, made phone calls, and assembled property and topography maps. By 1971, they formed the Friends of Marquam Nature Park to try to acquire at least some of the ravine for a public park and trail. Barbara and her group recognized that the proposed Marquam Nature Park could form part of a corridor that connected Willamette Park along the Willamette River to Council Crest, Portland's highest point, and Washington Park.

Barbara then discovered that her vision had an historic precedent. Landscape architect John Charles Olmsted (stepson to Frederick Law Olmsted) had proposed just such a plan of connected parks in his 1903 System of Parkways, Boulevards and Parks for the City of Portland. This official plan for the city's park system had been shelved for decades.

The sheer audacity of Barbara's vision helped her win support, but it also required a huge amount of work. Someone had to be committed to the project full time. With Wendell's blessing, Barbara stopped working for the family business and took on the task of raising money, soliciting land donations, organizing land-use studies, and working closely with land owners, developers, government officials, community organizations, and others.

Marquam Nature Park was Barbara's obsession for more than a decade—and she never really stopped working on behalf of this park. Piece by piece, Barbara was the catalyst for acquiring land for the park through donations and purchases. Dedicated in 1979, the park covers more than 130 acres and features a nine-mile trail, yet it is just minutes from downtown Portland.

To press on with Olmsted's vision of a parkway trail surrounding the city, Barbara and five others founded the 40-Mile Loop Land Trust in 1981 and began to secure properties and easements for the trail system. While the name "40-Mile Loop" remains, the planned trail has expanded to 140 miles as the Portland metropolitan area has grown. While most of the loop's trails are connected to one another, the effort to complete the entire loop continues into the 21st century.

Former Portland City Commissioner Mike Lindberg, who oversaw the city's park system, met Barbara at the dedication for Marquam Nature Park. "This is a pretty dynamic person," Lindberg later recalled himself thinking at the time. For several years, he and Barbara worked together on several Portland Parks projects, all part of Barbara's effort to see the 40-Mile Loop come into existence. "Nothing was impossible for Barbara," said Lindberg. "If the mission was bold enough, it could get done."

In 1980, along with Lindberg, Barbara became involved in a project to convert a central piece of downtown Portland real estate into a public plaza. The onetime location of the famed Portland Hotel, this 1.5-acre plot had been used as a parking lot for nearly 30 years. While many civic and business leaders rejected the idea of a public plaza, Barbara helped make the vision a reality. She proposed a grassroots-first funding strategy to raise \$500,000 through the sale of \$15 paving bricks inscribed with donors' names. With a groundswell of interest spurred by Barbara's approach, major contributors added more than another \$1 million, and Portland's famed Pioneer Courthouse Square, the city's "living room," was officially opened on April 6, 1984.

For more than a quarter century, Barbara was involved with virtually every high-profile parks project in the greater Portland area. Mainstays of the Portland Parks system that hundreds of thousands of people use every year owe their existence in no small way to Barbara. In addition to Marquam Nature Park and Pioneer Courthouse Square, these open spaces include Powell Butte Nature Park, Tom McCall Waterfront Park, the Eastbank Esplanade, the Springwater Corridor, and more.

Portland Parks and Recreation Director Zari Santner, a city park planner when she met Barbara in the early 1980s, fondly recalled working with Barbara. "I used her as a mentor," said Santner. "She is extremely eloquent and very passionate about preserving nature and also making it available to citizens to enjoy in a respectful manner."

Barbara's ability to succeed came in large part from her respect for all voices—land owners, environmentalists, community leaders, business people, and everyday citizens—as she moved forward with her efforts. She was also tenacious and earned enormous credibility by her ability to see what both Santner and Lindberg called, "the big picture." "She is able to look 10, 20, 50 years out at how decisions would impact our urban environment," said Lindberg.

While Barbara worked long hours as a more than full-time volunteer, she always made sure that she had time for her family. She was always home or off with the boys when they were not in school. The Walkers made it a point to congregate every evening for a nice family dinner. Backpacking, often in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness, became the annual family vacation.

In the early 1980s, Barbara and Wendell purchased a 70-acre tree farm in North Plains, Oregon. They planted an orchard and continually enlarge their forest. While the farm requires a great deal of work, it became a place to relax and enjoy nature as well.

"We need to provide urban people with an opportunity to access nature," said Barbara. "The excitement about nature comes from exposure to the outdoors. It can't be learned in the abstract. By experiencing nature firsthand, people develop the urge to be stewards of the land."

Over the years, Barbara received more than two dozen local and national awards for public service and her efforts to preserve urban green spaces. She also served on numerous boards and committees, including the World Forestry Center Board of Directors. Barbara's efforts raised millions of dollars and acquired acres of additional park land, and she educated thousands of people about the importance of natural spaces to a vibrant urban community.

But Barbara was never interested in personal credit. "She never required or asked for recognition," noted Mike Lindberg. "She focused on the best interests of the people of Portland and was willing to do a huge amount of selfless work behind the scenes to earn results."

What gratifies Barbara Walker is not recognition but what is under the feet of the countless people who visit and live in Portland. This growing Northwest metropolis has maintained its connection with nature through a system of parks and connecting trails that sets the standard for urban open spaces. Barbara also fostered a spirit of community cooperation that other civic leaders aspire to carry on today. "Above all, I wanted to pursue goals through civil discourse, not confrontation," said Barbara. "In addition to the parks themselves, my greatest satisfaction has come from working with people whose sense of purpose validates my belief in the goodness of human nature."

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