How Washington Nearly Became the Holly State: The Story of Holly in Seward Park

by Al Smith, Central Puget Sound Chapter

Holiday holly long ago invaded the Pacific Northwest, clogging forest understories and crowding out native plants. Most of us recognize English holly (Ilex aquifolium). Unfortunately, birds spread its seed and it grows quickly. It is an ongoing problem in Seattle parks and the city’s Washington Park Arboretum, where a sign now warns visitors about the misuse of English holly.

But how did it become such a problem? Newspaper articles, old records, and documents from the Seattle Park Department all recognize the responsible party: a well-connected woman with a penchant for projects, the ability to get newspaper coverage, and a vision. Worse, she spearheaded her monumental efforts under the guise of conservation.

In 1927 Mrs. Alexander F. (Lillian) McEwan founded the Washington State Society for the Conservation of Wild Flowers and Tree Planting, and on behalf of the society she began actively promoting the planting of holly with the goal of making Washington the “Holly State.” By the time the holly-planting efforts largely ceased 10 years later, thousands of seedlings had been planted in Seattle parks, the Seattle Arboretum, and elsewhere in the state.

After arriving in Seattle from Michigan in 1891 as a young bride, Mrs. McEwan became active in gardening and tree-planting organizations. She was well-connected socially, and her husband, Alexander F. McEwan, owned the Seattle Cedar Lumber Manufacturing Company on the ship canal in Ballard. In 1917 she founded the Seattle Garden Club. Four years later, Mrs. McEwan took up tree planting in earnest, spearheading an effort to create an 8-mile-long memorial drive from the High Line Road in Des Moines to the Seattle city limits to honor those from the Seattle area who died in World War I. According to the Highline Historical Society, “Four-year-old elms, 8- to 12-feet high, were to be planted at intervals of 60 feet on either side of the road to create ‘a living canopy’ for all those who passed under them.”

Mrs. McEwan’s interest in holly seems to date to the creation of the Conservation of Wild Flowers and Tree Planting Society, of which she was the first president. Hugo Winkenwerder, dean of the University of Washington’s College of Forestry, was vice-president. An essential purpose of the society, Mrs. McEwan related, was to make English holly so plentiful that Washington would become known as the Christmas or Holly State. In the nine years between its founding and its renaming in 1936 as the Washington State Conservation Society (WSCS), it had championed the planting of thousands of English holly berries, seedlings, and trees, mostly by children. In articles in the Seattle Times, both Mrs. McEwan and Dean Winkenwerder are quoted as encouraging the planting of holly “to line highways and the byways with beautiful holly trees covered with bright berries.”

In 1927, the same year she founded the Conservation of Wild Flowers and Tree Planting Society, Mrs. McEwan was chair of the Roadside and Conservation Committee for the Washington State chapter of the Garden Club of America. Unhappy with the national agenda focusing on the removal of billboards along scenic highways, she related that she had “to think of something new and interesting that would carry the idea of conservation.” Or as she explained in a press release that was published in some 20 Washington newspapers and carefully clipped and saved by the society, “the charm of our great outdoors is due to the abundance and beauty of our native flowers, trees and shrubs... But the interests of the
Society are broader than that. We would not only keep what we have but we would add to it. Just now there is a movement underway to encourage the planting of holly trees."

The original intent of the society, according to its constitution, would seem to preclude the promulgation of English holly as a legitimate purpose, since the society’s goal was "to encourage and educate the people of the State of Washington to love, conserve, protect and rescue the native plants, wild flowers, and trees from destruction, for the enjoyment of this generation and those to come; to cut them with care and discrimination, leaving rarer species to multiply and to awaken an interest in their cultural requirements among the community at large." In an undated list detailing the society’s objectives, the second objective, contrary to the constitution, encourages "the introduction of new species," including English holly. But the qualifying phrase, that the introduction be "suitable for ornamental, decorative, or commercial purposes," does not explain how the society could ever justify planting holly in an old-growth forest.

Regardless, the decision was made to add English holly to the beauty of our native flowers, trees, and shrubs, so that Washington might be known as the Holly State. The campaign was thought to carry the idea of conservation because *Ilex opaca*, the holly native to the East Coast, was so heavily harvested for Christmas greens that it was considered to be on the path to extinction. Planting English holly where it would grow so well, Washington State, would ease some of that overharvesting of *I. opaca*. At the same time, our own state’s evergreen shrubs were being, as Mrs. McEwan described, combed by "shiftless ne’er-do-wells who make a living by going into the woods and taking from other people’s property." To compensate for the destruction by these vandals, it was considered necessary to plant seeds and seedlings in the forest where "in due time holly trees will be plentiful."

Because Mrs. McEwan’s husband was a prominent lumberman, she might have been aware that early Puget Sound sawmills, such as those in ports Blakeley, Gamble, and Ludlow, acquired their timber when necessary, not just through theft, as she accuses the forest combers, but also through fraud and bribery (see Robert Ficken’s *The Forested Land: A History of Lumbering in Western Washington*). In 1949 Lucille McDonald, in an article in the *Seattle Times* titled "Industry in the Underbrush," acknowledges Mrs. McEwan’s efforts to require pickers to obtain written permits on any but their own land. The article is generally devoid of the colorful, albeit scornful, designations Mrs. McEwan foists on the underbrush takers. And there is no mention of holly in the article, nor did it warrant any special consideration in the last iteration of the WSCS from 1947 to 1953. During that period the society was occupied with the passage of a statewide Minor Forest Products Bill. The bill did not include holly.

Beyond the need to repair the depredations of underbrush pickers and takers, the society promoted the planting of holly as a way to boost the state’s economy and provided information to would-be holly farmers. One undated WSCS file noted that over 200 holly farms had been staked in the state. In 1933 the society even claimed a secret—another holly that would grow in eastern Washington. But growing holly in the state was not a new idea. One of the largest holly farms in the United States already existed in Medina and another was located just south of Seward Park on South Holly Street (Pat Killam, pers. comm.).

What was new and interesting was happening on the vast acreage of logged, idle land that could have been available

**Holly Facts**

- There are an estimated 400 to 600 holly species worldwide, but English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) is the species of concern in Washington. It is easily spread by seeds distributed in bird droppings, grows quickly, and crowds out native vegetation. It is also toxic to humans.

- English holly was introduced west of the Cascades from British Columbia south to California, and in Ontario, Canada.

- The King County Noxious Weed Control Program lists English holly as a "weed of concern." It grows in shade or sun in well-drained soil and can reach heights of 50 feet. Instead of using holly for Christmas decorations, King County suggests using Oregon grape (*Berberis aquifolium*) or false holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*).

- The Clark County Washington State University Master Gardeners (July 2001) listed English holly as one of 13 ornamental plants with bad manners that should be eliminated from gardens: [http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/Noxious-Weeds.html](http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/Noxious-Weeds.html).

- English Holly is not on the Washington State noxious weed list but is on the state “monitor list.”

- There are five commercial holly farms in Washington and three in Oregon (Northwest Holly Growers Association). Commercial holly growers have successfully lobbied against inclusion of *I. aquifolium* on Washington State weed lists.
for holly farming. Instead, the development and practice of sustained-yield forestry in the 1930s, particularly by the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company, culminated in the dedication in 1941 of the Clemson Tree Farm. The near future of Washington would be dominated by the growing and harvest of timber. Moreover, the campaign to have Washington become known as the Holly State could not overcome the "nom de guerre" from its inception, the "Evergreen State."

But that is not to say the efforts of the society to promote English holly can't be understated. In a 1961 pamphlet, *A History of English Holly (Ilex aquifolium) in Oregon and the Northwest*, John S. Wieman notes that 1930 was when the big upsurge in holly planting started. Fred C. Galle, in *Hollies: The Genus Ilex*, refers to the earlier pamphlet and its author and attributes the "culture of holly for Christmas [when] Wieman in Oregon started working with nursery growers in 1927." In what is an unexpected oversight, neither publication mentions Mrs. McEwan or the Washington State Society for the Conservation of Wild Flowers and Tree Planting, which were both quite active in this period promoting and propagating English holly. The WSCS did advocate for other causes besides the spread of English holly. These included a campaign to make the columbine the national flower, protection of the Sarnish heron rookery, lists of wildflowers that could be picked or were best left alone, and advocating for legislation to protect evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), salal (*Gaultheria shallon*), Oregon grape (*Berberis spp.*), and cascara (*Frangula pumila*)—all causes that conformed well with the society's goals as established by its constitution.

But from the society's beginning in 1927, the stress, most certainly at Christmas time, was to "Save Holly Berries and Beautify the State" (*Seattle Times*, Dec. 21, 1927). Drawing from an imposing roster of officers and the society's council, which included Mrs. William Boeing, Mrs. A. Scott Buller, Miss Olive Kerry, Dean Hugo Winkenwerder, Mrs. Josiah Collins, Miss Eugenia Fuller, Professor T. C. Frye, Asahel Curtis, Mrs. Langdon C. Henry, Mrs. O. B. Thorgrimson, and Miss Julia Shourek, an initial meeting was held at the Rainier Club in Seattle. It was determined that the society would hold the first of six annual "Holly Berry Teas." Children were invited to bring berries from discarded Christmas wreaths and were shown how to crush them and then bury them in flats of sand so they would sprout and could be planted later. At least 1,000 children attended the last Holly Berry Tea in 1937 and 30,000 hollies "were placed in the last planting . . . in parks and gardens."

The campaign to have Washington become the Holly State won endorsements. Significantly, the Park Board declared in 1928 that it would cooperate with the society's holly-saving committee. The Seattle Chamber of Commerce endorsed the planting of holly "along the highways and into the woods." In 1936 the *WSCS Bulletin* carried a proclamation from the governor urging that for Washington Conservation Week people "give some thought and consideration towards the perpetuation of our wild life, forests, native plants and those things which make the State of Washington the Evergreen State." Those things undoubtedly included English holly.

Holly, occasionally misspelled "holy" by the *Seattle Times*, could apparently do no wrong in leading the state to a brighter, more prosperous future. In 1927, the *Times* reported that "on May 5 we will appeal to school children once again, and taking the thousands of seeds we will go out in the country and Plant Them," Mrs. McEwan told Mrs. Herbert Hoover, wife of the Secretary of the US Dept. of Commerce, of our holly preservation plan and she was very enthusiastic over it." The campaign to have Washington become known as the Holly State not only won endorsements but sought to sustain and broaden its appeal by a full panoply of events. The advance publicity given by the *Seattle Times* to one such event held in 1934, the annual Christmas Exhibit and Program, noted the "exhibition of holly and wreaths with prizes and ribbons to be awarded by the Washington State Conservation Society," to be followed by the WSCS giving "school children one thousand holly seedlings and one thousand evergreen seedlings."

Largely the holly campaign was marked by an uncritical press. Mrs. Clarence Bletthen, whose husband was editor and publisher of the *Seattle Times*, was chair of the WSCS membership committee. The newspaper, in its coverage of the holly planting movement, acted much like a mouthpiece for the society, with holly receiving extensive, favorable coverage for years. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was also uncritical. Only the *Washington State Architect* (Apr. 29, 1929) warned that in places holly was making a trip through the woods impossible.

The foot soldiers in the campaign were schoolchildren, including Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and Friendly Indians. The Society estimated that 30,000 children planted holly in different parks. The recruitment of children in various organizations was facilitated by the hiring of a temporary public relations person. His efforts were obviously successful, because two newspaper clippings in WSCS files report participation in the "planting movement" by Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts outside Seattle. One, from the Bellingham *Morning Herald* (May 3, 1929) noted that some 50 Whatcom County Boy Scouts would observe holly berry planting day on May 4 on "the slopes of Sehome Hill and in other parts of Bellingham and vicinity to spread the growth of holly as part of a statewide movement" sponsored by the
WSCS. A second article in the Aberdeen World (May 7, 1928) reported that in Aberdeen more than 80 Girl Scouts planted holly berries "which have been germinated in damp-sand" at the Finch Playfield.

It seems likely many other children were recruited under the watchful eye of Miss Julia Shurek, supervisor of visual education and nature study for the Seattle School District. She was also conservation chairman under the Department of Applied Education for the Federation of Women's Clubs and a WSCS council member. Miss Shurek, who gave many presentations, led groups of schoolchildren in planting holly in city parks and around school grounds. She also served for several years as president of the Seattle Audubon Society, so it is possible that she considered the planting of holly as a means of aiding the creation of a bird sanctuary in Seward Park, an idea that went back to 1917 when that society asked the Seattle Park Board to authorize its "members to shoot sparrow[s] [house sparrows introduced from England] in any of the city parks."

One wonders how Seattle parks could stray so far from the advice given by the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm, which Seattle hired in 1903 to survey Seattle park possibilities and to submit a plan. In 1909, John Olmsted wrote to Park Commissioner Edward C. Cheasty:

So much of the local landscape effect along the greater part of these drives is due to natural wild growths that the greatest care should be taken in whatever planting is to be done to harmonize the new planting with the existing growths. I regretted to see in some instances this has not been done, trees having been planted in regular rows and of uniform sorts, and shrubs of recognized garden varieties having been planted, and the surface of the ground having been covered with grass instead of wild creepers and low bushes.

Another voice of caution was that of botany instructor Lyman Benson of Bakersfield (California) Junior College. Upon being asked about a desert holly appropriate for growing in eastern Washington, he responded that the holly referred to in the letter from the WSCS would likely grow in eastern Washington. "Of course any plant that is introduced is likely either to die out or to become a pest... my advice would be to try it first in some sort of isolated coulee from which its spread could be prevented. Otherwise introduction of the California plants might defeat the purpose of the society to preserve native plants."

But it was Seattle's Lincoln and Seward parks for which Mrs. McEwan and Jacob Umlauff, the park board's head gardener, had a vision "of seeing our woods aglow with all of these berry-bearing shrubs and trees, such as the mountain ash, the high bush cranberry, holly, madrona [sic], dogwood etc." In
1928 at Seward Park there was holly planting on Arbor Day and an all-day picnic when “conservationists” and Girl Scouts planted 1,500 small holly trees. For a May event in Seward Park, Mrs. McEwan described preparations to the Garden Club of America’s Conservation Committee so graphically that anyone working in forest restoration would cringe. She described a statewide Washington Holly Planting Day when Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and nature lovers would be supplied with baskets of seedlings and sharp-pointed sticks before hiking into the woods and planting holly “berries beneath low-growing plants such as salal [and] evergreen huckleberry, etc. Those plants will preserve the moisture and protect the young seedlings until they push their leaves above the heads of the plants under which they have been planted and in from six to ten years we will have fairly good sized holly trees.”

During 1928 and 1929 the society was also collaborating with the Seattle Schools PTA in order to establish a “conservation garden with a holly hedge” at Brighton School (located on Holly Street). In March 1930 Jacob Umlauf, in remarking on the berries that Seattle children saved at Christmas time, is quoted as chuckling, “There is now a holly berry kindergarten out there [in Seward Park] where those berries have sprouted into little trees.” In April, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported on 1,000 youths planting young holly trees at the annual holly planting ceremony at Seward Park. And, in an undated, unattributed clipping in the WSCS files, the nature study supervisor of the Seattle Public Schools, Miss Julia Shurek, was said to be bringing “a large number of children.” There was a photo in the Seattle Times of this event showing Girl Scouts planting holly under the headline “Sowing Seeds for Beauty.”

But the planting of holly by children at Seward Park, referred to as an annual ritual, was coming to an end. Perhaps Umlauf and Mrs. McEwan felt that they had planted enough holly in the park, or perhaps they saw that the 1,000 children present at the 1930 Arbor Day planting could not help but trample on holly planted previously as well as on the salal and evergreen huckleberry which would otherwise provide shade for the holly seedlings. It could be that Mrs. McEwan was suffering from a surfeit of too much interest by young people. The 1,000 children at the 1930 holly planting in Seward Park is by current standards a huge number, and the same number of children at the last Holly Berry Tea brought them to an end. Mrs. McEwan related that after “14 years of Conservation sponsored by the Garden Club of America in the State of Washington . . . Children’s memberships have been discontinued because they out grew all bounds . . . our last Holly Berry Tea was attended by more than 1,000 children and although the meeting was called for two o’clock many had arrived at the Olympic Hotel before 11 a.m.” Not only were Mrs. McEwan and the society responsible for helping to fill the woods of Seward Park with English holly, she had children saving berries of cotoneaster, laurel, mountain ash, common hawthorn, and pyracantha—all alien to the Northwest and perhaps some, if not all, planted with her blessing in Seward Park. Interestingly, Mrs. McEwan and the society seemed oblivious to the advantages and beauty of English ivy (Hedera helix), but that shortcoming was more than made up by the Seattle Parks Department. (In 1959, the two Seattle Park Department nurseries stocked almost twice as many Hedera helix plants as the total number of native plants.)

In 1936 a tree-cutting controversy erupted when someone objected to the promiscuous planting of exotics in what was to become known as the Magnificent Forest in Seward Park. The Park Department found itself accused of mutilating the forest in the process of both cleaning up windfall from a severe windstorm in 1934 and clearing out trees for a second set of 10 fish-rearing ponds. The department was especially criticized for not exercising enough control over the hundreds of Works Project Administration (WPA) workers who were described by Ben Paris, sportsman and former state game commissioner, as “the great army of unemployed now working and destroying the beauties of Seward Park.” Also, in what was perhaps a direct reference to English holly, Paris “censured the grubbing up of native underbrush and the planting of ‘nature faking’ perennials not native to this country.” The WSCS recognized that English holly was an exotic plant, but because it was now “established in the countryside” (WSCS Bulletin, 1935), it was considered an “American plant,” and Mrs. McEwan was to refer to it as having “almost gone native.”

Although both Jacob Umlauf and Mrs. McEwan were responsible for planting English holly in Seward Park, by 1936, Umlauf was under the gun, having been accused of tree butchery and making the park into something like a “Spokane pine forest.” He lashed out, claiming that Seward Park had been a “nightmare for 20 years.” His frustration with and even contempt for what was to become known as the Magnificent Forest was apparently not assuaged by his previous satisfaction with the holly kindergarden established in the park.

Mrs. McEwan’s initial response to the Park Department’s perceived failures in Seward Park was to blame the WPA workers. “We do not place the blame on superintendents. They tell the men not to cut down the trees or destroy the shrubs, but the workers simply do not obey orders.”

It is instructive to contrast Mrs. McEwan’s criticism of Seward Park management with her efforts on behalf of Olympic National Park. In 1936, Ashel Curtis wrote her, advocating for a smaller 400,000 acre park rather than the
proposed 800,000 acres. In 1938, Mrs. McEwan wrote to the Garden Club of America giving six reasons why the smaller park was preferable, none of which hinted that access to timber was an issue. She failed to mention that her husband was president of a lumber company or that loggers and mill owners were helping lead the opposition to a larger Olympic National Park to preserve unfettered access to low-elevation timber.

Regarding Seward Park, on April 1, 1936, Mrs. McEwan wrote the following on WSCS letterhead to the Seattle Park Board:

As president of The Washington State Society for the Conservation of Wildflowers and Native Trees, I desire to express the Conservationists’ viewpoint toward the present situation which exists at Seward Park.

Seward Park was originally purchased as a Woodland Park. It was evident at that time that the other Seattle parks located in the heart of the city, probably could not retain their primitive state indefinitely, due to the effect of atmospheric and other conditions upon the native growth. For this reason, it was thought desirable to purchase a large isolated area, suitably located and well covered with a growth of virgin forest, shrubs and flowers, growing in their native habitat and which, due to its isolated location, would retain its rural beauty as an example of our native forest.

For many years Seward Park remained in its natural state and became, as was foreseen, the only Wooded Park in Seattle, with the possible exception of Schmitz Park. Recently, however, the physical condition of Seward Park has been gradually changed until at last its natural charm and beauty has been irretrievably lost. At the present time it is being devoted to uses entirely unsuitable for a park of its type. We have lost sight of the fact that Seward Park has long since ceased to be a natural wooded park. Step by step, its natural beauty has been encroached upon and only now, with the recent clearing of trees, this fact abruptly brings us to the realization that Seward, as a woodland park, is gone forever.

In reviewing the matter and considering the present state of Seward Park, it seems that the issue of the moment is to determine whether the remaining native trees still standing shall be protected and preserved, or whether the future policy shall be to eliminate the natural features and make Seward another cultivated city park.

In this letter, WPA workers are condemned for the “recent clearing of trees,” but Mrs. McEwan also places blame on park superintendents. It was Jacob Umlauf who was responsible for placing 20 fish-rearing ponds in Seward Park, which we can infer from McEwan’s letter to be a use “entirely unsuitable for a park of its type.” And as suggested by a Seattle Times editorial (March 27, 1936), “the trout rearing ponds might have been located on other available city property and not in any park.” As for the final paragraph lamenting the loss of natural features, including the clearing of trees in Seward Park leading to it becoming another cultivated city park, Jacob Umlauf was never recognized, in encomiums at the time of his retirement or in his obituaries, for displaying any particular interest in the original evergreen forest that so captivated John Olmsted.

To more fully understand Mrs. McEwan’s letter, it is important to know that at the same time it was written the Park Board was facing another controversy—this one in the Arboretum, where WSCS Vice President Winkenwerder was acting director. As noted by one-time University of Washington President Henry Schmitz in his book on forestry at the university, “For some reason or other Mr. Umlauf did not like the Olmsted Plan or Dean Winkenwerder’s administration of the Arboretum project. Above all, he did not approve of the high cedar picket fence on the eastern boundary. As the man who was quite largely responsible for the development of Volunteer Park, Mr. Umlauf had many gardening friends, some of whom he tried to enlist in opposition to the Arboretum. This opposition made little progress but it was an unpleasant experience for Dean Winkenwerder at a most critical period in the development of the Arboretum.” Mrs. McEwan’s letter could be construed as a means of showing agreement with Winkenwerder in his assessment of Umlauf as he blamed the head gardener and park superintendent “for destruction of trees and shrubs in Washington Park by the WPA.”

The controversy seemingly accomplished nothing. And there is nothing to suggest that the WSCS responded in any way to the criticism by Ben Paris or at any point felt compelled to justify filling the woods of Seward Park with holly. Jacob Umlauf was similarly unmoved by the criticism made by Ben Paris about planting “nature-faking perennials not native to this country.” He had just finished, with no recognition of Olmsted’s words of disapproval, intermittently encircling Seward Park with poplar trees and planting about 200 sycamore and mountain ash trees. The final act of the WSCS in Seward Park was a description of the Seward Park Nature Trail as part of a survey of such trails in city parks: “[It is] 3 miles long winding through groves of large native trees, tall Oregon grape, ferns, Rhodies, and Azaleas—very Beautiful” (WSCS Bulletin, July 27, 1939). There is no mention of holly
here or in Mrs. McEwan's obituary (Seattle Times, Sept. 21, 1960) following her death at age 80. Instead, she is eulogized as being "nationally known for her work in conservation of beauty" and lauded for spearheading the effort to plant pink dogwood trees, the creation of Azalea Way on the University of Washington campus, and for memorial highway plantings following World War I.

In the 2005 Seward Park Vegetation Management Plan, holly was determined to be the third most common tree in the park after Douglas-fir (Pseudotsuga menziesii) and big-leaf maple (Acer macrophyllum). One conclusion in the plan is that "single species eradication efforts such as for holly may provide the greatest return in terms of habitat restoration area." Since then, through the efforts of volunteers, Friends of Seward Park, the Washington Native Plant Society, Ivy Out, the Earth Corps, the Seattle Green Partnership, the Seattle Parks Department, the Audubon Environmental Learning Center, contract crews, and a million-dollar donation, most of the holly is gone. But thickets remain and seedings are common in some areas, as are mature trees, such as one along the Broken Tree Trail above picnic shelter three, which is extravagantly laden with berries. It remains for now a reminder of the wish published by the Seattle Times on April 27, 1930, days before the last holly planting in Seward Park: "Hundreds of Seattle boys and girls, when they grow up to manhood and womanhood, will be able to walk through Seward Park and say 'I remember the day when we planted that holly.'"

Sources