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# Dolly Smith Cusker Akers

*“Day Eagle Woman”*

1901 – 1986

Public Servant and Indian Advocate

*“I am a very necessary evil. I try to stay in the background, but every now and then I have to come out and kick somebody in the shins.”*

– Dolly Smith Cusker Akers

Dolly Smith Cusker Akers, Montana’s first American Indian legislator, fervently championed Indian self-determination during the twentieth century. In addition to serving her state and tribe, she influenced passage of both the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act and 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act.

Born in 1901 in Wolf Point, Dolly Smith was the daughter of Assiniboine tribal member Nellie Trexler and Irish-American William Smith. She attended school on the Fort Peck Reservation and at the all-Indian Sherman Institute at Riverside, California. Graduating at age sixteen, she returned to Montana and married George Cusker in 1917. George and Dolly had a daughter, Alvina.

In 1921, the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes sent two elders to Washington, D.C., to lobby for school funding. Neither spoke English, so Dolly Smith Cusker accompanied them as interpreter. This opportunity ignited her lifelong passion for politics. Recognizing that American Indians deserved a voice in their political and economic situation, she advocated for Indian suffrage and lobbied for the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act.

Concerned about the economic difficulties affecting Montana’s tribes during the Great Depression, she ran

for state legislature in 1932. She was not only Montana’s first American Indian legislator but also the only woman elected to 1933-34 session. Her caucus selected Representative Cusker to chair the Committee on Federal Relations, a testament to her political acumen. Following her legislative tenure, Governor Frank Cooney appointed her as Montana’s first coordinator of Indian welfare.

In 1944, Dolly married rancher John Akers. While managing the ranch, she also directed her energy toward tribal governance. She was the first woman elected to chair the Fort Peck Tribal Council, a position she held for two terms, and later served as chair of the Fort Peck Tribal Housing Authority.

Dolly Smith Cusker Akers’ involvement in federal Indian policy spanned six decades and was not without controversy. She frequently criticized federal mismanagement of trust lands. She charged that the Indian Bureau leased land and mineral rights out from under tribes, robbing Indians of royalties that could have provided essential income.

Dolly Smith Cusker Akers made over fifty trips to Washington, D.C., over the span of her career. She supported the passage of the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act, successfully fought for federal money to improve Fort Peck housing, and lobbied for a bill that allowed tribes to secure independent legal counsel.

She died on June 5, 1986, having dedicated her life to securing opportunity for American Indians, especially members of the Fort Peck tribes.



Dolly Smith Cusker Akers,  
Legislative Collection,  
MTHS Photo Archives