

October 10, 2018

Remembering Alutiiq Leader Benny Benson

by Dr. Alisha Agisaaq Drabek, second language Alutiiq speaker and advocate

Erinarpet OUR VOICES



KDM by Alutiiq Language
Speakers & Learners

For this week's *Erinarpet – Our Voices* column, I'd like to deviate from directly celebrating Alutiiq language revitalization. Instead, it is most appropriate this week to acknowledge our Alutiiq and Alaska Native communities' history of oppression, of which our Alutiiq language was nearly a casualty.

Monday, October 8th was Indigenous Peoples' Day—a time to remember the challenges and achievements that Alaska Natives, and fellow Indigenous peoples worldwide, have had as a result of Western colonization.

Indigenous Peoples' Day was first recognized in 1992 by the City of Berkeley, California, in an effort to reclaim the "Columbus Day" federal holiday, as a symbolical protest of the historical conquest of North America, and 500 years of European colonization.

The effort to reframe the second Monday of October in 1992, marked the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' landing in the Americas on October 12, 1492, and the beginning of

a reign of terror that struck so many Native communities.

As a decolonized holiday Indigenous Peoples' Day gained momentum since 1992 across the United States. Yet it wasn't until 2016 that Governor Bill Walker and Anchorage Mayor Ethan Berkowitz were able to jointly adopt Indigenous Peoples' Day as a reframed holiday for both the State of Alaska and the Municipality of Anchorage. Then officially, House Bill 78 was signed in 2017 to permanently establish the holiday.

As Liz Medicine Crow, First Alaskans Institute Executive Director, stated, the proclamations were "a recognition that Indigenous peoples matter ... [I]t gives us a platform to continue to work on equitable law, policy and relationships." It is efforts like these that contribute to creating a space for Alaska Native languages to thrive.

International Indigenous Peoples Day represents a similar holiday celebrated as August 9th in many other countries. However, for Native American and Alaska Native communities, October will forever stand as a time of reflection.

October is a very important month in Alaska history, coincidentally or not. October 18, 1867, marked the flag-raising ceremony in Sitka upon the signing of the Alaska Purchase agreement between Russia and the United States. Sixty years later, in 1927, thirteen-year-old Benny Benson won a contest to design Alaska's new flag as leadership pursued statehood—only granted in 1959. Also in October, each year since 1966 the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) convention is held to bring Alaska Natives from across the state in advocacy and celebration.

In addition to these two historic events, Benny Benson was born October 12, 1913. His parents were Tatiana Schebolein, a woman from Chignik of Alutiiq and Russian



Benny Benson, age thirteen, from the Alaska State Library Portrait File, Alaska State Library Historical Collections. Identifier: ASL-Benson-Benny-1 · ASL-P01- 1921.

heritage, and John Ben Benson, a Swedish fisherman. After Benny lost his mother to pneumonia, he spent his childhood from age three to adulthood in orphanages. Benny Benson's youth symbolizes the fractured family and isolation that so many Alaska Native children have experienced during Western colonization.

Benny Benson's story and impact on Alaska is told by India M. Spartz as part of an Alaska State Museum traveling exhibitions program titled "*Eight Stars of Gold: The Story of Alaska's Flag.*" His flag design submission showed the Big Dipper and the Northern Star on a deep blue background. In his application essay, he wrote, "The blue field is for the Alaska sky and the forget-me-not, an Alaskan flower. The North Star in the future state of Alaska, the most northerly in the union, The Dipper is for the Great Bear—symbolizing strength." From 142 entries, Benny's design was unanimously selected to represent the State of Alaska.

In the early 1960, Benny Benson went on to be a civil rights pioneer by becoming the first Alaska Native to join a fraternal organization. He was admitted to the Kodiak Elks club, despite attempts by Elks clubs outside of Alaska to bar his acceptance.

What I know of Benny Benson personally, is that he lived near the Kodiak Channel off Tagura Road in his later years. In fact, my mother recalls after the first quakes of the 1964 earthquake that it was because Benny Benson made rounds along the road calling out to neighbors to head for high ground that her family knew what to do to escape the tidal wave. He passed away July 2, 1972, a few months before I was born, but his story is marked indelibly in our Alaska history and across Kodiak.

Today you can find an oil painting of Benny Benson in the entry way at Kodiak College, as well as a campus building and the road to Kodiak College named in honor of Benny Benson. While 2017 marked the 70th anniversary of his flag design, and he passed away just over 45 years ago, he is an Alutiiq leader we must remember so that generations to come of Alaska

Native peoples know the influence that we each can have upon our communities.

In memory of Benny Benson and his beautiful Alaska flag, I leave you with the Alaska Flag Song—our State Anthem now translated to Alutiiq:

Alas'kaam Flagaa – Alaska's Flag

Inglulgen agyat cungasqami
Eight stars on blue

Alas'kaam flagaa umiaqlluku
Alaska's flag makes you think of

Cungasqaq imaq, unum qilaa
The blue ocean, the night's sky

Ingrit nanwat, suit'kaat cali
The mountains' lakes, and the flowers

Suulutanek qawangurtuataallriit
The gold they always dreamt about

Ik'gt'sqaq suulutaq nunamek
The rare gold from the land

Akisqat agyat pamani et'sqat
The bright stars located up there

Tauka'aq, Qalutaq, akirluteng
The Bear, The Dipper, they are shining

Agyasinaq cimirtaan'it'sqaq
The big star that never changes

nuna cali imaq akirt'sluku
the land and sea it shines upon

Alas'kaam flagaa qunukarpet
Alaska's flag that we love

Piarait'sqaq flak Alas'kaamek!
The simple flag from Alaska!

The audio and lyrics for this song can be found on the Alutiiqlanguage.org website. Each year, I encourage the Kodiak community to join in celebration of **Benny Benson-rem Ernera – Benny Benson's Day.**

Learn more about the Alutiiq language at: www.alutiiqlanguage.org or www.alutiiqmuseum.org
Facebook: Alutiiq Language Speakers & Learners at www.facebook.com/alutiiqlanguage/