

Benny Benson Day — Benny Benson-rem ernala

UNUAQU BENNY BENSON-REM ERNERA. – TOMORROW IS BENNY BENSON’S DAY.



Photo: An Alaska state flag sewn by Benny Benson's wife and signed by Benny. Gift of Charles Mackay, AM749.

Many countries in the New World celebrate the second Monday in October as Columbus Day, honoring the European discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus. For indigenous people, however, Columbus Day represents the beginning of European colonization and the cruel treatment of indigenous people that often followed.

Although Columbus Day is a federal holiday, some Alaska residents prefer to think of this day as Benny Benson day, a day honoring the Alutiiq boy who designed Alaska’s iconic flag. He was born in Chignik to Swedish fisherman John Ben Benson and Tatiana Schebolein, a woman of Alutiiq and Russian ancestry. When he was just three, Benny’s mother died of pneumonia. Not able to care for his children, John Benson sent Benny and his younger brother Carl to the Jesse Lee Mission Home in Unalaska. For the next seventeen years, Benny lived in orphanages.

Benny’s childhood coincided with a tumultuous period in Alaska history. Neglected by the federal government, the region’s economy was suffering. In the 1920s, territorial politicians argued that statehood would bring both financial support to Alaskans. Territorial Governor George A. Parks recognized that Alaska needed an emblem: a flag that would represent its lands and people during the statehood battle. In 1927, he asked the Alaska Department of the American Legion to sponsor a flag design contest for Alaska students.

Benny’s submission showed the Big Dipper and the North Star on a deep blue background. He wrote, “The blue field is for the Alaska sky and the forget-me-not, an Alaskan flower. The North Star is the future State of Alaska, the most northerly in the union. The Dipper is for the Great Bear—symbolizing strength.” It was unanimously selected as the winning design from 142 entries. Benson received \$1,000.

Benson’s accomplishments went beyond designing the state flag. He was also a widely revered Alaskan who helped to break down the racial barriers that plagued Native people. In the early 1960s, he was admitted to the Kodiak Elks club. He became the first Alaska Native to join a fraternal organization, despite attempts by Elks clubs outside of Alaska to bar his acceptance.