

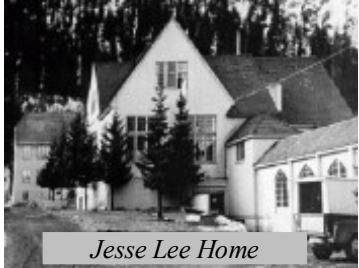
Benny's submission to the contest

The Alaska Flag

University of Alaska,
Alaska State Library



Benny Benson was born in Chignik, a small village on the south shore of the Alaska Peninsula October 12, 1913. John Ben Benson, Jr. was his full given name. His father, John Ben Benson, was a Swedish fisherman and his mother, Tatiana Schebolein, was an Aleut-Russian. During these years Alaska Native villages were being hit with waves of devastating epidemics and at the age of 3, Benny, his younger brother and older sister lost their mother to pneumonia and lost their house to a fire. This series of events caused Ben Benson, Sr. to split up his family. Benny and his brother Carl were sent to an orphanage in Unalaska and Elsie was sent to Oregon. The orphanage was called the Jesse Lee Home and it served hundreds of Aleut orphans. The home provided for the children in Unalaska until 1925 and then was moved to Seward.



Jesse Lee Home

In the first months of 1926, territorial governor George Parks was working hard for the cause of statehood. During a trip to D.C. he saw the flags of the 48 states flying outside the old Post Office Building and after conversing with the Postmaster General he was convinced that Alaska also needed a flag to fly alongside the others. He persuaded the Alaska American Legion to hold a contest open to all Alaskan children grades 7 – 12 to design a flag for the state. By January of 1927 the contest rules were circulated to schools throughout the Alaska territory. The first stage of the competition was to take place at the local level and each town was to organize a panel of judges sending only the 10 best designs on to Juneau. 142 designs were forwarded from around the state by the deadline of March 1, 1927. The contest winner was Benny Benson, a seventh-grader at the Territorial School at Seward. His design of eight stars to represent the Big Dipper, placed on a blue background to represent the sky, and the forget-me-not flower, was a unanimous winner by the panel of judges. By May of 1927 the flag design was unanimously adopted by the two houses of the Territorial Legislature. On his design submission Benny had also written some words of explanation: "The blue field is for the Alaska sky and the forget-me-not, an Alaska flower. The North Star is for the future of the state of Alaska, the most northerly in the Union. The dipper is for the Great Bear –symbolizing strength." The flag was flown for the first time on July 9, 1927. During this ceremony in Seward Benny was awarded a watch with the flag emblem on it and a \$1000 educational scholarship. Since the year 1927 was only four years after Native Alaskans received citizenship and the right to vote, this event became a source of great pride to native Alaskans. Natives throughout the state hailed Benny as a hero for winning the contest.



Benny Benson shortly after winning the contest

Benny became an airplane mechanic, married and raised two children. He lived out his life in Kodiak, Alaska. He died on July 2, 1972.



Perhaps the most widely honored Alaska Native, like the flag he designed, Benson was a strong, simple Alaskan who inspires others even today. Alaska Flag Day is recognized every year on July 9, the date it was first raised over the Jessie Lee Memorial Home in Seward where then 13-year-old Benny Benson lived.