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Birth date of Alaska flag designer Benny Benson corrected a century later

March 10, 2022 JUNEAU – An inquiry into the family history of Benny Benson, the winner of the 1927 Alaska flag contest and creator of the Alaska flag, has yielded a correction to Alaska history. Contrary to the long-standing belief that Mr. Benson was 13 years old when he won the flag contest, he was in fact 14 years old. Research led by Dr. Mike Livingston, Cultural Heritage Specialist for the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association (APIA), has determined that Benny Benson was born a year earlier than previously understood.

“Like many people, I love researching family trees,” commented Dr. Mike Livingston, who led the APIA team that spent at least five years researching this issue. “We never expected that taking a look at Benny Benson’s history would lead us to correct this beloved piece of Alaska history. Our research was also a fascinating window into the status of early Alaska records.”

The investigation involved examining records and historical information from the Russian Orthodox Church, Unga Territory Court, Alaska Department of Health and Social Service’s Health Analytics and Vital Records (HAVRS), Alaska State Museum and Archives, and the National Archives. After reviewing the evidence collected by APIA, Anchorage Superior Court Judge Adolf Zeman ordered the State of Alaska on Feb. 28, 2022 to correct Mr. Benson’s date of birth and his mother’s maiden name. Judge Zeman also noted that the correction was in the public interest given Mr. Benson’s historic role in creating the Alaska flag.

In October 1940, when Benny Benson tried to register to serve in World War II, he was required to submit a birth certificate, which he lacked. He believed his date of birth to be Oct. 12, 1913 and was issued a birth certificate with that date by the Unga Territory Court.

During historical research, Dr. Livingston’s team noticed that birth and baptismal records registered by a Russian Orthodox priest at Nikolaevskaya Chapel in Chignik reported Sept. 12, 1912 as Mr. Benson’s date of birth. Original copies of these records were confirmed by the National Archives. A family member of Mr. Benson requested in 2020 that the State’s Health Analytics and Vital Records correct the official birth certificate. The State of Alaska Museum convened a review panel of five experts to examine the evidence. After a thorough review process, the panel unanimously supported the corrections.

“We take accurate maintenance of vital records very seriously,” noted Rebecca Topol, Chief of Health Analytics and Vital Records and State Registrar. “This correction is warranted in the wake of this impressive research effort led by Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association.”

After receiving a certified copy of the Superior Court order, the State of Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records has issued a corrected version of Benny Benson’s birth certificate, 109 years after his birth.

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