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## Agnes Baker-Pilgrim (Grandma Aggie)

### Who was Agnes Baker-Pilgrim?

Agnes Baker-Pilgrim, often called Grandma Aggie by Siletz people, was an important elder and community leader of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. Aggie travelled the world as an activist supporting the rights of Indigenous people and working to protect the environment.



### Early Life

Aggie was born on September 11, 1924, in Logsdon, Oregon, about seven miles east of the town of Siletz. She was the granddaughter of George Harney, the first elected Chief of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. Her ancestors were Takelma people from southern Oregon, as well as Tillamook, Alsea, and Chinook on her mother's side and Coos on her father's. In the 1850's her people were forced to leave their ancestral homeland to live on the Coast (Siletz) Reservation. Her name in the Takelma language, Taowhywee, means Morning Star.

Aggie and her eight siblings grew up on the Siletz Reservation along with many other Tribal people and families. Life on the Siletz Reservation could be difficult. Since long before Aggie was even born, the U.S. government punished Native people for practicing traditional ceremonies or speaking their Native languages.

When Aggie was growing up, Native people often had a hard time earning money to make a living. Many Non-Native people did not like Native people and discriminated against people like Aggie and her family. Discrimination means treating someone unfairly because of something about them, like being an Indigenous person. Aggie remembered seeing signs that said "No dogs or Indians allowed" hanging in store windows near the Siletz Reservation.

### Adult Life

Aggie explored different jobs in her adult life to make a living and help support her family. She had six children: three boys and three girls. Throughout her life she worked as a physician's assistant, a singer, a logger, and even a race car driver.

In 1970, when Aggie was 45, she wanted to reconnect to her spiritual life. She began focusing on protecting and restoring the traditions and ceremonies of her people that the government had not allowed. She decided to go to university and graduated from Southern Oregon University in her 50's with a degree in psychology and Native American studies.

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## **Agnes Baker-Pilgrim (Grandma Aggie)** *(Continued)*

These experiences inspired Aggie to spend the next 50 years of her life as an activist. She helped to support Indigenous ways of living and to protect the environment of her Tribal homelands. She also helped make sure that Tribal people could practice their cultures and ceremonies free from discrimination.

### **Later Life**

Much of Aggie's work was with Tribal youth. She and her husband Grant, a member of the Yurok Tribe, worked with professors from Southern Oregon University to create a summer Native American Youth Academy (Kanawi Tilixam), in which Indigenous youth throughout Oregon are mentored by Tribal elders, peers, and professors. Through programs like this, Aggie helped prepare many Tribal young people to succeed in education and helped connect them to their communities.

In the 1990s, Aggie and her husband helped to restart the First Salmon Ceremony back on the Rogue River in southern Oregon. The First Salmon Ceremony is about the connection between Native people and salmon. The ceremony welcomes and gives thanks to the salmon as they return to the rivers each year. This traditional ceremony had been practiced by many Tribes in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years before settlers forced people from their homelands. She also worked to improve the habitat of the salmon by supporting the removal of dams on the Klamath and Rogue Rivers. She travelled across the country advocating for environmental protection and the rights of Indigenous people to their ancestral homelands.

In 2004, Aggie helped to start the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, a group of Indigenous elders from across the world. The council came together to support Indigenous rights and the wisdom of Indigenous people. Aggie spent the rest of her life traveling all over the world to spread the message about the importance of valuing Indigenous people. In 2015, she published a book called "Grandma Says: Wake Up, World!" about her life and the teachings that she wanted to pass on to all people.

When she died at the age of 95, Aggie was a grandmother to 18, a great-grandmother to 27, and a great-great grandmother to one. She was a treasured member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and had served on the Tribe's Culture Committee for many years. Many of the women in her family carry on her tradition of leadership to this day.

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## Agnes Baker-Pilgrim (Grandma Aggie) (Continued)

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