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# Ida Bensell

## Who was Ida Bensell?

Ida Bensell was a Siletz Tribal member and basket maker. She worked hard to continue the tradition of basketry and other important parts of Siletz language and culture.

## Early Life

Ida was born in 1879 on Siletz Bay, part of the Siletz Reservation. Ida's dad, Jim Samuels, was from the village of Euchre Creek in southern Oregon. Her mom, Nina Jim, was from Sixes, a village just up the coast from Euchre Creek.

When she was about six years old, Ida was sent to the boarding school at Siletz. A boarding school is a type of school where students live while they study. The children don't get to see their families. The government set up boarding schools on reservations to separate children like Ida from their families and stop them from learning their languages and traditions. But that didn't work on Ida. She became a great basket weaver and speaker of her ancestral language.

Ida learned to weave baskets by watching her elders and following what they did. As older weavers saw her skills and determination, they began to encourage her. Ida told a newspaper reporter about how she learned. She said, "When I was a little girl I sat on blanket in hot sun and watched old ladies make baskets. Then I make little baskets like theirs. They say, 'She's going to be good basket maker.'"

## Adult Life

Ida married Jim Bensell from Siletz and raised a large family of twelve children with him. Ida made sure that her daughters learned how to weave baskets. She taught them where to find the plants needed to make a basket and how to care for them. Siletz baskets are famous for their fancy designs and fine weaving. Collectors came from across the country to find Siletz baskets. Today, many of the baskets Ida and her daughters made are in museums and private collections. Many others are valuable treasures in her family and the Tribal community.



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## Ida Bensell *(Continued)*

During Ida's life it became more and more difficult to find the plants needed to make a basket. Loggers cut down many of the trees that weavers needed for roots. The county and state government sprayed pesticides on other plants that weavers used, making them brittle and unsafe. Ida kept weaving, sometimes traveling great distances to find the materials she needed.

### Later Life

Ida kept weaving for most of her life. She also enjoyed sewing and crocheting as she got older. She supported the Tribal community in many other ways throughout her life as well. For example, Ida played an important role in preserving her language. Ida spent many years working with many different scientists to write and record her language. She helped to make hundreds of pages of notes and hours and hours of recordings. Siletz people still use Ida's notes and recordings today to learn and remember their language.

In later years, Ida would weave and speak her language at community events and gatherings. Watching and listening to Ida gave other Siletz weavers and young people a chance to learn, just like she had as a young child. If it wasn't for Ida there would not be as many Siletz weavers today. She is a hero to many Siletz weavers and people working to learn their language.

Ida was over 100 years old when she died in 1983. She is buried at the Paul Washington Memorial Cemetery on the Siletz Reservation.

### Sources

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