



# Agnes Baker Pilgrim

## Taowhywee Morningstar

(1924 - 2019)

2015 photo by Jason R. Couch

*Medford Mail Tribune*, Thurs. Nov. 28, 2019 by John Darling

### 'Grandma Aggie' dies at 95

Takelma tribe elder Agnes Baker Pilgrim is remembered as a caring force for nature and an inspiration for sacred ceremonies in Southern Oregon over many decades. Much loved and known as “Grandma Aggie,” she died Wednesday in Grants Pass at age 95.

She was the most senior member of the Takelma tribe, which was centered for millennia along the Rogue River, until being displaced to reservations in upstate Oregon by Euro-American settlers in the mid-1850s.

In the 1970s, following work in her younger years as a singer, nightclub bouncer, jail barber and logger, “she embarked on a more spiritual journey,” according to a Southern Oregon University statement. She worked as a manager and social worker with the United Indian Lodge in Crescent City, California, before joining the Cultural Heritage and Sacred Lands Committee of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz.

She was widely known for supporting salmon, by working to remove dams on the Klamath and Rogue Rivers and recreating ancient native rituals honoring the salmon’s seasonal return.

In 1985, at age 61, she earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from then-Southern Oregon State College, with a minor in Native American studies. Agnes co-founded the University’s Konoway Nika Tillicum Native American Youth Academy, an eight-day residential program for Native middle school and high school students. She received the university’s Distinguished Alumni Award in 2002.

In 2004, Pilgrim co-founded the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, an alliance of female elders who promote protection of the Earth and awareness of Native culture. She was recognized as a “living treasure” by the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz.

In August 2019, Southern Oregon University presented her with the President’s Award — the highest honor it offers to a member of the community. At the award ceremony, Pilgrim said, “Love is all there is. Do you agree with me? I’m not talking about some egotistical love, I’m talking about being able to take in one more breath and the love of L-I-F-E — of life.”

“Grandma Aggie possessed a larger-than-life personality and wisdom to match,” noted SOU President Linda Schott. “She took it upon herself to preserve and protect Native American culture in our region and left us a foundation of success on which to continue her work. Her compassion, integrity, and courage will continue to affect us and to serve as yardsticks that we can measure ourselves against.”

She was a “nontraditional” student before that was common, returning to school in mid-life, notes Schott. “She prided herself on being a ‘voice for the voiceless,’ including plants, animals, and those without access to power. She provided inspiration to many.”

Grandma Aggie’s colleague, David West, director emeritus of the Native American Studies department at SOU, noted, “She has crossed to be with her ancestors, walking on the Milky Way. Great gratitude from all the family for the thoughts and prayers of all who love her.”

Local musician Alice DiMichele posted, “Our beloved Grandma Aggie has gone on to join her ancestors and the creator. Bless her journey with prayers from your own tradition. We were all so blessed to know her. May our love make her journey smooth. Much love to her children, grandchildren, many relatives, and all who loved her.”

Ashland music teacher Tish McFadden posted, “I am teaching music lessons today, and when I wasn’t sure how I’d manage it, my friend Louise said, ‘Tish, go make music ... Aggie loved music! Go teach the kids ... Aggie loved kids!’ So, I’m teaching music and loving kids to make my way up this river with gratitude, alongside all of you who have known and loved Agnes Pilgrim for so long. I’m grateful for her wisdom, heart, humor, and every moment she shared with us.”

McFadden and storyteller Thomas Doty have been collaborating with Pilgrim on “Upriver to Morning, A Journey to Wisdom,” a classroom curriculum package about a salmon’s year-long journey from the Pacific Ocean to the upper Rogue River. <https://www.uprivertomorning.com/>

David West said arrangements for a Celebration of Life will soon be announced by the family.

<https://mailtribune.com/news/top-stories/takelma-elder-agnes-baker-pilgrim-grandma-aggie-dies-at-95>

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Grandma Aggie sitting in the Story Chair by Ti'lomikh Falls on the Rogue River, near the village site of her Takelma ancestors (2012)

(Stephen Kiesling photo)



***Grants Pass Courier***, Fri. Nov. 29, 2019 by Jeff Duewel

## **Takelma elder 'Grandma Aggie' leaves towering legacy**

Agnes Baker Pilgrim, the face of the Takelma tribe in Southern Oregon, died Wednesday in Grants Pass at the age of 95.

Also known as "Grandma Aggie," Pilgrim was the oldest member of her tribe and granddaughter of a tribal chief. She was known for taking up the cause of women's empowerment, indigenous culture, and the environment.

She lived in Grants Pass since the mid-1990s.

"Southern Oregon University has lost a treasured alumna, the recent recipient of our university's President's Medal, and a true friend," President Linda Schott said in a statement. "Grandma Aggie possessed a larger-than-life personality and wisdom to match. She took it upon herself to preserve and protect Native American culture in our region and has left the rest of us a foundation of success on which to continue her work."

"It was my honor to recognize Grandma Aggie in August by presenting to her the President's Medal, SOU's highest tribute for service to the university and community. Her compassion, integrity, and courage will continue to affect us and to serve as yardsticks that we can measure ourselves against."

Pilgrim's face can be seen near the top of the wooden "We Are Here" statue in the Hannon Library at Southern Oregon University in Ashland. The sculpture, carved by her longtime friend Russell Beebe, is 19 feet tall.

Pilgrim's connections to SOU were strong. She enrolled at SOU in 1985 and graduated at age 61 with a degree in psychology and Native American studies.

Her connections to her people and their history were also strong. In 1994, Pilgrim revived her tribe's annual salmon ceremony at a site on the Applegate River. In 2007, she moved the ceremony to Ti'lomikh Falls on the Rogue River near Gold Hill. This site had just been confirmed to be the actual gathering place of her ancestors, before they were relocated to the reservation at Siletz in 1857.

In September 2019, a 95th birthday party was held for Grandma Aggie at Ti'lomikh Falls. More than 100 people attended, and many hiked down to the ancestral "Story Chair" by the falls, where the salmon ceremony was conducted for thousands of years.

Her birthday party capped a busy, last year of her life. She visited Sedona, Arizona, for a meeting of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. She went to Nashville for the Choose Peace Festival, and was in Port Townsend, Washington, for the Global Earth Repair Conference.

In August, she was grand marshal of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians' annual Nesika Illahee Pow-wow, near her birthplace, with five generations of descendants present. In September she traveled to New York for a book release.

Pilgrim was born in 1924 on the Siletz Reservation, where her family canned fruit, hunted, fished, and tended chickens, cows, sheep and cattle. She was the granddaughter of George Harney, a Takelma leader who was the first elected chief of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

Pilgrim was encouraged by her father, George Baker, to pursue music. She played guitar, piano, ukulele and the organ. As an adult, she worked as a truck driver, bouncer, musician and counselor.

In 1970, she adopted the medicine name of her Takelma great-grandmother, Taowhywee, or Morningstar, and dedicated her life to educating people about the value of the Earth and all living things.

"Many people mistakenly believe that all the Rogue River Indians were wiped out a century and a half ago," she once said, according to an online story about the Takelma people by the Bureau of Land Management. "It's not true. There are more than 70 descendants of Chief Harney alive today. I am a living link with the ancestors of this land."

Pilgrim traveled the world advocating for environmental, animal and indigenous rights. She went to Rome to lobby Pope Benedict XVI to repeal a centuries-old Roman Catholic edict that many Native Americans say provided the legal justification for European encroachment on Native American lands. Several times she met with the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.

Married three times, Pilgrim had six children, 18 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren, and a great-great-granddaughter.

"We will all miss her loving smile and nuggets of native wisdom," said Julie Norman, Secretary of the Agnes Baker Pilgrim Fund. "She had an impact on thousands of people in her 95 years. We are so lucky to have her in our lives and memories."

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Grandmother Agnes Baker Pilgrim offers a prayer during the "His Holiness the Dalai Lama Environmental Summit" in Portland (2013)

(Motoya Nakamura photo, *Oregonian*)

**Oregon Live / Associated Press**, November 28, 2019

## **Agnes Baker Pilgrim, the oldest member of Oregon's Takelma tribe and a vocal advocate for clean water and Native American rights, has died. She was 95.**

Agnes Pilgrim, better known as "Grandma Aggie," died Wednesday in Grants Pass. Her alma mater, Southern Oregon University, awarded Pilgrim the President's Medal -- its highest honor -- in August, for her extensive work to preserve and protect Native American culture and clean water around the world.

Pilgrim, the granddaughter of a tribal chief, traveled the world well into her 80s advocating for environmental, animal and indigenous rights.

Pilgrim also brought back tribal rituals to her home community in southern Oregon, including a sacred salmon ceremony. She referred to her work as being a "voice for the voiceless."

Pilgrim, a mother of six, said that at age 45 she began to feel restless. "This sensation was not only present in my waking hours, but also in the dream time. There was a force pulling me

toward a spiritual path. I was told to cleanse my inner-self. Ultimately, I did what I call a 'dying to self,'" she wrote in an essay posted on the website of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz. "At first I fought this inner calling, thinking I wasn't worthy to do it. Looking back, however, I can see where I began to change."

In 2004, she co-founded the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, a global alliance of female elders who promote protection of the Earth and awareness of indigenous culture.

"Being an 'international grandma' is not an easy job. I put in 10, 14, 17 hours a day — try that when you're nearly 86 years old," she said to applause in a 2010 speech. "But I'm very concerned about our water all over the world, and you should be too. Water is a precious commodity. Without water, all life dies."

Pilgrim was recognized as a “living treasure” by the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz. Her likeness is featured in a statue in downtown Ashland, Oregon.

<https://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/2019/11/agnes-pilgrim-indigenous-rights-advocate-and-oldest-member-of-oregons-takelma-tribe-dies-at-95.html>

Grandma Aggie and great grand-daughter Chantele on the Story Stone by Ti'lomikh Falls (2019)

(Stephen Kiesling photo)



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