



*Coe A. Whittern 6/2/2022*

### **Note**

Bracketed information was added by Michael Livingston to assist reader comprehension.

### **Summary**

Coe A. Whittern (1946 - 2024) was the son of the last Methodist minister (C. Keith Whittern 1919 - 1957) in Unalaska. Coe Whittern moved to Unalaska with his parents in 1949 when he was age three, returned to Indiana after his father and brother died in a boating accident in 1957, and then returned to Unalaska in 1968. He worked as a high school teacher, a builder, and a businessman, purchasing and remodeling the Jesse Lee Children's home boy's dormitory. In 1972, Benny Benson, who lived in the boy's dormitory from 1916 to 1925, returned to Unalaska to reconnect to his roots a year before he died on 7/2/1972. Coe Whittern said that Benny Benson told him he designed the Alaska flag in Unalaska before the Jesse Lee Home moved to Seward in 1925. Whittern said that Benny Benson expressed remorse that it was not public knowledge that he designed the flag in Unalaska.

### **Keywords**

Alaska flag, Benny Benson, Jesse Lee Children's Home, Unalaska, Coe Whittern.

### **Transcript**

Transcribed by Michael Livingston, February 14, 2025

### **Michael Livingston**

That one's going [referring to multiple audio recording devices]. So today is June 2, 2022 time by my clock is about 12:29 PM.

I'm Michael Livingston. We're in Unalaska, Alaska at 88 King Street [the residence of Coe Whittern and the former boy's dormitory of the Jesse Lee Home where Alaska flag designer Benny Benson lived from 1919 to 1925]. And if you would tell me your name, sir?

**Coe Whittern**

My name is Coe Whittern.

**Michael Livingston**

And Coe, where were you born?

**Coe Whittern**

Well, this is a trick, but I was born in Peru, Indiana. [Laughter.]

**Michael Livingston**

Okay, and can I ask your age today?

**Coe Whittern**

I'm 76.

**Michael Livingston**

And how did you end up in Unalaska?

**Coe Whittern**

I came here with my parents in the summer of 1949 [Whittern would have been around age 3] and was here for eight years with my parents, until my father and one brother passed in a boating accident. They died.

So my parents were missionaries, here, they were the last missionaries in a string of Methodist missionaries, starting with the children's home. It was here the Jesse Lee Children's Home started nominally in 1890. The building we're in, the boy's dormitory, I believe, was built in 1903.

**Michael Livingston**

And so you moved here in the summer of 1949, and then you were here for eight years?

**Coe Whittern**

Yes, my father died, and my younger brother, Quentin, died, a four-year-old. Dad was 38. Quentin was four. In a boating accident. They capsized and couldn't get to shore and died of exposure in 1957, October of [19]57.

**Michael Livingston**

What is your father's name?

**Coe Whittern**

C the letter C Keith Whittern. In my father's family, the oldest son was always Charles. So my dad's name was really Charles Keith Whittern, but since it was confusing to have two Charles Whittern's, his dad was Charles Whittern, and he was C. Keith Whittern. When he wrote his name, he would write C. Keith Whittern, and we called him Keith.

**Michael Livingston**

And that was in October 1957, and then did you leave?

**Coe Whittern**

And within a very short period of time, probably two weeks or less, we had moved back to where my mom was from in southeast Michigan. My dad was an Indiana farm boy, and my mom was a Michigan farm girl.

**Michael Livingston**

Was there a name of a town in Southeast Michigan?

**Coe Whittern**

She was from Prattville, Michigan.

**Michael Livingston**

And then did you end up returning to Unalaska?

**Coe Whittern**

When I left here as an 11-year-old boy, I had a given. I never processed it. I will come home when I can. And I've lived that out every day of my life since then.

**Michael Livingston**

And so, when did you return to Unalaska?

**Coe Whittern**

The first opportunity I had was when I graduated from college. I came back for the summer in 1968 with a friend of mine, Tom Borton [phonetically, might be Whorton]. Tom and I worked together with his dad in a construction business in the summers for me, because I was in college. And so Tom and I came and spent the summer.

I wanted to... I was... I went to school to be a school teacher so that I could come back here, because at the time I was making those plans, there was still no real way to make a living here.

And so if I was a school teacher, I could make a living. That was my plan. And I taught school one year in Michigan. After that visit to Unalaska, there wasn't any high school here when I came here, but there was going to start one that fall. And, Al Dalrymple, who's still in the community here, was the first high school teacher. I taught a year in Michigan, convinced my Michigan farm girl to come up here and marry me. And we started for Unalaska the next day, from Michigan, drove across the country and then flew up from there.

**Michael Livingston**

If I can back up a little bit, where did you go to college?

**Coe Whittern**

I went to Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, about 30 miles from Prattville, Michigan, where my mom still had her home. My brother Chuck, who was two years older than me, we rented when we were first back there in various places. Seemed to have to move every once in a while, but when my brother Chuck was going to be a junior in high school in the fall, that summer, he told mom, said, Mom, if you want, I could build your house.

Never done anything like this. Hadn't had any construction experience, but he's an unusual guy. Whitterns are, I'm more of a Durling, my mom's side, but so Chuck told mom he could do it.

Mom got one of her brothers to give her an acre out of the corner of a field that was on a paved road, and we had a contractor put in the basement and a shell, this one big room, open framing, no ceilings, just the rafters...the joists.... And my brother Chuck, not yet, a junior in high school, built us a home, a four bedroom house with a garage.

**Michael Livingston**

And so what year did you return to Unalaska?

**Coe Whittern**

I came back for the summer in [19]68. My wife and I... we got married June 22, [19]69. And we came to Unalaska, drove across the country and right on up to Unalaska, and got here some prior early July or something. And that was in [19]69 and I was the second high school teacher and the first basketball coach.

**Michael Livingston**

And over the years that you've lived here, what different occupations have you had?

**Coe Whittern**

Well, for the first nine years, I taught school. And interestingly enough, all those little kids are now grandparents. Seemed like! [Laughter.]

But... and ... then I... while I was still teaching, I ... because I had experience in construction from college summers, I had purchased this mission block we're on here from the Methodists.

Before I had my first real paycheck, I went home after my visit and told mom, I said the superintendent of missions said that he doesn't know what to do with the derelict out there.

And I told him, he needs to do better. And he said, make me an offer. So I said, Mom, will you lend me some money? So I bought the city block with the house thrown in for free because it was junk, basically.

And it's the old boys dormitory of the Jesse Lee children's home, of course. And then it was the mission house until my father's death. Anyway,...can't remember where we're at here....

**Michael Livingston**

You were ...you were going to mention some of the different occupations.

**Coe Whittern**

Oh, occupations. So I built my first house on this block. Salvaged old army buildings and re-sawed old lumber and stuff. But I bought some new stuff, obviously the siding and the shingles and the interior drywall stuff I bought, but it's basically built out of salvage military lumber, and that was started in [19]75 and finished in [19]76.

And my youngest son, Corey, was born there in November 25th, Thanksgiving Day. It was at the time of [19]76 in that house. Yeah, it's cool.

The other ones, I didn't get to be there. My wife had to go to Michigan with her folks and have the kids and then come back. And I was teaching school and couldn't leave.

And yeah. So after that, after my nine years of teaching, I branched out ... I did do some more building while I was teaching in the summers. So I was developing my building skills. I built my first duplex in [19]77 on the block.

And then also this jumps backwards a little bit ...Universal Seafoods, now called Unisea, came up here and started building their facilities in [19]74 and they had... Dick Pace... was the CEO of Unisea, and he hired his next door neighbor in Woodinville, Washington to be his construction superintendent. That's Ron Bundy.

Ron Bundy had been a two man-contracting residential construction company in the west side of Lake Washington, and he lived in Woodinville, where Dick Pace had his home, and Dick Pace hired Ron Bundy, this two-man contractor to build Unisea, multi-million dollar seafood operation.

And so Ron got his partner to come up here with him, and they decided they would hire inexperienced rather than poor character. So he went to a 19 year old kid in his church in Woodinville and said, find me six or seven other young men like yourself that have good character, and we'll teach you to be builders. We're going to build the seafood plant. They were known locally here as the God Squad.

And they did a really good job. And all, almost all of them, had dropped out of some kind of advanced education, Bible school or regular college or junior college to come up for a break. And those ended up being eight guys.

My friend Tom Borton [might be Whorton] had spent the summer up here in [19]68 with me came back up and was in that God Squad. Anyway, almost all those guys ended up not going back to school and being full time in construction [laughter] because they were taught so well. They just loved it. Yeah, it's an amazing thing.

So when I quit teaching, I went full time into construction. I got a contractor's license, and I built as a contractor for just maybe three years that would have been, well, actually, doesn't matter how straight the story gets, probably, but the first year I built the six unit apartment building that I planned to have as a rental on some property up the valley, but I ended up selling it to a couple skippers of crab boats, because it was fun to have a bunch of money [laughter].

And so then after that, I went into being a contractor, and did it for about three years, and then I dropped back to being an owner builder, and periodically I've got, let's see, two more rental units.

Got a total of four duplexes that I built on my block, plus the mission house is actually a duplex. So I resorted to being an owner builder, but also I started Unalaska Building Supply and True Value...it wasn't True Value... it started in 1980 and it wasn't True Value until 1990.

But, so I have this progression from teacher to builder to owner-builder, contractor, back to owner-builder, and then businessman. Now I'm... if you say you're retired, that means you've been tired more than once, right? It's okay. I'm retired [laughter].

### **Michael Livingston**

And so... some... if I remember correctly, somewhere along the way, you met Benny Benson?

### **Coe Whittern**

And so when we acquired the old mission house, Phyllis and I, we had to do an extensive amount of work for it to move into it, so I lived in my mom's rental on the next block that she used to have to rent to school teachers. She sold it eventually, but we lived there for several months while we cleaned out this place here. It was really a mess, and then we moved into it about the time school was starting in [19]69 and we lived in it until we got our next house on this block, built in [19]76, finished in [19]76. And, so, what was the original question again?

### **Michael Livingston**

So yes, somewhere along the way, you met Benny Benson?

### **Coe Whittern**

So okay, so we lived in this house quite a lot of the time, not all the time, but we lived in it continuously from when we came here in [19]69 and got moved into it until [19]76 and so Benny Benson came out here to reconnect with his roots and stuff a year before he died of cancer. And

I believe that was eight, just a minute, 6... 70... 72 ...I believe it was [19]72.<sup>1</sup> I'm fairly solid on that, but it could be verified by looking back a year from when he died.

**Michael Livingston**

And how did Benny get out here? Do you remember?

**Coe Whittern**

He would have flown out on Reeves [Reeve Aleutian Airways, also known as RAA, an airline operated by Bob Reeves from World War Two through the 1970s in the region].

**Michael Livingston**

Would he have flown by himself?



*Benny Benson and his wife in Unalaska, courtesy of Coe Whittern*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael asked that the date be changed to 1971 when Benny visit Unalaska. It was a year before he died in 1972.

**Coe Whittern**

No, his wife was with him. She was, I presume, probably Aleut, but she was Alaska Native, for sure.

**Michael Livingston**

Anybody else with them?

**Coe Whittern**

No.

**Michael Livingston**

And how long did you spend visiting Benny?

**Coe Whittern**

I think they only came here and visited us one day, but they were in town more than that.

**Michael Livingston**

And what did, what did Benny tell you?

**Coe Whittern**

My goodness! [Laughter.] Benny went through this whole house and told me what used to be everywhere, and so he's my solidest anchor for what was where, when.

**Michael Livingston**

Let me try to narrow down the question. When you and I met a couple days ago in the big school gymnasium, you related to me a story about where Benny designed the flag.

**Coe Whittern**

Okay, yeah, one of the things Benny said was that he wanted me to know that even though Juneau gets credit for him being from Juneau and from the Children's Home, not Juneau... Seward, get it right there, Seward, from the Children's Home in Seward, he said, yes, I won the contest while I was in Seward. But he says, I want you to know I designed the flag here in this house [thump, thump, thump, as Coe Whittern is thumping on the kitchen table he is sitting at] here in Unalaska. And he says, unfortunately, Unalaska hasn't gotten credit for me designing this territorial flag in Unalaska.

**Michael Livingston**

And do you remember where in the house you were when you had that conversation?

**Coe Whittern**

Not with total certainty, but probably right here in this room, which was Newhall's [Dr. Albert Warren Newhall] social living space. It's the northwest corner of the downstairs.

**Michael Livingston**

And can you describe to me what condition Benny... Benny was in?

**Coe Whittern**

Well, at the time he came, he was in remission from cancer, and he had lost one leg. It looks like, I've got a picture here, and it was his right leg, yeah, taken off just above the knee, and he was on crutches. But he was doing well, quite mobile, feeling good, but he did die the following year of a re-occurrence [of cancer].

**Michael Livingston**

And did he give you any details about... about how he designed the flag here?

**Coe Whittern**

He did not not, but, but it is true. And I think he did say this. He said it's true that that's the song that's been written is based on what he told them, that eight stars of blue on a field of gold, what it means and stuff in that song. He said, that's what I... that's what I said when I submitted my entry.

**Michael Livingston**

And was it, was it important? Do you feel it was important to Benny that that the record be straight about where the flag was designed?

**Coe Whittern**

It was important for him to let me know, and he did express some modest level of remorse that it is not public knowledge. He said, I wish that people could get credit for what I did here, as well as what I won in Seward.

**Michael Livingston**

And best you can, are you able to remember his exact words?

**Coe Whittern**

Not any better than I've already said it. [Laughter.]

**Michael Livingston**

Okay, but he was adamant?

**Coe Whittern**

Adamant, isn't... he was just comfortable. He wasn't worked up at all. He's just telling me.



*Robert Krukoff, Benny Benson, Isiah Krukoff, Coe Whittern in front of Boy's Dormitory, courtesy of Coe Whittern*

**Michael Livingston**

And, and can you tell me about the picture you have?

**Coe Whittern**

Yeah, he wanted a picture. I took... this picture... my wife did. But he also, I would think, has pictures too. I'm not certain, but I would think that in his stuff, there'd be pictures somewhere. And this is a picture of him and me and Robert and Isaiah Krukoff.

They were probably like five and six years old, and they were foster kids that we had at the time, and they're ...Robert's holding his right hand, and Isaiah is holding his left hand, and I'm standing to his left and I look a little different now. [Laughter.]

So do Robert and Isiah. [Laughter.]

**Michael Livingston**

Time does pass by, but and then Benny, he's got two crutches, and he's missing...

**Coe Whittern**

...right leg up to above the knee...

**Michael Livingston**

Okay. Is he holding anything else in his hands? Or, no, or..?

**Coe Whittern**

No. He just has the boy's hands.

**Michael Livingston**

Okay. And that's the pictures taken in front of this house?

**Coe Whittern**

That's right there. Yeah, right out the front yard, uh, diagonally to the northeast.

**Michael Livingston**

All right, is there anything else you'd like to say about Benny Benson saying that he designed the flag here?

**Coe Whittern**

Nothing that I'm aware of. It was just a passing thing. It wasn't the focus of our time together. But he did mention it, and he did express that, unfortunately, we don't get our part of the story.

**Michael Livingston**

And this came straight from Benny?

**Coe Whittern**

Oh yeah, yeah.

**Michael Livingston**

Okay, all right, I'm if I'm going to shut off these recorders, if there's nothing else you'd like to add about Benny. Was it a nice visit with him?

**Coe Whittern**

It was really good. He was really glad to be back, and he had a tremendous appreciation for the foundation of family he had here, this Children's Home wasn't an institution. It was a family to him.

**Michael Livingston**

If I remember right, you told me a story about where Dr. Newhall's desk was located?

**Coe Whittern**

Yes, over in this room behind this, that was the social space for the Newhall's, privately. Then he said that corner, which would be in the northeast corner of that room, he said that right there is where Dr. Newhall's desk was, I'm absolutely certain, and I'm just letting you know, because I know for sure he was very...

There's a few things he was adamant about. He was adamant, that's where the desk was.

**Michael Livingston**

And did he say something particular happened sometimes underneath that desk?

**Coe Whittern**

Well, he said the reason I know the desk was there was, he said that if we did something that was wrong, and it was clearly wrong, and we wouldn't acknowledge it, we couldn't see that it was wrong. He said, Doctor Newhall would let us sit, and let us isn't quite the right word, but he would have us sit under the desk and think about it until we could grasp that what we did was wrong, then we could come out [from under the desk].

**Michael Livingston**

And you took me on a wonderful tour of your home, and you showed me the attic.

What is upstairs in the attic that's connected to Benny Benson?

**Coe Whittern**

Well, one thing very directly is that on the... get my directions right here ... on the southwest side of the attic, there's still the original clothes bins that are built out of shipping crates that are fastened to the sloping rafters of the roof that were made to be cubicles.

And each cubicle had a paper identifying tag on it with a typewritten name on it, and that was each boy's clothes bin. And those tags are still there from the last boys to live in the Home when it was moved in [19]25 [to Seward, Alaska].

And Benny Benson's name is still on his clothes bin.

And he was so excited to see it, and he stood by it and had his picture taken by it.

He was just thrilled to find his name was still on his clothes bin.

And his brother, Carl, who was younger, Carl Benson, his name was still on his clothes bin. And a number of other people.

**Michael Livingston**

In your remodeling of the building, or in your living here, and all the years you've lived here, did you bump into their sister's [older sister Elsa or Elizabeth Benson] name?

**Coe Whittern**

I don't know of that. If she was in the Children's Home, she would have been the girls' dorm, which was up in the next block, and it was the major facility for the home.

The boys dormitory was strictly a dormitory. They went and ate in the girls' dorm. The cooking was in the girl's dorm, the chapel in the girl's dorm, the laundry was in the girl's dorm. It was a much bigger building, and this is a big building.

**Michael Livingston**

The girl's dorm is not around anymore?

**Coe Whittern**

The girls' dorm had a fire in the third floor. It had three floors and a stand-up attic, and it had a fire in the third floor, which really damaged it, but it was survivable. Didn't burn through the roof, but it needed to be replaced.

When you balloon frame [a type of building construction], a three-story plus building, in the Aleutians where the wind blows 120 [mph] several times a year, usually, or at least 100 [mph] a couple times a year. Those things shook like washing machines.

This house used to shake so bad that my son wouldn't stay in the bedroom in the wing when that was 100 [mph] plus, he'd come back and the more central part of the house, in case it blew away.

But we, when we remodeled, we stripped off all the board siding, which was horizontal, which made it rack easily, instead of being diagonal, and we re-sheeted it with plywood, with lock set up solid, and it doesn't wiggle. But that girl dorm was not stable and had fire damage, and it was torn down as soon as the Home was closed.

**Michael Livingston**

I might have asked you this question already but let me try again. When Benny was touring your home, did he say any place in the Home that he might have designed the flag?

**Coe Whittern**

No, he didn't get specific.

**Michael Livingston**

Okay.

**Coe Whittern**

And he may have designed it sitting at school or something, I don't know, but it was in Unalaska, and he was living here.

**Michael Livingston**

Okay.

**Coe Whittern**

Yeah.

**Michael Livingston**

Let me shut off these recorders.

Give me a second here.  
So the time now by my clock is 12:54 pm.

## **References**

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