Ephraim Kalmakoff: Remembering a Life, Honoring a Legacy

The story of the Jesse Lee Home is woven deeply into the history of The Methodist Church in Alaska. For many Alaskans, the Home is associated with Benny Benson and the design of the Alaska state flag. Yet there are many other stories—some widely known, others still emerging—that shape this shared history. One of those stories is that of Ephraim Kalmakoff.

As we tell Ephraim's story, we do so with care. The history of church-run residential homes and boarding schools in Alaska stands in a broader and painful context. Alaska Native children were often separated from family, language, and culture. Communities—including the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people of the Chignik region—experienced profound disruption, compounded by disease, war, and forced displacement. The full stories of many children who passed through institutions like Jesse Lee are not yet fully known. We honor both the achievements we can name and the histories that remain in shadow.

Ephraim Kalmakoff was born in the Chignik region and entered the Jesse Lee Home in October 1924 after losing his parents to tuberculosis. He and his brothers, Inikenti and Mike, were among six siblings navigating immense loss at a young age. When the Home relocated from Unalaska to Seward in 1925, Ephraim continued his schooling there, learning English in order to participate in his classes. His brother Mike died of tuberculosis in 1928, another sorrow in a childhood already marked by hardship.

During these years, Ephraim discovered a remarkable gift. Basketball was already becoming a beloved sport in Alaska, and he played on a Jesse Lee team. But it was in running that he made history.

On July 4, 1928, at just 14 years old, Ephraim won the famed Mount Marathon Race in Seward—defeating experienced adult competitors and breaking a long-standing course record. He would go on to win the race three consecutive times, including the 1930 race in a time of 54½ minutes. His record stood until 1957, when Olympic skier Sven Johanson posted a faster time. Ephraim remains one of the youngest champions in the race's storied history.

Seward's Community Mural 2000, "A Tribute to Mount Marathon," includes panels depicting Ephraim's victories—one portraying him sprinting down Seward's main street in his Boy Scout uniform, escorted by children on bicycles and cheered by townspeople. For a moment in time, the young runner from Chignik carried the colors of the Jesse Lee Home and the pride of a community.

Accounts also describe him as a devout Methodist who would not compete on a Sunday. His younger brother, Inikenti, later won the Mount Marathon Race in 1944, continuing the family's connection to the event.

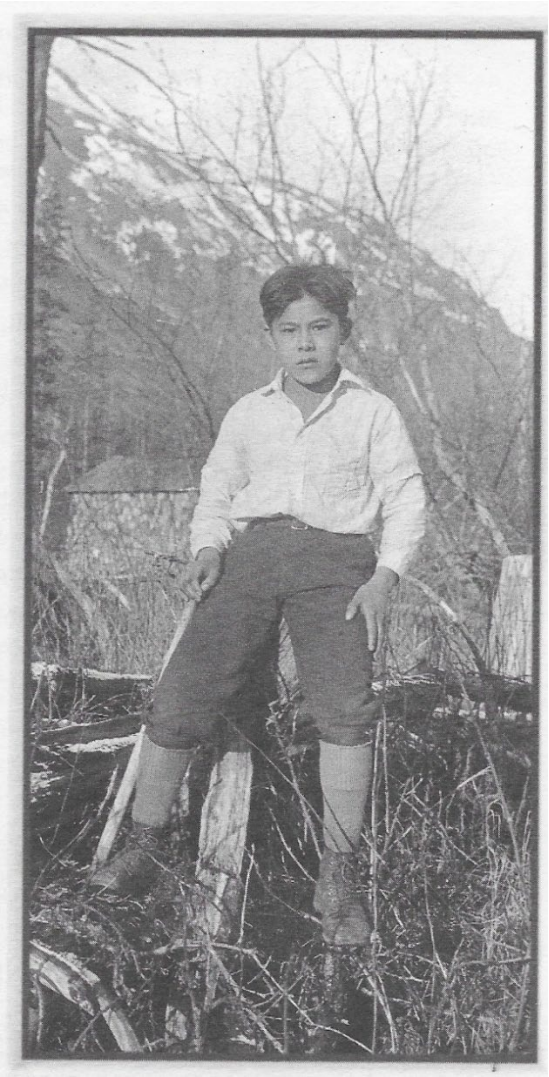
Ephraim's life, however, was brief. He contracted tuberculosis and died on May 16, 1937, at the age of 24. His obituary appeared in the *Seward Gateway* two days later.

This June, the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame will induct Ephraim Kalmakoff as a "Moment," recognizing the enduring significance of his Mount Marathon victories in Alaska's athletic history.

As we remember Ephraim, we do so with humility and gratitude. His accomplishments deserve celebration. At the same time, we acknowledge the larger and more complex history surrounding Alaska Native children, residential institutions, and cultural survival in Alaska. There is more to learn, more stories to hear, and more truth to honor.

Much of the historical material for this article comes from *Family After All: Alaska's Jesse Lee Home, Volume II*, compiled by Jacquelin B. Pels. This and other resources are available through the Alaska United Methodist Conference Resource Room.

Prepared by Conference Historian Larry Hayden, March 15, 2026.





Ephriam Kalmakoff

