
Helen “Nellie” Orton

Who was Nellie Orton?

Nellie Orton was an important cultural leader who helped to preserve Siletz ceremonies and dances and make sure they could continue on to today.

Early Life

Nellie was born in Siletz, Oregon, on March 6, 1913. Her parents were Billy Metcalf and Ellen Sampson, whose families were removed to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation from the southern Oregon coast. Nellie was raised on her family allotment (their plot of reservation land) in Siletz. She grew up eating traditional foods. She said she couldn't remember a time when her family wasn't eating salmon and eels.

Nellie had a challenging life. As a young person she suffered from a disease that made it hard for her to walk and do the things other children did. Since she couldn't run and play outside as easily as other children, Nellie spent a lot of time with elders, the older people of the Tribe. The elders spoke their Native language, called Athabaskan (Siletz Dee-ni). At this time, schools tried to make sure that most Native children spoke only English. But Nellie learned her Native language from the elders.

Nellie also learned traditional dances and culture from her parents and community. Her father Billy was a dance maker and cultural leader in the Siletz community. He would host dances at his house. When Billy was younger, people weren't allowed to dance traditional dances. The Reservation police even burned dance houses down. People had to dance in secret. Because Billy and others had kept the dances going, Nellie was able to work hard to remember the dances and keep her father's knowledge alive in the community.



Helen “Nellie” Orton *(Continued)*

Adult Life

Nellie married Charles Orton, a Siletz Tribal member from the Chasta Costa people on the Rogue River. Nellie and Charles made their home in Toledo, Oregon. They had two daughters and one son. Nellie lived through the “Termination years,” a time when the U.S. government no longer recognized the Siletz people as Tribal people. Even though it was a time of change and uncertainty, Nellie continued to be active in the Siletz community. She participated in Tribal dances and carried her people’s traditions forward.

Later Life

After the Siletz Tribe achieved Restoration in 1977, Nellie played an important role in the Siletz community. She worked with other Tribal members to make regalia, special clothing worn during dances and ceremonies. She helped others who wanted to learn their Native language and Nee-dash, a traditional dance. She used her childhood memories to teach younger Tribal people how to carry on their traditions and ceremonies.

When Nellie was young, some people felt sorry for her because she couldn’t walk as easily as others. When she was older, they were grateful for everything she knew about Siletz culture and language. Nellie’s special knowledge helped keep Siletz traditions going so they could be learned by new generations.

Sources

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