



Benedict Joseph Lee

December 24, 1931 – April 28, 2014

He was born on December 24, 1931, in Wagner, South Dakota, to Rosa Lee and Ellis Zephier. As a young child, he went to live at the Marty Mission, where he remained closely connected to the community throughout his life. He was baptized on January 3, 1932, at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Marty and remained a lifelong member.

Deaf from birth, Benny began his education at St. John's School for the Deaf in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, enrolling at about five years of age. After spending approximately eleven years there, he returned to South Dakota in 1946 to continue his education at the South Dakota School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls, where he later graduated with the Class of 1952. While a student, he enjoyed art, carpentry, and handicrafts, and once expressed interest in working for the school's maintenance department during the summers.

When Benny came to the South Dakota School for the Deaf in 1946 after spending the years at St. John's School for the Deaf in Wisconsin, he had an amusing first impression. Having grown up at the Marty Mission, he first thought the school in Sioux Falls would be filled mostly with Native American students like himself. As he settled in and met classmates from many different backgrounds, he quickly became comfortable. One school story recalled that when students from the Flandreau Indian School later visited and Native American girls stepped off the bus, some of the younger children were surprised — but Benny took the moment calmly, already understanding that the world was bigger and more diverse than he had once imagined.



Photo credit: Mark Hansen, archivist

Benny is shown standing at the front, wearing a dark blazer, with fellow pupils at St. John's School for the Deaf.

Graduating Class of 1952



Left to right—(front)—Bennie Maxwell, Dana Dillman, Marie Mueller
(Back)—Benny Lee, George Lastrico, Joan Fonder, Dean Lee, George Steele

After completing his education, Benny returned to Marty where he spent most of his life. He was known for his outgoing personality and strong involvement in community life. He enjoyed playing basketball, fishing, swimming, and faithfully attending local football and basketball games. Benny worked for many years in various roles at St. Paul's Indian Mission and the Marty Indian School, remaining active even after retirement.

Although he was unable to serve in the armed forces, he held deep respect for veterans. Each Memorial Day he honored them by placing flags on their graves and celebrating their service.

He had a special love for animals, especially dogs. In later years, he was often seen traveling through town in his wheelchair with several loyal dogs following behind him — a sight fondly remembered by many.

Benny loved his church, his coworkers, his friends, and his life in Marty. Even during his final years at the healthcare center, he continued to ask about those in the community and about his beloved dogs.

He is survived by his brother, Zane Zephier, along with many nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends who will remember his warm spirit and steady presence.

Funeral Mass was held at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Marty, with burial in the parish cemetery.