

HISTORIC ROOTS

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WILSON BENTLEY'S OBSESSION

By TOM SLAYTON

Wilson A. Bentley did not fit well into the farming community of Jericho, Vermont. When he was grown, he was a farmer and he earned a few extra dollars as a music teacher. But from his teens on, his greatest interest was snowflakes. His neighbors thought of him as something of a flake himself.

“Snowflake” Bentley is famous today for his hobby. He spent many cold winter hours, as a boy and a man, in a shed on the family farm, looking at snowflakes under a microscope. He later figured out how to attach a camera to the microscope and took the first pictures ever of snow crystals. What he learned about snow and other weather phenomena made him famous worldwide.

Wilson was a thin, shy boy. His mother, Fanny Bentley, noticed his strong interest in the world of nature. In 1880, on his fifteenth birthday, she gave him a microscope she had used when she was teaching school. Soon Wilson was spending hours looking at the natural world through his microscope. He looked at flowers and rocks, at drops of water

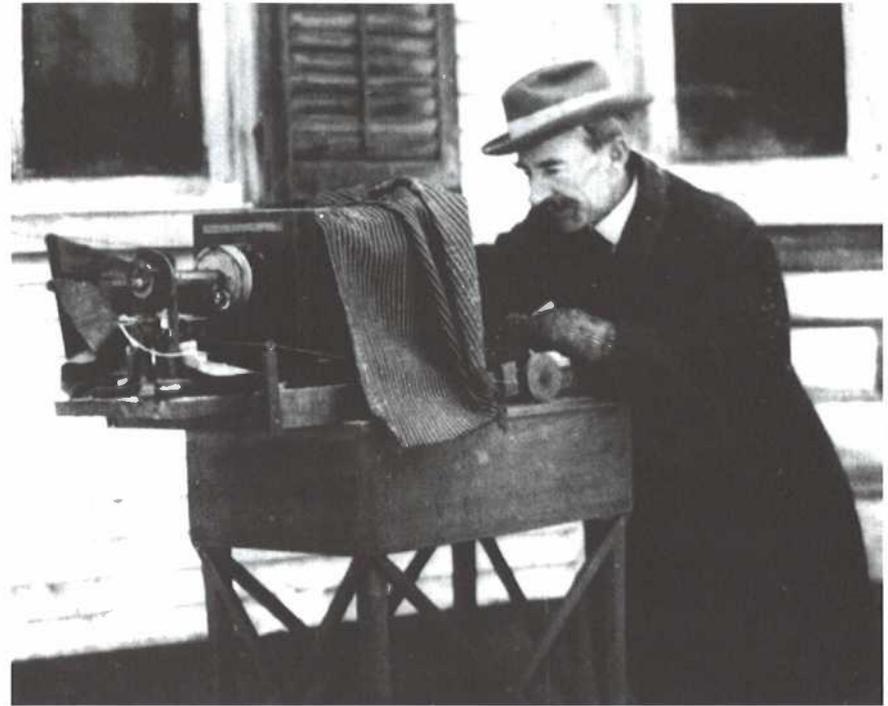


The Jericho Historical Society, Jericho, Vermont

Wilson Bentley preparing snowflakes for his microscope.

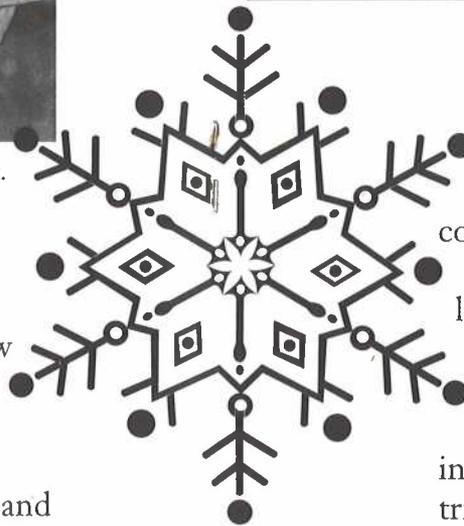
and at feathers. But what he liked to look at most of all was snowflakes. Wilson thought they were beautiful and wanted to know how they were made.

At first he drew pictures of what he saw through the microscope. But he knew his drawings couldn't begin to show the beauty and



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Wilson Bentley taking pictures of snowflakes.



structure of the snowflakes. His mother convinced his father to buy him a camera. It cost \$100, which was a lot of money in the 1880s. In today's dollars it would be more like \$2,000 or \$3,000. Edwin Bentley never saw any value at all in his son's hobby, but he did buy the camera.

Wilson kept right on looking and recording what he saw. By the time he was 19, after trial and error over long, cold winter months,

he figured out how to attach the camera to the microscope. He would then catch snowflakes, or snow crystals as they are more properly called, on a small board. He would brush them gently with a feather onto the stage of the microscope. Then he would take a picture. The result was a picture of a greatly enlarged snowflake. Bundled up against the winter cold, he eventually photographed more than five thousand snowflakes. These pictures are called photomicrographs.



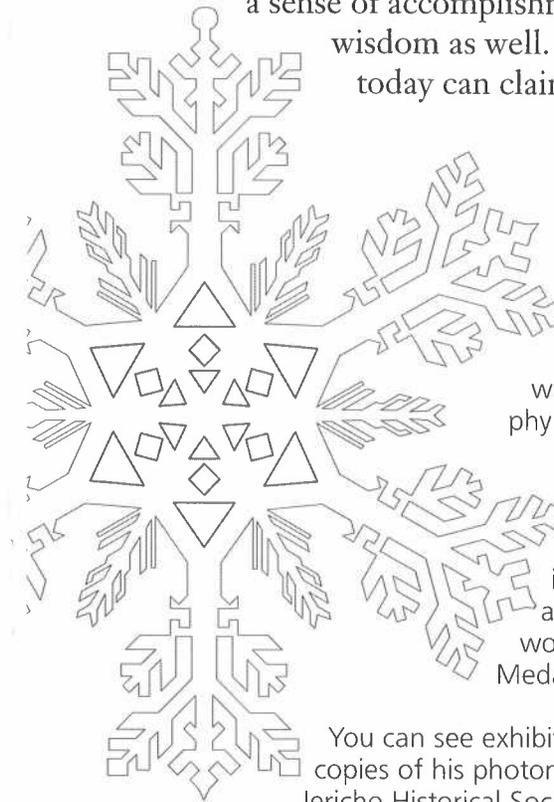
The Jericho Historical Society, Jericho, Vermont

Bentley studied snowflakes for the rest of his life. He published his pictures and articles about his studies. He gave lectures. And what he learned increased scientific knowledge about snow, ice, and weather. His studies brought him little money, but he became well known. He later wrote that the true pleasures of life come not from wealth or possessions. They come from a sense of accomplishment.

“Snowflake” Bentley is an appealing man. Not just for what he did, but for how he saw the natural world. “The snow crystals,” he once wrote, “come to us *not only* to reveal the wondrous beauty of the moment in nature, but to

teach us that all earthly beauty is transient and must soon fade away. But,” he continued, “though the beauty of the snow is transient, like the beauties of the autumn, of the evening sky, it fades, but to come again.”

Thus, “Snowflake” Bentley’s unusual life work gave him not only a world of beauty and a sense of accomplishment, but a measure of wisdom as well. How many of us today can claim as much?



Rooting Around

There are two new books about Wilson Bentley. Duncan C. Blanchard has written an adult biography called *The Snowflake Man*. Jacqueline Briggs Martin’s children’s book, *Snowflake Bentley*, illustrated, by Vermont artist Mary Azarian, won the 1999 Caldecott Medal.

You can see exhibits about Bentley and copies of his photomicrographs at the Jericho Historical Society at Chittenden Mills in Jericho, VT. Call 802-899-3225 for hours and directions. Admission is free.