

“Helen’s stuff” a tribute to women’s influence on Alberta



As part of her M.Sc. in Applied Art, Bentley designed and executed this silkscreen wall hanging based on nine of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories.



Rings made by Bentley. Her work was admired by the silversmith to the Danish royal family, Georg Jensen.



Helen Signe Petersen Bentley.

The past can speak to us when we have artifacts to interpret and learn from. Helen Signe Petersen Bentley felt strongly enough about some of her belongings to keep them throughout her life. Now those items have been donated to the Alberta Women’s Memory Project.

The collection, which spans the eighty-six years of Bentley’s life, consists of hundreds of items including photographs, letters and documents, furniture, textiles, and artistic creations such as pewter candlesticks, silk batik, and sculpture, which were part of her master’s thesis, in addition to weaving, stitchery and jewelry she created later.

“The collection describes who she was,” said her daughter, Ann Manson, who is making the donation. “Wherever she was—at home or on one of many international trips—she was interested in what local people did and how something was used by a family to sustain or maintain the family...there are things here that I always thought were worth preserving. I’m very happy that they will be kept in archival condition. It’s just perfect. It is a wonderful way to honour Mom.”

Bentley died in 1999 in Edmonton, after a distinguished career in which she held various positions at the Universities of Minnesota and Alberta, was an instructor of interior design at the Banff School of Fine Arts, and was later involved in co-op housing and interested in housing design. Manson said some family members saw her mother’s belongings as “just Helen’s stuff” and they were ready to dispose of them. “I decided I would take it. Over the years I have thrown some of it away but I kept a good core of items. A friend knew about the AWMP and it turns out this is just the kind of donation they are looking for.”

Born and educated in the U.S., Helen Petersen met her future husband Charles Frederick Bentley while she was teaching at the University of Minnesota. Fred Bentley became dean

of the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Alberta and was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1994 for his contribution to national and international agriculture and food production. The Bentleys moved to Edmonton in 1946 when he was hired at the University of Alberta to teach soil science. Helen Bentley was hired in the School of Household Economics, at the time one of the only post-secondary schools focusing on women’s interests and teaching women advanced skills for making a comfortable, esthetically pleasing and well-functioning home.

“With her Master’s of science in applied art, teaching experience at the University of Minnesota and her experience with outreach programs in rural communities in the U.S. and Saskatchewan, my guess is Mom would have been highly qualified at the university,” Manson said.

The collection’s historic value lies in a number of areas. It is the record of a young woman’s experience at university, at a time when few women attended university, and documents aspects of her daily life as well as what she was studying, what she was learning and what she was excited about. “It is also an artistic demonstration of the home life Mom grew up in and how she became interested in and pursued those interests,” Manson said.

As well, through the letters and photographs Bentley kept, there is the historic record of immigration from Denmark in the late 1800s, the gold rush in the early 20th century and early settler life which is such a large part of the history of this country.

Other pieces from the collection have been donated to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, the Goldstein Gallery at the University of Minnesota and to the University of Alberta textile collection.

“I think Mom was under-recognized for the outreach and extension home economics work she did in Saskatchewan and Alberta without a lot of fanfare,” Manson said. “Women in their 60s or 70s might know who she was, might have taken courses from her, but she didn’t receive public recognition for her work.

“She is part of a group of women who were highly influential on life in Alberta but were never highly touted. She was more known as the wife of Fred Bentley but in her own right, she was as influential on a day to day basis.”

The Bentley collection will be maintained by the Thomas A. Edge Archives & Special Collections at AU and will be digitized for public access through the [AWMP](#).