

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



February 11, 2015

Snow – everybody’s talking about it, many are shoveling it, and some are even enjoying it. Recently I have been enjoying the winter landscape revealed under the full moon the Potawatomi call Baby Bear Moon. One can almost sense the spirits of ancient creatures arising from the shadowy tree trunks and branches now spreading out upon the new snow in our old farm grove.

Snow has also been the theme for several afterschool programs this month. In addition to snowflake crafts and treats, we have learned about a remarkable man known as Snowflake Bentley. Born on February 9, 1865, on a farm near Jericho Vermont, Wilson Bentley lived in a “snowbelt,” where the annual snowfall averages 120 inches. That’s almost four times our yearly average here in Iowa of 32.4 inches and twice as much as our record snowfall of 59 inches during the winter of 1961-62. I remember that winter, traipsing through the grove with my brother, the drifts so high we had to duck under the telephone lines. Perhaps you do, too.

Back in Vermont, while the other kids were building forts and throwing snowballs, young Willie Bentley was catching single snowflakes. He studied the crystals under a microscope, drawing them with paper and pencil, but the snow crystals always melted before he finished. When Willie turned 17, his parents bought him a new camera with its own microscope, and the photomicrographs he created with it would become Bentley’s legacy and gift to the world.

Bentley became known as The Snowflake Man. Though famous, he never made much money, so in 1931 the American Meteorological Society gathered over 2,000 of his best photographs in a book entitled *Snow Crystals*. Sadly, less than a month after the book was published, Bentley died from pneumonia he contracted after walking home in a blizzard to make more pictures.

A monument and museum now stand in the village where Bentley lived and breathed snowflakes. Today children learn his story through *Snowflake Bentley*, a children’s book written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, illustrated by Mary Azarian, and 1999 Caldecott Medal Winner; while students still study the images in *Snow Crystals* that was reprinted in 1962.

The best snowstorm of Willie’s life happened on Valentine’s Day 1928 when he made over 100 photographs during a two-day storm. What are your plans for Valentine’s Day?

I’ll close with these words: “The average dairy farmer gets up at dawn because he has to go to work in the cow yard. I get up at dawn, too. But it is because I want to find some leaf, hung with dew; or a spider web . . . I take my camera with me . . . Because I do this I can show these lovely things to people who never would have seen them without my help. They will get their daily quart of milk, all right. Other farmers will attend to that. But I think I am giving them something which is just as important.” W. A. Bentley

