

Percy Dwight Bentley

Percy Dwight Bentley was born in La Crosse in 1885, the son of banker, E. E. Wheeler, who lived at 950 Cass Street. He graduated from Central High School in 1903. He went on to further studies at Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, just north of Columbus, though he did not graduate. He then took courses at the Armour Institute (now the Illinois Institute of Technology) in Chicago.

Though he did not finish his course work, he became intimately acquainted with the style being put forth by architects Louis Sullivan and his protégé, Frank Lloyd Wright. For some of his coursework Bentley spent time at the nearby Art Institute of Chicago, and often visited the architects who had offices in the Loop. The style, of course, was the "Prairie Style."

Bentley returned to La Crosse without completing his studies and became an apprentice in the office of Wells E. Bennett, a local architect. He soon found his own commissions and formed his own company in 1910, with Otto A. Merman as his draftsman and eventual partner. Their first houses in the new "Chicago" style were the Edward Bartl house at 17th and Cass Streets and the J. C. Hogan house at 1634 Main Street. Both were completed in 1910-11.

It wasn't long before Bentley seemed to become the architect of choice. The list of his homes built in La Crosse is extensive: the Henry Salzer house, 1634 King Street, 1912; the C. J. Felber house, 1408 King Street, 1913; the Gus Sexauer house, 1421 State Street, 1914; the Emil T. Mueller house, 128 South 14th Street, 1915-16 (still an outstanding example); the Daniel McMillan house,

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1222 Cass Street, 1915; and perhaps the Frank Sisson house, 1511 Main Street, 1914..

The Salzer house particularly is a showpiece of his Prairie Style—with strong horizontal lines, low, hipped roofs, over-hanging eaves, rows of windows tucked in under projecting eaves, and Prairie School urns in front. The original color scheme was a dark cream with brown trim and moss-green shingles. It was featured in the recent book, “Wisconsin’s Own 20 Remarkable Homes.”

Other impressive examples of his work are the mirror-image, matching houses, the Chase and Wohrluter bungalows, at 221-23 11th Street which date from 1913. They are outstanding examples of the airy, horizontal Prairie style, and they were named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. In fact the houses he designed alone and with Merman make up a good number of the buildings in “The Cass and King Street Residential Historic District,” created by the Historic Places designation in 1997.

He also designed the business building at 510 Main Street for the interior decorating firm headed by Olin Oyen. Oyen filled contracts with area theater owners to furnish their theaters, and Bentley wisely worked with Oyen in the design of the new store. It ended up presenting a perfectly balanced facade, the lower level, since altered, used for the business, the upper for apartments.

Beyond La Crosse he designed the Richland Center City Hall, 1911; the Alois Fix house in Tomah, 1912; the Citizens State Bank in Trempealeau, 1912; the Guy Wakefield house in West Salem, 1913; the M. L. Fugina house, Fountain City, 1916; the Gundersen summer cottage (with a Norwegian flavor) on Barron

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Island, 1918; a house in Prairie du Chien, 1919; the Fred Pratt house, 1919, in Richland Center; and the O. E. Davis house, Viroqua, 1923.

Bentley expanded his territory, working both in La Crosse and in the Twin Cities. One reason, perhaps minor, was that he was an accomplished piano player, and was sometimes featured with the St. Paul Orchestra. While in La Crosse he played the organ at the Methodist Church, and sometimes at the Congregational. He never married, but he was a popular guest at dinner parties, sometimes playing the piano for hours at a sitting.

In St. Paul he partnered off and on with architect Charles Hausler. During those years he designed the West End State Bank, 1914, of St. Paul; several homes, including the Frank and Rosa Seifert house, 1914; the Albert Wunderlich home, 1915; the Frank B. Thompson house in Falcon Heights, 1915; the A. W. Millunchick house, 1923, in St. Paul; the Stickney house, Grand Traverse, Mich., 1929.

Most stunning of all was the Mounds Park Pavilion in St. Paul in 1916. The covering of the pavilion is a perfect example of the Prairie Style low hipped roof of natural wood overwhelming the space below.

Bentley continued to do work in the Upper Midwest until the death of his La Crosse partner, Otto Merman, in 1935. The following year he moved to Hood River, Oregon, staying there for about three years. One of the houses he designed there was the Robert and Mabel Loomis house, 1938, which was added to the National Register of Historic places in 1990.

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He then moved on to Eugene, Oregon. There he shifted to designing public and commercial buildings and churches. He designed the city baseball complex, called the Civic Stadium, in 1938, working with the WPA. After the war he designed the Veterans Memorial Building in the city. It was not done in the Prairie School style. Its open porch running along the entire front of the building suggests instead a modeling similar to Washington's Mount Vernon home.

In 1947 he designed the First Christian Church in nearby Springfield to replace the old one destroyed by fire. This, too, owes little to the Prairie Style. And for the houses he designed in the area he seemed now to prefer the American Colonial style.

In 1956 he designed the expansion from two floors to four of the Center Court building in Eugene, doubling the square footage of the building originally constructed in 1928. He then designed the Professional Building in Eugene, again barely reflective of the Prairie Style—a one story, motel-like complex. One of his last commissions before retirement was the Village Green Motor Hotel in nearby Cottage Grove in 1960.

Percy Dwight Bentley died in 1968 in Eugene, Oregon. He was 83.